

Yanyuwa: “Men speak one way, women speak another”

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This paper describes briefly the apparently unique system within the Yanyuwa language of having separate dialects for male and female speakers. I will highlight some of the social and ethnographic features of language as it is used in day-to-day speech and in such specific examples as song and ritual. The system is pervasive and distinctly marks the way in which men and women must speak. As a result the roles of men and women in Yanyuwa society are not only contrasted by their social roles, such as ritual life, hunting and nurturing, such as can be found in other Aboriginal communities, but also explicitly by the use of different dialects by male and female speakers. The sex of the hearer has no relevance to the way the language is spoken: men speak their dialect to women and women speak their dialect to men.

The Yanyuwa people today are centred around the township of Borroloola some 970 kilometres south-east of Darwin. Traditionally the Yanyuwa people occupied the Sir Edward Pellew Group of Islands and the lower reaches of the McArthur River delta system and the Wearyan River. Today Yanyuwa speakers number approximately 90 to 150, ranging in age from the late twenties upwards. The younger generation have grown up speaking English with some influence from Kriol, though many have obtained a passive knowledge of Yanyuwa. The reasons for the decline in the language are many, varied and complex and have been described by Jean Kirton (1987). She has been working with the Yanyuwa since 1963 and has been in a position to document the language in considerable detail (see bibliography).

There have been a number of languages recorded throughout the world that have some sex differences. Edward Sapir (1923: 263–85) documented the now extinct Indian Yahi language, a dialect of the Yana group in Northern California. Sapir noted dialect differences relating to sex and found that in Yana the male form was longer than the female form and included a final syllable as the root; dialectal differences occurred more in complete words than in suffixed elements. There was also a further non-structural distinction in pronunciation whereby men when talking to men spoken fully and deliberately and when speaking with a woman preferred a ‘clipped’ style of speaking. Three examples of the Yana speech are given below.

	male	female
'grizzly bear'	<i>t'en'na</i>	<i>t'et</i>
'see me'	<i>diwai-dja</i>	<i>diwa-tch</i>
'Yana'	<i>Yana</i>	<i>Yah</i>

Sapir concludes that there are or have been few if any languages in the world in which the split in a dialect has been so pervasive or so thorough: The sex-based dialect differences in Yanyuwa are at least as far-reaching. The following text illustrates the extent of divergence between the two dialects (see Kirton 1988 for a full discussion of the grammatical differences). Note that the same word stems are used in both dialects, but it is the class-marking prefixes on the noun classes, verbs and pronouns which are affected. (NB Yanyuwa has seven classes of common nouns: male (M); female (F); masculine (MSC); feminine (FEM); food (non-meat) (FD); arboreal (ARB); and abstract (ABS); and four cases: nominative (NOM); dative (DAT); ergative-allative (ERG/ALL) marking transitive subject and 'to' a person or location; and ablative (AB).)

Women's Dialect

Nya-ja nya-wukuthu nya-rduwarra niya-wini nya-Wungkurli kiwa-wingka
 This-M M-short M-initiated man his-name M-personal name he-go
wayka-liya ji-wamarra-lu niwa-yirdi na-ridiridi ji-walya-wu
 down-wards MSC-sea-ALL he-bring ARB-harpoon MSC-dugong/turtle-DAT

Men's Dialect

Jinangu φ-wukuthu φ-rduwarra na-wini φ-Wungkurli ka-wingka wayka-liya
 This short initiated man his-name personal name he-go down-wards
ki-wamarra-lu na-yirdi na-ridiridi ki-walya-wu
 MSC-sea-ALL he-bring ARB-harpoon MSC-dugong/turtle-DAT

'The short initiated man whose name is Wungkurli, went down to the sea, taking a harpoon with him for dugong or sea turtle.'

The reason behind this dialect distinction is today unknown and the reason why a male and female dialect arose can only be left to the realms of speculation. The Yanyuwa themselves give no definitive answer as to why there are two dialects, and there is no mythological account for the distinction. In their mythology the female Creator Beings speak the women's dialect and the male Creator Beings speak the men's dialect. The Yanyuwa give no special terms for the two dialects and refer to them simply as *liyi-wulu-wu* 'for the men' and *liyi-nhanawaya-wu* 'for the women'. The most common statement given by the Yanyuwa people in relation to their language is as follows:

'Men speak one way, women speak another, that's just the way it is!' (Annie Karrakayn, 1986)

When I first asked why men and women had different dialects, people deferred to the knowledge of the elders who also readily admitted they did not really know, and thought that the question was a little peculiar. As one of the older Yanyuwa men put it:

'I am ignorant why there are languages for the men and women, maybe the Dreamings made it that way. I don't know, the old people spoke that way and we follow them. What about him, that "whitefella boss man" (scientist), he might know you should go and ask him.' (Old Tim Rakuwurlma, 1985)

Other people who profess a belief in Christianity believe that their language was given to them by God because that is the way He wanted the Yanyuwa people to speak. Only a few individuals offered opinions which were different from that of the general community.

‘I don’t really know, but I was thinking that men and women have to respect each other, so we talk different ways and so we show respect for each other, just like ceremony; you know men have their ceremony and their language well same way women have their own ceremony and their own language.’ (Mussolini Harvey, 1986)

Two women, on hearing of Mussolini Harvey’s comment, said they would do more thinking on the question and eventually came up with the following statement.

‘Look at you, you’re different you don’t have *na-wunban* [breasts] and you are a man, well same way you can’t have woman’s parts [vagina] so you see we’re different, different body, different job, different language, that’s why I can’t talk like a man and you can’t talk like us ladies.’ (Amy Friday with Bella Charlie, 1986)

It is obvious then that some Yanyuwa people see the system of two dialects as a natural off-shoot of differing sex roles within their community, in terms of such matters as ritual divisions of labour and other more daily activities such as child nurturing, hunting, social and group dynamics.

Unfortunately the younger generation of Yanyuwa people no longer speak Yanyuwa, so it is very difficult to discuss the way in which the Yanyuwa language was acquired by children. However, conversations with the older Yanyuwa people have enabled at least a partial, albeit fragmentary, reconstruction. It appears that in very early childhood children spoke a form of neutral Yanyuwa, that is, the dialectal markers were removed from words, so that ‘at or with the fire’ became *buyuka-la* rather than the correct *ji-buyuka-la* for women and *ki-buyuka-la* for men. As the children grew up they were reared in a predominantly female atmosphere surrounded by grandmothers, mothers and aunts, so that the language for the children of both sexes was predominantly the women’s dialect.

In early adolescence boys were, and still are, initiated through a series of rituals which culminated in circumcision, after which they were considered men and from which time onwards they were expected to speak the men’s dialect. However, it was no smooth transition. For at least 10 years the boys had been speaking a predominantly female form of Yanyuwa and only passively hearing the men’s dialect. As a consequence, for a short while after initiation they spoke a form of Yanyuwa which was a mixture of both men’s and women’s dialects. This was a situation which the older Yanyuwa apparently did not tolerate and the young men were disciplined for speaking incorrectly. A middle aged man gave the following account of such a situation.

‘I was only a newly initiated man, and I asked my mother where Douglas [male cousin] was. I spoke like a woman and she yelled at me, “Hey! you are a man, you have no foreskin, why do you talk like a woman? Speak like a man, you are not a small child!” I was shamed, it was not easy to get the men’s words right straight away.’ (D.M. 1986)

Another man remembers asking to go dugong hunting with his uncle using the female dialect.

‘When I spoke like a woman my father said to me, “Where are your breasts and woman’s parts [vagina]?” I was really shamed. I was very careful for a while after that to speak the men’s words.’ (J.T. 1986)

To the Yanyuwa the two dialects are socially very important and after maturity it is considered only proper to speak the dialect of the sex to which one belongs.

Today most young people are more familiar with the female form of the language because of their frequent association with female company, for example at meal times and shopping trips to the store. Consequently when on the odd occasion a young Yanyuwa male uses Yanyuwa he often speaks the women's dialect, for which he is then disciplined. The following example is typical of such a situation.

- SON: Mum, did you buy *ni-warnnyi* [meat]?
- MOTHER: Hey! Are you a man or woman? Man got to talk *na-warnnyi* not *ni-warnnyi* that's women's talk, you got to talk properly, you not little kid you know.
- SON: Hey look you complain because young people don't talk language and when we do you got to laugh at us, man may as well not even bother.
- MOTHER: Well, you just got to learn to talk proper way just like we did. (A.I. and D.I. 1985)

It would appear that the system of having separate dialects for men and women invokes strong feelings about speaking correctly, which in itself creates a system where slovenliness of speech is not acceptable social behaviour. If individuals wish to speak Yanyuwa then they are expected to speak the dialect which is associated with their sex – there is no other alternative.

The groups neighbouring the Yanyuwa, such as the Mara, Garawa and Kurdanji, all say that Yanyuwa is 'too rough to learn', that is, the sex-differentiated dialects are somewhat obstructive to the understanding and learning of the language for a person of non-Yanyuwa descent. Only a few Garawa and Mara speakers today speak Yanyuwa with an easy fluency, while the Yanyuwa declare that Garawa and Mara are easy languages and the fact that many Yanyuwa people today have Mara and Garawa as second and third language is proof of this for the Yanyuwa.

There are occasions when the Yanyuwa men and women do speak each other's dialects, such as when they are relating a story where people of the opposite sex to the speaker have spoken, in which case the quotation will normally be in the dialect which relates to the sex of the person who has spoken. However, there are times especially in rapid general conversation where the distinctions are not highlighted and one must rely on other contextual clues to find out the sex of the speakers involved.

On rare occasions, men and women utilize the dialectal differences in Yanyuwa to draw attention to themselves. Once an elderly man in charge of certain public funeral rituals was not pleased with the way the performances were developing. He began orating his displeasure. At first people paid little attention until a woman pointed out that he was using the female dialect. When this was realized people listened to what was being said. I have witnessed such an occurrence once in eight years of fieldwork, though people present at the time said it had occasionally happened in the past. It is more common for both sexes to be somewhat hesitant to speak the dialect of the other sex unless it is for a specific reason, such as working for anthropologists or linguistic researchers, and on some occasions male Yanyuwa speakers have difficulty constructing the female form of the language and often defer to their wives or ask what they have stated to be checked with a female speaker; the women's dialect is the more complex of the two.

Both men and women will use the dialect of the opposite sex quite freely in joking situations, more specifically in situations relating to male and female relationships and sexual encounters. These situations are somewhat ribald and risqué and full of humour to the Yanyuwa. Amongst the men such occurrences take place after certain ceremonial

performances, for example where a male dancer impersonates a woman, after which he will tease his brothers-in-law as if they are his prospective wives. An example is given below.

Female Dialect spoken by Male Speaker

Nya-ngatha nya-Nyilba nya-yabi yinda nya-marringaya nda-wuna

M-for me M-pers.name M-good you:sg M-beautiful your:sg-buttocks

‘My Nyilba, you are too good, you have beautiful buttocks.’

(T.F. 1986)

Another unusual occurrence is the use of the female dialect form within the song cycles used by the Yanyuwa men during ceremonial performance. Many of the male mythological species are marked with the female dialect marker *nya-*. In everyday spoken Yanyuwa the men do not use the names of these creatures with this prefix. Examples are *nya-Yilayi*, Spotted Nightjar, *nya-Walungkanarra*, Rainbow Serpent, and *nya-Wurrunkardi*, the personal name of the Dingo Dreaming.

Within the song cycles, there are also female dialectal markers on common nouns and a number of verb stems from the female dialect. Two examples are given below:

Song Verse

Manankurra ‘At Manankurra
kiya-alarri He (a Shark Dreaming) stood.’

Manankurra
place name

kiya-alarri
he: stand

The prefix *kiya-* in the second line of the above verse is a women’s dialect prefix, while in the men’s dialect it is *ka-*.

Song Verse

Warriyangalayani ‘The Hammerhead Shark
ni-mambul ni-ngurru makes spray with its nose.’

Warriyangalayani
Hammerhead shark

ni-mambul ni-ngurru
its:spray its:nose

The prefix *ni-* in the second line is the female masculine form. In the male dialect it would be *na-*.

When the men were questioned as to why the female dialect forms were found in song cycles, especially when some song cycles deal with male figures, they could give no answer and did not appear to be particularly disturbed. They classed such occurrences as ‘That’s just the Dreaming, they’re different’. It is tempting to hypothesize that the female dialect may be the more archaic of the two, but without sufficient evidence such a hypothesis remains very tentative. The occurrences of feminine dialect forms in the song cycles are too irregular to form any definite conclusions.

A hypothesis put forward by Dixon (1968) suggests that in some Aboriginal languages there is evidence of an underlying logic in apparent exceptions. He puts forward rules which apply to transfer of class membership in Australian languages. He believes irregular occurrences are in fact a purposeful class transference which classifies according to mythological characteristics rather than observable ones or which mark some important property, quite often danger. Dixon's hypothesis may be relevant to the unusual prefixing which occurs in Yanyuwa song cycles.

There are other examples of unusual language usage which fit more into the mundane social life of the Yanyuwa. Two such examples are where root words are given irregular male and female prefixes:

nya-bardibardi

M-old woman

This word is used by women to refer to older men who associate with women, especially widows, and who constantly demand food or money from them.

rra-malbu

FEM-old man

This word is used by men to refer to older women who are said to associate with men too much, especially in relation to aspects of Yanyuwa life in which they should only be minimally involved. Both of the above terms are not regularly used and are meant to be somewhat insulting in their intent.

The Yanyuwa language also has complex avoidance and kinship terms, both of which are affected by the men's and women's dialects. This has been described by Kirton (1982, 1988).

In any given culture there will be differences in the way men and women speak, for example, in terms of address and the use of expletives, but it would appear that in Yanyuwa the speech differences of male and female speakers are so extensive that the two forms of speech have become dialects of the one language.

In Yanyuwa society the system of two dialects is all pervasive; in day to day usage the two dialects are an intrinsic part of the language. The Yanyuwa continually stressed when asked why there were separate dialects: 'It's just the way it is, no other reason.' In fact many of the Yanyuwa thought, and probably still think, the question a trifle stupid. None of the neighbouring languages share this feature, and in fact some of these people, such as the Garawa, Mara and Kurdanji, see Yanyuwa as a language too difficult to learn because of the separate dialects. Even though the Yanyuwa take for granted their system of male and female dialects they still place much importance on speaking correctly.

The reasons as to why two distinct dialects for female and male speakers have developed are lost in time. This feature has however served to make Yanyuwa a language unique within Aboriginal Australia, if not the world.

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