Complete Grammar of the Yajéé Language

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1 Introduction

The Yajéé language is spoken by the Yajé people on the islands of Hamar and Hegüü, in the Western Sea, called Ṇeya'aa by the Yajé. The Yajé are voyagers and have explored many of the islands in that area, but at the point of modern Yajéé, they have only established permanent settlements on these two islands. The Yajé have been in constant contact with peoples on the mainland, and have inherited a significant number of loanwords from them. Many words referring to nomadic lifestyles or desert and steppe flora and fauna come from these mainlanders.

The Yajéé language is moderately synthetic and subject-prominent. It is consistently dependent-marking and has a nominative-accusative alignment.

Yajéé is a conlang I started working on in 2020 as part of a speedlang challenge. To anyone who reads this, please send me any comments and critiques you may have. I am always trying to get better at conlanging. Thank you!

1.1 History

Yajéé is descended from an earlier language, Proto-Yajéé. PY's morphosyntax included SOV word order, a case system like Yajéé's, a perfective/imperfective/habitual aspect system, and it did not have many features that Yajéé has, such as the partitive case, the irrealis marker, and converbs.

Below is a comprehensive list of significant developments that led to the formation of modern Yajéé:

C = consonant
V = vowel
N = nasal consonant
Ø = loss of sound
= word boundary

1. **Converbs develop**
2. C[+glottal]CV → CV[+high tone]
3. C[+aspirated]V → C[-aspirated]V[+high tone]
4. **Aspect shifts**
5. C[+stop][-voice] → C[+stop][+voice] / V_V
6. VNC[+continuant] → V[+nasal]C[+continuant]
7. a e o → e i u / _C(C)V[+high]
8. V[+high][+nasal] V[+mid][+nasal] → V[+mid][+nasal] V[+low-mid][+nasal]
9. **Partitive case develops**
10. t d ʈ ɖ k g → ʧ ʤ ʧ ʤ ʧ ʤ / _{e, i}
11. **Loanword influx from mainland**
12. V[+back] → V[+front] / _C(C){e, i, ɛ}
13. C[+velar] → C[+velar][+labialized] / _V[+round]
14. ɛ̃ œ̃ ɔ̃ → ɔ̃
15. **Jespersen's cycle completes, original negative lost, only the intensifier remains**
16. C[+lateral] → j / V_V
17. V → Ø / _#
18. VC[+stop][+voice] → V[-high tone] / _#
19. Pitch accent system implemented, maximum of one marked tone per word

2 Phonology

2.1 Consonants

		Labial	Dental/ Alveolar	Retroflex	Velar	Glottal
Stops		p (b)	t (d)	ʈ <ṭ> (ɖ <ḍ>)	k kʷ <kw> (g) (gʷ <gw>)	ʔ <'>
Affricates			tʃ <ch> (dʒ <j>)			
Fricatives			s	ʂ <ṣ>		h
Nasals		m	n	ɳ <ṇ>		
Approximates	Lateral		l	ɭ <ḷ>		
	Plain	w	r		j <y>	

Consonants in parentheses are allophones.

Brackets indicate romanization.

2.2 Vowels

	Front		Central	Back
	Unround	Round		
High	i	y <ü>		u
Mid	e ẽ <ę>	ø <ö> ø̃ <ọ̈>	ə̃ <ë>	o õ <ǫ>
Low	a ã <ą>			

High tone is marked with an acute accent.

2.3 Phonotactics

Yajéé's syllable structure is as follows:

CV^{T}N/S#

C = any consonant
V = any vowel
^{T} = tone (marked or unmarked)
N = any nasal consonant
S = consonants other than stops or laterals

• Velars do not occur before front vowels i, e and their rounded and nasal equivalents.
• Labialized velars only occur before rounded vowels and ɔ̃.
• Laterals do not occur between vowels.

2.4 Pitch Accent

Yajéé features a pitch accent system. Every word can take one of three tone patterns, but this is technically a result of a single marked tone in the word that dictates all other tones. The three patterns are as follows:

Unmarked: All tones in the word are low.

(1)   maay [màːj] "still, again"

Low marked: The marked syllable takes high tone, and all other tones are low.

(2)   wítee [wí.tèː] "to ride"

High marked: The marked syllable and the preceding syllable are high tone, all other tones are low.

(3)   tínár [tí.nár] "king, chief"

Any vowels in hiatus will default to the marked tone and are phonemically only a single tone.

When morphemes come into contact, if there is only one marked tone, the word will default to that. If there are two marked tones (low or high), the first will be lost and the second will become high marked. If the second tone is already high marked, then the first tone is simply lost.

(4)   rajem "to fall" + -imár "cessative aspect" = rajembimár "fell"

(5)   písan "prey, game" + -sóma' "partitive case" = pisánsóma' "some game"

There are also several instances of common words which do not fit these tone patterns, and must be memorized

(6)   tíbádár "to go"

2.5 Allophony

1. Voiced stops [b d ʤ ɖ g gʷ] are allophones of their unvoiced equivalents [p t ʧ ʈ k kʷ] between voiced segments. These were phonemic for a brief period of the language's history, but were lost quickly with the deletion of final voiced stops and did not have much time to solidify themselves as separate phonemes in the minds of speakers. These allophones are reflected in the romanization.

2. /r/ is phonetically a trill [r] in initial and final position, and is phonetically a tap [ɾ] between vowels.

3. Vowels occurring before nasals are lightly nasalized, but most speakers are not aware of this and the nasalization is not as strong as that of the true nasal vowels, so it is not reflected in the romanization.

3 Morphology

3.1 Nouns

Yajéé nouns inflect for case, and receive no marking for number or gender/class. However, direct objects do make a distinction between animate and inanimate nouns (see **3.1.1 Case**).

Nouns have a stem vowel which may be accompanied by a consonant in cases other than the nominative. Because of this, dictionary entries for nouns show both the nominative and accusative stems. The accusative stem is also what speakers differ to when creating new derivations.

3.1.1 Case

Yajéé nouns inflect for six cases, the Nominative, Accusative, Genitive, Dative, Partitive, and Locative.

Nominative	-
Accusative	-gáṣ
Genitive	-ḍaa
Dative	-mḝs
Partitive	-sóma'
Locative	-sóó

Nominative:
The nominative case is used for the subjects of transitive verbs, the experiencers of intransitive verbs, and the focus noun of a predicative phrase.

(7)   he   tá-Ø   ise-sóma'
       see.PERF 1SG-NOM PROX.DEM-PART
       He tá isesóma'.
       I saw him/her.

(8)   tíbádár chimáá-Ø
       go.IMP boy-NOM
       Tíbádár chimáá.
       The boy is going.

(9)   ṭayár   tá-Ø   chimamó-sóó
       exist.IMP 1SG-NOM boy-LOC
       Ṭayár tá chimamósóó.
       I am a boy.

Accusative:
The accusative is used to mark inanimate direct objects of transitive and ditransitive verbs. It is also used in nouns in postpositional phrases, when the preposition indicates a type of motion or change in state.

(10)   tan-imár si-Ø kongo-gáṣ
       hunt-CESS 1PL-NOM pig-ACC
       Tanimár si kongogáṣ.
       We hunted a pig.

(11)   rajimb-imár ḷa-Ø   lüümíí-Ø   sidaga-gáṣ par tá-ḍaa
       fall-CESS   one-NOM raindrop-NOM face-LOC   ALL 1SG-GEN
       Rajimbimár ḷa lüümíí sidagagáṣ par táḍaa.
       One raindrop fell on my face.

(12)   lür   tá-Ø   koonó-gáṣ páása-mḝs
       give.PERF 1SG-NOM saddle-ACC horse-DAT
       Lür tá koonógáṣ páásamḝs.
       I gave the saddle to the horse.

Genitive:
The genitive is used to mark possessors and comitatives.

(13)   yo   chimáá-Ø mije-ḍaa   lüümíí-gáṣ
       drink.IMP boy-NOM PROX.DEM-GEN rain-ACC
       Yo chimáá mijeḍaa lüümíígáṣ.
       His son is drinking rainwater.

(14)   tíbádér tá-Ø   Hamara-gáṣ tínára-ḍaa
       go.PERF 1SG-NOM Hamar-ACC chief-GEN
       Tíbádér tá Hamaragáṣ tínáraḍaa.
       I went to Hamar with the chief.

Dative:
The dative is used to mark indirect objects of ditransitive verbs, as well as benefactives.

(15)   lür   pun-Ø   rudu-sóma' chimámo-mȩ̈s ise-ḍaa
       give.PERF man-NOM fruit-PART   boy-DAT   PROX.DEM-GEN
       Lür pun rudusóma' chimámomȩ̈s iseḍaa.
       The man gave his son some fruit.

(16)   tan-asé-ímár   ṣebída   kon-Ø   tá-mȩ̈s ise-sóma'   ayii   chégá
       hunt-PASS-CESS yesterday pig-NOM 1SG-DAT PROX.DEM-PART be.complete.IMP SUB
       Tanaséímár ṣebída kon támȩ̈s isesóma' ayii chégá.
       They all hunted a pig for me yesterday.

Partitive:
The partitive refers to a portion or indefinite amount of a noun, and marks the direct object of transitive and ditransitive verbs with animate nouns. It also marks reintroduced agents in passive constructions.

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Locative:
The locative indicates location in space and time, and it is used with postpositions that have more specific meanings of these concepts. It also marks the comment noun in a predicative phrase.

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3.2 Pronouns

Pronouns function identically to nouns and receive all the same case marking. There are no third-person pronouns, as their uses can be approximated using demonstratives. The proximal and distal demonstratives serve as proximate and obviate third person pronouns, respectively.

	1		2	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
Nominative	tá	si	ṇi	lö
Accusative	tágáṣ	sigáṣ	ṇigáṣ	löjigáṣ
Genitive	táḍaa	siḍaa	ṇiḍaa	löjiḍaa
Dative	támẹ̈s	simẹ̈s	ṇimẹ̈s	löjimẹ̈s
Partitive	tásóma'	sisóma'	ṇisóma'	löjisóma'
Locative	tasóó	sisóó	ṇisóó	löjisóó

3.3 Verbs

Yajéé verbs conjugate for four aspects, which interact with the telicity of the verb to produce myriad aspectual distinctions, and they conjugate for passive and causative meanings as well. In addition, there are three converbs and a verbal noun, not to mention a handful of particles used to convey more grammatical meanings.

Verbs (except for a very small class) have two stems used in a variety of contexts, the perfective stem and the imperfective stem. Because of this distinction, and the fact that many verb forms require a stem vowel, dictionary entries for verbs display the verb in the imperfective, the inceptive, and if applicable, the perfective.

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3.3.1 Aspect

Yajéé verbs conjugate for four aspects: perfective, imperfective, inceptive, and cessative.

Perfective	Perfective Stem
Imperfective	Imperfective Stem
Inceptive	-iba
Cessative	-imár

The inceptive and cessative use the perfective stem.

Verbs can be categorized into three groups: changeless, atelic, and telic.

A changeless, or stative verb is one that describes a quality or state, and this group includes all adjectives as well.

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An atelic verb presents an action or event as being incomplete or having no defined endpoint.

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A telic verb presents an action or event as being complete in some sense.

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Each of these types of verb interacts with the four aspects to produce eight different aspectual distinctions:

	Changeless	Atelic	Telic
Perfective	*Stative*	*Perfective*	*N/A*
Imperfective	*Gnomic*	*Imperfective*	
Inceptive	*Inchoative*	*Inceptive*	*Defective*
Cessative	*N/A*	*Cessative*	*Perfective*

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3.3.2 Valency-Changing Operations

Yajéé verbs conjugate for passive and causative voice. Because the imperfective is historically the unmarked form of a verb, verbs always take the imperfective stem when used with these voices. However, to distinguish important grammatical aspects, the passive and causative have distinct forms for imperfective vs perfective stem uses.

	Imperfective	Perfective
Passive	-asé	-así
Causative	-ṇah	-ṇeh

The passive voice is used to promote a non-subject argument to the topic, and to demote an unimportant subject.

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The agent can be reintroduced with the partitive case, a remnant of its history as a combination of the locative case and an ablative postposition.

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3.3.3 Non-Finite forms

3.3.3.1 Verbal Noun

Verbs can be made into nouns via the verbal noun construction. The verbal noun takes the perfective stem of a verb.

Verbal Noun	-uu

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3.3.3.2 Converbs

Yajéé uses three converbs to mark dependent clauses: the imperfective, perfective, and purposive converbs. All three take the perfective stem, for historical rather than semantic reasons.

Imperfective	-ǫsóó
Perfective	-ümeer
Purposive	-ummę̈s

The imperfective converb signals that the converb clause is completed at the same time as the action of the main verb clause.

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The perfective converb signals that the converb clause was completed before the action of the main verb clause.

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The purposive converb signals that the main verb was carried out in order to complete the action of the converb clause

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3.4 Adjectives

Adjectives are identical in form and function to verbs, and receive all the same marking as verbs. When used attributively, they are subordinated in a relative clause.

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4 Derivational Morphology

4.1 Noun-Forming

Suffixes are attached to the accusative stem of nouns, and sometimes are accompanied by other changes.

• Ha-/he- - forms nouns meaning "place of X."

(49)　mar, mara- "mother", Hamar "the island of Hamar, the motherland"

(50)　küü "to be born, to be new", Hegüü "the island of Hegüü, lit. new land"

• -: - forms names of languages from ethnic group names. This affix has an interesting etymology, from the PY word ma "to be heavenly" or "to be inspired." The Yajé believe language to be a spirit which bestows its power on speakers to distinguish them from the animals.

(51)　ya, yajé- "voyager", Yajéé (the form Yajé is from an augmentative Ya'kea, its accusative stem is Yajéá-)

• The augmentative creates a larger, older, or more powerful noun, or a more intense verb. Its form is realized as the accusative stem of the original lexeme in the nominative stem, and -a in the accusative stem.

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4.2 Verb-Forming

The affix will determine the form the verb takes.

• siga- - forms verbs meaning "to make/do X."

(54)　wes, wesi- "thought, idea", sigawes, sigawesiba, sigawes "to think"

5 Syntax

5.1 Word Order

Yajéé has a basic word order of VSO, a shift caused by focusing of verbs in PY.

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Converb clauses occur just previous to the main clause.

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Adjectives and genitives follow their head nouns.

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Yajéé has postpositions, occurring after their dependent nouns.

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Auxiliary verbs occur before their head verbs.

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Relative clauses occur after their head nouns.

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Numbers precede nouns.

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5.2 Topicalization

In PY, topicalization was triggered by moving an argument to the front of a statement, and this method is still used by older speakers. Younger speakers tend to use the passive, allowing for an analysis that the subject is interpreted as the topic, and the passive promotes an otherwise commented object into a topicalized role.

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5.3 Periphrastic Grammar

Yajéé has several grammatical particles and auxiliaries which can occur before or after the verb, depending on historical factors.

5.3.1 Negative Particle

Verbs in PY were negated by a negative verb and an intensifier which meant "never". In modern Yajéé, the original negative verb has been lost, completing Jespersen's Cycle, and only the intensifier remains as a negation particle șii, which occurs after the main verb.

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5.3.2 Irrealis Auxiliary

The verb na, which means "to believe", is used to mark irrealis mood in verb phrases. It can also modify a converb clause by being placed into the imperfective converbial state, regardless of the lexical converb used in the clause.

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5.3.3 Subordinating Particle

Relative clauses can be formed by treating the relative clause like a normal main clause, with the subordinating particle chégá, which occurs after the main verb of the relative clause. However, the head noun must be the subject of the relative clause, so to maintain this, the passive may be used to move an argument to the subject. This means that extraneous non-core constituents of a verb phrase such as postpositional phrases may not be relativized.

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5.4 Predicatives

Predicative adjectives are used identically to changeless verbs.

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Nominal predicatives are formed by using the verb ṭayár "to exist" and placing the focus noun in the nominative and the comment noun in the locative, for a meaning like "X exists at Y."

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6 Semantic Fields

6.1 Kinship System

The Yajé have a strong patrilineal tendency in their society, and their Omaha-type kinship system reflects that. Same-sex siblings of one's parents are referred to as one's mother and father, their children are referred to as one's siblings, and one's mother's brother's children are referred to as one's uncles and mothers.

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6.2 Number System

Yajéé has a base-twenty number system with a sub-base of five. Numerals agree with nouns in case.

One	ḷa
Two	siwar
Three	ṭás
Four	ṭásair
Five	höy
Ten	chí'
Twenty	pun

To form larger numbers, roots are compounded to each other starting with the higher base. Each number has an initial and a final form used in these compounds (if occurring in between two numerals, a number takes its initial form with a consonant voicing, if necessary).

Initials:

Two	siwara-
Three	ṭása-
Four	ṭásaire-
Five	höye-
Ten	chí'e-
Twenty	punda-

Finals:

One	-ya
Two	-siwar
Three	-ḍás
Four	-ḍásair
Five	-höy
Ten	-chí'
Twenty	-bun

Numerals occurring before the roots "two", "ten", and "twenty" feature raised final vowels.

(76)   höy "five" + siwar "two" = höyisiwar "seven"

(77)   chí' "ten" + ṭás "three" = chi'éḍás "thirteen"

(78)   pun "twenty" + höy "five" + ḷa "one" = pundahöyeya "twenty-six"

(79)   pun "twenty" + chí' "ten" = pundachí' "thirty"

(80)   siwar "two" + pun "twenty" = siwarabun "forty"

6.3 Loanwords

Yajéé has experienced a significant influx of loanwords from peoples on the mainland. These people are steppe dwellers and so are rather experienced on horseback, so many words for these activities and that environment come from their language.

Because of the different phonotactics, many words undergo repair strategies such as epenthesis, or they break some of the distribution rules of phonemes (see **2.3 Phonotactics**).

(81)   faas "horse" → páás, páása-

(82)   kakle "land, area" → káke, káke- "steppe"

(83)   wit'ee "to go" → wítee, wítemiba, wítii "to ride" (changes from analogy with other verb forms)

(84)   khwon "chair, seat" → kóón kóóno- "saddle"

7 Examples

1347th Just Used 5 Minutes of Your Day

chir-ǫsóó   maay pisan-Ø ise-ḍaa   yo   koyisǫr-Ø mije-ḍaa
run-IMP.CONV still   prey-NOM PROX.DEM-GEN drink.IMP blood-NOM DIST.DEM-GEN
Chirǫ́sóó maay pisan iseḍaa yo koyisǫr mijeḍaa.
It drinks its blood while its prey is still running.

1337th Just Used 5 Minutes of Your Day

lees-ǫsóó   ṣii   is-Ø   mer-ímár tá-Ø
be.happy-IMP.CONV NEG PROX.DEM-NOM leave.CESS 1SG-NOM
Leesǫsóó ṣii is merímár tá.
I'm leaving and he is not happy.

1253rd Just Used 5 Minutes of Your Day

he   ṣegűű   ṇi-Ø   tá-sóma'
see.PERF tomorrow 2SG-NOM 1SG-PART
He ṣegűű ṇi tásóma'.
You will see me tomorrow.

1170th Just Used 5 Minutes of Your Day

tan-asé-ímár   ṣebída kon-Ø tá-mës ise-sóma'   ayii   chégá
hunt-PASS-CESS yesterday pig-NOM 1SG-DAT PROX.DEM-PART be.complete.IMP SUB
Tanaséímár ṣebída kon támës isesóma' ayii chégá.
They all hunted a pig for me yesterday.

1084th Just Used 5 Minutes of Your Day

rajimb-imár ḷa-Ø   lüümíí-Ø   sidaga-gáṣ par tá-ḍaa
fall-CESS   one-NOM raindrop-NOM face-LOC   ALL 1SG-GEN
Rajimbimár ḷa lüümíí sidagagáṣ par táḍaa.
One raindrop fell on my face.

Thank you for reading!

Fine