Deixis in MalakMalak: A case of language change in an endangered language

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This paper is concerned with language change in MalakMalak, a non-Pama-Nyungan highly endangered language with eleven remaining speakers in the Daly River region of Northern Australia. The language has an elaborate system of expressing spatial relations using directions of prevailing winds, the course of the sun, and significant landmarks such as the banks of the Daly River. Deixis and directionality are expressed in demonstratives, adverbs, and deictic suffixes attaching to all word classes. The semantics of the demonstratives and the distribution patterns of the deictic suffixes have changed over the last forty years. I argue that this is a direct correlation to a dramatically shrinking speaker community size and the resulting massive decline of language use.

The data for this analysis comes from recordings of the 1970s (Birk, 1974) and original fieldwork carried out between 2009 and 2013 in the Daly River region (Hoffmann, 2013). The study looks at distribution patterns in discourse and general usage of deixis, and draws conclusions for processes of semantic language change.

Historically, there used to be a four-way deictic distance distinction between *ngun-* 'there', *kaduk* - 'over there', *keen* - 'over here', and *ki* - 'here' as in example (1). This usage is recognized by today's speakers, but no longer produced. Instead, *keen* and *kaduk* are used as deictic complements to cardinal-type directionals such as *ngunanggi* in (2) and as discourse markers encoding old and new information respectively. The latter can be interpreted as a development from historical uses as markers of 'otherness' or taboo - *kaduk* in example (3) - and familiarity markers.

(1)   historical

kaduk	*wuyu*	***keen***	*wuyu*	*yawug*	*wunelli*
DIST	3SG.neu.stand.PST	PROX	3SG.neu.stand.PST	another	big.neu
ki	*wuyu*				
PROX	3SG.neu.stand.PST				

'There's one over there, one over here and another big one here (talking about groups of people sitting spread out during a meeting)'

(2)   current

dek	*ngunanggi*	***kaduk***
camp	south.western.bank	DIST

'(it is) on the other side of the river'

(3)   <u>historical</u>

kaduk   *yide,*   *dek*   *yuwaya*
DIST   3SG.masc.go.PRS   camp   2SG.go.PRS
'This other one (that person over there - brother that cannot be named) - he goes away with his brother'

Proximal (*-nggi*) or distal directional suffixes (*-ngga*) may attach to all word classes (4). Their distribution, however, has become much more restricted in current speech where they mainly occur in lexicalized form (5).

(4)   <u>historical</u>

ngurra   *tyid*   *pi*   *enung*-**ngga**
some/other   take   move   1SG.EXCL.go.FUT-DIST.DIR
'I'm going to take some beef back'

(5)   <u>current</u>

ngunanggi   *pi*   *yida*
western.riverbank/DIST.PROX.DIR   move   3SG.masc.go.PST
'he went to the other side'

A number of authors have addressed conceptual schemata underlying verbal semantics and temporal language, e.g. Koch (1999) and Marchello-Nizia (2006). This paper, in contrast, aims to address an aspect of spatial language change within a rich system of deixis and directionality. The lost complexity suggests a direct correlation between language use and geographic and cultural environment that are under threat alongside the language itself.

References

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