



A Morphological Study on Verbs in Wewewa Tengah Dialect of Wewewa Language with The Emphasis on Prefixation

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history</p> <p>Received : Nov, 30th 2025 Revised : Dec, 15th 2025 Accepted : Dec, 22nd 2025</p> <p>OPEN ACCESS</p>	<p>This study investigates the process of prefixation in the Central Wewewa dialect of the Wewewa language, which is spoken in Southwest Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara. The primary objectives of this research are to describe the morphological processes involved in verb formation through prefixation and to explain the meanings and grammatical functions of the prefixes. The study applies a descriptive-qualitative method, where data were obtained through elicitation, interviews, and natural conversations with native speakers in Wee Rame Village. The findings reveal four main types of prefixes used in verb formation: causative prefixes (pa-, ma-), reciprocal prefix (pa-), anticausative prefixes (ma-, man-, mang-), and derivational prefixes (pa-, ma-). These prefixes exhibit distinct morphological and semantic functions, indicating that prefixation in the Wewewa Tengah dialect not only generates new verbs but also encodes relationships between agents, actions, and events. Phonological processes such as nasal assimilation and semantic processes such as valency change are also found in formation. Overall, the study concludes prefixation the Wewewa Tengah dialect is a morphological that reflects both grammatical and cultural aspects of the language, contributing to the broader understanding and documentation of Austronesian linguistic diversity.</p>
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1. Introduction

Language is a complex and dynamic system that encodes layers of meaning through structural, semantic, and functional mechanisms operating at various levels of linguistic organization. Among these mechanisms, morphology constitutes one of the most fundamental components, as it examines the internal structure of words and the processes through which words are formed. Morphological analysis sheds light on how languages expand their lexicon, encode grammatical relations, and construct semantic distinctions that reflect cultural and cognitive perspectives. Within the field of morphology, affixation—particularly prefixation—has been widely recognized as one of the most productive and

universal processes across the world's languages. Prefixation enables languages to attach bound morphemes to the initial position of a lexical root, thereby generating new words, modifying argument structures, and signaling a variety of semantic and grammatical functions. Scholars such as Katamba (1993), Aronoff and Fudeman (2011), and Booij (2007) emphasize that prefixation not only contributes to lexical formation but also offers insight into deeper patterns of linguistic organization, typology, and language change. The Austronesian language family, one of the largest and most geographically diverse linguistic families, showcases a particularly rich tradition of affixation in its morphological systems. Researchers including Blust (2013), Adelaar and Himmelmann (2005), and Ross (2002) have documented how Austronesian languages employ a wide inventory of prefixes to express causation, reciprocity, anticausativity, transitivity, valency changes, aspectual meanings, and derivational extensions that expand the expressive capacity of verbal constructions. In these languages, verbs often serve as the central category around which grammatical relations and semantic roles are organized, and the verbal morphology is typically intricate, multi-layered, and highly productive. Prefixation, in particular, plays a crucial role in shaping how Austronesian languages conceptualize agency, undergoer relations, and event structures, making it not only an essential topic of morphological analysis but also a window into their typological behavior and historical development.

Indonesia, as the primary region where Austronesian languages are spoken, exhibits an extraordinary degree of linguistic diversity, with more than 700 local languages representing a vast range of morphological typologies (Sneddon, 2010). Eastern Indonesia—including Sumba, Flores, Timor, and Maluku—is especially notable for its complex verbal morphology and extensive use of affixes. Yet many languages in this region remain underdocumented, and systematic research on their linguistic structures, particularly in the domains of morphology and syntax, is still limited. Among these languages is Wewewa, spoken in Southwest Sumba Regency, East Nusa Tenggara. Despite its significance as a regional language used in traditional ceremonies, oral literature, daily communication, and intergenerational transmission, Wewewa has received relatively little scholarly attention compared to other Indonesian regional languages. The Wewewa language comprises several dialects, one of which is the Central Wewewa (Wewewa Tengah) dialect. This dialect displays rich morphological processes, especially in verb formation, yet linguistic literature on its morphology remains limited. While previous studies on Sumbanese languages have

explored phonology, general grammatical descriptions, or lexicon development, detailed analyses of affixation—particularly prefixation—are still scarce. Specifically, there is a notable absence of comprehensive research that systematically documents and analyzes prefixation in the Central Wewewa dialect. This gap is significant because prefixation is one of the primary mechanisms through which speakers construct, modify, and interpret verbal expressions, making it deeply intertwined with the semantic, syntactic, and cultural dimensions of the language.

Given these circumstances, the study of prefixation in the Central Wewewa dialect is both relevant and necessary. Describing the morphological processes through which prefixes interact with roots provides insight into how speakers encode relationships between agents, actions, and events. Moreover, examining the semantic and grammatical functions of prefixes reveals how Wewewa structures verbal meaning and organizes its verbal system. Such an investigation expands our understanding of Austronesian morphology and contributes to linguistic typology more broadly. It also plays a crucial role in supporting language documentation efforts, which are essential in culturally rich but underdocumented communities such as those in Sumba. Morphological studies on Austronesian languages have repeatedly shown that affixation interacts closely with phonological and semantic processes. Prefixes often trigger phonological adjustments—such as nasal assimilation, voicing, or segmental deletion—that reflect deeper phonotactic and historical patterns within the language. At the semantic level, prefixes may alter a verb's valency by adding or removing arguments, thereby modifying event structure and participant roles. For instance, causative prefixes typically introduce a new external argument, transforming an intransitive event into a transitive one, while anticausative prefixes reduce valency by removing the agent and highlighting the spontaneity of an event. Reciprocal prefixes merge two or more participants into a single reciprocal relationship, reflecting socially or culturally salient patterns of interaction. These morphological and semantic functions underscore the functional richness of prefixation and highlight its importance for linguistic analysis. Understanding prefixation in Wewewa therefore requires an integrated approach that examines morphological, phonological, and semantic dimensions. Such an approach enables a deeper appreciation of how linguistic structures function and how they reflect broader typological trends in Austronesian languages. Additionally, documenting prefixation in Wewewa contributes to preserving linguistic diversity at a time when many regional languages face challenges due

to the increasing dominance of Indonesian in education, administration, and media. Language documentation supports cultural identity and helps preserve traditional knowledge embedded in linguistic structures. Despite the importance of this topic, existing studies have not yet provided a focused examination of prefixation in the Central Wewewa dialect. Previous research on Wewewa has largely been descriptive and limited in scope, addressing general grammatical features or selected lexical items without substantial attention to morphological processes. Some studies mention affixation only briefly, and none offers a comprehensive morphological analysis of prefixes, their functions, and the phonological or semantic processes associated with them. This absence indicates a clear research gap that this study aims to fill.

With this background, the present research has two central objectives: (1) to describe the morphological processes involved in verb formation through prefixation in the Central Wewewa dialect, including identifying the types of prefixes used and analyzing their structural behavior; and (2) to examine the semantic and grammatical functions encoded by these prefixes, including their effects on valency, agency, and event interpretation. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions: How are verbs in the Central Wewewa dialect formed through prefixation? and What semantic and grammatical roles do prefixes play in shaping the verbal system of the language? To situate this study within broader linguistic research, it is necessary to consider the theoretical concepts that underpin the analysis. Morphological theory provides a foundation for understanding how affixes combine with roots to create derived forms. The distinction between derivational and inflectional affixes is central in this regard: derivational prefixes create new lexical items and may shift grammatical category or meaning, whereas inflectional affixes encode grammatical categories without altering lexical class. In many Austronesian languages, however, the boundary between derivation and inflection may be fluid, as certain affixes perform both lexical and grammatical functions. This multifunctionality makes prefixation an especially rich area of study because it demonstrates how morphological systems encode multiple layers of meaning simultaneously. The structural behavior of prefixes also interacts with phonological constraints. Processes such as nasal assimilation, voicing adjustment, vowel harmony, and segment deletion often occur when prefixes attach to roots. These phonological adjustments show that prefixation is not merely linear attachment but a dynamic interaction shaped by phonotactic rules. In the Central Wewewa dialect, nasal elements in certain

prefixes trigger assimilation to the place of articulation of the root's initial consonant. This pattern is widely attested in Austronesian languages and reflects broader phonological tendencies toward ease of articulation and harmonic sound patterns. Understanding these interactions is essential for accurately describing prefixation patterns. From a semantic perspective, prefixes perform a broad range of functions that influence meaning and argument structure. Causative prefixes introduce an external agent, increasing valency; anticausative prefixes suppress the agent, reducing valency; and reciprocal prefixes encode mutual action. These semantic distinctions are not merely grammatical but reflect culturally embedded conceptualizations of agency, reciprocity, and event structure. Thus, analyzing the functions of prefixes offers insight into cognitive and cultural dimensions of the language. The cultural and geographical context of the Wewewa-speaking community contributes to shaping linguistic structures. Sumba Island is known for its strong traditional values, ceremonial practices, and oral traditions. Language plays a central role in storytelling, ritual speech, kinship interactions, and cultural transmission. The nuanced use of verbal morphology—including prefixation—allows speakers to encode distinctions in social relationships, respect, and culturally salient patterns of action. These cultural layers enrich the interpretation of morphological structures and highlight the importance of linguistic documentation. While previous studies on Sumbanese languages have provided valuable insights, they remain limited in scope. Much existing work focuses on phonology, orthographic development, or lexical documentation, but lacks comprehensive morphological analysis. As a result, critical features such as prefixation remain insufficiently described. This study contributes to filling this gap by providing systematic documentation of prefixation based on primary field data.

Moreover, research on Austronesian morphosyntax has predominantly focused on languages from the Philippines, Polynesia, or western Indonesia. While these studies offer valuable theoretical models, they do not adequately represent the linguistic variation of Eastern Indonesia, particularly the languages of Sumba. Incorporating data from Wewewa enriches the typological representation of the Austronesian family and challenges assumptions based on limited language samples. Sociolinguistic factors also complicate linguistic research in underdocumented communities. The increasing use of Indonesian in education and public life reduces younger speakers' exposure to local languages. Consequently, certain traditional expressions and morphological forms are becoming less familiar. This shift highlights the urgency of documenting linguistic structures that may be at

risk. To analyze prefixation comprehensively, this study draws on construction morphology, which emphasizes morphological constructions rather than isolated morphemes, and valency theory, which examines how verbs encode participant roles. Event structure theory further informs the analysis by exploring how verbs represent temporal and causal relationships. Together, these frameworks support a nuanced analysis of prefixation as a system that reflects both linguistic structure and cultural cognition. The descriptive-qualitative approach used in this study is based on data collected through elicitation, interviews, and natural conversations with native speakers in Wee Rame Village. This field-based methodology ensures that the descriptions reflect authentic usage and capture variation across communicative contexts, strengthening the reliability of the analysis. Ultimately, the significance of this research extends beyond academic inquiry. It contributes to documenting and preserving linguistic diversity in Indonesia and supports cultural heritage in the Wewewa-speaking community. By providing a detailed analysis of prefixation in the Central Wewewa dialect, the study offers a foundation for future linguistic research and contributes to broader discussions in morphology, typology, and sociolinguistics. In summary, the introduction has outlined the theoretical, linguistic, and cultural motivations for analyzing prefixation in the Central Wewewa dialect. It has highlighted gaps in prior research, the significance of prefixation in morphological and semantic processes, and the broader implications for linguistic typology and language preservation. The following sections present the methodology, analysis, and discussion that together form a comprehensive examination of prefixation in the Central Wewewa dialect.

2. Research Method

This study employed a descriptive-qualitative research design to document and analyze the formation and functions of prefixation in the Central Wewewa dialect, following the methodological framework outlined in the researcher's thesis. The research was conducted in Wee Rame Village, Central Wewewa, and involved native speakers selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of fluent and culturally knowledgeable participants. The data consisted of verb roots, prefixed verb forms, and example sentences collected through elicitation, semi-structured interviews, and natural conversations, supported by instruments such as an elicitation list, field notes, and an audio recorder. During data collection, elicitation was used to obtain specific morphological forms, interviews were conducted to clarify meanings and functions, and observation of natural conversations captured spontaneous language use. The collected data were transcribed, organized, and

analyzed through several stages: identifying root forms and their prefixed derivatives, classifying the types of prefixes, examining phonological processes such as nasal assimilation, and interpreting the semantic and grammatical roles of prefixes—particularly their effects on valency, agency, and event structure. By triangulating elicited forms, conversational data, and speaker explanations, the analysis provides an accurate, reliable, and context-grounded description of prefixation in the Central Wewewa dialect.

3. Research Findings and Discussion

Research Findings

This section presents the research findings on verb formation through prefixation in the Central Wewewa dialect. The findings are reported descriptively and are organized according to the research questions. The data were obtained from elicitation sessions and naturally occurring utterances produced by native speakers of the Central Wewewa dialect.

3.1. Findings Related to Research Question 1

What are the morphological processes involved in the formation of verbs through prefixation in the Central Wewewa dialect?

The findings show that prefixation is the primary morphological process involved in verb formation in the Central Wewewa dialect. Based on the analysis of the data, four types of prefixation processes were identified:

- a. Causative prefixation
- b. Reciprocal prefixation
- c. Anticausative prefixation
- d. Derivational prefixation

These prefixes attach to base forms consisting of verbs, nouns, or adjectives to produce new verb forms. The process involves the addition of a prefix to the root without internal modification of the base form.

3.2. Findings Related to Research Question 2

What are the meanings and grammatical functions of the prefixes used in verbs of the Central Wewewa dialect?

- a. Causative Prefixes (pa-, ma-)

The data indicate that the prefixes pa- and ma- are used to form causative verbs. These prefixes attach to verb roots and result in verbs that express actions caused by an agent.

Examples include:

malle → pamalle

Ku pamalle wa na dara.

‘I make the horse run.’

dura → padura

‘to put to sleep’

In these constructions, the prefixed verbs occur with an additional participant compared to their base forms.

b. Reciprocal Prefix (pa-)

The prefix pa- is also used to form reciprocal verbs. Reciprocal verbs express actions performed mutually by two or more participants.

Examples include:

tullu → patullu

‘to help each other’

dekki → padekki

‘to kiss each other’

These verbs occur in clauses where participants act toward one another.

c. Anticausative Prefixes (ma-, man-, mang-)

The prefixes ma-, man-, and mang- are used to form anticausative verbs. These verbs express events that occur without an external agent.

Examples include:

wewar → mawewar

‘to scatter’

irra → mairra

‘to be torn’

The forms man- and mang- appear as phonological variants of ma- depending on the initial consonant of the root.

d. Derivational Prefixes (pa-, ma-)

The data also show that the prefixes pa- and ma- function derivationally to form verbs from nouns and adjectives.

Examples include:

ana (N) → paana (V)

‘to give birth’

luadi (Adj) → paluadi (V)

‘to increase’

In these cases, prefixation results in a change of lexical category from noun or adjective to verb

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that prefixation in the Central Wewewa dialect is a highly productive morphological process that plays a central role in verb formation. The prefixes pa- and ma- serve multiple functions, including causative, reciprocal, anticausative, and derivational, enabling speakers to change word classes, increase or decrease valency, and convey complex agent–action–result relationships. These prefixes not only create new verbs but also influence semantic interpretation and argument structure, illustrating the intricate relationship between morphology and meaning in this dialect.

Causative prefixes (pa-, ma-) function to increase verb valency by introducing an agent who performs an action affecting a patient or object. For example, pamalle (“to make [the horse] run”) and padura (“to put [a sibling] to sleep”) demonstrate how intransitive verbs can be transformed into transitive forms. Similarly, pario (“to bathe someone”), derived from rio (“to bathe oneself”), indicates that the subject initiates the action, highlighting agentive control. These findings align with Fromkin & Rodman (2003), who argue that morphological changes are systematically related to argument structure. Previous research on Austronesian languages also confirms that causative prefixes consistently encode intentional actions and agent–patient relations (Katamba, 1993; Verhaar, 1999). This productivity demonstrates that the Central Wewewa dialect allows speakers to manipulate verbal structures flexibly to reflect social and pragmatic nuances.

Reciprocal prefix pa- indicates mutual or bidirectional actions among participants. Examples such as patullu (“to help each other”) and pawapo (“to hug each other”) illustrate how all participants act simultaneously as both agents and patients. Although pa- also occurs in causative constructions, the semantic and cultural context clarifies the reciprocal reading. This is particularly evident in actions like kissing (padekki), which culturally are understood as mutual in Wewewa interactions. The finding highlights the interaction between morphology and pragmatics, supporting Verhaar (1999) and Booij (2007), who emphasize that reciprocal constructions are guided not only by morphological form but also by social and semantic conventions. Therefore, prefix pa- reflects both grammatical and cultural encoding of interpersonal relationships.

Anticausative prefixes (ma-, man-, mang-) mark actions that occur spontaneously or naturally without an external agent, reducing verb valency. Examples include mawewar (“to scatter”) and mairra (“to be torn”), where subjects undergo a change of state independently. Similarly, madeika (“to scream”) and mawago (“to play”) reflect self-initiated, spontaneous actions. These findings are consistent with Booij (2007), who classifies anticausative prefixes as valency-decreasing processes, and with Kridalaksana (2008), who notes similar patterns in related Wewewa dialects. The data also illustrate the morphophonological variation of the prefix (ma-, man-, mang-) according to the phonological context of the root, showing systematic adaptation to phonetic constraints while maintaining semantic consistency. This underscores the integration of phonology and morphology in productive verb formation.

Derivational prefixes (pa-, ma-) allow nouns or adjectives to be converted into verbs, broadening the lexical inventory. Examples include paana (“to give birth”) from ana (“child”), paulle (“to have tusks”) from ulle (“tusked”), and paluadi (“to multiply”) from luadi (“many”). Such derivational processes demonstrate class-changing effects and semantic expansion, allowing speakers to encode causation, intensification, or transformation of meaning. This supports Kridalaksana’s (2008) assertion that derivational affixation is a central mechanism for word formation in Austronesian languages.

Overall, prefixes pa- and ma- in the Central Wewewa dialect reveal a productive and flexible morphological system that systematically links form and meaning. They allow speakers to encode complex agentive, reciprocal, and spontaneous events, while enabling lexical innovation through derivation. These results not only corroborate existing linguistic theories on valency-changing processes and morphological productivity but also highlight how culture and context influence semantic interpretation. Implications for further research include examining prefixation in spontaneous spoken discourse, conducting cross-dialectal comparisons within Wewewa and other Sumba dialects, and exploring the interaction between phonology and morphology in natural speech. Such studies can provide deeper insights into cognitive and social mechanisms underlying morphological productivity and the role of prefixes in shaping event conceptualization and interpersonal communication.

4. Conclusion

This study has shown that prefixation in the Central Wewewa dialect is a highly productive morphological process essential in verb formation. The prefixes pa- and ma- function as causative, reciprocal, anticausative, and derivational markers, allowing speakers to modify word classes, adjust valency, and express semantic relations between agents, actions, and outcomes. Causative prefixes introduce an agent to increase valency, reciprocal prefixes indicate mutual actions, anticausative prefixes mark spontaneous or naturally occurring events, and derivational prefixes transform nouns or adjectives into verbs. These findings demonstrate the systematic connection between morphological form and meaning, confirm previous linguistic theories on valency and derivation, and highlight the role of cultural and contextual factors in semantic interpretation. Future research may focus on spontaneous speech, cross-dialectal comparisons, and phonology–morphology interactions to further understand the cognitive and social mechanisms underlying prefix productivity in Central Wewewa.

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