



HAL
open science

Transfer and applicative constructions in Gunwinyguan languages

Maïa Ponsonnet

► **To cite this version:**

Maïa Ponsonnet. Transfer and applicative constructions in Gunwinyguan languages. Bouveret, Myriam. Give constructions across languages, 29, John Benjamins, pp.121-143, 2021, Constructional Approaches to Language, 9789027208422. 10.1075/cal.29.05pon . hal-04174216

HAL Id: hal-04174216

<https://hal.science/hal-04174216v1>

Submitted on 31 Jul 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

****Author's version****

**TRANSFER AND APPLICATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS
IN GUNWINYGUAN LANGUAGES
(NON-PAMA-NYUNGAN, AUSTRALIA)**

Maia Ponsonnet

The University of Sydney

Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language

Published as: Ponsonnet, Maia. 2021. Transfer and applicative constructions in Gunwinyguan languages (non-Pama-Nyungan, Australia), in Bouveret, M. ed., *Give constructions across languages*, 121-143. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Abstract

This article describes the syntax and semantics of benefactive and comitative constructions in Dalabon, a Gunwinyguan language (Australia, non-Pama-Nyungan). After having described the respective subcategorisation operations and meanings of each of these constructions, I show that the criterion for using benefactive constructions is the animacy of the benefactive participant, whereas the criterion for using comitative constructions the semantic role of the argument: the Dalabon comitative marker selects arguments with typical “comitative” meaning (accompaniment and instrument). In addition, I show that the comitative construction has developed a cross-linguistically unusual semantic extension towards the notion of transfer. When combined with verbs of attainment (‘get’, ‘pull’, etc.), Dalabon comitative constructions express malefactive transfer (or removal, i.e. the opposite of giving). Comparing Dalabon with neighbouring languages of the same family reveals that this extension is not limited to the Dalabon language, but also occurs in Bininj Gun-wok and Rembarrnga, including with comitative markers that are not cognate with the Dalabon marker. In addition, the Dalabon comitative constructions can also express the transfer of contents of communication with verbs meaning ‘tell’ or ‘ask’, an extension that is not attested in Bininj Gun-wok or Rembarrnga.

Author's version of: Ponsonnet, Maia. 2021. Transfer and applicative constructions in Gunwinyguan languages (non-Pama-Nyungan, Australia), in Bouveret, M. ed., *Give constructions across languages*, 121-143. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Key words: valence, diathesis, benefactive applicative, comitative applicative, animacy, polysynthesis, transfer semantics, Dalabon, Gunwinyguan, Australian Aboriginal languages

1. Introduction

This chapter explores the semantic extensions from the comitative domain to the notion of transfer: either to malefactive transfer – i.e. removal, the opposite of giving, which is the topic of this volume – or to the transfer of contents of communication (speech). The semantic extension of a comitative marker to cover malefactive transfer had apparently not been reported in the literature on the comitative domain so far. The present article describes and analyses this extension as it occurs in Dalabon, an Australian language of the Gunwinyguan family (non-Pama-Nyungan).

There are few published linguistic studies on the notion of “comitative” or “concomitances” (Lehmann & Shin, 2005), and the core definition of this label varies across authors. Arkhipov (2009) for instance, following Maslova (1999) and Stassen (2000), defines the “comitative” markers as those capable of expressing accompaniment in the sense of (co-)participation to an event. Other authors focus on semantic extensions of accompaniment such as manner, material, ingredients, instruments – all expressed by ‘with’ in English (Schlesinger, 1995, p. 61). In their typological study of the functional domain of concomitance, Lehmann & Shin (2005) include partner and companion, vehicle, tool, material and manner or circumstance as “concomitant” roles. I have not found any mention of transfer listed as a semantic extension of comitative markers – but this extension is well attested in some Australian languages, as I illustrate here with the Dalabon language.

Overall, the semantics of Dalabon comitative applicative constructions is consistent with the concepts considered in the above-cited studies: they frequently express accompaniment,

instrument and material. The expression of participant sets is only very marginal (see Section 5.1), and the expression of manner is absent. In addition, Dalabon comitative constructions also express of malefactive transfer and transfer of content of communication. In fact, the semantic extension from comitative to malefactive transfer (removal) is not only attested in Dalabon, but also across several other languages of the Gunwinyguan family, including for comitative markers that are not cognates of the Dalabon marker. The semantic extension from canonical comitative roles to transfer is therefore a significant addition to our understanding of the comitative domain, as well as of how notions of transfer (gift or removal) can be expressed by means of constructions across the world's languages. These semantic extensions of the Dalabon comitative applicative are discussed in detail in this article, and compared with comitative applicative constructions in two neighbouring languages of the same Gunwinyguan family, namely Bininj Gun-wok and Rembarrnga.

Before we can understand malefactive transfer constructions, it is necessary to describe the semantics of benefactive constructions, which play a key role in describing recipient participants. In Dalabon, the syntactic and semantic articulation between benefactive and comitative constructions underpins the malefactive transfer constructions identified above. The discussion of this articulation paves the way to the analysis of the malefactive transfer construction.

In Section 2 and 3 I present the languages discussed in this study and provide some details about Dalabon grammar, in particular the morphological encoding of arguments on the Dalabon verb complex. The following sections describe the two applicative constructions available in Dalabon. Section 4 discusses benefactive applicative constructions (prefix *marnu-*), used to add a supplementary animate participant to the subcategorisation frame of a predicate. Section 5 describes Dalabon comitative applicative constructions (prefix *ye-*), used to add an inanimate

participant or an animate participant in a comitative role. In this section, I also show how Dalabon comitative applicative constructions contrast with benefactive applicative constructions, where benefactives and applicatives specialise respectively for benefactive and malefactive transfer (i.e. removal, the opposite of giving). Dalabon remains in focus throughout the article, but comparisons with Bininj Gun-wok and Rembarrnga will be offered along the way.

2. The languages in this study

Dalabon is an Australian language of the Gunwinyguan family, among the non-Pama-Nyungan group. Prior to colonisation, Dalabon was spoken by a few hundred people in the western part of the Arnhem Land region in the Northern Territory of Australia. Nowadays, Dalabon is severely endangered and fluently spoken by less than ten persons in remote Aboriginal communities to the east of the town of Katherine (Barunga, Beswick, Bulman, Weemol). My analyses of the Dalabon language are based on first-hand data (60-hour corpus) collected in Weemol, Beswick and Barunga between 2007 and 2012 with five main speakers, all of them above sixty years old, and all but one of them female.

There exists no full grammar of Dalabon at this stage, but there is a dictionary (Evans, Merlan, & Tukumba, 2004), and a number of articles and theses describe various aspects of the language, including the verbal template, tense/aspect/mood categories, person prefixes (Evans, 2006; Evans, Brown, & Corbett, 2001; Evans & Merlan, 2003), demonstratives (Cutfield, 2011), prosody (Evans, Fletcher, & Ross, 2008; Ross, 2011), nominal subclasses (Ponsonnet, 2015), the vocabulary of emotions (Ponsonnet, 2014), among other things.

This article systematically compares Dalabon constructions with functionally equivalent constructions across two other languages of the same family (Gunwinyguan, non-Pama-

Nyungan): the Bininj Gun-wok dialect chain and Rembarrnga. Bininj Gun-wok is a dialect chain spoken by approximately 1,600 persons, to the north-west of the Dalabon region. According to Evans (2003, p. 33), Dalabon and Bininj Gun-wok both belong to the central Gunwinyguan branch, and are therefore more closely related than they are to Rembarrnga (eastern branch). Rembarrnga is severely endangered, with probably a few dozen speakers left. It has been classified by Evans (2003, p. 33) within the eastern Gunwinyguan branch, i.e. the branch adjacent to Dalabon. However, possibly due to contacts and borrowing (see for instance Ponsonnet (2015, p. 4) on noun incorporation), the resemblances between Dalabon and Rembarrnga are perhaps as significant as between Bininj Gun-wok dialects and Dalabon. Rembarrnga has been extensively described in McKay's (2011) detailed grammar, and Saulwick (2003) provides further analyses of the Rembarrnga verb complex.

Like most languages in non-Pama-Nyungan families, Dalabon, Bininj Gun-wok dialects and Rembarrnga are all polysynthetic, agglutinative, and head-marking. In the following section, I present the aspects of the Dalabon grammar that will be necessary for the reader to follow the rest of the argument.

3. The Dalabon verb complex

In Dalabon, clausal arguments are systematically cross-referenced by prefixes on predicates. There are also some nominal case suffixes, including an optional ergative suffix (Luk & Ponsonnet, 2019). Dalabon polysynthetic verb complexes follow a regular template outlined in Figure 1 (see Evans & Merlan (2003) or Ponsonnet (2014, pp. 61–64) more extensive accounts). Dalabon word order is syntactically free and pragmatically determined.

-11 | -10 | -9 | -8 | -7 | -6 | -5 | -4 | -3 | -2 | -1 | 0 | +1 | +2 | +3/4 | +5

Diminutive
Case/Poss. encl.
TAM
Refl./Recip.
ROOT
Comitative
Number prefix
Incorporated nom.
Misc. adverbs
Benefactive
Misc. adverbs
Sequential
Focus
Status
Person pref.
Object pron.

Figure 1. The Dalabon verb template and explanation of its slots. Adapted from Evans & Merlan (2003, p. 271) and Evans, Fletcher & Ross (2008, p. 95). Shaded columns indicate compulsory slots.

While the template numbers 15 slots, in ordinary speech only a fraction of these are filled in a given utterance. As illustrated in (1), many verb complexes only fill the four obligatory slots. In example (2), the verb complex has two aspectual markers and an incorporated noun, amounting to six morphemes, which is also very common.

20120706b_000_MT 043 [Film]¹

- (1) *Woy, dja-h-dokka-n ngarra-h-bo-niyan,*
 INTJ.hey 2sg-R-get.up-PRS 1pl.incl-R-go-FUT
wudjirru-ba-n barra-h-yin.
 APPR:1du>2sg-leave-PRS 3du-R-say/do:PRS
 'Hey, get up, we're going, or we'll leave you here they say.'

20120705b_004_MT 118 [Film]

- (2) *Bunu ka-h-na-ng, barra-h-dja-Ing-kakku-yurd-minj.*
 3du 3sg>3-R-see-PP 3du-R-FOC-SEQ-really-run-PP
 'She looked at them two, they were running fast.'

Dalabon verbs are lexically defined as either transitive or intransitive, in the sense that they pick one of two sets of obligatory prefixes and clitics. One of the sets is intransitive and encodes just one argument, like *dja-* second person singular in the first line of (1) above for instance. The other set is transitive and encodes two arguments. This is done either by means of clitics like

¹ Gloss abbreviations not listed in the Leipzig Glossing Rules. APPR: apprehensive mood; DIM: diminutive; FILL: morphological filler; FOC: focus prefix; h: high(er) on scale of animacy; INCH: inchoative marker; INTJ: interjection; PI: past imperfective; PP: past perfective; R: realis mood; REDUP: reduplication; SEQ: sequential; SUB: subordinate marker. Data type abbreviations. [ContEl]: contextualised elicitation; [ConvEl]: conversation in the course of elicitation; [El]: standard elicitation; [Film]: comment on movie; [Narr]: narratives; [Stim]: response to elicitation stimuli. Glosses in capitals indicate an etymological meaning not used in synchrony.

Author's version of: Ponsonnet, Maïa. 2021. Transfer and applicative constructions in Gunwinyguan languages (non-Pama-Nyungan, Australia), in Bouveret, M. ed., *Give constructions across languages*, 121-143. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

bunu in (2) above, which cross-references a dual third person pronoun second argument of the transitive verb *nan* ‘see’; or by portmanteau prefixes, like *wudjirru-* in (2), which encodes the action of first person dual upon second singular (in the apprehensive mood).

In this article, I will use the letters S, A and O to refer respectively to the single argument of an intransitive clause, and to the first and second argument of a transitive clause.² In addition, I will use ‘second object’ or O2 for the third argument of ditransitive clauses. Second objects are not cross-referenced on Dalabon predicates, as illustrated in (3) where the cross-referenced O is first person plural inclusive, i.e. the persons to whom the Theme *yang* ‘language’ is being shown. The Theme is an O2 expressed as an incorporated noun and is not cross-referenced by the verbal prefix. Note that in Dalabon, animate participants tend to have priority in terms of cross-referencing on the verb. That is, there is a strong preference for treating animate participants as clausal arguments, and thus encoding them on the verb.

30024/2007 – 14’ (JW) [ContEI]
 (3) *Bulu-ngokorrng-yih* *ngorr* *ka-h-yang-buyhwo-n.*
 father-1pl.incl.POSS-ERG 1pl.incl 3sg>1-R-language-show-PRS
 ‘Our father God taught us [gave us] languages.’

As mentioned above, the set of prefixes assigned to a given verb is lexically defined: verbs cannot freely alternate between one valence or the other. Instead, valence alternations must be sanctioned by valence changing morphemes, in particular two applicative operators: the benefactive applicative *marnu-* and the comitative applicative *ye-*. As shown in Figure 1 above, both of them are verbal prefixes that occur between the person prefix and the root. In Dalabon, the comitative applicative *ye-* occurs in constructions semantically specialised for transfer. Given that this semantic specialisation of the comitative applicative is the clearest when

² Here, the roles S, A, O and O2 refer uniquely to the morphological cross-referencing by verbal prefixes and clitics, irrespective of purely syntactic relations such as the notion of a syntactic subject.

Author’s version of: Ponsonnet, Maïa. 2021. Transfer and applicative constructions in Gunwinyguan languages (non-Pama-Nyungan, Australia), in Bouveret, M. ed., *Give constructions across languages*, 121-143. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

contrasted with the benefactive applicative, both applicatives will be discussed in turn, and then compared.

4. Benefactive applicative constructions

The basic function of the Dalabon applicative prefix *marnu-* is to allow for an animate who is involved in the event but is not included in the lexically defined subcategorisation of the verb to be formally encoded as an argument on the verb. As discussed below, this usually results in raising the valence of the predicate by one (intransitive > transitive, transitive > ditransitive). Verbal affixes with very similar morphological and semantic behaviours have been described for several Gunwinyguan languages. Bininj Gun-wok dialects have the cognate form *marne-* (Evans, 2003, pp. 427–432), and Evans also reports the cognate *marnaj-* in Kunbarlang (Gunwinyguan). In addition, Rembarrnga has a non-cognate form *bak-* with a very similar behaviour to the Dalabon *marnu-*, as described by McKay (2011, pp. 261–282) and Saulwick (2003, pp. 208–226).³ Some fine differences between Dalabon and Rembarrnga are discussed in Section 5.2.

Example (4) illustrates the subcategorisation alteration operated by the Dalabon prefix *marnu-* with a lexically intransitive predicate as a base, where *marnu-yenjdjung* ‘talk to’ is preceded by *bulu ka-*, third singular acting upon third plural. Without *marnu-*, *yenjdjung* ‘talk’ is intransitive and can only cross-reference a single argument.

20120721_003_LB 009 [Film]

(4)	<i>Bulu ka-h-yinmiwo-ng</i>	<i>bulu ka-h-marnu-yenjHyenjdju-ng.</i>
	3pl 3sg>3-R-tell-PP	3pl 3sg>3-R-BEN-talk:REDUP-PRS

‘He tells them, he talks to them.’

³ The Rembarrnga *bak-* prefix also has cognates in two other Gunwinyguan languages, Ngalakgan (Merlan 1983, p. 47;94) and Ngandi (Heath 1978, p. 81).

Author’s version of: Ponsonnet, Maïa. 2021. Transfer and applicative constructions in Gunwinyguan languages (non-Pama-Nyungan, Australia), in Bouveret, M. ed., *Give constructions across languages*, 121-143. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

In (5), with the lexically transitive base ‘take’, the prefix *buka-* encodes the action of third singular upon third singular higher in animacy, encoding the animate owner of the tobacco as O. Without *marnu-*, an inanimate object such as the tobacco would be encoded on the verb, using *ka-* third person singular acting upon third person singular. Figure 2 presents the modification in subcategorisation operated in each case (intransitive and transitive bases) by the benefactive *marnu-*.

20110526b_001_MT 021 [ContEl]

(5) *Men-mungu* *kanh* *beka* *buka-h-marnu-m-e.*
 idea-unintentionally DEM tobacco 3sg>3sg.h-R-BEN-get:PP

‘He unintentionally took her tobacco [to her detriment].’

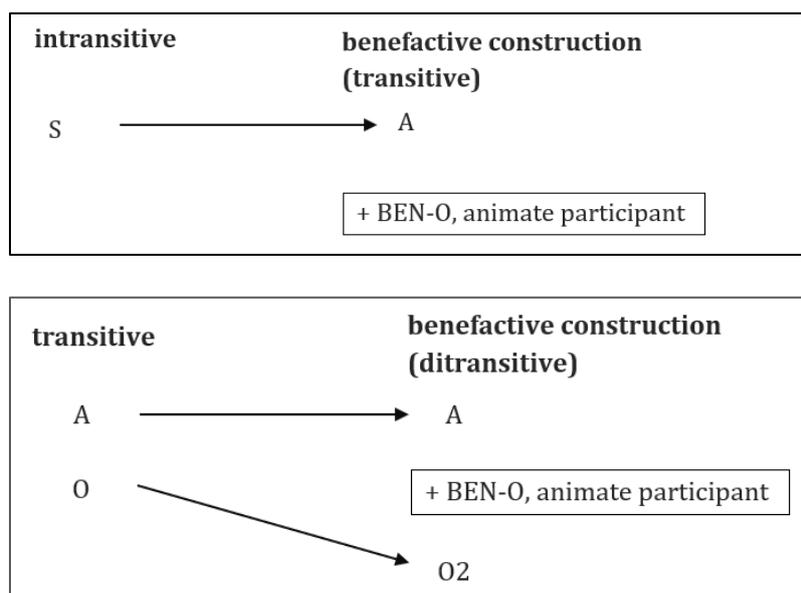


Figure 2. Subcategorisation operations of the Dalabon benefactive applicative *marnu-* upon an intransitive (top) and transitive (bottom) predicate.

The label “benefactive” is convenient here because it is standard terminology for applicative markers, yet it is partially misleading, because it suggests that the applicative in question selects the arguments it introduces on the basis of their semantic role. The Dalabon benefactive prefix *marnu-* (like its cognates in other Gunwinyguan languages) can introduce arguments with a

large variety of the semantic roles, and ultimately the semantic role of the argument depends upon the lexical sense of the base verb (as suggested for the Rembarnga *bak-* by Saulwick (2003, p. 222)). Instead of the semantic role of the participant, the availability of *marnu-* constructions depends essentially on the animacy of the participant: participant introduced by *marnu-* must be high in animacy (humans or personified animals). Given that the benefactive selects animate participants involved in the event, they are often benefactees or malefactees, as in (6) and (7) below.

Benefactee

20120707b_000_MT 414 [Narr]

- (6) *Mmm, byunrul yila-h-marnu-yidjnja-ninj-wurd.*
 INTJ.approv funeral 1pl.excl>3-R-BEN-have-PI-DIM

‘Mmm, we had a small funeral for her.’

Malefactee

20120706a_001_MT 113 [ContEI]

- (7) *ngorr bula-h-marnu-ngu-yan.*
 1pl.incl 3pl>1-R-BEN-eat-FUT

‘They will eat it on us [our food].’

However, depending on the base verbs, the applicative argument can also be an emotional stimuli (8), and addressee (4 above), a goal or location (9), a possessor (10), and probably more. Note that possessors can often be construed as benefactees or malefactees, as in (5) or (6) above, but this is not very clearly the case (10), where the benefactive construction is simply another way of encoding possession.

Emotional stimuli

20120707b_000_MT 204 [Narr]

- (8) *Mak bula-Ing-bukku-yurr-mi, kahke-no,*
 NEG 3pl>3-SEQ?-give.in.return-IRR NEG

kardu bula-h-marnu-djong-m-inj.
 maybe 3pl>3sg-R-BEN-FEAR-INCH-PP

‘They didn’t take revenge at all, maybe they were afraid of them.’

Location

20110605_002_LB_ND 123 (LB) [Stim]

Author’s version of: Ponsonnet, Maïa. 2021. Transfer and applicative constructions in Gunwinyguan languages (non-Pama-Nyungan, Australia), in Bouveret, M. ed., *Give constructions across languages*, 121-143. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

- (9) *Darnki ka-h-bo-n, buka-h-marnu-bo-ninj darnkih.*
 close 3sg-R-go-PRS 3sg>3sg.h-R-BEN-go-PI close

‘He comes close, he was coming close to him.’

Possession

20120706a_000_MT 036 [E1]

- (10) *Dja-h-marnu-labbarl-n-iyān.*
 1sg>2sg-R-BEN-pond-see-FUT

‘I will see your pond (billabong).’

This list of semantic roles is very consistent with the list provided by Evans (2003, pp. 427–432) for the cognate prefix *marne-* in Bininj Gun-wok dialects, as well as with the one provided by Saulwick (2003, pp. 208–226) for the non-cognate prefix *bak-* in Rembarrnga.

5. Comitative applicative constructions

5.1 Syntax and semantics

Like the benefactive applicative *marnu-*, the comitative applicative prefix *ye-* sanctions the addition of an argument in the subcategorisation pattern of the predicate. But unlike the benefactive construction, the comitative valence-change operation is driven mostly by the semantic role of the applicative argument, and it somewhat less syntactically systematic. Cognate prefixes are found in Bininj Gun-wok (*yi-* for most dialects and *re-* in Kune, see Evans (2003, pp. 432–437)) and in Rembarrnga, where *yi-* and *re-* are described as two different comitative prefixes by Saulwick (2003, pp. 227–236) (see also McKay, 2011, pp. 151–154). Evans (2003, p. 437) indicates that these verbal prefixes originated in nominal comitative suffixes of the form *-yih* (Dalabon), *-yi* (Bininj Gun-wok) and *-yi(nda)* (Rembarrnga) – the Rembarrnga *-yi(nda)* can actually incorporate to verb complexes following incorporated nouns. Given that *r/y* correspondences are attested morpheme initially within the Gunwinyguan family⁴ the three items *yi-* > *ye-* > *re-* form a cognate set, with the order of historical derivation

⁴ E.g. *rawoyh-* in Dalabon and *yawoyh-* in Bininj Gun-wok for the verbal prefix ‘again’, Harvey (2003, p. 257)). Author’s version of: Ponsonnet, Maïa. 2021. Transfer and applicative constructions in Gunwinyguan languages (non-Pama-Nyungan, Australia), in Bouveret, M. ed., *Give constructions across languages*, 121-143. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Figure 3. Subcategorisation operation of the Dalabon comitative applicative *ye-* with an intransitive predicate as a base.

When the base verb is transitive, the comitative *ye-* makes it ditransitive, and whether the new comitative participant or the original O is encoded on the verb depends upon their respective animacy: the participant with the highest degree of animacy is cross-referenced as O on the comitative predicate. In (12), the participant added by the benefactive construction is an inanimate instrument (teeth), while the patient of the base verb is animate (someone being bitten). As a result, the comitative participant is not cross-referenced on the verb, because it is lower in animacy. Thus, *njel ka-* cross-references third singular acting upon third plural exclusive. The same prefix and clitic would have been expected for *bang* ‘bite’ alone without the comitative construction, so that the original O is not demoted to O2. Instead, the inanimate comitative object is treated as O2.

20100724_004_MT 096 [Stim]
 (12) *Nunda njel ka-h-ye-ba-ng.*
 this 1pl.excl 3sg>1-R-COM-bite-PRS
 ‘[The crayfish,] this [its teeth] is to bite us with.’

In example (13), the original A and the comitative participant are a participant set undertaking an action together: “they look after the land with us”. Note that this configuration is reported by Evans (2003, p. 423) to be impossible in Biniñ Gun-wok. Contrary to what was observed in (12), here the comitative participant, which is semantically a co-agent, is cross-referenced as O on the verb (*njel* for first person plural exclusive O). The theme, which is the incorporated *kurnh* ‘country’ being looked after, is inanimate. It would have been encoded as O on a bare verb *nahnan* ‘look after’ (*bula-h-nahna-n*, ‘they look after it’), but in the applicative comitative construction it is superseded by the animate comitative participant, so that the theme *kurnh* ‘country’ is no longer cross-referenced on the verb.

20100722b_008_MT 085 [ConvE]

(13) *Rembarrnga njel bula-h-kurnh-ye-nahna-n.*
 prop.n 1pl.excl 3pl>1-R-country-COM-see:REDUP-PRS

‘The Rembarrnga people [ethnic group], they look after the land with us.’

These two cases illustrated respectively in (12) and (13) imply two slightly different subcategorisation operations.⁶ As shown in Figure 4, in the first case (top), when the original O is animate, a comitative participant is added as a non-cross-referenced second object. In the other case, when the original O is inanimate and the comitative participant is animate, the comitative participant is cross-referenced on the verb, and the original O is demoted to the non-cross-referenced function O2.

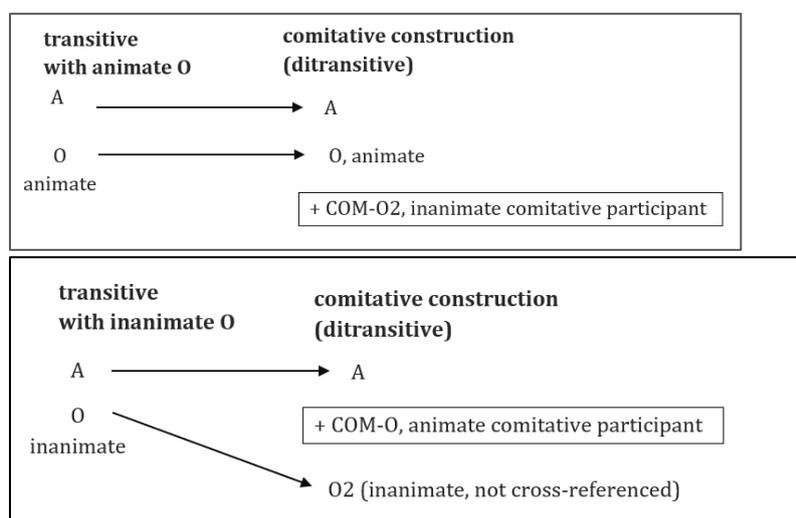


Figure 4. Subcategorisation operations of the Dalabon comitative applicative *ye-* with a transitive predicate, when the original O is higher in animacy than the comitative participant (top), and when it is lower in animacy (bottom).

Semantically, the comitative applicative *ye-* covers many of the contexts typically covered by markers called “comitative markers”, i.e. the domain of “concomitance” (Lehmann & Shin,

⁶ Given the semantics of comitative participants (see below), in a large number of cases, both the comitative participant and O are inanimate. Since, inanimates do not attract plural agreement in Dalabon, it is not possible to tell which one is encoded on the verb, because they would both be encoded in the same way anyway, as third person singular. My corpus does not contain any occurrence where both the original O and the comitative participant are animate.

Author’s version of: Ponsonnet, Maïa. 2021. Transfer and applicative constructions in Gunwinyguan languages (non-Pama-Nyungan, Australia), in Bouveret, M. ed., *Give constructions across languages*, 121-143. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

all inanimate applicative participants, as well as animate participants with “comitative” semantics (as defined by Lehman (2005), Schlesinger (1995)). The benefactive *marnu-*, on the other hand, is used to encode all animate applicative participants, except the ones with typically comitative semantics. Based on this distribution, the benefactive applicative may be better qualified as an “animate” or “non-comitative” applicative marker rather than “benefactive”. As discussed in Section 4, it supports most semantic roles apart from comitative ones.

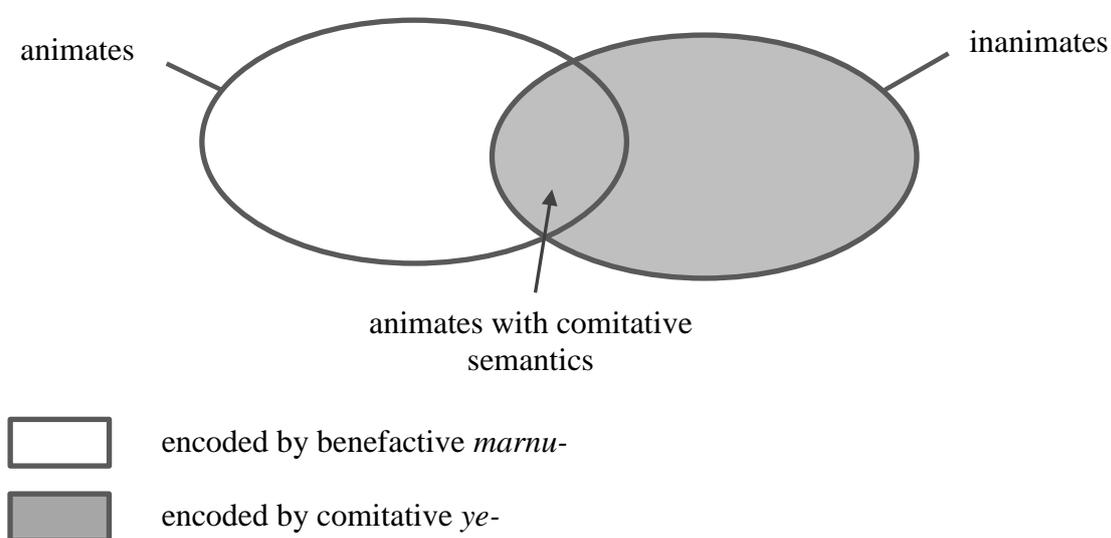


Figure 5. The distribution of labor between Dalabon benefactive applicative (*marnu-*) and comitative applicative (*ye-*) constructions.

Based on Saulwick (2003, pp. 227–242), it appears that the distribution of labor between applicative prefixes differs slightly in Rembarrnga, where there are three comitative prefixes (*yi-*, *re-* and *bardda-*) and one benefactive prefix (*bak-*). According to Saulwick (2003, p. 228), *yi-* introduces “non-human comitative arguments with intransitive verbs”; *re-* and *bardda-* introduce “any type of comitative argument (i.e human, non-human, animate or inanimate, and

may be used with verbs of all transitive values)”; and the prefix *bak-* is used with human participants (Saulwick, 2003, p. 222), and can occasionally be found with semantically comitative arguments if they are human/animate. Therefore, according to Saulwick (2003), the distribution of the Rembarrnga benefactive applicative *bak-* and comitative applicative *yi-* are primarily determined by the animacy of the participant, irrespective of its semantic role. In Dalabon on the other hand, as discussed above, the choice between the benefactive *marnu-* and the comitative *ye-* is governed partly by an animacy criterion, partly by semantic roles. Given that the Rembarrnga system of applicative prefixes is richer than the Dalabon or Bininj Gunwok one, it is possible that Rembarrnga is developing further distinctions, with animacy gaining ground as a decisive criterion.

5.3 Malefactive transfer constructions

In addition to the semantic contexts listed in Section 5.1, the Dalabon comitative marker *ye-* can express transfer when it combines with certain verbs. In a first case, described in this section, the comitative construction denotes a malefactive transfer of good between two participants – i.e. the removal of a possession, the opposite of a gift. The second case, discussed in Section 5.4, concerns the transfer of content of speech.

The most frequent malefactive-transfer construction, which is the most frequent, occurs with transitive verbs expressing “attainment” – i.e. grasping, holding etc. This is illustrated in (17) and (18) with *mang* ‘get’. Example (17) presents the bare use of *mang*, where the theme (here *bad-ngong*, ‘all the money’) is treated as O (*yila-*, first person plural exclusive acting upon third person singular).

20100724_000_MT 35 [Narr]

(17) *Nunh kanh bad-ngong yila-h-ma-nginj,*
 DEM DEM money-group 1pl.excl>3-R-get-PI

njel bula-h-ngabbu-ninj.
 1pl.excl 3pl>1-R-give-PI

‘We used to take the money, that they gave us.’

In example (18), we see that a comitative construction applied to the verb *mang* ‘get’ means ‘take away from someone’. Here the O argument of *mang* ‘get’ is no longer the theme (the food being taken away is not expressed in the utterance), but the persons being deprived of the food, encoded as *ngorr*, first person plural inclusive. This conforms to the comitative subcategorisation operation presented in Figure 3 in Section 5.1: given that the original O is inanimate, it is demoted to an O2 position, while the new animate participant sanctioned by the comitative applicative prefix *ye-* is cross-referenced as O on the verb.

20120706a_001_MT 113 [ContEI]

(18) *Wurrhwurrungu* *ngorr* *bula-h-ye-ma-ng,*
 old.person 1pl.incl 3pl>1-R-COM-get-PRS

ngorr *bula-h-marnu-ngu-yan.*
 1pl.incl 3pl>1-R-BEN-eat-FUT

‘They take it [food] from us old people, they eat it on us [they eat our food].’

Semantically, this “comitative” construction expressing malefactive transfer reaches out of the cross-linguistically typical comitative range, because there is no sense of accompaniment. It is easy to see that the malefactive transfer relates to the notion of accompaniment to the extent that the A participant goes away *with* the theme. Yet, the action that is undertaken with the theme is not expressed by the verb. Given that attainment verbs like *mang* ‘get’ do not express either movement or location, and given that neither O (the persons being deprived of food) nor the theme (the food) are either an instrument or a material etc., we cannot translate (18) using the English “with” for instance. The notion of transfer is not conveyed by a compositional combination between the verb *mang* ‘get’ and the comitative *ye-*, but by the construction itself. McKay (2011, p. 150) and Saulwick (2003, p. 234) state that Rembarrnga comitative constructions apply to arguments that “lack control”, in line with both their semantic status as comitative participants and their usually lower degree of animacy. Indeed, malefactive-transfer

constructions describe situations where the added participant (the malefatee, not the theme) in spite of being animate, lacks control over the item being taken away from them.

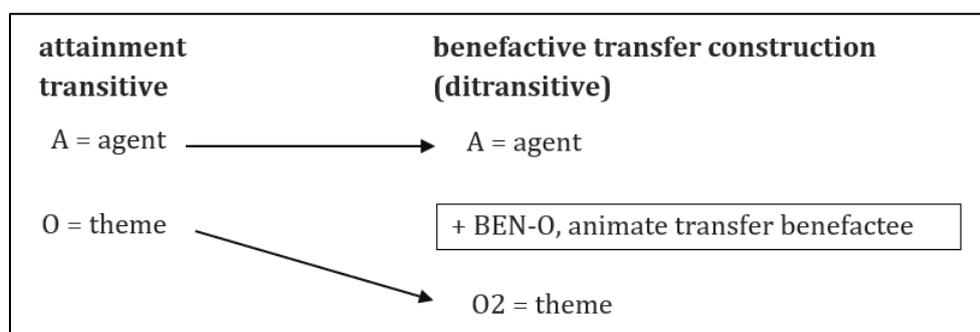
The participant added by the comitative applicative *ye-* in this transfer construction is neither semantically comitative, nor inanimate. Therefore, this participant could in principle be taken charge of by a benefactive construction (see Sections 4 and 5.2). But instead, the transfer construction contrasts neatly with its sister benefactive (*marnu-*) construction, presented in (19). Here the benefatee participant is encoded as *bulu* third person plural, the O2 is *burningkird* ‘wild plum’, and the whole construction expresses benefits for O: “A gets plums for O”.

20120710b_001_MT 111 [Narr]

(19) *Burningkird bulu bula-h-marnu-ma-nginj.*
wild.plum 3pl 3pl>3-R-BEN-get-PI

‘They [the mothers] used to get wild plums for them [the children].’

As discussed in Section 4, benefactive participants can in principle be malefatees as well as benefatees, but in this case, the benefactive construction is restricted to benefatees – “get something for someone” –, and malefactive interpretations are taken care of by the comitative-based transfer construction illustrated above in (18) above – “take something away from someone”. Figure 6 shows that the benefactive and the comitative constructions share identical subcategorisation patterns and only differ in meaning, with the construction based on the comitative *ye-* yielding a malefactive-transfer meaning.



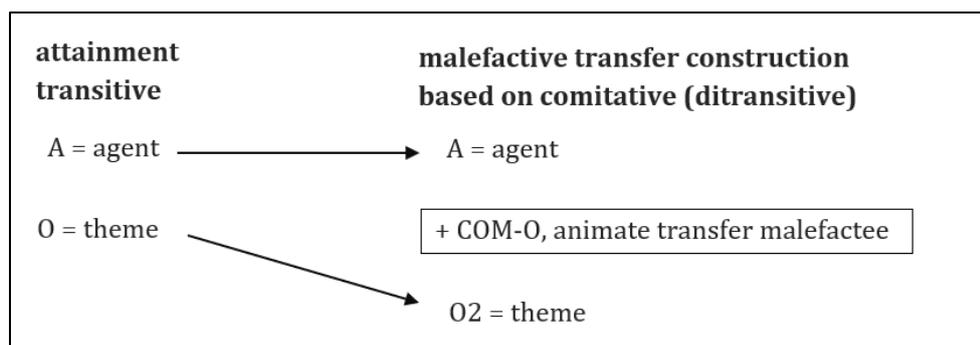


Figure 6. Subcategorisation operations of applicative comitative (top) and benefactive (bottom) constructions with verbs expressing attainment.

Thus, the transfer meaning of comitative constructions applied to verbs of attainment is adequately described as a lexicalised semantic value of this construction. The construction applies productively with verbs of attainment, as illustrated for *durrk(mu)* ‘pull out’ in (20). *Durrk(mu)* is lexically ditransitive, with the person being deprived treated as O, and the theme treated as a second object. In (20), the subcategorisation remains the same, except that the second object is now a comitative participant, due to the presence of *ye-*. The comitative marker does not really alter the construction, and neither does it change the sense of the verb. In other words, it is somewhat pleonastic, but does impart a malefactive dimension to the otherwise neutral verb *durrk(mu)* ‘pull out’. In this case, the comitative prefix may impart emphasis, as the speaker is talking about how some of her siblings were taken away from her parents by government authorities – i.e. a particularly hurtful removal.⁷

20110519b_001_LB_ND 034 (LB) [Narr]
[Reported speech from the speaker’s parents.]
(20) *Njel* *bula-h-ye-durrk-minj.*
1pl.excl 3pl>1-R-COM-?pull.out?-PP

‘They took them from us [your elder siblings].’

In addition, the malefactive transfer construction also occurs in cases where the verb already implies malefactive transfer, so that the construction becomes entirely pleonastic. In (21), the

⁷ As part of the government policy now known as the “Stolen Generation”, see Commission on Human Rights and Equal Opportunity’s (1997).

Author’s version of: Ponsonnet, Maïa. 2021. Transfer and applicative constructions in Gunwinyguan languages (non-Pama-Nyungan, Australia), in Bouveret, M. ed., *Give constructions across languages*, 121-143. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

verb *djirdmang* ‘steal’ already expresses the idea of malefactive transfer, but the construction is nevertheless used because its lexicalised semantics matches the event being described.

20110520_001_LB 118 [ConvE]

(21) *Bulu bula-h-ye-djirdjirdma-nginj kirdikird-bulng.*
 3pl 3pl>3-R-COM-steal:REDUP-PI woman-3pl.POSS

‘They used to steal their wives.’

This malefactive-transfer construction is attested with comitative prefixes for attainment verbs in both Bininj Gun-wok and Rembarrnga. Evans (2003, p. 435) calls it “eventual possession” and Saulwick (2003, p. 228;238) calls it “deprivative”, but the construction and its meaning are the same. In Rembarrnga, the construction is available for both *re-* and *bardda-*, i.e. for all the comitative suffixes that can occur with transitive verbs. In (22), this is illustrated for the Gun-djeihmi Bininj Gun-wok dialect with a verb where the attainment is figurative. Examples (23) and (24) illustrate it with the Rembarrnga transitive verb *ma* ‘get’, cognate with Dalabon *mang* ‘get’.

(Bininj Gun-wok, Gun-djeihmi dialect, Evans 2003:435)

(22) *Ban-warde-yi-birrbme-ng.*
 3/3pl-money-COM-clean-PP
 ‘She cleaned them out of money.’

(Rembarrnga, Saulwick 2004:233)

(23) *Nga-re-ma-ngara.*
 1>3-COM-get-FUT
 ‘I’ll get it off him/her.’

(Rembarrnga, McKay 2011:151)

(24) *Dambakku banga-bardda-ma-ngara.*
 tobacco 1>3a-COM-get-FUT
 ‘I’ll get some tobacco from them.’

Thus, the semantic extension of comitative markers to encode malefactive transfer is not language specific. On the contrary, the phenomenon occurs in several languages across the Gunwinyguan family, for markers that are cognates (*yi-*, *ye-*, *re-*) but also for markers that do not belong to this cognate set (*bardda-* in Rembarrnga). This suggests that this semantic extension to malefactive transfer is a cross-linguistically significant semantic extension of

applicative comitative markers. It remains an open question for future research whether this extension occurs in other language families, in Australia and elsewhere.

5.4 *Communication transfer constructions: transfer of content of speech*

In addition to malefactive transfer, the comitative construction has another lexicalised transfer meaning, namely the transfer of contents of communication. This meaning occurs with verbs of verbal communication *wokan* ‘tell someone/something’ and *djawan* ‘ask something to someone’. Unlike the malefactive-transfer construction above, this construction related to communication is not reported in Bininj Gun-wok or in Rembarrnga. Semantically, both *wokan* ‘tell someone/something’ and *djawan* ‘ask something to someone’ have three main standard participants, namely an agent, an addressee, and a theme which is the content of speech. Lexically, in Dalabon *wokan* does not subcategorise for three but only two arguments: it is lexically transitive, not ditransitive. However, the semantic mapping of these two arguments varies. A is always the agent i.e. the person who is speaking, but O can be either the recipient of the speech content, or the speech content itself, i.e. the theme in terms of semantic role. In (25), O is *bulu* third person plural or ‘them’, i.e. the recipient, and the theme is not expressed. In (26), by contrast, the theme is *dawo* ‘story’, cross-referenced on the verb with *da-* which is second person singular acting upon third singular; the recipient is not expressed.

20120710a_000_MT 279 [Film]

(25) *Kanh-kun mak bulu ka-h-Ing-woka-n.*
DEM-GEN NEG 3pl 3sg>3-R-SEQ-tell-PRS

‘That’s why he’s not going to tell them.’

2007/30089 - 1’ (MT) [E1]

(26) *Kirribuk dawo da-h-woka-n.*
true story 2sg>3-R-tell-PRS

‘You’re telling a true story.’

As expected given the comitative subcategorisation patterns described in Section 5.1, a comitative construction makes *wokan* ‘tell someone/something’ ditransitive: *ye-wokan* ‘tell

something to someone’. Also as expected given the Dalabon animacy hierarchy, the recipient of the speech content is normally animate and therefore cross-referenced on the verb. The theme, which is inanimate, is second object. This is illustrated in (27), where the recipient is cross-referenced as O on the verb with *nol* second person plural, and the theme is the comitative participant *dawo*, treated as O2 and therefore not cross-referenced on the verb.

20110601_003_MT 53 [ConvEl]

(27) *Kanh dawo nol nga-h-woh-ye-woka-n.*
 DEM story 2pl 1sg>2-R-a.little-COM-tell-PRS

‘This is the small piece of news I’m telling you.’

It is unclear which of the addressee or theme is the added comitative participant, given that the base verb allows for both to occur as O. Evans (2003, p. 434) reports that in Biniñ Gun-wok dialects, the cognate verb *wokdi* ‘talk’ occurs in comitative constructions where the comitative participant is a language, i.e. *yi-wokdi* ‘talk in [language name]’. This conforms with typical comitative semantics, namely an instrumental sense (Schlesinger, 1995, pp. 63–66). However, this Biniñ Gun-wok usage is not attested for Dalabon *wokan* ‘tell someone/something’. Note that the transitive *wokan* ‘tell someone/something’ can take part in benefactive applicative constructions as well, with an equivalent meaning as the comitative applicative construction. We see in (28) that with the benefactive *marnu-*, the recipient of the speech content is cross-referenced on the verb by *dja-* third person singular acting upon second person singular, and the speech content, or theme, is a subordinate clause. However, this benefactive applicative construction is only marginally attested with *wokan* ‘tell someone/something’, while the comitative applicative construction is frequent.

20120718a_000_MT 020 [ContEl]

(28) *Mulah-ngu ka-ye-do-nj,*
 mother’s.sister-2sg.POSS 3sg-SUB-die-PP

nah-ngu dja-h-marnu-woka-ng [...].
 mother-2sg.POSS 2sg-R-BEN-tell-PP

‘When your maternal aunt’s died, your mother told you [...].’

The behaviour of the verb *djawan* ‘ask something to someone’ in comitative constructions confirms that with both verbs, *djawan* and *wokan* ‘tell someone/something’, the comitative construction encodes transfer. *Djawan* is lexically ditransitive, so that the bare verb readily subcategorises for the agent who is the author of the request, the recipient of the request, and the theme – the request itself. In (29), O is the recipient, cross-referenced on the verb as *njel* first person plural exclusive. The theme is *manjh kanj-no* ‘meat’, treated as O2 without a cross-reference.

20100718b_006_MT 021 [ContEI]

(29) *Manjh kanj-no njel ka-h-djawa-n.*
 meat flesh-FILL 1pl.excl 3sg>1-R-ask-PRS

‘She asks us for meat [she asks us meat].’

Given that it is already ditransitive, in principle there is no reason why *djawan* ‘ask something to someone’ would take part in valence-raising comitative constructions. But it does, as illustrated in (30), where the comitative construction is pleonastic: it does not modify either the subcategorisation frame or the meaning of the verb. Confirming to the frame described above for this verb, the recipient of the request is cross-referenced as O with *buka-* third person singular acting upon third person animate; and the request or theme, *dah-no* ‘wood’, is a second object, now treated as a comitative participant although it is part of the subcategorisation frame of the bare verb.

20120708b_007_MT 24 [ContEI]

(30) *Yoan, kanh dah-no, buka-h-ye-djawanj [proper name].*
 prop.n DEM wood-FILL 3sg>3sg,h-R-COM-ask-PP [proper name]

‘Yoan, [proper name] asked him for firewood.’

Here the syntactic input of the comitative construction is nil, but it flags transfer semantics. The sense of the clause does remind of malefactive transfer since asking something to someone relates semantically to taking it from them. In addition, the meaning and construction in (30)

also echo the pattern observed with *ye-wokan* ‘tell something to someone’ construction in (27): in both cases, the transfer of the content of speech in the context of verbal communication that is being flagged. Acts of communication can easily be interpreted as transfer of communication. In this Dalabon construction, neither the recipient of the request nor the request or theme conform to the cross-linguistically standard “comitative” semantic domain. It is not clear which of the canonical cross-linguistic meanings of comitative constructions, as discussed in Section 1, could have offered a bridge towards transfer of content of communication. Therefore, a good candidate explanation for this semantic extension is an assimilation with the malefactive transfer construction presented in Section 5.3. Constructions where a language is treated as a comitative participant for verbs denoting speech, like *yi-wokdi* ‘talk in [language name]’ in Bininj Gun-wok, may also have favoured this extension – although they are not attested in Dalabon in synchrony, they may have existed in the past.

6. Conclusions

This article has described both Dalabon applicative constructions, namely the benefactive applicative construction with the verbal prefix *marnu-*, and the comitative applicative construction with the verbal prefix *ye-*. Both constructions raise the valence of the main predicate by one. Benefactive applicative constructions are used in most of the contexts where the new participant is animate. Comitative applicative constructions are used for participants in comitative semantic roles, including animate participants. Therefore, benefactive applicative constructions can introduce participants in a broad range of semantic roles, as long as these participants are animate. Comitative applicative constructions introduce participants in typically comitative roles such accompaniment of main participants (with movement or static), instrument, material. These semantic roles are often assigned to participants with lower animacy, which often lack control in actions undertaken by animate participants.

With respect to applicative constructions, Dalabon is relatively similar to neighbouring, related languages, the Bininj Gun-wok dialect chain and Rembarrnga, but I have highlighted some nuances. For instance, in Rembarrnga, where there exists a broader set of comitative verbal prefixes, one of them solely targets inanimate participants, to the exclusion of animate ones. Therefore, while in Dalabon the distribution between benefactive and comitative applicative constructions is guided by animacy and semantic roles combined, in Rembarrnga some of the constructions rely exclusively upon an animacy criterion.

In addition, Dalabon comitative applicative constructions also cover semantic roles that are not typically comitative typologically. These are for instance the notion of “cause” (e.g. “fight ‘over’ something”), as well as notions of transfer. I have shown how the Dalabon comitative marker *ye-* expresses malefactive transfer (i.e. removal, the opposite of giving) when combined with verbs of attainment (e.g. ‘get’). This sense is a plausible semantic extension from the notion of accompaniment of movement (‘to go *with*’), which is a core comitative notion. Another atypical semantic extension of the Dalabon comitative is the notion of transfer of content of communication. Since this notion can hardly be construed as an extension from one of the standard comitative meanings of the Dalabon marker, it is more likely that comitative constructions came to describe the transfer of contents of communication via semantic assimilation with malefactive transfer, possibly combined with constructions where the comitative participant is the language used to speak in (i.e. a sort of instrument).

While the transfer of content of communication construction is only attested in Dalabon, the malefactive transfer construction is also attested in other languages of the same Gunwinyguan family such as Bininj Gun-wok and Rembarrnga, including with comitative markers that are not cognate with the Dalabon comitative prefix *ye-*. Therefore, the semantic extension from comitative to malefactive transfer is not a unique scenario but could – as may be revealed in

future research – be more widespread across the region, across the continent, and possibly elsewhere.

References

- Arkipov, A. (2009). Comitative as a cross-linguistically valid category. In P. Epps & A. Arkipov (Eds.), *New Challenges in Typology 2: Transcending the Borders and Refining the Distinctions* (Trends in, pp. 223–246). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Cutfield, S. (2011). *Demonstratives in Dalabon. A language of south-western Arnhem Land*. PhD, Monash University.
- Evans, N. (2003). *Bininj Gun-Wok: A pan-dialectal grammar of Mayali, Kunwinjku and Kune*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.
- Evans, N. (2006). Who said polysynthetic languages avoid subordination? Multiple subordination strategies in Dalabon. *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, 26(1), 31–58.
- Evans, N., Brown, D., & Corbett, G. (2001). Dalabon pronominal prefixes and the typology of syncretism: A network morphology analysis. In G. Booij & J. van Marle (Eds.), *Yearbook of morphology 2000* (pp. 103–172). Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Evans, N., Fletcher, J., & Ross, B. (2008). Big words, small phrases: Mismatches between pause units and the polysynthetic word in Dalabon. *Linguistics*, 46(1), 89–129.
- Evans, N., & Merlan, F. (2003). Dalabon verb conjugation. In N. Evans (Ed.), *The non-Pama-Nyungan Languages of Northern Australia: Comparative studies of the continent's most linguistically complex region* (Vol. 552, pp. 268–283). Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.
- Evans, N., Merlan, F., & Tukumba, M. (2004). *A First Dictionary of Dalabon*. Maningrida: Maningrida Arts and Culture, Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation.
- Harvey, M. (2003). An initial reconstruction of Proto-Gunwinyguan phonology. In N. Evans (Ed.), *The non-Pama-Nyungan languages of northern Australia: comparative studies of the continent's most linguistically complex region* (Vol. 552, pp. 205–268). Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.
- Heath, J. (1978). *Ngandi grammar, texts and dictionary*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
- Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. (1997). *Bringing them home: Report of the National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families*. Sydney: HREOC.
- Lehmann, C., & Shin, Y.-M. (2005). The functional domain of concomitance. A typological study of instrumental and comitative relations. In C. Lehmann (Ed.), *Typological studies in participation* (pp. 9–110). Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
- Luk, E., & Ponsonnet, M. (n.d.). Optional ergativity in Dalabon: Discourse and pragmatic functions. *Australian Journal of Linguistics*.
- Maslova, E. (1999). Reciprocals and set construal. In Z. Frajzyngier & T. S. Curl (Eds.), *Reciprocals: Forms and functions. Vol. 2. Typological Studies in Language 41* (pp. 161–178). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- McKay, G. R. (2011). *Rembarrnga, a language of central Arnhem Land*. Munich: LINCOM Europa.
- Merlan, F. (1983). *Ngalakan grammar, texts and vocabulary*. Canberra: Pacific linguistics, Australian National University.
- Ponsonnet, M. (2014). *The language of emotions: The case of Dalabon (Australia)*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Ponsonnet, M. (2015). Nominal subclasses in Dalabon (South Western Arnhem Land). *The Author's version of: Ponsonnet, Maïa. 2021. Transfer and applicative constructions in Gunwinyguan languages (non-Pama-Nyungan, Australia), in Bouveret, M. ed., Give constructions across languages, 121-143. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.*

Australian Journal of Linguistics, 35(1), 1–52.

Ross, B. B. (2011). *Prosody and grammar in Dalabon and Kayardild*. School of Language and Linguistics. The University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

Saulwick, A. (2003). *Aspects of the verb in Rembarrnga, a polysynthetic language of northern Australia: Grammatical description, texts and dictionary*. Linguistics. University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

Schlesinger, I. M. (1995). *Cognitive space and linguistic case. Semantic and syntactic categories in English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stassen, L. (2000). AND-language and WITH-language. *Linguistic Typology*, 4(1), 1–54.