

A Tourist's Guide to the Sydney Aboriginal Language

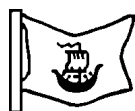
bayabanyi biyal-biyal yagu

Jeremy Steele

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jsteele@pobox.com

Extracts
from the Dawes
and Anon notebooks
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Meeting the Sydney people: yura (eora)

When the First Fleet of eleven ships arrived to set up the convict colony in Sydney on 26 January 1788 it numbered about 1350 people. There is little agreement on the precise figure. Governor Arthur Phillip said at the end of the second year that 1030 were landed. He also, not long after first arrival, estimated the local Aboriginal population around the harbour and in the neighbouring areas to be about 1500. The Aboriginals were overwhelmed and virtually outnumbered from Day 1.

The Fleet included some 778 convicts, of whom 192 were women. There was a guard consisting of four companies of Marines (168 men) to provide order. There were, too, five surgeons, and various ‘artificers’; there were 40 wives of soldiers and their children, as well as members of the Royal Navy to man the two permanent ships of the colony. These were the fleet flagship, the East Indiaman the *Sirius*, and the smaller brig acting as a tender, the *Supply*. Both remained when the nine merchant vessels, the transports that carried the people and provisions, had one by one all left to resume their normal shipping activities.

The Aboriginals first greeted the newcomers with wary cordiality as might be normally extended to unknown visitors. When trees began to be cut down and the intention of the arrivals to stay was made plain, relations deteriorated. The First Fleeters with their numbers and their guns and fishing nets soon made game and food hard to find. The way of life of the ages was permanently altered for the native people.

Within a year-and-a-half smallpox had devastated the local population—leaving almost untouched the Europeans with

immunity conferred upon them by prior exposure. In some communities a fatality rate of over ninety per cent was reported. In April 1789, dead black bodies were commonly to be found on the beaches and points of the coves of the harbour foreshores. Bradley wrote in early May:

From the great number of dead Natives found in every part of the Harbour, it appears that the smallpox had made a dreadful havoc among them.

Learning the language

It was essential that the new authorities be able to communicate with the indigenous population. In their attempts to do so they made some big discoveries. The first was that there was not a single language for the whole country.

Governor Phillip made attempts to acquire the language, first in December 1788 by capturing a local man, Arabanoo being the unfortunate detainee, who was supposed to learn English and then to teach the whites his own language. He proved not a great linguist. Still in captivity after six months, he too died of smallpox, on 18 May 1789.

While all of the marines and naval personnel would have picked up a smattering of words, and while some may have become moderately proficient, only one made a systematic attempt to record elements of the grammar as well as compiling a word list. That was Lieutenant William Dawes, aged twenty-six.

William Dawes (1762-1836)

Dawes the Marine was an **artillery** man, and as such set up a defensive fortification consisting of several guns on what is now Dawes Point. This became known as Dawes Battery.

Dawes was also an educated man, a scientist or more particularly an **astronomer**, and had been asked to establish an observatory from which to study and record a comet last seen in 1661, expected in the southern skies in 1789. He had been provided with the necessary materials and he set up this facility on the same general location as his fortifications, and named it Maskelyne Point after the Astronomer Royal, his mentor. But it was his own name that was to stick to the landmark site, today dominated by the southern abutment of the Harbour Bridge.

When the authorities went on exploring expeditions on foot, it was meticulous Dawes who recorded distance by counting the **paces**, all day long. And it was Dawes the humanitarian who took the keenest interest in the Aboriginal population and their language.

Watkin Tench wrote in 'A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson' [1979 edn, p. 291]:

Of the language of New South Wales I hoped to have subjoined to this work such an exposition . . . but the abrupt departure of Mr Dawes . . . precludes me from executing this part of my original intention, in which he had promised to cooperate with me; and in which he had advanced his researches beyond the reach of competition.'

Dawes listened to the people around him; he associated with them; he learnt; he checked and amended; and he practised speaking the language himself. He recorded his findings in two small notebooks.

Legacy unfulfilled

In mid December 1790, some clashes between the whites and the blacks culminated in the fatal spearing, by Pemulwuy of Bidygal clan, of the Governor's gamekeeper, John McIntyre. Believing this attack to be unprovoked, Phillip ordered a punitive expedition to be led by Captain Watkin Tench. This originally had the gruesome aim not only of capturing two of the Aboriginals but of returning with the heads of ten others in bags to serve as a lesson. The scope of the mission was later reduced to capturing six natives, two for hanging and the rest for sending to Norfolk Island.

Dawes, after first refusing in writing to participate, reluctantly complied with the order. Afterwards, he expressed his regret to Phillip at having done so, and made it clear that he would not take part in any such future expedition. This repudiation of authority was grounds for a court martial, to which he would have been subjected had he not been an officer of the Marine Forces. It was the turning point for him. He returned to England, never to come back, when his fellow marines—including Tench—were relieved, leaving in the *Gorgon* on 18 December 1791. Phillip himself left a year later in the *Atlantic*, departing on 10 December 1792.

Dawes's two notebooks ended up in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London. To these have been attached another, possibly compiled largely by Phillip. If Dawes used the time on the slow ocean voyage back to England to prepare a more definitive grammar, the work has not so far been discovered. As a consequence we are left with his notebooks—so rich in detail yet so with so many tantalising holes. How could he have developed a system for recording

sounds and progressively refined it without returning to the start to apply it consistently? How could he have not adjusted earlier spellings as he developed his transcription criteria? How could he have made provision for conjugating a few verbs in the present, past and future tenses, but not fully conjugate one in the present and past (although three are provided in the future)? How could he have failed to decline a single noun fully in its several cases?

Prof G. Arnold Wood wrote [*JRAHS* Vol. 10, 1924]:

There is no man among the founders who ought to have given us so much information about himself and his views as Lieutenant Dawes, and there is no man among them who has given so little. He was the scholar of the expedition, man of letters and man of science, explorer, map maker, student of language, of anthropology, of astronomy, of botany, of surveying, and of engineering, teacher and philanthropist. The duty to posterity of such a man, in such singular circumstances was that he should be always writing, and in fact he wrote nothing at all that can now be read.'

Wood did not then know about the Dawes notebooks.

SYDNEY ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE

Some facts about the Sydney Aboriginal Language (SAL) are nevertheless apparent.

Verbs had a stem to which endings were attached to indicate, as in Latin, tense and number.

Tense: There was a past tense; particles conveyed aspects covered by the verb 'to be' and 'to have' in European languages.

Past indicator: The letter or sound 'dy' in verb endings indicated the past tense.

Future indicator: Likewise the letter ‘b’ indicated the future. **Nouns**, too, had a stem and endings, to indicate up to a dozen ‘cases’. Gender, and plurals, were differentiated only if needed. **Number**: Unlike Latin (and English), the SAL distinguished between 2 and more than 2, though how Dawes did not formally explain.

A variety of particles, and the manner of expressing oneself, conveyed nuances in meaning that in European languages are covered by **articles** (a, an or the), **conjunctions** (and, but), and **prepositions** (in, at, under, down etc.)

Pronouns existed in free and ‘bound’ form as the table below illustrates.

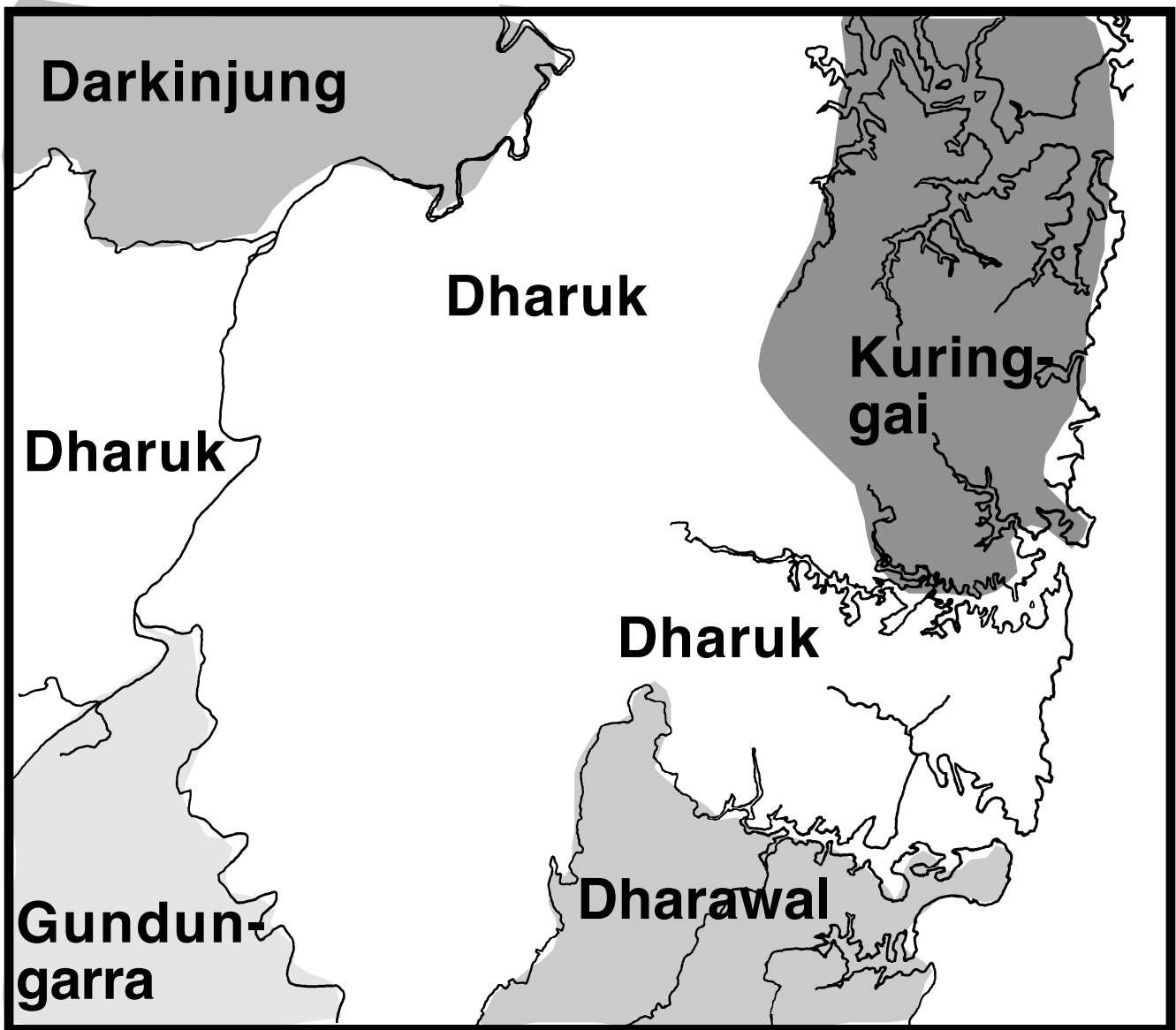
Unlike in English (‘man bites dog’), words could be in any order because endings carried necessary information, but generally **word order** followed a pattern based on significance to the statement. Adjectives followed nouns.

The Sydney language, as with its speakers, was probably the first of the some 250 languages in the continent to be overwhelmed by the Europeans, and so to lose full fluent social validity. Nevertheless a limited usage persists, and, because of its being the first medium of contact with the Europeans, more of its words entered the English vocabulary than from any other Australian indigenous source. Some of these are:

dingo	dog	waddy	slick/club
woomera	throwing stick	dyin	woman
waratah	the flower		

Some place names had particular meanings:

Berowra	fish-hook, shell	Wahroonga	when
Yagoona (the Sydney suburb)		Today or now;	
Yennora (another suburb)		Walking	



Tribal organisation

The Dharuk language was spoken:

- from the coast at Sydney west into the Blue Mountains,
- and from the Hawkesbury River to Appin in the south.

Within this area at least two and possibly three dialects were spoken:

- the coastal dialect, sometimes referred to as 'eora' (yura),
- and the inland dialect.

The common language means that the Aboriginal people in this area belonged to the Dharuk tribe.

MAP and text based on map by Jim Kohen.

SYDNEY PRONOUNS FREE AND BOUND

The table summarises the occurrence of both free and bound pronouns in the Dawes notebooks. It was not possible to identify the complete range.

SINGULAR	Usage key	<i>1st person</i> <i>I, me</i>	<i>bound</i>	<i>2nd person</i> <i>you</i>	<i>bound</i>	<i>3rd person</i> <i>he, him</i> <i>she, her</i>	<i>bound</i>
NOMINATIVE —sgNOM	I saw it I fell you (thou) he, she, it	ngaya ngayú (I alone)	-wu -wi- -yu	ngyini ngyinú (thou alone)	-mi	wugul (?) [b.22.2]	-ban, band -nga (?) -na (?) -ng (?)
ACCUSATIVE —sgACC	she saw: me you (thee) him, her, it	dana	-nga		-nya		-nyi
GENITIVE —sgGEN	my ... hat your (thy) .. his, her, its ...	danaí (for dangai?)		ngyini-ngái (ne-ne-ni)		nganu-ngái ^a daringal (for dangai?)	
DATIVE —sgDAT	she sent it to me to you to him, her, it	dana ngaya-da (for me) dana-wá-go- lá'ng (for me)	-nma			diyi [b.34.11]	

DUAL		<i>1st person</i> <i>we two</i>	<i>bound</i>	<i>2nd person</i> <i>you two</i>	<i>bound</i>	<i>3rd person</i> <i>they two</i>	<i>bound</i>
NOMINATIVE —duNOM	we two ... you two ... they two ... saw it	ngaliya [b.28.7; a.7.6.2] ngalu (we two alone)	-ngun	ngalai [?]	-ban [mistake]	yila [b.35.1]	-ila -ban, -band
ACCUSATIVE —duACC	she saw us two you two them two	ngalari	-ngála				
GENITIVE —duGEN	our (2) ... hat ours yours (2) theirs (2)	ngalari-ngai					
DATIVE —duDAT	she sent it to us two to you two to them two						

PLURAL		<i>1st person</i> <i>we all, us</i>	<i>bound</i>	<i>2nd person</i> <i>you all</i>	<i>bound</i>	<i>3rd person</i> <i>they all</i>	<i>bound</i>
NOMINATIVE —plNOM	we all saw it you all they all	^b ngyíla ^c [b.19.18] ^d ngyilu (we three alone);	-nyi ^e		-nyi [mistake for we: b.29.9]		-wi
ACCUSATIVE —plACC	she saw us, you, them all	ngyinari	-nína (b.34.7)				
GENITIVE —plGEN	our (>2) ... hat your (>2) their (>2)	[ngyinari-ngai] ^f					
DATIVE —plDAT	She sent it to all of us, you, them						

a.b.14.10: Dawes gives 'his or hers', but more likely 'someone's' or 'whose'.

b.'ngyila' assumed to be 'we two' by analogy with the other -a and -u pairs and similarity of form.

c.[c.21.12] Speaking of a man and his wife: gniella—this could be 'we two', 'you two', 'them two', or not even a pronoun

d.Ngyéla tienmíle ngyéla: Come to play, come [Dawes]—but perhaps the translation is: 'we two play, we two'

e.[b.29.9] biyal nangadyingun, nangadyinyi: Hence nangadyíngun is dual We, & nangadyínye is Plural We

f.Postulated form: no examples in the Dawes or Anon notebooks.

ngalai = with me[?]: [b.14.6]
Will you go with me ngalai yana

First person

ngaya	I	1 sg NOM SINGULAR: First person: free pronoun
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a	40	ii	Ngia yenma (wooroo)	ngaya yan-ma wuru	I go (away)
b	29	12	P to D: Ngia ngirinarabaou- wínia berara	ngaya ngayri-na-ra-ba- wí-nya bira-ra	I will go and fetch you some fish hooks (or the shells)
b	31	12	Ngí 'a dturabaou Wáriweárna	ngaya dhura-ba- wu Wáriwiyá-na	I will kill (lice)for Wariwear
b	3	3.1	Ngía bángabaóu	ngaya banga-ba-wu	I will paddle or row

-wu, -wi	I	1 sg NOM SINGULAR: First person: bound pronoun
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a	1	13	Naabaóu	naa-ba-wu	I shall or will see etc.
a	16	13	Bangabaóu	banga-bá-wu	I shall or will paddle
a	35	7	Ngaradióu	ngara-dya-wu	I did hear, think or listen
b	11	10	Kaadianma-dióu	gadayan-ma-dyá- wu	I 'kaadianed' it (that is, I put the shell on the wómera)
a	40	1	Píyibaouwi dana or Píyibaouwí- nga	bayi-ba-wi dana OR báyí-ba-wi-nga	They will beat me
b	32	6	P.: Nabaoui-ínia Windáyin Tamunadye- mínga	naa-ba-wí-nya WINDáy-in damuna-dyi-mí- nga	I will look at you through the window (because) you refused me (bread)
c	30	20.2	wea-jowinia	ngwiya- dya-wi-nya	Relating to giving

FIRST PERSON DUAL

-ngun				we two	1 du NOM
				DUAL: First person: bound pronoun	
a	20	16	Patabángoön	bada-bá-ngun	We [shall or will eat]
b	30	8	Yúdidyíngun yudi Burungà	yúdi-dyí-ngun yudi Burung-á	We two are going to see Booroong part of the way home
b	31	9	Nabá ¹ bulángun ² Ngalgear ³ bulanga ⁴ Tugéarna ⁵	naa-bá bulá-ngun Ngalgiya bula-nga Dugíya-na	We two ² will go and see ¹ or look for ¹ Ngalgear ³ and Tugear ⁵ they two ⁴
b	33	18	P.: Manmángun tyíbung wella madwá 'ra	man-má-ngun dyíbung willa-ma-dwá 'ra	We will gather tyíbungs as we come back

-nyi (-nya?)				we all	1 pl NOM
				PLURAL: First person: bound pronoun	
-					
b	12	13	Yenmánye kaouwi [sp.? kamarabú	yan-má-nyi ga-wi gamara-bú	We will return the same day [1 pl? JS]
b	29	7.2	Bial Nangadyi- ngun; Nangadyínye	biyal nanga-dyi- ngun, nanga-dyí- nyi	Hence Nangadyingun is dual We, & Nangadyínye is Plural We [1 pl JS]
c	4	11	Yenmannia	yan-ma-nyi	Shall or will go [We-all will go JS]
c	29	9	Cot-bannie	gudba-nyi	Cut [We-all shall cut? [1 pl? or Cut you sg JS?]
c	29	14	Vuida-i-dinia	widayi-dyi-nyi [wayida-yi-di- nya?]	Related to drinking [We-all drank JS?]

c	29	17	Yennarabanie yennool	ya-na-ra-ba-nyí yanul	Related to walking [We- all will walk JS]
c	29	18	Yenmania	yan-ma-nyí	Ditto [related to walking] at a future time [We-all will walk JS?]

Dawes was uncertain about -nie (-nyí) and first classed it as you plural.

This was before he was aware of the dual/plural distinction.

Then in the example b.29.9 he discovered that -nyí meant ‘plural we’: 1 pl NOM.

Second person

ngyini	you (thou)	2 sg NOM SINGULAR: Second person: free pronoun
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b	22	18	Ngieni waúnia	ngyini wãnya	You lie
b	23	9	Yoóroo. Ngiéenee goóla yoóroo	yuru. ngyini gula yuru	Hungry. Are you hungry?
b	32	16	D.: Mínyin ngyíni bial piabúni whiteman	mínyin ngyíni biyal baya-búni WHITEMAN?	Why don't you (learn to) speak like a whiteman?
b	5	5.3	Ngieéenee dtoóradiémi	ngyíni dhúra-dyí-mi	Thou pinchedst

ngyila	you all	2 pl NOM PLURAL: Second person: free pronoun
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b	19	18	Ngyéla tienmíle ngyéla	ngyíla dyan-mí-li ngyíla	Come to play, come
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NOTES

dyanibi = laughter

dyan + verbaliser -mi- = to play

Who, someone

NOMINATIVE	ngana, ngan	who
ACCUSATIVE		whom
GENITIVE	nganu-ngai	whose
DATIVE	ngana-ma, ngana-wa	to whom

Third person

-wi	they all	3 pl NOM PLURAL: Third person: bound pronoun
a 16 18	Bangaboóui	banga-bá-wi They [will paddle]
b 34 12	P.: Ngwia-dyaoúwi magora eorara dyi	ngwiya-dya-wi magura yura-ra dyi The eoras gave fish to him
b 35 3	Brúwi karadyuwi ngábung	burúwi gara-dyu-wi ngábang (All) three have large breasts—that is: They are all three women grown

Model verb	banga: to paddle (& to do, make)
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FUTURE Singular	banga-bá-wu	I shall paddle
	banga-bá-mi	Thou ...
	banga-bá	He, she, it ...
Dual	banga-bá-ngun	We two ...
		You two ...
		They two ...
Plural	banga-bá-nyi	We all ...
		Ye all ...
	banga-bá-wi	They all ...
PAST Singular	banga-dya-wu	I did paddle
	banga-dyi-mi	Thou ...
	banga-dya	He, she, it ...
Dual	banga-dya-ngun	We two ...
		You two ...
		They two ...
Plural	banga-dyi-nyi	We all ...
		Ye all ...
	banga-dya-wi	They all ...

Nouns

- nouns do not show singular or plural
- adjectives generally follow nouns
- nouns may be marked for up to 12 cases, with some particle duplication among these cases

1a. S subject ABSOLUTE	intransitive subject <small>[Kolbi swims]</small>	∅
1b. S subject NOMINATIVE	<i>transitive subject</i>	-a, -ya
2a. O object ABSOLUTE	transitive object <small>[the whiteman sees Kolbi]</small>	∅
2b. O object ACCUSATIVE <small>[direct object]</small>	<i>transitive object</i>	-na, -nga [-ra, -a?]
3. A agent/actor ERGATIVE	transitive subject <small>[the whiteman sees Kolbi]</small>	-a, -ra
4. LOCATIVE	in, at, on <small>[he lives in the house]</small>	-a, -ra
5. ALLATIVE	to, towards <small>[he was going to the tree]</small>	-gu
6. ABLATIVE	from <small>[he was coming from Parramatta]</small>	-in
7. DATIVE <small>[indirect object]</small>	to, at <small>[talking to his wife; laughing at the dog]</small>	-nyi, -nya, -na, -∅
8. PURPOSIVE	goal of activity <small>[hunting for meat]</small>	-u
9. CAUSAL	reason for event <small>[hunting for meat from hunger]</small>	-in
10. INSTRUMENTAL	with/using <small>[he hit him with a stick]</small>	-ra
11. AVERSIVE	for fear of <small>[he is frightened of the dog]</small>	?
12. GENITIVE	of <small>[the leg of the table]</small>	-ai

This analysis is provisional. Ergative–absolute seems, improbably for a Pama-Nyungan language, to co-exist with nominative–accusative. Dawes’s record, too, might have been erroneous in parts.

b 26 12.1	P.: Galabi- ya wāmai Daringa- nga	Kolby scolded Tari’nga.	-ya NOM; -nga ACC
b 34 10	P.: ngwiyai dali dyangúra BREAD- a yúra	He gave pork (and) bread to the eoras	-a ACC
b 34 7.2	bayi-dyí-nina WHITEMAN- a ngyinari Bandál- na , Bunda- nga	A white man beat us three, we three ³ , Pundúl, Poonda (& myself, understood)	-a NOM; -na, -nga ACC
b 32 14.2	W.: naa-ba-wi ngalári wayida-dwã’ra yurá- ra naa-ba	The eoras shall see us drink (sulphur)	-ra ERG
b 34 11	P.: ngwiya-dya-wi magura yura- ra diyi	The eoras gave fish to him	-ra ERG; -∅ ABS [magura-∅]

Some useful words from the notebooks

babana	brother	dhirúmin	sister	maan	to take, find	walama	to return
bada	to eat	didyiri-gúru	enough	maan-wári	to take	wálan	rain, it rains
bada-garång	red kangaroo	dirumu	tree(s)		away	walंगा	to follow, be second
badu	water	diyí	this	mai	eye	wálu	chin
bagarai	swamp wallaby	dunga	to cry	málung	dark	wámi-	to scold
banga	to do, make, paddle	dyin	woman	mánya	start, frightened jump	wána	to want
baribúgu	tomorrow	dyingu	dog	marayång	emu	wánya	to lie, fib
bayi	to hit, beat	dyira	white	mari	big, very	wára	away
bayi	to speak	gábara	head	mari-dulu	four, many	warंगा	when
badang	rock oyster	-gal	men of a clan, group	minyín	why	wáringa	soon
badya	to be hurt, ill	-galyång	women of a clan, group	mirana	to go first	wara wará	just now
bána	rain	gamarú	day	mirang	belonging	wári	away
bánarung	blood	gánalång	heat	múla	man	wárigal	dog
barani	yesterday	ganga	wash	mulnawúl	tomorrow	wárim	where
barbaga	to lose	-gangi	emphasis	-muni	negative	wáya(na), wiya(na)	mother
barin	'petticoat'	garaga	mouth	múding	fish-gig	wayida	to drink
biyana	father	garawai	white cockatoo	naa (ngaa)	to see	wi-ngára	to think
bimul	earth	garibiri	dance style	naa-muru	compass	wiráwi	child (f)
bira	fish-hook, shell	gawí	to call, cooee	nabang	breast	wiri	bad
birang	belonging	giba	stone, rock	nánga	to sleep	wúmara	fly, run (animal)
birayá	to sing	gíyara	name	naráng	small, little	wungara	child (m)
biyal	no	gudbara	to cut [Eng.?)	nawi	canoe	yagu(na)	today
bugi	bathe, swim	-gulång	for (purpose)	ngayíri	to bring, carry, fetch	yan	to go
bula	two	gulara	angry	ngalawá	sit, stay	yanada	moon
-buni	negative	gumira	hole	ngan	what	yini	to fall
buruwán	island, ship	guni	to smell	ngara	to hear, know, understand	yirí	to throw
buruwi	three	gunya	hut	ngaya	I	yirúng	tree, a
daa-bánga	to yawn	guri	more	ngwiyi	to give, put	yura	Aboriginal
dagara	cold	guwing	sun	ngyíni	you (thou)	yuru	hungry, angry
damilai	to exchange names	gwågu	soon	wadi	wood, stick	yúwin	indeed, it is true [yes? js]
dáringal	his	gwára	wind	wagan	crow		
		gwiyang	fire	wágul	one		

This simple presentation of the Sydney Aboriginal language is indebted to the work of William Dawes, contemporary compilers of word lists, as well as to later professional scholars including Jakelin Troy, *The Sydney Language* (1992) and R.M.W. Dixon, *The Languages of Australia* (1980).

Dawes: Mínyin¹ ngyíni² bial³ piabúni⁴ whiteman
mínyin **ngyíni** biyal baya-búni WHITEMAN?
Why¹ don't³ you² (learn to) speak⁴ like a whiteman?

Patyegorang: Wiangabunínga bial
ngwiya-nga-buní-nga biyal

Not understanding this answer I asked her to explain,
which she did very clearly, by giving me to understand it was because
I gave her victuals, drink and every thing she wanted,
without putting her to the trouble of asking for it.

I then told her that a whiteman had been wounded some days ago in coming
from Kadi to Wårang [Sydney Cove] and asked her why the blackmen did it.

Answer: Gulara¹
gulara
(Because they are) angry¹

Dawes: Mínyin¹ gulara² eora³?
mínyin gulara yúra?
Why are¹ the black men³ angry²?

Patye: Inyám ngalaowi white men
inyám **ngalawái** WHITE MEN
[Inyám=here; ngalaowi=they sit/they are? JS]
Because the white men are settled here

P.: Tyérun¹ kamarigál²
dyirun Gamari-gál
The kamarigals² are afraid¹

D.: Mínyin tyérun kamarigál?
mínyin dyirun Gamari-gál?
Why are the kamerigals afraid?

P.: Gúnin¹
GUN-in
Because of the guns¹.

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