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A grammar sketch of Yamdena and an introduction to its corpus

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Yamdena is an Austronesian language of eastern Indonesia. Although many language materials are available, the language has received very little scientific attention. In this article, I present the Yamdena corpus, which includes glossed legacy materials and original fieldwork. I also give an up-to-date introduction to Yamdena grammar, sketching its phonology, word classes, pronouns, nouns and noun phrases, possessive marking, verbs and verbal inflection, some clausal syntax, multi-verb constructions, and clause coordination.

1. Introduction

This article has two goals: first, to introduce the Yamdena language corpus to the reader and, second, to provide an up-to-date introduction to Yamdena grammar with reference to the corpus materials.

Yamdena (ISO 639-3 code *jmd*) is an Austronesian language of the Tanimbar-Bomberai subgroup (Grimes & Edwards, forthcoming). It is spoken by around 30,000 people on Tanimbar Island in southern Maluku province (Mettler & Mettler 1990). There are two dialects: North Yamdena (Nus Das) and South Yamdena (Nus Bab). Yamdena is considered to be a stage 5 (“Developing”) language following the EGIDS vitality scale (Eberhard et al. 2022).

Yamdena has a long history of linguistic description and work related to Bible translation and language conservation. The work can be divided into two periods: pre-1950 and post-1980. All work has been carried out on the South Yamdena dialect (locally called *Nus Bab* ‘lower island’, while the South Yamdena dialect is called *Nus Das* ‘upper island’; Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 2).¹

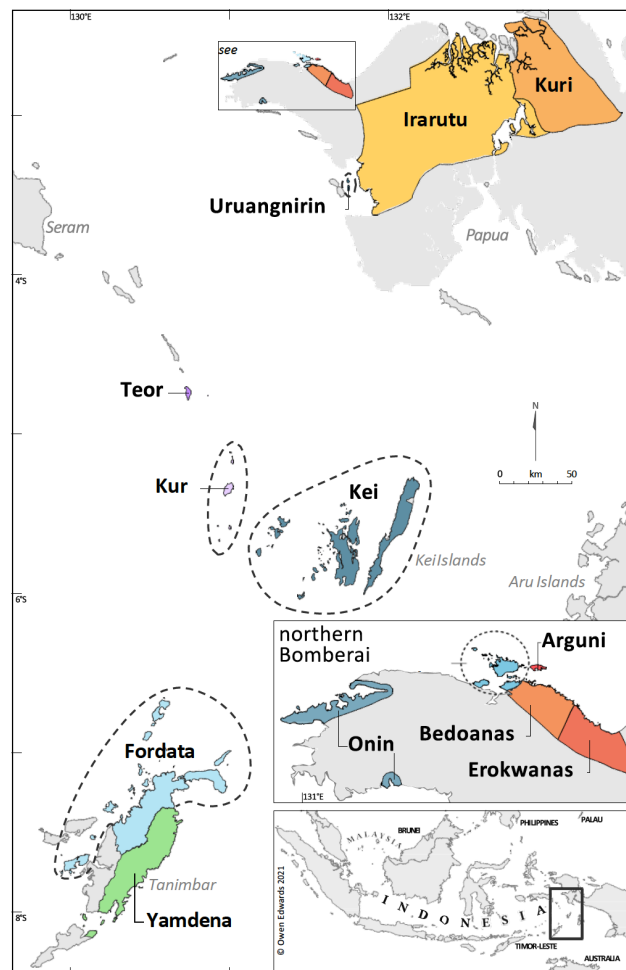


Figure 1. The Tanimbar-Bomberai subgroup with Yamdena in the south

¹ The dialectal differences have not been systematically studied. Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 2) report that the “southern dialect shows fuller morphological forms and is considered more prestigious.” The division between North and South Yamdena seems to be cursory, as there are also “minor differences from village to village” (Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 2), and when describing nominalisation, they divide the language into a lower, middle, and upper dialect (24). Drabbe (1926b: 2–3) describes the main difference between North and South Yamdena as follows: All roots that have an /a/ in the final syllable in South Yamdena, have an /i/ in North Yamdena. ‘To lift off’ is fangat in South Yamdena but fangit in North Yamdena. Furthermore, /we/ and /wi/ in South Yamdena correspond to /u/ in North Yamdena: ‘husband’ is sawe in South Yamdena but sau in North Yamdena.

1.1 Pre-1950 materials

The oldest Yamdena materials are the result of the work of the Dutch Catholic missionary Petrus Drabbe. They include a catechism and prayer books completely in Yamdena (*Agama ni angri silaaia* 1918; *Soerat sembajang* 1930; *Katekismoes nde agam' katolik ni kateman* 1948),² a grammar sketch written in Dutch (Drabbe 1926b), and a Yamdena–Dutch dictionary (Drabbe 1932). The catechism and prayer books are archived at the Heritage Center of the St. Agatha Monastery in Sint Agatha, the Netherlands.³ The grammar sketch and dictionary are available in several (university) libraries in the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia. Both the grammar sketch and the dictionary contain many unglossed example clauses. The sketch, which covers a wide range of topics, also contains some lists exemplifying derivation and inflection, but no overview tables.

1.2 Post-1980 materials

After a hiatus of more than thirty years, new publications on Yamdena begin to appear. The first new publication is Pieter et al. (1986), a 51-page grammar sketch published by the Indonesian Center for Language Construction and Development (Pusat Pembinaan dan Pengembangan Bahasa), which worked on the preservation of regional languages. It includes chapters on phonology, morphology, and syntax. The sketch is written in Indonesian and includes unglossed Yamdena examples but no tables that give an overview of, for example, pronouns or verbal inflection. The sketch is available in university libraries in the Netherlands, the United States, and Australia.

In the same period, the missionary couple Toni and Heidi Mettler moved to Tanimbar to start working on a Bible translation, supported by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) and Pattimura University in Ambon (UNPATTI). In collaboration with local language experts, they made a storybook with Indonesian free translations (SIL & UNPATTI 1991), a Yamdena–English–Indonesian phrasebook accompanied by an 11-page grammar sketch in Indonesian (Lamere & Mettler 1994), a spelling guide in Indonesian (Mettler 1994), an Indonesian–Yamdena word list (Mettler & Mettler 1997a), a 152-page grammar sketch in Indonesian (Rumyaru et al. 1999), and other materials.⁴ Lamere & Mettler (1994), however short, includes some rudimentarily glossed examples and some good tables. Rumyaru et al. (1999), an Indonesian sketch aimed at (partially fluent) speakers of Yamdena, primarily exemplifies morphophonology, so the sketch consists mainly of tables with roots or stems, derivations, and inflections. Example sentences are unglossed and partly also untranslated. The Mettlers also drafted a 260-page grammar sketch in English, which was unfortunately never published (Mettler & Mettler 1997b). This sketch contains some glossed examples. Their tables are mainly collections of derived or inflected words and are not meant for final publication but rather as an illustration of phenomena that yet need to be analysed in full. Of these materials, many are marked with messages such as “for private use only,” “trial edition,” and “not for distribution or research.” Some of the materials could be downloaded from SIL’s archives.⁵ The others were shared with me by SIL Asia, after consulting with Toni and Heidi Mettler, and I have been given permission to use them. One scientific paper on the phonology of Yamdena is published as Mettler & Mettler (1990).

Currently, the Bible-translation work has been taken over by a local language foundation on Tanimbar: Foundation for the Advancement of Local Peoples (Yayasan Pemberdayaan Masyarakat Desa, henceforth YPMD). At the time of writing, its publications are accessible on its home page⁶ and include song books in Yamdena, a Yamdena liturgy, Yamdena short stories with Indonesian free translations, a 117-page Yamdena–Indonesian word list, and a Yamdena translation of most of the Bible books of the New Testament. (All materials except the Bible books can be downloaded as PDF files. I obtained a PDF version of the Bible books from the YPMD director via email.)

² It is unclear who the authors of these works are, but it is likely that they stem from the work of Petrus Drabbe, who lived on Tanimbar Island working with the languages Yamdena and Fordata from 1915 to 1935 (Gonda & Anceaux 1970).

³ <https://www.erfgoedkloosterleven.nl/> (Accessed 2023-10-25.)

⁴ Including songbooks, a poem book, and language drills for learning Yamdena.

⁵ [https://www.sil.org/resources/search?query=\[jmd\]](https://www.sil.org/resources/search?query=[jmd]) (Accessed 2023-10-25.)

⁶ <https://www.ypmd-maluku.org/en/home> (Accessed 2023-10-25.)

1.3 Contributions of this article

Although there is a considerable body of publications in and on the Yamdena language, and some of these materials are very useful for speakers of the language, very little of it is meant for a scientific audience. The publications that attempt at describing the language are generally not up to today's standards. Most of them lack glossed examples and good overview tables. No publications make reference to where the data come from, so claims cannot be checked. Linguistic terminology is often outdated or lack definitions of applied terminology. Another issue is that part of the materials are written in Dutch or Indonesian, languages that are not spoken by a wide, international audience.

In order to create a searchable database, I imported a selection of Yamdena legacy texts into FieldWorks (also known as FLEx; SIL International 2022) for glossing. The annotated texts include four conversations from Lamere & Mettler (1994), a song given in an ethnographic study about Tanimbar (Drabbe 1940), five stories from Mettler & Mettler (1997b), the text in Mettler & Mettler (1990), four stories from SIL (1991), two religious songs found on the YPMD website, the ten commandments (*Katekismoes nde agam' katolik ni kateman* 1948), and five stories published by YPMD. These texts add up to 13,000 words. I developed the FieldWorks lexicon while I glossed, looking up words in the YPMD word list, Drabbe's (1932) Yamdena–Dutch dictionary, the word lists in Mettler & Mettler (1990), and some of the sketches. For each word in the lexicon, the source where I first found it is given in the Sources field. If I consulted more than one source, several sources are given. If the word could not be found in any of the lexicons, but the meaning could be easily derived from the contexts in which it appears, I put my initials as the source. Tentative word translations are marked with a question mark. The original publications of the glossed texts, which can be found in the Texts & Words section of FieldWorks, are given in the Source field. My glosses are informed by the grammar sketches but include many analyses of my own. Where I could not make a decisive analysis, I left the gloss open. In some cases, I added some comments about possible analyses in the Dutch Free Translation field. Besides glosses, all texts include an English free translation. Sometimes, the English translation is copied from the original. When the original had no English translation, it is mine. The Comment field contains information about the source of the translations. Indonesian translations are included where there was one available in the original.

In addition to glossed legacy texts, the Yamdena database includes some materials that stem from original fieldwork by myself, conducted via video call in the spring of 2022. The fieldwork was carried out with three speakers of the Southern Yamdena dialect, the same dialect as all previous work on Yamdena was carried out on. All consultants are female employees of YPMD who are involved in Bible translation. They were all born in the 1970s. A questionnaire about Yamdena verbal inflection was carried out with all consultants. Two of the three consultants also narrated the Pear Film (Chafe 1975) and the Jackal and Crow story (Carroll et al. 2011), to have a minimum of naturalistic material. Responses to the questionnaire and the narratives are glossed and translated in FieldWorks. I transcribed the questionnaire answers myself while conducting them. The two speakers I recorded a Jackal and Crow story and the Pear Film with, Au and Ina, helped to transcribe their own stories. After I made first transcription in ELAN with the words I could understand, I exported the transcription with time stamps for each utterance to a word processor file and emailed it to the speakers to correct. They also added Indonesian translations. We then had another video call to check any remaining questions.

In this article, I wish to present an introduction to the Yamdena grammar, with ample reference to existing literature and the annotated materials. All glossed examples are accompanied by an example tag with the syntax `texttag_linenumber`. The text tag corresponds to the Abbreviation field in the Texts section of the FieldWorks project and to the Key field in the archive, and the line number to the line within the text. The tags are clickable and lead to the relevant page in the online archive. This grammar introduction and the corpus are meant to serve as a springboard to further inquiry on the Yamdena language.

The methodology presented here of incorporating legacy materials into contemporary documentation work can also serve as an example for future documentation projects.

2. The Yamdena language corpus

The Yamdena language corpus is archived at the Humanities Lab at Lund University in Sweden (Visser 2023b). All materials are openly accessible. The landing page of the corpus contains a corpus description and seven folders, presented alphabetically, as follows:

- Annotated legacy materials 1926-2018
- Annotated recordings 2022
Elicitation 2022
- FLEx companion data
- Literature (unannotated legacy materials 1918-2022)
- Maps
- Yamdena consent documents

I discuss the contents of the folders in turn.

2.1 Annotated legacy materials 1926-2018

This folder contains XML files with fully glossed and translated texts from legacy materials. The text tags, their English titles, and the original sources are given in Table 1.

2.2 Annotated recordings 2022

This folder contains one folder per recording, with the original video recording, a copy of the audio of the recording, and an ELAN and XML file with the transcriptions. Table 2 lists the transcribed recordings.

Table 1. Annotated legacy materials

tag	title	source
ch2	Drabbe 1926 Ch 2 example sentences	Drabbe (1926b)
dic	Drabbe's dictionary example sentences	Drabbe (1932)
eth1	Liliri song	Drabbe (1940)
lets1	Getting acquainted	Lamere and Mettler (1994)
lets2	Where are you coming from?	Lamere and Mettler (1994)
lets20	Playing	Lamere and Mettler (1994)
lets36	Gossip	Lamere and Mettler (1994)
mm1	Sago	Mettler and Mettler (1997b)
mm2	We cook rice	Mettler and Mettler (1997b)
mm3	A good man	Mettler and Mettler (1997b)
mm4	Lempit	Mettler and Mettler (1997b)
mm5	Fence	Mettler and Mettler (1997b)
mett1990	I make a hut	Mettler and Mettler (1990)
nangin1	Tilngoi Lempitenan	SIL (1991)
nangin2	The turd who turned into a child	SIL (1991)
nangin3	The dolphins and the orphans	SIL (1991)
nangin5	The girl who turned into a crocodile	SIL (1991)
rel1	Come praise God	https://www.ypmd-maluku.org/files/Mari%20Puji%20Tuhan%20%28d1m%204%20bahasa%29.pdf
rel2	Angkosi Yamdena	Olinger et al. (2018)
rel3	The ten commandments (1948)	n.a. (1948)
ypmd2	Rabbit and his friend	Lamere and Tim Pengembangan Bahasa Yamdena (2005)
ypmd3	The goose who laid golden eggs	Lamere et al. (2005a)
ypmd4	The girl that became a statue	Lamere et al. (2005c)
ypmd5	Froggie goes to town	Lamere et al. (2005d)
ypmd6	The proud turtle	Lamere et al. (2005b)

Table 2. Transcribed recordings

tag	title
crow1	Jackal & Crow Ina
crow2	Jackal & Crow Au
pear1	Pear video Ina
pear2	Pear video Au

2.3 Elicitation 2022

This folder contains fourteen folders (one per questionnaire) with a scan of the filled-out questionnaire, an XML version of the glossed sentences, and a recording of the elicitation session. Table 3 gives an overview of the questionnaire tags and titles.

Table 3. Elicited materials

tag	title
appl1	Applicatives questionnaire
appl2	Applicatives questionnaire 2
cor1	Person prefixes questionnaire
cor2	Person prefixes questionnaire 2
der1	Derivational prefixes questionnaire
der2	Derivational prefixes questionnaire 2
der3	Derivational prefixes questionnaire 3
der4	Complex derivational prefixes questionnaire
ipfv1	Perfective/imperfective contexts questionnaire
min1	Minimal pairs perfective/imperfective
min2	Minimal pairs perfective/imperfective
pass1	Passive questionnaire
persder1	Person prefix behavior under derivation questionnaire
recp1	Reciprocals questionnaire (small set)

2.4 FLEx companion data

This folder contains the FieldWorks project that includes all the annotated materials: the annotated legacy materials, the elicitation materials, and the transcribed recordings. I have done this to ensure that any user, whether they are interested in the whole project or just a part, can get access to the FieldWorks project so they can check analyses for themselves. The FieldWorks project contains 41 glossed texts with more than 13,000 words in total. The lexicon contains more than 2,300 items (including both headwords and subentries).

2.5 Literature (unannotated legacy materials 1918-2022)

This folder contains all the literature for Yamdena that is copyright-free or for which I obtained permission from the copyright owner to upload it to the archive.

2.6 Maps

This folder contains a draft for a map of the languages of the Tanimbar Islands in GeoJSON, PNG, and SVG formats.

2.7 Yamdena consent documents

This folder contains the recordings with the informed consent from the Yamdena consultants. All consultants consented to having their sessions stored in an open-access format.

2.8 The future of the Yamdena language corpus

If more Yamdena materials are collected in the future by other scholars, I am happy to collaborate with them to upload their materials to the Yamdena language corpus.

3. Yamdena grammar introduction

For most analyses, I respect the previous works in Yamdena as authorities. I try to cast their analysis in current descriptive linguistic terminology and illustrate their points with ample well-annotated data. Where previous works contradict each other, I justify the choice for one analysis over another. In areas where I have done elicitation myself, notably verbal inflection, I give some of my own analyses. I will make ample reference to the existing sketches and data in the corpus so that the interested reader knows where to look when they want to investigate an issue further. If a source is not mentioned about a particular subject, it means either that (an)other source(s) have more elaborate information or that the source does not mention this topic at all.

3.1 Phonology

The most elaborate sources on Yamdena phonology are Mettler & Mettler (1990) and Mettler & Mettler (1997b). The former covers a broad range of topics within phonology, including distribution of phonemes and minimal pairs.

3.1.1 Consonants

Yamdena has fifteen consonant phonemes.

Table 4. Consonant phonemes

	bilabial	labiodental	alveolar	palatal	velar
stop	p b		t d		k
nasalised stop		nd-nr ⁷			
nasal	m-mb-mp		n		ŋ
trill			r		
fricative		f	s		
approximant	w			j	
lateral			l		

Mettler & Mettler (1990) and Mettler & Mettler (1997b) give sixteen consonant phonemes. Pieter et al. (1986) also give sixteen, but place [m]~[mb] and [n]~[nd] in the same cells, by which they likely mean there is free variation. Mettler & Mettler (1990) and Mettler & Mettler (1997b) have [mp], while Drabbe (1926b) and Pieter et al. (1986) have [mb]. There is free variation between [nd] and [nr] (Lamere & Mettler 1994: xviii; Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 16). For [m] and [mb]/[mp], I follow Pieter et al. (1986), as Mettler & Mettler (1990) fail to give minimal pairs for [m] and [mb]/[mp]. That means I consider there to be free variation between [m], [mb], and [mp].

The minimal pairs in my lexicon are inconclusive, as they are semantically very similar and very few in number. Two examples are given in (1) and (2). A third minimal pair consists of the verbal derivational prefixes *m(a)-* and *mp(a)-/mb(a)-*, discussed in §3.7.4. In elicitation, these could not be exchanged, but Drabbe (1926b: 56) notes that in some words, the *mb(a)-* prefix is used in North Yamdena, while *m(a)-* is used in South Yamdena.

- (1)
- a. *nema* ‘so that; or; in order to’ YPMD word list
- b. *nempa* ‘so; but; however’ YPMD word list
- (2)
- a. *amo* ‘term of address for father’ YPMD word list
amo ‘term of address from child to father, from parents to son, and further for male persons in general’ Drabbe (1932)
- b. *ampo* ‘term of address for grandparent’ YPMD word list
ambo ‘term of address for grandchild to grandparent and vice versa’ Drabbe (1932)

For [n] and [nd]/[nr], I follow Mettler & Mettler (1990) and Mettler & Mettler (1997b), as there are a few clear minimal pairs (Mettler & Mettler 1990: 34). See (3) for an example. That means that I consider /n/ to be one phoneme, and [nd]

⁷ ~ means free variation. See text for comments.

and [nr] are allophones of another phoneme.

- (3)
- | | |
|---------------------------|----------------|
| a. <i>feni</i> ‘turtle’ | YPMD word list |
| b. <i>fenri</i> ‘to sell’ | YPMD word list |

Four phonemes are not given in the chart as they have marginal status: /ɟ/ only occurs in loans (none in my data, but see Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 9), /v/ only occurs in the loan *televisi* ‘television’, /g/ only occurs in the loan *gelas/gelayas* ‘glass’, and /h/ only occurs in the interjections *hete* ‘oh!’ and *ha* (unclear meaning).

3.1.2 Vowels

There are five vowels: /i/, /e/, /a/, /u/, and /o/. All sources agree on this, although Drabbe uses two spellings for /e/: <e> and <é>. This does not seem to indicate a phonemic contrast, however. Vowel sequences are common, and many combinations are allowed. For a detailed overview, see Mettler & Mettler (1990: 53).

3.1.3 Syllable structure

A Yamdena word consists minimally of a vowel. It can optionally be preceded by two consonants and a glide and followed by a consonant (Mettler & Mettler 1990; 1997b):

- (4) (C)(C)(G)V(C)

Examples of each type are /i/ ‘3SG’, /sa/ ‘one’, /or/ ‘with; carry’, /je/ ‘here’, /pus/ ‘break’, /pnu/ ‘village’, /bja.re/ ‘diarrhea’, /tnje.tak/ ‘storage’, and /sljap/ ‘wing; shoulder’.

The nasal-obstruent sequences [mp]~[mb] and [nd]~[nr] can also occur preceded by consonants: *tmpur* ‘to hug’, *kmpwer* ‘attic’, *kndyai* ‘sand’. In the corpus, they are only ever followed by /w/: *lmbwar* ‘to lift a cadaver’, *kmpwer* ‘attic’.⁸

3.1.4 Morphophonology

The main morphophonological processes are deletion, vowel insertion, metathesis, and reduplication.

There are several kinds of (feature) deletion. First, /u/ and /i/ are reduced to semivowels when they lose their syllabic position due to morphological changes: *silai* ‘big.SG’ → *silayar* ‘big.PL’. Second, word-final /u/ and /i/ become devoiced following unvoiced consonants: *buti* [butʰ] ‘ten’. Third, word-final glides /w/ and /j/ are generally not pronounced, unless they follow a voiceless stop or before a pause: *Aratw* [Aratw] ‘Aratw (name)’, *-lury* [lur] ‘swim’. Fourth, voiced stops are devoiced when the following vowel is removed by a morphological process: [kabal] ‘ship’ → [kaplar] ‘ships’.⁹ Finally,

⁸ No occurrences for [nr] + C.

⁹ The opposite analysis, that voiceless stops voice in between vowels, does not hold: Yamdena has many words with stops in this position, such as *kapar* ‘empty’, *bitu* ‘bag’, and *buke* ‘hair’.

a sequence of two identical consonants will be degeminated, and a sequence of two identical vowels results in vowel deletion (Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 10). These processes are amply exemplified in Mettler & Mettler (1990). See also Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 13) and Lamere & Mettler (1994: xx).

Vowel insertion may happen after consonant-final words that are followed by consonant-initial verbs. The exact conditions under which this happens are not clear, although Mettler & Mettler (1990: 66) state the consonants must “share some common features.” The inserted vowel is [a], but Mettler & Mettler (1997b) report free variation with [i].¹⁰

- (5) *Katutun* **a** *ne* *bunir* *yadin* *desar*.
 tree TRNS DIST fruit.PL much very

‘That tree had a lot of fruits.’

[pear1 14](#)

Another type of vowel insertion is resyllabification of [e], which disappears on non-NP-final nouns (Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 15). In my corpus, however, I find epenthetic *e* also following verbs and preceding commas. One of my consultants noted that *e* “signifies a pause or a comma” (Ina Matruty, p.c.). The YPMD word list also lists *e* as a closing word for important phrases, but what exactly constitutes an important phrase is not clear.

Metathesis is a common process. Among other places, it occurs in the formation of compounds and plurals as well as in person-verb agreement. In compounds, word-final glides move to the position after the first consonant of the next word: *anakw* ‘my child’ + *bate* ‘female’ → /*anak bwate*/. The subject prefixes *ku-* ‘1SG’, *mu-* ‘2SG’, and *mi-* ‘3SG’ may undergo metathesis in some specific instances (see §3.7.1). Plural formation with suffix /Ar/¹¹ is quite complex in Yamdena but is well explained in Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 31–34). I will get back to this in §3.5.1. Metathesis happens, for example, when the root is consonant-final: /*wemul*/ ‘pond; puddle’ → /*wemlwar*/ and /*ompak*/ ‘earth; ground’ → /*ompkar*/.

Reduplication is a common process that can apply to several word classes. The two main functions are nominalisation and shift of focus and intensity. The functions are exemplified elaborately in Chapter 12 of Mettler & Mettler (1997b). Formally, the following kinds of reduplication are attested: full reduplication (*monuk* ‘all’ → *monuk-monuk* ‘all and every’), partial reduplication of the stressed syllable (*-kei* ‘scrape’ → *kekei* ‘scraper’, *silai* ‘big; grown’ → *silalai* ‘grown a bit’), and imitative reduplication (*-mpane* ‘walk’ → *mpane-mpone* ‘stroll’). For more examples of the latter type, see also Pieter et al. (1986: 15) and Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 116–117).

3.1.5 Stress

Roots carry stress on the penult: /*ka'tutun*/ ‘tree’, /*'asu*/ ‘dog’. Verbs with subject prefixes retain stress on the verb root: *ku* ‘1SG’ + *-min* ‘stay’ → /*ku'min*/, *ta-* ‘1PL.INCL’ + *-mtoran* ‘sit’ → /*tam'toran*/. Drabbe (1926b) also claims the stress of verb roots changes with its transitivity in ambitransitive verbs: transitive roots have penultimate stress, while their intransitive counterpart has final stress. Plural /-Ar/ causes stress shift to the plural morpheme except when the root ends in /e/: /*'bulan*/ ‘month’ → /*bul'nar*/ ‘months’, /*'lete*/ ‘garden’ → /*'letar*/ ‘gardens’. None of the sketches mention what happens to other derived or inflected roots. As there are no words in isolation or in a carrier sentence in the spoken corpus, this remains for further research.

¹⁰ I use the Leipzig Glossing rules (Comrie et al. 2015) with the following additional abbreviations: COORD = verb coordinator, EMPH = emphasis, FDIST = far distal, INT = interjection, OPT = optative, TRNS = transitory vowel, and UNACC = unaccusative.

¹¹ The vowel of this suffix is always /a/. Glides may be added when pluralising roots ending with /i/ or /u/, and there are complex metathesis rules changing the form of the suffix (or of the root, depending on how you look at it).

3.1.6 Spelling

In the rest of this article, I spell /ŋ/ as <ng> and /j/ as <y>. Note that in all Drabbe’s works, /j/ is spelled as <j> and /u/ as <oe>. When I cite examples from his works, I use <y> and <u>, respectively. Drabbe has two spellings for /e/: <e> and <é>, where I only use <e>. The other previous publications on Yamdena use the same spelling as in this article. Table 5 summarises this.

Table 5. Spelling of the phonemes /ŋ/, /j/, and /u/

phoneme	spelling in Drabbe	spelling in this article
/ŋ/	<ng>	<ng>
/j/	<j>	<y>
/u/	<oe>	<u>
/e/	<e>, <é>	<e>

In the glossed examples, punctuation is used to mark intonational units. A comma indicates non-final intonation, and a full stop indicates final intonation.

3.2 Word classes

I follow Mettler & Mettler (1997b), the only sketch that defines some word classes.

There are two open word classes in Yamdena: verbs and nouns.

Noun roots have a recognisable meaning, can be pluralised, can function as arguments in a clause, and can be verbalised by attaching verbal prefixes.¹² Most nouns can be made inalienably possessed by attaching a possessive suffix.¹³

Verb roots must be inflected with a subject prefix, cannot function as arguments in a clause, and can be nominalised into abstract nouns by various processes.¹⁴

Modifiers are a semantic class, not a syntactic one. They “modify the local and/or temporal frame of things or events, [or their] modality or quality” (Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 97). When used attributively, they follow the noun they modify. Mettler & Mettler (1997b) also include predicative modifiers and adverbial ones. It is not clear why this word class is analysed as a closed class. Moreover, it seems like many, if not all, the words in this class (also) belong to another class: nouns, verbs, or adverbs (although the latter is not a clearly defined class in Yamdena). I will come back to this in §3.3.

Quantifiers are described as numbers in Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 140–143), but the chapter includes both numeral and non-numeral quantifiers. Non-numeral quantifiers include monomorphemic monuk ‘all’, dengany ‘enough’, and yadiny ‘many; much’. The others seem to be fixed expressions like the following, which all mean ‘a few; several’: du e tely ne

¹² Mettler & Mettler’s (1997b) statement that nouns cannot be directly agentivised with the prefix *mang-* is refuted by the data they present on pp. 21–22.

¹³ Pronouns and, to a certain extent, numerals behave like nouns so that Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 18) propose an overarching class nominals for these three word classes.

¹⁴ Mettler & Mettler (1997b) also note that verb roots, as opposed to noun roots, do not have a recognisable meaning before they have undergone morphological changes (presumably inflection or, sometimes, derivation). With this, they probably mean that native speakers cannot readily translate a verb root.

(lit. ‘two trns three dist’), *fir nre fir* (lit. ‘how much or how much’), and *feny rufuky* (lit. ‘like a little’).

There are three demonstratives: *ye* ‘prox’, *ne* ‘dist’, and *no* ‘fdist’. They take the last position in the NP. They also occur in many conjunctions and expressions, like *ne ye* ‘then’, *mpe ne* ‘then’, *ne ma ka* ‘so that if’, and *ne ka* ‘usually’. For more information, see Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 137–139).

Yamdena also has conjunctions, which according to Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 144) can often function as prepositions. Their definition is unclear to me, and they list many items that maybe rather are auxiliaries, question words, and aspect markers.

I have identified three prepositions (a word class not recognised by Mettler & Mettler 1997b): *ber* ‘to; for’, *na* ‘in; on; at’, and *rof* ‘from’.

Finally, Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 152–165) list “temporal expressions,” which are a semantic class of nouns, noun phrases, adverbs, and other constructions that are used to express temporal and sometimes aspectual meanings. They interestingly notice “there is considerable overlap between temporal and locative expressions” (152), but the draft sadly includes no information about the latter.

Because not all the word classes are well-defined, and because many words do not seem to fall in any of the classes, many of the entries in the FieldWorks lexicon remain without a word class.

3.3 Word class flexibility

Yamdena, like many Austronesian languages,¹⁵ has a great deal of roots that occur as nouns, nominal modifiers, verbs, and/or verbal modifiers. Sometimes, derivational or inflectional morphemes are involved, but not always. In many cases, the root is nominal. In this section, I describe some of the most common processes and which word classes are involved. For a more extensive discussion, see Chapter 6 in Mettler & Mettler (1997b). This is a topic that needs further investigation, and that might lead to a thorough review of word class definitions in Yamdena.

Nouns very productively derive verbs by adding a subject prefix. It is not clear what the restrictions are, if there are any, and whether the meaning of the verb can be predicted from the meaning of the noun. A few examples are given in (6). The verbs, on the right-hand side, are inflected with the third-person singular prefix *na-* or *n-* (see §3.7.1 for a description of the subject prefixes). The verbs can also be derived with the help of one of the verbal derivational prefixes described in §3.7.4, as illustrated in (6h–l).

- (6)
- a. *lale* ‘flow’ → *n-lale* ‘flow’
 - b. *kdyaip* ‘flood’ → *na-kdyaip* ‘be flooded’
 - c. *teik* ‘loincloth’ → *na-teik* ‘dress with loincloth’
 - d. *bwaye* ‘crocodile’ → *na-bwaye* ‘turn into crocodile’
 - e. *pnue* ‘village’ → *na-pnue* ‘build village’
 - f. *bati* ‘rock’ → *na-baty* ‘become hard; freeze’
 - g. *mpumpuki* ‘joy; mirth; dance’ → *na-mpumpuki* ‘be happy’
 - h. *diri* ‘post’ → *na-f-diri* ‘erect; build’

¹⁵ See, for example, *Theoretical Linguistics* 35(1), Haspelmath (2012), van Lier (2016), and François (2017) for discussion and examples of how to describe this flexibility on the language-level and cross-linguistically.

- i. *diri* ‘post’ → *na-m-diry* ‘stand’
- j. *ngare* ‘name’ → *na-f-ngare* ‘name someone’
- k. *leku* ‘bend’ → *na-m-lekw* ‘bent; crooked’
- l. *leku* ‘bend’ → *na-f-leku* ‘bend something’

(Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 40–42)

Some nouns can be used as NP heads, as NP modifiers (adjectives) without any derivational marker, and as verbs with a subject prefix.

(7)

- a. *yatak* ‘badness; evil’
- b. *tomwat yatak* ‘bad person’
- c. *Tomwate ne na-yatak.*
person DIST 3SG-bad

‘This person is bad.’

(Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 40)

Some roots derive NP modifiers (adjectives) with the prefix *nga-* or *ma-*,¹⁶ which can be verbalised with a subject prefix. The root may be a noun, like *fele* ‘shape’ in (8), or it may be a bound root, like *-metam* in (9).

(8)

- a. *fele* ‘shape’
- b. *nga-fele* ‘beautiful’
- c. *Bate ye na-nga-fel.*
woman PROX 3SG-ADJ-beautiful

‘This is a pretty woman.’

(Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 100, 106)

(9)

- a. *-metam* (bound root)
- b. *me-metam* ‘black’
- c. *Funri na-me-metam lo.*
banana 3SG-ADJ-black already

‘The banana is already black.’

[der2 28](#)

¹⁶ This prefix is *me-* before roots that have /a/ or /e/ in the first syllable, and *ma-* in other roots (Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 105).

Some words can function as predicates without a subject prefix. Mettler & Mettler (1997b) list *arwaluk* ‘big; large’, *koko* ‘alone’, *lalatu* ‘green’, *ngotu* ‘low’, *oliny* ‘fine; slim’, *silai* ‘big; large; important’, and *wangim* ‘old; decrepit’. They can occur as NP modifiers, and some also as NP heads (Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 104). However, the annotated corpus does not have any such examples, and this point is not illustrated well in Mettler & Mettler (1997b). (10) illustrates *silai* ‘big’ as a predicate. Some of these words can also modify verbs, as illustrated in (11).

- (10) *Kanak ma n-bali i, silai lo.*
 child REL 3SG-return 3SG big already
 ‘The child who returned is already big.’ [der3_70.2](#)

- (11) *I na-tanuk silai.*
 3SG 3SG-talk big
 ‘He is talking big/important words.’ (Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 101)

In the rest of this article, I will refer to NP modifiers as adjectives.

3.4 Personal pronouns

There are seven independent pronouns, given in Table 6. They occur in subject and object position and in reflexive constructions (exemplified in (12) and (13)), replacing nouns “almost without restriction, in almost any position” (Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 19). It is unclear what the restrictions consist of. *Yakw* ‘1SG’ is pronounced [yak] before verbs and [yak^w] elsewhere. *Kmi* may be metathesised to *kim* (Lamere & Mettler 1994: xxiii). The verbal subject prefixes are given in §3.7.1. While the subject prefixes are obligatory, personal pronouns are not.

Table 6. Pronouns

	SG	PL
1	<i>yakw</i>	<i>kam</i> (excl.), <i>kit</i> (incl.)
2	<i>ko</i>	<i>kmi</i>
3	<i>i</i>	<i>sir</i>

- (12) *I na-tmpur ko.*
 3SG 3SG-hug 2SG
 ‘He/she hugs you.’ [der3_44](#)

- (13) *Manik n-bali i lo.*
 bird 3SG-return 3SG already
 ‘The bird returned.’

[der2 36](#)

3.5 Nouns and noun phrases

This section describes some aspects of Yamdena nominal morphology and the noun phrase. A noun phrase headed by a noun can be modified by an adjective, a numeral, and a demonstrative, in that order, as illustrated in (14).

- (14) *Ne bat ngafel sa ye*
 N Adj Num Det
 then woman beautiful one PROX
 ‘Then one beautiful woman, [...]’

[nangin3 31.2](#)

3.5.1 Noun classes

There are four noun classes, defined by their final phoneme(s).¹⁷ They follow different morphophonological rules, as outlined in Table 7.

Table 7. Noun classes

	e-final	i/u-final	C-final	ae-final
(feature) deletion when modified?	yes, e → ∅	yes, i → y; u → w	no no	yes, e → ∅
(feature) deletion when pluralised?	yes, e → ∅	yes, i → y; u → w	yes	yes, e → ∅
stress shift when pluralised?	no	yes		yes
metathesis when pluralised?	no	no	yes	no
y-insertion when pluralised?	no	no	no	yes

An example of a pluralised noun from each class is given in (15). More elaborate plural formation rules can be found in Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 31–34).

¹⁷ It seems that Yamdena nouns cannot end in /a/ or /o/. My FieldWorks project lexicon contains a few items, most of which are loans. The others are *ano* and *amo*, which I categorised as nouns meaning ‘woman’ and ‘man’, respectively, but in the annotated corpus they seem to be used as address forms only. Of loans like *oto* ‘car’ and *rusa* ‘dear’, it is not known how they behave when pluralised or modified.

- (15) a. 'dase 'house' → 'dasar 'houses'
 b. 'sori 'canoe' → sor'yar 'canoes'; 'asu 'dog' → as'war 'dogs'
 c. 'ngarak 'year' → ngar'kar 'years'
 d. 'karyae 'work' → karya'yar 'works'

(Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 29–31)

Vowel-final roots undergo feature deletion when they are modified by a numeral or an adjective in the noun phrase. Modification by a demonstrative has no effect on the root. This contrast is illustrated in (16).

- (16) a. Ne **bat** ngafel sa ye
 then woman beautiful one PROX
 'Then one beautiful woman [...].'

[nangin3_31.2](#)

- b. Mpe_ne **bate** ye dalam to na-ngamon.
 then woman PROX inside NEG 3SG-be_good
 'Then the woman is not happy.'

[nangin2_3.3](#)

3.5.2 Noun derivation

There are many noun formation processes, including compounding (17a), derivation with *mang-* to create agent nouns (17b), verb nominalisation with *-ny-* (17c), active verb nominalisation with *an-* (17d), verb nominalisation by partial reduplication (17e), instrument noun derivation from verbs by partial reduplication (17f), derivation with *fa-* to create active or benefactive nouns (17g), and derivation with *nga-* to create state nouns (17h).¹⁸ The examples are taken from Chapter 4 in Mettler & Mettler (1997b), where more examples and some subtypes can be found.

- (17) a. *dase* 'house' + *dalamy* 'inside' → *dasdalamy* 'family'
 b. *-balun* 'lead; be ahead' → *mang-balun* 'leader'
 c. *-sare* 'measure' → *s-ny-are* 'measurement; unit'
 d. *-fai* 'know' → *an-fai* 'knowledge'
 e. *-molin* 'forbid' → *mo-molin* 'taboo'
 f. *-soli* 'sweep' → *so-soli* 'broom'
 g. *mudi* 'behind; last' → *fa-mudi* 'the person following; younger born'
 h. *yadiny* 'many' → *nga-yadiny* 'multitude'

¹⁸ The latter two categories need some more research and better labels, as it is not quite clear to me what "active or benefactive nouns" and "state nouns" mean. For now, I just use the label from Mettler & Mettler (1997b). Compare also to the causative prefix *fa-* and adjective/stative verb deriver *nga-* discussed in §3.7.4.

3.5.3 Adjectives

Most adjectives are derived from nouns or dependent roots with adjectivisers *mA-*, as illustrated in (18), or *nga-*. Some adjectives are underived forms. See also §3.3 and §3.7.4.

- (18) *Mpimpi me-metam na-ne uru.*
 goat ADJ-black 3SG-eat grass
 ‘The goat eats grass.’

[der3_120](#)

If the NP is plural, it is the noun modifier that is pluralised, like *yatkar* ‘big.PL’ in (19) from the underived adjective *yatak* ‘big’.

- (19) *I n-falak kabain yatkar.*
 3SG 3SG-say thing bad.PL
 ‘He/she says bad things.’

[min2_34.1](#)

3.5.4 Quantifiers

Quantifiers follow the noun they modify. (20) illustrates the non-numeral quantifier *monuk* ‘all’,¹⁹ and (21) shows numeral quantifier *du* ‘two’.

- (20) *Ni bobole ne, merwanar monuk ral nir sansilai*
 3SG.POSS tomorrow DIST men all 3PL-take 3PL.POSS machete
 ‘The next morning, all men took their machetes [...].’

[nangin3_6.1](#)

- (21) *Knroweryar du a ne ra-fone sir a ma ra-mpriang desar.*
 egrets two TRNS DIST 3PL-look 3PL TRNS and 3PL-be_surprised very
 ‘The egrets looked at each other with astonishment.’

[ypmd6_13](#)

I will also present the main cardinal numbers here, but the citation forms are hard to determine because the different sources give slightly different forms for many numerals. It seems to be the case that many numerals have a final vowel /i/ or /u/ that can be reduced to /j/ or /u/ or elided altogether (for similar processes, see §3.1.4, nouns in §3.5.1, and possessives in §3.6). The final /e/’s that Drabbe gives are left out in newer publications. In Table 8, I give the numerals as presented in the different sources. From the YPMD word list, I give the spelling I found in the main entry, but, for ex-

¹⁹ This quantifier is possibly also used after the predicate to indicate completive aspect or sequential actions.

ample, *raty* ‘one hundred’ can also be found as *rati* in subentries and example phrases in the word list.

Table 8. Numerals as given in Drabbe (1926b: 25), Pieter et al. (1986: 34), the YPMD word list, Rumyaru et al. (1999: 82), and Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 140)

	Drabbe	Pieter	YPMD	Rumyaru	M&M
1	<i>sa</i>	<i>sa</i>	<i>sa</i>	<i>sa</i>	<i>sa</i>
2	<i>due</i>	<i>du</i>	<i>du</i>	<i>du</i>	<i>du</i>
3	<i>teli</i>	<i>tely</i>	<i>tely</i>	<i>tely</i>	<i>tely</i>
4	<i>fate</i>	<i>fat</i>	<i>fat</i>	<i>fat</i>	
5	<i>lime</i>	<i>lim</i>	<i>lim</i>	<i>lim</i>	
6	<i>neme</i>	<i>nem</i>	<i>nem</i>	<i>nem</i>	
7	<i>itu</i>	<i>it</i>	<i>itw</i>	<i>itw</i>	
8	<i>walu</i>	<i>walu</i>	<i>walu/walw</i>	<i>walw</i>	
9	<i>siwe</i>	<i>siw</i>	<i>siu/siw</i>	<i>siuw</i>	
10	<i>buti</i>	<i>buti</i>	<i>buti>buty</i>	<i>buti</i>	<i>buty</i>
100	<i>rati</i>	<i>rati</i>	<i>raty</i>	<i>rati</i>	<i>raty</i>
1,000	<i>ribun</i>	<i>ribun</i>	<i>ribun</i>	<i>ribuni</i>	<i>ribuny</i>
10,000	<i>roit</i>				
100,000	<i>rasan</i>				

Tens are made with *resin(y)*, which is a nominalisation of *-resy* ‘exceed’ and means ‘excess’ (Drabbe 1926b: 26; YPMD word list): *buty resin(y) lese* ‘11’. *Roit* ‘10,000’ and *rasan* ‘100,000’ seem not to be in use anymore, or are not used in compound numerals, based on the numerals given in Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 140–141), such as the one in (22).

- (22) *ribuny raty tely buty du resin(y) lese raty fat buty du*
 thousand hundred three ten two excess one hundred four ten two
- resiny lim*
 excess five
- ‘321,425.’ (Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 141)

3.5.5 Demonstratives

Yamdena has three demonstratives that indicate, according to Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 140), “the relative distance towards the speaker or, in stories, the relative distance to the main participant or the last participant.” The demonstratives are employed for both temporal and local distance. Both nouns and pronouns can be modified by a demonstrative. The three demonstratives are *ye*, *ne*, and *no*. While Mettler & Mettler (1997b) have chosen to analyse these as proximal,

- (26) *Merwane ma katutun das a ne to na-fai*
 man REL tree high TRNS DIST NEG 3SG-know
 ‘The man who is in the tree doesn’t know [...].’ [pear1_45](#)

- (27) *ra-fili a wawar ma dine ra-min boti ne*
 3PL-pick TRNS mangoes REL before 3PL-stay basket DIST
 ‘They picked the mangoes that were in the basket before [...].’ [pear1_72](#)

It may also follow question words. In that case, the relative clause itself seems to be lacking.

- (28) *Ise ma n-al ni a wawe boti dalam a ne?*
 who REL 3SG-take 3SG.POSS TRNS mangoes basket inside TRNS DIST
 ‘Who (is it that) took his mangoes from the basket?’ [pear1_109](#)

Ma seems to have more general coordinating and subordinating functions (discussed in §3.9 and §3.10.1).

3.6 Possession

Yamdena distinguishes between alienable and inalienable possession. Alienable possession is expressed with a possessive pronoun, which may alternatively be analysed as the verb *ni-* ‘to own’ inflected with a possessive suffix (Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 29), although this analysis does not work for all forms. Table 9 gives the forms, which are slightly different depending on whether the pronoun is NP-final or not. The table is based on Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 29, 35).

Table 9. Possessive pronouns

	final	non-final
1SG	<i>ningu</i>	<i>ningw</i>
2SG	<i>nime</i>	<i>nim</i>
3SG	<i>nie</i>	<i>ni</i>
1PL.INCL	<i>ninre mami/mamy/mame</i> ²¹	<i>nind</i>
1PL.EXCL		<i>mam</i>
2PL	<i>mire</i>	<i>mir</i>
3PL	<i>nire</i>	<i>nir</i>

²¹ Mettler & Mettler (1997b) give all three forms, and it is not clear how they differ. They do not occur in the annotated corpus.

(29) shows *ni* ‘3SG’ in non-final position. (30) shows *nind* ‘1PL.EXCL’ in non-final position, preceded by a personal pronoun. The combination of a personal pronoun and a possessive pronoun is described by Drabbe (1926b: 36) as a “re-inforcement,” while the other sketches do not make any remarks about this. The exact function of the combination remains for further research. The annotated corpus does not contain examples of possessive pronouns in NP-final position.

(29) *Ratu ni faretar buti.*
 God 3SG.POSS command.PL ten
 ‘God’s ten commands.’

[rel3_1](#)

(30) *Ktwi k-kurat kit nind olak a nbal.*
 1SG.go 1SG-weed 1PL.EXCL 1PL.EXCL.POSS rice_field TRNS again
 ‘I go weed our rice field again.’

[nangin3_5](#)

Inalienable possession, typically used for body parts and family members, “almost never” (Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 35) occurs without a possessive suffix. Inalienable nouns include *dedi*- ‘forehead’, *kaplili*- ‘kidney’, *ulu*- ‘head’, *empu*- ‘grandfather’, *ema*- ‘foot’, and *ura*- ‘opposite-sex sibling’.²² The form of the suffix depends on the final phoneme of the root, as well as on the person and number of both possessor and possessed. Table 10 shows the suffixes and is based on Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 35–36).²³ None of the post-1980 sketches explain what happens to consonant-final roots. Drabbe (1926b: 37) gives examples of three inflected consonant-final roots: *ifar* ‘brother-in-law’, *kulit* ‘skin’, and *rusuk* ‘rib’. From his lists, the forms appear to be closest to the paradigm for e-final roots, but there seems to be some metathesis involved. Because he lists both North Yamdena and South Yamdena forms without indicating which is which, I leave out the paradigms and refer the interested reader to the original.

²² Based on examples in Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 36–37) and Drabbe (1926b: 35). For more examples, see Rummyaru et al. (1999: 66–72) and Drabbe (1926b: 39–40).

²³ Mettler & Mettler (1997b) give different paradigms for roots ending in *-i* and in *-u*: *-ingw* vs. *-ungw*, *-im* vs. *-um*, and *-iny* vs. *-uny*. Since vowel deletion occurs when two identical vowels are adjacent, there is no way to check whether these suffixes actually include the initial vowel. Perhaps Mettler & Mettler (1997b) decided to include them because the e-final roots also have vowel-initial suffixes. I think the simpler analysis is the one with less paradigms (i.e., the one where roots ending in *-i* and *-u* take the same suffixes). Proof that the vowel belongs to the root comes from examples where the root is reduplicated or compounded.

Table 10. Possessive suffixes

	possessed			
	SG	PL		
	-e	-i/-u	-e/-i/-u	
possessor	1SG	-angw	-ngw	-ngur
	2SG	-am	-m	-mar
	3SG	-any	-ny	-nir
	1PL.INCL	-ninrar	-ninrar	-ninrar
	1PL.EXCL	-myamar	-myamar	-myamar
	2PL	-mir	-mir	-mir
	3PL	-nir	-nir	-nir

I will now illustrate inalienable possessive marking on a verb-final root. The root *keke-* ‘chin’ is classified as a singular possessed noun, since each person or animal normally only has one chin. For singular possessors, we take the endings *-angw*, *-am*, and *-any*, since *keke-* ends in *-e*. The final vowel of the root is elided. For plural possessors, the forms *-ninrar*, *-myamar*, *-mir*, and *-nir* are used. If the root is potentially plural, like *lime-* ‘hand’, and if the possessor is singular, the possessive suffix depends on whether the possessed noun is singular or plural. If it is singular, the suffixes are the same as for singular possessed nouns. If it is plural, the forms *-ngur*, *-mar*, and *-nir* are used. These forms are illustrated in Table 11, adapted from Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 36–37; see also there for more illustrations). Stress is somewhat irregular: plural forms and second-person singular have stress on the suffix, while first- and third-person singular have stress on the root (Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 37).

Table 11. Roots ending in *-e* inflected with possessive suffixes

	possessed noun			
	<i>keke-</i> ‘chin’	<i>lime-</i> ‘hand’	<i>lime-</i> ‘hands’	
possessor	1SG	<i>'kekangw</i> ‘my chin’	<i>'limangw</i> ‘my hand’	<i>lim'ngur</i> ‘my hands’
	2SG	<i>ke'kam</i> ‘your chin’	<i>li'mam</i> ‘your hand’	<i>li'mar</i> ‘your hands’
	3SG	<i>'kekany</i> ‘3SG’s chin’	<i>'limany</i> ‘3SG’s hand’	<i>lim'nir</i> ‘3SG’s hands’
	1PL.INCL	<i>kek'ninrar</i> ‘our chins’	<i>lim'ninrar</i> ‘our hands’	<i>lim'ninrar</i> ‘our hands’
	1PL.EXCL	<i>kek'myamar</i> ‘our chins’	<i>li'myamar</i> ‘our hands’	<i>li'myamar</i> ‘our hands’
	2PL	<i>kek'mir</i> ‘your chins’	<i>li'mir</i> ‘our hands’	<i>li'mir</i> ‘our hands’
	3PL	<i>kek'nir</i> ‘our chins’	<i>lim'nir</i> ‘our hands’	<i>lim'nir</i> ‘our hands’

The hypothetical cases in which one would like to express plural possession of a noun that is typically singular (e.g., “its heads,” about a snake with two heads) have not been explored. An example of the inalienably possessed noun *ene-* ‘mother’ in the annotated corpus is given in (31).

- (31) *Enangw* *n-ti* *sawak* *lo*.
 mother.1SG.POSS 3SG-go deep_sea already
 ‘My mother went to the deep sea.’

[nangin3 62.6](#)

A third group of nouns can occur as either alienably or inalienably possessed nouns, which may cause a semantic shift. *Krawe* ‘liquid; water’ means ‘body fluid’ when inalienably possessed, and *pnue* ‘village’ means ‘sheath’ (Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 38). Drabbe (1926b: 39–40) mentions part-whole relations, place relations, and properties as inalienably possessed nouns. It is my impression that these rather fall in the category of nouns that may be both alienably and inalienably possessed. For example, he lists *bali* ‘half’ and *angat* ‘smell’. In the annotated corpus, these do not occur with any kind of possession. This also counts for some body parts, like *kulit* ‘skin’. Which nouns exactly belong to this group and what their semantics are remains for further research. In the annotated corpus, I have not discovered any examples which can illustrate this phenomenon.

3.7 Verbs and verbal inflection and derivation

This section describes some aspects of Yamdena verbal morphology and the verb phrase.

3.7.1 Subject prefixes and aspect

Subjects are obligatorily indexed on the verb by means of a prefix. There are two sets of prefixes: long and short. One class of verbs can take both short and long prefixes. For these verbs, in addition to indexing the subject, the short prefixes mark perfective aspect, and the long prefixes mark imperfective aspect. The long prefixes may also express reciprocity, pluractionality, or transitivity (*n-fen* ‘3SG is full’, *na-fen* ‘3SG fills’). The two sets may also be used to distinguish homophonous stems: *r-kurat* ‘they clear forest; cut down trees’, *ra-kurat* ‘they weed’. A second class only takes long prefixes. This subclass includes, besides verbs with CC-initial roots, roots with a progressive or stative meaning like *-tomwat* ‘become human’ and *-min* ‘stay’. It also includes verbs like *-saur* ‘tell a story’, which is neither stative nor progressive. A third class only takes short prefixes. It is as yet unclear which features the verbs in the third class share. See Table 12 for an overview of verb roots that were confirmed in elicitation to a) accept both short and long prefixes, b) accept only short prefixes, or c) accept only long prefixes. The elicitation results can be found in the corpus under the tags *cor1*, *cor2*, *ipfv1*, *min1*, *min2*, *persder1*, and *recp*. It is not clear what governs the division into the three subclasses beyond what was described above. Lamere & Mettler (1994) and Mettler & Mettler (1997b) note that most verbs may take both long and short prefixes. Rumyaru et al. (1999) give extensive lists under headers of long and short prefixes, with only a handful of roots occurring in both lists. It is not clear if these lists are meant to be exhaustive. For a further discussion of the function of the subject prefixes, see Visser (in press).

Table 12. Elicitation results of verbs inflected with both, short-only, and long-only subject prefixes

both	short	long
-endat 'ask'	-angat 'smell'	-fai 'know'
-falak 'say, talk'	-bali 'return'	-mtoran 'sit'
-fen 'kill'	-lur 'swim'	-min 'stay'
-fen 'be full; fill'	-sail 'lift'	-ngamon 'be good'
-keban 'see'	-ti 'go; leave'	-saur 'tell a story'
-kurat 'clear forest; weed'		-tomwat 'become a person'
-pule 'wrap'		
-putu 'tie'		
-salan 'see'		

There are five inflection classes for the short prefixes. The forms for the first- and second-person singular and the second-person plural differ between the classes, while the other forms stay the same. The classes are phonologically determined by the first or first two phonemes of the verb root. Discontinuous prefixes wrap themselves around the first phoneme in consonant-initial roots: the first-person singular of *-fangat* 'go' is *k-f-w-angat*. Table 13, based on Rummyaru et al. (1999: 22–31) and Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 77–79), gives the long prefixes on the left hand and the classes of short prefixes on the right hand.

Table 13. Subject prefixes

long		short				
		1	2	3	4	5
		#a,e,i_	#o,u,w_	#y_	#Ca,e,i_	#Co,u_ ²⁴
1SG	ku-	kw-	k-	k-	k-w-	k-
2SG	mu-	mw-	m-	m-	m-w-	m-
3SG	na-	n-	n-	n-	n-	n-
1PL.INCL	ta-	t-	t-	t-	t-	t-
1PL.EXCL	ma-	m-	m-	m-	m-	m-
2PL	mi-	my-	my-	m-	m-y-	m-y-
3PL	ra-	r-	r-	r-	r-	r-

3.7.2 Verb stems, transitivity and aspect

Yamdena possibly marks transitivity and/or aspect also on vowel-final verb stems. Mettler and Mettler (1997b: 83–84) tentatively describe how final /u/ and /i/ seem to be reduced to semivowels and final /e/ is deleted or exchanged with

²⁴ Some verbs in this class behave as class 4.

a stressed /i/ when the verb is incomplete. They define complete as “actions that are [...] clearly limited in time without changing the state of the undergoer,” while incomplete voice is for “any action that is either undefined as to when it ends, or leads to a different state of the undergoer” (83). Drabbe (1926b: 10) makes a similar observation but analyses it as a difference in transitivity. Drabbe’s analysis works neither with all the examples he gives nor with the examples in Mettler & Mettler (1997b). Table 14 gives verb pairs from Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 84) and Drabbe (1926b: 10). The former also note that some incomplete verbs seem to be derived from nouns, like *-mat* ‘die’ from *mate* ‘death’.

Table 14. Complete–incomplete verb pairs

complete	incomplete	source
<i>-flae</i> ‘run’	<i>-fla</i> ‘run away’	M&M
<i>-ose</i> ‘make; do’	<i>-os</i> ‘produce something’	M&M
<i>-fate</i> ‘break’	<i>-fat</i> ‘broken’	M&M
<i>-flonri</i> ‘straighten; calm’	<i>namlondy</i> ‘quiet; in order’	M&M
<i>-lole</i> ‘go towards a line’	<i>-lol</i> ‘stand in a line’	Drabbe
<i>-fsawe</i> ‘make marriage certificate’	<i>-fsau</i> ‘be married’	Drabbe
<i>-mian</i> ‘stay behind’	<i>-min</i> ‘stay’	Drabbe

The complete–incomplete analysis, as well as the transitive–intransitive one, seems to be supported by (32) from the annotated corpus.

- (32) a. *I* *n-lore* *fase*.
 3SG 3SG-crush rice
 ‘He/she crushes rice.’

[der4 71](#)

- b. *Fase* *n-lor*.
 rice 3SG-crush
 ‘The rice is crushed.’

[der4 72](#)

Other pairs are less convincing. Both (33a) and (33b) seem to mean ‘make’ and are transitive. If anything, *-os* in (33b) is more complete-like since it is clearly limited in time.

- (33) a. *Ku-saur ma madu amang m-ti m-ose*
 1SG-tell REL we_two father.1SG.POSS 2PL.EXCL-go 1PL.EXCL-make
kendyape na letar.
 hut LOC gardens

‘I’m telling about when me and my father went to make a hut in the gardens.’

[mett1990 5.1](#)

- b. *T-os kalpar monuk betno, t-ketin ormpi.*
 1PL.INCL-make sago_choppers all then 1PL.INCL-cut sago_tree

‘After making the sago choppers, we cut the sago tree [...].’

[mm1 3.3](#)

The annotated corpus does not contain any examples of *-flae*, but *-fla* is reasonably common and seems to mean intransitive ‘run’ in most cases (see (34)). There is one example of *-flai*, given in (35), which is possibly transitive, although I am not quite sure of the translation. According to the YPMD word list, *-flai* is a (possibly reflexive) verb that means ‘hide, run away’.

- (34) a. *Na-fla far das burit.*
 3SG-run to house outside

‘She runs out of the house.’

[nangin2 9.6](#)

- b. *Asu na-fla a n-larat.*
 dog 3SG-run TRNS 3SG-follow

‘The dog follows running.’

[crow1 13](#)

- (35) *Nonr ber bate ne, ma na-flai a topi ne ber bate ne*
 bring to woman DIST and 3SG-run TRNS hat DIST to woman DIST

‘[He] brings [it] to the girl, and he runs the hat to the girl [...].’

[pear1 93–94](#)

In theory, this variation in verb stems can interact with the variation in subject prefixes, but this has not been investigated yet. It does not seem coincidental, however, that the long (i.e., imperfective) subject prefix sometimes must coincide with a long verb stem, as in the sets in (36) with *bis(i)* ‘rip’ and (37) with *pus(e)* ‘break’. The long stem *pus(e)* may also mean ‘share’. Examples (36b) and (37b) confirm that short forms do not always correspond to transitive clauses.

(36) a. *I na-bisi buku.*

3SG 3SG-rip TRNS

'He is ripping the book.'

[der1 32.3](#)

b. *Yakw k-bis buku.*

1SG 1SG-rip book

'I rip the book.'

[der1 32.1](#)

c. *tar-bis*

UNACC-rip

'ripped'

[der1 32.1](#)

(37) a. *I na-puse roti.*

3SG 3SG-break bread

'He is breaking bread.'

[der2 41.3](#)

b. *I n-pus roti.*

3SG 3SG-break

'He/she breaks.'

[der2 41.2](#)

c. *Roti n-tar-pus.*

bread 3SG-UNACC-rip

'The bread is broken.'

[der2 42.2](#)

For further investigation, one should also follow Drabbe's (1926: 12) suggestion that ambitransitive verbs have final stress when they are used intransitively and penultimate stress when they are used transitively (*'n-malip yakw* 'he laughs at me', *n-ma'lip* 'he laughs') and that incomplete or progressive aspect is expressed with final stress, while complete aspect is associated with stress on the penult.²⁵

3.7.3 Aspectual words

Verbs can also be modified with a number of words that express aspect. They are given in (38), and an example is provided in (39). *Lo* can possibly be analysed as an iative, a perfect, or a change-of-state marker (Olsson 2013; Vander Klok & Matthewson 2015), but I stick to the gloss 'already', awaiting further analysis.

²⁵ He uses the terms *bedrijvend* 'transitive' and *onzijdig* 'intransitive', but from his examples, he seems to mean something akin to progressive/incomplete and complete, respectively.

- (38) a. *dedesar* ‘always; continuously’
 b. *lolone* ‘still’
 c. *lo* ‘already; concluded’
 d. *omp* ‘finished; enough’
 e. *omp lo* ‘already finished’

- (39) *Nempa Tilngoi Lempitentan ye, n-tak dedesar.*
 but Tilngoi Lempitentan PROX 3SG-ask continuously
 ‘But Tilngoi Lempitentan keeps on asking.’ [nangin1 8.1](#)

The words in (38) are analysed as modal adverbs, more precisely as clitics, in the chapter on “descriptors” in Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 101–102). Their interaction with the verb stems and verbal subject prefixes has not been investigated.

3.7.4 Verbal derivational prefixes

Drabbe (1926b: 54–59) lists eleven possible verbal derivational prefixes. These are causative *f(a)-*; posture/shape *t(a)-*; adjectivisers and/or intransitivisers *k(a)-*, *m(a)-*, *mb(a)-*, *ng(a)-*, *ngor-*, and *p(a)-*; and three prefixes, which he is not sure how to analyse, *r(a)-*, *s(a)-*, and *l(a)-*. Some of these are mentioned in Mettler & Mettler (1997b), with long lists of possible derived forms. The other sources do not mention the prefixes at all. Kei (van Engelenhoven 2021), Fordata (Drabbe 1926a; Elath et al. 1990), and Irarutu (Jackson 2014) have thirteen, six, and four (sometimes petrified) derivational prefixes, which are partly similar in form and proposed function to the Yamdena ones.²⁶ One goal of my online fieldwork was finding out whether the prefixes identified by Drabbe are still in use and what their functions are. The questionnaires and their answers can be found under the corpus tags *der1*, *der2*, *der3*, *der4*, and *persder1*. The findings are summarised in Table 15.

The prefix *f(a)-* is a clear causative marker, of which cognates are widely attested in Austronesian languages (Blust 2013: 379). It mainly attaches to intransitive verbs. Other functions mentioned in Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 39, 80–81, 227, 331), such as a benefactive and attribute marker, could not be confirmed. One function mentioned by Drabbe (1926b) that could be paraphrased as ‘accuse of’ was confirmed. This prefix appears to be common, judging from the many verbs in the YPMD word list that start with *f(a)-* and make reference to a root. From the elicitation sessions, however, it seems that *f(a)-* is not a productive causative marker. Attempts at eliciting *-nonton* ‘watch (TV)’, *mpuat* ‘play’, *-kirim* ‘send’, *-falak* ‘say’, *-keban* ‘see’, *-fen* ‘fill; be full’, and *kurat* ‘pull out’ in a causative context resulted in serial verb constructions (SVCs) with *-ose* ‘do; make’. This may have been an effect of translating from Malay constructions with SVCs with *kasih* ‘give’.

The prefix *t(a)-*, suggested to indicate posture or shape, could not be confirmed. Forms given in Drabbe (1926b) and Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 227) were not recognised by my consultants, except for *t-belar* ‘stand spread-eagled’ from *be-lar* ‘open’.

The prefix *k(a)-* is one of the derivational prefixes that is suggested to derive adjectives and intransitive verbs. Only one clear example could be confirmed: *k-leti* ‘have a gap’, which resembles *let* ‘gap (noun)’ and *-leti* ‘cut (verb)’. Because of the similarity to the proto-Austronesian form *ka-* with a similar meaning and to Kei *ka-* ‘non-volitional condition verb’ and *ka-* ‘adjective’, it seems reasonable to confirm Drabbe’s analysis.

²⁶ Also, outside the subgroup we find very similar-looking systems, for example, in Dela of Rote Island, close to Timor (Tamelan 2021).

Table 15. Yamdena verbal derivational prefixes

Drabbe (1926b)	Current author's analysis	examples	Blust (2013)
<i>f(a)-</i> causative	causative	<i>f-toran</i> 'set down' ← <i>toran</i> 'sit' <i>f-berat</i> 'raise, praise' ← <i>ma-berat</i> 'heavy' <i>f-nang</i> 'accuse of stealing' ← <i>nang</i> 'steal'	* <i>pa/pa-ka-</i> 'causative'
<i>t(a)-</i> posture, shape	?	<i>t-belar</i> 'stand spread-eagled' ← <i>belar</i> 'open'	* <i>ta-/taR-</i> 'sudden, unexpected or accidental action'
<i>k(a)-</i> adjective, intransitive	adjective, intransitive	<i>k-leti</i> 'have a gap' ← <i>let</i> 'gap (noun)', <i>leti</i> 'cut (verb)'	* <i>ka-</i> 'stative, manner, achieved state'
<i>m(a)-</i> adjective, intransitive	adjective, intransitive	<i>ma-fut</i> 'white' ← <i>futi</i> 'white' <i>m-tipal</i> 'broken' ← <i>tipal</i> 'break'	* <i>ma-</i> 'stative'
<i>mb(a)-</i> adjective, intransitive	adjective, intransitive	<i>mpa-sole</i> 'chaotic' ← <i>sole</i> 'destroy, throw around'	
<i>ng(a)-</i> adjective, intransitive	adjective, intransitive	<i>nga-nanam</i> 'tasty' ← <i>nanam</i> 'delicious'	
<i>ngor-</i> adjective, intransitive	?	<i>ngor-metam</i> 'black' ← <i>-metam</i> 'black' (bound root)	
<i>p(a)-</i> adjective, intransitive	nothing		
<i>r(a)-</i> ?	nothing		
<i>s(a)-</i> ?	applicative?	<i>s-rai</i> ← 'lean' <i>rai</i> 'stand' <i>skwatam</i> 'clasp with body' ← <i>katam</i> 'clasp with utensil'	* <i>Sa-/Si-</i> 'instrumental voice'?
<i>l(a)-</i> ?	-al 'take'	see text	
<i>tar-</i> , <i>tak-</i> , <i>tam-</i>	undergoer-oriented transitive	<i>-tar-bis</i> 'ripped' ← <i>-bis</i> 'rip'	

The prefix *m(a)-* is a very common adjective and intransitive verb deriver. Its cognates are one of the most widely attested affixes in Austronesian (Blust 2013: 376). The YPMD word list is full of derived words starting with *m(a)-*, where the root is also given. The roots are usually intransitive verbs, so it is not always clear what the derivation actually does. For example, *-tuny* is given as ‘burn’, and *-mtuny* as ‘burn; shoot’. There is also a possible example of a verb-to-noun derivation: *-teby* ‘erode’ and *mteby* ‘landslide’. Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 18, 41, 80–81, 105) write that the prefix without *m-* is used on stative verbs, while *ma-* (sometimes *me-*) is used on adjectives. This seems confirmed by the annotated corpus. See also §3.3. Elicitation showed that several of the forms suggested by Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 241–243, 248) are not derived roots but rather have *m*-initial roots. It is unclear how productive this prefix is: it could not be elicited on the verbs ‘speak’, ‘return’, ‘plant’, ‘kill’, or ‘wrap’. All attempts at turning these verbs into stative intransitive verbs resulted in the consultant rephrasing as Subj REL 3PL-Verb Obj ‘the thing that they Verbed’.

The prefix *mp(a)-* (Drabbe: *mb(a)-*) is not very common but seems to derive adjectives and intransitive verbs from transitive verbs. Drabbe (1926b: 56) suggests that *mb(a)-* is the North Yamdena variant of *m(a)-*. He lists one root (*-lonri*) that takes *mb(a)-* in North Yamdena and *m(a)-* in South Yamdena. Both derived words mean ‘straight’, while the meaning of the root is not given. A few other words with *mb-* are given as North Yamdena forms. In elicitation, I tried to exchange *mp(a)-* with *m(a)-* and vice versa in elicitation. None of the consultants, who are speakers of South Yamdena, allowed this.

The prefix *ng(a)-* is an adjective and intransitive verb deriver. Drabbe (1932) and the YPMD word list contain a few derived forms with their roots. Mettler & Mettler (1997b) also say that while both *m(a)-* and *ng(a)-* derive undergoer-oriented verbs, *ng(a)-* is a “stronger undergoer marker” (106) than *m(a)-*. They also list roots that supposedly take both prefixes (236–240), but this could not be confirmed in elicitation. Since the YPMD word list gives words with *m(a)-* with meanings such as ‘white’, ‘dark’, ‘enter’, ‘broken’, ‘old’, ‘cut’, ‘empty’, ‘thick’, ‘detached’, and ‘scattered’, and words with *ng(a)-* meaning ‘clear’, ‘tasty’, ‘angry’, ‘good’, or ‘difficult’, the “stronger undergoer marker” hypothesis seems baseless. Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 133) suggest *ng(a)-* derives from pAN (proto-Austronesian) **ka-*.

The prefix *ngor-* was only confirmed on one root: *-metam*. The derived form *me-metam* means ‘black’, as does *ngormetam*. Other forms suggested by Drabbe (1926b) were not recognised by my consultants. It is unclear how *ngormetam* and *memetam* differ. In an Indonesian–Yamdena translation task, where the target sentences had ‘black’ as an adjective in the subject or object NP, or as a predicate, the consultants always spontaneously chose *memetam*, and *ngormetam* (upon checking afterwards) was refused.

The prefix *p(a)-*, which supposedly has the same function as *k(a)-*, *m(a)-*, *mp(a)-*, *ng(a)-*, and *ngor-*, could not be confirmed in elicitation. Drabbe (1932) and the YPMD word list give very few *p*-initial derived forms, and those were not recognised by my consultants. Maybe there has been some confusion with *m(a)-* and/or *mp(a)-*. Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 106–107), who do not recognise a *p(a)-* prefix, write: “Phonetically, the /mp/ phoneme seems to be a prenasalised /p/, however, it also may or may not be a shift of some PAN sound other than that.”

No examples of the prefix *r(a)-* could be found in Drabbe (1926b; who only gives *tar*-forms; see paragraph following (40) below), Drabbe (1932), or Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 133; who note that some verbs start with *r(a)-*, but they do not give examples). The annotated corpus has no instances of this prefix other than the third-person plural subject prefix, which may be used in agentive passive constructions (“the glass is broken by somebody”).

The prefix *s(a)-*, which was tentatively identified by Drabbe, might have been an applicative marker that now only remains in some forms. Two could be identified: *s-rai* ‘lean’ from *rai* ‘stand’ and *s-kwatam* ‘clasp with body’ from *katam* ‘clasp with utensil’, although it is unclear where the /w/ comes from.

The suggested prefix *l(a)-* is perhaps the root *-al* ‘take; give; use; wear’ followed by transitory vowel *a*, which frequently occurs in multi-verb constructions in the annotated corpus.

- (40) *ma n-al a n-lele i monuk desar.*
 and 3SG-take TRNS 3SG-wrap 3SG all EMPH
 ‘and she wrapped herself [in the cloth].’

[nangin1_10](#)

3.8.2 Passive-like strategies

Yamdena has no passive construction. Pieter et al. (1986: 24) claim that a passive can be formed by fronting the object, but they only give one example and I have not encountered this elsewhere. Drabbe (1926b: 65–66) explicitly claims there is no passive. Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 89) say that passive constructions are rare but may be formed with verbs inflected for the third-person plural.

- (44) *Ra-frawe yakw ngarkar butdyu ma_rsapat_a_ne.*
 3PL-give_birth 1SG years twenty ago

‘I was born twenty years ago.’

(Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 89)

This is not a real passive because the subject is not an undergoer, but this actor- suppressing (or undergoer-orientation) strategy is confirmed by my fieldwork. When trying to elicit passive constructions, I found that this was one of the strategies employed, as illustrated in (45), where I asked for a translation of *kelapa yang ditanam* ‘the coconut that was planted’.

- (45) *Nure ma r-tanam.*
 coconut REL 3PL-plant

‘The coconut they planted.’

[der3 72](#)

Other undergoer-orientation strategies are some of the derivational prefixes discussed in §3.7.4 and possibly shortened verb roots as described in §3.7.2.

3.8.3 Negation

Negation of the verb phrase is achieved by adding *to* before the predicate, illustrated in (46). The clause remains otherwise unaltered. According to Drabbe (1926b: 62), the negator may precede the subject to stress the negation. There are no examples of this in the annotated corpus.

- (46) *Sir to ra-min kote dalamy.*
 3PL NEG 3SG-stay city inside

‘They don’t live in the city.’

[ypmd5 19.3](#)

Based on one example from the annotated corpus, *to* can also be used to negate possession, as in (47).

- (47) *Ra-fsau* *ma* *ngarkar* *tel* *i* *fat* *e* *lo,* *nempa* **to**
 3PL-be_married for year.PL three ? four TRNS already but NEG
angkir *a* *fuk.*
 child.3PL.POSS TRNS yet

‘They had been married for three-four years, but they didn’t have children yet.’

(Mettler & Mettler 1997b:167)

The example above, together with (48), also shows that *fuk(y)* ‘yet’, when combined with negator *to*, means ‘not yet’.²⁷

- (48) **To** *t-bae* *kulyam* *a* **fuk.**
 NEG 2PL.INCL-find skin.2PL.POSS TRNS yet

‘We haven’t found your skin yet [...].’

[nangin3 44.4](#)

Lo ‘already’ combined with negator *to* means ‘not anymore’, as illustrated in (49).

- (49) *ne* **to** *n-ma* *da* *lo.*
 then NEG 3SG-come landside already

‘[...], then she didn’t come to land anymore.’

[nangin3 60.2](#)

Clauses where the predicate is a noun phrase modified by a demonstrative are negated with *tate*. Mettler & Mettler (1997b) describe this as negation of the NP, but they give no other kinds of NPs. They also note that *tate* may optionally be added at the beginning of the clause in this kind of negation. This is exemplified in (50). Further research must determine which predicates are negated with *tate*, and which with *to*.

- (50) (**Tate**) *i_ye* *sefar* *tely* **tate.**
 NEG PROX chicken three NEG

‘These are not three chickens.’

(Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 167)

²⁷ The word *lolone* ‘not yet; still’ can have the meaning ‘not yet’ when answering a yes/no question (Drabbe 1926b: 62). The YPMD word list also lists it with both meanings. In the annotated corpus, it occurs only twice, modifying a verb, with the meaning ‘still’.

In the annotated corpus, *tate* only occurs as the negative answer (see (51)) and in the expression *nre tate* ‘or not’ (see (52)). The latter can also be used as a tag question ‘isn’t it; right’ (“rhetorical negation” in Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 168).

- (51) *Wetrue n-falak: “Tate!”*
 parrot 3SG-answer no
 ‘The parrot answered: “No!”’

[ypmd2 8.1](#)

- (52) *Bise ma n-tolar ian a ne ber i nre tate?*
 can REL 3SG-let_down fish TRNS DIST for 3SG or no
 ‘Can he let the fish down for him or not?’

[crow1 23](#)

The prohibitive marker is *kete*, which is illustrated with prohibitions from the Bible as quoted in the liturgy in (53). *Kete* may be reinforced with optative *ka*, as in (54) from the ten commandments.

- (53) *Na tetetkar a ne ra-rengi farve: keta mi-lalin,*
 LOC decision.PL TRNS DIST 3PL-write like_this if 2PL-empty_for_water
kete mi-fen, kete mi-mnang, ma kete mi-mkeus tomwatar nir
 PROH 2PL-kill PROH 2PL-steal and PROH 2PL-want people.PL 3PL.POSS
kabanir.
 things

‘In the commandments it is written like this: if you are thirsty, don’t kill, don’t steal, don’t covet people’s belongings.’

[Liturgy: 4](#)

- (54) *Ka kete mlwang bolar Tuhan ko nim Ratu ngaran.*
 OPT PROH say.2SG wrong Lord 2SG 2SG.POSS God name.3SG.POSS
 ‘Don’t use the name of the Lord your God in vain.’

[rel3 4](#)

All of these constructions have several examples in the annotated corpus. See also Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 167–168) for more un glossed examples.

3.8.4 Questions

Yes/no questions are formed with question marker *fali*.

- (55) *Fali ko to mu-ndemi yakw desar e?*
 Q 2SG NEG 2SG-miss 1SG big TRNS
 ‘Won’t you miss me very much?’

[nangin3_56.2](#)

Other questions are formed with the in-situ question words *safe* ‘what’, *mpe* ‘where; when’, *fali safe* ‘why’, *fen safe* ‘how’, *fir* ‘how many’, and *bengfir* ‘what day’.

- (56) *Anoi n-ti mpe?*
 mother.2SG.POSS 3SG-go where
 ‘Where did your mother go?’

[nangin3_62.5](#)

- (57) *Ko nim ngarkar fir?*
 2SG 2SG.POSS years how_many
 ‘How old are you?’

[lets1_10.2](#)

3.9 Multi-verb constructions

Verbs can be coordinated and subordinated into what may or may not be analysed as serial verb constructions.²⁸ All verbs in these constructions must carry a subject marker.

Verbs can be combined with *ma*, which is homonymous to the relativiser described in §3.5.6 and is also used to coordinate clauses (§3.10). Mettler & Mettler (1997b) suggest it is cognate to pAN perfective **mE-*. Two examples, illustrating three pairs of coordinated verbs, are given in (58) and (59).

- (58) *T-loli fase, t-loli ma n-lor,*
 1PL.INCL-stamp rice 1PL.INCL-stamp COORD 3SG-be_destroyed
t-suk ma t-af.
 1PL.INCL-take COORD 1PL.INCL-winnow

‘We stamp the rice, we stamp until [it’s] destroyed, we take and winnow [it].’

[lets1_10.2](#)

²⁸ Depending on one’s definition of serial verb construction, and awaiting further analysis. For example, we don’t know what the intonation contour of these constructions is like, and whether aspect markers have scope over all verbs in the construction.

- (59) *kete mu-daun ma mbwali ko lo.*
 PROH 2SG-think COORD 2SG.return 2SG anymore
 ‘[...] don’t you think about returning anymore!’ [lets1 10.2](#)

Another way to combine verbs, not mentioned by Mettler & Mettler (1997b), is with the transitory vowel *a*, illustrated in (60).

- (60) *O, enan to n-al a n-bal.*
 INT mother.1SG.POSS NEG 3SG-give TRNS 3SG-return
 ‘Oh, my mother just does not want to give it to me!’ [nangin1 9.1](#)

Verbs can also be combined without the help of *ma* or *a*. Mettler & Mettler (1997b) analyse this as subordination, whereby the first verb is the subordinate verb that more closely defines the second verb. They exclusively give examples with movement verbs as the first verb. These are all verbs that can occur independently, so I am not sure that a subordination analysis is warranted. The annotated corpus contains many adjacent verbs where the first verb is a movement verb, like (61). However, I also found many examples with another first verb, like the resultative construction in (62).

- (61) *ne nir kanre n-ma n-baly.*
 then 3PL.POSS enemy 3SG-come 3SG-return
 ‘[...], then their enemy came back.’ [mm4 10.2](#)

- (62) *r-sai r-fen i*
 3PL-stab 3PL-kill 3SG
 ‘[...] they stabbed him dead [...].’ [mm4 10.6](#)

It is possible to combine more than two verbs, as in (63).

- (63) *ne n-ti n-soly na-tmpur bate ne*
 then 3SG-go 3SG-hold 3SG-hug woman DIST
 ‘[...] then he went to hug the woman [...].’ [mm4 10.6](#)

3.10 Clause coordination and subordination

Yamdena has a large number of conjunctions. The most common is *ma*, which was introduced as a relativiser in §3.5.6 and is also used to combine verbs (§3.9). Its other functions are described in §3.10.1. In §3.10.2, I exemplify some of the other conjunctions.

3.10.1 With *ma*

The word *ma* seems to have general coordinating and/or subordinating functions. In many cases, the best translation seems to be ‘and’, like in (64), where there seems to be no subordinating relationship between the two clauses.²⁹

- (64) *I n-fangat katutun ma merwan sa n-lanre nof katutun sepan*
 3SG 3SG-climb tree and man one 3SG-pass from tree under
a ne.
 TRNS DIST
 ‘He climbs the tree and a boy passes under the tree.’ [pear1 72](#)

Ma may also have a purposive function, like in (65). While the clause introduced by *ma* is semantically subordinate, there is no syntactic sign of subordination. Both clauses have fully inflected verbs.

- (65) *Merwan sa n-ti letar ma n-salan ah ni ah katutun*
 man one 3SG-go gardens REL 3SG-see eh 3SG.POSS eh tree
sa fali na-bu.
 one because 3SG-fruit
 ‘A man goes to his garden to see his tree because it fruits.’ [pear1 8-13](#)

According to Mettler & Mettler (1997b), *ma* can also mean ‘but’, which they illustrate with (66). I have not attested this use of *ma* in the corpus, despite its more than 500 occurrences.

- (66) *Nuse r-ma monuk lo, ma i to na-min.*
 people 3PL-come all already but 3SG NEG 3SG-stay
 ‘The people had all come, but he was not among them.’ (Mettler & Mettler 1997b: 149)

²⁹ All examples in this section are taken from the same text to show that the many different uses are so common that they can be found in one text.

In many cases, the function of *ma* is not clear. Consider (67).

- (67) *Merwane dine ma n-fangat sepeda ne to ma n-tulung i.*
 man before REL 3SG-ride bike DIST NEG ? 3SG-help 3SG
 ‘That man who rode a bike didn’t help her.’ [pear1 22](#)

The glossing of *ma* in the annotated corpus is not consistent. In many cases where I chose to gloss *ma* as ‘and’, a subordinating reading may also be possible.

3.10.2 With other conjunctions

Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 144–151) list a great number of possible conjunctions. A minority of these seem better analysed as aspect markers, adverbs, or mood markers. The rest connect two main clauses logically. All conjunctions are illustrated with several translated but unglossed examples in Mettler & Mettler (1997b). Here, I illustrate the most common ones with examples from the annotated corpus: *ne* ‘then’ in (68), *mpa* ‘so; therefore’ in (69), and *nempa* ‘but’ in (70).

- (68) *N-falak monuk far ye, ne ulun i ne na-manik desar*
 3SG-say all like PROX then head.3SG.POSS 3SG DIST 3SG-become_bird very
 ‘She said this, then her head (it) became a bird[’s head] [...].’ [nangin1 19.1](#)
- (69) *Noak_a_ne na-udan, mpa dalam- ra-wekat.*
tenar
 at_that_time 3SG-rain so roads 3PL-be_muddy
 ‘At that time it was the rainy season so the roads were muddy.’ [ypmd4 11.1](#)
- (70) *Luryain e, enany to n-inrang, nempa Nita n-iwal dedesar.*
 first TRNS mother.3SG.POSS NEG 3SG-allow but Nita 3SG-insist continue
 ‘First, her mother did not allow [it], but Nita continued to insist.’ [ypmd4 3.2](#)

Many of the conjunctions can be combined, but the semantics are not always clear. Mettler & Mettler (1997b: 144–145) give, for example, *betno* ‘then’, which links two events whereby the first event must be completed; *la betno* ‘then’, whereby the first event is still in the future; and *ne betno* ‘then’, which does not seem to have any special requirements. *Ne* is also a conjunction that means ‘then’ in itself (it is unclear how it differs from *ne betno*), and *la* is a conjunction that means ‘then’ whereby the second event is some time in the future with an indefinite starting time. Again, it is not quite clear how *la* differs from *la betno*.

4. Concluding remarks

I hope to have provided an introduction to Yamdena that can answer some basic questions (what are the phonemes in Yamdena? what does the pronominal system look like? what is the constituent order in the NP and in the clause? how are verbs inflected?), that points the reader to relevant information about topics that I could not elaborately describe here (either in the legacy materials or in the annotated corpus), and that sparks interest in topics of Yamdena that warrant further research. Among these topics are the definitions of the word classes noun, adjective, verb, and adverb; the functions of the demonstratives; the expression of aspect and the combination of different ways of marking aspect; the functions of relativiser/verb combiner/clause combiner *ma*; and the functions of the conjunctions.

I have also introduced the Yamdena corpus, which is a combination of annotated and unannotated legacy materials and annotated materials based on contemporary fieldwork by myself. This was a valuable resource for compiling the Yamdena grammar introduction and, since it is open-access, is a valuable resource for any future work on Yamdena. I also hope it can serve as a model for future documentation and description work on languages that have legacy materials available.

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