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## Linguistic Theory and Cultural Conceptualisations

Farzad Sharifian\*

*Monash University, Asturalia*

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### Abstract

Formal theories of language have so far been developed out of the study of a limited set of morphosyntactic properties of Indo-European languages. Motivated by a search for linguistic universals, these theories have often led to the formulation of highly idealised models encompassing abstract mechanisms and components. This paper challenges such models and argues for the role of culture in linguistic theories. It presents examples from several languages where various syntactic and discoursal features appear to embody schemas and categories that dwell in cultural and ontological systems. The examples show how grammatical properties such as noun classifiers, pronoun systems, honorifics, demonstrative, etc. may reflect culturally constructed conceptualisations of experience. It is therefore maintained that theories of language need to employ cultural conceptualisations as a tool in accounting for many aspects of linguistic structure.

*Keywords:* cultural linguistics, linguistic universals, cultural conceptualizations.

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### Introduction

Formal theories of language have in the past mainly focused on accounting for the morphosyntactic aspects of human languages. Linguistic diversity has been viewed mainly in terms of morphosyntactic discrepancies between different languages. Other aspects of language, such as the semantic component, and semantic diversity for that matter, have hardly been of interest to the majority of

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\* Corresponding Author's Tel. : +61 399024898  
*E-mail address:* Farzad.Sharifian@Monash.edu.au

linguistic theories. This might be attributable to various factors among which the fact that semantic structures are not open to overt inspection. Moreover, exploration of semantic domains often requires linguists to expand their comfort zone and look into other fields such as anthropology, psychology, and sociology and this may prove less than ideal to some. This observation has tangibly narrowed the scope of linguistic theories and has led to the accounts of language that are highly syntax based.

Another limitation of the major theories of language has been that they were formulated on the basis of the exploration of a restricted set of languages belonging to a specific group of languages (Van Valin & LaPolla, 1997). This has largely led to the discovery of many commonalities across the languages belonging to the same group. This phenomenon, heralded by the ambition of finding universals in human languages, has led to the formulation of highly idealised statements and models regarding the structure of human language. Linguistic diversity, if accounted for at all, has been mainly viewed a result of external random factors, which would not have any serious ramification for the theory. In fact, as Nicholas (1992, p. 5) puts it, “diversity has no theoretical status in historical linguistics (or, for that matter, in synchronic linguistics”.

For theories of language such as that of Chomsky, linguistic diversity is mainly the product of parameter setting and has nothing to do with the principles that are embodied in UG. Diversity in parameters is in turn attributed to factors and forces outside the domain of human cognition, which are not of significant value for a theory of language. In fact, the Generativist theory does not attempt to account for diversity as its main aim is to find universals. It is also to be noted that the Generativist theory of language structure has mainly been developed out of the analysis of English.

In contrast to Chomsky, Van Valin (1997) made an attempt, in his Role and Reference Grammar (RRG), to take as the starting point languages such as Lakhota, Tagalog and Dyrirbal. Van Valin observed that to be able to account for the syntactic structure of a language such as Dyrirbal, An Australian Aboriginal language, a syntactic theory should allow for “discontinuous constituency”. In Dyrirbal (Dixon, 1972) all possible combinations of the words used in a sentence such as the following would be regarded as completely grammatical:

*dugumbil bangul buran balan yaranngu*  
woman.ABS NM.ERG see NM.ABS man.ERG  
'The man saw the woman.'

Within these possible orders, *bangul*, the noun marker for *yara* ‘man’, may occur at any place in the sentence and it is still a noun marker for the same word. Similarly *balan* is the noun marker for *dugumbil* ‘the woman’, no matter where it occurs. This is what is meant by ‘discontinuous constituency’. In accounting for such this phenomenon, RRG posits a construction-specific theory of syntactic functions that can deal with mixed-pivot languages.

Discontinuous constituency is handled in RRG by the provision of multiple projection representations. According to PRG, for instance, noun markers and their associated nouns belong to separate projections. Overall, despite the fact that RRG is more pluralistic in the scope of languages that it analyses, it is still a syntax-based theory that resorts to highly abstract mechanisms for accounting for language structure.

In this paper I make an attempt to show that many morphosyntactic features of human languages reflect culturally-driven conceptualisations and, therefore, a theory of language structure needs to employ cultural conceptualisations as an explanatory tool in accounting for the structure of the human language. Culture of course does not only feed into the morphosyntactic component but also forms and informs all aspects of language content and structure. Theories of language therefore need to take into account the role of cultural conceptualisations in carving and constructing all levels of language from lexicon to semantic and pragmatic meanings. In this paper, however, I focus only on showing how various morphosyntactic and discoursal features of different languages and language varieties may reflect cultural conceptualisations.

### *Language, Culture, and Conceptualisation*

The relationship between language and conceptualisation has received remarkable attention in the newly emerged field of cognitive linguistics. The major tenets of cognitive linguistic research are that a) meanings are conceptualisations of experience and b) grammar reflects these conceptualisations. Conceptualisation of experience of course does not stand in a one-to-one relationship with the “real world” but is closely linked to our bodily experiences (Lakoff, 1987). In cognitive linguistics, language diversity is viewed as a result of discrepancies in the ways speakers of different languages conceptualise experience.

Cognitive linguistics recognizes that conceptualisations, which are entrenched in various aspects of linguistic structure, are largely culturally constructed. As Langacker (1994, p. 31) puts it, “the advent of *cognitive linguistics* can be heralded as a return to *cultural linguistics*. Cognitive linguistic theories recognize cultural knowledge as the foundation not just of lexicon, but central facets of grammar as well” [emphasis original]. Langacker presents several examples of culturally constructed features from different languages and concludes that “culturally salient and familiar concepts tend to be coded linguistically in a relatively compact manner” (1994, p. 42).

In his seminal book *Toward a Theory of Cultural Linguistics*, Palmer (1996) argues that marriage of cognitive linguistics with the traditional anthropological approaches of Boasian linguistics, ethnosemantics, and the ethnography of speaking can lay the foundation of a theory of Cultural Linguistics. He brings together evidence from numerous studies revealing how linguistic structures of different kinds may embody cultural-specific conceptualisations, which he

collectively refers to as *imagery*. In this ground breaking work, Palmer examines cultural imagery that underlies phenomena such as narrative sequence in Kuna, spatial organization in Coeur d'Alene place names and anatomical terms, honorifics in Japanese sales language, the domain of ancestral spirits in Proto-Bantu noun-classifiers, Chinese counterfactuals, and perspective schemas in English. He observes that culture and worldview provide a basis for the way languages of the world are patterned.

Cultural Linguistics has in recent years has moved beyond the disciplines of cognitive linguistics and linguistic anthropology and has drawn on several other disciplines and sub-disciplines towards developing a theoretical framework that would offer an integrated understanding of the notions of 'cognition' and 'culture', as they relate to language. This framework that may be referred to as *cultural cognition and language* (Sharifian, 2008, 2009, 2011) proposes a view of cognition that has life at the level of culture, under the concept of *cultural cognition*.

Cultural cognition draws on a multidisciplinary understanding of the collective cognition that characterises a cultural group. Several cognitive scientists have that moved beyond the level of the individual, working on cognition as a collective entity (for example, Clark and Chalmers, 1998; Sutton, 2005, 2006; Wilson, 2005). Other scholars, working in the area of complex science often under the rubric of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS), have been seeking to explain how relationships between parts, or agents, give rise to the collective behaviours of a system or group (for example, Holland, 1995; Waldrop, 1992). A number of scholars, notably Hutchins (1994), have explored the notion of 'distributed cognition', including factors external to the human mind, such as technology and the environment, in their definition of cognition (see also Borofsky, 1994 and Palmer, 2006a for the notion of *distributed knowledge* in relation to language). Drawing on all this work, Sharifian (2008b, 2009b, 2011) offers a model of cultural cognition that establishes criteria for distinguishing between the relationship of what is cognitive (and how it is cognitive) and what is cultural in the domain of Cultural Linguistics.

Cultural cognition embraces the cultural knowledge that emerges from the interactions between members of a cultural group across time and space. Apart from the ordinary sense of 'emergence' here, cultural cognition is emergent in the technical sense of the term (for example, Goldstein, 1999). In other words, it is the cognition that results from the interactions between parts of the system (that is the members of a group) which is more than the sum of its parts (more than the sum of the cognitions of the individual members). Like all emergent systems, cultural cognition is *dynamic* in that it is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated across the generations of the relevant cultural group, as well as through the contact that members of that group have with other cultures.

Language is a central aspect of cultural cognition as, it serves as a 'collective memory bank' of the cultural cognition of a group, to use the term used by wa

Thiong'o (1986). Many aspects of language are shaped by the cultural cognition that prevailed at earlier stages in the history of a speech community. Historical cultural practices leave traces in current linguistic practice, some of which are in fossilized forms that may no longer be analysable. In this sense language can be viewed as storing and communicating cultural cognition. In other words language acts both as a memory bank and a fluid vehicle for the (re-)transmission of cultural cognition and its component parts or *cultural conceptualisations*, which are 'cultural schemas', 'cultural categories' (including 'cultural prototype'), and 'cultural metaphors'.

Consistent with the view of cultural cognition discussed earlier in this chapter, these analytical tools are seen as existing at the collective level of cultural cognition, as well as that of the individual. Cultural conceptualisations and their entrenchment in language are intrinsic to cultural cognition.

In the rest of this paper I focus on examining how morphosyntactic and discursive features may be motivated by cultural conceptualisations. This is however not to deny the role of other factors, such as innate, biological, and environmental variables, in shaping the structure of language.

### *Noun Classifiers*

As an example of culturally constructed imagery, Palmer and his colleagues (Palmer, 1996; Palmer and Arin, 1999; Palmer and Woodman, 1999) observed that noun classes in Bantu are governed by cultural-specific salient ritual scenarios. They observed that noun classes in Bantu are each like a network of radial categories based on a cross-section of the cosmos, including physical experience, domestic scenarios, ritual scenarios, and worldview. A scenario is a cultural model of social action whose conceptual content may relate to social institutions, domains of discourse from the mythical and ritual to the economic and domestic. The following are examples of domestic and ritual scenarios from Bantu culture:

*Domestic:* Grain is pounded daily with a mortar and pestle.

*Ritual:* People pray to the ancestors. (Palmer and Woodman, 1999)

Overall, in many languages noun classifiers appear to codify cultural categories and cultural ontologies (Palmer, 1996, p. 8). For instance, nouns in Dyrbal, are classified into four categories (*bayi, balan, balam, bala*), which are rooted in Dyrbal cultural categorisation (Lakoff, 1987). These categories can be defined by combinations of values on the dimensions of *potency* and *harmony* as follows:

1. vaguely harmonious non-potent things,
2. specifically harmonious non-potent things,
3. potent and ingenious beings, and
4. disruptive things (Mylne, 1995, p. 387)

Murrinh-Patha, another Australian Aboriginal language, uses ten noun classes, which again are reflective of Murrinh-Patha cultural classification (Walsh, 1993; Street, 1987). These classes are identified through noun class markers that appear before the noun. The following list includes the class markers and the definition of each category:

1. *Kardu*: Aboriginal people and human spirits
2. *Ku*: Non-Aboriginal people and all other animates and their products.
3. *Kura*: Potable fluid (i.e., ‘fresh water’) and collective terms for fresh water (i.e., ‘rain’, ‘river’).
4. *mi*: Flowers and fruits of plants and any vegetable foods. Also faeces.
5. *thamul*: spears.
6. *thu*: offensive weapons (defensive weapons belong to *nanthi*), thunder and lightning, playing cards.
7. *thungku*: Fire and things associated with fire.
8. *da*: place and season (i.e. dry grass time).
9. *murrinh*: speech and language and associated concepts such as song and news.
10. *nanthi*: a residual category including whatever does not fit into the other nine categories. (Walsh, 1993, p. 110)

The above categorisation also allows for multiple membership in the sense that depending on the function of an entity at the time, it may be categorised into one or another class. For instance, a boomerang may be categorised as *nanthi* when it is used as a back-scratcher and *thu* when it is used as an offensive weapon (Walsh, 1993). Also in the Dreamtime Creation stories, the Ancestor beings turned into animals in their journey of creating the nature and this is signalled by a switch from one noun class into another. This system of noun classification is obviously entrenched in Murrinh-Patha culture and worldview. For instance, as Walsh argues, the fact that fresh water, fire, and language have separate classes is an indication that each holds a prominent place in the culture of the Murrinh-Patha.

### *Honorifics*

Another grammatical domain that usually embodies cultural conceptualisations is “honorifics”. Palmer (1996, p. 200) maintains that honorific expressions draw on cultural schemas of ranking. Langacker (1994) also refers to the use of honorifics in Nahuatl as an example of culture-specific conceptualisations. He notes that Nahuatl employs the fully productive *reflexive causative* construction for second person honorifics. Thus a sentence in Nahuatl may be literally translated as “You cause yourself to want it”. Langacker maintains that here “the speaker evidently honors the addressee by emphasising the control he exerts over his own actions”

(p. 37). In Persian, the second-person plural pronoun *shomâ* is used as a second person singular honorific and the third-person plural pronoun *ishân* is also used as an honorific for the third person singular. Plurality as a marker of respect is not only marked on the pronoun system but is also marked at the end of the verb. Consider the following examples:

- a) *in nokteh râ Ishân beh man goft-and.*  
This point DO marker he/she(respect) to me said-plural
- b) *in nokteh râ ‘u beh man goft*  
This point DO marker he/she to me said  
(He told me this point)

The above two sentences differ in terms of the degree of respect and esteem that one holds for the person being talked about, whether or not the person is physically present where the conversation is being conducted. As mentioned above, this respect is reflected in plurality that is marked on the pronoun and the verb ending. In some cases the verb itself is also different depending on the respect that one wants to convey toward the personal subject. The use of *ishân* is now so much become associated with respect that in Modern Persian it is hardly used as a marker of plurality per se. That is, the usage of *ishân* even as the third-person plural pronoun is often associated with expressing respect and high esteem.

Another example of culturally constructed syntactic feature associated with ranking is the use of prefixes *yi-* and *bi-* as markers of a transitive verb in Navajo. It is maintained that the choice of these prefixes in Navajo reflects how the third person is ranked in prominence (Aissen, 2000; Witherspoon, 1977, cited in Palmer, 2007). This ranking is based on factors such as intelligence, size and animacy. It is observed, for instance, that infants are ranked with less intelligent “calling” beings (mostly animals), which are below intelligent “talking” beings (mostly human beings) (Palmer, 2007, p. 16).

### *‘Being’ and ‘Motion’ in Aboriginal Languages*

Most Aboriginal languages do without verbs “to be” as markers of existence and ‘being’. They, instead, represent “X is Y” type of propositions as “XY”. Aboriginal English also tends not to rely so much on ‘being’ verbs. Malcolm (2002) observes that in consonance with an Aboriginal cultural imperative, Aboriginal English represents life as ‘action’ rather than ‘existence’. Malcolm and Rochecouste (2000), for instance, note that discourse produced by a group of Aboriginal children in the Yamatji land, mid-west of Western Australia, is predominantly governed by expressions of “moving” and “stopping”. They maintain that these expressions instantiate the Aboriginal cultural schema of Travel.

Motion and movement also build into many Aboriginal languages in a distinctive way. Koch (1984) notes that in many Central Australian languages,

verbs capture a main activity as well as some form of motion, which is usually marked by a suffix or an auxiliary on the verb. He calls this grammatical category “Associated Motion” (1984). Koch further notes that Associated Motion subcategories may signal whether the motion is prior to, immediately subsequent to, concurrent with the main activity. They may also mark whether the motion is towards the speaker or not, or back to a former location. Koch (2000) argues that these motion markers are maintained in Central Australian Aboriginal English through juxtaposing English verbs such as in the following sentence:

*Twofwlla bin go’n wait for ... them bulock.* (Koch, 2000, p. 50)

I argue here that the motion that characterises the linguistic systems employed by Aboriginal people may well reflect Aboriginal cultures and worldview. Aboriginal cultures have traditionally been characterised by motion and movement associated with their traditional hunting-and-gathering lifestyle. Aboriginal people’s traditional way of life is so much associated with movement that an expression such as *walking about one’s country* is interpreted as *living in one’s country* (Arthur, 1996). ‘Movement’ also lies at the heart of Aboriginal worldview. The Ancestors in the Dreamtime created the world by moving through a barren land, hunting, camping, and fighting and in doing so shaped a featureless landscape.

### **Kinship, Collective Culture, and Grammar**

Australian Aboriginal people are group-oriented and group memberships in fact need to be clearly marked with regard to their inclusion or exclusion of the interlocutors in a conversation. Due to considerations such as skin classification, a wrong inclusion or exclusion may in fact lead to adverse consequences. Conversations among Aboriginal people usually involve several interlocutors and each turn usually addresses more than one person. In other words, conversations between Aboriginal Australians are predominantly *communal* rather than *dyadic* (Walsh, 1991). Aboriginal cultural conceptualisations relevant to communal communication as well as inclusion/exclusion are saliently marked in the pronoun system of many Aboriginal languages. Walpiri, an Aboriginal language, marks this feature on its system of pronouns as follows:

Ngaju I  
Nyuntu you  
Ngali you and I  
Ngajarra we two (excl. you)  
Nyumpala you two  
Ngalipa you and I and other(s)  
Nganimpa we (more than 3, excl. you)  
Nyurrula you (more than 3) (Yallop, 1993)

In general, the pronoun system of many Aboriginal languages codifies certain culturally-constructed systems of categorisations. For instance, there are pronouns in many Aboriginal languages that mark moiety, generation level, and relationship. In Arabana, as an example, the pronoun *arnanthara*, which may be glossed into English as ‘kinship-we’, captures the following complex category:

Arnanthara = we, who belong to the same matrilineal moiety, adjacent generation levels, and who are in the basic relationship of mother, or mothers’ brother and child (Hercus, 1994, p. 117).

In Arabana, this cultural categorisation of kin groups is also marked also on second plural kinship pronoun *aranthara* and third person plural kinship pronoun *karananthara*. These examples clearly reveal how cultural conceptualisations may be encoded in the grammatical system of a language.

Upon contact with European settlers in Australia, Aboriginal people realised that the grammar of English does not mark number and inclusion/exclusion the way they do and thus forced their cultural conceptualisation into the grammar of Australian Pidgin as well as Aboriginal English. Koch (2000) observes that Australian Pidgin includes pronouns such as *mefella* meaning ‘I and others excluding you’, *mentwofella* meaning ‘we two excluding you’, *menyou* meaning ‘you and I’. The pronoun *menyou*, or one of a number of variant forms of it, is also used today in many varieties of Aboriginal English.

In Aboriginal Australia, kinship is the pillar of existence and the extended family is the essence of Aboriginal identity. For Aboriginal people, the company of extended family members is the source of security and solidarity as well as identity. Close family ties among Aboriginal Australians are clearly marked in the systems of kin terms in Aboriginal languages as well as certain features of their syntactic structure. In other words, many features of Aboriginal languages instantiate Aboriginal cultural schemas and categories of Family. For instance, Murrinh-Patha has various second person pronouns including those which mark family members. These include *nhi* ‘you singular’, *nanku* ‘you two brothers and sisters’, and *nanku ngintha* ‘you two who are not brothers or sisters and one or both are female’ (Walsh, 1993). It can be seen that the unmarked second person pronoun is the one which is used to address brothers and sisters. It should be kept in mind that in most Aboriginal cultures the terms ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ are used to address siblings and even cousins. Examples like this clearly show how various aspects of language structure can reflect cultural conceptualisations.

Another feature of some Aboriginal languages which reflects cultural values attached to family ties is the use of ‘dyadic’ terms (Merlan and Heath, 1982). A dyadic term captures two or more kin concepts such as father and child. The need for such conceptualization is that the unit of being in traditional Aboriginal societies is hardly one individual, as it is in many Western cultures. The minimal unit in any social domain is at least two family members, be it the extended family or the nuclear family. In Arandic languages of Central Australia the dyadic terms

are formed by adding the suffix *-nhenge* to a term that marks the kin relationship (Koch, 2000). Example of this usage in Kaytete is *arlweye-nhenge* ‘father and child’, where *arlweye* means ‘father’, and *arrere-nhenge* ‘elder sister and younger brother or sister’, where *arrere* means ‘elder sister’. The pairs or sets captured in dyadic kin terms express unitary wholes closely bound by family ties into socially recognized units. Such bonding is of course conceptualized by mutual responsibility and obligation. It clearly reflects the spirit of togetherness which strongly conceptualized Aboriginal cultures.

The above-mentioned cultural conceptualization has also been carried over into some varieties of Aboriginal English such as Central Australian Aboriginal English (CAAE). Speakers of CAAE have used *-gether*, a truncated form of English *together*, as a suffix to express dyadic kin concepts. The CAAE parallels of the dyadic terms discussed above are *father-gether* ‘father and child’ and *sister-gether* ‘elder sister and younger brother or sister’ (Koch, 2000). Although Aboriginal English is a variety of English and not a different language, it merits studying in the light of language diversity as it gives evidence as to how Aboriginal Australians have managed to preserve their cultural conceptualizations in the face of the loss of their original languages. Many features of Aboriginal English carry cultural conceptualizations that are clearly rooted in Aboriginal cultures and worldview (Malcolm & Sharifian, 2002).

The structure of Aboriginal English suggests that it is not so much the structure of a language which influences the thinking patterns of its speakers but largely the opposite, that is, speakers of a language may force their cultural conceptualizations into the structure of a language that they learn. Aboriginal Australians adopted English as a lingua franca to communicate with each other and also for communicating with Europeans (Malcolm & Kosciuszki, 1997). In doing so Aboriginal people manipulated both the structure and the content of this Indo-European language as it was spoken by Europeans to express the cultural conceptualizations that they had built into their Aboriginal languages for thousands of years prior to conceptualization. As Malcolm (2001, p. 217) puts it, “AbE [Aboriginal English] is a symbol of cultural maintenance; it is the adopted code of a surviving culture.” The following section explores some of the features of Aboriginal English that reflect Aboriginal cultural conceptualizations.

### **Schema-based and image-based processing in Aboriginal English**

In Aboriginal English, the speakers often use the demonstrative *that* or *dat* where Australian English would use *a*, that is the first time a noun is introduced in a text. In situations where the demonstrative does not achieve an exophoric role, it appears that it retrieves its antecedent from an image or a schema in the mind of the speaker. I have called this usage *image-based referencing* and *schema-based referencing* (Sharifian, 2001, p. 130). Consider the following text:

J: My sister she went to ... she went to put er rubbish away ...

K: Yeah

J: an she was messin roun playin like dat  
an ... she was gunna git cut  
K: mmm  
J: she came out like dat dere ...  
she nearly killed *dat* snake  
A she stepped on the snake like dat  
J: Yeah. (Text P19)

In the above text the use of *dat* before the word ‘snake’, which is introduced for the first time in the whole text, makes a reference to the image of the snake, as part of the whole scene, evoked in the mind of the speaker. In other words, the demonstrative refers to an element in a mental image in the speaker rather than an element in the previous discourse or an entity in the immediate physical environment of the speech. Such usage, which is not infrequent in Aboriginal English, was closely explored with Aboriginal English speakers and their explanations along with gestures that they made while using the demonstrative, for example an upward index-finger gesture, supported the hypothesis of image-based referencing. Schema-based referencing appears to be much more prevalent in Aboriginal English than in Australian English. The two varieties also appear to be different in terms of how they lexicalise this process. In Aboriginal English, demonstratives and pronouns provide a productive tool for schema-based referencing.

In general many features of Aboriginal English reveal a tendency on the part of its speakers towards visual processing. The following excerpt from a conversation between two Aboriginal children and a non-Aboriginal teacher exemplifies this cognitive tendency.

Jenny We’re going um fishing.  
Teacher Where are you going fishing?  
Jenny Down the creek.  
Teacher Which creek’s that?  
Jenny You go right  
and you turn off that road and you see...  
Bert See a brown river  
Jenny And you see water in this river.  
Teacher Good. (Text A1)

It can be seen that in the sentence “You go right and you turn off that road and you see ...” the speaker appears to be making a reference to the mental image of the creek that she has been evoked in her mind. This preference for visual processing is in resonance with the research finding of cognitive psychologists that Aboriginal people enjoy superior visual skills. Research throughout the twentieth century almost constantly showed a superiority in visual processing for Aboriginal people over non-Aboriginal people (Kearins, 1986; also see Klich, 1988). Kearins attributes this visual superiority of Aboriginal

people to cultural factors such as child-rearing habits of Aboriginal mothers. Aboriginal people traditionally belong to hunting-and-gathering cultures, where people learn from their early childhood to attend closely to the detailed features of their environment to learn from nature the skills that they need in their life. It is therefore hardly surprising that Aboriginal people have developed strong visual processing skills.

Overall, the usage of demonstratives in schema-based referencing discussed above provides another example of how morph syntactic features of a language may relate to cognitive processes that are engineered by cultural factors.

### *Discourse Organization in Aboriginal English*

Another aspect of Aboriginal English that reflects cultural conceptualisations is the structure of discourse. Organization of narratives produced by many Aboriginal English speakers does not so much rely on chronological ordering of the events (Sharifian, 2002). In other words, the speakers often do not appear to employ linear temporal schemas in their construction of discourse. Consider the following excerpts from two Aboriginal English speakers:

1. and we had goanna for dinner
2. and my uncle ate most of it
3. he had to knock it on the head twice
4. and it was really fun (Text P58)

1. In Carnarvon
2. when I went to get a thing off the line
5. in Carnarvon there
6. my clothes
7. was at night or in the morning
8. an as I walked out there
9. me and my little brother
10. and I walk 'e walked out first
11. an I was walkin up behind im
12. an 'e seen something out there (Carnarvon Ghost story)

It can be seen that in the above narratives the utterances produced do not seem to represent the original sequence of the events being narrated. In the first text above, the 'dinner' event is mentioned first followed by a partial description of hunting the goanna and finally the speaker has made an evaluative comment on the hunting event. In the second text, the speaker has started off by mentioning the place where the event happened and then follows with a partial description of the event. The third line is a return to the place of the event whereas the fourth line clarifies the referent of "a thing" in the second line. Line 5 is an attempt to set the time of the event. This attempt to set the

time of the event might have been a strategy on the part of the speaker to accommodate to the discourse conventions of the hearer's dialect (i.e., Australian English) which usually marks the time of the events clearly around the beginning of the narrative. The speaker then begins (line 6) to describe the event of seeing "something", which could be described as a spirit, but then leaves the description of the event (line 7) to mention the people who were present at the scene (i.e., *me and my little brother*). Next, he resumes the description of the event (line 8) by mentioning that he was walking, which is then repaired into his brother walking first and him following behind him. It is clear that here the setting of the narrative is somehow dispersed throughout the discourse and the progression of the text could be described more as circular rather than linear. This pattern of discourse organization might somehow be associated with circularity which characterises many aspects of Aboriginal cultural conceptualisations.

Circularity in Aboriginal conceptualisations reflects the Aboriginal worldview of Dreaming in which the Creation is envisaged to be carried out by Ancestor Spirits in circular movements (Glenys Collard, pc). Many paintings of the Dreamtime stories depict journeys of the Ancestors during which various features of the land were created as circular. Circularity which characterises Aboriginal worldview is reflected various forms of Aboriginal Art as well as in rituals and ceremonies.

Discourse in Standard Australian English is governed by temporal schemas that are characterised by linearity and the conception of time as a straight path in some conceptualised space. The Anglo-western notion of time, as an entity partitioned into measurable units which follow one another, is obviously a conceptual by-product of a the Western industrial culture. Progression of discourse in Standard Australian English reflects conceptualising the construction of discourse as a straight path, or what Johnson calls a path *image-schema* (Johnson, 1987). The topic of discourse is usually associated with a 'point' on this straight path and speakers should develop the point along this path without digressing from the path. Since the numerical system itself is a metaphorical system based on the path image-schema, numbers can provide an order on this path so that 'first' is a point prior to 'second', which is prior to 'third'. An alternative image for discourse progression would be having several themes associated with several points on this straight path, which should be attended to in a linear order. This pattern of discourse construction reflects the conceptualisations of 'logical sequence', 'linear order', and 'temporality' which characterise clock-and-calender industrial cultures.

On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, discourse in Aboriginal English does not so much rely on linear temporal schemas. Aboriginal cultural conceptualisations that draw on the Dreaming worldview conceptualise time and temporality along a very different dimension (Elkin, 1969). Stanner, an influential Australian Anthropologist states, "I have never been able to discover

any Aboriginal word for *time* [emphasis original] as an abstract concept” (1996, p. 227). He observes that “[o]ne cannot ‘fix’ The Dreaming *in* time; it was, and is, everywhen” (p. 228). Stanner also notes the existence of circularity in Aboriginal worldview. He observes:

Time as a continuum is a concept hazily present in the Aboriginal mind. What might be called *social* time is, in a sense, ‘bent’ into cycles and circles. The most controlled understanding of it is by reckoning in terms of generation-classes, which are arranged into named and recurring cycles. As far as blackfellow<sup>1</sup> thinks about time at all, his interest lies in the cycles rather than in the continuum, and each cycle is in essence a principle for dealing with social interrelatedness. (p, 234)

The Dreaming does not partition time into past, present, and future. In a sense, past is still present and so are Ancestors. The Dreaming provides a spiritual connection between the Ancestors and the people who believe in them. The relationship between language and The Dreaming is also noted by several other linguists. Mühlhäusler (1996) has developed the notion of linguistic ecology as framework for the study of Aboriginal languages, including Aboriginal English, and he observes that the Dreaming, Law, and Language are pivotal to the linguistic ecology of the Central Australian groups that he was studying. Muecke (1981) has similarly noticed the association between the Dreaming and Aboriginal languages. He notes that Kimberley narratives provide categories for understanding Aboriginal law and spirituality.

## Conclusion

I have tried to show in this paper that in accounting for various aspects of language structure we may need to explore the culturally-driven conceptualisations that act as bedrock for these linguistic features. The cases analysed in this paper clearly support Palmer’s observation that “many grammatical phenomena are best understood as governed by cultural schemata rather than universal innate or emergent cognitive schemata” (Palmer, 2006b, p. 1). I therefore argue that in order to achieve explanatory adequacy, theories of language structure need to expand their comfort zone and explore aspects of culture and cognition whose interplay might be engraved in linguistic structure.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> It is acknowledged that the use of the word “black fellow”, as used by non-Aboriginal people to address or refer to Aboriginal people, is considered to be offensive.

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