2 The Story Begins

The following story was told on a hot day, whilst people were sitting on a low-lying salt flat, in the sun. We had just previously returned from the mangroves, having collected a large amount of *ku thali* (‘longbumps’, *Telescopium telescopium*) and *ku warrgi* (‘mangrove worms’, *Teredo* spp.), and had sat down to have a cup of tea and feast on the haul. Where the transcribed passage commences, I was walking away from the feasting group, leaving the flash-ram recorder running, so as to record the conversation. Present were two senior women, Phyllis and Elizabeth, three of Elizabeth’s granddaughters – two teenagers (AC and MC), and a third granddaughter in her twenties, JC. Also present was JD, the husband of JC (also in his twenties). Elizabeth is a traditional owner of the place we were visiting, in that the area forms part of the estate of her patrilineal clan.\(^4\) The immediately preceding talk was about the name of the country and about which way the old foot-tracks used to go.

Fragment 1  On the Flat (2005-07-05J801)

\[ 0.75 \]

25  Phyl *karda* thamul pinnangam\[nubi:rrya;\]
    This might be where they fought with spears.
26  Eliz  \[xx xxx x: J:\]
27  (0.66)
28  Phyl Nawa, >ma ngarrangu thunggu pinnam\[nubirryu.
    Isn’t that right? But which way was that shooting?
29  (2.9)
30  Phyl \underline{Elizabeth}.
31  Eliz =Heyi
32  (0.48)
33  Phyl Kanyirda yana pilampi ngalla nga.
    Right here on the big salt plain, hey.
34  (.)
35  Eliz da ngalla.
    The big one ((salt plain)).
36  (0.24)
37  Phyl ku panguwangulu.
    The thing(s) of the “ku” class, over that way.
38  (0.25)
39  MC (thaniwup kanyimaniwulu) \[x x x x x x x x x x x\]
    (You can sit down over here) xxxx xx .
40  Eliz  \[jininika bere pir\indic{4}ditj\indic{1}me.=mere
41  tje pumabatja nyinda.\(^4\)
    That happened a long time ago. They won’t know about that.
42  (0.14)
43  Phyl *Aaɔ*\(^*\)

\(^4\) See §3.3.3.
Huh?

Phyl Aa:. *karduyida puddanayitjthapurniya.
Oh! They used to tell the story.

Eliz Mm.
Phyl Da nukunuka minggi yileyle mamngarrungime.
Minggi’s own father told us.

There are two important issues that emerge from this fragment. The first is the question of how is it that stories get told, and in particular how they start off. The second is the question of referential problems, how do they emerge and how do they get resolved. Nice as it would be to separate these issues, in this fragment and in the two that follow, they are inextricably intertwined.

Unlike formal storytelling, Murriny Patha conversational narratives do not (generally) start because someone announces that they have a story to tell. In this Murriny Patha corpus, stories usually commence because they are touched off either by something in the prior talk, or by the setting in which speakers find themselves. Stories tend to unfold spontaneously as their telling becomes relevant. All of the conversations transcribed in this dissertation were recorded in the bush, some 20 or 30 kilometres from Wadeye, usually on visits to the traditional estates of my consultants. Each transcribed conversation has a number of spontaneously produced narratives. Since my consultants have lived in the area for all of their lives, they have lots of stories and anecdotes about people and events that have some relevance to the places we were visiting. Very often the country itself seems to touch off a story. Indeed the corpus would suggest that storytelling is a proper and legitimate activity to be performed whilst in the bush.

Conversational narratives are ephemeral, fragile entities. They are vulnerable to incursion – this may be a mere momentary interruption or it may be a complete takeover by another story. Storytellers can become distracted by children, animals, food, and generally other goings-on. Stories may recommence after a while or they may become obliterated by other events as the talk unfolds. At times the would-be

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5 That is, in the conversational data storytellers tend not to make a fanfare about having a story to tell, and tend not to begin with any formal structures that literally announce a story (e.g., *Once upon a time*, *There was this guy*, etc.). Having said that, storytellers frequently employ story prefaces that, in a veiled way, pragmatically herald a story as forthcoming. By contrast, in formal narratives storytellers regularly employ formal narrative initiating devices (e.g., line 1 of Fragment 26, p. 144).

6 Fragment 1 is a case in point (lines 25 and 28).
audience don’t pay attention. It can be an effort for a storyteller just to maintain a plot. Because of this, establishing reference in conversational narratives can be a long, confusing and convoluted process. Like any other problems in conversation, referential problems may be resolved after a while, or they can prove to be insurmountable.

The referential problems that emerge in this passage spring (at least in part) from a lack of attention being paid to Phyllis, the initial narrator of the story, by her story consociate\(^7\), Elizabeth, in the initial unfolding of the narrative. This lack of attention results in Phyllis’s attempts to prompt Elizabeth to tell the story being misconstrued by Elizabeth as Phyllis soliciting permission to tell the story. The passage shows that sometimes certain hearers conceive of referents differently to others, and differently also to how the speaker conceives of what he or she is referring to. The narrator of the story makes a particularly elliptical reference (line 37) that later results in a considerable amount of confusion for both audience and narrator alike. Two particular hearers of this culprit referential expression have very different degrees of access to the referent that the speaker has in mind. In fact one of them has much more knowledge of what the speaker is talking about (indeed more than the speaker) and the other much less. Significantly, the hearer with less knowledge is still able to track the referent without knowing who (or possibly even what) the speaker was talking about.\(^8\) The passage is also remarkable in that it demonstrates how large referential problems can be ultimately resolvable. Both the elliptical reference and the subsequent tracking of the referent need to be understood within the context of the first narrator’s attempts to secure a greater contribution from her story consociate towards co-telling the story, or even taking on the role of primary storyteller.

On conversational storytelling, Lerner (1992: 257) writes: “[t]he story preface is a site for displaying one’s alignment to the projected story. It thereby provides a locus for working out who will do the story on a particular occasion.” In line 25 of this first

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\(^7\) In multiparty speech, where more than one conversationalist has prior knowledge of the story being told, narratives tend to be collaboratively co-constructed. This is particularly true of Murriny Patha conversation. As such, narratives may have one or more co-tellers who take on roughly equal roles in the telling; or they may have a primary teller and one or more “story consociates”. A story consociate (Lerner 1992) is a knowledgeable participant who plays a lesser role in the storytelling (minor additions, correcting points of fact, anticipatory laughter etc.). These roles are not static in that a story consociate can take on a larger role and become a co-teller of the story, or even take over primary tellership and become the main teller.

\(^8\) As we will see in due course, this has cognitive implications for just how referents are conceived of by speakers and hearers.
fragment, Phyllis, rather than tell the story herself, tries to solicit the story from Elizabeth with a story prompt, “this might be where they fought with spears’.

Elizabeth is a few years older than Phyllis and knows more than her about the events and individuals involved. As a traditional owner she also has more authority than Phyllis to speak about events that took place on her own clan’s estate. The mumbled utterance in line 26, that overlaps Phyllis’s turn (line 25) shows that Elizabeth is not paying full attention to what her friend is saying (and therefore is not orienting to what she is doing with her talk). Indeed she seems to be mumbling something to herself and not really listening attentively. The lack of uptake from Elizabeth produces a second more direct story prompt (line 28, “Isn’t that right? But which way was that shooting?”), since it specifically targets Elizabeth as the only person present old enough to be able to answer the direct question. The ensuing 2.9 second silence (line 29) and the Heyë in line 31, in response to Phyllis’s direct call for her attention (line 30), further show that Elizabeth wasn’t paying attention to her friend. Thus Phyllis’s first two attempts to prompt Elizabeth to tell the story are in vain. Furthermore, it seems subsequent attempts to solicit the narration are not perceived in the light in which they were intended.

In line 37, Phyllis produces a nominal predication, ku panguwangu, “the thing/things of the ku class, over that way”. The nominal classifier ku has a very broad range of denotata (animates, flesh, meat, game, dead bodies, non-aboriginal human beings, spirits, totems, totemic sites, money, women’s genitalia). Bare nominal classifiers make very vague referential expressions because they often function like
indefinite pro-forms, standing in place of fuller nominal expressions. In the case of 
*ku*, this makes for an extremely elliptical expression because the scope of its 
denotatum is so broad. Given such a minimal and elliptical utterance, it seems 
remarkable that Elizabeth was able to work out what Phyllis was talking about. Yet 
she certainly was able to work out what was being talked about. Her reply in lines 
40 and 41, “that happened a long time ago, they won’t know about that”, shows not 
only that she was able to perceive the referent and understand that the reference 
relates to events that happened in the distant past, it also shows that she appreciated 
that the elliptical construction should be understood as a kind of story preface. The 
elliptical nominal predication, *ku panguwangu* in line 37, was specifically tailored to 
be interpretable to Elizabeth and Elizabeth alone. That it is understood as such, is 
revealed in her reply, “That was a long time ago, they won’t know about that,” since it 
too is cast in such a fashion that it reveals nothing to other members of the audience 
about the nature of the referent. The turn pronounces the events as potentially 
newsworthy for the other people present.

Although Elizabeth demonstrates an understanding of both what was being talked 
about and of the secretive nature in which the reference was cast, the turn spanning 
lines 40 and 41 more than merely pronounces the story as potentially newsworthy, it 
also serves as a go-ahead. This shows that Elizabeth did not take line 37 to be a story 
prompt, but rather as a kind of story preface that seeks permission to narrate the story. 
This go-ahead is a license for Phyllis to tell the story. That the intent of Phyllis’s

13 See §6.1.2.1.
14 The predication consists of the nominal classifier *ku* and a distal deictic. Although nominal 
classifiers followed by simple deictics (e.g., *pangu*, “over there”) produce specific referential 
expressions (see §6.1.2.1), the derivational directional suffix -*wangu*, “away from”, makes the deictic 
expression predicative of the bare nominal classifier. That is to say, *panguwangu* “in that direction” is 
something that is said “about” whatever it is that *ku* is standing in the place of. As a verbless 
construction, the predication lacks both temporal anchoring and the marking of number (in which case, 
it should best be interpreted as “some things/something of the *ku*-class is/are/was/were/will be in that 
direction”).
15 Since these forms are non-specific, bare nominal classifiers are not normally used for initiating 
reference. Because they are predominantly used for “globally subsequent” reference, they may be 
considered “globally subsequent reference forms” (see §7.1.2). When non-specific subsequent 
reference forms are used in “globally initial” position, the forms are used to invite the recipient to 
identify the referent. The pattern used here is thus a sort of “recognition inversion” of form and position (see §7.3.2.1 and §8.5)
16 In CA parlance, the reference had been “recipient-designed” (Sacks et al. 1974: 727) so as to be 
interpretable to Elizabeth, and be uninterpretable to anyone else.
17 In Aboriginal Australia certain stories about country fall within domains of ownership and 
responsibility. As such, land-owning individuals bear rights to the stories. Non-owners may seek 
permission from “owners” to tell a story. In which case it seems reasonable to give the name 
“permission solicit story preface” to the interactional device employed to do so.
elliptical construction was misconstrued is revealed in line 43, where Phyllis produces a rather confused *قارع*, which suggests that Elizabeth’s go-ahead was not the expected result. When she realizes that that no narrative will be forthcoming from Elizabeth, she produces a change-of-state token *قارع* (“Oh!”) in line 45 and then proceeds with the narration herself.

**Fragment 2**  On the Flat (2005-07-05JB01)

50 Phyl  *Pana. (... marip, (0.28) konggurlanggurlya.
      That paternal grandfather of Marip.
51 (0.45)
52 Phyl  thungu mawumawu kardanugathu nuradhadiini.
      He came this way for a rifle.
53 UnId  [mmh hm ha ha ha j
54 (1.0)
55 Eliz  thaminy ingay, my maternal grandfather.
56 (0.2)
57 Phyl  ithamuny nyyinyinyu. Yeah your maternal grandfather.
58 UnId  [Mmha ha.
59 (0.9)
60 JD  (kumbaru lololola)= (Cockroach ahead.)
61 AC  =moha ha ah
62 (0.8)
63 JD  kambaltjerr
      Kambaltjerr ((place name)).
64 AC  [nghha hja.
65 (0.4)
66 Phyl  thungungkardurrnu.
      You go first.
67 (0.17)
68 Eliz  thg:nggu.
      what?

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18 Heritage (1984) writes that the change-of-state marker “Oh” is a “[...] particle used to propose that its producer has undergone some kind of change in his or her locally current state of knowledge, information, orientation or awareness”. They are frequently produced in receipt of “informings”, in receipt of repairs (by the producer of an other-initiation of repair), and in displays of understanding.

19 The mid-rising “appeal” contour (Du Bois et al. 1993: 54-55) of the *قارع* reveals non-comprehension of the intent of Elizabeth’s go-ahead. It is in effect an “open class” repair initiator (Drew 1997). Unfortunately, as already stated, there is no video recording of this passage so it is not possible to observe whether Elizabeth employed non-verbal cues to signal to Phyllis that she should proceed with the narration herself. Even so, when neither an explanation nor a story is forthcoming in the ensuing 1.2 seconds of silence (line 44), the (audible) absence of an expected repair solution makes relevant a re-examination of the intent of Elizabeth’s utterance. Such a re-examination would reveal that Elizabeth’s pronouncing the story as potentially newsworthy was never meant to be taken as neutral with regards to who should do the telling, and should thus be interpreted as a go-ahead. In pronouncing it newsworthy, Elizabeth is tacitly selecting Phyllis to proceed with its telling, since she herself is withholding the telling at the very time when the telling is relevant (no other hearers being in a position to tell the story).

20 This may also be a person’s name.
Lerner (1992: 258) notes that once a story has begun, a correction from a more knowledgeable story consociate can “re-occasion” the issue of who is to tell the story and thus a change in storyteller can result. In line 50, Phyllis introduces a new referent using a kinterm-based referential formulation, *Pana marip kanggurlanggurliya*, “that paternal grandfather of Marip”. She then goes on (line 52) to say that he came this way looking for a rifle. In line 55, Elizabeth challenges Phyllis as to the identity of the person being referred to. She does this by proffering her own kinterm-based formulation for the person that she thinks Phyllis has in mind – *thumuny inga_y*, “my maternal grandfather”. In line 57, Phyllis confirms that the referent was indeed Elizabeth’s own maternal grandfather. This proffer-confirmation

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21 Lerner (1992: 258) gives the following example:

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1 A: yeah they called up the delicatessen one time
2 (,)
3 B: it wz- ugh- alpha [beta]
4 E: [be:y]dah
5 → A: it wz alpha b=you tell the story
6 (0.3)
7 B: okay we came over ta alpha beta,
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In line 3, B corrects A by providing the name of the delicatessen that was telephoned (B was one of the people who called the delicatessen). In line 5, A relinquishes the tellership to B who has first hand experience of the events being recounted. B takes up the storytelling in line 7.
combination is an insertion sequence in the storytelling. The expression thaminy innga_y, is prosodically marked. This utterance is striking, due to the dramatic contrast in relative pitch across adjacent syllables (as indicated by the upward arrow in thaminy and the downward arrow in innga_y). The word thaminy (here pronounced thaminy), “maternal grandfather”, ordinarily attracts stress on the first syllable. In this case, the stress pattern has been manipulated by placing the pitch peak on the adjacent syllable. This high-pitched second syllable contrasts in terms of relative pitch to the word ngay which falls, and then rises slightly, giving the intonation unit a continuous terminal contour. The referential item is thus intonationally “tweaked”. This “tweaking” serves to draw the hearer’s attention to the item and thus to the candidate-referent being proposed (the maternal grandfather). Because this kinterm-based referential item is the first pair part in an insertion sequence that immediately follows a prior referential item of the same type, attention is brought not only to the prosodically-marked marked item and its referent, but to the prior one, and its referent as well. This juxtaposition of similarly fashioned constructions problematizes the prior referential item, challenging the storyteller to ascertain whether the participant being referred to in both referential formulations are one and the same.\textsuperscript{22} This confirmation is produced in line 57, i thamuny nyiniyu, “yeah your maternal grandfather”. Clearly the problem is not merely one of comprehensibility, since Elizabeth was easily able to establish the referent.\textsuperscript{23} Rather, because the referent, although deceased, was the biological kin of most of the hearers, then a more apt referring strategy would have been to associate the referent to the current conversationalists and thus choose someone currently present as an anchor (propositus) for the kinterm, rather than someone not so immediately connected with the grounding of the discourse.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} It is thus an “astonished” other-initiation of repair. “Prosodically marked initiations of repair are used to point out a contradiction between the items echoed from the prior turn and the speaker’s own expectations” (Selting 1996: 246).

\textsuperscript{23} The named participant Marip, propositus for the kin-term kanggurl, “father’s father”, was well known to all present.

\textsuperscript{24} This is strong support for the preference for “Association” (Brown 2007; Stivers, Enfield & Levinson 2007) – namely, that a referent should preferably be associated to the current conversation’s participants (see §5.3.4.1).

In fact, “the paternal grandfather of Marip” is in violation of the principle of recipient design, since by rights a properly cast reference should be “designed for the recipients” – Elizabeth and her family. Sacks (1992, 2: 446) gives the example “one shouldn’t use ‘my mother’ to a recipient to whom the person referred to is also the mother – one should use instead, ‘our mother.’”
A simple yu, “yes”, or awu, “no”, would have adequately provided the confirmation required. However, more than achieving this much, the prosodically marked item resulted in Phyllis’s wholesale adoption of Elizabeth’s own referential formulation. The prosodically marked тhарmіn inglecy, in line 55, thus amounts to a critique of Phyllis’s formulation of the person reference in line 50, that results in its ultimate replacement. Phyllis may have deliberately cast this person reference in such a fashion so as to secure a more concerted participation from her story consociate than she had thus far received. Whether or not that is the case, it certainly secured Elizabeth’s attention. Standing corrected, (following a brief exchange that probably deals with a nearby cockroach, lines 60 - 6325) Phyllis, in line 66, attempts to hand over the tellership to Elizabeth, thungungkardurrnu, “you go first”.

Whether distracted by the cockroach, the heat, the food, the three grandchildren and the grandson-in-law, or some other reason, Elizabeth had not been paying full attention to what her friend was saying (as evidenced in lines 26, 27 29, 31 and 40) and is thus oblivious of Phyllis’s persistent attempts (lines 25, 28, 30, 37 and perhaps 50) to secure her participation in co-telling the story. Phyllis’s “reluctance” to tell the story has gone undetected by Elizabeth who has misconstrued the story prompts as permission-seeking story prefices. She therefore does not make any connection between “you go first” and storytelling.

Elizabeth then goes on to initiate a repair with the open class repair initiator (Drew 1997: 307) thanggu, “what?” (line 68). When this repair initiator fails to initiate the required repair, she repeats it (line 70) with increased amplitude and length. When this also fails to secure a response, JD produces a third repair initiator, Aa?, in line 72. Each of these repair initiators demand Phyllis (as the producer of the troublesource turn and hence as thrice-selected next speaker) produce an explanation as to the intent of thungungkardurrnu, “you go first’’.26 That such an explanation is not forthcoming, in spite of the pressure on her to produce one, suggests that for Phyllis to explicate the utterance would have been very problematic. It is here that we reach the limits of the micro-analytic approach and must look for explanations beyond the confines of the transcript. Phyllis is a visitor to the country and is in the company

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25 The relevance of the place name Kambaltjerr (line 63) escapes me.
26 In this corpus, the producer of a troublesource-turn never treats the repair initiator thanggu, “what”, as dealing with hearing problems. This would suggest that for Elizabeth, the trouble lies in not knowing what Phyllis means by “you go first”.
of four descendents of one of the story’s protagonists. Elizabeth is a traditional owner and (as will be evidenced shortly) knows the story better than Phyllis, and presumably Phyllis suspects as much. The onus is thus on Elizabeth (and not Phyllis) to inform her grand-daughters about the events that took place on their ancestor’s clan’s estate and that relate to their kinsmen. If these were the factors motivating Phyllis’s apprehension about telling the story, they would have certainly been difficult to explicate without embarrassing Elizabeth in front of her family. Thus we have the setting of an impossible scenario where Phyllis is being pressured to explain that which etiquette prevents her from spelling out. We thus have a possible explanation for Phyllis’s silence (lines 73, 75 and 77). The young girl’s laughter (line 76) may be respondent to a noted absence of the expected repair solution (although without video footage other explanations cannot be ruled out). In what is surely a face-saving exercise (for reasons that will become apparent in due course, see footnote 30), JC produces in line 78, an utterance that is elliptical by the same order of magnitude as the culprit reference that we saw earlier (in line 37). However, Ku pandaya thanggugu, “that/those thing(s) of the ku class, what’s its name”, includes a recognitional demonstrative, pandaya, that is frequently used anaphorically (see §6.1.2.2.1). Although vague in terms of its scope, because of the demonstrative, this particular reference is both definite and specific, in that it harks back to a particular mention of some prior underspecified referent of the ku class (ku panguwangu, line 37).

Strangely, Phyllis’s reply in line 80, thanggugu, “what sort of thing(s) of the ku class?”, suggests that she can’t remember making reference to anything of this class. Below, when we actually learn what Phyllis had been referring to in line 37, we will get some insight into perhaps why she doesn’t remember. Ku pandaya thanggugu (line 78), is a recasting of the original culprit cryptic reference that Phyllis made in line 37, though this time it has been directed towards the very speaker who produced it. We will also see that Phyllis’s not being able to compute JC’s recast version of her own referential expression is a measure of just what an elliptical formulation her own prior reference had been.

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27 As the next-selected speaker, Phyllis has both the right and the obligation to produce a sequentially appropriate next turn (Sacks et al. 1974). As a non-producer of an obligated next turn, these silences are directly attributable to her (Levinson 1983: 320-321).
Now that this recast version has been removed from the surrounding talk that made its antecedent interpretable as a story preface, as a decontextualized reference it has become so open-ended that it is no longer interpretable, even to the person who produced it in the first place. The repair initiator, thanggugu, “what thing of the ku class?” (line 80), thus becomes a humorous question to the teenage girl AC, who (laughing in line 82) interprets the previous line (78) as a thinly veiled reference to a certain part of the female anatomy that shouldn’t be mentioned explicitly in polite company.  

In line 83, Phyllis also begins to snigger, which shows that this was clearly not what she had been talking about. This “joke” receives admonishment from Elizabeth in line 85, pirda, “Stop it!”

In line 87, JC attempts to repair her problematic utterance by recasting it so as to specifically locate Phyllis’s original cryptic reference (line 37), Ku panday thanggugu thurdananginthayitjhatjini, “That thing of the ku-class, you two were telling a story” – to put it in other words, “I don’t know what you two were talking about because you haven’t finished telling us what sort of ku the story relates to”.

Thus without even knowing what Phyllis had been talking about, JC has been able to track this vaguest of unspecified referents and recast it twice (lines 78 and 87), re-presenting it to the very person who produced it in the first place, in an attempt to bring the story back on track.

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28 That the nominal classifier ku has anatomical denotata, is a constant source of mirth for Murriny Patha people. This coupled with the fact that a number of molluscs (mud clams, freshwater mussels, spiny chitons) bear a striking resemblance to a part of the female anatomy, form the basis of countless funny stories and anecdotes (see for instance “Spiny Chitons”, Appendix D). Thus the interrogatives/indefinite pro-forms thanggugu and ku nan (§6.1.2.2.2), as well as the adjectival nominal ku ngala (large thing of the ku class), frequently make people laugh. Veiled references of this type are in fact so common, that the anatomical interpretation is almost the default.

29 Presumably the humour lies in Phyllis’s recognizing the irony in how the serious matters about which she had been speaking are subsequently misconstrued as as anatomical joke. This, along with the irony of her not remembering having made any ku-reference in the first place, is certainly a farcical state of affairs.

30 It should now be clearer why the problematic line 78, here recast and elaborated as line 87, was probably designed to be face-saving for Phyllis. That is, ku pandaya thanggugu relates to the telling of the story – the story that has yet to reveal the nature of this mystery ku-referent. Phyllis had been obliged to explain thungungkardurarra, ”you go first!”, yet was at a loss for words as to how to do it without offending Elizabeth. Firstly by self-selecting, JC nullifies Phyllis’s obligation as next-selected speaker to repair her prior turn. Secondly, ku pandaya thanggugu is actually her attempt to explain, on Phyllis’s behalf, what it is that Elizabeth actually should actually go first at doing – namely telling the story! In other words, “That ku-thing you two were telling us about, don’t just leave us hanging, get on with the story!” Effectively ku pandaya thanggugu (line 78) was the repair that lines 68, 70 and 72 demanded, since it specifically dealt with the trouble in line 66 – the intent behind thungungkardurarra. However, because it was modelled on such a cryptic construction in the first place, just how something of the ku-class related to storytelling was lost on all hearers. Note that in JC’s second recasting (line 87), the verb thurdananginthayitjhatjini, “you two were telling a story”, specifically refers to both of the older women as being implicated in co-telling the story.
Fragment 3  On the Flat (2005-07-05JB01)

87  JC   ku panda thangggu >thurdananginthayitjthatjini< *eh *ha::.
    That thing of the "ku" class, what’s name. You two were telling
    that story.
88  (0.64)
89  UnId   Huh?
90  (0.87)
91  Phyl  mh ha ha ha hm.
92  (0.37)
93  Phyl  Ya::!
        I dunno!
94  (.)
95  Eliz  Ba mangalala;
        Oh, [you mean] Mangalala?
96  (1.0)
97  Phyl  Ya ngarrra mangalalayuf: 1
        Dunno, what is Mangalala?
98  JC
99  AC
       [ahja ha ha ha ah ha]  
       [mh hh]
100  (1.23)
101  JD  Ngayka mi *nyinuwa-:::.=
        I want that thing of the vegetable class.
102  JC  =mh ha ha=
103  JD  =Ngunumurrknufgangi.]
        I want to eat some.
104  Eliz [ Ba,]=mi be:ka::=
        Oh tobacco?
105  JC  =.he (. ) ma:nggalalai]
        ((And what about)) Manggalala ((mispronounced))?
106  (0.15)
107  Eliz Mangala"la" kanardang kardaya.
        Mangalala was shot here.

By this stage (lines 88 - 94) total confusion reigns. Phyllis herself doesn’t
remember making reference to anything of the *ku* class. JC has pointed out that a
*ku*-reference had been made. Phyllis is clearly having trouble reconciling the events in
the story with the forgotten cryptic reference, for which she has just been held (at least
partly) responsible. The irony of this state of affairs doesn’t escape her. In line 91, she
laughs before announcing in 93, *Ya*, “I don’t know”\(^{31}\)  In line 95, Elizabeth finally
makes the connection that what JC had been probing for and Phyllis’s mystery
referent are one and the same, so she proffers the name *Mangalala* as a possible “root-
of-all-confusion” (the *Ba* that precedes the name *Mangalala* is another “change-of-
state” token\(^{32}\)). However the confusion does not end there. Phyllis’s turn (line 97)

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\(^{32}\) (Heritage 1984).
displays her non-recognition of the term Mangalala by asking Ngarra Mangalalayu, “What is Mangalala?” If she had recognized Mangalala as a personal name, she would have asked Nanggal Mangalalayu, “Who is Mangalala?”, rather than “What is Mangalala?” (The continued confusion causes further amusement in lines 98 and 99.) After a brief digression (lines 101-104), JC once again (line 105) attempts to get the story back on track. Finally, Elizabeth reveals all in line 107, Mangalala kanardang kardaya, “Mangalala was shot here”. This short line not only reveals Mangalala to be a personal name of a dead man, but it also reveals ku panguwangu to be a veiled reference to his dead body, ku karatj. From there Elizabeth and Phyllis continue to tell the story – Elizabeth’s aforementioned grandfather came to get the shot-gun, but it was another man (the man who owned the shot-gun) that actually killed Mangalala.

Perhaps the difficulty Phyllis had in recalling her own ku-reference (lines 80 and 93) springs from an association of events with living people (living Aboriginal people belong to the kardu class and take the nominal classifier kardu), rather than dead bodies (which belong to the ku class). That is, we tend to visualize people as walking and talking. We even try to remember the deceased for what they were like when they were alive, rather than how they were when they died. The nominal class ku is not one that is associated with living Aboriginal people, and thus ku is not a classifier that Murriny Patha people tend to use for reference to Aboriginal persons (except under extraordinary circumstances such as this). This might explain how in fact the original cryptic reference in line 37 was a particularly clever one. Not only was it both minimal and non-specific, it was also quite oblique, since effectively the first mention of one of the main protagonists was as a corpse. Following turns relating to spearing (line 25) and shooting (line 28), the veiled reference to a dead body would easily be interpretable to a knowing recipient, yet quite opaque to anyone else. This suggests that although Elizabeth had not been giving Phyllis her full and undivided attention (as displayed in lines 26, 27, 29 and 31), she did in fact hear lines 25 and 28 (even if she wasn’t listening attentively), and was thus able to realize that the

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33 Mangalala was a man from the Daly River region who came to the Yek Nangu estate with a rifle in the 1930s, allegedly for the express purpose of capturing a wife. Most Murriny Patha people had spears at the time, although one man had a shot-gun. A battle broke out (with spears and guns), and the unfortunate Mangalala had his head blown off.

34 See §6.1.2.1 and also Walsh (1997).

35 See §5.3.3.
expression *ku panguwangu* in line 37 was used in reference to the dead body of Mangalala.

So *ku panguwangu* in line 37 was actually a reference to a person, yet it was effectively disguised as a reference to a thing. Perhaps Phyllis’s subsequent inability to recall referring to anything of the *ku*-class (lines 80 and 93) was because by this stage she had in mind a living man (*kardu*) who then died, rather than a man who was already dead (*ku*). Two hearers of this cryptic construction were able to track the referent. Elizabeth was able to compute the reference as being specifically to the man Mangalala, from around Daly River. JC on the other hand noted that the reference was to some particular thing of the *ku* class that had something to do with a battle (because of lines 25 and 28). Because it was pronounced as potentially newsworthy, it was clearly of some significance so she flagged it for future reference. Phyllis on the other hand, knew more or less who she was talking about, though she didn’t know the name of the man who got shot (as evidenced in line 97). Thus all three people have different amounts of knowledge about what was being referred to. The question is then, “if the actual man Mangalala was really the referent being expressed by *ku panguwangu*, can we explain how JC was able to track this referent, without knowing that the referent was a man?” Clearly she did track the referent and was even able to recast it and re-refer to it (twice).

Most theories of reference treat referents as entities or participants in the real world that get referred to in passages of talk. This data poses a problem for such a notion because clearly, for each of these individuals, their “referents” aren’t all equal.

If on the other hand we allow a degree of separation between referents and participants (or entities), we can easily account for both JC’s and Elizabeth’s tracking of this “referent”. Let us take the “hearer’s referent” to be the mental projection of some real-world participant(s) or entity/entities that is conveyed to the hearer by the speaker’s use of some particular referential expression in an utterance, embedded within a context. For Elizabeth, having heard mention of spearing and shooting (lines 25 and 28), then hearing the referential expression *ku panguwangu*, her hearer’s referent would be the mental image of the lifeless, headless body of Mangalala lying on the ground, not too far from where she was sitting. For JC, her hearer’s referent

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36 Because most authors take this as given, there are very few that feel the need to define the term *referent.* Lyons is one of the few that does. Paraphrasing Ogden and Richards (1923), he gives the term “‘referent’ for any object or state of affairs in the external world that is identified by means of a word or expression…” (Lyons 1977, 1: 175).
would be a much fuzzier projection. She may have envisaged a dead human, though this is perhaps not very likely. She might have realized that the referential expression had something to do with a battle and that the referent was of the ku class, so she may have envisaged an animal of some kind (perhaps a horse or a dog) or perhaps a white man. In any case, her mental projection would not have been very clear so it is not surprising that she was so motivated to find out what they had been talking about.

Let us take the “speaker’s referent” to be the mental approximation of some real-world participant(s) or entity/entities, of whom the speaker has some worldly knowledge or experience. For Phyllis, the speaker’s referent would be the mental image of a nameless man who was shot in this area. Her mental image would have come from the story that had been told to her many years earlier (line 48, Fragment 1). Given that the man had died in this area, framing the reference to him as a corpse would not be unreasonable, nor would giving him a “ku” classification.

As mental projections, Phyllis’s speaker’s referent is not quite the same as Elizabeth’s hearer’s referent. Elizabeth was the best informed as to the events, so for her the mental image would be the most detailed. For JC, her hearer’s referent would be very fuzzy indeed. For each – Elizabeth, JC and Phyllis – the participant in question is one and the same, Mangalala.

With this additional layer of separation, the two hearer’s referents and the speaker’s referent (the mental projections) can be thought of as indexing the actual man Mangalala who was killed. For both Phyllis and JC, their mental projections would both have sharpened a great deal upon hearing line 107, when they would have learned that Mangalala was the name of the dead man.

Thus a fine-grained analysis of referencing in Murriny Patha interaction yields some surprising findings that are challenging for conventional theories of reference. The importance of treating referents as existing in the minds of speakers and hearers, and of separating these from participants and entities, is but one of the issues to be taken up during the course of this dissertation. Coming to terms with how speakers do referring requires coming to grips with what referring is and what it is that speakers refer to. We will also see that just as person references in Murriny Patha conversation may be dense multilayered constructions, doing referring is a series of complicated, multilayered processes. For this reason, this dissertation aims to examine these processes from a number of perspectives: interactional, morphosyntactic, cognitive,
pragmatic and prosodic. Just as referring is multilayered, so too will be the tools of analysis.