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*Yalŋgi matha : making it easy for the child*

*Yalŋgi matha*, a simplified child-directed speech register is used widely and consistently in these families in their interactions with babies and young children. The features of this register include **phonological and morphological simplifications, exaggerated intonation contours, exaggerated articulation, slower rate, frequent repetition, increased use of sign language and other non-verbal cues such as facial expression**. One parent described the register used with young children:

...to help her understand - use *goŋ* (hands), sign language, simple language, *ga action djäma* and face changes and change voice...

Devlin (1986) described the simplified language register used by Yolngu adults to babies and very young children as mimicking some of the features observed in the language used by young children, such as deletion of initial /ng/. This register is characterised by syllable reduction, reduplication, and simplification of consonant clusters. In another Northeast Arnhemland community, Amery (1993) also identified a simplified register used with young children. Harris (1977) described a developmental child language in the nearby community of Milingimbi, which differed from adult language in terms of vocabulary, greater consciousness of taboos, greater use of slang and English corruptions, regularising of irregular verbs and use of three instead of four verb tenses. This variety of Yolngu Matha reportedly persisted well into their late teens. However, he did not observe much use of a 'baby talk' register, and suggested that adults did not modify their conversation for children to the extent that non-Aboriginal people do. This finding is not sustained by other studies in the region that have consistently reported extensive use of a specific child-directed speech register in Yolngu communities.

**Simplification of input** by Aboriginal adults in interaction with young children has been described in a range of other communities, but opinions about the extent and purpose of this simplification differ. In Maningrida, 'baby talk' is used with young children up to the age of two or three, and, as with Yolngu, the form of 'baby talk' differs between dialects: as each parent may use a different dialect, children are used to hearing slightly different forms of language from early childhood (Machbirrbirr, 1990). A modified 'baby talk' register that features contrastive intonation and repetition, and simplification of the linguistic code is used with Western Desert children up to four years old (Jacobs, 1986). Warlpiri adults are also reported to use a speech style in which both phonological and semantic structures are simplified, in their interaction with young children (Laughren, 1984). However, Laughren suggests that the function of this register is not to facilitate the child's comprehension but to symbolise the social roles between adults and children. Bavin (1993) also describes features of the simplified register used by Warlpiri adults with children, such as the modification of kinship terms by Warlpiri adults to guide early learning, but suggests that baby talk is primarily used in playing with or teasing young children, putting responsibility on them to learn the adult form. In contrast, the use of 'baby talk' in Yolngu families appears to be a very deliberate form of child-centred communicative accommodation which also is intended to facilitate the child's communicative development.

Yolngu refer to the modified register they use with young children as *yalŋgi matha*. This is contrasted with adult language, referred to as *däl matha* (strong, hard or difficult - the opposite to *yalŋgi* which is defined as soft or easy). **The choice of register - *yalŋgi* or *däl* or a mixture - appears to be primarily determined by the child's level of comprehension.**

Interaction with babies is predominantly *yalŋgi*, and other features of communication, as mentioned above, include exaggerated intonation and facial expression, and extensive use of gesture. For example, in the first ten minutes of interaction filmed with Balang (0;8) and his family, 72 % of utterances directed to Balang were in *yalŋgi matha*, that is, simplified in some way. Initially, utterances are heavily modified; as children get older the phonological modifications in this register appear to decrease in extent and the words gradually become closer approximations of the adult form. For example, in these families the word for 'mother' appeared to go through the following stages:

ama -> amama -> amala -> ŋamala -> ŋama'/ŋändi (adult forms)

And the word for 'mine':

agagu -> daku/raku -> rraku/ŋarraku (adult forms)

As children's receptive communication develops the amount of *däl matha* is gradually increased and the amount of non-vocal input (ie. Yolngu sign language as well as non-verbal cues) is decreased. In contrast to the frequency of *yalŋgi matha* used with Balang (0;8), 35% of utterances directed to Gutjan (2;1) during the first ten minutes of filmed interaction were in *yalŋgi matha*. By pre-school age some children will still use some *yalŋgi matha* but can understand *däl matha* (see further detail on developmental stages below).

However, for children who have any degree of communication difficulty or developmental delay, speakers will continue to use simplified language and additional non-verbal cues at the level required for effective communication to occur. Chronological age or the size of the child do not influence the language register used with the child - this is determined entirely by the developmental stage of the child's receptive communication.

A few family members were a little hesitant initially in talking about their use of *yalŋgi matha*, possibly due to critical comments made about this practice in the past by Balanda in the community. However, all family members of all ages were observed to use *yalŋgi matha* with young children and often strongly defended its role in both in ensuring effective communication and in facilitating the child's language development. This position contrasts with the reports of Bavin (1993) and Laughren (1984) that Warlpiri 'baby talk' is not used to fulfil such functions. Explanations about why Yolngu use *yalŋgi matha* include:

That's their first language - to make them understand before they learn adult language - *märrma'* (two); it's easy to make them understand through *yalŋgi matha* and they quickly get that word then at two or three or four (years old) then they talk *yalŋgi matha* word into *däl matha*

Another parent also argued strongly in support of using this modified register:

*Yalŋgi matha* (is) part of Yolngu system - we can't change that for anything - helps kids to develop their talking and they might use that to their own children; to help the baby to understand and teaching and educating through *yalŋgi matha*; *yalŋgi matha* helps development and understanding and learning (also) through action and expression on the face - (in the) middle they realise they can use *däl matha*

The use of *yalŋgi matha* is considered important for language comprehension:

... with *yalŋgi matha* some children can easily get (the message): babies like Balang's age (0;8) can easily catch '*athatha*' for '*ŋatha*' - showing the food and saying *ŋatha* - maybe he doesn't know what it means (so if we) use action and *yalŋgi* word the baby can understand what we say.

It also facilitates expressive language development: 'it's easy for the *yothu* (child) to say (the word) in a *yalŋgi* way'. That is, it is easier for the child to imitate a phonologically simplified model.

As discussed above, kinship terms are used with a high level of frequency with young children and most are modified to varying extents, depending on the phonological structure of the adult form of the word and the age of the child. Some other examples of *yalŋgi matha* include:

<i>abubu'</i>	( <i>lupthun</i> : wash yourself)
<i>dhambuyu</i>	( <i>dhamburu</i> : chubby)
<i>argudhu'</i>	( <i>ŋarraku yothu</i> : my baby)
<i>hatha'</i>	( <i>ŋatha</i> : food)
<i>matjĩ</i>	( <i>marrtji</i> : go)

The following example illustrates the extensive use of the two forms of *yalŋgi matha* - the adult 'baby talk' register used by Gutjan's mother (Gu) and the developmental child language used by Gutjan (2;1) herself (the adult form of the *yalŋgi* word follows in brackets). This example also illustrates the way in which different levels of modification are employed as part of the scaffolding strategies used in communication with young children :

- Gutjan: *bakun (barrku)*  
Gone.
- Gu: *Oku (yolku) läli bayim?*  
Who will get lollies bought for them?
- Gu: *mamak othu (manymak yothu) ma' 'gapu ŋaya ŋäkul'*  
Good child. Do this: 'Gapu ŋaya ŋäkul' (Yolngu song).
- Gu: *mamak othu (manymak yothu) Djapuku*  
Good child, Djabuku.
- Gutjan: (looks at Gu) *ŋalaku? (ŋarraku)*  
Mine?  
  
(points) *unha (ŋunha) gam' yanha (ya' ŋunha) ya' Djutara*  
(*Djaturru*)  
For that person, see there, see? Djaturru.  
  
(makes 'sadness' action) *upan (ŋupan) dhu*  
Going to chase.
- Gu: *upan dhu yolnha ŋayi dhu ŋupandja?*  
Chasing? Whom will he chase?
- Gu: *Gurimaŋu dhu ŋupan eh? wo yolnha?*  
Going to chase Gurimangu eh? Or who?

and later...

- Gu: *orku (yolku) Bikal?*  
To whom does Bikal belong?
- Gutjan: *bakun (barrku) Ardhu (Hazel) bili dhawut*  
Gone. Hazel has just flown.
- Gu: *Dhawut ga mämu (mari'mu)*  
Grandfather is flying.
- Gutjan: *Baa (bäyngu)*  
Gone.
- Gu: *eh (pause) nhä epu (wirrupu) dhäwu?*  
Oh. What's another story?
- Gutjan: *Gumaŋu (Gurimaŋu)*  
Gurimangu.
- Gu: *Guymaŋu? Yol barpuyu (barpuru) ga burr'yun? Yol? Gawirrin*  
*mala?*  
Gurimangu? Who was dancing yesterday? Who? Gawirrin's  
group?

In some utterances Gutjan's mother uses the same *yalŋgi* form as Gutjan herself and at other times she uses a closer approximation to the adult form. For example, when Gutjan says 'upan dhu' (*ŋupan dhu*) her mother repeats this, also deleting the initial consonant, then in the same utterance uses *ŋupandja* (same verb but with a suffix) without deleting the initial consonant. Later, when Gutjan uses *Gumangu* (Gurimangu) her mother responds with a closer, but still phonologically simplified, approximation of the adult form: *Guymangu* (substituting /y/ for the syllable /ri/). Similar differences in the extent of simplification used by the adult speaker (*ŋarirri/ariri*), as well as variations in the approximations used by the child (*ŋayiyi/ari*) can be found in the following transcript. This is another example of extensive use of *yalŋgi matha*, on this occasion during interaction between Wamuttjan (aged 1;6) and her *märi* (grandmother):

Märi: *Othu (yothu)*  
Baby.

Wamuttjan: *ŋarirri. (pause) ariri (ŋarirri) djäma nhäma nhäma aya (ŋaya)*  
*dhu riri (ŋarirri) djäma ya 'ariri (ŋarirri) yindi*  
Fish (pause) fish drawing. Look, look. I'll draw a fish, a big fish

Märi: *Ŋarirri ya' mel ma' ga dhanu ya' ariri (ŋarirri)*  
Fish there, look with your eyes and this, look, fish.

Wamuttjan: *bulu ŋayiyi (ŋarirri)*  
More fish.

Märi: *bulu ŋaya djäma - barrku! barrku!*  
I will do draw some more - get out of the way! out of the way!

Wamuttjan: *bulu ŋayiyi (ŋarirri)*  
More fish.

Märi: *bulu ŋaya djäma - barrku! barrku!*  
I will do draw some more - get out of the way! out of the way!

Wamuttjan: *ayi (ŋarirri)*  
Fish.

*ah wanya (wanha)*  
Ah, where?

One Yolngu mother summarises the process of communication development like this:

*Yolŋu yoŋu* get a lot (of) learning (to) communicate in many different ways, without using eyes - telling story with their head down - easy to pick up lot of different words and they learn a lot of ways of getting words - talking *ga* listening *ga* seeing *ga* understanding. When they are growing up they get strong when they are telling stories - *yalŋgi matha* gets stronger when they are exercising - telling stories, talking and playing, talking and joking. Sometimes when they make mistake they quickly rewind or come back to that *matha* and try to speak again properly; some children speak in sentences and they pause to get the right word; in the midst of talking - if two children are telling stories by doing it on the sand - lot of talking going on still we would correct them - they play a lot through talking.

In interaction with older children (preschool age) *däl matha* might be used but the speaker will revert to *yalŋgi matha* to repair communication difficulties if they occur:

if using *däl matha* need to explain slowly - if kids don't understand *däl matha* then use *yalŋgi matha*...

Even very young children are able to select the appropriate register, depending on their communicative partner:

Galikali can use *däl matha* (since two and a half) with adults and *yalŋgi matha* with babies ...

The linguistic simplifications, as well as the other features of the *yalŋgi matha* register - exaggerated facial expression and intonation, sign language and repetition - are consistently used by young children with other children who are at an earlier developmental stage.