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## **Expressivity and performance.**

### **Expressing compassion and grief**

#### **with a prosodic contour in Gunwinyguan languages (northern Australia)**

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### **Abstract**

In order to shed light on how emotions surface in language, this article addresses a gap in our empirical knowledge about ‘expressive’ linguistic resources. Expressive resources are classically defined as ‘symptoms’ or ‘indices’ of the speaker’s emotional states at the time of speech, which suggests that they are essentially reflex – i.e. spontaneous and sincere. This article shows how actual expressive resources largely depart from this ideal type, by analyzing a case where they are performed and operate in a frame where sincerity remains largely irrelevant. Based on first-hand data, the study analyzes how expressivity combines with performance in a highly conventionalized prosodic contour used to express compassion in several Aboriginal languages of the Arnhem Land region in Australia. The form, semantics and pragmatics of this contour are described and analysed for the Dalabon (Gunwinyguan) and Kriol language (creole), and the study of how it is used shows that performance can channel elaborate communication around deep emotions such as grief. The article discusses how the performance of this ‘compassionate’ contour contributes to communication strategies that help the speakers deal with grief, and highlights how this performed linguistic tool channels emotional expression and management at the same time.

### **Key words**

expressivity; performance; prosody; compassion; grief; Australian Aboriginal languages

## **1. Introduction**

This article explores the role of emotions in language, and more specifically how emotions surface in linguistic communication. Emotions are defined here as *internal* states (emotional behaviors being their observable counterparts) that are *cognitive* (contrasting with sensations such as pain or hunger) and have a *subjective* component (unlike pure judgments, e.g. to agree) (Ortony, Clore & Foss 1987; Ponsonnet 2014a:5–17). Like most definitions of emotions, this one includes basic emotions

(sadness, fear, surprise, anger etc., Ekman (1992)) as well as social emotions such as shame, guilt or compassion for instance.

Emotions pervade most aspects of humans' lives, and many scholars concerned with linguistic communication have argued that they color all aspects of language. Ochs & Schieffelin (1989:9), for instance, write that 'affect'<sup>1</sup> permeates the entire linguistic system. Almost any aspect of the linguistic system that is variable is a candidate for expressing affect. In other words, language has a heart as well as a mind of its own'. In other words, emotions shape language because our fluctuating emotional states influence practically everything we say.

On the other hand, the expression of emotions is shaped by and in language as much as emotions shape language: in human life, the vocalization of emotions, is most of the time – if not always – informed by linguistic convention to some extent at least. Decades ago, I happened to be an auditory witness of my neighbor (unwillingly) falling off the sixth floor of our building. A striking feature of the event was that within the fractions of a second that precipitated him to his death, he screamed '*maman!*' ('mummy!'). And, contrasting with the habitual noises of children playing down the street, the quality of this scream instantaneously convinced me that something extremely serious was happening. The point I wish to highlight here is that while my neighbor's prosody successfully conveyed the most immediate and dreadful fear, his last, obviously purely instinctive utterance was not at all an indistinct vocalization. Instead, he managed to articulate a well-formed lexical item endorsed with complex conative as well as expressive functions (to follow Jakobson's (1960) partition). If even our most pressing emotions only surface in communication as 'domesticated by language' (Scherer 1988:82), can 'true', 'sincere' emotions ever surface in language at all? What is left of 'expressivity' once it is shaped up by the conventions of language and of socially-constrained, performed communication? What is, then, the nature and role of linguistic expressivity in linguistic communication?

Linguists who have studied the linguistic encoding of emotions (for instance Irvine (1982:31–32) Besnier (1990:419), Bednarek (2008), Foolen (2012:350), Majid (2012:432), Ponsonnet (2014a:21–22), among many others) have often relied upon a simple dichotomy between two types of linguistic resources: descriptive linguistic resources on the one hand (mostly the lexicon, e.g. 'she is *impressed*'), and expressive linguistic resources on the other hand (for instance evaluative morphology, prosody, interjections, e.g. '*wow!*'). While this distinction is conceptually sound and formally sustainable (Potts 2007), I contend that it does not account for important nuances as to what types of expressive resources do occur in the languages of the world, and how they operate. Presumably, interjections do not work in the same way and achieve the same things as, say, evaluative morphology. And, do interjections

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of this article additional notions such as feelings or affects can be subsumed under my definition of emotions.

'work' in the same way in all languages in the world? How do various types of expressive resources deal with the tension highlighted above between social 'domestication' via performance (heard in Goffman's social definition (1974), not in Chomsky's (1965) sense) and expressivity? What room does this leave for the actual communication of emotions in language?

So far, very little empirically based, cross-linguistic research has attempted to answer these questions by describing what emotional expressive resources of various types can and cannot do in languages across the world. Some researchers sought to further address the theoretical notion of expressivity (Caffi & Janney 1994; Potts 2007; Ochs & Schieffelin 1989), but to my knowledge, very little empirical attention has been given to the way expressive resources function to externalize emotions in actual use.

This article addresses this gap by offering a case study on a formally noticeable and highly conventionalized emotional prosodic contour found in several languages of the Gunwinyguan region in Australia (Top End, Northern Territory), including Dalabon and Kriol, the local English-based creole. This contour expresses compassion as well as endearment and approval of empathetic emotions such as compassion or grief. After presenting the form and meaning of this 'compassionate' contour, I will analyze a narrative where it was used. This case study highlights how performance combines with expressivity in order to articulate complex messages about the speaker's emotions, moral views on emotions, and to support coping strategies when dealing with severe grief.

After presenting the linguistic context and the data in Section 2, the formal characteristics and contexts of use of the 'compassionate' prosodic contour will be presented in Section 3. Section 4 analyzes the relation of this contour to performance, as well as its role in asserting moral values about emotions and in the management of grief. Overall, the case study shows that in order to understand how expressive resources channel the expression of emotions, we need a more refined and flexible conception of what an expressive resource is. While the definition of expressivity seems to tie it closely to the notion of reflex, spontaneous, sincere response, the present study shows that in actual use, expressive resources do not preclude performance, and that the question of their sincerity is somewhat ill-formed. In order to understand how humans express emotions with language, we need to understand how expressivity combines with conventions, communication and performance, and how these do not stand in opposition with sincerity.

## **1.1 Reflex expression of emotions: an ideal type**

### *1.1.1 Expression vs description*

The linguists who have referred to 'expressivity' with respect to the domain of emotions (see above) tend to refer implicitly or explicitly to a number of foundational texts that

distinguish between key functions of language, among which the ‘expressive’ (or ‘emotive’) function. The most famous of these functional partitions is perhaps Jakobson’s (1960), who contrasted the emotive function with the referential, conative, phatic, metalingual and poetic functions of language. Among others, Leech (1974:42–47), Lyons (1977:50–56), Halliday (1976:26–29) or Cruse (1986:270–278) also postulated comparable partitions, using similar labels and criteria. These distinctions are often intuitive rather than empirically grounded. As a basic criteria for what the expressive function covers, and to contrast it with descriptive resources in particular, many authors rely upon the semiotic status of the linguistic devices in question, referring explicitly or implicitly to Bühler’s (1934) notion of ‘symptom’, or to Peirce’s (1955) notion of ‘index’.

Bühler (1934) distinguishes three different types of linguistic signs, with different semiotic statuses: symbols (referring to things in the world), symptoms (expressing a state of the sender) and signals (aiming at a response from the receiver). Peirce (1955) also distinguishes three types of signs, but his theory applied to all signs rather than linguistic signs only. The three types are symbols (bearing a *conventional* relationship with the thing they designate), indices (bearing a *causal* relationship with the thing they designate), and icons (bearing a *formal* resemblance with the thing they designate). Bühler and Peirce were not concerned with the same sets of signs, and their semiotic categories are largely orthogonal to each other. Nevertheless, both theories feature a semiotic category that accounts for the semiotic specificity of ‘expressive’ resources: expressive emotional resources can be defined as symptoms and/or as indices of emotional states: they result causally from a state experienced by the sender.

These semiotic properties suffices to effectively distinguish many expressive from descriptive resources and roughly characterize them. Expressive emotional forms, for instance ‘*wow!*’, are those that are causal effects of a state experienced by the speaker at the time of utterance. They convey meaning by indexing this state. As a consequence, such resources can never allude to a state of someone else than the speaker (or the ‘reported speaker’ in reported speech), or to a state experienced by the speaker in the past or future. Descriptive resources, on the other hand – for instance ‘she is *impressed*’ –, are not bound to the speaker’s emotional state in this way. They can therefore refer to states experienced at any point in time, by the speaker or by others. A logical correlate of these semiotic properties is that expressive utterances are not truth-conditional: they have no propositional content and therefore cannot be deemed true or false (Kaplan 1999) – instead, they can be sincere or deceiving. Potts (2007) has considerably elaborated upon these properties and their

logical consequences, providing both a set of five criteria<sup>2</sup> to identify expressive resources, and a formalization of these criteria in logical terms.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.1.2 Expression vs communication

The above semiotic characterization (as Bühler’s symptoms or Peirce’s indices) might not provide strict linguistic tests to decide in every case whether a resource is expressive (Potts 2007), but it does justify a binary conceptual distinction between description and expression to the extent that it allows us to successfully identify *many* expressive emotional resources. Yet, it would be misleading to understand these definitions and resulting properties too restrictively. Indeed, they present expressive resources as essentially reflex reactions, relying upon a causal, uncontrolled physiological response to a truly felt emotional state (Scherer 1988:82–83). This characterization is misleading to the extent that it implicitly suggests that, as illustrated in Table 1, prototypical expressive resources are natural (i.e. grounded in human physiology) rather than conventional (bound by human-made rules), spontaneous rather than performed, and sincere rather than deceiving or manipulated.

<b>Expressive</b>	<b>misleading contrast</b>
Reflex	controlled
Nature	convention
Spontaneity	performance
Sincerity	deception

Table 1. Properties associated with prototypical expressivity, and their misleading opposites.

Embracing such an ideal notion of expressivity assumes a simplistic model that leads one to, implicitly, collapse together the properties listed in each column of Table 1, thus more or less equating spontaneity and sincerity for instance. Here I define ‘nature’ Here I define spontaneity as the lack of planning or calculation, contrasting with performance defined (following Goffman (1974:125; 504)) as a display calculated for an audience. Sincerity – which has been described as a cornerstone of some Western systems of communication (Trilling 1972) – is defined as a match between display and internal states (Irvine 1982). Under the ideal model of expressivity, all the items in the left column of Table 1 are implicitly construed as incompatible with those to the right, across the lines of the table: conventions are supposed to impede spontaneity, performance to impede sincerity, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Independence (content is independent of propositional content), non-displaceability (anchorage at time of utterance), perspective dependence (content is speaker’s perspective, apart from some modulations in indirect reported speech), descriptive ineffability (untranslatability), immediacy (they are performative utterances), repeatability (repetition results in emphasis rather than redundancy).

<sup>3</sup> Note that both Kaplan’s (1999) basic definition in terms of non-truth-conditionality and Potts’s (2007) criteria encompass a larger set of resources than just emotional expressive resources. Indeed, their definitions can extend to all indexical resources (including deictics for instance) as well as to evaluative adjectives (e.g. *damn*). In this article, I am only concerned with emotional expressive resources, i.e. resources that are the symptoms/indices of emotional states. This is not only because my interest is in emotions and their expression, but also because deictics and evaluatives can be shown to belong to different logical types, closer to truth-conditionality (Lasersohn 2005).

However, the ideal of fully reflex, natural, spontaneous and sincere expressivity is hardly ever realized by actual expressive resources, because humans use expressive resources to *communicate*. While ‘expression’ contrasts with ‘description’ as highlighted in Section 1.1.1 above, it also contrasts with ‘communication’. This latter contrast captures the fact that reflex responses caused by an internal state of the sender are not necessarily intended to inform an addressee about this internal state (although they may do so independent of an intention). But in human languages on the contrary, expressive resources are precisely recruited for this communicative purpose, and to that extent they are conventional and performed for an audience.

The confused associations between the notions encapsulated in the ‘ideal’ model of expressivity have rarely been tackled explicitly, let alone empirically. Goffman (1978), who contributed a significant reflection on the problem, did so on the basis of his own intuition but brought very little data to the question. The case study presented in this article offers an empirical demonstration that the properties associated with ‘ideal’ expressivity do not hold when we consider the way human beings actually use linguistic expressive resources to communicate. The study unfolds how conventions, performance and sincerity interact and combine in actual communication in the case of a highly conventionalized prosodic contour in an Australian Aboriginal language. I show in particular that expressive resources can be performed while not losing their expressive power for this reason; and that performance does not contrast with sincerity which, defined as a straightforward match between display and internal states, is of little relevance to understand expressivity in language.

## **1.2 Performance and sincerity in Indigenous Australia**

Australian Aboriginal languages offer an interesting context for exploring the relations between expressivity, performance and sincerity. Indeed, these languages are used in cultural settings where the conflation of the expression and performance of emotions is hardly seen as a contradiction. Displays of emotions at funerals are a striking example. Matching my own original puzzlement, non-local observers have sometimes reported to me that they find it difficult to perceive as spontaneous and sincere the obviously performed ritualized crying or self-harm (typically, women hitting themselves on the head with stones). Nevertheless, it becomes evident outside of the ceremonial context that the corresponding emotions are truly felt, and in this cultural setting their performed expression is their standard expression. Musharbash (2008) identifies precisely this combination of expressivity and performance in Warlpiri (Central Australia) mourning practices, and criticizes Durkheim’s (1976 [1915]:442) (mis)understanding of ritualized mourning as performed and inauthentic. As Turner’s (2010:109) discussion of ‘sadness’ (grief) among her own group (the Arrernte of Central Australia) shows, emotions are as much to be seen as they are to be felt, and acting or performing in the socially expected manner is the right way to experience

morally adequate feelings. In this context, the lack of opposition between performance and spontaneity is evident. The present article describes and analyzes how this is achieved in a particular Australian context, but Durkheim's (1976 [1915]) discussion suggests that this combination between expressivity and performance may in fact be widespread among human groups across the world.

### **1.3 Conventionalized prosodic contours**

Given its distinctive form (see Section 3.1), the 'compassionate' contour considered in this study cannot plausibly be entirely reflex: on the contrary, it is highly conventionalized. Speakers control its production to some extent: they can (try to) produce this contour when prompted, or abruptly engage in and out of its production. There is no local label for the contour, but descriptive references to it are usually understood in metalinguistic discussions. Intuitively it seems likely that many languages across the world feature comparable expressive melodic tools. However, Apart from a few early works (Bolinger 1986; Fonagy & Magdics 1963) and some contributions by anthropological linguists (Omondi 1997), we know very little about the cross-linguistic prevalence and nature of conventionalized emotional prosodic contours like the one under scrutiny here, and even less about how they are used in actual communication.

Psychologists have explored the prosody of emotions, but their interests usually lie in purely reflex, uncontrolled expression (shaped by 'push factors', i.e. physiological conditions, Scherer (1988)) rather than in conventionalized expressive resources (shaped by 'pull factors', i.e. the needs of communication). Besides, psychological research often focuses on the reception (or perception) of prosody rather than on its production (Scherer, Clark-Polner & Mortillaro 2011). For instance, humans' capacity to rely on prosody to identify the emotions expressed in a language that they do not speak has been experimentally tested (Gobl & Ní Chasaide 2003; Elfenbein & Ambady 2003). The results show that although the prosody of an unknown language does inform humans about emotions, knowing a language remains an advantage even when relying uniquely on prosody to decode (i.e. when a speaker is exposed to prosody only, with actual words rendered inaudible) (Bhatara et al. 2016). This supports the above claim (Section 1.1.2) that reflex expression is never entirely free from conventions (as also demonstrated by Fónagy & Magidcs (Fonagy & Magdics 1963)), but tells us little about how humans use the sort of conventionalized resources considered in this article.

## **2. Languages and data**

The present study takes into account data from four different languages, all spoken in the Australian Top End (Northern Territory), in or near Arnhem Land, a vast tract of

land owned by indigenous groups. The two languages in focus are Dalabon,<sup>4</sup> a severely endangered Gunwinyguan language; and Kriol,<sup>5</sup> the English-based creole that has now replaced Dalabon. Data from Kunwinjku (Bininj Gun-wok dialect)<sup>6</sup> and Rembarrnga,<sup>7</sup> two other languages of the Gunwinyguan family, was also taken into account. Dalabon is severely endangered and is no longer known by the youngest generations, who have adopted Kriol. Nevertheless, most people born in the 1970s or earlier still have some knowledge of Dalabon or another traditional language (in particular Kunwinjku and Rembarrnga), and older people (1950s and earlier) usually speak several Aboriginal languages along with Kriol (and English).

All the analyses presented here rely upon first-hand data comprising audio- and video-recorded speech of various genres: narratives including personal emotional ones, as well as stimuli-based elicitation designed to collect close-to-spontaneous emotional data (Ponsonnet 2014b). Stimuli-based data-collection relied on a range of methods such as pictures designed for the purpose of elicitation, video clips from Baron-Cohen's (2004) Mind-Reading Library, as well as a number of mainstream Australian movies with culturally appropriate topics and scenarios. Data was collected almost exclusively from female speakers in all the languages under examination. The particular linguistic history and background of participants were systematically documented and taken into account in the analysis. Throughout the article, the short examples link to sound files for the reader's convenience.

Dalabon serves as a 'reference language' in this study, because it is the language for which the 'compassionate' contour is better known. Ponsonnet (2014a:127–142) offers a detailed description of emotional linguistic resources in this language (including an analysis of the contour, p. 128–133, summarized in Section 3). The corpus is by far the most extensive, with about 60 hours collected mostly from 2007 to 2014 from four mature speakers. I also analyze examples from Kriol, for which I have a corpus of about 20 hours, collected between 2014 and 2016 from about twenty speakers between 8 and 80+ years old. Comparisons with other languages of the region rely upon smaller corpora for Rembarrnga and Kunwinjku and remain peripheral to the argument, mostly indicating cross-linguistic tendencies in this region of Australia.

It is not possible to discuss emotions without some degree of personal interpretation. I concur with Rosaldo (1996) that theoretical considerations are only of limited help to understand and analyse emotions in oneself or in others. Importantly, emotions being internal states, they can only be inferred rather than *directly* observed in everyday life. Nevertheless, we do commonly make inferences about the emotions of the people we

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<sup>4</sup> See Evans & Merlan (2003), Evans, Merlan & Tukumba (2004), Ponsonnet (2015) for general description, Ross (2011), Ross, Fletcher & Nordlinger (2016) on prosody.

<sup>5</sup> Sandefur (1979), Schultze-Berndt, Meakins & Angelo (2013).

<sup>6</sup> See Evans (2003) for general description, Bishop & Fletcher (2005) on prosody.

<sup>7</sup> McKay (1975), Saulwick (2003).

interact with, and these inferences are often correct (Wittgenstein 1953; Cavell 1979) – especially when we know these people well. The interpretations I will propose here rely upon my long-term acquaintance with the speakers and the local cultural context. I have lived and worked in the Gunwinyguan region of Australia for more than half a year each year from 1998 to 2003, and have since returned every year for field work. Like many linguists (and anthropological linguists in particular), I have known most of the speakers I work with for many years, and I am also well versed in local cultural codes. This facilitated both the collection of personal, emotional narratives as well as their interpretation.

### 3. The ‘compassionate’ intonation contour in Dalabon

#### 3.1 Form

Evans *et al.* (2008) and Ross (2011:96–101) indicate that standard Dalabon intonation phrases typically display a ‘hat pattern’ (rise and fall, described by Bolinger (1986:47–50) as the unmarked contour for English) or a ‘plateau contour’ (flat). Compared to these standard forms, the compassionate contour considered here is highly distinctive and perceptually identifiable. Visualizations from the Praat software (that extracts acoustic parameters such as formants, intensity etc.<sup>8</sup>) are helpful in the exposition, and Praat was also occasionally used to disambiguate marginal occurrences, but most of the time the contour was immediately audible without specialized tools. The contour starts with an initial high or very high pitch (above the speaker’s usual range) on the first morpheme(s) of the intonation unit, which usually coincides with a clause and often begins with an interjection. Then the pitch falls abruptly on the following syllable(s)/morpheme(s), below the speaker’s usual range. After this fall the pitch returns to the average range, reaching a plateau which often coincides with the predicate of a clause. The last or penultimate syllable of the phrase can be lengthened. Finally, the pitch usually drops again slightly at the end of the phrase, which marks the full realization of the contour in its prototypical form. The contour frequently ends with an interjection. The pattern is often realized over a whole clause, even if the clause is long, and speakers sometimes line up several consecutive realizations of this contour. It can also occur with relatively short occurrences (e.g. presentative noun phrases). Example (1) offers a prototypical realization, with the corresponding pitch trace in Fig. (1).

(1) Dalabon: 20120705b\_005\_MT 140 [Link to sound file. Caption: Example 1]

MT     ↑ ? *bulu*                     ↓ *bula-h-yaw-ngabb-ong-wurd.*

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.fon.hum.uva.nl/praat/>

? 3pl                    3pl>3-R-little.one-give-PPFV-DIM<sup>9</sup>  
*They gave [a bit of food] to the poor children.*

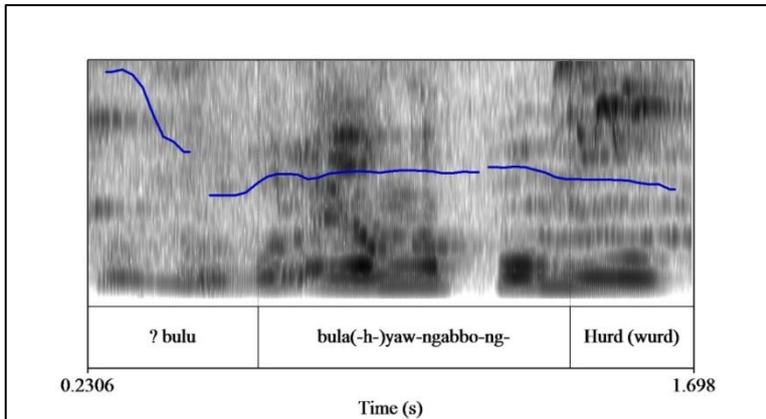


Fig. 1. Pitch trace of (1). Pitch measure between 30 and 400Hz, vertical scale from 0 to 400Hz.

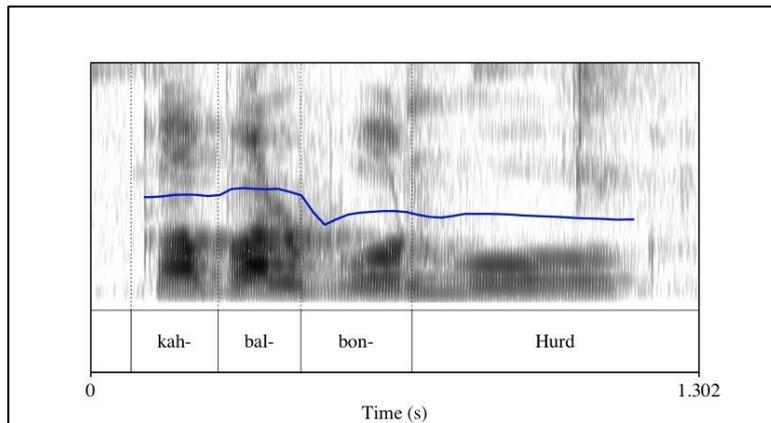
### 3.2 Contexts of occurrence: compassion

The ‘compassionate’ contour undoubtedly qualifies as expressive: it communicates information about the speaker’s emotional state at the time of speech. Attempts to elicit the contour in the absence of emotionally adequate stimuli indicate that the speaker’s experiencing certain emotional states is a condition for successful realization: imitation tends to produce somewhat imperfect tokens. The most common context of occurrence of the contour relates to compassion, i.e. when the speaker feels bad because something bad is happening to someone else. In Dalabon, this context accounts for nearly half of the tokens in stimuli-based elicitation. In (2), the speaker commented on a movie where the young hero – who she had a lot of sympathy for – was seen leaving his family group, sulking. The contour expresses that the speaker feels sad because the character feels sad.

(2) Dalabon: 20120713a\_001\_MT 065 [\[Link to sound file. Caption: Example 2\]](#)

MT                    *Ka-h-↑bal-↓bon-wu: :rd.*  
                          3sg-R-directly-go-DIM  
                          *He takes off poor thing [because he is sulking].*

<sup>9</sup> Non-standard abbreviations. ↑: pitch raises; ↓: pitch drops; approb: approbation; compass: compassion; CONJ: conjunction; DIM: diminutive; EMPH: emphasis; h: higher animacy; HAB: habitual; INTJ: interjection; NPST: non-past; R: realis; REDUP: reduplication; SHIFT: nominal shifter.



*Fig. 2. Pitch trace of (2). Pitch measure between 30 and 400Hz, vertical scale from 0 to 400Hz.*

Compassion has been described as the cornerstone of the emotional moral system among some Australian groups (see Myers (1979; 1986:358) for the Pintupi of Central Australia), and my own ethnographic observations confirmed this for the Dalabon group.<sup>10</sup> In this cultural context, compassion, seen as the emotion that ensures social cohesion, is approved and encouraged. One owes compassion to others and makes sure to express it; conversely compassion is expected from others. As pointed out by Turner (2010:109) about the Arrernte group in Central Australia, in these cultural contexts, compassion is morally valued because it is empathetic, although it involves feelings of negative valence (i.e. emotional pain). More generally, all empathetic feelings are morally valued and encouraged, even when they entail emotional pain (negative valence). For instance, grief, like compassion, presupposes positive feelings for others, i.e. affection, and is therefore approved and encouraged – as will be shown in Section 4. Such empathetic feelings – grief and compassion – are evidence of social bounds, and are encouraged for this reason.

Speakers frequently use the ‘compassionate’ contour to express their approval and endearment when witnessing people being compassionate with each other. The most typical and expected demonstrations of compassion are sharing with and taking care of others, i.e. bringing material support: these behaviors are regarded as evidence of compassion and are even equated linguistically with compassion (Ponsonnet 2018:116–118). Accordingly, speakers frequently use the ‘compassionate’ contour to express approval and endearment when people share with or care for each other. Example (3) describes the main female character of a movie looking after her grandmother, and the contour starts as the comment on the caring event begins. Experiencing grief for a relative is also regarded as another demonstration of compassion, triggering endearment expressed by the compassionate contour (Section 4.2.4). These contexts where speakers express their approval of compassionate behaviors account for a bit less than half of the occurrences of the compassionate contour in stimuli-based elicitation.

<sup>10</sup> I use the term ‘compassion’ to follow Myers. ‘Empathy’ would also be appropriate.

(3) Dalabon: 20120719a\_001\_MT 209 [\[Link to sound file. Caption: Example 3\]](#)

MT           Ka-h-yaw-men-burram- --  
              3sg-R-little.one-ideas-good

↑Mimal ↓buka-h-marnu-worrhworr-mu:.  
fire        3sg>3sg.h-R-BEN-prepare.fire:REDUP-PRES

*This young one is really goo-  
She's making fire for her [for her grand mother]!*

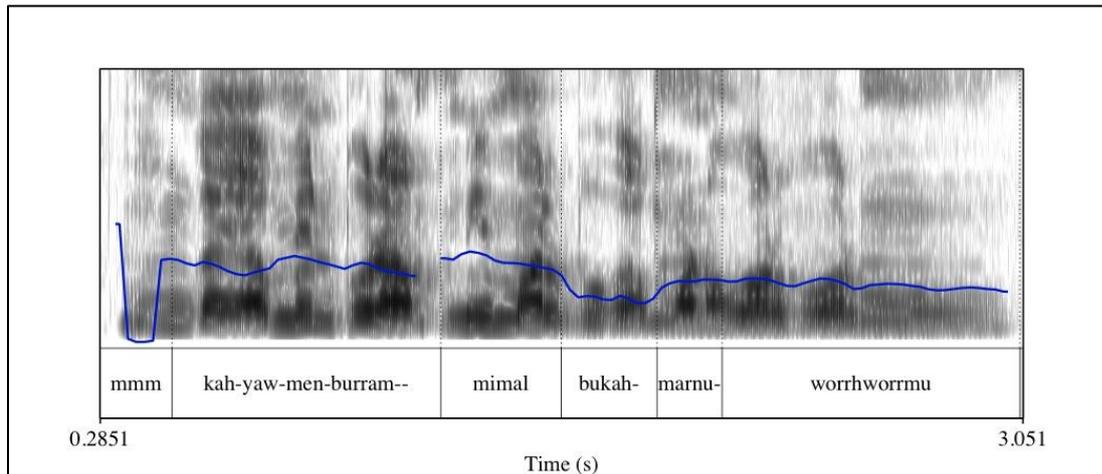


Fig. 3. Pitch trace of (3). The ‘compassionate’ contour starts from mimal ‘fire’, with a somewhat less marked but yet very audible pitch raise. Pitch measure between 30 and 400Hz, vertical scale from 0 to 400Hz.

Other contexts of occurrence included relief for others (the speaker feels good about something good that happens to someone *who was in a dire situation before*), which relates to compassion; nostalgia, often tinted with compassion; as well as witnessing endearing intimacy or daily routines. However, these contexts remained marginal, as compassion and witnessing/approving considered together accounted for the majority of the tokens under consideration in the quantitative study.

### 3.3 The ‘compassionate’ contour across the Gunwinyguan region

The ‘compassionate’ contour is common to several languages of the Gunwinyguan region, but is not used in exactly the same contexts or with the same frequency in each of these languages. It occurs in Dalabon, Kunwinjku and Kriol, but it is only scantily attested in Rembarrnga. In general, Rembarrnga speakers used less formally marked contours with drastic pitch variation in my corpus, especially when compared with Kunwinjku speakers, who afforded the largest repertoire. Kriol and Dalabon fall between the two, with relatively frequent use of the ‘compassionate’ contour, but only few other formally marked contours. This distribution matches metalinguistic representations among speakers, as discussed with a multilingual speaker with mastery in Kriol, Kunwinjku and Dalabon. Kriol and Kunwinjku speakers used the

'compassionate' contour with essentially the same compassionate values as in Dalabon:

(4) Kriol: 20140328a\_003\_LB\_ND 066 [\[Link to sound file. Caption: Example 4\]](#)

LB            Na↑    yuluk?    ↓tubala    nogud binji bla im    bobala:.  
 EMPH    CONJ            3du            bad    belly    DAT    3sg    INTJ.compass  
***And there look they two are upset about her poor thing.***

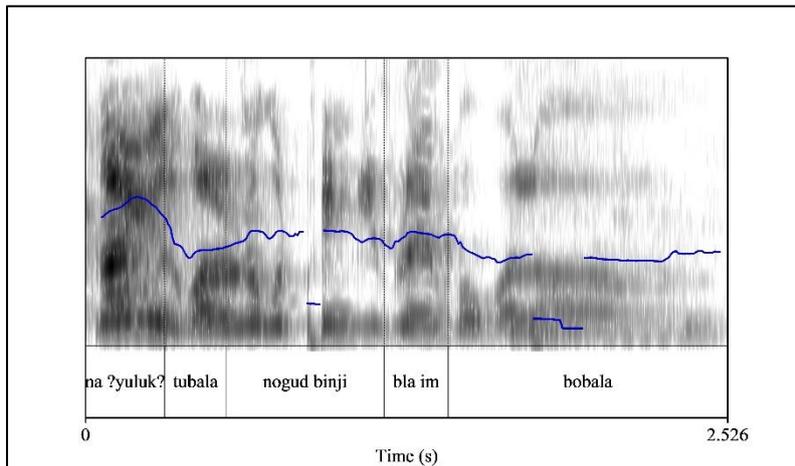


Fig. 4. Pitch trace of (4). Pitch measure between 30 and 400Hz, vertical scale from 0 to 400Hz.

(5) Kunwinjku: BGW\_20160722b\_003\_MJ 013 [\[Link to sound file. Caption: Example 5\]](#)

MJ            ↑Ba-yaw-↓bolk-yurr-me    nuye warre.  
 3sg>3-DIM-country-NPST    3M.OBL INTJ.compass  
***He leaves his country poor thing.***

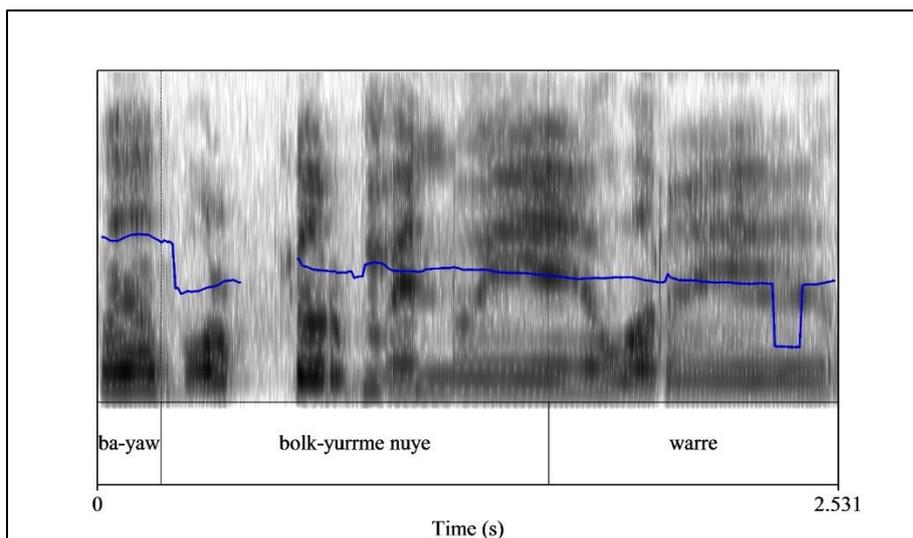


Fig. 5. Pitch trace of (5). Pitch measure between 30 and 400Hz, vertical scale from 0 to 400Hz.

There are some nuances in the way speakers use this contour depending on which languages they speak. Speakers of Dalabon and Kunwinjku all used the contour predominantly to express compassion, and when speaking Kriol they did the same. However, speakers of Kriol who do not speak another Australian language displayed a slightly different range of contexts, with more tokens expressing pure endearment as well as nostalgia, rather than compassion (see Ponsonnet (in prep-a) on the impact of language shift on these expressive features). The distribution of the expressive contours and their meaning across languages and speakers will be explored in future research. For the moment, I turn to the analysis of the ‘compassionate’ contour in use.

## **4. Performed expressions of emotions**

### **4.1 Staged narratives**

As discussed in Section 3.2, the compassionate contour is undoubtedly expressive to the extent that it indexes an emotional state of the speaker at the time of utterance. At the same time, it illustrates the mismatch between expressivity and spontaneity anticipated in Section 1.1 in the introduction: the range of narratives in which the ‘compassionate’ contour was used in my corpora indicates that this expressive feature is most often used in staged contexts – i.e., it is performed, as the discussion of these contexts will now show.

As suggested by the examples in the previous section, the contour occurred most frequently in comments on visual stimuli (Section 2), particularly clips illustrating emotions (Baron-Cohen 2004) and mainstream movies. In these contexts, speakers also used a number of expressive features that have been described as typical of performed narratives (Hymes 1974; Wolfson 1978:216–217) such as other prosodic contours, expressive sounds, interjections, and direct reported speech including the imitation of the protagonists. By contrast, speakers more rarely used the ‘compassionate’ contour to refer directly to an event that had immediate emotional impact on them. In line with these observations, some speakers did not use the ‘compassionate’ contour *while* watching movies, but when they were asked to re-tell the story of the movie on the basis of extracted still pictures. During such tasks, freed from the immediate emotional impact of an unfolding narrative, some speakers used the ‘compassionate’ contour almost continuously. In other words, the ‘compassionate’ contour was used primarily when speakers stood at some emotional distance from the event, which enabled them to consider an audience and perform for its benefits, then delivering a scenarized sequence.

### **4.2 Case study: performed expression of emotions**

This case study analyzes one of the few situations where the ‘compassionate’ contour was used with reference to actual events – as opposed to fictitious contexts depicted

by stimuli (e.g. movies). While the contour does express the current emotional state of the speaker, in the case under consideration this purely indexical function is not in focus: as shown in the following sections, expressivity is dissociated from both spontaneity and sincerity. After presenting the content of the recording under scrutiny in Section 4.2.1, Section 4.2.2 and 4.2.3 discuss the role of performance and how performed expressive resources serve to assert the speaker's moral stance. Finally, Section 4.2.4 show that in this excerpt, expressive features contribute to elaborate a 'pragmeme of accommodation' that can be understood as a strategy to deal with grief.

#### 4.2.1 *The narrative and its context*

The recording I am considering here is a 6-min-long piece in Kriol, audio- and video-recorded in April 2014. The speaker was probably around seventy-five years old then, and her first language is Dalabon. Given this linguistic background, when speaking Kriol she uses the 'compassionate' contour as she would in her first language, Dalabon (Section 3.3). The speaker had previously recorded very similar contents about the same event in Dalabon, where the 'compassionate' contour played a very comparable role – but this was not videoed.

In this 6-min recording, the speaker comments on an event that affected her at the time, namely the expulsion of a long-term white friend of hers from her community. The topic was my suggestion, reflecting repeated conversations between us in the preceding hours and days. The recording is a quasi-monologue, apart from one question and some expressive responses by myself – there was no other audience. The speaker knew she was being recorded and was performing accordingly (she is familiar with audio- and video-recording), alternatively addressing myself and a broader, virtual audience. She did not unfold a long and chronological report on the events she was referring to, but segmented her quasi-monologue into a number of small-scale recounts, as typically occurs in conversation (Jefferson 2015; Goffman 1974).

I had known the speaker for sixteen years when I recorded this narrative and had spent a considerable amount of time with her over the years. My observations and our personal conversations during this field session suggest that she was significantly affected by her friend's forced departure. On the other hand, this was presumably not her main cause of concern at the time, as she was experiencing severe grief: in the preceding year, she had lost two very close family members. Her own son had died four months earlier and she was still subject to obsessive thoughts about the circumstances of his death – which corresponds for her, as she told me, to the first stage of grief, when one is still unable to 'get over' the loss as a fact. This phase is regularly described with the lexicalized collocation *kan get oba* in Kriol (Ponsonnet 2018:111), or the verb *njirrk(mu)* 'be upset, be confused, brood over' in Dalabon (Ponsonnet 2011).

This person has experienced a very unusual number of traumatic deaths of extremely close family members in her life, even compared to the higher mortality rate among indigenous Australians. During the sixteen years I have known her, she has lost three very close family members – two in tragic circumstances – and this was only a fraction of the losses she has suffered in her life. Having survived such a succession of severe episodes of bereavement is remarkable: as a matter of fact and as highlighted by local folk theories, in these communities grief leads to depression and alters health. I have been given to observe and discuss her own mourning strategies with her, and it appears that she implements sophisticated, at least partly self-conscious methods (Ponsonnet 2014a:44–47). My exposure to these personal and cultural parameters constitute the background of my interpretations in the present case study.

The content of the recording is not transcribed in full for reasons of privacy, but it is summarized in Table 2, and I present and discuss relevant excerpts in (6) and (8). The speaker's thread is not about events, but about people's feelings for each other and related behaviors – whether they attack or support each other. The recording divides into five main sequences. Firstly, the speaker explains that many children in her community liked her friend who has been chased away and therefore miss him (example (6)). Secondly, answering my question, the speaker talks about her grandson being recently troubled, due to his grief for the gone friend and for his deceased father – the speaker's own son (example (8)). A third sequence presents another list of grieving community members. In a fourth sequence, the speaker alludes to the quarrel that resulted in her friend being chased away. Finally, the fifth and last part of the recording discusses who supported her and her friend in this quarrel. Given the focus on interpersonal relationships, most of the sequences feature lists of names – names of those who grieve, or names of those who harmed or supported her friend.

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MP introduces the topic, as agreed before the recording started.

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**SEQUENCE 1 – from start to 1’33 – See Excerpt 1**

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The speaker explains that community members, children in particular, liked the friend who has left, and miss him. She explains that he (and another friend) looked after the children well, which is why they liked him. She lists children who miss him, highlighting their relationships to adult community members known to MP. At the end of the sequence, she states that she misses her friend herself.

The style of the narration in this sequence features the ‘compassionate’ contour and other less conventionalized contours, frowning, approving nods and tongue clicks, persisting smiles, emotion metaphors.

---

**SEQUENCE 2 – from 1’33 to 2’37 – See Excerpt 2**

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Upon MP’s prompt, the speaker discusses some of her grandchildren’s recent misbehavior. She links these disorders to grief: for the gone friend, but also for their recently deceased father (her own son). She then discusses her grandchildren’s attachment to herself, and concludes that things are now back in order.

The style of narration in this sequence includes the ‘compassionate’ contour and other less conventionalized contours, approving nods, tongue clicks and lip pointing, smiles, assertive hand gestures and a compassionate interjection. The speaker’s voice becomes creaky at a point when she is about to mention grief for a deceased person (a well-identified prosodic association, see Ponsonnet (2014a:134–137)).

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**SEQUENCE 3 – from 2’37 to 3’45**

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The speaker returns to community members who miss the gone friend. She lists grieving children, as well as grieving young adults this time.

The style of narration compares with that of Sequence 1, with additional interjections, some direct reported speech, assertive hand gestures, and frowning.

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**SEQUENCE 4 – from 3'45 to 5'13**

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The speaker alludes to the dispute that led to the expulsion of her friend from the community. The evocation consists mostly in listing the names of those who took an active part in the meeting that led to the decision. She explains that she was angry against them and confronted them.

There are no 'compassionate' contours in this sequence. Instead, the speaker uses features associated with indignation or criticism, such as whispering (see Ponsonnet 2014a:137).

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**SEQUENCE 5 – from 5'13 to 6' (end of the recording)**

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The speaker names family members who supported her and her friend in the quarrel, and how they did so.

She uses a 'compassionate' contour when naming her supporters, expressing her approval of support between people. She also uses direct reported speech with some indignation contours (Ponsonnet 2014a:134), nodding and frowning.

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Table 2. Structure of the 6-min Kriol recording. Left: content; right: style.

#### 4.2.2 Expressive performance

In these 6 minutes, the speaker hardly *describes* her own feelings, but she extensively expresses them by means of a number of expressive features involving facial expressions and gestures as well as vocal features. The high number of expressive features corresponds to typically performed narratives (Hymes 1974; Wolfson 1978:216–217). In addition, the pace at which the speaker navigates from one type of expression to another (sometimes with contrasting emotions) gives the impression of performance for a controlled effect. The speaker seems to be emphasizing a range of emotions so that the audience understands her message more clearly.

In a Dalabon narrative recorded in 2012 on the same topic, the speaker used similar expressive features, including 'compassionate' contours; but the narrative was interrupted by several bursts of giggles as the speaker was witnessing something she found hilarious. Every time, she recovered a serious tone immediately when getting back to the narrative. This type of dissonance has been presented as an earmark of insincere communication (Irvine 1982:35), but I argue that it is better treated as evidence of performance, irrespective of the question of sincerity. The speaker is communicating her feelings to the intention of an audience, and to this extent her display is partly staged. The emotions that are expressed are most likely real, but they are not exclusive of other emotions experienced at the same time – in spite of folk theories that view negative and positive emotions as incompatible with each other (as

reported for instance by Varga (2017:92) among American college students). The speaker's ambivalence in the case reported above illustrates the discussion in Section 1.1: there is no reason to consider performance as deceiving or insincere, but simply that it allows speakers to focus on one or another of the feelings they experience at a given point in time.

#### 4.2.3 Asserting a moral stance

Throughout the recording, there are ten clear occurrences of the 'compassionate' contour – plus approximately as many contours that do not match the strictest pattern for this contour, but bear some resemblances with it. The ten tokens of the 'compassionate' contour are concentrated in Sequences 1 and 3, and occur essentially when naming grieving and/or supportive people, as illustrated in example (6) and Fig. 6. In line with the semantic description provided in Section 3, the contour expresses the speaker's endearment, satisfaction and approval when witnessing other people caring for each other (missing a friend or supporting him). This is also expressed by facial expression and body posture, as illustrated in Fig. 7.

(6) Kriol: 20140401a\_002\_MT from 0'23 to 0'46

- 1 MT Mmm tru.  
INTJ.approb INTJ.approb  
**mmm, true.**  
[((nodding head tilted))]
- 2 Bobala.  
INTJ.compass  
**Ah well.**  
[((frowning and nodding head tilted))]
- 3 Iben [name], †ol [name] †tu dei wori bla im.  
even old too 3pl feel.bad DAT 3sg  
**Even [friend's friend], dear [friend's friend], they miss him to.**  
(name is friend's name)  
[('compassionate' contour)]  
[((frowning and nodding head tilted))]
- 4 Kos† im yustu teik olebat langa, †Kliklimarra.  
Because 3sg HAB.PST take 3pl LOC [place.name]  
**Because he used to take them to, Kliklimarra.**  
[((non-conventional expressive contour))]  
[((hand gestures))]
- 5 [Name] im yustu lukabt-um olebat, garra †olmen †[friend].  
3sg HAB.PST look.after-TR 3pl with old  
**[Friend's friend] used to look after them, with old [friend].**  
[((non-conventional expressive contour))]  
[((hand gesture, nodding head tilted))]
- 6 En dei bin rili, laik-im tubala.  
and 3pl PST really like-TR 3du  
**And they [the children] really liked them two.**  
[((raising eyebrows, nodding head tilted))]  
[((beginning of a smile))]
- 7 Laik lil †Ricardo†.

CONJ little name

***Like little Ricardo.***

[((non-conventional expressive contour))]

8

↑**Jobin en** ↓**Jarrett tu rili oldei** **dei toktok fo im.**  
name and name too really all.the.time 3pl talk:REDUP about 3sg  
***Jobin and Jarrett too they keep talking about him all the time.***

[(( 'compassionate' contour ))]

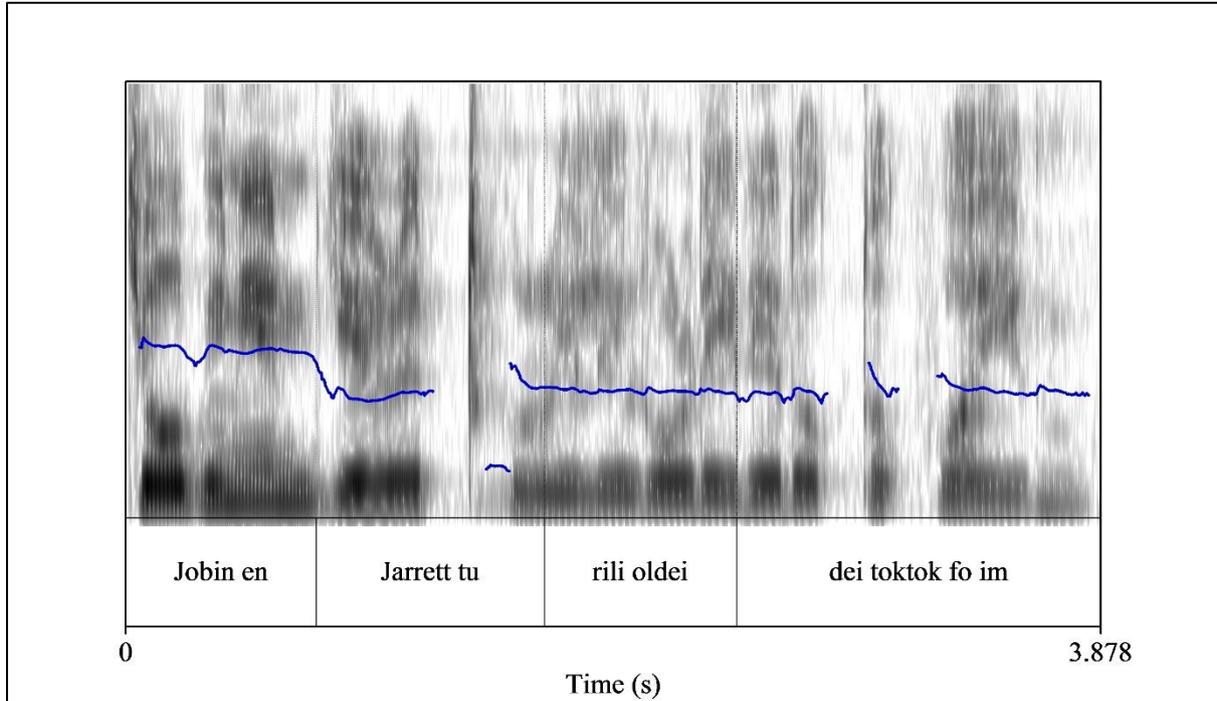


Fig. 6. Pitch trace of line 8 in (6). Pitch measure between 60 and 300Hz, to accommodate the speaker's pitch range, vertical scale from 0 to 400Hz.



Fig. 7. Facial expression and posture at line 8 in (6).

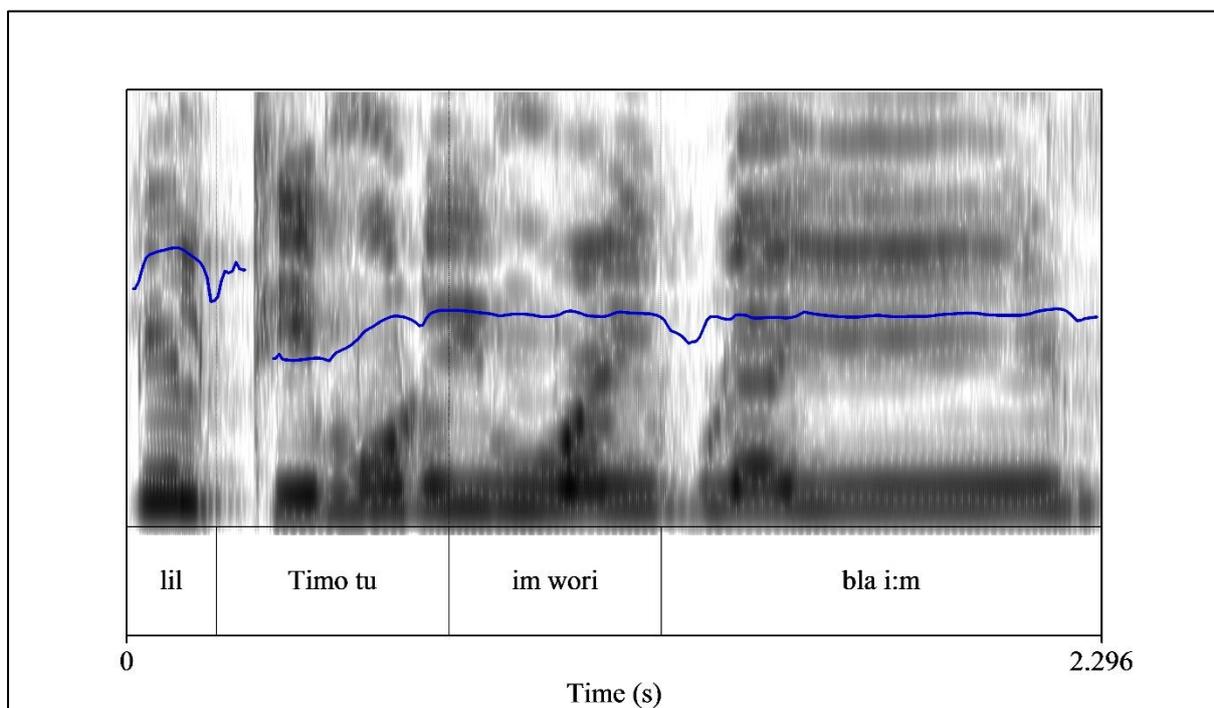
In example (6), the speaker uses the 'compassionate' contour when describing

children who miss her friend (line 3<sup>11</sup>) as well as when describing behaviors that indicate that they miss him (line 8, talking about him). Less typical compassionate contours and other expressive features describe how the gone friend looked after the children (caring for others). In the first lines, the speaker is frowning and looks concerned, but in line 6 she starts smiling, expressing her satisfaction that the children liked – and therefore miss – her friend. As presented in (7), later in the recording (Sequence 3) she uses a very clear ‘compassionate’ contour when referring to the same feelings of affection of the children for her friend, but the emphasis is then on the children’s grief, i.e. on their actual emotional pain. Thus, the ‘compassionate’ contour allows the speaker to express her endearment, approval and satisfaction about the children’s suffering – an extension of the positive view of compassion that may seem less intuitive, given that compassion usually implies feeling sorry (rather than satisfied) about others’ suffering.

(7) Kriol: 20140401a\_002\_MT 062 [\[Link to sound file. Caption: Example 7\]](#)

↑*Lil*      ↓*Timo*    *tu im wori*            *bla i:m.*  
 little    [name]    too 3sg feel.bad      DAT 3sg  
***Little Timo misses him too.***  
 [((high pitch range))]

1



<sup>11</sup> The Kriol verb *wori* (<Eng. *worry*) accompanied by a dative complement means ‘miss someone’ or ‘grieve for someone’ (Ponsonnet 2018:119–120).

Fig. 8. Pitch trace of (7). Pitch measure between 30 and 400Hz, vertical scale from 0 to 400Hz.

While it may seem paradoxical to rejoice about children's suffering, this is easily explained considering that grief is eminently empathetic. As discussed in Section 3, among the Dalabon group, emotions with negative valence that are empathetic (a sign of affection for others) are praised and encouraged because it is morally valued that fellow community members and kin feel positively for each other. Here the contour expresses precisely this: it helps the speaker assert her moral view on how community members (young ones in particular) should feel with respect to her friend – and this includes suffering for others. As pointed out by Turner (2010:104) for the Arrernte context, children have to be taught these emotional behaviors, and this can explain why the speaker's praise of grief applies to children and young adults. Using the 'compassionate' contour, the speaker expresses her satisfaction and approval of a world where the people she cares for also care for each other – and this can imply suffering for each other in the case of grief.

This emotion or attitude is socially embedded and its expression is an eminently performed display. Yet, there is no reason to think that the speaker's approval and endearment are deceptive and not real – in other words, that they are not insincere. Nevertheless, expressive features are manipulated here for a calculated effect on the audience, and performance helps introduce the somewhat counter-intuitive approbation of children's emotional pain. In addition, as I will now show, the speaker's attitude and the associated moral views also relate to deeper emotions of grief, and to the speaker's emotional well-being.

#### 4.2.4 *Dealing with grief*

In examples (6) and (7), the speaker's satisfaction and approval concerns relatively mild emotional pain, relating to a white person who had lived with the community for decades but was not an actual relative.<sup>12</sup> In addition, although this person had left and given no news, he was known to be alive. In Sequence 2, the speaker deals with a much more painful topic, namely the grief experienced by one of her grandsons about his father, the speaker's own son, deceased just four months earlier.

As explained in Section 4.2.1, the speaker was in an early and severe phase of grief at the time. During the days preceding the recording, she constantly returned to the topic of her white friend who had left, openly expressing her concern about it. She far less often mentioned her grief for her son, but when she did it sounded much deeper. This matches an explicit local avoidance strategy whereby painful topics are eluded so as not to exacerbate grief (Ponsonnet 2014a:44–47). This avoidance is institutionalized via the formal taboo on the name of the deceased for instance

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<sup>12</sup> Although he is called 'grandpa' in line (8)4 of (8) by virtue of adoptive classificatory kinship that ordinarily applies to white acquaintances.

(Glaskin et al. 2008), and further implemented in daily life in the choice of conversations, places to (not) go to etc. By contrast, local principles of bereavement invite mourners to maximize joyful interactions (for instance with children). In the light of these principles, at the time of recording I had come to hypothesize that the speaker was expressing concern for her white friend ‘in place of’ expressing grief for her deceased son. This compares to what happens in (8)<sup>4</sup> of example (8), where the speaker puts her grandson’s behavioural disorders on the account of grief for the white friend who has been chased away. However, she then rectifies her assessment so as to emphasize her grandson’s grief for his deceased father, her son, which she presents in a positive light. In spite of her own severe grief, which she does not mention, in (8) she expresses endearment, approval and satisfaction about her grandson’s grief.

(8) Kriol: 20140401a\_002\_MT from 1’37 to 2’02

- 1 AA En yu bin telim mi dat kid bin gede... problem hey.  
**And you told me that the children had.. problems hey.**
- 2 MT Yeah, dei bin, ↑dei bin smel-im↓ petrol wan --  
INTJ.approb 3pl PST 3pl PST snif-TR petrol one  
**Yeah, they, they sniffed petrol onc-**  
[[ (start of ‘compassionate’ contour, interrupted) ]]
- 3 Main wan im-in smel-im petrol wan taim.  
1sgposs SHIFT 3sg-PST snif-TR petrol one time  
**Mine sniffed petrol once.**  
[[ (looks sideways) ]]
- 4 Bikos im-in wori ba olmen grenpa [friend] matbi.  
because 3sg-PST feel.bad DAT old.man grandfather maybe  
**Because he was missing/grieving for his grandpa [friend] perhaps.**  
[[ (non-conventional expressive contour) ]]  
[[ (pace and intensity decrease, voice becomes creaky) ]]  
[[ (looks sideways) ]]
- 5 Bad athawei matbi im-in wori ba im ded tu,  
but otherwise maybe 3sg-PST feel.bad DAT 3sgposs father too  
dat [grandson’s name].  
DET  
**Or otherwise he was in grief for his father too, this [grandson].**  
[[ (non-conventional approving contour) ]]  
[[ (approving nods) ]]  
[[ (starts smiling and smiles fully in the end) ]]
- 6 Madi im-in wori fo im ded en fo im andi tu.  
maybe 3sg-PST feel.bad for 3sgposs father and for 3sgposs aunt too  
**He must have been grieving his father and his aunt as well.**  
((the aunt is speaker’s daughter-in-law, also recently deceased))  
[[ (pace and intensity decrease) ]]  
[[ (persisting smile, approving nods) ]]
- 7 Bat, ba [granddaughter’s name], TSK [tongue click].  
but DAT  
**But, for [granddaughter’s name, daughter of the deceased aunt, grandson’s cousin], tsk.**  
[[ (approving tongue click) ]]  
[[ (smiling, approving lip pointing and nods) ]]

The ‘compassionate’ contour plays a lesser role in (8) than in the first excerpt presented in (6). The first sentence on the speaker’s grandson’s misbehaviors (line 2) is initially framed within this contour, but this is interrupted and reformulated with a more neutral contour when discussing a more serious matter closer to the speaker’s family. Shortly after (line 4), a less typical contour is used when mentioning the grandson’s grief for the gone friend, and then abandoned again when mentioning father-related grief. But even when discussing this dire grief, the excerpt contains many expressive features conveying sadness initially, and then satisfaction – a pattern already observed in (6), where the speaker starts smiling and nodding in approval towards the end.

Expressing satisfaction about the grief experienced by one’s grandson with respect to the death of one’s own son may feel counterintuitive, but in this particular cultural context and given the speaker’s emotional state at the time, there are many reasons to see it as an effective way to deal with grief. In a number of respects, this monologue is evocative of ‘pragmemes of accommodation’ (Capone 2010) – or interactive sequences – reported in mourning interactions in other cultural contexts (in Europe and elsewhere). The recording under consideration here can be heard as a tribute to the speaker’s friend; and as Capone (Capone 2010) observes, praise is a key feature of sermons aimed at providing solace during Italian funerals. The fact that the speaker only *alludes* to her son’s death is a euphemism typical of bereavement-related discourse (Hänggi & Diederich (2017), based on data from German and English). That the speaker also avoids mentioning her own severe grief is equally unsurprising, as overt emotional exposure threatens ‘face’ (Brown & Levinson 1987), and ‘face’-preserving circumspection is also an identified strategy in death-related contexts (Williams 2006). In this light, the description of the endearing grief of children can also be interpreted as an indirect and therefore emotionally safer way to euphemistically express the speaker’s own grief.

At the same time, the speaker’s satisfaction about the children’s grief also relates to emotion-management strategies in several other important ways.

Assigning positive moral value to painful feelings can transcend them. Here, an approved empathetic emotion replaces a more painful one at the front of the scene, and this replacement can help the speaker deal with her own emotions. Secondly, the assurance that others share one’s grief is an important source of solace in loss-related pragmemes of accommodation (Wakefield and Itakura (2017) on English and Japanese). Thus, the speaker’s satisfaction about the children’s pain may simply be the overt expression of a satisfaction that is expected to remain private in many cultural settings. Finally and perhaps most importantly, emphasizing the affection between family members and friends reinforces reassuring relationships and social bounds – in line with another salient feature of mourning interactions, namely the emphatic presence of others as a source of emotional and practical support (Ehineni (2017) on

Yorùbá death-related social practices). In this Australian context, younger generations in particular represent a reassuring potential for care as long as they respect the compassionate imperative to love and support their kin. The fact that children experience grief is particularly satisfying because it confirms that they are embracing morally valued emotional behaviors that are being taught to them.

Thus, the speaker's monologue combines a number of features typical of loss-related pragmemes of accommodation observed in many social groups: praise, euphemism, and the recruitment of others for emotional and practical support. In this case, since the pragmeme in question is a quasi-monologue, the speaker does not primarily rely upon the collaboration of interlocutors to find solace. Instead, she orchestrates her own performance as a pragmeme of accommodation, which involves expressing satisfaction about others' sharing her own grief.

Several major steps of this grief-management strategy are encapsulated in the semantics of the 'compassionate' contour, because it expresses positive feelings about negative emotions when they are empathetic – and these emotions are an essential support in grief. In addition, the essentially performed nature of the contour also supports this strategy, as it implies that speakers distance themselves from their own emotions for the purpose of a controlled display – in line with the preference for euphemism and avoidance of direct mention of painful events and emotions. Linguistically speaking, in (8) the speaker's strategy to deal with grief is implemented via a range of expressive features rather than by the 'compassionate' contour alone. Nevertheless, the tokens presented in (6) and (7) introduce the moral framework that set the ground for the approval of dire grief that takes place in (8), and the compassionate contour overall has a key role in the development of the speaker's quasi-monologue.

### **4.3 Performance, sincerity and the expression of emotions**

In the recording analyzed above, the highly conventionalized 'compassionate' contour available to speakers in Kriol and other languages of this region is a key linguistic tool of a performance in which the speaker achieves several goals in relation with her own and others' emotions.

- Firstly, she expresses satisfaction and approval about her relatives and friends caring for each other, an attitude or emotion experienced by the speaker at the time of speech.
- At the same time, the speaker presents a moral perspective on the emotions experienced by the members of her community (children in particular). In line with the local ethical grid, she asserts the value of empathetic emotions such as compassion and grief.
- Thirdly, the first two achievements combine to implement various strategies typical of pragmemes of accommodation observed in situations of mourning

and grief. These include praise, euphemism and the recruitment of others for emotional and practical support. By virtue of its semantics, the ‘compassionate’ contour is a key tool in dealing with grief in this manner.

Rimé (2009) has shown that sharing emotions – i.e. articulating narratives about emotional events – helps deal with emotions in deep and subtle ways: it reinforces social bounds and helps identifying management strategies. Here it is the performance and scenarization of one’s emotions – feeling endeared with other people’s compassion and grief – that asserts social bounds, and this *is* the emotional strategy itself.

Throughout this quasi-monologue, the speaker seems to closely control expressive features for a designated effect, which conveys a strong impression of performance. However, the performance here is not only for a social purpose: it has effects on the speaker’s emotions. Asserting a moral stance on emotions is a social move, but it is finely interwoven with the intimate enterprise of dealing with one’s own grief. Far from cancelling the speaker’s power to express her own emotions, the performance of linguistic expressive features encapsulates a complex emotional message. As discussed in Section 1.2, the performance of felt emotions is characteristic of Aboriginal Australian cultures, but whether this may actually be a widespread and perhaps dominant stance across the world’s cultures and languages is a question for future research.

In this context, although it is relatively clear that no deception is involved, the notion of sincerity as a match between the emotions displayed and the internal state of the speaker is irrelevant. The speaker’s internal feelings are multiple and complex, and she chooses to express some of them rather than others. In addition, communicating about emotions operates as an emotion-management strategy which may modify the speaker’s feelings. In this situation – which is presumably the default for human beings at any point in time – the question of the match between the display and internal states is ill-formed. The nature and role of expressivity is to be found elsewhere, in the complex messages and strategies developed by the speaker.

## 5. Conclusion

This empirical examination of a conventionalized prosodic contour used in languages of the Gunwinyguan region of Australia (Top End, Northern Territory) has revealed that it is essentially performed, but that far from cancelling the expression of emotions, performance allows speakers to communicate extensively about them – including expression, moral assertion and emotion management. In other words, conventionalized expressive forms support complex emotional strategies embedded in social norms. This opens up the question of whether the resources available in a

given language determine the emotional-management strategies and pragmemes of accommodation used by its speakers – that is, to which extent the nature of our language influences the way we actually experience emotions (Ponsonnet submitted).

This case study confirms that the semiotic definition of emotional expressive resources as symptoms (Bühler 1934) or indices (Peirce 1955) does not tell us enough about what these resources accomplish. Most expressive resources are not purely reflex, spontaneous and sincere responses. Instead, like the Dalabon ‘compassionate’ contour presented here, they are conventionalized, and to some extent performed. They also transform emotions as much as they express them, which implies that an unrefined notion of sincerity construed as a match between displayed and felt emotions can only pursue a moving target. Much empirical work is needed before we understand the respective role of various expressive resources – prosody but also interjections or evaluative morphology for instance – in human communication and management of emotions.

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