



Linguistic Society of America

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Overcoming Linguistic Taboos: Lessons from Australia

(Washington, DC) – Grammar is sometimes shaped by restrictions on language use. This is the key finding of a new study to be published in the December issue of the scholarly journal *Language*, demonstrating how taboos can bring on changes to language structures. The paper, “Preference organization driving structuration: Evidence from Australian Aboriginal Interaction for pragmatically motivated grammaticalization” is authored by Joe Blythe of the University of Melbourne, Australia, and the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. A pre-print version is available online at: <http://www.linguisticsociety.org/document/language-vol-89-issue-4-news-release-article>. A synopsis of the paper is available at: <http://preferenceorganization.wordpress.com/>.

In many Australian Aboriginal languages there are taboos that limit the use of personal names. When we speak in a group about someone known to all present, we need to ensure that who is referred to can be recognized, and names are obvious means that can secure that recognition. But if a particular person’s name is restricted by a taboo, another means should be sought.

Luckily, extensive and detailed family relationships are expressed in the grammars of many Australian Aboriginal languages. These grammatical kinship inflections have apparently evolved because they are useful in dealing with the taboos that limit the use of personal names. When a particular name becomes unavailable, speakers of the Aboriginal language Murrinh-Patha can use their kin-inflected grammar to allow others to recognize the person being spoken about, avoiding the tabooed name. For example, a woman can avoid saying the name of her late husband by stating, ‘We two who were not brother and sister left’ (*ngankungintha ngunungamngintheadurr*). After that, she can single out her late husband by using a form that will be understood to mean “he,” as in, ‘He put bullets in that big rifle as he came along this way’ (*thungku banurdurditharragathu thungku ngalla nyiniyu*). Making the initial reference dual (‘we two’) and the subsequent reference singular (‘he’) is a routinized pattern of language use. It places the burden of inference on the kin-inflected grammar, sidestepping the need to specify individuals by name. Widespread taboos on personal names have led to the development of kin-based inflections in languages across the Australian continent because these structures can secure recognition when names are not appropriate.

Employing tools from historical linguistics and conversation analysis, this research provides a more complete picture of language evolution by presenting a longitudinal view of grammatical change along with a detailed view of a still evolving language in face-to-face conversation. It shows how the requirement for name-avoidance has most likely given rise to the kinship inflections that allow person recognition to be achieved. This study illustrates that an examination of how and for what practical purposes some linguistic structures are used in social interaction can reveal just why they emerge in the first place.

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The Linguistic Society of America (LSA) publishes the peer-reviewed journal, Language, four times per year. The LSA is the largest national professional society representing the field of linguistics. Its mission is to advance the scientific study of language.