

Language and Pronunciation guide.

This guide is an edited amalgam of content from the “Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara to English Dictionary” and “A Learner’s Guide to Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara”. It draws together the concise descriptions of the Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara language found in both publications. While some content has been omitted this has been done in an attempt to present only the basic (yet no less fundamental) parts of the language. For further detailed explanation of the language we recommend consulting either of these two sources, published by IAD Press (www.iad.edu.au/press).

We hope that you find this guide extremely useful. To ensure you get the best result out of this experience please pay close attention to the descriptions contained within this guide. We will be using some linguistic terms in this guide, and in the course itself, to describe the particulars of Pitjantjatjara as a language. Although this may seem daunting at first as the course progresses your familiarity with these terms will also. If you do find yourself a little confused and wish to seek assistance from your Pitjantjatjara tutors please contact us and we will take the time to respond to you. Forward your enquiries to: <mailto:enquiries@ngapartji.org>

A word on Yankunytjatjara.

Yankunytjatjara is a “Western Desert” dialect that shares a large part of its borders with Pitjantjatjara. These languages are quite similar yet they do have some differences. The main difference between the languages is in their vocabulary. In other words there are some distinctive words that Yankunytjatjara uses that Pitjantjatjara does not. For example the word ‘going’ in Yankunytjatjara is *yankunytja*, and in Pitjantjatjara it is *pitjantja*. This distinction is highlighted in the names of the two languages, and can be made clear if we break the names down into their meaningful parts. Yankunytjatjara is a combination of the word *yankunytja*, and the ending *-tjara*. Similarly Pitjantjatjara is a combination of the word *pitjantja*, and the ending *-tjara*. The ending *-tjara* simply means ‘having’. So Yankunytjatjara means ‘(language) having (the word) *yankunytja* (=going)’. And Pitjantjatjara means ‘(language) having (the word) *pitjantja* (=coming)’.

There are also grammatical, and accent differences between the two languages. For further explanation of these differences please refer to either the “Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara to English dictionary” or the “A Learner’s Guide To Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara” IAD Press.

PRONUNCIATION:

Every language has an inventory of significant sounds which it draws upon to make up words. These sounds are called **phonemes**. In a good spelling system every phoneme is spelt in a different way so that you can be sure how a word is said on the basis of how it is spelt alone.

The spelling system used in Pitjantjatjara does express each and every phoneme in a unique way. In some cases, however, a single phoneme-a single sound-is spelled by a combination of two letters. This is called a **digraph**. Also, to distinguish some phonemes it is necessary to write a line underneath a letter, as in the words *malu*, *punu*, and *tjuta*. In these words the letters l, n, and t represent different sounds to those represented by the same letters without the line, i.e. l as opposed to l, n as opposed to n, and t as opposed to t.

The main thing the language learner needs is some idea of where in the mouth the phonemes are made, and how they are pronounced.

CONSONANTS:

The consonants of Pitjantjatjara are set out the chart below, grouped according to how they are pronounced.

	Labial	Laminodental	Dental	Retroflex	Velar
Stops	p	tj	t	<u>t</u>	k
Nasals	m	ny	n	<u>n</u>	ng
L-Sounds		ly	l	<u>l</u>	
Other	w	y	r	<u>r</u>	

The sounds spelt p, t and k often sound like English b, d and g. Partly this is because the Pitjantjatjara pronunciation lacks the aspiration, or little puff of air, that accompanies English p, t and k, at the beginning of a word. In any case, the distinction made in English between p and b, t and d, and k and g is irrelevant in Pitjantjatjara. The sound spelt p, for instance, can be-and often is-pronounced as b, especially in the middle of a word; the sound spelt t is often pronounced as d, and so on.

The sounds spelt with the aid of an underlining, namely n, l, and t, are known as retroflex sounds, because they are pronounced by curling the tongue back slightly in the mouth. Such sounds are very common in Pitjantjatjara, for instance in the words *punu* 'plants, wood', *malu* 'kangaroo' and *tjuta* 'many, plural'. Retroflex sounds can be hard for English-speaking people to hear unless we train our ears by careful listening (for this reason the team here at Ngapartji-ngapartji are providing you with many opportunities to practise listening to language on the website). You will find they have a thicker

sound than the non-retroflex counterparts and an r-like quality, something like the way most Americans pronounce the middle sounds in the words ‘corner’, ‘surely’ and ‘warder’.

There are **two r-sounds**. The underlined r, as in *waru* ‘fire, firewood’ is like the ordinary English r-sound, as in ‘road’ or ‘arrow’. It is generally called either ‘retroflex’ r or ‘smooth’ r. In contrast, the ‘sharp’ r is tapped or rolled, as in some European languages and Scottish English. These spelling conventions can be confusing at first, since it is the underlined letter which is the same as the ordinary English r, and the non-underlined letter which is different to the normal English pronunciation.

The teeth sounds (laminodentals) *tj*, *ny*, and *ly* are pronounced by thrusting the tongue forward so it touches the backs of both sets of teeth. You can find the position by putting the tip of the tongue at the base of the lower teeth, and pushing the tongue forward. *Ny* and *ly*, as in *nyuntu* ‘you’ and *palya* ‘good’ sound a bit like the English sounds in the words ‘onion’ and ‘million’. *Tj* as in *tjuta* ‘many, plural’ sounds a bit like ch, as in ‘church’.

Many Pitjantjatjara words, e.g. *ngayulu* ‘I’, *ngalkuni* ‘eats’ and *ngura* ‘camp, place’, begin with sound *ng*, which in English is found only in the middle and at end of words; for instance, it occurs twice in ‘singing’.

Some people find it hard to pronounce the *ng* sound at the beginning of a word. If so, try the following exercises. Slowly say an English word with *ng* in the middle, such as ‘hanger’. Say it slowly in two syllables ha-nger, ha-nger ... now gradually begin to pronounce the first part ha- more softly ... ha... nger...and then only mentally. You are now pronouncing –nger, -nger, with an initial *ng* sound as in Pitjantjatjara. Try to build on this to say *ngura* ‘place, camp’ or other words beginning with *ng*.

VOWELS:

There are three significant vowel sounds, written with the letters *a*, *i* and *u*. An *a* usually sounds as in ‘father’ but a bit shorter. The *i* and *u* usually sound as in ‘pizza’ and ‘put’.

Because there are only three types of vowel, however, each can vary quite a bit in pronunciation depending on the neighbouring sounds. For instance, in words like *wangka* ‘speech’, *wala* ‘quickly’ and *apungka* ‘on the rock, in the hills’, the *a* usually sounds like an o-because the rounding of the lips of the previous sound is carried over to affect the *a*.

Also, when an *i* comes before a sharp r, as in *miru* ‘spear-thrower’ or *wira* ‘digging-scoop/cup’, it usually sounds more like the e in ‘pet’. An *i* before a retroflex t, n, and l, as in the words *piti* ‘burrow, hole’, *ini* ‘loose’ *ili* ‘wild fig’, sounds something like the e in ‘here’.

In some words the first vowel is long. Long vowels are spelt by using two letters e.g. *tjaa* ‘mouth’, *nyii-nyii* ‘zebra finch’.

GRAMMAR:

Parts of speech: These are categories such as noun, adjective, verb, pronoun, and so on, which indicate what kind of word we are dealing with, in terms of how it functions in the grammar of the language.

Most of the Pitjantjatjara parts of speech are very similar to those of English.

Two points of difference are as follows. First, in Pitjantjatjara there is an important difference between ‘intransitive’ and ‘transitive’ verbs. Intransitive verbs are those which involve only one essential participant, or ‘do-er’, such as verbs like ‘go, sleep, cry, wait’ and so on. Transitive verbs are those whose meaning necessarily involves two participants, generally a ‘do-er’ and a ‘do-ee’, such as ‘kick, eat, make, cook’ and so on.

Second, there is a special part of speech called ‘active adjective’, which comprises words with meanings like ‘quickly, angrily, carefully’ and so on. These would be called ‘adverbs of manner’ in English grammar, but in Pitjantjatjara they have some special grammatical behaviour which makes them more like a special kind of adjective.

Word-building: Pitjantjatjara has a number of regular processes for deriving words from other words, especially for deriving verbs and nouns from adjectives. Aside from the kind of meaning involved, these processes also take account of the stress pattern of the word, in particular whether it has an odd or even number of vowels. Other common ways of forming words are compounding and doubling.

Although regular or semi-regular from a grammatical point of view, derived words often call for English translations that cannot reflect this fact, e.g. *palya* ‘good, usable; *palyani* ‘make, fix, mend’; *kutjupa* ‘different’; *kutjuparinyi* ‘change’.

Case-endings: Nouns often have endings (called case-endings) added to them to show the role that the person, place, or thing plays in the event being described. For example, when the word *wati* ‘man’ is the subject of a transitive verb, it will appear as *watingku* (i.e. with the ending *-ngku*). This ending has a purely grammatical function, as opposed to other case endings that carry more tangible meanings. For example, *watiku* (with the ending *-ku*) means ‘the man’s’ or ‘for men’. The word *ngura* ‘camp, home’ can also appear *ngurangka* ‘at camp’, or as *ngurakutu* ‘to camp’, or as *nguranguru* ‘from camp’. In other words, the endings, *-ku*, *-ngka*, *-kutu*, and *-nguru* express the same kind of meanings as are expressed in English by words such as ‘for/of’, ‘at’, ‘to’, and ‘from’.

Most endings have several variants, depending on whether the noun is a so-called ‘common noun’ or a so-called ‘proper noun’. For example the ending *-ngku* can’t be added to a person’s name, but the alternate ending *-lu* serves the same function. Actually, the language is quite particular about giving special grammatical treatment to proper nouns – so much so that if a proper noun doesn’t have any other ending attached to it, it is generally given the special ‘name ending’ *-nya*. For example we wouldn’t just call someone by their name, we would say their name plus the *-nya* ending; for example ‘*Yaminya*’. Place names are the same in that they would also take the *-nya* ending. This *-nya* ending is like a verbal capital letter.

Case-endings also assume different forms if the final sound of the basic form of the word is a consonant, such as *n*, *l*, or *ny*, rather than a vowel.

Case-endings don't necessarily go onto nouns. In fact, they attach to the final word of a noun phrase, where the 'noun phrase' refers to a noun and to any other demonstrative or descriptive words that belong with it. For example, the expression 'a tall man', 'this man', and 'this tall man' are all noun phrases in English, they correspond to *wati wara*, *wati nyanga* and *wati nyanga wara* in Pitjantjatjara. As you can see, the modifying words come after the noun in Pitjantjatjara. The word which carries the case-ending is the last word in the noun phrase, whatever that might be. So if we wanted to say that 'a tall man', 'this man' or 'this tall man' did something transitive (such as drink tea, shoot a kangaroo, or make a boomerang) the appropriate phrases would be *wati war^uangku*, *wati nyang^uangku*, or *wati nyanga war^uangku*, respectively.

The following table shows some of the main case-endings, using the base words *wati* 'man', *Yami* (a man's name), *ngura* 'place', and *Mimili* (the name of a community). Remember that different forms would be used if the base word ended in a consonant sound.

wati-ngku	Yami-lu	Subject of a transitive verb (also known as 'ergative' case).
wati-ku	Yami-ku	'for', 'of', and 'belonging to'.
ngura-ngka	Mimili-la	'at'
ngura-kutu	Mimili-lakutu	'to', 'towards'
ngura-nguru	Mimili-languru	'from'

Pronouns: These are words like ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘he’, and ‘her’. In English they take different forms depending on their grammatical function; for example, ‘me’ can be thought of as a different form of the word ‘I’, and ‘him’ can be thought of as a different form of ‘he’. This is also the same in Pitjantjatjara grammar. The following table lists the basic forms used when the pronoun appears as the subject of sentence. Also included are a special set of pronouns called ‘dual-pronouns’, these are used when talking about groups of two. Also the word *paluru* is used when referring to either gender, its equivalent in English is the ‘he’, ‘she’ or ‘it’ pronouns.

<i>ngayulu</i> ‘I’	<i>ngali</i> ‘we two’	<i>nganana</i> ‘we’
<i>nyuntu</i> ‘you’	<i>nyupali</i> ‘you two’	<i>nyura</i> ‘you’
<i>paluru</i> ‘he, she, it’	<i>pula</i> ‘they two’	<i>tjana</i> ‘they’

A pronoun adopts a different form when it occurs as the grammatical ‘object’ of a sentence; in other words, when it indicates a person (or people) who is (or are) undergoing some action. All the object pronouns end with *-nya*, though in the case of the words for ‘me’, and ‘him/her’ the base form is shortened before the *-nya* is added.

<i>ngayunya</i> ‘me’	<i>ngalinya</i>	‘us two’	<i>nganananya</i>	‘us’
<i>nyuntunya</i> ‘you’	<i>nyupalinya</i>	‘you two’	<i>nyura</i>	‘you’
<i>palunya</i> ‘him, her, it’	<i>pulanya</i>	‘them two’	<i>tjana</i>	‘them’

To express meanings like ‘for me, mine’, ‘to you’, ‘from him’, ‘with them’ and so on, the case endings we just saw in the section above are added to the base form, though there are a few exceptions. For example, ‘for me’ or ‘mine’ is *ngayuku* (using the ending *-ku*) but the other pronouns use the ending *-mpa* instead: *nyuntumpa* means ‘yours’ or ‘for you’; *tjanampa* means ‘theirs’ or ‘for them’.

Bound Pronouns: Some of the pronouns have short forms (called ‘bound pronouns’) which are not separate words but yet another kind of ending. For example, the ending *-na* means the same as *ngayulu* ‘I’, so instead of saying *Ngayulu anu* ‘I left’ one could say *Anu-na*. Similarly, instead of saying *Nyuntu kura* ‘you’re bad’, one can just say *Kura-n*. The most common bound pronouns are shown below.

<i>-na</i> ‘I’, <i>-ni</i> ‘me’	<i>-li</i> ‘we two’, <i>-linya</i> ‘us two’	<i>-la</i> ‘we’, <i>-lanya</i> ‘us’
<i>-n</i> ‘you’, <i>-nta</i> ‘you’	-	-
-	-	<i>-ya</i> ‘they’

Bound pronouns don’t just go anywhere in a sentence. They attach themselves to the last word of the first phrase in a sentence or to a connective word such as *ka* ‘and, but’ and *munu* ‘and’ (if there is one).

Verbs: Verbs in Pitjantjatjara carry endings. The choice of ending indicates the relative time (e.g. present, past) the action or event took place; or that an order or request is being given, or that the verb is being used to depict a potential event; or that the action is something typically or characteristically done.

There are in fact four slightly different sets of these endings, depending on which of the four groups or ‘verb-classes’ a verb belongs to.

The following table shows the basic verb endings, using a typical verb of each class.

	(0) (‘zero’ class)	(l) (also called la-class)	(ng) (also called wa-class)	(n) (also called ra-class)
	‘talk’	‘bite’	‘hit’	‘put’
Imperative	wangka	patjala	puwa	tjura
Past	wangkangu	patjanu	pungu	tjunu
Imperative (continuous)	wangkama	patjanma	pungama	tjunama
Present	wangkanyi	patjani	punganyi	tjunanyi
Past (continuous)	wangkangi	patjaningi	pungangi	tjunangi
Future	wangkaku	patjalku	pungkuku	tjunkuku
Characteristic	wangkapai	patjalpai	pungkupai	tjunkupai
Serial	wangkara	patjara	pungkula	tjunkula
Nominal form	wangkanytja	patjantja	pungkunytja	tjunkunytja

More complex verb forms exist, however they have not been included. For further reference, please consult your “Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara to English Dictionary”.

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