2 The character of the language

Yélî Dnye is a language in which nothing seems to be straightforward – it is baroque at many levels, from the sound system to the marking of negation. Despite the huge phoneme inventory and words up to six or more syllables long, homonymy and polysemy needlessly abound. Most verbs have suppletive forms, and many nouns do too. Grammatical categories may be signalled, often in distributed fashion, across different constituents of the verb phrase. The inflectional particles or clitics conflate half a dozen grammatical categories into one portmanteau monosyllabic or disyllabic form. On top of all this there is a quite intricate syntax of the kind one associates with languages with strict phrase order, but Yélî has no fixed phrase order. Some of the more startling characteristics only emerge on growing familiarity with the language, and are worth pointing out in advance.

Yélî Dnye is sufficiently unusual in character to motivate a novel approach. On the analysis adopted here (and see also Henderson 1995), inflectional categories are marked by clitics or particles rather than affixes – this analysis is motivated on phonological grounds, since the inflectional clitics are not phonologically incorporated into the head words whose grammatical status they mark (but in other respects these clitics are very affix-like). It can thus be said to lack a systematic morphology, but, unlike many languages with isolating tendencies, Yélî Dnye does not express equivalent grammatical categories on the phrasal level (e.g., by using serial verb constructions to express aspectual distinctions). Instead, it uses irregular but systematic suppletion on the one hand, and massive inventories of clitics on the other, each of which tends to be a portmanteau form expressing the intersection of half a dozen grammatical categories. As a result, the underlying grammatical categories are quite opaque, and detailed reviews of the forms – which the reader will find in the following chapters – will not themselves yield immediate insight into the relevant distinctions. I have therefore taken the unusual strategy of first outlining in this chapter relevant grammatical categories divorced from the means of their expression.

2.1 Lexicalization vs. rule-governed productivity

Most languages are conservative with lexical proliferation – if there is a central concept, say 'to eat', they lexicalize it once and derive, say, an intransitive from the transitive, or use the same form for both transitives and intransitives, as in English. Yélî Dnye goes the other way, and lexicalizes the transitive as *ma*, the intransitive as *kmaapî*, and it is reasonable to judge them distinct lexemes, although caution

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is in order: this is a language with massive suppletion, so the Remote Past of *ma* is *ntîî*, and in the Continuous aspect it is *pîpî*. So, are all these forms one lexeme, two, or four? I will judge two (in the sense that there are two distinct sets of roots, one transitive the other intransitive), but perhaps the answer is moot. It is an interesting puzzle from the point of view of language acquisition: how does the child sort out the many distinct roots of a verb expressing a single basic concept?

Yélî Dnye has almost no derivational morphology, and this in part explains lexical proliferation – there are few valence-changing operations for verbs, for example, so intransitives can be derived only in limited ways, and appear instead as separate lexical items unrelated in form. Lexicalization thus replaces much that in other languages is done by rule and associated semantic compositionality. Take for example reported speech, rendered in English by a clause of saying with an embedded clause. In Yélî Dnye, for each possible kind of telling event (as multiplied out by person and number of speaker and addressee, tense, etc.), there is a lexicalized quote formula. There are around 320 of these largely unpredictable forms, as illustrated in Table 2.1 (see §8.4 for the details):

Table 2.1: Example quote formulae.

kwoch:e	'we2 said to him today'	*nyedê*	'he said to us2 today'
yich:e	'we2 said to them today'	*nyedê*	'they said to us2 today'
kwinye	'we2 said to him day before yesterday'	*nyepê*	'he said to us2 day before. . .'
yinye	'we2 said to them day before yesterday'	*nyepê*	'they said to us2 . . .'

2.2 Portmanteau expression of intersecting grammatical categories

In line with its lack of overt affixal morphology, Yélî Dnye expresses verbal cross referencing in clitics on either side of the verb, and these clitics non-compositionally express in one or two syllables a large range of grammatical categories. It is essential when considering such paradigms to make a distinction between the theoretical number of cells in the paradigm that come from multiplying out the grammatical categories, and the actual number of forms deployed. For example, the proclitic potentially indicates one of nine person categories for the subject, one of two aspects, one of up to five moods, one of six tenses – that is one of 540 basic cells in an inflectional paradigm. In addition, there are nine deictic/epistemic markers, negation and counterfactual markers which fuse into that same inflectional proclitic – yielding potentially over 5000 compound concepts to be expressed in the one clitic slot! In fact this matrix is simplified by the systematic

absence of certain tense distinctions in certain aspects/moods, so that instead of 540 filled basic cells we have 144 – still that leaves over 1000 potential cells in the matrix once we allow for the deictic/epistemic modulations. As in many such massive paradigms (as in the Australian prefixing languages, Evans et al. 2001, Evans 2003), partial conflations of categories – e.g. 2nd person singular with 1st person dual – reduce the number of forms deployed, and Rossel uses 56 distinct forms for the 144 basic cells. Thus the proclitic *dpî* ranges over the following portmanteau concepts (where s = singular, d = dual, pl = plural):

dpî = Habitual Punctual: 1s or 1pl (excluding 1d) or 2d or 3s/d/pl
= Punctual Near Past or Remote Past: 2d
= Punctual Immediate Past: 2 d or 1pl
= Continuous Immediate Past: 2d or Near Past 2d/3d
= Deferred Punctual Imperative: 2/3 s/d/pl

It also happens to be the same form as the 2nd person dual possessive pronoun. In contrast, the proclitic *dnye* has no related pronominal forms, and only two meanings:

dnye = Punctual Immediate Past: 1d
= Continuous Remote Past: 3pl

(Yes, the same form occurs in the name of the language, meaning 'sounds, words, language', but that is a typical example of the widespread homonymy.) Many of these syncretisms lack, however, the systematicity found in other languages with large paradigms of this sort – there seem to be no hard rule-bound conflations, one must just learn for each form its range of extension over the paradigm (but see §2.4.1 below on the Monofocal/Polyfocal distinction, which groups singular and first person of all numbers).

The enclitics after transitive verbs indicate person/number properties of both subject and object, as well as tense, mood, and aspect, so in principle vast numbers of distinctions. But here we find we need to distinguish a third level of analysis, between the combinatorial matrix of grammatical categories on the one hand, and the forms on the other: This is a systematic reconceptualization of the categories, so they fall into a smaller number of cells. So instead of 81 person categories (9 for subject and 9 for object), for example, we end up with a reduction of the subject categories to one or two categories in all but the imperatives: typically, 1st person in all three numbers and singular forms of all other persons conflate in one category, and 2nd and 3rd persons dual and plural conflate in another. In the end 60 forms suffice.

The quotative particles mentioned in §2.1 indicate the sort of tolerance the language has for large paradigms of at least partially unpredictable forms. These particles conflate categories, but unpredictably, e.g. *dpópu* 'he/they2/they3 used to say to us2 but no longer do so'. Some of the quotative particles are partially retrospectively analysable: thus *kwod:a* '1s.to.3s.IMM' can be seen to be constructed from the dative pronoun *kwo* 'to him/her' plus *dî* '1sIMMPI verbal proclitic' plus some modulation. There is thus a large gap between what a speaker has to know to produce the right form (from the speaker's point of view it is a fixed expression – nothing else will do) and what the addressee has to know to understand it (the meaning is, on production, quite largely compositional or transparent).

2.3 Triality of patterning: Gestalt vs. discrete morpheme signalling

Here is a point that linguists think little about: compositionality is semiotically expensive. That is, much of the signalling power of morphemes is lost once their combinatorial collocations are restricted either by syntax or semantics. Consider a semiotic analogy based on traffic lights. Green means go, red means stop, and yellow means prepare to stop. From three lights in two possible states each (on/off) we could get $2^3 = 8$ signals:

red	green	yellow
+	–	–
–	+	–
–	–	+
–	–	–
+	+	–
–	+	+
+	–	+
+	+	+

But to get 8 signals we have to give up on the simple meaning of e.g. 'stop' for red and 'go' for green (because the combination 'stop'+'go' would be a contradiction) – instead we can let the whole gestalt of three lights stand for an arbitrary meaning. Yélî Dnye often seems to follow such a strategy, and in doing so it appears to be minimizing the already formidable number of elements it uses to signal grammatical categories (quite why there is a pressure for minimization of forms at the expense of ambiguity is less clear – but quite a lot of the signalling burden for verbal inflection is carried by unstressed clitics of one or two syllables).

Consider the following extracts from both positive and negative paradigms (where --- indicates a zero verbal proclitic):

(i)	*doo pîpî*	'He was eating it the day before yesterday or before'
(ii)	*doo ndîî*	'He did not eat it yesterday'
(iii)	---- *ndîî*	'He did eat it the day before yesterday or before'
(iv)	*daa ndîî*	'He did not eat it the day before yesterday'
(v)	---- *ma doo*	'He did eat two of them the day before yesterday'
(vi)	---- *ma ngópu*	'They2 did eat it the day before yesterday'
(vii)	*daa ma ngópu*	'They2 did not eat it the day before yesterday'

Following the glossing tradition that stems from American structuralist linguistics, one may try to analyse the first three of these sentences in a way that makes them compositionally the sum of their morphemes:

doo	*pîpî*
3s.RemotePast.**Positive**.ContinuousAspect	eat.transitive.ContinuousAspect
doo	*ndîî*
3s.NrPST.**Negative**.PunctualAspect	eat.transitive.PunctualAspect.**Negative**.NrPST
------	*ndîî*
3sRemotePast.PunctualAspect	eat.transitive.PunctualAspect.**Positive**.RemotePast

Here we have selected quite different glosses for *doo* and *ndîî* according to the collocational context, each having different polarity in different contexts! Such an analysis imposes ambiguities such that *doo* is a clitic that means either positive or negative third singular depending on aspect, and *ndîî* is a verb root which signals negative in the Near Past (yesterday) or positive in the Remote Past (the day before yesterday or before). The disambiguation comes from the whole assemblage, and this suggests another kind of analysis in terms of gestalts – no parts have meanings independent of the whole: it is the whole that conveys the meaning. Thus *doo ndîî* cannot be Remote Past, because *doo* only combines with a Continuous aspect verb root (*pîpî*) in that tense, when it means 3s.positive, nor can it be positive here because *ndîî* would then need to be a Continuous root. The whole assemblage forces a negative Near Past reading. A gestalt analysis of this sort suggests that Rossel has partially lexicalized its syntax, by letting strings of words convey arbitrary meanings, a bit as if the 'duality of patterning' in language was jacked

up one notch to create a **triality of patterning**. In some ways such an analysis is thoroughly in line with the tendency of the language throughout to lexicalize what other languages tend to express as combinable morphemes or derivable words. The languages of Southern New Guinea have also forced a re-think along these lines, discussed under the rubric of distributed exponence – see Carroll (2017), and Evans (2019).

We can extend the analysis a bit as in sentences (iv) and (v) above. The Remote Past and negative sense can be restored by shifting to an overtly negative preverbal clitic as in (iv). But in (v) we see the verb root change again to what we will call the 'followed root' – this time not to mark Continuous vs. Punctual aspect in Remote Past (*pîpî* vs. *ndîî*) but now to indicate Punctual aspect with a following enclitic (*ndîî* → *ma*). This change has lost the marking of Remote Past tense in the verb root, which is now shifted to the post-verbal clitic *doo* (1st person or singular subject, 3rd person dual object, transitive indicative Punctual Remote Past OR Continuous aspect Proximal Habitual mood). Note that post-verbal *doo* has little in common with pre-verbal *doo*.

If we take the simple utterance *ndîî*, 'he ate it the day before yesterday (or before)', and change the subject number as in (vi), we get the followed root form again, now with a post-verbal clitic signalling dual 3rd subject and singular object. This can mercifully be overtly negated as in (vii). Note that although the pre-verbal clitic normally carries the most subject information, here it is the post-verbal clitic which carries the subject information.

The language is rife with such gestalt encodings. Here is another example, where a complex proclitic changes its meaning radically in collocation with different root forms of the same verb:

(3) *choo n:aa* *loo*
2sIMM.PI.MOT go.REM
'You1 didn't go (today)?'

(4) *choo n:aa* *lêpî*
2DualC.IMP going
'You2 go now!'

To summarize this set of examples, we have seen that the verb root can carry information about tense, aspect, polarity and subject number (indirectly), and so can the pre- and post-verbal clitics. Which element carries which burden varies across the tense/aspect/person paradigm.

A similar issue has arisen in the history of morphological studies, where morphemic analysis is often opposed to the word and paradigm model. More recently,

systematic deviations from morphological compositionality have been the object of extensive study (see e.g. Evans 2019). In what follows, I will gloss examples with the appropriate one of the many competing meanings, but this can be very misleading for it suggests of course that there is only one such meaning, but the disjunctive list of glosses would be extremely hard to read or process. The implicit analysis then is of disjunctive lexical entries, combined with a unification procedure that combines all the senses that fit together, discarding the rest. This is in fact to depart from a strictly gestalt analysis, suggesting a partial decomposition of gestalt meaning – I am far from sure that this is correct, but it certainly will be more familiar to the reader.

Here is another example of gestalt signalling of grammatical categories. Henderson (1995:26) correctly isolates six tenses in the language. These tenses are absolute (tied strictly to diurnal spans hooked to the time of speaking), and refer to events that happened earlier today, yesterday, or before yesterday in the past, and events that are happening now, later today versus tomorrow or later. These six tenses are only fully coded in the TAM particles in one aspect and mood, namely the Continuous indicative, and even here there are many specific conflations or homonyms, so that e.g. *nê* covers '1st person singular subject EITHER Continuous aspect tense 3 (earlier today) or tense 4 (yesterday) OR punctual aspect tense 4 (yesterday) or tense 5 (day before yesterday)'. Now, Henderson (1995:102) recognizes a Remote Past (day before yesterday) vs. a Recent Past (yesterday) tense in the Punctual aspect – but it is not coded in the pre-verbal TAM particle at all (his table has identical forms in both tenses). He maintains the distinction because it is displayed in the verb root, which typically (but not always) suppletes in the remote past. In addition, there is a post-verbal clitic which marks some aspects of the subject and some TAM properties, and this makes some systematic distinctions between the Remote Past and the Near Past in the Punctual aspect. Here are some examples to make the point – as noted, the pre-verbal TAM particle for 1st person singular stays identical across the Remote and Near Past, but the verb root – here 'to hit' – changes from *vy:a* (Proximal tenses) to *vyâ* (Remote Past), *providing it is followed by a zero morph* for 3rd person singular object, Monofocal subject, Remote Past. If there is e.g. a 2nd person object, the object-indicating post-verbal particle is non-null, and picks up the burden of indicating the tense:

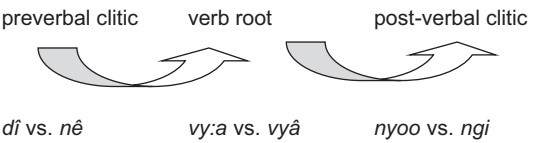
Punctual		Continuous
nê vy:a nyoo	'I hit you day-before-yesterday'	*noo vyee ngi*
nê vyâ	'I hit him the day before yesterday'	*noo vyee*
nê vy:a ngi	'I hit you yesterday'	*nê vyee ngi*
nê vy:a	'I hit him yesterday'	*nê vyee*
dî vy:a ngi	'I hit you today'	*nê vyee ngi*

Dissecting the first example, we could gloss it as follows:

nê		*vy:a*	*nyoo*	
1sSubj	Cont.(Today/Yest/Tom) Punct(Yest/BeforeYest)	hit.Punct(Today/Yest) (Followed)	anyS2sO	Cont.Hab.(Today/Yest/Tom) Punct (BeforeYest)

The only possible unification is underlined. As noted above, such an analysis posits multiple homonyms, and a mechanism for selecting 'all the news that fits'. The alternative, perhaps psycholinguistically more plausible account, is simply that the whole assemblage is recognized as a gestalt, much in the way in which we visually recognize common words on the page without processing each grapheme.

This is a kind of *distributed* marking of the grammatical category of tense, whereby the marking can get shifted onto another part of the verb complex, according perhaps to some preference hierarchy (see Evans et al. 2018 on 'circumfixal morphology'):



2.4 Grammatical categories of Yélî Dnye

It is unusual for a grammar to outline the set of grammatical categories exhibited in the morphosyntax of a language independently of the formal expression of them. But for Yélî Dnye this will prove helpful because many of these categories are immanent, and are clearly expressed only indirectly or through the collocation of forms that may be independently described elsewhere in passing – this follows from the gestalt marking properties noted above. In addition, when searching for related languages, such deeply ensconced distinctions may be important stigmata, and a number of parallel patterns will be pointed out in passing. These parallels, in addition to the portmanteau marking of verbal parameters and the suppletion of verb roots already mentioned, all help to relate Yélî Dnye to the highland Papuan languages of New Guinea. Some of the most prominent domains of grammatical categories are as follows.

2.4.1 Person and number

As we will see *passim*, the language motivates a paradigm of nine person/numbers as follows:

	Singular	Dual	Plural
1st person			
2nd person			
3rd person			

This paradigm is not fully explicit in independent pronouns (e.g. there are no third person 'nominative' or unmarked pronouns), and all nine forms are never fully distinguished in the pre-verbal inflectional clitic marking subject number. But cross-cutting realizations together fully exemplify the pattern, and the full nine cells are distinguished by the intersection of pre- and post-verbal clitics, the latter encoding *inter alia* properties of the object, conflated with subject and tense/aspect.

A number of conflations on this matrix are recurrent. For example, third person forms are never distinguished by number in the inflectional preverbal particles specialized for punctual aspect. Quite typically, 2nd person singular (2s) is conflated with first person dual (1d), in a pattern reminiscent of East Highland languages like Gahuku, Hua and Benabena (see Foley 1986:134–135). Sometimes in Yélî paradigms there is also conflation of 2nd person dual and 3rd person dual (2d = 3d). These conflations can be found in preverbal inflectional particles marking the subject, tense, aspect and mood in portmanteau fashion.

A special pattern of conflation is found in the post-verbal enclitics marking both subject and object properties for transitive verbs – a pattern special enough to constitute a grammatical category in its own right. Here the subject properties are grouped, so that 1st person OR singular persons are grouped into one category, Monofocal, and the 2nd and 3rd person non-singular persons are grouped in another, Polyfocal, category (the terminology comes from the study of other Papuan languages, e.g. Young (1971), Crysmann (2018), and is used by Henderson 1995:39). Languages exhibiting this category are found amongst the Gorokan family (Young 1971). Henderson 1995 noted the pattern in Yélî Dnye verbal enclitics, although in fact his version of the paradigms underplays its significance – see §6.1.2 for the details.

	Singular	Dual	Plural
1st person	MONOFOCAL	POLYFOCAL	
2nd person			
3rd person			

The monofocal/polyfocal distinction is covertly present in a number of other paradigms. For example, the Remote Past suppletive form of the verb root of many verbs is used with monofocal subjects only – this is because an alternative root is triggered by a non-zero post-verbal clitic which is bound to occur with polyfocal subjects.

2.4.2 Tense, aspect and mood

Henderson (1995) isolates 6 tenses, 2 aspects and 3 moods. These are variously and partially expressed in pre-verbal and post-verbal clitics and suppletive verb roots. Tense is absolute – that is, always anchored in the time of speaking, not relativized to points in the discourse (as in the English pluperfect *He had already gone*). Further, tense is metrical (as opposed to vectorial), based on diurnal units as indicated in Table 2.2 (see Frawley 1992; Comrie 1985, for comparative typology). Yélî Dnye is amongst the few languages in the world with six such tense distinctions (see Foley 1986:159–60, Stebbins et al. 2018, Foley 2018:917 for other Papuan languages with diurnal tenses). Since the Yélî tenses indicate the number of diurnal spans away from today, they may be lexically expressed by the Rossel words for 'today', 'day before yesterday', etc. which closely match the tense distinctions (see Levinson & Majid 2013 for Rossel conceptions of time).

Table 2.2: Main tense distinctions in Yélî Dnye.

Tenses: Henderson's (1995) labels	Semantic extension	Parallel lexical adverbial
Future Distal	Tomorrow or later	*mââ* 'tomorrow', *m:ii* 'day after tomorrow'
Immediate Future	Later today	*awêde* 'today'
Present	Now	*ala ngwo* 'right now'
Immediate Past	Earlier today	*awêde* 'today'
Near Past	Yesterday	*ma* 'yesterday'
Remote Past	Day before yesterday (or before)	*m:iituwo* 'day before yesterday or before'

Tense systems of this kind seem common in many Papuan languages, although in this case not the Gorokan ones (Foley 1986:160); they are found both in Trans New Guinea languages and in other languages of Southern New Guinea (Evans et al. 2018). Henderson (1995:23) notes that in inflectional paradigms the tenses are often functionally grouped into **proximal** and **distal** tenses, where the proximal tenses are *those three tenses nearest to coding time as available in the relevant aspect*, a point returned to below.

Henderson isolates two aspects, the continuous and the punctiliar (these terms are standard in Papuan linguistics, but 'punctiliar' is not distinct in connotation from the more usual term 'punctual', which I have therefore used instead). These aspects are marked not only in the preverbal and postverbal clitics, but also by suppletion or reduplication of the verb root, and it is one of the most far-reaching grammatical distinctions in the language. Papuan languages with aspectual marking of this type are found especially in the Western province of Papua New Guinea (Foley 1986:146) and in the languages of Southern New Guinea like Marind (Olsson 2017; Evans et al. 2018), but can also be found in Trans-New-Guinea languages like Mian (Fedden 2011). The punctual aspect is perfective, and the continuous aspect is imperfective – the continuous is used e.g. in a 'while'-clause, and it is the continuous form that provides nominalized gerunds 'doing X'. The two aspects form a fundamental distinction which plays a crucial role in the organization of the grammar and morphology.

The two aspects run through three moods. There is the indicative, imperative and what Henderson (1995:16) calls the habitual mood. Imperatives occurs in two tenses and 9 person/number combinations, and are one of the main ways of expressing deontic modality. As for the habitual, Henderson claims that the habitual cannot be a type of imperfective aspect, as Comrie (1976:26) appears to suggest in general discussion of such oppositions, because habituals occur in both the punctual and continuous aspects in Yélî, whereas Comrie's Table 1 (1976: 25) portrayed the habitual and continuous as two contrasting types of the imperfective, both opposed to the perfective. This, Comrie (pers. comm.) points out to me is incorrect, since although that is a typical configuration (opposing perfective to either habitual or continuous), other languages do combine a perfective aspect with the habitual. In this regard, Yélî parallels Bulgarian, so that the Perfective Imperfect (denoting iterative perfective events) in that language corresponds to Yélî's Punctual Habitual in the terminology used here (see Comrie 1976:31–32). In Yélî Dnye, the habitual indicates an action normally or regularly done, either punctual or imperfective in character, and it comes in two tenses (in the continuous aspect but only one in the punctual) indicating that the action is still so done, or was formerly so done. Treating it as a mood, Henderson argued, allows these intersections with tense and aspect to be portrayed paradigmatically. I retain his termi-

nology here for clarity and consistency. The imperative mood occurs in all persons and two tenses (Present and Future), and is one of the more complex corners of Yélî syntax and semantics, forming part of a complex system for the expression of deontic modality. There are a number of other mood-like distinctions which might be treated as moods: conditionals, counterfactuals, and subjunctive-like forms of the verbal complex based on using parts of the counterfactual marking.

Henderson (1995:26) provides the following table illustrating the interaction of tense distinctions with mood and aspect (note that this table implies, amongst other details, that the Habitual Past tense has a Remote Past semantics – which is correct). I have marked the tenses which are differentially treated as proximal (vs. 'distal') in the two aspects with 'prox' – these groupings determine shared marking in the post-verbal clitics.

Table 2.3: Cross-cutting categories of tense, mood and aspect in Yélî Dnye (after Henderson 1995: 26) √/Ø indicate, respectively, that the category is, or is not, operative in that intersection of categories by row/column.

TENSE	**MOOD**					
	INDICATIVE		***HABITUAL***		***IMPERATIVE***	
	CONT	**PUNCT**	**CONT**	**PUNCT**	**CONT**	**PUNCT**
FUTURE	√ distal	√ prox				
IMMED. FUTURE	√ prox		Ø	Ø	√	√
PRESENT	√ prox	Ø	√			√
IMMED. PAST	√ prox	√ prox				
NEAR PAST	√ distal	√ prox				
REMOTE PAST	√ distal	√ distal	√	√	Ø	Ø

2.4.3 Transitivity

Transitivity is marked largely in the post-verbal clitic: one cannot determine transitivity by the form of the pre-verbal clitic or the verb stem itself, although many verbal notions (e.g., betel-chewing, eating, grating coconuts, etc.) have distinct roots for transitive and intransitive counterparts (which one might treat as suppletion, except that these counterpart roots themselves supplete on other dimensions). Post-verbal intransitive clitics mark the number of the subject together with various collapsed categories of tenses and aspects, following the monofocal/polyfocal distinction mentioned above. Different clitics encode subject, object and tense/aspect/mood in portmanteau form.

Since the language is both morphologically and syntactically ergative, transitivity of the clause is also marked indirectly by the presence of an ergative NP, or an absolutive NP which is not a subject, or by syntactic processes restricted to clauses with ergative NPs (see e.g. §8.6.2). Some degree of interstitial transitive status occurs with some kinds of object incorporation (§7.9.4) and with reciprocals (§7.8).

2.4.4 Definiteness and epistemic status

The marking of definiteness and associated notions is distributed. Definiteness itself is not directly expressed, but the deictic and anaphoric status of NPs are marked in various ways. First, deictic and anaphoric determiners may precede the noun. Second, many nouns take a suffix *-ni*, while others have a suppletive form, collocating with such individuating determiners, as in *ló pi-ni* 'which man?'. Third, indefinite status may be marked by an indefinite singular quantifier, which may migrate (by quantifier-floating) into pre-verbal position only if the NP is in the absolutive case. Fourth, plural quantified noun phrases can occur with *knî*, a definite plural/'augmented' postpositional clitic.

The anaphoricity of the subject, as well as its epistemic certainty or uncertainty, or the deictic direction or uniqueness of actions (as opposed to their repetition by same or different actors), and so on, are marked in or on the preverbal clitic. The notions expressed are subtle, and my treatment in §6.1.3.1–§6.1.3.6 probably fails to catch many of the subtleties. Some of the distinctions here are also found in the demonstratives (§4.2.2.3).

2.4.5 Case

Ergative and Absolutive case are marked by postpositions on NPs, as well as in some subtle determiner movements (indefinite absolute determiners ending up in the pre-verbal nucleus). 'Ergative' implies the agent (A role in Dixon's (1994) terminology), and 'Absolutive' both the patient (or O role) in a transitive clause and the subject (S role) of an intransitive clause. In equatives both NPs are Absolutive (actually unmarked). Both Instrumental NPs and the Experiencer subjects of special experiencer constructions look superficially similar to Ergative NPs, but are distinguished in the dual or plural, so must be recognized as distinct cases on this and on syntactic grounds. In a curious pattern, both the Dative and Ablative (as in source or goal of giving) are conflated in a single case, and Locative source/goal are also systematically undistinguished (with zero case marking, and e.g. the same interrogative forms; §11.2).

Cross-referencing on inflectional clitics is nominative-accusative in pattern. Overt pronouns rarely co-occur with verbal cross-referencing – if they do, they can be marked on a 'nominative' pattern (shared form for intransitive and transitive subjects) or an ergative/absolutive one (especially in quotation contexts). There is an oblique case marker used to mark non-locative source/goal (or dative, ablative notions), which also sometimes occurs marking Experiencer subjects. There are also Comitative and Sociative postpositions, and a special form of the Ergative used for Experiencer NPs. Case postpositions often supplete to indicate the number of the NP (singular, dual or plural). The Locative case, along with the Absolutive, is unmarked. The Absolutive, however, may be indirectly marked by the lowering of indefinite quantifiers into the pre-verbal slot. Independent pronouns come in four paradigms, three associated with the unmarked or 'nominative', the experiencer and the oblique (source/goal) case and a fourth with the possessive.

There are important syntactic correlates of ergativity (Chapter 9) with e.g. (1) two kinds of clefts according to A vs. S/O role of the focal NP, (2) indefinite marker lowering on absolutive NPs only (whether in O or S function), (3) preservation of only absolutive (S or O) arguments in nominalizations.

2.4.6 Possession

Possession is normally marked by a possessive pronoun preceding the head noun, on the pattern 'John his house': [*Mwonî* [*u ngomo*]], which should be understood as bracketed in the manner shown (i.e. as a head-marking pattern). The possessive pronouns may of course be used without a preceding noun. The second person singular form of all nominals is formed by nasalizing the initial stop of a word, and altering other initial segments according to rules discussed under phonology below. Possession is asserted with a locative construction (on the lines of 'it is sitting in his possession'). Body part terms and a few kinterms have special forms for 3rd person possession – e.g. *kêê* 'arm' has the form *kóó* 'his arm', perhaps remnants of a more systematic category of inalienable possession.

As in many languages, possession plays an important role in NP-building, allowing the construction of complex NPs expressing, e.g., abstract time concepts (see §5.3).

2.4.7 Temporal subordination

Temporal subordination (see §8.5), as in 'While/when/during . . .' can be expressed in a number of distinct ways, for example by special forms of the pre-

verbal clitic incorporating *yi*, adverbial phrases of the kind *dini ghi n:ii ngê* ('at the time when') in the continuous aspect, and by nominal gerunds followed by *têdê*. In addition, there are 'When'-subordinators.

2.4.8 Conditionals and counterfactuals

Conditionals (§8.2) are expressed by special verbal enclitics on the antecedent; they are infrequently used. In comparison, the counterfactual conditionals (§8.3) are frequently used, and are expressed by special proclitics on both antecedent and consequent in a total paradigm of 252 cells! Both antecedent and consequent can be used alone to express deontic modality.

In addition to these domains of grammatical categories, Yélî Dnye has a number of themes that run through the grammar. One is the underlying theme of syntactic ergativity, with observations gathered together in Chapter 9. Remarkable is the small role that a subject category (uniting agents of transitives and subjects of intransitives) plays in the grammar. Another is the complexity and irregularity of negation, with an overview provided in Chapter 10. Many other remarkable features will be met in passing – this is an unusual language.