

Definiteness and Familiarity in Yemba

Overview. Yemba (a.k.a. Dschang) is an understudied Bamileke language spoken in West Cameroon with over 300,000 speakers. Data from Yemba have seldom featured in theoretical discussions, except Hyman and Tadjou (1976); Hyman (1985); Bird (1996); Brown and Torrence (2021); Chen and Lehman (2021); Czuba (2022); Faytak and Steffman (2024). This paper investigates definiteness in Yemba, focusing on two markers associated with definite interpretations: the relative clause (RC) marker [la] and the anaphoric marker [mɛt]. We argue that [la] is a determiner that heads a RC (cf. Ouhalla 2004 on Arabic) and [mɛt] is an anaphoric *modifier* that encodes familiarity. All data below comes from original fieldwork with a 30 y.o. native speaker consultant from Bafou, Cameroon.

Data. Bare nouns (1), NPs with demonstratives (2), NPs with RCs headed by [la] (3), and NPs followed by the anaphoric marker [mɛt] (4) can all receive definite interpretations in Yemba. We focus on the semantic/syntactic contributions of [la] and [mɛt], discussed in turn below.

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| <p>(1) mɔ̃ɛŋ tɛ̀ kù m̃d̃ʒiã nù.
1SG NEG can see sun
'I can't see the sun.'</p> | <p>(2) mó wɔ̃ áŋvèk.
child this short
'This child is short.'</p> |
| <p>(3) ɪzó mɔ̃ɛŋ ʒɪjó tã ɱbú. ɱbú mɔ̃ɛŋ kɔ̃ nʒɪjó lá̃ ā kɔ̃ nbón.
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.'</p> | |
| <p>(4) ɪzó mɔ̃ɛŋ ʒjó tã ɱbú. ɱbú mɛ̀t kɔ̃ nbón.
yesterday 1SG see one dog dog MET PST good
'Yesterday I saw a dog. The dog was cute.'</p> | |

[la]. [la] exhibits three distributional restrictions: ① [la] is only felicitous in definite NPs. This is evident by its incompatibility with the numeral [ta] 'one' in (5). ② [la] requires a modifying RC and cannot occur with bare nouns (7). ③ RCs with [la] force a restrictive interpretation: e.g., (6) is only felicitous in a context with more than one dog. Put another way, [la] imposes an anti-uniqueness requirement on the head noun [mbu] 'dog' in (6).

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| <p>(5) mɔ̃ɛŋ koŋ (#ta) mbu a-nsɛnɛ la.
1SG like one dog 3SG-black RM
Available: 'I like the dog that is black.'
Unavailable: 'I like a dog that is black.'</p> | <p>(6) mbu a-nsɛnɛ la a-nfaŋ tɛ.
dog 3SG-black RM 3SG-big very
'The dog that is black is very big.'</p> |
| <p>(7) ɪzó mɔ̃ɛŋ ʒɪjó tã ɱbú. ɱbú mɛ̀t/(*la) kɔ̃ nbón.
yesterday 1SG see one dog dog MET/RM PST good
'Yesterday I saw a dog. The dog was cute.'</p> | |

[mɛt]. [mɛt] requires familiarity of the definite's referent, satisfiable by certain types of strong or weak familiarity (cf. Roberts 2003): e.g., [mɛt] is felicitous in cases of strong familiarity via coreference (4), weak familiarity from contextual entailments (8), and bridging via relational inference (9).

- (8) [Context: Background music of a song playing, John says to Michel:]
pɔl a si ŋkɔn azɔp mɛt, da a læsiŋkɔn ɔnzɔpɔ.
Paul 3SG PROG like song MET but 3SG NEG.like singer
'Paul likes this song, though he doesn't like the singer.'
- (9) mɔ̃ɛŋ ʒɪjó tãŋ gié í:ã. zìn mɛ̀t gɔ̃n sã.
1SG see one house yesterday roof DET CORP break
'I saw a house today. The roof was broken.'

Crucially, [mɛt] is infelicitous when the referent lacks any form of familiarity. In (10), for instance, [mɛt] is ruled out if the woman is discourse-new. Notably, the RC in (10) exemplifies what Hawkins (1978) terms an 'establishing RC', which characteristically does not presuppose familiarity.

- (10) mōenzuí (*mèt) ikāṭó kōné pōī ikótrèt ā kōn zīé í nkō
 woman M_{ET} 3SG.went hangout with.3SG last-night 3SG PST give 3SG problem
 ‘The woman he went out with last night was nasty to him.’

Unlike [la], we argue [mèt] does not require anti-uniqueness. Although [mèt] is found to be infelicitous in larger situation definites (11) and superlatives (12), we argue that their infelicities come from a lack of the appropriate form of familiarity encoded by [mèt], not non-satisfaction of anti-uniqueness.

- (11) nū (#mèt) tē īāṅ (12) pōl aṅmia ngaṅ (#mèt) aṭe jēsku mēt
 sun M_{ET} very shining Paul big person M_{ET} within school M_{ET}
 ‘The sun is hot.’ ‘Paul is the tallest man in the school.’

Analysis. Ouhalla (2004) argues that RCs vary cross-linguistically in being CPs or DPs. The restriction of [la] to RCs in definite NPs supports DP RCs in Yemba. Following Ouhalla’s analysis of Arabic, we propose that Yemba RCs are DPs headed by [la] which reside in a specifier position in the nominal domain. The definite [ṁbú mōṅ kō nzió lál] ‘the dog that I saw’ in (3) thus receives the structure (13). (Yemba DPs are head-final, with demonstratives (2) and numerals occurring post-nominally.) We further propose that [la] denotes (14): [la] takes two type $\langle e, t \rangle$ arguments (from N and RC), presupposes that the N is anti-unique, and returns the unique individual satisfying both.

- (13) $[_{NP} [_{N} \text{ṁbú}]] [_{DP} [_{TP} \text{mōṅ kō nzió}]] [_{D} \text{la}]]$ (14) $\lambda P \lambda Q: [|Q| > 1]. \text{i.x}. P(x) \wedge Q(x)$

Turning to [mèt], we first argue that [mèt] is not a demonstrative marker: [mèt] patterns with definite markers cross-linguistically in exhibiting a consistency effect (cf. Löbner 1985; Dayal 2004; Moroney 2019). In particular, definite markers resist contradictory predication (15), unlike demonstratives.

- (15) [mó wō/#mèt] āṅvèk, dānbō [mó wō/#mèt] ísísíā
 child this/M_{ET} short but child this/M_{ET} tall
 ‘(lit.) This/#the child is short but this/#the child is tall.’

We further argue that [mèt] is not a determiner. This is supported by the optionality of [mèt]. If another definite marker is present (e.g. [la]), [mèt] becomes optional in most cases (cf. (3)). Without [la], the optionality of [mèt] is also greatly improved when the noun is modified by adjectives:

- (16) Yesterday I saw a black dog and a white dog...
 nsene mbu (mēt) a-le mponte
 black dog M_{ET} 3SG-PST beautiful

‘Yesterday I saw a black dog and a white dog. The black dog was beautiful.’

If [mèt] is a determiner, its optionality would violate the Blocking Principle (Chierchia 1998), which bans covert type-shifting if an overt determiner (i.e. [mèt]) can do the job. We thus analyze [mèt] as an anaphoric modifier that denotes (18) and propose that the definite [ṁbú mèt] ‘the dog’ in (4) has the structure in (17). While markers in other languages similar to [mèt] are analyzed as determiners (Arkoh and Matthewson 2013; Sharma 2025), our proposal to analyze [mèt] as a modifier is reminiscent of the determiner-genitives vs. adjectival-genitives divide in possessor constructions (Lyons 1986; Plank 1992). We propose that a similar divide exists in nominal anaphoric elements – in some languages they are determiners but in others they are modifiers.

- (17) $[_{NP} [_{N'} \text{ṁbú}_{[M_{etP} \text{mèt Index}]]}]$ (18) $[[\text{mèt}]] = \lambda x \lambda y. x = y$

Implications. A central question in the analysis of anaphoric definites is where anaphoric indices are syntactically located—commonly assumed to be arguments of either NPs (e.g. dynamic semantics à la Heim and Kratzer 1998) or definite determiners (e.g. Schwarz 2009). This paper proposes a third option: anaphoric indices are NP modifiers. Evidence from Yemba shows that [la] selects both an NP and a relative clause, excluding the NP as an argument of [mèt] – an unexpected conclusion if [mèt] were a determiner. The optionality of [mèt] and the Blocking Principals further argue against a determiner analysis. We conclude that [mèt] functions as a modifier hosting an anaphoric index.

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