Preface

Rossel Island has a certain fame despite its small size, small population and remote location. First, in anthropology it is well known as the home of an indigenous money system of unrivalled complexity. Malinowksi had hoped to work there, but the First World War put him under closer observation on the Trobriands. How different the history of anthropology might have been had he been placed amongst the Rossels, puritans, economists and philosophers of the Louisiades, instead of among the light-hearted, competitive, hierarchical Trobrianders. His linguistic gifts would certainly have put the language on the map. Instead, a remarkable ethnographer, later to be a professor of economics, Wallace E. Armstrong worked there in 1921, and published an ethnography which is quite extraordinary given the three odd months of fieldwork on which it was based. This highlighted the highly-developed indigenous shell-money system – since then a Danish anthropologist John Liep (2009) has corrected the record with a full-length monograph of his own. Neither of these anthropologists broke the language code. For the island has a second claim to fame: the Rossel language Yélî Dnye is renowned throughout Milne Bay Province as bizarre and unlearnable, so that it already attracted curious glances from a number of early New Guinea pioneers in linguistics like the Reverend Baldwin, although they left nothing but notes (see e.g. Capell n.d.; see also Capell 1969). The difficulties in reaching Rossel, 250 reef-strewn nautical miles off the mainland, have kept generations of the curious from its shores.

This is not the first grammar of Yélî Dnye – that honour belongs to Jim Henderson's (1995) *Phonology and Grammar of Yele, Papua New Guinea*, a work of a hundred pages packed with information.[1] It is based on thirty years of experience that Jim and Anne Henderson have had translating the Bible into Yélî Dnye and promoting literacy in the language. It has proved a solid foundation on which to build, and I have been able to take over lock, stock and barrel the two most essential parts of that analysis – the phoneme inventory (with minor modifications) and the analysis of the verb complex. These are the two most complex parts of the language, and without that work, this one would not have been possible on any

1 The first published work on Yélî Dnye is MacGregor (1890), followed by the anonymous report in the *Annual Report on British New Guinea*, 1893–4, pp. 116–12. Ray (1895) provides some comparative vocabularies, with further notes by Armstrong in *Annual Report, Papua*, 1921–22, and in Ray (1938). Besides the works by the Hendersons and the present author (see references), the only other known material of value is a typescript by A. Capell, with notes by the Rev. B. Baldwin, in the SIL archives in Ukurumpa.

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reasonable timescale, if at all. This grammar absorbs most of the information in the earlier one, while being more explicit about many details and adding much richer information on sentence structure. I have tried to keep the terminology the same or similar to make it easy to compare the two works.

I have benefited in other ways too from the Hendersons' work. First, Jim shared with me his accumulation of handwritten verbal paradigms, which gave me a framework for later elicitation and saved years of fumbling in the dark. Secondly, I took over the first edition of the dictionary the Hendersons published, which allowed me to rapidly set up a glossing system for texts – since then I was able to contribute many hundreds of words to their second edition (Henderson & Henderson 1999), partly I hope repaying the debt. Thirdly, I inherited some skilled collaborators, whom the Hendersons had trained to write and think about the language. Most important of these was Isidore Yidika, who served me, and this project, with extraordinary loyalty for more than 20 years, dropping all his other obligations at short notice to work with me whenever I was on Rossel. He was a man with only a few years' formal education who had that extraordinary and rare ability to examine a language inside his own head. He died before this grammar was quite complete, and it is dedicated to him. His son Ghaalyu helped in the final stages of its completion.

This work, which has been two decades in the making, would not have happened without the initial support and help of the Catholic Church and its MSC Missionaries (as I was privileged to be able to tell His Holiness the late John Paul in 1998). Bishop Desmond Moore arranged my first and many subsequent trips to Rossel. The late Brother Colin Milne was the essential facilitator in Alotau, arranging boats to my remote destination. Father Ensing based halfway at Nimowa helped me on my way many times, and we spent Cyclone Justin together in 1997, when the mission at Nimowa was almost totally destroyed and the mission on Rossel severely damaged, so that I spent a field season as an aid worker. The late Father Kevin English was my first host on Rossel, a man whose dedication to the people of Rossel is still legendary, and whose prowess on the steep and narrow paths of Rossel in his 80s I could not rival in my 40s. Following him, Father Michael Sims (the last Australian resident) likewise put all the resources of his mission at Jinjo at my service – without his radio, boats and generator, supplies and such, the logistics of work on Rossel would have been much more difficult for my first few fieldtrips. The dedication of the Catholic Mission to the peoples of the outer islands of the province was inspirational. In the last decade its material arm has been severely retrenched, with the loss of much infrastructure and regular shipping, but it continues to run the primary school and clinic in difficult circumstances.

In all the later years, I lived in the village of Wâpuchêdê, in the hamlet of Isidore Yidika Wombodo tp:oo, my principal consultant. He and his brothers provided land, built bush-material houses for myself and my wife Penelope Brown, maintained them, guarded our stockpile of solar panels and the like, and in general made work on Rossel possible. I owe a huge debt to his extended family for their generosity and their thoughtful hospitality.

Working on Rossel Island has been for me a wonderful experience – I mention this in the hope of inspiring other fieldworkers to work in the Papuan world, where a large proportion of the world's remaining language diversity now resides. As an undergraduate, I vividly recollect hearing Meyer Fortes, the great British anthropologist, telling of his wonder at first moving amongst the Tallensi: "Here was the Old Testament come alive". And so I felt on Rossel, in a fully functional 'tribal' society miraculously preserved into the 21st century, where kinship and clanship are the backbone of the social system, where people routinely reckon ten generations back in genealogy, where there is little effective government presence, where subsistence methods are unchanged for millennia, and the things of the West have little importance. And what a rich world it is, in every way. A vast wealth of traditional knowledge, from fishing techniques to medicinal plants, from a huge mythology to a complex bilineal kinship system, from the intricacies of the shell money system to the complex beliefs behind the myriad sacred places on the island. And then there is the language, woven into all of this, constitutive of it in part, and flowing like a lifeblood into all these intricate social institutions. Here is a society of orators, with a rich ethnomusicology, native poetry, taboo vocabularies, divination sessions and enough complexity to fill the lives of many ethnographers of speaking. No one with a background in anthropology or linguistics could step on this enchanted island and not be in thrall for life.

I should say something about the aims of this grammar. In some ways it is a byproduct of work on particular aspects of the language motivated by cross-linguistic comparison in my research group at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. Many of the finer analytical points made below would not have emerged without the use of detailed elicitation techniques developed for the study of semantic typology, and I owe a big debt to all my colleagues, past and present, who helped develop those techniques. For a number of good reasons this is not, or not only, a text-based grammar. It is informed by a very large corpus of spoken Yélî Dnye, including records of every language genre (from conversation to poetry to song to village courts to sorcery inquisitions) I have been able to record, but it is a language with both huge and systematic paradigms and nooks of horrible irregularity. A text-based approach would give one only fragments of this, and not allow one to get an overall picture of the maximal structure of the language – many aspects of that structure are arcane, or vanishingly rare in

production. I plan to make my text corpus available in some form in the future. But for comparative purposes we want a record of the maximal structure, what is grammatically possible and how it would be said, and for this language that means extensive reliance on informant work. Consequently, the reader will find tables of paradigm after paradigm – it is simply that kind of language. I have tried to be generous in exemplification (though it would be impossible in reasonable bounds to exemplify each of the interacting myriad forms), in part because there are so many distinctions it would be hard for the reader to compute even the simplest sentence correctly. Further the examples make clear the distributed nature of grammatical coding in this language – a paradigm is reflected not in the morphology of one part of a sentence but distributed throughout it. Because of the extraordinary complexity of the language and the huge paradigms, this record must be assumed to be flawed and incomplete – it will take a native-speaker linguist to finish the job, and for that we may have to wait a generation or two.

I should record that this grammar reflects a remarkable partnership between me and Yidika Wombodo tp:oo. The last white missionary, Father Michael Sims, seeing us hard at work for 10 hour days in a very un-Melanesian fashion, used to joke that I was downloading Yidika's mind, and who was to say whether his Yélî Dnye was representative. Yidika developed a quite remarkable ability to rattle off paradigms, though checking them was more painful. It could take a week or more to be confident that a single paradigm was basically sound, and then the collection of plenty of textual exemplification (the control on Yidika's representativeness) before I felt sure we had cracked it. Few people in any world would have had the patience and intellectual stamina for this. Really, this grammar is at least as much his as mine, but because he would not have been able to follow what I have made of his material, I alone must take the blame for all the inevitable mistakes. So it appears under my name, but with a dedication to him.

I have not included more than a small sample (Appendix II) of the customary sample glossed texts (except *passim* as illustrations of points of grammar), nor a word list, for reasons of space and cost, but glossed samples and a working Toolbox lexicon will be found archived under a persistent identifier.[2]

Finally, a number of colleagues have read this grammar and given me helpful hints and corrections. I am grateful to Gunter Senft, Ger Reesink, Penelope Brown and Harald Hammarström for extensive comments. I was fortunate to have reviewers steeped in both the area and the typological literature: Nick Evans, Bernard Comrie, and Bruno Olsson. I had early help on the formatting from Edith Sjo-

2 https://hdl.handle.net/1839/0eef0ca4-fcb9-4f0d-80bd-636ebcc7670f

erdsma and Ludy Cilissen. Last, I was lucky enough to have Angela Terrill, both an expert in off-shore Papuan languages and typology, help in the final preparation of the MS for the press. They all hugely improved the manuscript – remaining faults are mine.

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Note to the Reader

A basic typological outline can be found in Chapter 2. Topics of special interest for typologists include the phonology (Ch. 3), ergativity (Ch. 9), negation (Ch. 10) and semantic fields (Ch. 11), while the rest of the grammar will provide the normal grist for the typological mill. Discussion of the extensive morphology – or rather the clitic-like equivalent – will be found in Chapters 6–8. Throughout, I have tried to provide copious examples, partly so that readers can check the analysis themselves, partly because in a language of this complexity the possibility of re-analysis has to be allowed for. Impatient readers can just examine the first examples of a construction or paradigm and pass on. What this grammar does not capture at all is the very special character of verbal interaction on Rossel, with its intensive use of gesture and facial expresssion (see Levinson 2005, 2007b, 2015, Levinson & Majid 2013). A single short text will be found in Appendix II. Extensive video and text collections will be made available at The Language Archive, Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.[3]

3 https://hdl.handle.net/1839/8c915b82-3c51-4333-ad02-d107a9baa5e1