

Definiteness and Familiarity in Yemba^{*}

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background on Yemba

▷ About the language:

- Also known as Dschang.
- A major Bamileke language spoken in the West Region of Cameroon.
- Over 300,000 speakers (Grimes 1988).
- Our consultant is from Bafou, Cameroon.



▷ Existing literature:

- Mainly focuses on its phonology: e.g. tonal system, syllable structure (Hyman & Tadadjeu 1976; Hyman 1985; Bird 1996).

1.2 The focus of this paper

▷ **Overarching question:** how does Yemba express definiteness?

▷ **Two specific puzzles:**

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- Yemba has a definite marker *lā* that only surfaces when the definite is modified by a relative clause. **How do we analyze a definite marker that specifically requires a relative clause?**
- Yemba also has an anaphoricity/familiarity marker *mèt* that appears to be optional. **How do we analyze a definite marker that is optional?**

Preview of the proposal:

- **Relative clauses in Yemba are DPs that can be headed by *lā*** (à la Arabic relative clauses).
- *Mèt* is a definite article that takes two arguments, one an NP and the other an anaphoric index. ***Mèt* is optional because situational uniqueness uses of bare nouns can also derive anaphoric readings in Yemba** (à la Dayal & Jiang 2022's analysis of Mandarin), though the preference for bare nouns can also be influenced by factors such as the amount of descriptive material available.

▷ Roadmap

- §2 Overview of definite noun phrases in Yemba
- §3 The relative clause marker *lā*
- §4 The anaphoric marker *mèt*
- §5 Conclusion

2 A brief overview of definite noun phrases in Yemba

▷ Three ways to express a definite noun phrase in Yemba:

- Demonstrative articles *wō/hā* and *iz̩io*:
 - All demonstrative articles appear post-nominally.
 - Distribution is determined by animacy: *wō* and *hā* occur with animate nouns (1), *iz̩io* occur with inanimate nouns (2).

- (1) a. mó wō
child this
'this child'
- b. mó hā
child that
'that child'

- (2) pəl a si ŋkən azəp iz̩io.
Paul 3SG PROG like song this
'Paul likes this song.'

- The relative clause marker *lā*:

- (3) izó mōɛŋ ʒɪjó tən m̩bú. m̩bú mən kən ʒɪjó lá ā kən bón
yesterday 1SG see one dog dog 1SG PST see REL 3SG PST good
'Yesterday I saw a dog. The dog that I saw was cute.'

- The anaphoric marker *mèt*:

(4) *izó mœŋ ʒɥíó tǎn ɱbú. ɱbú mèt kǎn bón.*
 yesterday 1SG see one dog dog MÈT PST cute
 ‘Yesterday I saw a dog. The dog was cute.’

Our focus: *lā* and *mèt*

- *lā*: a determiner that introduces a relative clause.
- *mèt*: an anaphoric definite determiner that encodes familiarity.

3 The relative clause marker *lā*

3.1 A brief overview of *lā*

- *Lā* requires a relative clause and cannot occur with nouns in isolation.

(5) **ni:mbǎŋ la*
 man RM
 Intended: ‘the man’

- *Lā* must occur *after* a relative clause. (Relative clauses in Yemba occur post-nominally, as opposed to adjectives, which occur pre-nominally: compare (6) and (7).)

(6) *isia nimbǎŋ a-sɪ nzɥi*
 tall man 3SG-PROG laugh
 ‘The tall man is laughing.’ adjective

(7) *nimbǎŋ i-sisia la a-sɪ nzɥi*
 man 3SG-tall RM 3SG-PROG laugh
 ‘The man that is tall is laughing.’ relative clause

- Syntactically, Yemba relative clauses are externally headed.
 - The subject and direct object of a transitive clause are both potential heads for relative clauses with *lā*.

(8) *nimbǎŋ i-sisia la a-sɪ nzɥi*
 man 3SG-tall RM 3SG-PROG laugh
 ‘The man that is tall is laughing.’ subject

(9) *nimbǎŋ mœŋ kə ʒʷo la a-kə si nzɥi*
 man 1SG PST see RM 3SG-PST PROG laugh
 ‘The man that I saw was laughing.’ direct object

(10) *itsu nimbǎŋ a-kə mɸet la a-kə nbuk*
 food man 3SG-PST eat RM 3SG-PST bad
 ‘The food that the man ate was bad.’ direct object

- Direct and indirect objects of di-transitives can also both head relative clauses.

- (11) mbu mœn kə ɲg^jɛ ndoŋ la a-sɪ mfɛt i
 dog 1SG PST give bone RM 3SG-PROG eat 3SG
 ‘The dog that I gave the bone is eating it.’
- (12) ndoŋ mœn kə ɲg^jɛ mbu la a-lɛ ɪ-mpon
 bone 1SG PST give dog RM 3SG-PST 3SG-good
 ‘The bone that I gave the dog was good.’

- Semantically, relative clauses with *lā* have two main restrictions.
 - First, relative clauses with *lā* only occur in definite noun phrases.

- (13) mœn koŋ ta mbu a-nsɛnɛ (*la).
 1SG like one dog 3SG-black *RM
 ‘I like a dog that is black.’
- (14) mœn sɪ ɲkɔŋ ta mbu aɣo kap tœŋɛ (*la).
 1SG PROG want one dog can protect house *RM
 ‘I want a dog that can protect the house.’
- (15) mœn sɪ ɲkɔŋ ta akɛtɛ mœn ku ntoŋ (*la).
 1SG PROG want one book 1SG FUT read *RM
 ‘I want a book that I can read.’

- Second, relative clauses with *lā* must be interpreted restrictively. Compare (16a) and (16b):

- (16) a. [Context: There is only one dog, and that dog is black.]
 ??/#mbu a-nsɛnɛ la a-nfaŋ tɛ
 dog 3SG-black RM 3SG-big very
 ‘The dog that is black is very big.’
- b. [Context: There are several dogs, one of which is black.]
 mbu a-nsɛnɛ la a-nfaŋ tɛ
 dog 3SG-black RM 3SG-big very
 ‘The dog that is black is very big.’

The same restriction is not found with other types of modifications, such as adjectives:

- (17) a. [Context: There is only one dog, and that dog is black.]
 nsɛnɛ mbu a-nfaŋ tɛ
 black dog 3SG-big very
 ‘The black dog is very big.’
- b. [Context: There are several dogs, one of which is black.]
 nsɛnɛ mbu a-nfaŋ tɛ
 black dog 3SG-big very
 ‘The black dog is very big.’

3.2 Cross-linguistic comparison: Yemba and Standard German, Austro-Bavarian

▷ On first appearance, Yemba *lā* seems to bear resemblance to the strong definite articles in languages like Standard German and Austro-Bavarian.

- Both *lā* and strong definite articles can appear in definites modified by relative clauses.

- (18) Fritz ist jetzt in **dem** Haus, das er sich letztes Jahr gebaut hat.
 Fritz is now in the_{strong} house that he REFL last year built has
 ‘Fritz is now in the house that he built last year.’
 (Standard German, [Hartmann 1978:77](#))
- (19) [Context: A and B are having a discussion about the retirement age of mailmen, and other civil servants. A complains: mailmen and garbage collectors retire way too early. For example...]
Dea Briaftroga dea was bei uns austrogn hot is jetzt in pension.
 the_{strong} mailman the_s COMP at us delivered has is now in retirement
 ‘The mailman who delivered mail in our neighborhood (rather than the mailmen who deliver mail somewhere else) is now retired.’
 (Austro-Bavarian, [Wiltschko 2012:2](#))

- Both *lā* and strong definite articles require the relative clause to be interpreted restrictively. Compare (19) with (20):

- (20) [Context: the mailman who has been delivering mail in the neighborhood for the last 10 years is retired. Everyone knows this mailman. A and B have been living in this neighborhood. A tells B:]
 Wasst eh, **da/*dea** Briaftroga was bei uns austrogn hot is jetzt in
 know PRT the_{weak}/*the_{strong} mailman COMP at us delivered has is now in
 pension.
 retirement
 ‘You know, the mailman who delivered our mail is now retired.’ (ibid.)

▷ However, *lā* and strong definite articles also differ in an important respect.

- Strong definite articles can appear without relative clauses; *lā* cannot.

- (21) Hans hat einen Schriftsteller und einen Politiker interviewt. Er hat von **dem**
 Hans has a writer and a politician interviewed he has from the_{strong}
Politiker keine interessanten Antworten bekommen.
 politician no interesting answers gotten
 ‘Hans interviewed a writer and a politician. He didn’t get any interesting answers from the politician.’
 (Standard German, [Schwarz 2009:30](#))

3.3 Cross-linguistic comparison: Yemba and Arabic

▷ The fact that *lā* can only be used with definite noun phrases is shared with some Semitic languages: e.g. Arabic relative clause markers are allowed in definite DPs (22), but not indefinite ones (23).

- (22) l-baTT-a illi ?akalnaa-ha ...
 the-duck-FEM RM we.ate-it
 ‘the duck that we ate ...’
 (Lebanese Arabic, [Ouhalla 2004](#) from [Haddad & Kenstowicz 1980](#))

- (23) kteeb (*yalli) ħkyit ʕann-o laila
 book RM talked.she about-it Laila
 ‘a book that Laila has talked about’

(Standard Arabic, Ouhalla 2004 from Choueiri 2002)

▷ In both Arabic & Yemba, the relative clause marker is morphologically different from the complementizer for clausal subordination. (In Yemba, the complementizer is [ŋgɛ]:)

- (24) pāl lœŋ mbú dzōŋ ŋgɛ ní:mbàŋ kən χwésī
 Paul tell to John COMP man PST fall
 ‘Paul told John that the man fell.’

☞ This allows us to adopt an analysis for Yemba similar to what Ouhalla proposes for Arabic.

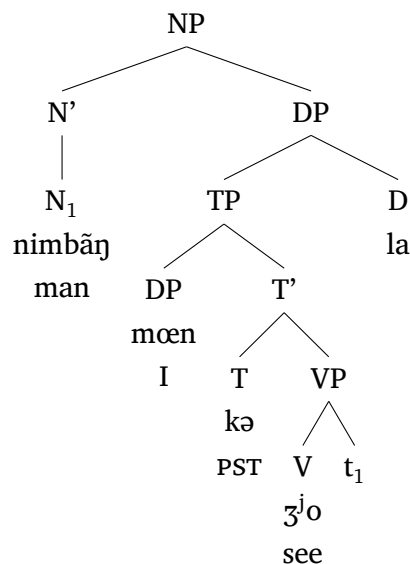
3.4 Analysis of *lā*

▷ Ouhalla (2004) on Arabic relative clauses:

- DPs rather than CPs.
- Located at the Spec-NP position.

☞ We adopt a similar syntactic analysis for Yemba relative clauses with *lā*.

- Syntactically, the relative clause in (9) (*ní:mbāŋ mœn kə zʲio la* ‘the man that I saw’) would thus have the structure below.



☞ Semantically, we propose that *lā* has the denotation in (25).

- *Lā* takes two type $\langle e, t \rangle$ arguments, one from the noun and one the relative clause, adds an anti-uniqueness requirement on the noun, and returns a set of individuals satisfying both arguments.¹
- The NP then undergoes type-shifting by ι to obtain a definite interpretation.

¹ Note that this is similar to the *R* functional head Simonenko (2014) proposes for Austro-Bavarian.

- We assume following [Ouhalla \(2004\)](#) that there is definiteness agreement between the relative clause and the higher determiner, which forces noun phrases modified by relative clauses with *lā* to be definite.

(25) $[[lā]] = \lambda P \lambda Q : |Q| > 1. \lambda x. P(x) \wedge Q(x)$

4 The familiarity marker *mèt*

4.1 An overview of *mèt*

▷ *Mèt* encodes familiarity and shows up in places where one typically finds familiarity markers/articles cross-linguistically.

(26) Narrative sequences:

izó mœŋ zɸíó tān mbú. **mbú mèt** kēn bón.
yesterday 1SG see one dog dog MET PST cute
'Yesterday I saw a dog. The dog was cute.'

(27) Donkey sentences:

ārēārē wèt kūnā ēŋtsík **kūnā mèt**.
everyone have pig feed pig MET
'Every man who owns a pig feeds the/that pig.'

(28) [Context: Background music of a song playing, John says to Michel:]

pəl a si ŋkɔn **azɔp mèt**.
Paul 3SG PROG like song MET
'Paul likes this song.'

(29) Bishop sentences:

ifue da ŋbu zjo umɔ nbu, **ənbu mèt** izi entʃuo anɛ umɔ nbu.
when one dog see other dog dog mèt begin barking PREP other dog
'When a dog sees another dog, the dog barks at the other dog.'

▷ *Mèt* is infelicitous when the referent is not familiar: in (30), *mèt* is felicitous in the definite referring to the two dogs, but not in the definite referring to the big dog among them.

(30) izo mœn kɛ zjo mbu menbja. **nfaŋ mbu (*mèt)** (anɔ **mbu mèt**) a kɛ tʃuaŋ.
yesterday 1SG PST see dog two big dog MET PREP dog MET 3SG PST bark
'Yesterday I saw two dogs. The big dog (among the dogs) barked at me.'

▷ Though curiously, *mèt* doesn't pattern with other familiarity markers/articles in terms of bridging: *mèt* is felicitous in part-whole bridging, while infelicitous in producer-product bridging:

(31) Part-whole bridging:

mœŋ zɸíó tān gié í:ā. **zín mèt** gēn sā.
1SG see one house yesterday roof DET CORP break
'I saw a house today. The roof was broken.'

- (32) [Context: Background music of a song playing, John says to Michel:]
 pəl a si ŋkən azəp mət, da a ləsiŋkən ənzəpə (*mət).
 Paul 3SG PROG like song M&T but 3SG NEG.like singer *M&T
 ‘Paul likes this song, though he doesn’t like the singer.’

▷ Like familiarity markers/articles in many other languages, *mèt* resists situation-dependent co-variation:

- (33) mə kɛ ʃunɛ pə ifə mət antɛ kwa la.
 INDEF PST speak with chief M&T in every village
 ‘In every village, we visited the chief.’
 = We visited the same individual in every village.
 ≠ We visited the chief of each village.

▷ *Mèt* is also infelicitous when the noun is unique.

- *Mèt* is incompatible with superlatives:²

- (34) pəl aŋmia ŋgaŋ (*mət) atɛ jɛsku mət.
 Paul big person M&T within school M&T
 ‘Paul is the tallest man in the school.’

- *Mèt* is incompatible with larger situation definites:

- (35) nū (*mèt) tɛ iáj/
 sun D very shining
 ‘The sun is hot.’

- *Mèt* is felicitous in these contexts only when the definite receives a contrastive interpretation, such as when one considers multiple solar systems, or when different temporal stages of the sun are considered:

- (36) sáj (mèt) mən kən ʒjɔ kótrèt ā lé zɛnmɛlí.
 moon M&T 1SG PST see last.night 3SG CORP round
 ‘The moon that I saw yesterday was round’.

We note that this behavior of *mèt* is similar to the use of classifiers with globally unique nouns (e.g. the sun/moon) in contrastive contexts in languages like Cantonese and Bangla (K.-F. Yip, U. Banejee, M. C. Y. Lee, C. Ahenkorah, p.c., [Simpson & Biswas 2016](#)), as well as the use of demonstratives in languages like Mandarin ([Jenks 2018](#)).

▷ **The distribution of *mèt* can be summarized as follows:**

² The *mət* at the end of the sentence is part of the definite *jesku mət* ‘the school’.

	<i>mèt</i>
anaphoric uses	✓
donkey sentences	✓
“perceptual” uses	✓
part-whole bridging	✓
producer-product bridging	✗
covarying uses	✗
larger situation uses	✗

Figure 1: The distribution of *mèt*

4.2 The optionality of *mèt*

▷ Interestingly, *mèt* is not obligatory:

(37) mœn ʒ'íó tà mɔ. mɔ́ ?(mèt) əŋvèk.
I see one child child M&T short
'I saw a child. The child is short.'

(38) izo mœn kə nʒ'íó ta mbu pɔ ta məwentsam. mbu ?(mèt) a-lɛ nsɛnɛ
yesterday 1SG PST see one dog and one cat dog M&T 3SG-PST black
'Yesterday I saw a dog and a cat. The dog was black.'

▷ Adjectives are found to improve the optionality of *mèt*:

(39) izo mœn kə nʒ'íó ta nsɛnɛ mbu pɔ ta fəfo mbu. nsɛnɛ mbu (mèt) a-lɛ
yesterday 1SG PST see one black dog and one white dog black dog M&T 3SG-PST
mponte.
beautiful
'Yesterday I saw a black dog and a white dog. The black dog was beautiful.'

▷ *Mèt* is also preferred to be dropped (but not completely out) when the definite is modified by a relative clause with *lā*.³

(40) izo mœn kə nʒ'íó ta mbu pɔ ta məwentsam. mbu (??mèt) mœn kə nʒ'íó la
yesterday 1SG PST see one dog and one cat dog M&T 1SG PST see RM
a-lɛ nsɛnɛ
3SG-PST black.
'Yesterday I saw a dog and a cat. The dog that I saw was black.'

(41) mɔ́ (?mèt) mændɛ zudɛ la iʃu.
child M&T 1SG wait REL come
'The child that I was waiting for came.'

▷ **Summary of the data:**

- *Mèt* is not always obligatory.
- Bare noun definites can sometimes receive the same interpretation as definites with *mèt*.

³ Based on the data we have so far, we found that this kind of examples usually represents the clearest cases where *mèt* can be felicitously dropped.

- *Mèt* is most clearly preferred to be dropped when the definite is modified (e.g. by a relative clause, adjective, etc.).

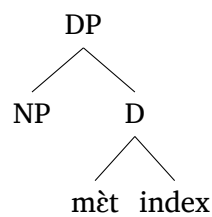
4.3 Analysis of *mèt*

▷ Proposal for *mèt*:

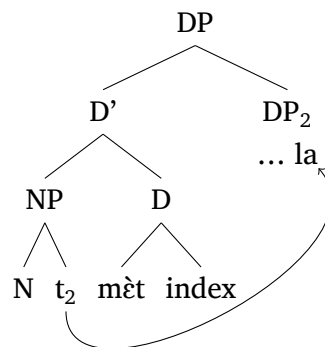
- *Mèt* is a definite determiner that encodes familiarity and presupposes anti-uniqueness (cf. Schwarz (2009) on German strong definites, Jenks (2018) on Mandarin demonstratives):

$$(42) \quad \llbracket m\grave{e}t \rrbracket = \lambda s \lambda y \lambda Q. \iota x. P(x)(s) \wedge x = y$$

- A definite with *mèt* has the structure below:



- A definite with *mèt* modified by a relative clause with *lā* has the structure below, where the relative clause DP moves to Spec-DP at PF.



- We propose that *mèt* is optional because of two reasons.
 - Situational-uniqueness uses of bare nouns can also receive anaphoric readings (Elbourne 2013).
 - The situational-uniqueness use of bare nouns improves the more descriptive material there is, such as when the definite is modified by relative clauses or adjectives.
 - The extra descriptive material help disambiguate that the definite co-refers with its indefinite antecedent. We observe a similar effect in English too:

- (43) a. I met a president yesterday. But the president didn't want to talk about it.
 = My president didn't want to talk about it.
 = The president I met didn't want to talk about it.
- b. I met a president yesterday. But the president I met didn't want to talk about it.
 ≠ My president didn't want to talk about it.
 = The president I met didn't want to talk about it.

5 Concluding remarks

✍️ What does this paper tell us:

- *lā*: a determiner that heads a DP-type relative clause.
- *mèt*: a determiner that encodes familiarity.

✍️ Remaining questions:

- The availability of *mèt* in bridging constructions is the opposite of that of similar markers in other languages. How do we analyze the behavior of *mèt* in bridging constructions?
- When is *mèt* optional, exactly?
 - This paper: *mèt* can be optional in general, but preferably when the definite is modified.
 - Future works: does it matter whether the second clause extends the situation of the first clause (cf. Dayal & Jiang 2022)?

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