M17

Project Australian Aboriginal

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This project recreates a mimic of an Australian Aboriginal language.

A lexicon of 3000 root words, with about 1600 defined, is randomly generated using the LangMaker program with specified phonological parameters.

> "Before the nineteenth century over 200 Aboriginal languages were spoken in Australia. Today half of these are extinct and only a few score of the remainder have enough speakers to survive for more than another generation. Grammatical information is available for about 150 languages, mostly in the form of brief grammars."
>
> *from page 1 of Australian Aboriginal Grammar (1987) by Barry Blake*

Language Family Distribution in Australia

Phonology

Inventory

Phonemic equivalents in the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) are given within slashes.

Consonants

There are 17 consonants in the constructed language M17.

	labial	alveolar	retroflex	palatal	velar
voiceless stop	p /p/	t /t/	rt /ʈ/	tj /c/	k /k/
nasal	m /m/	n /n/	rn /ɳ/	nj /ɲ/	ng /ŋ/
lateral		l /l/	rl /ɭ/	lj /ʎ/	
flap		rr /ɾ/	r /ɽ/		
glidal	w /w/			y /j/	

"Retroflex" refers loosely to the top of the mouth cavity between the teeth and the palate. The digraphs <rt>, <rn>, and <rl> may be a bit tricky to recognize; the <r> in these digraphs indicates retroflexion and is not pronounced as an /ɽ/.

<lj> is pronounced like <li> in English <vermilion>. <nj> is pronounced like the Spanish <ñ> as in <piña> or like <ni> in English <onion>. <tj> is pronounced like <ts> in English <its> or even like <t> in English <picture>. The aforementioned palatals are thus pronounced even at the end of syllables and words. <y> is pronounced as in English <yoyo>.

Vowels

a /a/	i /ɪ/	u /ʊ/

<i> is pronounced as in English <pit> and <u> is pronounced as in English <put>. The three-vowel system is common in the Pama-Nyungan language family.

Phonotactics

The phonotactics of M17 is partly inspired by the Aboriginal language Njungar of South-West Australia.

V = {vowels}
C = {consonants}
K = {clusters} = {lp, rlp, ljp, mp, rnp, njp, ngp, lt, rlrt, ljtj, nt, rnrt, njtj, lk, rlk, ljk, nk, rnk, njk, ngk, lm, rlm, ljm, nm, rnm, njm, tjm, tjp, kng, pt, nw, rp}

The structure of a root morpheme may be CVC, CVCVC, or CVKVC.

Stress predictably lies on the first syllable of a word.

Syntax

Nouns

Nouns are inherently numberless, being either singular or plural. To indicate that the noun is *definitely* plural, one reduplicates the noun.

wampay (boomerang / boomerangs) > **wampay-wampay** (boomerangs)

There is no article, definite ('the') or indefinite ('a'/'an'), that usually accompanies the noun. However, in instances where one needs to indicate definiteness, one uses the equivalents for 'this' (nar) or 'that' (rraw) or 'that yonder' (ngut).

Case System

Similar to languages like German, Latin, and Russian, an Australian Aboriginal language usually has a *case system*, in which nouns and adjectives have special endings to specify relationships or function. M17 is no exception and tries to be a typical Australian Aboriginal language. M17 has seven cases:

Case	Relation / Function
nominative	intransitive subject
ergative	transitive subject
accusative	transitive direct object
dative	'for'
locative	'at' / 'in' / 'on'
allative	'to'
ablative	'from'

A "transitive subject" governs a verb which *can* take a direct object (*The tribe eats kangaroo / The tribe eats*). An "intransitive subject" governs a verb which *cannot* take a direct object (*The boomerang flies*).

The dative expresses these functions:
[1] indirect object of intransitive verbs (*He is jealous of me.*)
[2] purpose (*He went for the meat.*)
[3] beneficiary (*He made the spear for me.*)
[4] possessor (*bird's nest*)
[5] recipient of verbs of giving (*He gave the spear to me.*)
[6] through, across, among, along

The ergative also expresses the instrumental (*He hunted with/using the spear*).

Case	Noun Suffix	Adjectival Concord
nominative	_	_
ergative	–a	–a
accusative	_	_
dative	–i	–i
locative	–ungk	–ungk
allative	–angk	–angk
ablative	–ingk	–ingk

Case	Pronoun Suffix	Adjectival Concord
nominative	_	_
ergative	_	_
accusative	–u	–u
dative	–i	–i
locative	–ungk	–ungk
allative	–angk	–angk
ablative	–ingk	–ingk

Because of the case system, most Australian languages have great freedom of word order as with M17. However,

[1] topic precedes comment;
[2] focus comes first.

Permutations are possible in M17 which are not possible in English. Constituents may be scattered through the clause. Adjectival concord allows distancing of the noun from the adjective.

Examples

'This big dog bites the tall man in the desert.'

nara witjiya rruljmita ngurput narnurt watjinjk yulmirtungk.
this-erg dog-erg big-erg tall man bite-incompletive desert-locative

Or,

nara witjiya ngurput narnurt yulmirtungk watjinjk rruljmita.

Or,

rruljmita nara witjiya ngurput watjinjk yulmirtungk narnurt.

Or,

nara ngurput narnurt yulmirtungk watjinjk witjiya rruljmita.

Or,

ngurput narnurt watjinjk nara witjiya rruljmita yulmirtungk.

And so on...

Verbs

Many Australian Aboriginal languages have complex verbal paradigms, but some like Njungar in South-West Australia have simple ones. M17 is like Njungar in this respect. In M17, the verb has no grammatical tense, but it has a choice of two aspects:

[1] incompletive or continuative aspect, indicated by the suffix -injk;
[2] completive or perfective aspect, indicated by a null (absent) suffix.

An adverb of time, or a time phrase or clause may indicate tense.

Pronouns

person	singular	dual	plural
1st	yan	ljap	pirt
1st & 2nd	_	kur	milj
2nd	njar	njaw	rtir
3rd, animate	rruk	ngir	rlim
3rd, inanimate	runj	walj	ljirt

Prefixes

Root morphemes have an inherent character of being a noun, verb, adjective, or adverb. Root verbs are inherently either transitive or intransitive. Conversion among these is possible by adding a prefix.

Prefix	Conversion Function
pwa–	to transitive verb
pwi–	to intransitive verb
twa–	to adjective
twi–	to adverb
kwa–	to noun

titatj (beautiful) > **kwatitatj** (beauty)
wampay (boomerang) > **twawampay** (boomerang-like / boomerangish)
njutarl (kangaroo) > **pwinjutarl** (to become or be or do like or as a kangaroo)
pumpir (to jump) > **pwapumpir** (to make [someone/something] jump)
rlutil (fat) > **pwirlutil** (to become or be fat)

Code-switching

As the vocabulary of M17 is quite limited, loanwords from another language may be required. *Code-switching* between M17 and [Interlingua](#) is permissible. When there is no appropriate word in M17, one could rely on the lexicon of Interlingua. Grammatical affixes of M17 are appropriately tacked onto the Interlingua words. Phrases of Interlingua may be interleaved with those of M17. This kind of phenomenon, code-switching, is often the case in diglossic societies wherein two cultures have collided.

Example

(Interlingua is italicized here.)

in australia, nara witjiya rruljmita *anxie-a* ngurput narnurt watj yulmirtungk *quando io visitava*.

in Australia, this-erg dog-erg big-erg anxious-erg tall man bite desert-locative when I visit-past.

'In Australia, this big anxious dog bit a tall man in the desert when I visited.'

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