

IS MARRNGU A SUBGROUP?

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The status of Marrngu as a subgroup within Nyungic (Southwest) Pama-Nyungan has been generally accepted since O'Grady, Voegelin & Voegelin's 1966 lexicostatistical classification of Australian languages, though no study has demonstrated this status through historical reconstructions. My paper presents a comparison of the phonological, lexical, and morphological characteristics of the Marrngu languages (Karajarri, Mangala, and Nyangumarta). As such, it joins existing studies on other Nyungic subgroups (for instance, O'Grady 1966 and Dench 2001 among others on Ngayarta; McConvell & Laughren 2004 on Ngumpin-Yapa) and is meant to form a basis for future higher-level comparative studies. Data was collected from a mixture of wordlists, and published and unpublished descriptions of the languages. The results of the comparison lead me to three main conclusions: (1) there is little evidence that the Marrngu languages form a subgroup on the basis of shared innovations; (2) the morphology of the languages is often shared by neighboring groups of languages and could be better described as having descended from a higher-level subgroup containing, minimally, Wati (Western Desert); (3) the Marrngu languages do however share a large number of lexical items that are *not* shared with Wati, which may be evidence for a period of shared development. The evidence for these conclusions is reached through two methodological approaches to the data. In one, I undertake a traditional study of sound correspondences across lexical items using comparative methodology. A word list of lexical items common to at least two of the three languages is presented. In the second, I demonstrate through a morphological comparison that the range of forms found in the languages support my theory that the Marrngu languages are related, but descended from a genetic level above that of a local subgroup. I also present some genetic similarities to Wati, with emphasis on verb conjugation classes and other verbal inflectional suffixes. In a concluding section I discuss future research needed to fully describe the linguistic history of the Marrngu languages. A comparison of the Marrngu languages was hindered in part by the varying degrees to which each language has been documented; while full and partial grammars exist for Karajarri (Sands 1989) and Nyangumarta (Hoard & O'Grady 1976; Sharp 2004), Mangala in particular is less well described in published materials, and a full comparison would benefit from further documentation of the language. Additionally, detailed lexical comparisons over a broader area should be made using the Marrngu data gathered here. A lexical comparison of the Marrngu languages and Wati is needed to support the morphological similarities presented here. A higher-level reconstruction is also needed in addition to the bottom-up approach begun here to fully describe the relation of the Marrngu languages to one another and to the other Nyungic languages.

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