

Yamben: A previously undocumented language of Madang

This paper introduces Yamben, a previously undocumented Papuan language of Madang province, Papua New Guinea, which until now has gone unmentioned in the linguistic literature, lacking even an ISO-639 code. I discuss the reasons that Yamben has been overlooked, give an overview of its phonology and grammar, and discuss prospects for arriving at a genetic classification of the language.

Yamben has been overlooked by linguistic science until the author's primary fieldwork, carried out over several visits from 2016-2018. This is surprising, given that Yamben-speaking communities are by no means isolated. They are in daily contact with other well-known language groups, and within a day's trip of the nearest city, Madang. The main reason that Yamben was not recorded in previous linguistic surveys of the area, including the foundational work of J. A. Z'graggen (1980), is conflation with the similarly-named nearby language Yaben.

Yamben's phoneme inventory has several features typical of a Papuan language, including stops at three places of articulation, a five-vowel system, and small number of fricatives, liquids, and glides (Foley 1986). Features not found in Yamben's closest neighbors, but not uncommon in Papuan languages more widely, include a palatal nasal and a labialiovelar series (Foley 1986).

The syntactic profile of Yamben has many typically Papuan traits, including agglutinative, fusional verbal morphology characteristic of many Papuan languages. Tense and person and number of the subject are marked by fusional suffixes, while person and number of the object are marked by prefixes. Yamben also possesses traits which are particularly characteristic of languages of Madang, such as is suppletive forms of the verb 'give', with different verb roots depending on the person and number of the recipient. Another areal trait found in Yamben is that object-marking prefixes are used on only a subset of transitive verbs, while in the majority of transitives objects are unmarked.

A comparison of a sample of basic vocabulary of Yamben and nearby languages, including Yaben (Table 1), shows some potential cognates (items 2, 5, 7, 8), but a greater number of forms that seem clearly unrelated. Although regular sound correspondences have been identified between Yaben and the other nearby languages, none have been established between Yamben and any language. I therefore suggest that Yamben likely belongs to the proposed Madang subgroup of Trans-New Guinea, and is potentially a primary branch of this subgroup. It therefore potentially plays an important role in understanding the linguistic history of Madang and Trans-New Guinea.

Table 2. Basic vocabulary in Yamben and nearby languages

gloss	Yamben	Yaben	Manep	Gabak	Barem
1. man	dambu	munanu	munu	mur	mamunden
2. name	bupim	upim(u)	unim	vin	unim
3. fire	angaji	muta	andup	akut	munduv
4. tree	angan	namu	mundu	ŋam	wam
5. louse	angun	gunu	gunu	igun	gun
6. bird	akiem	malagwanu	nambe	liweŋ	munungan
7. house	m ^w an	mupni	amun	kaven	amun
8. tooth	ananji	n ^Λ na	nananŋ	anek	nananŋ
9. head	kumu	tazi	kumu	daut	sa
10. eye	mambudum	magipo	musanŋ	mek	muanŋ

Foley, W. A. (1986). *The Papuan Languages of New Guinea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Z'graggen, J. A. (1980). *A Comparative Word List of the Northern Adelbert Range Languages, Madang Province, Papua New Guinea*. Pacific Linguistics: Canberra.