

# Enindhilyakwa (Australia) gender and other noun categorization systems

Marie-Elaine van Egmond

THEORIA Mecklenburg-Vorpommern scholarship holder

Enindhilyakwa is a richly polysynthetic Australian Aboriginal language spoken by over 1,400 people living on Groote Eylandt, Gulf of Carpentaria, NT. It is one of the very few Australian languages that is still acquired by children. The language has been described as having the most complicated noun-classifying system in Australia (Sands 1995: 275), including gender, noun classes, and incorporated classifiers. Gender prefixes are used to classify humans and domesticated animals, noun class prefixes to classify non-humans, and classifiers can be incorporated into verbs and adjectives to categorize inanimate items (including human body parts) in terms of their shape, size, and so on.

In this talk, I will describe the various systems of noun categorization in Enindhilyakwa, showing that this in language: (i) noun class membership is determined on partly a semantic and partly a phonological basis, (ii) the traditional view that no language has both noun classes and classifiers (e.g. Dixon 1982) is superseded, and (iii) *triple* noun class/gender marking occurs, as illustrated in the following constructions, where the gender/class markers are bolded:

- a.     **yi-ni-m-emindha**                      **yikarba**  
      **MASC-m-INALP-NEUT.nose**    **MASC.woomera**  
      ‘woomera hook’ (Lit. ‘nose belonging to something of MASC noun class, woomera’)<sup>1</sup>
- b.     **dh-adhi-m-aringka**                    **dirija**  
      **FEM-f-INALP-NEUT.head**        **dress(FEM)**  
      ‘dress bodice’ (Lit. ‘head belonging to something of FEM noun class, dress’)

These examples involve the inalienable possession (INALP) derivational prefix *m-*, which allows a body part noun to agree in noun class with an independent noun. The derived nominal maintains its original noun class prefix (here, NEUTer *a-* ~ *e-*), and takes an additional inner gender prefix (masculine *ni-* in [a] and feminine *adhi-* in [b]), plus a noun class marker in harmony with the class of the independent noun (MASCuline *yi-* in [a] and FEMinine *dh-* in [b]). As far as I am aware, triple gender/class marking does not occur anywhere else in the world.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the exuberantly elaborated noun categorization system of Enindhilyakwa is striking and deserves specialists’ attention.

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<sup>1</sup> A woomera is a spear-throwing device.

<sup>2</sup> Aikhenvald (2000: 66) notes that *double* class marking is already a rare phenomenon in the world’s languages, occurring in a few other Australian languages (Wubuy, Nungali, Gurr-goni and Yanyuwa) as well as several Bantu languages.