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A Morpho-Syntactic Analysis of Tense-Aspectual Categories in English and Nàijá

Emmanuel Avwarosuọghẹnẹ Mede PhD, Ejiro Daystar Ọghọyonẹ-Amorighoye MA & Evelyn Uruemuesiri Agbaghe

Department of English, Delta State College of Education, Mosogar, Delta State, Nigeria

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***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Emmanuel Avwarosuoghene Mede

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Abstract **Original Research Article**

This study investigates the following tense-aspectual categories in English and the English-lexifier Nigerian creole, Nàijá: absolute tenses (present, past, future) and the perfective, pro-gressive, and durational aspects. The adopted theoretical framework is the minimalist program (MP) of generative syntax. The primary data for the analysis are the relevant Nàijá tense-aspectual structures and their English translation equivalent. Two research questions guided the analysis: (i) What are the points of syntactic convergence and/or divergence between Nàijá and English tense-aspectual structures? (ii) What are the points of morphological convergence and/or divergence in Nàijá and English tense-aspectual structures? The following are the key findings. In English present tense, tense/T is a null (Ø) category; in contrast, Nàijá present tense obligatorily requires the auxiliary 'dè' at the tense/T node. The other two tenses (past and future) have the same syntactic structure in both languages. With reference to the progres-sive, perfective, and perfect-progressive aspectual categories, the syntactic structures are the same in English and Nàijá. With the sole exception of the syntactic structure of present tense (as noted above), the observed differences between English and Nàijá are morphological: Whereas English auxiliaries and verbs vary morphologically in response to the tense, number, and person features of the syntactic structure in which they occur, Nàijá auxiliaries and verbs are morphologically invariant.

Keywords: aspect, category, Nàijá, tense, translation equivalent.

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1.0 Background to the Study

Globally, leading economies are knowledge-driven: They rely more on intellectual capabilities than on natural resources. Acquisition of intellectual capabilities is achieved through the instrumentality of natural language; and, as evidenced by leading global economies, knowledge acquisition is enhanced when the lingua franca (and thus the language of education) is endoglossic. Regrettably, given the multi-lingual structure of Nigeria, the exoglossia, English, serves a dual function as Nigeria's lingua franca as well as the language of education. Although Nàijá, the creolized English-lexifier Nigerian endoglossia, serves as unofficial national language, its adoption as the language of education is hampered by (among other things) a perceived lack of standardization. Against this backdrop, while the immediate

objective of this study is to document the syntax and morphology of Nàijá tense-aspectual categories, the long-term objective is to attain standardization of the Creole in order to facilitate its adoption as Nigeria's official endoglossic lingua franca.

The adopted theoretical framework is the minimalist program (MP) of transformational generative grammar. In MP, structural representations are category-based; e.g. a noun phrase (NP) is a phrase which is headed by a noun/N; a verb phrase (VP) is one headed by a verb/V, and so on. Following Radford (2002, p. 37), we shall define a grammatical category as 'a class of expressions which share a common set of grammatical properties'. These grammatical properties consist of both *morphological* and *syntactic* features. By morphological features, we refer to:

> …the **inflectional** and **derivational** properties of words: inflectional properties relate to different forms of the same word (*e.g*. the plural form of a noun like *cat* is formed by adding the plural suffix +*s* to give the form *cats*), while derivational properties relate to the processes by which a word can be used to form a different kind of word by the addition of another morpheme (*e.g*. by adding the suffix +*ness* to the adjective *sad* we can form the noun *sadness*) (Radford, 2002, p. 38; emphasis in the original).

By *syntactic features*, on the other hand, we refer 'to the fact that categories of words have different *distributions* (i.e., they occupy a different range of positions within phrases or sentences)' (Radford, 2002, p. 40; emphasis in the original).

2.0 Methodology

The study adopted the observer-participant approach in deriving the Nàijá primary data: The researchers recorded the spontaneous utterances of Nàijá speakers in natural urban settings such as motor parks, markets, pubs, newspaper stands, and other similar settings where the language of inter-ethnic interaction is predominantly Nàijá. The utterances which instantiate the relevant morphological and syntactic units were then extracted from the primary data. To avoid ethical issues, these utterances were not used directly; rather, their structural patterns were used in generating new Nàijá sentences. The sentences so derived were then assigned to fifteen coordinate bilingual[1] speakers of Nàijá and English to translate into English. To establish reliability of the translation, each translator worked independently of the others. Their translations were considered reliable because they all returned essentially the same data. The responses of these translators constitute the English translation equivalent[2] of the Nàijá data. Finally, the syntactic structures of the Nàijá sentences and their English translation equivalent were analyzed within the framework of the minimalist program of generative syntax. The data analysis was guided by the following research questions:

(i) What are the points of *syntactic* convergence and/or divergence between Nàijá and English tense-aspectual structures?

(ii) What are the points of *morphological* convergence and/or divergence in the derivation of Nàijá and English tense-aspectual structures?

3.0 Time, Tense, and Aspect

Time is a universal temporal continuum (Smith 1991). Given its essence as a continuum, we can only locate events in time by imposing an arbitrary point of orientation, conventionally tagged Speech time (S) on the continuum. Events (or states-of-being) preceding S are past (e.g. 'Ann *was* angry'); those which are contemporaneous with S are present (e.g. 'Ann *is* angry'); while those subsequent to S are in the future (e.g. 'Ann *will be* angry').

Following Reichenbach (1947), we may conceptualize *tense* as the grammaticalized relationship between Event time (E) and Speech

[1] That is, competent speakers of two languages who are able to separate their grammars (Osakwe, 2010, p.7).

[2] Utterances in different languages are considered translation-equivalent if, as Snell-Hornby (1988, p. 17) explains, they have 'similar significance'.

time (S). Where E precedes S (E–S), the tense is *past*; e.g. 'I work*ed*'; if E is contemporaneous with S (E/S), the tense is *present*; e.g. 'I work'; and when E occurs subsequent to S (S–E), the tense is *future*; e.g. 'I *will* work'. In English, the grammaticalization of this temporal relation is achieved via the use of bound morphemes such as the *–ed* past tense morpheme (e.g. 'I work*ed*') or free morphemes such as '*will*' (e.g. 'I *will* work').

Within each of these three tense domains (i.e. present, past, and future), the event (E) may be viewed as *completed* (e.g. 'I *have eaten*'), *ongoing* (e.g. 'I *was reading* when you called'), or *durational* (e.g. 'By August next year, I *will have been teaching* for eight years'). These three dimensions—completive, progressive, and durational—are termed *aspect* or the internal temporal structure of a situation (Declerck et al 2006). Syntactic structures which express completed activities constitute the *perfect* aspect; those which document ongoing activities constitute the *progressive* aspect; while those which convey a sense of duration constitute the *perfect-progressive* aspect.

4.0 Tenses

The tenses are the *present*, *past*, and *future*. In terms of discourse function, the present tense indicates (i) habitual/cyclic actions (e.g. 'John *smokes*'; 'It *rains* in July'); (ii) factual information (e.g. 'Honest people *hate* cheating'); (iii) a future certainty, particularly in a formal context (e.g. 'The President *arrives* tomorrow'); the 'instantaneous present', particularly in the context of sports (e.g. 'Odinga *hands* the baton to Ola; Ola *sprints* like a cheetah'); a past but still valid suggestion or decision (e.g. 'The authors *suggest* that current research must interrogate these a priori assumptions'; 'Philip *argues* that the modernist approach is open to challenge'). The past tense indicates an action, activity, or occurrence whose factual reality terminated in the past; compare, for instance, 'Paul *wrote* five books' (implying that Paul no longer writes) with 'Paul *has written* five books' (implying that he's not yet done with writing books). Future tense indicates conditions, actions, activities, states-of-being, and so on, which are yet to occur or hold true (e.g. 'If it rains, I *will stay*'; 'She *may be* angry'). This tense also indicates intention; e.g. 'I *will act* on their recommendation'.

The study adopts minimalist schema in representing syntactic structures. In minimalist syntax, a declarative sentence is termed a tense phrase (TP); that is, a phrase headed by tense/T which, as a consequence of the Extended Projection Principle (EPP), projects through an intermediate projection (T^I) to a maximal projection (TP) with a specifier (Spec-TP) on its edge. (In functional grammars such as systemic functional grammar/SFG, the specifier of a tense phrase is termed 'grammatical subject'.) The data (1a–3b) below are tokens of the present, past, and future tense categories. (Here, as in the rest of the work, the 'a' sentences are English and the 'b' sentences are the Nàìjá translation equivalent.)

(1) a. Ann work*s*. (**Present tense**)

[$_{TP}$ [$_{Spec\text{-}TP}$ Ann [$_{T}$ Ø [$_{V}$ work*s*]]]]

b. Ann *dè* work[3].

[$_{TP}$ [$_{Spec\text{-}TP}$ Ann [$_{T}$ *dè* [$_{V}$ work]]]]

(2) a. Ann work*ed*. (**Past tense**)

[$_{TP}$ [$_{Spec\text{-}TP}$ Ann [$_{T}$ Ø [$_{V}$ work*ed*]]]]

b. Ann work.

[$_{TP}$ [$_{Spec\text{-}TP}$ Ann [$_{T}$ Ø [$_{V}$ work]]]]

(3) a. Ann *will* work. (**Future tense**)

[$_{TP}$ [$_{Spec\text{-}TP}$ Ann [$_{T}$ *will* [$_{V}$ work]]]]

b. Ann *gò work*.

[$_{TP}$ [$_{Spec\text{-}TP}$ Ann [$_{T}$ *gò* [$_{V}$ work]]]]

In English present tense (1a), tense/T is a null or phonologically empty category (Ø); hence the agreement features of number/person between the specifier of the tense phrase (Spec-TP) and the tense/T constituent remain at the verb/V position; compare, for instance, 'Ann work*s*' (V-

[3] The English verb 'work' /wɜːk/ is phonologically realized as /wɒk/ in Nàìjá; hence some researchers prefer the orthographic form 'wọ́k' rather than 'work' in Nàìjá sentences.

s) with 'I work' (V). On the other hand, in Nàìjá present tense, T is obligatorily occupied by the Nàìjá auxiliary tense marker, *dè*, as in (1b). Thus, Nàìjá present tense differs syntactically from English present tense. With reference to past tense (2a/b), the two languages have the same syntactic structure: In both English and Nàìjá, T is a null (Ø) category. Thus, the sole difference between the two structures is morphological: whereas the V constituent in English is morphologically marked for past; e.g. 'work*ed*' (V-ed), the V constituent in Nàìjá is morphologically fossilized; it is, invariantly in the base/V form (e.g. 'work') which is coded 'past' by default. In both languages, future tense (3a/b) has the same syntactic and morphological structure: a lexical marker of futurity at T (e.g. *will*, in English; *gò*, in Nàìjá) and the base form of the verb at V. In brief, English present tense differs syntactically and morphologically from Nàìjá present tense. With reference to past tense, both languages have the same syntactic structure but differ in morphological structure; while in future tense, Nàìjá and English have the same syntactic and morphological structure.

We turn now to the aspectual forms, beginning with the progressive aspect.

5.0 Progressive Aspect

Typically, the progressive aspect expresses ongoing activities in the present (e.g. 'I *am* cook*ing*'), past (e.g. 'I *was* cook*ing*'), or future (e.g. 'I *will be* cook*ing*'). To put our discussion on a firm footing, consider the data (4a–6b) which are tokens of English and Nàìjá present, past, and future progressive aspectual categories.

(4) a. I *am* cook*ing*. [**Present progressive**]

[$_{TP}$ [$_{Spec\text{-}TP}$ I [$_{T}$ *am* [$_{V}$ cook*ing*]]]]

b. I *dè cook*.

[$_{TP}$ [$_{Spec\text{-}TP}$ I [$_{T}$ *dè* [$_{V}$ cook]]]]

(5) a. I *was* cook*ing*. [**Past progressive**]

[$_{TP}$ [$_{Spec\text{-}TP}$ I [$_{T}$ *was* [$_{V}$ cook*ing*]]]]

b. I *dè cook* bifọ.

[$_{TP}$ [$_{Spec\text{-}TP}$ I [$_{T}$ *dè* [$_{V}$ cook [$_{Adv}$ bifọ]]]]]

(6) a. I *will be* cook*ing* by then. [**Future progressive**]

[$_{TP}$ [$_{Spec\text{-}TP}$ I [$_{T}$ *will* [$_{Prog}$ *be* [$_{V}$ cook*ing* [$_{AdvP}$ by then]]]]]]

b. I *gò dè cook* dat time.

[$_{TP}$ [$_{Spec\text{-}TP}$ I [$_{T}$ *gò* [$_{Prog}$ *dè* [$_{V}$ cook [$_{AdvP}$ dat time]]]]]]

With reference to the progressive category, the two languages exhibit a convergence in syntactic structure. As exemplified in (4a/b), present progressive comprises a present (auxiliary) tense marker (e.g. *am*/*dè*) at the tense/T node, and a verb constituent at V. Similarly, past progressive (5a/b) comprises an auxiliary marker of past tense at T (e.g. *was*/*dè*), and a verb constituent at V. Future progressive (6a/b) in both languages syntactically consists of an auxiliary marker of futurity (e.g. *will*/*gò*) at T; a progressive auxiliary (e.g. *be*/*dè*) at Prog; and a verb constituent at V. The difference between the two languages is morphological. First, whereas the English auxiliary BE inflects to reflect the morphological features of tense/person/number present in the structure (e.g. 'I *am*…'; 'I *was*…,' etc.), the Nàìjá translation equivalent auxiliary *dè* is morphologically invariant; that is, it does not inflect in sympathy with the tense/person/number features in the syntactic string (Compare 4a/b, on the one hand, with 5a/b, on the other). By inference, the Nàìjá auxiliary *dè* is present tense by default; it only becomes past when the sentence instantiates a temporal adverbial (Adv) or adverbial phrase (AdvP) such as '*bifọ*' (5b) whose past tense features percolate upwards to the tense/T position. Second, whereas English verbs (e.g. COOK) have an inflected progressive form (e.g. cook*ing*), Nàìjá verbs are morphologically fossilized; they do not license or permit the progressive (*–ing*) or, as we shall see, the perfective (*–ed*/*–en*) aspectual suffixes.

6.0 Perfective Aspect

The perfective categories express completed activities in the *present* (e.g. 'Paul has eat*en*'), *past* (e.g. 'Paul had eat*en*'), or *future* (e.g. 'Paul will have eat*en*'). The data (7a–9b) are tokens of this aspectual category.

(7) a. Paul *has* eat*en*. (**Present perfect**)

[TP [Spec-TP Paul [T *has* [V eat*en*]]]]

b. Paul *dón chop*.

[TP [Spec-TP Paul [T *dón* [V chop[4]]]]]

(8) a. Paul *had* eat*en* by then. (**Past perfect**)

[TP [Spec-TP Paul [T had [V eat*en* [AdvP by then]]]]]

b. Paul *dón chop* dat time.

[TP [Spec-TP Paul [T *dón* [V chop [AdvP dat time]]]]]

(9) a. Paul *will have* eat*en* by then. (**Future perfect**)

[TP [Spec-TP Paul [T *will* [Perf *have* [V eat*en* [AdvP by then]]]]]]

b. Paul *gò dón chop* dat time.

[TP [Spec-TP Paul [T *gò* [Perf *dón* [V chop [AdvP dat time]]]]]]

As evidenced by the data (7a–9b), the syntactic structure of each of the English perfective categories (present, past, and future) is exactly the same as that of the corresponding Nàijá aspectual structure: a tense indicator at T (e.g. *have*/*dón*; *had*/*dón*; *will*/*gò*); a perfective aspectual marker at Perf (e.g. *have*/*dón*), and an *–ed*/*–en* verb at V (e.g. eat*en*/*chop*). Again (as in the progressive aspectual category), the basic difference between English and Nàijá perfective tense is morphological: Unlike English auxiliaries and verbs which inflect for tense, number, and aspect, Nàijá auxiliaries and verbs are morphologically invariant. For instance, the English present auxiliary '*has*' (in 7a) and past auxiliary '*had*' (in 8a) are invariantly rendered as '*dón*' (7b/8b) in Nàijá.

7.0 Durational Aspect

The durational aspect (or, more conventionally, perfect-progressive category) expresses activities that have been, had been, or will have been ongoing by some specific moment in the *present* (e.g. 'They have been wait*ing*'), *past* (e.g. 'They had been wait*ing*…'), or *future* (e.g. 'They will have been wait*ing*…'). The data (10a–12b) examples of this aspectual category.

(10) a. They *have been* wait*ing*. (**Present perfect progressive**)

[TP [Spec-TP They [T *have* [Perf *been* [V wait*ing*]]]]]

b. Dem *dón dè* wait since.

[TP [Spec-TP Dem [T *dón* [Perf dè [V wait [Adv since]]]]]]

(11) a. They *had been* wait*ing* for two hours. (**Past perfect progressive**)

[TP [Spec-TP They [T *had* [Perf *been* [V wait*ing* [AdvP for two hours]]]]]]

b. Dem *dón dè* wait reach two hour dat time.

[TP [Spec-TP Dem [T *dón* [Perf *dè* [V wait [AdvP reach two hour dat time]]]]]]

(12) a. They *will have been* wait*ing* for two hours by then. (**Future perfect progressive**)

[TP [Spec-TP They [T *will* [Perf *have* [Prog *been* [V wait*ing* [AdvP for two hours by

then]]]]]]]

b. Dem *gò dón dè* wait reach two hour dat time.

[TP [Spec-TP Dem [T *gò* [Perf *dón* [Prog *dè* [V wait [AdvP reach two hour dat time]]]]]]]

As with the preceding progressive and perfective aspects, the data (10a–12b) shows that English and Nàijá converge in syntactic structure in all three durational aspects: present, past, and future. Again, as in the two preceding aspectual categories, the sole difference between English and Nàijá is morphological: English auxiliaries and verbs inflect for the tense, number and person features in the sentence, while Nàijá auxiliaries and verbs are morphologically invariant.

[4] The Nàijá verb 'chop' (meaning 'eat') is pronounced /ʃɒp/.

8.0 Conclusion

This research examined morpho-syntactic structures which instantiate tense and aspect in English and Nàijá. The immediate objective is to determine points of morphological and syntactic convergence and divergence between Nàijá and English vis-à-vis the investigated tense-aspectual categories. The long-term objective of the research is to document Nàijá narrow grammar as a step towards the standardization and adoption of the Creole as Nigeria's endoglossic lingua franca. The data analysis shows that (1) in English present tense, tense/T is a null (Ø) category, while Nàijá present tense obligatorily requires the auxiliary '*dè*' at the tense/T node; (2) the other two tenses (past and future) have the same syntactic structure in both languages; (3) with reference to the progressive, perfective, and perfect-progressive aspectual categories, the syntactic structures are the same in English and Nàijá, the observed differences being solely morphological: Whereas English auxiliaries and verbs vary morphologically in response to the tense, number, and person features of the syntactic structure in which they occur, Nàijá auxiliaries and verbs are morphologically invariant.

These findings corroborate those of Mede & Gayovwi (2025) on the morpho-syntactic structure of Nàijá tenses, progressive, and perfective aspects. In addition, it expands the scope of that earlier study by adding the durational aspect. In overall terms, the structure of Nàijá tense and aspectual categories is more elegant that that of the corresponding English categories because of the morphologically invariant nature of Nàijá auxiliaries and verbs. This factor makes it easier to understand the Creole and represent it orthographically, in comparison with English. If further research reveals that other aspects of Nàijá narrow grammar follow this same trajectory, that fact alone would be an eloquent argument in favour of the eventual adoption of the language as Nigeria's official endoglossic lingua franca.

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