Out of sight and out of mind:

Distance and accessibility contrasts in Kuuk Thaayorre placeholders

(+ a few other Australian languages)
Thanks to:

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Esther Foote

and the broader Thaayorre / Pormpuraaw community
- Rose (2021: slide 5)

- **A placeholder:**
  - is a referential expression that is used as a substitute for a specific lexical item that has momentarily eluded the speaker (and which is often specified subsequently as a result of a word search), and...
  - it occupies a syntactic slot that would have been occupied by the target word, and thus constitutes a part of the syntactic structure under construction
  - = a word with minimal lexical content, in many cases carrying the appropriate morphology
Fillers

- Some languages have dedicated placeholder fillers
  (Enfield 2002, Evans 2004, ...)

- Many other languages use pronouns and/or demonstratives for this function
  (Diessel 1999, Podlesskaya 2010)
Kuuk
Thaayorre
Kuuk Thaayorre

- Pama-Nyungan family (Upper Southwest Paman < Paman)

- ~200 speakers on west coast of Cape York Peninsula

- Grammar (Gaby & KTLE 2017; Hall 1972), Dictionary (Foote & Hall 1992)

- 63 hours audio & video recordings
Kuuk Thaayorre demonstratives
- **Adnominal demonstratives**

  \[\text{inh} \ 'this', \ \text{ith} \ 'that', \ \text{ulp} \ 'the'\]

- **Pronominal demonstratives**

  \[\text{inh'nhul} \sim \text{inhul} \ 'this one', \ \text{yuunhul} \ 'that one'\]
- Adnominal demonstratives

  *inh* ‘this’, *ith* ‘that’, *ulp* ‘the’

- Exophoric usage:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><em>ith</em></th>
<th><em>inh</em></th>
<th><em>ulp</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accessible to Speaker</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessible to Addressee</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+/-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Kuuk Thaayorre demonstratives

- Adnominal demonstratives

  $inh \ 'this', \ ith \ 'that', \ ulp \ 'the'$

- Exophoric versus endophoric usage:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$ith$</th>
<th>$inh$</th>
<th>$ulp$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exophoric</td>
<td>inaccessible</td>
<td>Sp-accessible</td>
<td>Addr-accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endophoric</td>
<td>deactivated</td>
<td>activated</td>
<td>topic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- Adnominal demonstratives
  
  \( \text{inh} \) ‘this’, \( \text{ith} \) ‘that’, \( \text{ulp} \) ‘the’

- Pronominal demonstratives
  
  \( \text{inh} \text{'nhul} \sim \text{inhul} \) ‘this one’, \( \text{yuunhul} \) ‘that one’
• Adnominal demonstratives
  
  \textit{inh} ‘this’, \textit{ith} ‘that’, \textit{ulp} ‘the’

• Pronominal demonstratives

  \textit{inh ‘nhul} \sim \textit{inhul} ‘this one’,
  \textit{yuunhul} ‘that one’

\textit{Cf. nhul ‘3sgNOM’, i ‘i ‘here’, ii ‘there’, yuuw ‘far away’}
**inhul**  ‘this one’

(1)  *raak thAAPirri inhul, Station Creek*
place nearby  this.one Station Creek
‘Station Creek, that place is nearby’

**yuunhul**  ‘that one’

(2)  *pam-AL ii (radio) yuunhul too high yik<ik>a-n-r!*
man-ERG there radio  that.one too high playing
‘(those) people are playing that one (radio) too loud!’
Placeholder functions of demonstrative pronouns
Speakers of Kuuk Thaayorre use fillers to either:

- avoid disruption
- signal disruption
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**Inhul** ‘this one’, ‘nondisruptive’

- reference need not be made explicit for the conversation to progress
- referent is ‘accessible’ to speaker
- speaker has reason not to mention referent explicitly

**Yuunhul** ‘that one’, ‘disruptive’

- reference must be established for the conversation to progress
- referent is ‘inaccessible’ to speaker
Inhul ‘this one’

(3) *inhul ulp, peln*
this.ones the 3plNOM

*Donald, Cyril, peln ulp walmeerem=uhn*
Donald Cyril 3plNOM the remember=3sgACC
‘those whatsits, like Donald and Cyril, they all remember him’

(4) *ngul nhul irrā yat... inhul wanhul-ak*
then 3sgNOM to.there go:P.PFV this.ones who-DAT
‘then she went off to that whatsit [other man]’
‘that one’

(5) *man yuunhul inh, ngan wan-r? man-nhapn* throat that.one this what call-NPST throat-egg ‘what’s this throat-whatsit called? The windpipe’

(6) *kar yuunhul ... pam meermele nhul, kar nganc-le ulp* like that.one MAN pois.cous 3sg(NOM) like poison-! the ‘like that whatsit poison cousin, he’s taboo’

(7) *nhunt ngene katpirr?*  
AG: ‘how did you catch [the prawns]?’  
AJ: *yuunhul=yuk... peep ngancin drag-m rirk-m* that.one=STUFF net(ACC) 1pl:excl(ERG) drag-TR DO-P.IPFV ‘with a whatsit... we were dragging a net’
1. GJ: *kaar rirk-m ngay mit.*
   NEG DO-P.IPFW 1sg(NOM) work
   ‘I wasn’t able to work’

2. *yuunhul… ngay money sick pay mi’im.*
   that.one 1sg(ERG) money sick pay(ACC) pick.up:P.IPFW
   ‘I collected what... sick pay’

3. AG: *raak ngan?*
   TIME what
   ‘when was that?’

   TIME dem:sp.prx 1970. long time long time really
   ‘this was in nineteen seventy. A long time ago, a very long time ago.’

[AGJ03/02/04 Conversation]
(9) winwin kar ngan?
AG: ‘what does winwin mean’

AJ: kar yuunhul, ngan=yuk
like that.one what=STUFF
‘like those whatsits’

yuunhul kar wang ngan nhaath-nhan, wang yomprr
that.one like ghost what see-GO&:NPST ghost(NOM) appear:NPST
‘like when you see a whatsit, when spirits appear’
... a brief excursion

Ignoratives
• Interrogative/indefinite polysemy well-documented globally, and particularly across Australia (e.g. Karcevski 1969; Wierzbicka 1977, 1980; Mushin 1995, inter alia)

• Kuuk Thaayorre ignorative functions:

(a) interrogatives
(b) indefinite pronouns
(c) relative pronouns
(d) “free choice items” (whenever, wherever…)
(e) rhetorical/emphatic particles
(f) “counterfactual emphatics”
(g) hedges
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge category</th>
<th>Ignorative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>person</td>
<td>wanh ‘who’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thing</td>
<td>ngan ‘what’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$place_{TRJ}$</td>
<td>wanthan ‘where to’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$place_{LOC}$</td>
<td>wanthanngun ‘where at’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manner</td>
<td>wanthantharr ‘how’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quantity</td>
<td>ngannganr ‘how many’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reason</td>
<td>ngene ‘why’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$place_{DIR}$</td>
<td>wanthan pal ‘where towards’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$place_{ORIG}$</td>
<td>wanthan nheman ‘where from’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>time</td>
<td>raak ngan ‘when’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interrogative function

(9) *nhunt ngene yan irrkop Cairns-na?*
    you why going to down Cairns-LOC
    ‘why are you going to Cairns?’

(10) *raak pungk pelnan wanthanngun?*
    place knee their where LOC
    ‘where is their land?’
Indefinite pronoun function

(11)  *wanhul*=okun mungk-arr
    who=DUB   eat-PERF
    ‘somebody must have eaten it’

(12)  *iiparr, somewhere raak kuuw* wanthanngun=okun
    there.south somewhere place west     where_{LOC}=DUB
    ‘[it’s] somewhere there in the south, in the west somewhere’
Hedge function

(13) **yuunhul ith** *ngan* kar *pam.nhump ulp* *pam.koyethnih ngathanan* that.one that what like old.man that FFF my "that thing like my great great grandfather"

(14) **ngul nganjin irra** *dingy-ak yat,* *ngan canoe-ak* then we to.there dingy-DAT went what canoe-DAT ‘then we went off in a dingy, or canoe or whatever’
... back to placeholders
Speakers of Kuuk Thaayorre use fillers to either:
- avoid disruption
- signal disruption

**Inhul** ‘this one’, ‘nondisruptive’
- explicit reference not required for the conversation to progress
- referent is ‘accessible’ to speaker and addressee, OR
- speaker has reason not to mention referent explicitly

**Yuunhul** ‘that one’, ‘disruptive’
- reference must be established for the conversation to progress
- referent is ‘inaccessible’ to addressee AND
- lexeme is ‘inaccessible’ to speaker
Why do proximal / distal map onto nondisruptive / disruptive?
The function of demonstratives is “to propose particular configurations of ‘participant access’ to the referent and thereby structure the interactive context in which acts of demonstrative reference take place.” (Hayashi & Yoon 2010:48, cf. Hanks 1992)

(3) *inhul ulp, peIn*  
this.one the 3plNOM  
‘whatsit, them [Donald and Cyril’s sister]’

(4) *ngul nhul irra yat… inhul wanhul-ak*  
then 3sgNOM to.there go:P.PFV this.one who-DAT  
‘then she went off to that whatsit [other man]’
• Deictics in general, and demonstratives in particular, have the core function of “indexing a referent as identifiable” (Cutfield, 2012: 8).

• “Demonstratives are used to indicate to the addressee how they should recognize the speaker’s intended referent.” (Cutfield, 2012: 11).
deictics in general, and demonstratives in particular, have the core function of “indexing a referent as [non-]identifiable” (Cutfield, 2012: 8).

“demonstratives are used to indicate to the addressee how [or whether] they should recognize the speaker’s intended referent.” (Cutfield, 2012: 11).
Why make a disruptive / nondisruptive contrast?
Defining placeholders

- Per Hayashi & Yoon (2010:43), a placeholder:

  1. appears to be motivated by constraints in cognitive processes, such as difficulty in remembering or “accessing” an appropriate lexical item.
  2. participates in the syntactic structure of an unfolding utterance.
  3. is used as a referential expression.
  4. is [frequently] subsequently replaced by a more specific lexical item.
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3. is used as a referential expression.

4. is [frequently] subsequently replaced by a more specific lexical item.
“[placeholders] are explicitly oriented to the interactional nature of the speech context, drawing attention to a speaker’s assumption that the listener can figure out what the speaker is referring to.”

(Enfield 2002: 101)
The use of placeholders to introduce new referents (and, in particular, inaccessible referents) represents an exception to the principle of iconicity in reference tracking:

*Generally speaking, the lexico-grammatical weight of a referring expression is inversely related to the perceived degree of accessibility of the referent to the interpreter at that point in the discourse.*

(Stirling forthcoming, after Givón 1983 inter alia)

Unlike most better-studied languages, the Kuuk Thaayorre speech style:

- Treats knowledge as a commodity
- Favors opacity
- Places the onus for the construction of meaning on the hearer (cf. Garde 2002, Walsh 1991)
Because of ‘implicit’ communicative style, not all referents need be identified & the use of uninterpretable placeholders is a legitimate (anti-iconic) rhetorical device.


“A preference for the implicit as a form of verbal art” (Garde 2013: 255)

“It is far preferable to say ‘whatsisname’ than to blurt out someone’s uniquely identifying personal name” (Walsh 2016)

The Kuuk Thaayorre placeholders contribute to our understanding of how grammatical structures are shaped by sociocultural norms of communication.
To do

- Corpus frequency of placeholders in a range of languages (by genre / speaker / ...)
- Pause length following the placeholders
- Co-speech gesture
- Hypothesis testing
With John Bradley (knowledge of Jemima Miller a-Wuwarlu, Dinah Norman)
Dedicated form: *ngabiya*

- **Noun class inflection:**

  \[a\text{-}ngabiya\] ‘what is that feminine thing I am trying to recall?’

  \[ma\text{-}ngabiya\] ‘what is that (non-meat) food I am trying to recall?’

  \[na\text{-}ngabiya\] ‘what is that arboreal thing (derived from plant based materials) I am trying to recall?’

...
Dedicated form: *ngabiya*

- Case (locative):

  *kalu-wingka waykaliya kalu-arri ngabiya-la.....ngabiya-la.... aaa wakara kalu-arri wayka barra Yamirri*

  ‘they went downstream, they were there at-what’s-that-place... at-what’s-that-place... aa I have it, they were down there at Yamirri.’
Dedicated form: *ngabiya*

- Verbal inflection and/or derivation:

*Kurda kalinyamba-ngabiya-manthaninya... kalinyamba-ngabiya-manthaninya kalinyamba-ra-manthaninya wayka nungku-wurramala*

‘Dear me, they would all be doing that thing to each other, they would all be doing that to each other, they would all be fighting each other down there at the fighting ground’
Wubuy

With Simon Musgrave (and Brett Baker, drawing on texts collected by Jeffrey Heath)
Wubuy

- Also known as Nunggubuyu (Heath 1980, 1982, 1984)
- Eastern Gunwinyguan (non-Pama-Nyungan)
- Head-marking; polysynthetic
- Language currently sleeping

- 171 texts
  - Texts range 1-44 units (mean = 7.1, median = 4)
  - Unit of text = 3-4 lines
Various commentators have noted the prevalence of expressions like ‘whatitsname’ in Aboriginal narratives (e.g. Berndt & Berndt, 1989, p. 390). For instance, in Figure 1 there are 13 instances of ‘whatchamacallit’ in a short Nunggubuyu [Wubuy] text extract consisting of a mere 75 (audible) words: …

(Walsh 2016: 202-203)
- Phonologically predictable root allomorphy
  - wa:ŋ ~ a:ŋ

- Emphatically marked form
  
  *When the speaker really wants to express disgust with himself or herself for being unable to remember a name or noun, a stronger form /wa:nɡ yagu/, often pronounced /wa:nɡ-jagu/ (an irregular extension of Hardening P-18), is used, e.g., §20.4.3, 157.6.5.*
- Standard nominal inflection:
  - noun class prefixes
  - case suffixes
Standard nominal inflection:

- noun class prefixes
- case suffixes

Noun class prefixes sometimes omitted, sometimes incongruous:

*Presumably this is because the speaker may not know even the noun class of the "forgotten" noun; indeed, when the speaker does try to anticipate, and puts a $NC_{infl}$ prefix on the 'whatchamacallit?' word, it turns out that he/she has guessed wrong rather frequently.*

(Heath 1981: 461-462)
- Standard nominal inflection:
  - noun class prefixes
  - case suffixes

- Standard verbal inflection:
  - TAM / subject prefix