

Notes on the Bneraf language (a.k.a. Beneraf, Bonerif, Edwas)

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Introduction

This document records what I have learnt about the Bneraf language during five days of (intensive) fieldwork in the village of Beneraf, Papua Province, Indonesia, in August 2026. The main consultants who taught me about the language were Yesiah Rerak, Nikanor Wainok, William Wainok, Absalom Abwere, Naftali Abi, and Frankie Mafud. All of these men are aged around 50-75, except for Frankie Mafud, who is aged around 40.

This document is not a community-approved representation of the Bneraf language.

The speakers I worked with indicated that they want to make a book representing their language, and they want to check this before it can be released. What is reported in this document is not an officially validated publication of that type, but rather is intended for sharing among linguists who might extend work on Bneraf, or who work on other languages of NW New Guinea. This document is for linguistic research purposes only. Given the precarious situation of languages in the area, and the severe lack of information about this, preliminary notes of this type may play an important role.

The language has elsewhere been named as Beneraf, Bonerif or Edwas. William Wainok mentioned that Edwas can be used as a name for the language, but otherwise noone I spoke to mentioned this name. The speakers I worked with seemed to mostly refer to it as Beneraf, though in fact they prefer to spell it as Bneraf, which better matches their pronunciation, [b^əneraf]. Usher on his ‘New Guinea World’ website proposes that it is a sister language of Berik, sitting within the Tor language family. Having also worked on Berik, I can attest that there are substantial similarities, though there are also plenty of major differences.

There is very little previous work on this language. An unpublished SIL report (Lee & Wambaliau 2005) provides a wordlist, which matches the variety reported in this document. (Voorhoeve 1975) provides another [wordlist](#), for a variety named as Bonerif, but that does *not* seem to be the same variety as what is documented here, and the differences are too great

to be accounted for by language change in the intervening years. Tentatively, I propose that Bonerif is a closely related language/dialect, but not the same as Bneraf (Beneraf).

The current analysis is based on approximately 300 elicited example sentences, some verbal paradigm elicitation, as well as two short texts that have been transcribed and translated. Many morphological elements have as yet eluded analysis, but in the following I will focus on those things that do already seem relatively clear.

Phonology and spelling

Onset clusters or complex segments

Bneraf has plenty of rounded onsets consonants, e.g. *kwersow* [k^werso^u] ‘west’, *tweur* [t^wøɾ] ‘sago pulp’ and *rwēn* [r^wen] ‘domestic rat’. It also has many onsets of more unusual types, which are probably best seen as onset clusters, mostly or only in word initial positions. A favoured pattern seems to be coronal stops followed by dorsal or labial consonants:

tkun [tkʊn] ‘rock’
dgwina [dg^wina] ‘sit’
dbaro [d̪baɾo] ‘head’
tfa [tfa] ‘hand’
mraw [mra^u] ‘tree cuscus’

Schwa and other non-canonical vowels

Bneraf makes extensive use of a weak central vowel that I will annotate as schwa. There seem to be both phonetic lenition processes that produce this in place of full vowels, but also words in which it is lexically specified, i.e. a careful pronunciation is not judged correct except for with a schwa. E.g. *orkh* [ɔrkə] ‘ikan’ and *athk* [atək] ‘tie’. The word for ‘banana’ seems to be different for different speakers, either *kwhr* [k^wər] or *kwer* [k^wɛr]. Overall I have a slight impression that more fluent speakers have more schwaful pronunciations.

There are also two front-rounded vowels: a high-front rounded vowel that I will represent as in *riuski* [ryski] ‘wake up’ or *iu* [y] ‘stomach’; and a middish one that I will represent as in *eurba* [øɾba] ‘minum’.

Spelling

Non-obvious spelling conventions are summarised here. All of these conventions were suggested by the speakers I worked with, though they were also using multiple distinct graphemes for some sounds (especially schwa), and I pointed out the need to use a consistent spelling.

[ɔrkə] => *orkh* ‘fish’
[otkə] => *otkh* ‘?from nature’
[atək] => *athk* ‘tie’

[daxme] => *daxme* ‘tomorrow’

[søɾ] => *seur* ‘male (animal?)’
[øɾba] => *eurba* ‘drink’

[y] => *iu* ‘stomach’
[ryski] => *riuski* ‘get up’

[do^u] => *dow* ‘want’

[k^werso^u] => *kwersow* ‘west’
[r^wen] => *rwen* ‘domestic rat’

[mra^u] => *mraw* ‘tree cuscus’

Some sentence structures

Bneraf sentences mostly end with a verb, but beyond that the presence and ordering of syntactic constituents appears to be highly flexible. Agents and patients may occur in either order before the verb, and their relative ordering with aspectual words is also flexible. In elicitation, speakers often spontaneously provided variants with different orders.

Nominal expressions can also be omitted altogether. For example in (1), the second and third sentences do not have any overt nominal expressions for the agents. In fact I am not sure whether it is the man or the woman from the first sentence who performs the actions in the following sentences. Neither does verbal agreement give any clues in these instances (see section on verbs below).

- (1) *Dep di wi-n a=byer-na-m, ‘Syarsya i-kwiba, tiumba brema-n i-kwrakh-n!’*
DIST ? woman-N 1=say-ACT-?? meal IRR-make food thing-N IRR-cook-ACT
‘There, I said to my wife, “(You) prepare a meal, cook some food!”’

Tku-n ti shnyers-na.
rock-N wood build.fire-ACT
‘(She/I) built a fire with rocks and wood.’

Tku-n kese kwrakh-n.
rock-N ANAPH cook-ACT.
‘(She/I) baked the rocks.’ (2026-08-06_William-Wainok)

Two-part predicates

There are quite a few event predicates split into two words, a non-finite verb and finite verb. Some of these seem to use a light finite verb, for example EAT seems to be usually expressed using a verb *kwiba* ‘do, make’. The two-part predicate *tiumba ... kwiba* ‘food... do’ can be separated by various other elements, including aspectual words.

- (2) *Sa-n de-m a=kwiba-na.*
house-N 3-?? 1=make-ACT
‘I have to make a house.’
- (3) *Tiumba ai dow kwiba-f.*
food 1STR DESID do-DESID
‘I want to eat.’
- (4) *Tiumba-s erma-t ai kwiba-na.*
food-ACC still-? 1STR do-ACT
‘I’m still eating.’

Some other examples seem to be pronounced as a single word, but then show splitting behaviour with certain aspectual or modal additions (5, 6, 7). The separated element here *tana* is not yet attested as an independent verb, though this has not been properly investigated.

- (5) *Dei nius-ta-na.*
3STR sleep-??-ACT
'(S)he is sleeping.'
- (6) *Ai niun erma ai ta-na.*
1STR sleep still 1STR ??-ACT
'I'm still sleeping'
- (7) *Ai niun yam ta-na-m.*
1STR sleep NEG ??-ACT-NEG
'I'm not asleep (yet).'

There are other examples where so far it remains unclear whether the finite verb has an independent meaning, or can be used at all without the non-finite element. An example is *bran ... tyerwa* 'laugh', where the first element *bran* can be used independently, but regarding the second element *tyerwa*, consultants indicated that this is only used in the two-part construction.

- (8) *Bran kakh-me!*
laugh lack-??
'Don't laugh!'
- (9) *Bran-s im ba-tyerwe-na.*
laugh-ACC 2STR AG:PL-?laugh-ACT
'You're all laughing.'
- (10) *?Tyerwena*
[consultant indicates this is not used (Indo. *tidak ada*)]

Pronouns

Pronouns are unspecified for number, which instead is marked on the verb, or by various optional additions to nominal expressions. Third person pronouns are not distinct from demonstratives, and these are used frequently for objects or people who have already been established in the discourse. There seems to be a 'strong' third-person pronoun *dei* '3STR', which is used when it stands alone as a nominal expression, and a more frequent form *de* '3', that enters into a variety of complex constructions. As for speech-act-participants (SAPs), the first-person nominative pronoun has strong and weak forms, *ai* ~ *a=*. Note a potential connection to the 'agentive' suffix *-i*, discussed below. The second person nominative pronoun has a strong form *im*, and a related verbal prefix *i-*, which may be used not just for second person, but generally for imperatives and perhaps other irrealis constructions.

Pronouns		
PERSON	STRONG	WEAK
1	<i>ai</i>	<i>a=</i>
2	<i>im</i>	[<i>i-</i> (IRR)]
3	<i>dei</i>	<i>de</i>

I suspect there is also a first-inclusive form, *nek* ~ *ne*, though this requires more investigation.

In natural speech, the strong forms may be more used in focal contexts (11), and often appear in sentence-initial position. In elicitation, speakers also generally produce these forms. The

weak forms may occur more frequently in spontaneous speech, and at least for *a*= ‘1’, it seems to occur immediately before the verb, thus exhibiting clitic-like behaviour (12, also 1 above). For the weak ‘second person’ *i*-, the only spontaneous examples I have so far are irrealis constructions (imperative 13, and a hypothetical 14), of which one example does not clearly express second person. I therefore gloss it for now as a prefix *i*- IRR, thus treating it as not quite a pronoun.

- (11) *Ai kede-i dgwi-na-m.*
 1STR PROX-AG sit-ACT-M
 ‘I’m the one sitting here [in contrast to others who are now gone].’
 (2026-08-04_Absalom-Abwere)

- (12) *Fon esdi bero-kim a=eurba-na.*
 water-N other ?wood-INSTR 1=drink-ACT
 ‘I drank other water using ?wooden implement.’ (2026-08-04_Absalom-Abwere)

- (13) *Ito i-rauriu teski.*
 plate IRR-wash1 wash2
 ‘(You) wash the plates!’ (2026-08-04_Absalom-Abwere)

- (14) *Dei frutye-kh, tiumba buta ne i-bwa-na.*
 3STR arrive-COND food then 1INCL IRR-eat.AG:PL-ACT
 ‘If s/he arrives, then we will eat.’

As mentioned above, in elicitation speakers produce the *ai* and *im* forms. I suspect this is because SAPs are often interpreted as focal in elicitation contexts. Furthermore, speakers often add *ai* more than once (15, 16, 17). This is not a marginal phenomenon, but rather occurs in many if not most elicited sentences with an SAP agent.

- (15) *Ai akh-n-hwut ai saka-nh.*
 1STR garden-N-? 1STR arrive-ACT
 ‘I’m arriving from the vegetable garden.’
- (16) *Ai kwhr ermat ai athkta-na.*
 1STR banana still 1STR tie-act.
 ‘I’m still tying up bananas.’ (2026-08-08_Yesiah-Rerak+al)
- (17) *Im dem im tebaski-ne.*
 2STR 3-M 1STR hold-ACT.TH:F
 ‘You hold her.’ (2026-08-06_Yosiah-Rerak+al_02)

(Westrum 1988) describes this type of pronoun duplication for Berik, but does not mention elicited vs spontaneous speech. In the data I have collected so far for both Berik and Bneraf, it appears to be primarily or perhaps exclusively a phenomenon of elicited speech. In fact I have not yet identified any examples in spontaneous speech. I suspect this is linked to elicited examples being broken up into multiple intonational phrases, with the pronoun *ai* being added to each intonational unit, rather than the clausal unit. Pronoun duplication would therefore not be expected to occur often in spontaneous speech clauses, which are more rarely broken up prosodically, and where SAPs only occasionally have a focal role.

Pronouns can also be the base for case marking, as described in the next section. For this they take their weak forms, e.g. *a-s* ‘1-ACC’.

Nominal suffixes

A few different nominal suffixes can already be identified, some with relatively standard case functions. These clear examples are *-s* ACC, *-p* LOC, *-f* DAT (including recipients), *-m* GEN (including possessors), and *-kam* COM (including instruments). There is also a suffix *-i*, which is not yet so clear, but may be an optional device to mark the most agentive participant:

- (18) *Yaye-s ai dam-ta-na kwra-i teuk-ta-na.*
sibling.older-ACC 1STR see-TH:M-ACT dog-AG bite-TH:M-ACT
'I saw older brother get bitten by a dog.'

There is also a frequent nominal ending *-n*, which I suspect has no semantic function at all. It does not seem to be associated with any particular thematic role. This may be similar to the ending *-na* in Berik, which also lacks any clear semantic function (Westrum 1988). Here are some examples:

- (19) *Angku-n swaif an se ba-frutye.*
man-N many later ?? AG:PL-arrive
'Many men will arrive later.'
- (20) *Sa-n de-m a=kwiba-na.*
house-N 3-N 1=make-ACT
'I have to make a house.'
- (21) *Kwra-n ke-s ai damtana yaye-s de-i teukta-na.*
dog-N PROX-ACC 1 see-ACT sibling.elder-ACC 3-AG bite-ACT
'I saw the dog that bit elder brother.'

The *-n* ending seems to be highly frequent, but not obligatory. There are plenty of sentences where it is not used at all. I have an overall impression that people used it less in elicited speech, and sometimes used it when they first pronounced a sentence, but then dropped it when pronouncing it again more carefully. This gives the impression that it is not a semantic marker, but rather a purely morphophonological phenomenon.

- (22) *Wi angku-s tebaski-na.*
woman man-ACC hold-ACT.TH:M
'The woman is holding the man.' (2026-08-06_Yosiah-Rerak+al_02)

There may be a distinct usage of *-n* as linker between nouns and some case suffixes. This usage may be obligatory, e.g. I have multiple examples of locative constructions with *fī* 'sea, coast', and the locative suffix *-p* is always mediated by *-n*.

- (23) *Buta di win-kim.*
then ?? woman-n-com
'Then (I) got my wife'
- (24) *Ai fī-n-hp ai fruni-na im-di dgwin-ba.*
1STR sea-N-LOC 1STR go-ACT 2-CONTR sit-AG:PL
'I'm going to the sea, you all stay here.'

Overall, it might be reasonable just to call *-n* a 'noun ending', which we can conveniently gloss as 'N'.

Verbs

Verbs are where a lot of the action is. Verbs inflect for number and gender of participants, but not person. This fits neatly with the basic pronoun paradigm, which distinguishes person, but

not number or gender. The number/gender marking on the verb can be applied simultaneously to two participants, with a general pattern of more specific marking for less agentive participants, i.e. themes, undergoers, recipients, stimuli. Agent marking is usually only for number (not gender), and there are some verbs in which agent features are not marked at all. An interesting general feature (of both Bneraf and Berik) is that verbs fall into different classes that specify the number/gender of participants to different degrees.

In addition to these number/gender features, verbs also have rich inflection for time and space, with some typologically unique tense categories, and inflection for proximity and elevation. The morphological structure of the verbs involves a mixture of affix agglutination, phonological stem alternations, and stem suppletion.

To help orient the reader, I will start by illustrating some (partial) verb paradigms, and then discuss the inflectional features a little more. I start with more regular examples.

Sample paradigms

I have only been able to collect relatively complete paradigms for verbs that have fewer inflectional features. For example, I suspect that the paradigm for *dmeuniu* ‘swim’ is relatively complete, inflecting only for tense and agent number (since there are no other participants to specify). Note that this verb is likely also inflectable for proximity (see details below), though I did not test this.

<i>dmeuniu</i> ‘swim’: Proximate forms			
	SINGULAR	PLURAL	DUAL
ACT	<i>dmeuniu-na</i>	<i>ba-dmeuniu-na</i>	<i>ka-dmeuniu-na</i>
MORN	<i>dmeuniu-fh</i>	<i>ba-dmeuniu-fh</i>	<i>ka-dmeuniu-fh</i>
NOCT	<i>dmeuniu-sa</i>	<i>ba-dmeuniu-sa</i>	<i>ka-dmeuniu-sa</i>
YEST	<i>dmeuni-nht</i>	<i>ba-dmeuni-nht</i>	<i>ka-dmeuni-nht</i>
PST	<i>dmeuniu-nak</i>	<i>ba-dmeuniu-nak</i>	<i>ka-dmeuniu-nak</i>
DESID	<i>dmeuniu-waf</i>	<i>ba-dmeuniu-waf</i>	<i>ka-dmeuniu-waf</i>
IMP	<i>i-dmeuniu-wa</i>	??	??
Q	<i>dmeuniu-ne</i>	??	??

This is one of the more regular verbs that I elicited. It has an essentially invariant stem, and agent number is consistently expressed by prefixes *ba-* PL and *ka-* DU. Tenses are expressed by regular suffixes.

Another fairly regular paradigm is *dgwin* ‘sit’. What is shown here is in fact the forms for proximate sitting, with unspecified elevation (e.g. same level as speaker). Later we will come back to the proximity/elevation distinctions.

<i>dgwin</i> ‘sit’: Proximate, unspecified elevation			
	SINGULAR	PLURAL	DUAL
ACT	<i>dgwin-a</i>	<i>dgwin-ba-a</i>	<i>ka-dgwi-a</i>
MORN	<i>dgwin-fh</i>	<i>dgwin-ba-fh</i>	<i>ka-dgwin-fh</i>
NOCT	<i>dgwin-sa</i>	<i>dgwin-ba-sa</i>	<i>ka-dgwin-sa</i>
YEST	<i>dgwin-at</i>	<i>dgwin-ba-nat</i>	<i>ka-dgwin-at</i>
PST	<i>dgwin-ak</i>	<i>dgwin-ba-nak</i>	<i>ka-dgwin-ak</i>
DESID	<i>dgwin-tkef</i>	<i>dgwin-ba-tkef</i>	<i>ka-dgwin-tkef</i>
IMP	<i>i-dgwin-tke</i>	<i>i-dgwin-ba-tke</i>	??
NEG	<i>dgwina-m</i>	??	??

This paradigm in general confirms the identity of the regular formatives, with only a few irregularities. The desiderative and imperative forms have an extra *the* formative. The plural agent forms use the same formative *ba* ‘AG:PL’ as above, but now it is in a different morphotactic position, between stem and tense suffix. Both the prefix and suffix positions for *ba* ‘AG:PL’ are attested on multiple verbs, and it is unclear so far which is more common.

Other paradigms have been elicited to a much more partial degree, which is almost inevitable, given the large number of inflected forms. I have elicited a substantial number of forms for an intransitive version of the verb *kwiba* ‘do’, though the full paradigm seems to be much larger. I elicited this using the construction *tiumba ... kwiba* ‘eat’ (see above), in which only an agent seems to be implicated as a participant, giving the following forms, marked for agent number and event proximity:

<i>kwiba</i> ‘do’: Intransitive forms, elicited with <i>tiumba...</i>				
	SINGULAR		PLURAL	
	PROXIMATE	DISTANT	PROXIMATE	DISTANT
ACT	<i>kwiba-na</i>	<i>kwiba-t-na</i>	<i>nibwa-na</i>	<i>nibwa-t-na</i>
MORN	<i>kwiba-fh</i>	<i>kwiba-f-na</i>	<i>nibwa-fh</i>	<i>nibwa-f-na</i>
NOCT	<i>kwiba-sa</i>	<i>kwiba-sa-na</i>	<i>nibwa-sa</i>	<i>nibwa-sa-na</i>
YEST	<i>kwiba-nat</i>	<i>kwiba-t-nat</i>	<i>nibwa-t</i>	<i>nibwa-t-nat</i>
PST	<i>kwiba-nak</i>	<i>kwiba-t-nak</i>	<i>nibwa-nak</i>	<i>nibwa-t-nak</i>
DESID	<i>kwiba-f</i>	??	<i>ibwa-f</i>	??
IMP	<i>i kwiba</i>	??	<i>ibwa</i>	??
Q	<i>kwiba-ne</i>	??	<i>nibwa-ne</i>	??

In addition, there are dual forms like *ka-kwiba-na* ‘do.ACT.AG:DU’, which seem to be formed in a completely regular fashion using the *ka-* prefix. This seems to be a general pattern of *ka-* ‘AG:DU’ prefixing, and from here on I will not include this in paradigms unless relevant.

The intransitive *kwiba* paradigm is a little more irregular than *dmeuniu* ‘swim’. Firstly, there is stem suppletion with *nibwa* ‘do.AG:PL’ and *ibwa* ‘do.AG:PL.IRR’. Secondly, the introduction of distance distinctions adds some complexity, with *-t* ‘DIST’ in some environments, but *-na* ‘DIST’ in the presence of the fricative tense suffixes *-f(h)* ‘MORN’ and *-sa* ‘NOCT’. I have only asked about proximity distinctions for a few verbs, but so far speakers immediately offered such distinctions in all cases, generally using *-t* ~ *-na*. Proximal forms like *tiumba kwibana* are usually provided for most types of events, when the elicitation context does not specify distance. However there are other instances where the first forms provided may in fact be distant forms, e.g. *damtana* ‘see.TH:M.?DIST’, and overall I had the impression that speakers produce distant forms quite readily. More investigation is required to better distinguish proximate vs distant forms. Tentatively, it looks as if proximity inflection is available for all verbs in Bneraf.

The verb *kwiba* ‘do’ has an unknown number of additional forms when multiple participants are involved. Only a few scattered forms are known so far. An example with a recipient/beneficiary is *kwiba-mi-na* ‘do-RCP:DU-ACT = make (tea) for two people’. There are two examples with a theme involve smoking tobacco, which appear to have inanimate themes taking forms also used with female undergoers: *kwiba-we-na* ‘do-TH:F-ACT, smoke (tobacco)’, *kwiba-we-fh* ‘do-TH:F-MORN, smoke (tobacco) this morning’. These forms suggest that *kwiba* ‘do’ also inflects for recipients and themes. It may also have forms specifying both at once (see example for *korba* ‘give’ below).

Tense

As already seen in the paradigms, there are several tense distinctions (I use ‘tense’ to refer to TAM inflectional categories in general), oriented towards past time distinctions, and modality. I do not think that there are any true future tense distinctions. The *-na* ‘ACT(IVE)’ tense is highly generic, and therefore difficult to give a neat label. It is certainly the dominant form used for present and future events, and it seems to also be usable for past events, when the speaker does not wish to specify the past time period. For now I use the label ‘active’ because some forms suggest that it is *not* used in certain resultative expressions in which there is no active agent (25, 26, cf. 27). But the analysis of semantic differences with and without *-na* is still very unclear, so *-na* ‘ACT’ is essentially placeholder label.

- (25) *Dei mes tye.*
3STR COMPL die
‘(S)he is dead.’

- (26) *Sa-n ke-dh-s mes toba.*
house-N 3-M-ACC COMPL build
‘The house is complete (built).’ [Indo: *Rumah ini sudah selesai.*]

- (27) *Sa-n dem toba-na.*
house-N 3-M build-ACT
‘A house is/was built for him/her (to live in).’ [Indo: *Rumah dia kasih tinggal.*]

There is a yesterday tense *-nat* ‘YEST’, for which I am not yet clear whether its extension is strictly yesterday, or can also go back a few days. I noticed after a while that in the Beneraf variety of Indonesian, the word *kemarin* ‘yesterday’ is often used for past times earlier than the preceding day. There is also a more distant past tense *-nak* ‘PST’, for which I do not yet have any information about usage.

For more recent events, Bneraf has the *-fh* ‘MORN’ and *-sa* ‘NOCT’ tenses, which are of great typological interest. More specifically, these are used for referring back to events in the current diurnal cycle, i.e. ‘this morning’ and ‘last night’. Speakers have clear intuitions about these. It seems that they are not used for any other morning/night periods, which do not have any special tense marking. Evidence so far also suggests that *-fh* ‘MORN’ is not used for current events when talking in the morning. (This seems to be a difference from Berik). For example, in a situation when some speakers were sitting in the morning around 8am chewing betelnut, and I asked them how to say that, they used the form *dgwin-ba-na* ‘sit-AG:PL-ACT’. But this was still a kind of elicitation, rather than truly spontaneous speech.

The meanings ‘this morning’ and ‘last night’ seem fairly clear, though there is barely any spontaneous data yet, since the two narratives I have transcribed and translated both refer to long-past events. I did record a narrative referring to events of the past 24 hours, and although this is mostly unanalysed, it does seem to include at least some MORN forms. On the other hand, there are plenty of elicited examples, usually also including time-of-day adverbials e.g.:

- (x) *Gwinme sabkh-s ai kwiba-we-fh.*
morning tobacco-ACC 1STR do-TH:F-MORN
‘I smoked tobacco this morning.’

- (y) *Dafhm mes ai saka-sa.*
 night COMPL 1STR arrive-NOCT
 ‘I arrived last night.’

Proximity and elevation

I have already given some examples above of proximity distinctions. For at least some positional verbs, these also combine with elevation distinctions.

For *dgwin* ‘sit’, we have already seen distinctions for tense and agent number. In addition, there seems to be a neat 2 x 2 set of distinctions for proximity (proximate or distant) and elevation (unspecified or above). These are so far only elicited for the active tense. I here exclude AG:DU forms, since they appear to be completely regular across all verbs. Plural forms were only elicited for unspecified elevation.

<i>dgwin</i> ‘sit’: Proximity and elevation; active tense forms				
	SINGULAR		PLURAL	
	PROXIMATE	DISTANT	PROXIMATE	DISTANT
ABOVE	<i>dgwi-niu-na</i>	<i>dgwi-niu-t-na</i>	??	??
UNSPECIFIED	<i>dgwin-a</i>	<i>dgwin-t-na</i>	<i>dgwin-ba-na</i>	<i>dgwin-ba-t-na</i>

This paradigm suggests an additional suffix *-niu* ‘ABOVE’, while confirming the *-t* ‘DIST’ suffix illustrated above. I call the base forms ‘unspecified’ for elevation, since they seem to be used whenever the event is not above the speakers, or when elevation is not relevant. I asked about someone sitting below the speaker, and it seemed that the unspecified forms could be used for this situation too.

When we turn to *fya* ‘stand’, we now find a three-way elevation distinction, where standing below the speaker is distinct from standing level with the speaker. Again these are crossed with a two-way proximity distinction. Here I show only singular forms.

<i>fya</i> ‘stand’: Proximity and elevation; singular active tense forms		
	PROX	DIST
ABOVE	<i>fya-niu-tye</i>	<i>fya-niu-t-na</i>
LEVEL	<i>fya-na</i>	<i>fya-t-na</i>
BELOW	<i>fya-siu-tye</i>	

We again see the *-niu* ‘above’ suffix, now contrasting with a *-siu* ‘below’ suffix. Both above and below proximate forms also have an irregular suffix *-tye*, which does not follow any pattern I have yet identified. One possibility is that there was an elicitation error, and these two are not in fact active tense forms, though they do not seem to match any other regular tense suffixes either. Consultants suggested that there is no distinctive form for DIST + BELOW, saying that either the distant form *fyatna* or the below form *fyasiutye* would be used in such a situation. This seems plausible, since the combination DIST + BELOW may not be common enough to facilitate grammaticalisation of a dedicated form.

I also attempted to elicit DIST + NOCT forms for *fya* ‘stand’. Consultants again suggested that there is no dedicated form for this, and either the active distant form *fyatna* or the nocturnal proximate form *fyasana* would be used in such a situation. Again, this combination of time and space may not be common enough to have its own distinctive form.

Kinship inflection?

Bneraf may have some special verbal and pronoun forms for groups of kin. Consultants explained some forms in this way, as meaning (Indo.) *di dalam keluarga* ‘within the family’. I have not yet investigated this further.

Participant number and gender inflection

Bneraf verbal inflection for participant number and inflection is quite complex, so this section will only scratch the surface.

Number marking applies to all participant types. For the most agentive participant, there is a singular/plural distinction marked by adding the prefix or suffix *ba* ‘AG:PL’), while dual agent is marked consistently by adding *ka-* ‘AG:DU’ to the singular forms.

Number marking of less agentive participants such as themes, undergoers, recipients, etc generally makes a three-way distinction SG/PL/DU, and involves more complex combinations of affixation, phonological stem alternations, and stem suppletion. Themes and recipients also have inflectional gender features, which are generally based on the natural gender/sex of higher animates, F(EMALE) vs M(ALE). There is no distinct form for inanimate themes, and I have tried to establish whether the TH:F or TH:M form is used for inanimates. So far this is unclear to me, and it may even vary from one verb to another. In the paradigm tables below I will indicate where one gender or the other seems to be used for inanimates.

Gender is distinguished only for singular participants, meaning that themes and recipients distinguish the following four number/gender categories: F, M, PL, DU. Multi-participant verbs can also have proximity distinctions (I have not checked for elevation), though it is not yet clear how proximity is controlled by agents, patients, or the relation between the two. For the moment, I will indicate proximity alongside theme distinctions, though this does not necessarily indicate that it relates just to the proximity of the theme.

An example of theme distinctions can be seen in the verb *damta* ‘see’. Shown below are what I consider to be the likely ‘active’ forms. However the regular *-na* ‘ACT’ suffix is missing from some, and I also recorded many other forms without this suffix, for which the semantic distinctions remain unclear.

<i>damta</i> ‘see’, active forms					
		TH:M/?INAN	TH:F	TH:PL	TH:DU
AG:SG	PROX	<i>damta(-na)</i>	<i>doma-na</i>	<i>damta-bye</i>	<i>dom-sa</i>
	DIST	<i>damta-t-na</i>	<i>doma-t-na</i>	<i>damta-bye-ntaⁱ</i>	<i>dom-s-na</i>
AG:PL	PROX	<i>damata</i>	<i>dama-we</i>	<i>dama-teba</i>	<i>dama-so</i>
	DIST	<i>damata-t-na</i>	<i>dama-we-t-na</i>	<i>dama-teba-t-na</i>	<i>dama-so-t-na</i>

i. This form seems like it should be *damta-bye-t-na*, and should be rechecked to establish whether this is a genuine irregularity or an elicitation error.

This verb shows more suppletion and irregularity than those above. We might identify five different stem forms. There are also apparently cumulative suffixes, such as *-we* ‘AG:PL.TH:F’, rather than agglutination of one consistent suffix for each participant. To compound this irregularity, these patterns appear to be quite different from one verb to another. At least the *-t* ‘DIST’ suffix is consistent.

A second example gives some flavour of the verb-by-verb idiosyncracies. Here I illustrate *fita* ‘chop’. Note that for this verb inanimate themes seem to take the same forms as female themes. This may be different from *damta* ‘see’.

<i>fita</i> ‘chop’, active forms				
	TH:F/?INAN	TH:M	TH:PL	TH:DU
AG:SG	<i>fita-bye-na</i>	<i>fita-ba-na</i>	<i>fita-na</i>	<i>fita-mi-na</i>
AG:PL	<i>fida-bye-na</i>	<i>fida-ba-na</i>	?	?

This illustrates how participant morphology varies from one verb to another. Here *-ba* marks male themes, whereas in other verbs it marks plural agents. Among the theme values, the plural now appears to be the morphologically unmarked option. As for agent number distinctions, SG/PL is here marked by a t/d voicing alternation in the stem, which is quite different from what we saw in other verbs.

For the AG:SG forms of *fita* ‘chop’, I am also able to illustrate how the theme distinctions play out over a few different tenses, demonstrating that theme and tense are systematically recombinable. I also add to this table an additional series of ‘singulative’ forms, which tentatively seem to be used for a single punctual action as opposed to extended or iterated actions. An example given by participants was killing a snake with one chop, versus chopping down bunches of bananas. They also suggested that these forms could be the same for any theme gender/number. This and several other data points suggest that Bneraf has further inflectional distinctions beyond what is covered in this sketch.

<i>fita</i> ‘chop’, singular agent forms					
	TH:F/?INAN	TH:M	TH:PL	TH:DU	SINGULATIVE
ACT	<i>fita-bye-na</i>	<i>fita-ba-na</i>	<i>fita-na</i>	<i>fita-mi-na</i>	<i>fis-na</i>
NOCT	<i>fita-bye-sa</i>	<i>fita-ba-sa</i>	<i>fita-bye-ski-sa</i>	<i>fita-mye-sa</i>	<i>fis-sa</i>
YEST	<i>fita-bye-nat</i>	<i>fita-ba-nat</i>	<i>fita-bye-ski-nat</i>	<i>fita-mi-nat</i>	<i>fis-nat</i>

This partial paradigm suggests that tense distinctions are in general more regular, whereas theme distinctions are more irregular – especially once we compare different verbs. The TH:PL series here has a quite unexpected *-ski* formative in the NOCT and YEST tenses. This appears in some forms of other verbs, and so far I have not been able to associate it with any particular meaning. It could also just be an elicitation error.

For *damta* ‘see’, consultants suggested that there is no gender distinction for agents, thus giving the SG/PL agent distinction illustrated above. But this does not seem to be the case for all verbs. For *arta* ‘search’, consultants did suggest gender distinctions for both agent and theme, as illustrated here with the active tense forms.

<i>arta</i> ‘search’, active tense forms				
	TH:F/?INAN	TH:M	TH:PL	TH:DU
AG:M	<i>arta-bye-na</i>	<i>arta-ba-na</i>	<i>arta-ba-bye-na</i>	<i>arta-mye-na</i>
AG:F	<i>arta-bye-se-na</i>	<i>arta-ba-se-na</i>	<i>arta-ba-bye-se-na</i>	<i>arta-mye-se-na</i>
AG:PL	<i>arate-ba-na</i>	<i>arata-ba-na</i>	<i>arata-ba-bye-na</i>	<i>arate-m-na</i>

I leave it to the reader to note the various irregularities in this paradigm. One thing shared with *fita* ‘chop’ (but not *damta* ‘see’) is a contrast between *-bye* ‘TH:F’ and *-ba* ‘TH:M’. But here there is a new and interesting phenomenon: the TH:PL forms have *-ba-bye*, combining the TH:F and TH:M suffixes into a string, as if plurality were expressed by the conjunction of

the genders. I have not yet observed this in any other verbs. So far, almost every verb seems to have its own idiosyncracies.

A final example, *korba* ‘give’, suggests that this verb crosses theme and recipient features, though perhaps in a limited way. It is not yet known whether agent features are also marked on this verb.

	<i>korba</i> ‘give’, active, singular agent forms			
	TH:F/?INAN	TH:M	TH:PL	TH:DU
RCP:SG	<i>kor-ba</i>	<i>dgar-ba</i>	<i>kor-ba-na</i>	<i>teut-ba</i>
RCP:PL	<i>dgar-na</i>	<i>dgar-na</i>	<i>dgar-na</i>	<i>bik-teut-ba</i>
RCP:DU	<i>dgar-ma</i>	?	?	?

Again we see here a structure that is quite different from the other verbs illustrated. There is a different type of stem alternation, with *kor* ~ *dgar* distinguishing singular from non-singular recipients. Dual theme is marked by a suppletive stem *teut*. The formative *-na* occurs mostly with plural recipients, and *-ba* mostly with singular recipients. These are both formatives that we have already encountered above, but with quite different semantic associations. Even based on the limited data currently available, this inconsistency of form:meaning mapping appears to be a pervasive form of complexity in Bneraf verbs.

Summary

Although this report is sketchy on many details, I hope it conveys some of the typological interest and morphological complexity of the Bneraf language. It also provides slightly more information about Tor languages, for which we so far know so little.

Bneraf speakers are very enthusiastic about language documentation, and I hope that linguists will be able to take up some of the challenges sketched in this report, while also producing documents that could help Bneraf language to keep being used, in the face of rapid incursion from Indonesian.