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Series B Volume 3

AN AUSTRALIAN CREOLE IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY: A DESCRIPTION OF NGUKURR-BAMYILI DIALECTS (PART 1)

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PREFACE

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INTRODUCTION TO
SERIES B VOLUME 3

The purpose of this paper is to make available for the layman a description of the creole language spoken in the Roper River area of the Northern Territory. It is written particularly with Europeans working in the area in mind. It has not been written as a technical paper for linguists, but it is hoped that linguists will find it useful in providing information on the language.

It should be noted that this volume (Part 1) does not contain a complete description of Creole. Intonation and rhythm, word formation, adverbs, conjunctions, questions and commands, complex sentences, and discourse structure are not discussed. It is planned that these sections will be described in a second volume (Part 2) in the future. (In addition, a basic dictionary is being published separately as *Work Papers of SIL-AAB*, Series B, Volume 4.) The sections contained in Part 1 are comprehensively, but not exhaustively, covered.

At several places in this paper the reader is referred to a discussion of a particular item at another location. When the reference is stated as being 'elsewhere', it means that the item will be discussed in Part 2. If the discussion is within Part 1, the chapter or section reference is given.

Examples occur frequently throughout the chapters dealing with Creole grammar. These examples are written in the Creole practical orthography as discussed in Chapter 3. In some situations an example of an unacceptable or ungrammatical construction is given. These examples are marked by a preceding asterisk (*).

This paper is based on some 27 months of fieldwork under the auspices of the Summer Institute of Linguistics since March 1973. Of this time approximately 60% has been spent at Ngukurr, 30% at Bamyili, and the remaining 10% elsewhere.

Without the help of many people this paper would not have been possible. I would like to thank the many Creole speakers who have shared their language with me, especially those who patiently worked with me in formal situations: Barnabas Roberts, Mordecai Skewthorpe, Andrew Joshua, Isaac Joshua, Charlie Johnson, Wallace Dennis, David Jentian, and Danny Jentian. Thanks are due to the late Lothar Jagst,

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CHAPTER 6

PREPOSITIONS AND PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

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Creole has relatively few prepositions. At first glance it would appear, therefore, that Creole is underdeveloped in this area and can only inadequately handle the degree of specification that English prepositions make. This, however, is not the case. When further specification is needed, Creole makes use of adverbs to modify prepositional phrases instead of having a multitude of specific prepositions. This tends to follow the general pattern of Aboriginal languages, though they generally express the relational meanings with case suffixes and postpositions rather than prepositions (Vaszolyi 1976:38-39).

6.1 THE PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE

A prepositional phrase basically consists of a preposition followed by an object or prepositional complement. The complement is normally a noun, pronoun, noun phrase, and in some cases an adverb or clause.

Preposition + Prepositional Complement

laga gabarra (noun)
'on the head'

burrum olabat (pronoun)
'from them'

gadam blandibala bigbaba buligi (noun phrase)
'with many big cattle'

burrum jeya (adverb)
'from there/after that'

blanga dalibat mi laya (clause)
'for telling me lies'

Prepositional phrases need not occur singularly but several may occur sequentially.

Im jidanbat laga tharran longwan bilibong
'He is living at that long billabong'

laga gudwan kantri *blanga im dadi.*
in the good country that belongs to his father.'

In some circumstances, English is able to post-position its prepositions. That is, the preposition can follow its complement or the complement can be deleted.

The house I told you about burnt down.
He's hard to work with.

Creole, however, cannot post-position its prepositions nor delete the prepositional complement. The examples above in Creole would be

Blanga awus ai bin dalim yu bin barnbarn.
'About the house I told you burnt down.'

not *Awus ai bin dalim yu blanga bin barnbarn.

Im adbala: blanga we:k gadim im.
'It's hard to work with him.'

not *Im adbala blanga we:k gadim.

6.2 PREPOSITIONS

Prepositions can be divided into two main groups - simple and complex. Simple prepositions consist of only one word. Complex prepositions consist of a sequence of close knit words.

6.2.1 Simple Prepositions

There are four main simple prepositions in Creole:

langa (indicating location or direction to)
burrum (indicating direction from)
blanga (indicating a genitive or benefactive relation)
gadim (indicating instrument or accompaniment)

All four of these prepositions have alternate forms:

langa has the short form *la*. Occasionally this is heard as *na* from older people.

burrum has the light forms *brom* and *from*.

blanga has the short form *bla*. Younger children, especially at Bamyili, often also use the shorter form *ba*. In some constructions, the light form *fo* 'for' is used and occasionally *av* 'of' and also *abat* 'about'.

gadim has several phonological variants - *garrim*, *gada*, *garra*. It sometimes occurs as the light variant form *with*.

The short forms of *langa* and *blanga*, that is *la* and *bla*, and also *gadim* are not used in the Barkly Tableland dialect.¹

In addition to these main prepositions and their alternate forms, there are several words that behave in many ways like prepositions, though they also function as adverbs or other parts of speech. These include *thru* 'through', *bifo* 'before', *abda/afta* 'after', *raidap* 'until', and *til* 'until'.

Some of the adverbial suffixes discussed in the chapter on verbs (Section 5.2.2) are loosely related to prepositions because of their derivation from English prepositions.

In light Creole some of the more common English prepositions occur. These will not be handled in detail here, but it should be noted that when they do occur their complement is usually a noun phrase with the noun preceded by a regular determiner or the light 'article' determiner *da*.

Imin go langa kemp.
 and *Imin go tu da kemp.*

both mean

'He went to the camp.'

6.2.2 Complex Prepositions

In addition to the simple prepositions, there are a few complex prepositions in Creole. These consist of a sequence of close knit words that are essentially indivisible both in terms of syntax and in terms of their meaning. These include:

1. *rait langa* 'right to'

Imin galimap in rait langa top.
 'He climbed it right to the top.'

Imin galimap in langa top.
 'He climbed it to the top.'

is possible, but not

**Imin galimap in rait.*
 'He climbed it right.'

Compare this with the permissible construction involving the adverb *raitap*:

Imin galimap in raitap.
 'He climbed it right up.'

2. *nomo gadim* 'without'

Im wangulubala nomo gadim dadi dubala mami.
'He's an orphan without a father and a mother.'

Compare this, however, with the use of *nomo gadim* as negative verbal auxiliary plus verb:

Im nomo gadim dadi dubala mami.
'He does not have a father nor a mother.'

3. *onli fo* 'full of, covered with, surrounded by'

Mela bin labda silip onli fo mad.
'We had to sleep covered with mud.'

Jad pleis im onli fo rok keinggurmu.
'That place is full of euros.'

6.2.3 Modification of Prepositional Phrases

Somewhat similar to complex prepositions are prepositional phrases modified by pre-positioned adverbs. The distinction between the two rests basically on the ability of the adverbs to operate independently of the prepositional phrase in a given construction while the complex preposition cannot be split. For example, the adverb *wansaid* 'beside' in the modified prepositional phrase in the sentence

Dubala yanggel bin jidan wansaid langa bilibong.
'Two girls sat down beside the billabong.'

can also follow the prepositional phrase and retain the same meaning:

Dubala yanggel bin jidan langa bilibong wansaid.

This post-positioning of an adverb modifying a prepositional phrase is probably more closely related to Aboriginal language use of postpositions than the English use of prepositions. 'Very often, the English equivalent to an Aboriginal postposition . . . will be a preposition' (Vaszolyi 1976:39).

It is also possible for the prepositional phrase to be deleted when understood in a larger context, leaving the adverb on its own but still carrying the same meaning.

Dubala yanggel bin jidan wansaid.
'Two girls sat down beside (the billabong).'

Complex prepositions, however, cannot undergo such changes.

Olabat bin bunggul nomo gadim bambu.
'They had a corroboree without a didjeridoo.'

cannot be

**Olabat bin bunggul gadim bambu nomo.*

nor **Olabat bin bunggul nomo.*

6.3 PREPOSITIONAL MEANINGS

Prepositions basically express a relation between two entities, one being that represented by the prepositional complement. The relational meanings expressed by Creole prepositions and modified prepositional phrases are not exhaustively handled here. Only the main meanings are discussed below.

6.3.1 Prepositional Meanings of Location

Prepositional constructions dealing with location can be divided into two main types - those dealing with static location or position and those dealing with directional location. With few exceptions, the same Creole prepositional constructions are used for both position and direction. The distinction between the two, in Creole, is usually dependent upon the nature of the verb or predicate with which the prepositional phrase is associated.

Imin bogi langa riba. (position)
'He swam in the river.'

Imin didiwu langa riba. (direction)
'He dove into the river.'

A modified prepositional phrase incorporating the adverb *thru* 'through', however, can only indicate directional location.

Imin go thru langa gali.
'He went through the valley.'

The main preposition used to indicate location is *langa* or one of its alternate forms (*la*, occasionally *na*). By itself *langa* is undifferentiated as to specific location, indicating only the general position or destination. English lacks such a 'generic' preposition. In interpreting this generic use of *langa*, the context or the

characteristics of the prepositional complement itself often indicate whether its meaning is 'in, at, on, to, into'.

Imin bogi langa woda.
'He swam in the water.'

Im langa im kemp.
'He is at his camp.'

Im silip langa gran.
'He is sleeping on the ground.'

Imin gobek langa olabat.
'He returned to them.'

Imin budum im langa boks.
'He put it in the box.'

When needed or desirable more specific location can be expressed by modifying the prepositional phrase with an adverb. The adverb, while most often pre-positioned or occurring before the prepositional phrase, may also follow or be post-positioned.

Imin leidan atsaid la im kemp.
and *Imin leidan la im kemp atsaid.*

can both mean

'He laid down outside of his camp.'

Another preposition used to indicate location is *burrum* or one of its alternate forms (*brom*, *from*). Its relational meaning is most often the ablative direction 'from'.

Olabat wandi gaman burrum Dawin.
'They want to come from Darwin.'

Unlike *langa* prepositional phrases, *burrum* phrases are not normally modified by the full range of adverbs. They can, however, take the full range of adverbs as their complements and build up in sequence with *langa* phrases to express more specific ablative location.

Im gaman burrum riba.
'He is coming from the river.'

Im gaman burrum najasaid.
'He is coming from the other side.'

Im gaman burrum najasaid langa riba.
'He is coming from the other side of the river.'

but normally not

**Im gaman najasaid burrum riba.*

Burrum prepositional phrases may be modified by a small group of adverbs that indicate relative distance. These include adverbs such as *longwei* 'a long way, far away', *gulijap* 'near, close', *hafwei* 'about half way', and *lilbit longwei* 'not too far'.

Ai go wokabat lilbit longwei burrum kemp.
Ai go wokabat burrum kemp lilbit longwei.
'I'm going walking not too far from camp.'

Though *burrum* is usually used to indicate direction away from something, in some situations it can be used to indicate a static location or position. In such cases, it normally occurs with a prepositioned modifier.

Jat bilibong im nomo longwei burrum stakyad.
'That billabong is not far from the stockyards.'

Chart 6.1 on the following page illustrates most of the basic meanings of the locative prepositions and modified prepositional phrases.

The prepositional meanings illustrated in Chart 6.1 fall into two sets of cause-and-effect relationships.

1. Positive Destination results in Positive Position:

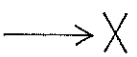

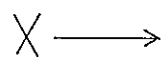

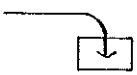



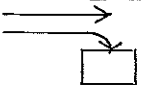

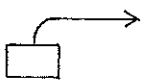

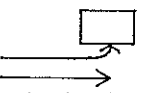







Dumaji imin go langa riba,
'Because he went to the river,

im langa riba.
he is at the river.'

Dumaji imin galimap la top la wadi,
'Because he climbed to the top of the tree,

im la top la wadi.
he is at the top of the tree.'

Chart 6.1. Locative Prepositions and Modified Phrases

Positive		Negative	
Destination	Position	Direction From	Position
 <i>langa</i> 'to'	 <i>langa</i> 'at'	 <i>burrum</i> 'from'	 (<i>longwei</i>) <i>burrum</i> '(far) away from'
 <i>insaid langa</i> 'in, into, inside'	 <i>insaid langa</i> 'in, inside'	 <i>atsaid burrum</i> 'out of'	 <i>atsaid langa</i> 'out of, outside'
 <i>ontop langa, la top la</i> 'on, onto, on top, above'	 <i>ontop langa, la top la</i> 'on, on top of, above'	 <i>burrum ontop la, burrum top la</i> 'off, from the top of'	 <i>nomo ontop la, nomo la top la</i> 'not on top of, not above'
 <i>andanis langa, la bodum la</i> 'under, underneath, below'	 <i>andanis langa, la bodum la</i> 'under, below, underneath'	 <i>burrum andanis la, burrum bodum la</i> 'from under, from underneath'	 <i>nomo andanis la, nomo la bodum la</i> 'not under, not beneath'
 <i>la bodum la</i> 'at/on/to the bottom'	 <i>la bodum la</i> 'on the bottom of'	 <i>burrum bodum la</i> 'from the bottom of'	 <i>nomo la bodum la</i> 'not on the bottom of'

2. Negative Direction results in Negative Position:

Dumaji imin gudan burrum ontop la hil,
 'Because he descended from the top of the hill,

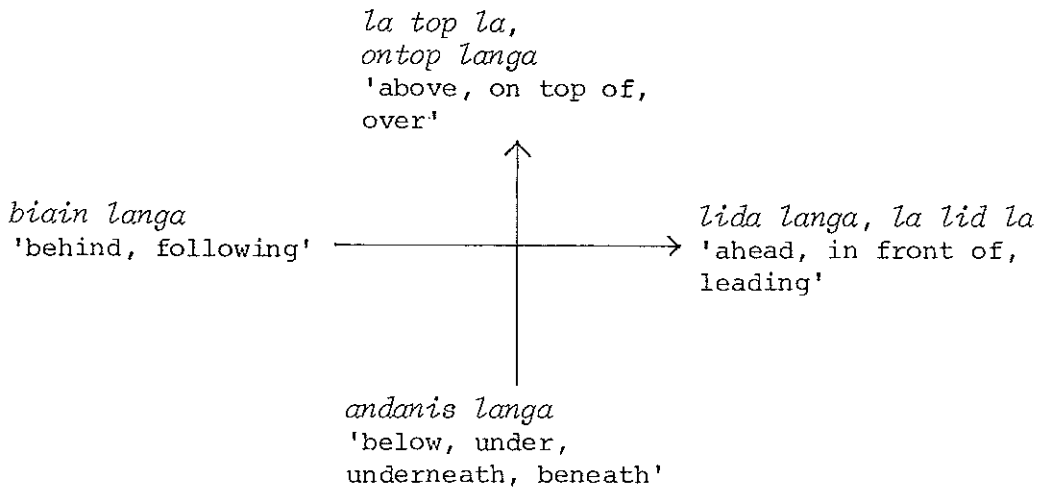
im nomo ontop la hil.
 he is not on the top of the hill.'

Dumaji imin gaman atsaid burrum awus,
 'Because he came out of the house,

im atsaid langa awus.
 he is outside the house.'

Most of the above prepositional meanings express simple location. That is, they simply express the position, destination, or direction of a single entity.

In addition to these, there are several prepositional constructions that express the relative position of two entities. These can be diagrammed in terms of a vertical and horizontal axis:



Unlike simple location, relative position constructions do not have a cause-and-effect relationship. Rather, they have more of an antonym or converse opposite relationship.

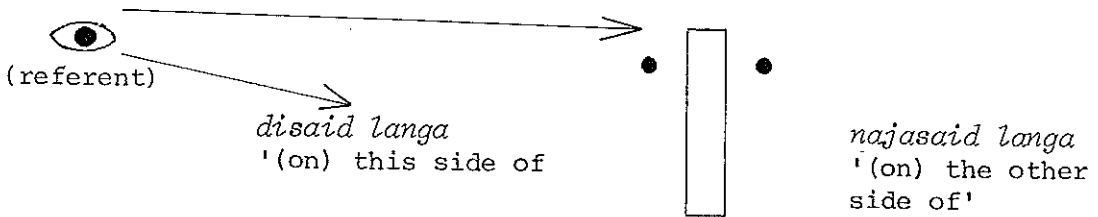
Biganini dagadagat lida langa melabat. =
 'The children eat before us.'

Melabat dagadagat biain langa biginini.
 'We eat after the children.'

Rod go ontop langa krik. =
 'The road goes over the creek.'

Krik go andanis langa rod.
 'The creek passes under the road.'

Another relative position construction gives the position of an entity relative to the position of a referent fixed in the context. This could be illustrated thus:



Jat bilibong im disaid langa jat waitrok,
 'That billabong is on this side of that white rock,

nomo najasaid langa im.
 not on the other side of it.'

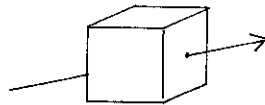
Related to this construction is *wansaid langa* 'on the side of, beside, along'.

Dubala bin silip wansaid langa wadi.
 'They slept beside the tree.'

Ai bin wokabat wansaid langa riba.
 'I walked along the river.'

Two other prepositional locative constructions should be noted.

1. *thru langa* 'through'



Bulit bin go thru langa im jolda.
 'The bullet went through his shoulder.'

2. *la midul la* 'in the middle of'



'between'



Wi bin labda silip la midul la krik.
'We had to sleep in the middle of the creek.'

Ai bin buldan la midul la dubala wadi.
'I fell down between two trees.'

Compare the following related construction:

Yurmi meigim midul la dog.
'We are on both sides of the dog.
(Literally:
We make middle the dog.)'

6.3.2 Prepositional Meanings of Time

Time in Creole, for the most part, is expressed by time adverbs or nouns rather than by prepositional phrases. For example, in English we say

1. He is coming at noon.
2. They will give it to me on Monday.
3. We always eat porridge in the morning.
4. For a long time I lived there.

These examples would be expressed in Creole without prepositional phrases:

1. *Im gaman dinadaim.*
2. *Olabat gibit la mi Mandei.*
3. *Mibala oldei dagadagat ongkultobi ailibala.*
4. *Longtaim ai bin jidan jeya.*

There are, however, several prepositions used in expressing time in Creole. These include *bifo* 'before', *abda/afta* 'after', *burrum/brom/from* 'from', *raidap* 'until', and *til* 'until'.

Bifo 'before' and *afta* 'after' function not only as time prepositions but also as time adverbs and conjunctions. When functioning as prepositions they are followed by complements that normally consist of a noun, whereas when functioning as adverbs they stand independently, and as conjunctions they are connected to a following clause.

Bifo, *ai bin we:k langa Elsi.* (adverb)
'A long time ago I used to work at Elsey Station.'

Bifo milnait *imin bago.* (preposition)
'Before midnight he vomited.'

Bifo ai gijim yu throt, *ai* *gijim*
'Before I record your voice, I'll get
nyubala. (conjunction)
a new (one).'

Bifo as an adverb in some contexts functions as a synonym of the adverb *longtaim*.

Bifo, *mananga bin gaman.*

and Longtaim, *mananga bin gaman.*

both mean

'A long time ago, Europeans came.'

Both of these are in contrast with

Bifo *mananga bin gaman*, . . .
'Before Europeans came, . . .'

and Longtaim *mananga bin gaman.*
'For a long time Europeans have been coming.'

In speech these are distinguished by intonation or breath pause and context. It might be mentioned here that stories are often started with *longtaim* - 'A long time ago . . ., Once upon a time . . .'.

Burrum is most often used as a locative preposition but is also used as a time preposition with its complement being a time adverb or noun. Unlike other time prepositions, it cannot function as an adverb nor conjunction.

Burrum as a time preposition is most commonly used with the adverb complement *jeya* meaning 'from there, after that, then'. This construction is used as a discourse marker. It indicates a significant section or 'paragraph' break within a story.

Ai bin wokwokwokwok, *nagap na.*
 'I walked and walked and walked until I was worn out.'

Ai bin silip. Burrum jeya, ai bin gidap.
 (So) I slept. After that, I got up.'

Afta can also be used with identically the same prepositional meaning, though its complement is the adverb *that* 'that' - *afta that/abda jat* 'after that, from there, then'.

Raidap 'until' and *til* 'until' are closely related. As time prepositions they have as complements a time noun or clause.

Ai bin weidabat raidap sabadaim.
 'I waited until evening tea time.'

Imin toktok raidap yu bin gaman.
 'He was talking until you came.'

Imin sikbala til imin go langa hospil.
 'He was sick until he went to the hospital.'

Both *raidap* and *til* are used in a situation involving a pair of time constructions expressing a meaning of duration.

Imin weitweit burrum smokodaim raidap dinadaim.
 'He was waiting from ten o'clock until noon.'

Olabat bin bogibogi burrum ailibala til
 'They were swimming from early in the morning until

ai bin gaman.
I arrived.

The first of a paired time construction need not be a prepositional phrase.

Ai bin silip dinadaim raidap sabadaim.
 'I slept from lunch time until tea time.'

6.3.3 Prepositional Meanings of *Blanga*

1. The most common or frequent usage of *blanga* or *bla* is probably that which expresses the genitive meaning 'of'. This includes the expression of possession or ownership.

mani blanga mi
 'money of mine'

blanga olgamen daga
'the woman's food'

It is also used to express a sense of close relationship.

san blanga olmen
'the son of the man'

blanga olabat kantrimen
'their countrymen'

neim blanga im
'name of him'

Genitive constructions normally involve the prepositional phrase modifying a noun, pronoun, or noun phrase. The prepositional phrase, as illustrated in the previous examples, may either precede the noun or noun phrase or follow it. In light Creole *av* 'of' sometimes occurs in place of *blanga* when the prepositional phrase follows the noun it modifies.

2. The second most common usage of *blanga* is probably the expression of the benefactive relationship 'for'. Benefactive prepositional constructions normally have a noun, pronoun, or noun phrase as the prepositional complement.

Imin dai blanga melabat.
'He died for us.'

Im gibit gud toktok blanga ola skulkid.
'He gives a good talk for all the school children.'

In light Creole *fo* is sometimes used instead of *blanga*.

3. Somewhat similar to the benefactive construction is a purpose construction 'for, because of'. The distinction between the two is not always easy to make. The complement of the purpose construction, unlike the benefactive complement, is often a clause, though in some cases it need not be.

Gabadi kolbala blanga dringim.
'The cup of tea is cold enough for drinking.'

Im we:k iya blanga breigimin brambi.
'He works here in order to break in the wild horses.'

Imin album mi blanga buligi.
'He helped me with the cattle.'

4. *Blanga* is also used to express the meaning of 'about'. This phrase most often occurs as an object of a double transitive sentence. In very light Creole *abat* is sometimes used.

Yu dalim im blanga dadan na.
'You tell him about that one.'

Yu wandi asgim im blanga baptais.
'You should ask him about baptism.'

Ai bin asgim. abat thadan.
'I asked (him) about that.'

5. One final important usage of *blanga* is comparable to the English infinitive usage of 'to'. Strictly speaking, *blanga* in such constructions is functioning more as a conjunction than a preposition. It is closely related to the purpose constructions discussed above both in terms of meaning and in terms of the construction of the complement, which is normally a clause.

Imin asgim mi blanga gibit im sanding blanga dagat.
'He asked me to give him something to eat.'

Im andi gobek blanga gijim najan.
'He wants to return to get another one.'

6.3.4 Prepositional Meanings of *Gadim*

The prepositional meanings of *gadim* can be divided into three basic categories, though these are not absolutely distinctive.

1. *Gadim* may express means or instrument.

Imin kilim im gadim waya.
'He killed it with a fishing spear.'

Imin meigim gadim naif.
'He made (it) with a knife.'

Imin gaman gadim hos.
'He came by horse.'

2. *Gadim* may also express accompaniment or close association. This category of meanings can also be expressed by other constructions, particularly those making use of *mijamet* 'together'.

Imin gaman gadim im lambarra.
'He came with his father-in-law.'

or *Im en im lambarra bin gaman mijamet.*
'He and his father-in-law came together.'

Olabat bin sing gadim bambu.
'They sang with a didjeridoo.'

or *Olabat bin sing en bulum bambu.*
'They sang and played the didjeridoo.'

3. *Gadim* is also used to express a meaning of ingredient or material with or out of which something is made. This usage is restricted, however, to occurring in constructions using a verb of 'making'.

Yu meigim bred gadim draibom.
'You make bread with yeast.'

Imin meigim bambu gadim dis kain wadi.
'He made a didjeridoo out of this kind of tree.'

All of the above examples in this section were positive. They can all be made negative by modifying the preposition with *nomo*.

Imin kadim nomo gadim domiyok.
'He cut (it) without an axe.'

Ai bin gaman nomo gadim yu baba.
'I came without your brother.'

Yu meigim damba nomo gadim draibom.
'You make damper without yeast.'

Jat mananga nomo gadim bodi.
'That European is without a body (i.e. is skinny).'

6.3.5 Other Prepositional Meanings

1. The somewhat abstract or non-physical sense of source or origin is expressed by *burrum*.

Jadan stori bin kamat burrum jeya na.
'That story came out from there (i.e. that is the

account of the incident that was given by those who were there).'

Di jan ai toktok langa yumob burrum baibul.
'What I'm telling you is from the Bible.'

2. There are several ways of expressing the use of language. They all have the same basic meaning. In the following examples, *langwis* means 'traditional Aboriginal language' and a specific language name could occur in the same position. The English translations are literal.

Imin toktok langwis.
'He was speaking language.'

Imin toktok burrum langwis.
'He was speaking from language.'

Imin toktok gadim langwis.
'He was speaking with language.'

Imin toktok la langwis.
'He was speaking in language.'

The Creole speaker's perspective of language is different in many ways from that of Europeans. Europeans speak of a person's language dying when it passes out of existence:

Our language died.

In Creole, however, it is expressed as the person dying in respect to his language, not the language dying:

Melabat bin dai la langwis.
'We died with respect to (our) language.'

Also, one does not speak of translation as putting a text into a language as does English:

We're translating the Bible into language.

Rather, the language is put into the text being translated:

Mibala pudumbat langwis langa baibul.
'We're putting language into the Bible.'

3. In double transitive sentences, and sometimes in single transitive sentences as well, the objects of the verb may be expressed as prepositional phrases. The prepositional meanings could be said to be that of recipient, goal, or target. Normally, only the prepositions *langa* and *blanga* and their short forms *la* and *bla* occur.

Imin gibit langa mi bib.
'He gave to me some meat.'

Imin dalibat la biganini stori.
'He was telling to the children a story.'

Imin meigim blanga im mami dop.
'She made for her mother a blouse.'

NOTE FOR CHAPTER 6

¹Neil Chadwick, personal communication 1974.

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