

Relational, Copula and Verbless Clauses in Rembarrnga

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Abstract. Rembarrnga, a polysynthetic language of Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia, has a range of clauses fitting the type termed copula clauses in earlier typologies by Curnow (1999) and Dixon (2002). These express relationships such as attribution, identity, location and possession between a subject noun phrase (CS) and a complement (CC), which may be a noun phrase, an adjective, a locational expression etc. Existential clauses are similar. In Rembarrnga, many of these clauses have no copula verb, suggesting that the category may be better defined functionally rather than formally, as Halliday (1994) and McGregor (1990, 1992, 1996) do.

Most such clauses in Rembarrnga involve juxtaposition of CS and CC. The noun phrase complement (CC) may be inflected for tense and for subject pronoun (CS) like intransitive verbs, though with some differences. Rembarrnga inflected nominals in such clauses can also incorporate nouns between the root and the pronominal prefix, just like verbs. There is a set of inchoative suffixes. Tense inflection for these types shows some similarity with positional verbs. A separate positional verb may also be used as a copula. Some examples show the distinction between characterising (verbless) and situational (with copula verb) types found by McGregor for Gooniyandi (McGregor 1990:308).

Keywords: copula, verbless (clause), relational (clause), existential, polysynthetic, Rembarrnga

1. Introduction

Languages typically have one or more clause types which are used to express such meanings as relationships between participants, classification or attribution using noun phrases or adjectives, and various similar meanings. Halliday (1994:119-138) deals with this general class of meanings functionally under the category of relational processes. Previous discussions of these clause types include the cross-linguistic study by Curnow (2000) and, with particular reference to Australian languages, that of Dixon (2002). Both Curnow and Dixon classify formal characteristics of such clauses under the heading “copula clauses”. McGregor (1990:292-317; 1992; 1996), who follows a functional classification based on Halliday, discusses clauses of these types in the Gooniyandi language of the Kimberley region of north-west Australia.

In the present paper we will outline the formal classifications of Curnow and Dixon and will suggest that the use of the term “copula clauses” is somewhat problematic for some of these clause types (those without copula verbs) and that this range of clause types has been brought together because of functional similarities.

Secondly, we will examine clauses of this functional type in Rembarrnga, a polysynthetic language of central Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia. These show a number of parallels to the patterns observed by Dixon, Curnow and McGregor, while the polysynthetic nature of Rembarrnga provides examples of features not covered by these earlier typological discussions. In particular Rembarrnga clauses of this type allow some features of verbal inflection such as noun incorporation, while at the same time distinguishing the tense/aspect inflection and pronominal prefix forms used with nominals from those used with verbs. As with many other Australian languages, verbless clauses are more common than copula clauses and positional verbs are used as copulas when applicable.

2. Earlier typological discussions of “copula clauses”

2.1. *Curnow*

In order to facilitate cross-linguistic comparison and the necessary data collection, Curnow defines what he calls “copula constructions” fairly narrowly as:

the most basic construction or constructions which a language uses to encode the meanings of:

- (a) identity of two participants normally encoded as noun phrases [...] (for example, ‘that man is my father’ [...]); and
- (b) group membership or classification using noun phrases (for example, ‘that woman is a doctor’ [...]) (Curnow 2000:1-2)

Using examples from a range of languages around the world he concludes that four main strategies are used for these constructions. In listing these he uses CS to represent “copula subject” and CC to represent “copula complement”. The term “particle” is used to refer to an additional word that cannot be seen as a verb. Order is not significant in defining the four basic strategies, though Curnow goes on to discuss the order of constituents within his typology.

- Verbal copula construction (CS + CC + Verb)
- Particle copula construction (CS + CC + Particle)
- Inflectional copula construction (CS + CC-inflected similar to verb)
- Zero copula construction (CS + CC)

Curnow excludes from his study related constructions that do not involve two noun phrases in the CS and CC roles and thus excludes from consideration clauses expressing such meanings as existence, possession, location, and attribution involving adjectives as CC. It seems anomalous to use the term copula in relation to the zero copula construction and perhaps even the inflectional copula construction since there is in effect no copula present in such clauses. This set of clause types is gathered under the heading “copula clauses”, it seems, primarily on the basis of similarity of functions or meanings rather than of formal presence of a copula or “linking verb”.

2.2. Dixon

Dixon (2002:1-4) states that copula clauses have relational meaning and that a copula is a verb that occurs with two core arguments, a copula subject (CS) and a copula complement (CC). Dixon indicates (2002:2) that verbless clauses (cf. Curnow’s zero copula construction) simply have these two noun phrases in juxtaposition without a

copula verb and that, in languages which lack a copula, such verbless clauses would typically be used to translate copula clauses from other languages. In other words he, too, is drawing on the functional unity of a formally diverse set of clause types.

Dixon claims that in some languages, including Australian languages, verbless and copula clauses may simply be variants of one type, while in other languages they may be distinct types (2002:2). He goes on to claim, using examples from Boumaa Fijian and Tariana, that an intransitive clause with a noun carrying verb inflection and functioning as “predicate head” (cf Curnow’s inflectional copula construction) must be clearly distinguished from a clause in which the same noun functions as copula complement (CC) after a copula verb (2002:2-4).

Dixon (2002:5-6) goes on to outline a more extensive list of functions for copula clauses than Curnow had done, some of which are paralleled in Halliday’s functional classification below (§2.3):

- Relation of identity (‘he is a doctor’) or equation (‘he is my father’): CC is NP
- Attribution: CC is adjective
- Location (‘John is from Perth’, ‘I am here’): CC is local adverb or NP + local case
- Possession (‘That car is John’s’): CC is NP + genitive
- Wanting/Benefaction (‘who’s for tennis?’, ‘that’s for John.’): CC is NP + dative
- Existence: No CC (CS only)

Unfortunately Dixon’s use of the terms “identity” and “equation” conflicts with that of Curnow. Dixon’s “identity” equals Curnow’s “group membership or classification” (which Halliday (1994:120-122) calls “attributive”). Dixon’s “equation” equals Curnow’s “identity” (which Halliday (1994:122-124) classes as “identifying”). Dixon’s use of “attribution” only recognizes attribution with CC as an adjective, while Curnow had only dealt with classification or group membership involving a noun phrase as CC. Halliday groups both types as “attributive”, e.g. *Paula is a poet*, *Sarah is wise* (Halliday 1994:120).

Note also that “existence” is listed here as one of the types of copula clause and is defined as having just one core argument in CS function. Later in the paper Dixon

(2002:17; cf. p. 22) indicates that “if it takes only one argument, then it should be classified as an intransitive verb, not as a copula verb”. This makes a lot of sense given the basic meaning of the word “copula” as a “linking verb”, but it does suggest that existential clauses, like verbless clauses, do not fit within a formally defined category of “copula clause”. The inclusion of existentials in the discussion is presumably due to the formal similarity in a language like English between copula clauses and existentials in that the verb ‘be’ (in other languages various position verbs) is used as a copula verb and an existential verb.

2.3. *Halliday*

Halliday (1994:119-138) classifies relational processes (including those expressed by copula verbs) into two main categories of meaning, or modes:

- Attributive: ‘*x* is a member of the class of *a*’
e.g. ‘She is wise’, ‘She is a poet’
- Identifying: ‘*x* is identified by *a*’, ‘*a* serves to define the identity of *x*’
‘Alice is the clever one’, ‘The clever one is Alice’
‘Tom is the leader’, ‘The leader is Tom’

These apply to each of the three types of relational process that he recognises (Halliday 1994:119):

- Intensive: ‘*x* is *a*’
- Circumstantial: ‘*x* is at *a*’ (where *at* represents a range of prepositions)
- Possessive: ‘*x* has *a*’

The examples given under attributive and identifying above are of the intensive type. Table 1 sets out examples of the various types (after Halliday’s Table 5(4), 1994:119):

	Attributive	Identifying
Intensive	Sarah is wise.	Tom is the leader.
	Paula is a poet.	The leader is Tom.
Circumstantial	The fair is on a Tuesday.	Tomorrow is the 10th.
		The 10th is tomorrow.
Possessive	Peter has a piano.	The piano is Peter's.
		Peter's is the piano.

Table 1 Principal types of relational processes

In Halliday's approach an existential process is of a separate type from relational processes (Halliday 1994:142-143), which is consistent with Dixon's view that without two noun phrases (both CS and CC) such a verb cannot be considered a copula.

3. Copula and Verbless clauses in Australian languages

3.1. *Dixon*

Dixon surveyed material on approximately 250 Australian languages to investigate the typology of verbless and copula clauses in Australian languages (2002:30). He maintains he "know[s] of no Australian language in which a nominal or an NP can function as the nucleus of an intransitive clause" (2002:10). This seems to indicate that he did not find clauses using the inflectional copula construction as described by Curnow. Rembarrnga does have such clauses inflected for tense (example (6) below) and/or for pronominal subject (examples (2), (3), and (5) below).

Dixon also claims that all Australian languages have verbless clauses comprising just CS and CC. He further notes that "a fair number of them also have copula clauses" and that "in every such language the copula verb is optional in many circumstances", leading him to conclude that "in many (perhaps in all) Australian languages" copula clauses and verbless clauses can be treated as varieties of one clause type (2002:10). Rembarrnga has both verbless and copula clauses but, as found by McGregor for Gooniyandi (1990:308) and by Nordlinger for Wambaya (1998:179) (mentioned by Dixon 2002:16), they cannot be considered varieties of one clause type. See §3.2 below.

Dixon lists 38 Australian languages as having copula verbs (2002:12-15) and goes on to distinguish three types of language with copula verbs (2002:16):

- with one copula verb for both ‘be’ and ‘become’
- with two copula verbs: ‘be’ versus ‘become’
- with a copula verb for ‘become’ but verbless clauses for ‘be’

He further notes that “a copula is likely to be omitted if reference is to present time, but included – with the appropriate tense suffix – for past or future reference” (2002:17). He distinguishes the copula verb ‘become’ from inchoative suffixes (2002:18-20). Furthermore he notes that in Australian languages copula verbs typically develop out of stance or motion verbs (e.g. ‘sit’, ‘stand’, ‘lie’, ‘go’) (2002:20-22) and that they typically have irregular paradigms or at least different tense, aspect and mood suffixes from other verbs (2002:25).

3.2. *McGregor*

McGregor adds a further dimension to the discussion of relational clauses and verbless clauses in his presentation of data from the Australian language Gooniyandi, a non-Pama-Nyungan language spoken in the Kimberley region of northern Western Australia (1990:292-317; 1992; 1996).

What is distinctive about Gooniyandi, according to McGregor, is that verbless and copula clauses are distinguished from one another in both attributive and identifying types. It is not legitimate in Gooniyandi to interpret verbless clauses as the same as copula clauses with optional omission of the copula verb. McGregor writes (1990:308):

[T]he choice between verbal and non-verbal clause is significant. Verbal clauses describe a situation in which the Attribute holds; verbless clauses characterise the Carrier by its possession of the Attribute. This distinction between characterisation and engagement in a situation approximates, but does not coincide with at least two other oppositions that might be invoked to characterise the difference between verbal and verbless clauses which attribute qualities of things. They are: (i) the difference between permanent and temporary possession of the Attribute; and (ii) the difference between present and

past possession of the Attribute (the relevant times may be with respect to either the speech situation or the referent events).

An example of (i) might be *He is generous* versus *He is being generous*, while an example of (ii) might be *He is a good hunter* versus *He used to be a good hunter*.

Nordlinger (1998:179) reports a similar distinction between clauses with and without a verb in Wambaya in the Northern Territory of Australia, but only with two adjectives: *bagidjbi* ‘bad’ and *guridjbi* ‘good’. She describes the difference as being between an “objective (or evaluative) meaning” for a verbless clause (e.g. ‘The boy is good/bad’) and a “subjective (or experiential) meaning” when a copula verb occurs (e.g. ‘The boy feels good/bad’). The objective meaning is a form of characterisation whereas the subjective meaning is more a matter of (temporary) situation, with the added subjective element of meaning.

4. Relational and verbless clauses in Rembarrnga

Rembarrnga is a non-Pama-Nyungan Australian language spoken in central Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. In the light of the discussion above, the approach taken here to exemplifying these phenomena from Rembarrnga will be to examine form based on a classification of these clauses by function (e.g. as relational, attributive, positional, existential, etc.). We find that a variety of formal means are used in Rembarrnga to express relational and existential clause meanings.

In Rembarrnga there appears to be no clear formal distinction between categories of noun and adjective and such words are termed “nominal” on account of similar affixing potential in Rembarrnga (McKay 1975:72-73; cf. Evans 2003:124 on shared morphological properties of nouns and adjectives in Bininj Gun-wok).

In the examples that follow, the core elements of the relevant clauses are in bold and pauses are represented by an upright mark (|). Punctuation is used in an attempt to indicate the structure of clauses, mostly linked to the occurrence of pauses.

Evans (2003:555-571) describes a very similar range of clauses in the neighbouring language Bininj-Gun-wok.

- (2) “*Nginygarnœch nginy-munanga,*” | *bak-yini-ny.* |
 2MIN.EMPH 2-white_man [3 > 3]IMPLIC-say-PAST.PUNCT
 “*Waba,*” | *yanda yarra-yini-ny bi-gappul,* |
 no 1A 1A-say-PAST.PUNCT Aborigine-DEF.AUG
 “*nanda-ma matjih bi.* |
 that-*ma* also Aborigine
Nœndahna gurlah-na ngœerroengœerr-yi. |
 no_matter skin-3MIN.POSS be_red-NOMLSR
Nœnda-ma bi,” | *yarr-bak-yini-ny.* |... [33/54-57]
 that-*ma* Aborigine 1A > 3-IMPLIC-say-PAST.PUNCT
 “‘You’re a white man,’ he said to him. ‘No,’ said all us Aborigines. ‘He’s an
 Aborigine too. It doesn’t matter that his skin is red [light]. He’s an Aborigine,’
 we said to him.’

Example (3) provides a negative clause in which the negative particle precedes a single nominal (CC) carrying a pronominal prefix representing the CS together in the distinctive form appropriate for a negative clause, just as with intransitive verbs. Once again this is an example of Curnow’s inflectional copula category if *jubul* is interpreted as a nominal rather than an adjective.

- (3) “*Mœlak ngirri-jubul,*” | *ngan-bak-yini-ny.* [27/54-57]
 NEG 1/2A.BACKGD-many 3 > 1-IMPLIC-say-PAST.PUNCT
 “‘There are not many of us [lit. “we not many”],’ he said to me [so we don’t
 need to go and fetch more].’

Example (4) shows a further similarity with verb forms in terms of affixation possibilities by incorporating a nominal between the pronominal prefix and the root to create a single-word attributive clause. This incorporated nominal limits the scope of the CC nominal. The incorporation of nominals into verbs is very common in Rembarrnga, with this being an example of “logical incorporation” (McKay 2007:42-43) with the prefix marking the possessor as subject (CS). The incorporation of a nominal into this CS-prefixed CC is a type not exemplified by Dixon, Curnow or McGregor.

- (4) “*Garda nga-ganga-rderhrderh.* | *Mungu nginda-yih*
oh 1-belly-hard perhaps 1MIN-ERG

nga-yaw-wa.” yini-ny. [3/53-54]

1 > 3-spear-FUT [3]say-PAST.PUNCT

“‘Oh, I’ve got a hard belly / My belly is hard. I’m going to spear it [kangaroo],”
he said.’ [Having a hard belly is a reference to courage. The speaker is a dove.]

Examples (5), (6) and (7) are in the past tense. The morpheme *-niyi* glossed as PAST is the same in form as the past tense of the verb ‘sit’, so *-niyi* might be treated either as a copula verb with the CC nominal incorporated into the verb form, or, in the case of example (6) only, as a separate verb, because the appropriate subject pronominal prefix would be zero in this case, and therefore it is not apparent at the surface whether this prefix immediately precedes the nominal *wurhwurrungu* or the verb/tense element *-niyi*. In examples (5) and (7) the former interpretation is the only one possible on account of the non-zero pronominal prefix form. For consistency, I analyse all three as involving an incorporated nominal. Furthermore in relational clauses of this type the past *-niyi* is the only tense found. There are no occurrences of the future or past counterfactual, unlike when the verb ‘sit’ appears as a regular positional verb (McKay 1975:93).

This means that tense inflection on nominals is defective compared with most verbs in Rembarrnga. Dixon noted (2002:8) that copula verbs often have limited tense/aspect/mood (TAM) forms or irregular forms. He finds a number of reports of irregular copula verbs in Australian languages but only one report (for Wardaman) of limited TAM inflection on copula verbs and one (Wembawemba) of limited pronominal suffix inflection on such verbs (2002:25-27). We are not claiming that the TAM marking on nominals in Rembarrnga is a copula verb, since positional verbs are used as copulas in some situations in Rembarrnga and in these cases the full range of verbal TAM inflection can occur. The examples here will be treated as inflected nominals.

Furthermore Rembarrnga does have two defective verbs (McKay 1975:139-141), so defectiveness in respect of TAM inflection is not confined to nominals. One of these defective verbs is the form *many*, which is a past punctual form meaning ‘went’, and

has no other tense/aspect form distinctions, though it does normally take intransitive pronominal prefixes. The other is *bart*, which means ‘pick up’ and which carries no TAM inflection and no pronominal prefixes, though it can be used in contexts where a number of different subjects and objects and a number of different TAM configurations are appropriate.

- (5) *Yarra-warna-jirrocmah-niyi*. [37/112]
 1A-still-wild-PAST
 ‘[We were living in the bush.] We were still wild [“cheeky”].’
- (6) *Wurrpparn wurhwurrungu-niyi | bi-niyi |*
 emu [3]old_person-PAST [3]person-PAST
ngayang | ngayang-niyi wurpparn. [3/3-4]
 devil devil-PAST emu
 ‘The emu was an old person [old woman], she was a person, a devil. Emu was a devil.’
- (7) *Nga-warna-waba-niyi-tjji*. [23/45]
 1-still-nothing-PAST-TEMP.LOC
 ‘When I was still nothing [hadn’t been born yet].’

4.2. Inchoative attributive

Examples (8)-(11) contain inchoative attributive clauses. In all these cases the inchoative suffix is used. In (8) and (9) it is in the present tense form, in (10) it is in the future tense form and in (11) it is in the past tense. These suffix forms (conjugation 7) are similar but not identical to the suffixes of (the various sub-classes of) conjugation 6, which contains only the various positional verbs, suggesting a possible formal relationship between the inchoative and the positional verbs (McKay 1975:96, 132). In example (11), despite the occurrence of zero prefix forms for third person singular subject in the past punctual, it is clear that the CS nominal *borloh* ‘tree’ can not be incorporated into the CC nominal. If it were incorporated in the same way as within verb forms it would follow the applicative prefix *-bak-*.

- (8) *Ye-ngulbitj-man-ji* ... [38/95]
 1/2.BACKGD-cold-INCHOAT.PRES.TEMP.LOC
 ‘When you and me get cold [in the middle of the night]...’
- (9) *Gekkuburrh gi-gurlah-rdath-man* ... [8/10]
 daytime 3.BACKGD-skin-dry-INCHOAT.PRES
 ‘In the daytime, when his skin dries out [the buffalo stands in the shade].’
- (10) “... *ngihgarnceh nga-yi-wurrpparn-miyana,*” *yini-ny.* [3/192]
 1MIN.EMPH 1-*yi*-emu-INCHOAT.FUT [3]say-PAST.PUNCT
 ‘I’ll be (an) emu myself [and like humans in sleeping at night and getting around in the daytime]”, she said.
- (11) *Borloh bak-ralk-miny.* [43/59]
 tree [3 > 3]IMPLIC-big-INCHOAT.PAST
 ‘The tree swelled [got big] on him [as a result of being “sung”, thus preventing him from climbing down].’

Dixon (2002:18) notes that “[a]lmost all Australian languages have an inchoative suffix which, when added to a nominal, derives an intransitive verbal stem with the meaning ‘become’”. The Rembarrnga examples show clearly that the inchoative in Rembarrnga is a suffix added to a nominal, not a separate copula verb. They also demonstrate that the inchoative in Rembarrnga is not defective in terms of TAM categories. Curnow does not deal with the inchoative.

The inchoative suffix in Rembarrnga can be used to supply the missing future tense for attributive clauses in the light of the fact that TAM inflection on nominals is restricted to a zero present tense and *-niyi* PAST (McKay 1975:93-97).

4.3. Identifying

Examples (12) and (13) have identifying function in which one nominal expression is identified by another. Such clauses involve simple juxtaposition of the two noun phrases/noun groups. In the case of (13) a pronominal prefix on CC once again cross-references the independent nominal CS. This is the basic zero copula con-

struction described by Curnow (2000:4) and the basic form reported for Australian languages by Dixon (2002:10).

- (12) *Medurlh nihdanda mipparr ganda-na.* [31/16-17]
 type_of_spear 3MIN.M black_breasted_buzzard leg-3MIN.M.POSS
 ‘The *medulh*-spear is the leg of the black-breasted buzzard.’

- (13) “*Nginda nga-mappurn,*” *yini-ny.* [42/62]
 1MIN 1-grub/boil [3]say-PAST.PUNCT
 “‘I am *mappurn* [the grub or boil dreaming],” he said.’

One subtype of identifying clauses recognised by McGregor (1990:297-298) is the naming clause. One distinguishing feature of this subtype in Gooniyandi is that the (verbless) relational identifying clause type has a corresponding (verbal) situational naming clause. In Rembarrnga, too, both verbless and verbal naming clauses are found. See examples (14) and (15).

- (14) *Nge-barrparrah munanga-pparah | Kapiu | Yurumh |* [38/199-202]
 name-3UA.POSS white_man.UA [name] [name]
 ‘The two white men’s names were Kapiu, Yoram [Baduan lay missionaries (identification Gowan Armstrong pers. comm.)].’

- (15) *Bi-wala nginda nga-nge-ttu-ru Milmilgama.* [23/62]
 Aboriginal-ABL 1MIN 1-name-stand-PRES [name]
 ‘In Rembarrnga [lit. “from Aboriginal (person)”] my name is Milmilgama.’

4.4. *Locational*

Another type of clause meaning that appears in both verbless (examples (16) and (17)) and verbal (example (18)) types is the locational clause. In fact in example (18) there are three locational clauses essentially repeating the same information with slight variations in information and/or focus, a feature described as Focusing repetition by McKay (2008:11-13). The first and last example use the positional verb ‘lie’ while the middle one is a verbless clause.

Locational clauses are listed by McGregor as one of the subtypes of the circumstantial subcategory of characterising (attributive) clauses (McGregor 1990:301-304).

- (16) *Yene-tjja* *gœhdœ* *Namorarra?* [32/12]
 INDEF-LOC now [name]
 ‘Where is Namorarra?’
- (17) *Juga* *muju* *bcœnda?* [43/24]
 sugar check there
 ‘The sugar’s there, isn’t it? / There’s sugar there, isn’t there?’
- (18) *Datpa* *bcœnda-tjja* *ga-yuru.* |
 king_brown_snake there-LOC 3-lie.PRES

Jarng-na *bcœnda-tjja.* | ...
 dreaming-3MIN.M.POSS there-LOC

Bœnda-tjja *jarng-na* *ga-yuru* *datpa.* [12/37-40]
 there-LOC dreaming-3MIN.M.POSS 3-lie.PRES king_brown_snake
 ‘The king brown snake is there. Its dreaming is there. The king brown dreaming is there.’

These examples seem to show verbless and copular locational clauses as simple alternatives, not following the characterising versus situational distinction outlined by McGregor (1990:308). They could be interpreted as clauses with a copula verb that may optionally be deleted, as suggested by Dixon (2002:10). Example (17) can also be interpreted as an existential clause with a locational expression. See §4.7 below. This example cannot be formally distinguished from what Dixon describes as copula clauses expressing a relation of location, having a locational expression as CC (Dixon 2002:5).

4.5. Possession

Possession clauses are a further subtype of circumstantial characterising clauses in McGregor’s terms (1990:301-304). Example (19) exemplifies the two ways of marking these clauses: using the dative suffix *-gan* and using the possessive pronoun suffixes. In each case only one word occurs.

- (19) “*Bi-gan*,” *yini-ny.* | “*Dawal-barrœ.*” [33/53]
 Aborigine-DAT [3]say-PAST.PUNCT country-3A.POSS
 “It belongs to the Aborigines,” he said. “It’s their country. / The country is theirs.””

Example (20) provides another example of a series of possessive clauses using both dative and possessive.

- (20) ... | *Gutjpcærrœ-ja.* | *Nginda-gan dawal.* |
 [place]-LOC [3]1MIN-DAT country

Mœlak yi-nginda-gan gorrih-ngæncœ, |
 NEG 3.BACKGD-1MIN-DAT alone-1MIN.POSS

jubul dawal-yarrœ. | *Bœnda-tjja* [42/24-25]
 many [3]country-1AUG.POSS there-LOC
 ‘At *Gutjpcærrœ.* That country is mine. / That is my country. It’s not mine on my own, but the country belongs to a whole lot of us.’

The first and second of these clauses, being positive and negative, provide some further insight into the morphology of this structure. In particular the negative clause shows that after the negative particle the dative-marked pronoun carries the negative form of the third person singular subject pronominal prefix. This suggests that in fact *nginda-gan* in the first line of this example should be interpreted as carrying a zero non-negative third person singular subject (CS) prefix as marked by the bracketed gloss. This analysis would also apply to both possessive clauses in example (19), which could be presented using an alternative notation as (21), in which the zero pronominal prefix form is included in the text of the example as well as in the gloss. By the same token comparison with the earlier examples where a past tense was available suggests that these examples could also be seen to have zero present tense marking.

- (21) “*Ø-Bi-gan-Ø,*” *Ø-yini-ny.* | “*Ø-Dawal-barrœ-Ø.*” [33/53]
 3-Aborigine-DAT-PRES 3-say-PAST.PUNCT 3-country-3A.POSS-PRES
 “That belongs to the Aborigines,” he said. “It’s their country. / The country is theirs.””

Given that this third person singular prefix has zero form in these present tense clauses, this provides another distinctive characteristic of relational clauses in Rembarrnga. With verbs, the zero third person singular subject prefix form only occurs in the past tense. This type of distinctive prefix realisation on nominals is reported by Evans for Biniŋ Gun-Wok, a near neighbour of Rembarrnga and a closely related language (2003:556). Compare Dixon’s note regarding defective inflection for copula clauses (2002:8, 25-27), though these Rembarrnga clauses involve an inflected noun phrase rather than a copula verb. Dixon’s examples of the possession relation use a copula (2002:24)

4.6. *Having/lacking clauses*

Yet another type of circumstantial characterising clause recognised for Gooniyandi by McGregor is that using the comitative suffix, which he terms Associative. This type also occurs in Rembarrnga, not only with the comitative suffix (‘having’) but also with the privative suffix (‘lacking’).

Example (22) is a comitative example in which the CC is marked with the comitative but also carries a second person singular pronominal prefix to mark the subject (CS). Example (23) is a similar example with the privative suffix.

(22) *Nginy-bartta-wany-bulkka-yi.* [P/49/23]

2-with-armpit-hair-COMIT

‘You’ve got armpit hair.’

(23) “*Waba. | Ya-me-ttœ, ya-mœh-nyarh, | yaluk.*” [32/29-30]

no 1/2-tucker-PRIV 1/2-EVIT-die hunger/hungry

‘No [we won’t stay here]. We have no tucker [i.e. vegetable food] and we might die, of hunger/hungry.’

Example (24) uses the privative suffix but is in the past tense as marked by the suffix *-niyi*, exemplified for attributive clauses above.

- (24) *Nayukka-gan mœlak munanga*
 long.time-DAT NEG white_man
ge-bolh-mœ-tjji waba,
 3.BACKGD-arrive-IRR-TEMP.LOC nothing
yarra-bartta-munanga-ttœ-niyi ... [37/110-111]
 1A-with-white_man-PRIV-PAST
 ‘Long ago when the white man hadn’t yet come, nothing, and we were without
 white men / we had no white men ...’

4.7. *Existential*

The existential clause draws attention to the existence of some entity, sometimes indicating its location. These clauses comprise simply the relevant nominal (CS) plus, where applicable, a locational expression as in example (25).

- (25) *Mulah banda-tjja nga-bu-na | munmunh? |*
 grandson here-LOC 1 > 3-cut[hit]-FUT grass_species
Waba. Bœnda-ma jala. [3/113-114]
 no there-*ma* piss/urine
 ‘Grandson, shall I get the grass [*Alloteropsis semialata*] here?’
 ‘No. There’s piss there.’

In example (26) there is no locational expression and the existential clauses each contain just one core item. Following the particle *guya*, which I have translated “they might think”, indicating a mistaken opinion, a verb would normally require the prefix *yi-*. This prefix is described by Saulwick (2003:100-109) as poly-homophonous, with at least twelve different meanings. This may be an example of the usage that he glosses “reported speech” (Saulwick 2003:104-105). In this case the nominal is prefixed with an overt non-past third person singular subject prefix, as is required before *yi-*, though there is no separate subject (CS) for it to cross-reference.

- (26) *Guya* *ga-yi-buwa* *matjjih*
 they_might_think 3-*yi*-river and

guya *ga-yi-gorngorr* *garræh* *waba.* [26/27]
 they_might_think 3-*yi*-billabong but no
 ‘They might think there’s a river or billabong, but no [it’s a desert].’

Finally the privative-marked example in (27) may be taken as a negative existential, though parallel to examples (23) and (24) above.

- (27) *Ngurah-dæ-niyi.* [30/4]
 fire-PRIV-PAST
 ‘There was no fire.’

Example (17) above could be interpreted as either a locational clause or a locational existential clause, as the two alternative translations there suggest.

4.8. “Situational” clauses and position verbs

In some examples position verbs are used and these may describe a “situation” in McGregor’s terms rather than characterising a particular entity. This is clearly the case, for instance, with example (28), which presents a temporary situation. Notice that the two situational clauses given in example (28), the second of which is effectively a focusing repetition of the first (McKay 2008:11-13), use different positional verbs (‘stand’ and ‘lie’) with the same nominal *jirræ* ‘trouble’. Typically the choice of position verb would be related to the characteristic position/orientation of the entity referred to, but with a relatively abstract entity like *jirræ* ‘trouble’ it may be that this pattern cannot apply.

(28) ... *jirœ* *boenda* *barran-bak-yappah-yu-wa.* |
trouble there 3 > 3A-IMPLIC-UA-lie-PAST.PUNCT

Jirœ *barran-bak-diyi-pparra* *ralk*
trouble 3 > 3A-IMPLIC-stand.PAST.PUNCT-UA big

garlina *ngayang-ja.* [38/19-20]
big dead_person-LOC

‘There was trouble there for the two of them. There was huge trouble for the two of them on account of murder.’

Example (29) contains two clauses with positional verbs separated by a verbless identifying clause that was discussed above as example (12). The two clauses with positional verbs can be taken as describing a “situation”, namely that a certain type of tree for making spear shafts can be found at a particular place. This is not a matter of characterising either the place or the trees but rather of giving information on current availability. The middle clause, however, does characterise this particular tree by identifying it with the legs of the black-breasted buzzard in mythological terms.

(29) *Yarrakkuh* *buwa-tjja* | *ga-duru* *medurlh.* |
down river-LOC 3-stand.PRES tree_species

Medurlh *nihdanda* *mipparr* *ganda-na.* |
tree_species 3MIN.M black_breasted_buzzard leg-3MIN.M.POSS

... *Bordi* *ga-duru.* [31/16-17]
spear 3-stand.PRES

‘Down at the river side there are *medurlh*-trees [spear shafts]. The *medulh*-spear is the leg of the black-breasted buzzard. There are spears [i.e. shafts] [standing there].’

It seems, then, that the distinction between verbal situational and verbless relational clauses described by McGregor for Gooniyandi also holds for examples like this in Rembarnga. It is not yet clear whether this is systematically true in Rembarnga. Example (18) above, for instance, seems to be one where this contrast does not explain the distinction between verbal and verbless clauses.

5. Conclusion

Rembarrnga certainly does not use a copula in most of the clauses that are used to express the range of meanings discussed above. It is unfortunate that the term “copula clause” has come to be used by Dixon and Curnow, since this focuses on one particular formal means of expression, namely a copula verb. This then leads to a situation in which terms such as “zero copula” and “inflectional copula” appear to be anomalous because a separate copula is not used. McGregor (drawing on Halliday) has avoided this particular problem by focusing on the functions or meanings involved in these types of clauses, freeing them to recognise diverse means of expression, including verbless clauses and inflected nominals. In fact the selection of constructions for inclusion by Dixon and Curnow owes a lot to functional rather than formal similarity.

Rembarrnga does use verbless clauses for attributive, identifying and existential clauses when the tense is not marked (normally present tense). When marked tense is required there are past and inchoative suffixes available. The past suffix seems to be related to the past tense of the verb ‘sit’ (*niyi*), but is defective in lacking forms corresponding to the other tenses of that position verb.

Nominals in Rembarrnga can be inflected to function in verbless clauses or even to form one-word verbless clauses in their own right. These inflections include tense suffixes and pronominal subject prefixes. Like verbs, such inflected nominals may also have nouns incorporated into them.

Finally position verbs are used to form existential and naming clauses in Rembarrnga.

There appear to be some Rembarrnga parallels to the Gooniyandi distinction between relational (verbless) and situational (verbal) clauses but it is not yet clear that this distinction holds systematically in Rembarrnga.

Abbreviations

1, 1/2, 2, 3: first (exclusive), first (inclusive), second, third person (minimal number unless specifically marked otherwise) – A: augmented number (minimal plus more than one) – ABL: ablative – AUG: augmented number (minimal plus more than

one) – BACKGD: backgrounded – COMIT: comitative – DAT: dative – DEF.AUG: defined augmented – EMPH: emphatic – ERG: ergative – EVIT: evitative – FUT: future – IMPLIC: implicative (applicative) – INCHOAT: inchoative – INDEF: indefinite – IRR: irrealis – LOC: locative – M: masculine – MIN: minimal number for person category (singular except for first person inclusive) – NOMLSR: nominaliser – NEG: negative – PAST: past – PAST.PUNCT: past punctual – POSS: possessive – PRES: present – PRIV: privative – TAM: Tense/Aspect/Mood – TEMPLOC: temporal location – UA: unit augmented number (minimal plus one) – [...] zero morpheme

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