# CHILDREN'S USE OF NYÁ CONSTRUCTIONS IN EWE

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Research on first language (L1) acquisition has shown children to command many of the grammatical principles and rules governing their native language by the age of four. This paper examined the age at which Ewe-speaking children acquire, **nyá** constructions. Three **nyá** forms can be identified in Ewe. They are the **nyá** verb 'come to know' and two **nyá** auxiliaries/modals, a **nyá** certainity marker and a **nyá** VOICE marker both of which grammaticalised from the **nyá** verb. The **nyá** construction is said to be structurally anagolous to the passive construction in English. Data was drawn from 20 monolingual Ewe-speaking children at the mean age of 2;5, 3;6, 4;4, 5;5, 6;4+ (4 participants per age group) and five adult speakers of Ewe. Results suggest that although the acquisition of the **nyá** main verb is at an early age (2;6) and the children acquire the certainty function of the modal by the time they are five years, the **nyá** VOICE is hardly used by the Ewe children studied. The paper thus offers support for the maturation hypothesis that certain grammatical principles involving A-chain formation are not initially available to the child but mature in due course.

La recherche sur l'acquisition de la langue maternelle (L1) montre que les enfants on tune maîtrise de plusieurs principes grammaticaux et règles qui régissent leur langue maternelle à l'âge de quatre ans. Cet article examine l'âge auquel les enfants locuteurs d'ewe acquièrent les constructions **nyá**. L'on peut identifier trois formes de **nyá** en ewe. Ce sont : le verbe **nyá** 'venir connaître' et deux auxiliaires/modes **nyá**, un **nyá** marqueur de certitude, et un **nyá** marqueur de la Voix, tous les deux grammaticalisés à partir du verbe **nyá**. L'on considère la construction **nyá** analogue, structurellement, à la construction passive en anglais. Les données viennent de 20 enfants monolingues locuteurs de ewe avec un âge moyen de 2;5, 3;6, 4;4, 5;5, 6;4+ (4 participants par groupe d'âge) et cinq locuteurs adultes de ewe. Les résultats suggèrent que, bien que l'acquisition du verbe principal **nyá** se fasse à un âge précoce (2;6) et les enfants acquièrent la fonction de certitude du mode vers l'âge de 5 ans, la Voix **nyá** n'est presque pas utilisée par les enfants ewe que nous avons étudiés. L'article vient ainsi appuyer l'hypothèse de la maturation que certains principes grammaticaux impliquant la formation de la chaine-A ne sont pas disponibles initialement chez l'enfant mais qu'ils croissent en maturité le moment venu.

## 0. INTRODUCTION

The **nyá** construction is syntactically similar to the passive in English because the object of the clause is realized as the subject. Being a Kwa language, one can expect that Ewe would have the following typical verbal grammatical features (among others) suggested for the (Old) Kwa languages of West Africa by Westermann and Bryan (1952: 93, cited in Hyman, 2004).

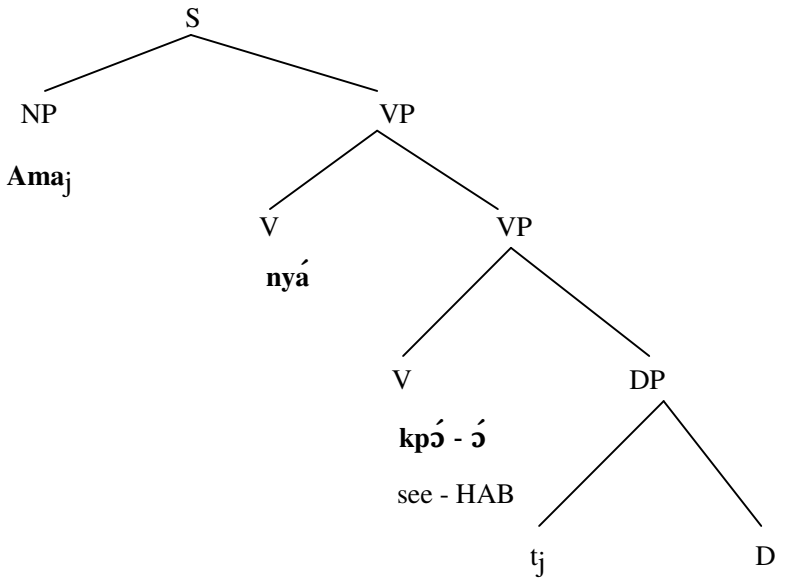
- There are no morphological verb classes
- There are no verbal derivatives
- There is no passive voice.

But the function of passivization is to foreground a logical object, and at the same time to de-emphasize a logical subject into the background. Syntactically, this is represented as the promotion of the former (direct-object changes to subject) and demotion of the latter (subject changes to oblique).

According to these changes of grammatical relations associated with particular thematic roles, passives are taken to mark the perspective of a patient – denoting sentence subject (Ameka 2005). Collins (1993: 45-47) also discusses the **nyá**

construction. He notes that the **nyá** construction is structurally analoguous to the passive in English and can be classified as an Ⱥ-movement construction. For instance, in example (1) the VP headed by **kpɔ́** is embedded under **nyá** which absorbs the case of **kpɔ́** and dethematizes the subject position. This situation gives rise to A-movement.

(1) a.




b. **Ama nyá kpɔ́ - ɔ́**
Ama MODAL see - HAB
'Ama is pretty.' (Ama is pretty to look at.')

In language acquisition, passive structures are typically assumed to be one of the later acquired constructions. With respect to the absolute timing of language development, some generative linguists argue that certain grammatical properties only become available after a certain point in development, activated by processes of neural maturation. For instance, Borer and Wexler (1987, 1992) have claimed that some of the syntactic processes required for the formation of a passive sentence like *The man was bitten by the cat* "mature" around the age of four. This hypothesis which has been based on English, has been challenged by studies on other languages, where passives are more frequent in the input (see Suzman, 1985, Pye and Poz, 1988; Allen, 1994; Allen and Crago, 1993, 1996). In these studies, even two-year old children have been found to produce passives productively, which suggests that the relevant syntactic processes are already available to them. Moreover, such findings show the potential impact of input properties like frequency.

Discussing the relative timing of acquisition processes, some researchers have also referred to both formal and conceptual factors. The most (in) famous form-oriented approach was the so-called derivational theory of complexity (Miller and Chomsky, 1963, Brown and Hanlon, 1970). According to this approach, complex sentences are derived from active sentences by the passive transformation and should therefore be acquired after active sentences. There is a strand of acquisition research which talks about semantics and given that the similarity to agentive passives is only formal, it would be interesting to see what is said about the semantics of other types of passives. Some languages, including several southeast Asian languages, use a form of passive

voice to indicate that an action or event was unpleasant or undesirable. This so-called adversative passive works like the ordinary passive voice in terms of syntactic structure- that is, a theme or instrument acts as a subject. In addition, the construction indicates adversative effect, suggesting that someone was negatively affected. Japanese and Korean for instance, have adversative passives, also called Indirect passives (Oshima, in press). Indirect passives can be formed on the basis of either transitive or intransitive verbs. The sentence in (2b) is an example of the indirect passive based on the intransitive verb in (2a). The Japanese examples are drawn from Ono (2013).

(2) a. **Kodomo- ga nai- da**
Child- NOM cry- PAST
'The child cried'

b. **Tar- ga kodomo- ni nak- are -ta**
Taro - NOM child- by cry- PASS -PAST
'Taro was adversely affected by the child's crying'

The intransitive verb **nak** 'cry' can be passivized as shown in 3(b). The active and passive pair in (3) denotes different situations. In the passive, a new participant (the syntactic subject) is added to the event denoted by the base verb. The sentence in (3b) is an instance of indirect passive based on a transitive verb.

(3) a. **Tonari- no gakusei- ga**
neighbouring- GEN student- NOM

**piano- o asa- made hiita**
piano- ACC morning- until played
'The neighbouring student played the piano until morning'

b. **Hanako- ga tonari- no gakusei- ni piano- o**
Hanako- NOM neighbouring- GEN student- by piano- ACC

**asa- made hik- are -ta**
morning- until play- PASS - PAST
'Hanako was adversely affected by the piano until morning'

The indirect passive sentence in (3b) contains the transitive verb **hik** 'play'. The object of the verb (the piano) remains in the passive sentence, involves an extra participant, represented as the syntactic subject, which is not originally involved in the event denoted by the transitive verb. The indirect passive generally has an adversative meaning. As indicated in the English glosses, the indirect passive sentences have an implication that the new subjects (Taro in (2b) or Hanako in (3b) are adversely affected by the event denoted by the active counterparts.

Stative and dynamic passives also exist. In languages such as English, there is often a similarity between passive clauses expressing an action or event, such as

(4) a. The dog is fed (every day)

and clauses expressing a state, such as:

b. The dog is fed (for now)

In sentence (4a) the auxiliary **is** and the past participle **fed** combine to express the verbal passive voice, while in the second sentence, is serves as an ordinary copula and the past participle as an ordinary adjective. Sentences of the second type are sometimes

confused with the passive voice, and in some treatments are considered to be a type of passive – a *stative* or *static* passive, in contrast to the *dynamic* or *eventive* passive exemplified by the first sentence (4a). The stative type may also be called false passives. Some languages express or can express these meanings in contrasting ways.

This paper explores the acquisition of **nyá** constructions in Ewe-speaking children. The **nyá** constructions are the cognitive verb **nyá** 'to come to know', the **nyá** CERTAINTY modal and the **nyá** VOICE modal. The main concentration is on the two **nyá** modals which have grammticalised from the **nyá** main verb. The paper investigates whether the grammatical principles governing the **nyá** modals especially the **nyá** VOICE modal are accountable for their early or delayed acquisition and what the implications of the Ewe data are for the status of the Maturation Hypothesis. The paper is organized as follows. In Section 1.1, a brief grammatical sketch of Ewe is given. Section 1.2 describes the Maturation Hypothesis and how it generally relates to the acquisition of passives. Section 2 presents a syntactic analysis of the **nyá** constructions in Ewe and discusses briefly, how it is similar to, yet also differs from the spontaneous use of verbal passives in English. In Section 3, I talk about the methodology used and Section 4 presents the results and discussion followed by the conclusion.

## 1. A GRAMMATICAL SKETCH OF EWE[1]

Ewe is a language with basic SVO word order and several interesting grammatical properties. It is an isolating language with agglutinative features. As such, most morpho-semantic features are expressed by lexical items or markers and by periphrasis. Most categories of the verb are expressed by markers (see Table 1).

Table 1: Ewe Verb Complex

| Preverb Markers Verb | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Modal 1 | Aspect | Directional | Modal 2 | Modal 3 | Directional | | Aspect |
| | | 1 | | | 2 | | suffix |
| Potential | Repetitive | Itive | Certainty | Imme-diate | Ventive | Verb root | Aorist |
| **(l)à** | **ga** | **hé** | **nyá** | **gbé** | **vá** | | |
| | | | | | | | **Ø** |
| Subjunc-tive | | | | Bother | | | Habit ual |
| **ná-** | | | | **xa** | | | **-(n)a** |

Adapted from Ameka 2008:136

Ewe however does not make the traditional distinction between tense and aspect. The potential morpheme **la** or **a** yields a future interpretation in context (Essegbey 2008). Standard or clausal negation is expressed by a bipartite morpheme **me** … **o** … **me** is cliticized onto the first element in the VP while **o** occurs at the end of the clause but before sentence final particles.

[1] We are concerned with the verb phrase and the forms in the column labeled Modal 2 (see Table 1) which also do not collocate with each other.

Ewe has both prepositions and postpositions. Prepositions in Ewe constitute a small closed class of ten elements including a dative **ná** grammaticalised from the verb 'give' and an allative **ɖé** grammaticalised from the verb 'reach'. These two prepositions are used to mark different kinds of experiences in experiential constructions among other functions. The dative preposition is used to code the Actor-like argument in the **nyá** VOICE construction (Ameka 2005: 51). Prepositions in Ewe are distinguished from verbs by the fact that they cannot occur with the habitual suffix –**na**.

Postpositions on the other hand also constitute a closed class of about thirty members. They have evolved historically from nouns – mostly from body part terms but now constitute a distinct form class which is not necessarily a sub-class of the nominal class (Ameka and Essegbey 2006: 369).

## 1.1 THE MATURATION HYPOTHESIS

The Maturation Hypothesis states that biological maturation determines the grammatical principles available to the child to the extent that there is some individual variation in when children begin to teethe and walk; we might also expect some limited variatbility in the timing of passive acquisition across languages. Borer and Wexler (1987) proposed that certain grammatical principles involving A-chain formation are not initially available to the child but "mature" in due course. Once a grammatical principle has matured, the child can then produce the grammatical constructions that depend on that particular grammatical principle. This implies that once the grammatical principles involving A-chain formation have matured, children should be able to comprehend and produce syntactic passives. The implicit assumption of this view would be that grammatical principles would mature at more or less the same time for all children and we should therefore expect to find syntactic passives emerging at relatively the same age across languages. Borer and Wexler (1987) however acknowledge the fact that some English passive constructions are produced early in language development but they claim that these early passives are in fact lexical or adjectival rather than verbal or syntactic. They based this claim on the fact that in Hebrew, adjectival passives are acquired long before verbal passives. Goodluck (1991:94) thinks that Borer and Wexler's proposal runs into some difficulties however. For instance, Maratsos et al (1985) and Pinker et al (1987) both find that children generally do comprehension tests with passives involving, action verbs (such as 'kick') than passives involving non-action verbs (such as 'see' or 'hear'), a result that goes against the grain of the adult semantic restriction on adjectival passives and forces Borer and Wexler to propose that the semantic restriction on adjectival passives is not available to the child. Another difficulty pointed out by Pinker et al (1987, cited in Goodluck 1991:94) is that the absence of 'by phrases' in children's speech may be an artifact of the circumstances in which the speech was produced. The idea that children's competence with passives may be deficient is also undermined in a general way by the fact that studies of languages other than English show that very young children may have a strong command of sentence types that are equivalent to passives (see Pye and Poz 1988 for a study of Quich Mayan) and /or with the formal characteristics of movement passives (see Demuth 1989 for a study of Sesotho).

With these crosslinguistic considerations and the Maturation Hypothesis in mind, I now examine Ewe-speaking children's use of **nyá**-constructions after looking at the syntactic analysis of the **nyá** forms followed by the methodology used in collecting data.

## 1.2 THE GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURE OF THE EWE **nyá** CONSTRUCTIONS/ MODALS.

There are three **nyá** constructions in Ewe; the main verb **nyá** 'come to know' and two **nyá** modals, one for epistemic certainty marking and the other for marking Undergoer VOICE.[2] Modality is a cover term for a range of meanings related to the beliefs and attitudes of the speaker. A basic distinction can be drawn between what are termed the root and epistemic meanings of the modals. Root meanings convey the speaker's beliefs and attitudes indicating inter alia permission, probability, obligation, intention and ability. The epistemic meanings (frequently related to the root meanings) convey some sense of a process of reasoning – the drawing of conclusions based on evidence.

Gbegble (2012) provides a comprehensive overview of the different means available in Ewe for expressing modality. She defines the concept of modality as the "qualification of states of affairs" and argues that modal expressions in Ewe belong to three types of expressive devices. These include grammatical categories (that is, a morpheme and auxiliaries) as well as adverbials and full verbs (verbal constructions). Items within these different types of expressive devices, express different types of qualificational meanings such as dynamic, deontic and epistemic modality as well as evidentiality and directivity. Some of these different qualificational meanings she notes are highly context-dependent (see Gbegble, 2012 for a catalogue of the different modality expressions in Ewe).

Two kinds of modal meaning can be expressed by the two nyá modals resulting in ambiguity as sentence (5a) and (5b) show:

(5) a. **Eka- á me nyá he.**
rope- DEF inside CERT stretch
'The rope is (indeed) well stretched.'

b. **Eka- á me nyá he.**
rope-DEF inside VOICE stretch
'The rope is easy to stretch.'

In (5a) and (5b), there is ambiguity between a root meaning of 'the rope is actually fully stretched' and an epistemic meaning of influence, 'it is very easy to stretch.'

The two **nyá** modals are also mutually exclusive. However, they can each co-occur with the main verb form, **nyá** 'come to know' as in (6) and (7).

(6) **E - nyá nyá détsí ʃo- ʃo.**
3SG-CERT know soup RED-prepare
'S/He does know how to prepare soup.'

(7) **É- do viviti me- nyá nyá- na o.**
3SG - wear/put/plant darkness 3SG- NEG VOICE know HAB.NEG
[A person's interior is like the barrel of a gun.]
'It is dark, it is not knowable = one cannot know/see it.'
(Ayeke 1974; as cited in Ameka 2005:143)

[2] Voice distinctions apply to verbs and have to do with the relationship between the subject and the verb and its object, or the verb and some other noun tied to it in an intimate way. In English for example, VOICE is not an inflectional category but is determined by the structure of the verb phrase.

There is another formal difference between the two **nyá** modals. The epistemic CERTAINTY **nyá** modal can occur in one place constructions (see (8) below). The VOICE modal marker, on the other hand participates in a two place construction in which the single argument is an undergoer as in example (9) where an effector – experiencer argument can be expressed as a dative object. Because of this, it has been said that such **nyá** constructions are syntactically like English passives (Essegbey 1999, Collins 1993, Duthie, 1996, cited in Ameka 2008:143-144).

(8) **Amavi nyá vá le Dzóɖágbe.**
Amavi CERT come be.at.PRES Monday
'Amavi did come on Monday.'

(9) **Ga nyá ná- ná dɔnɔ - wó ná Awó.**
money VOICE give-HAB sick- PL DAT Awo
'Awo likes giving money to the sick.'

It should be noted however that the semantics of the construction is not an agent passive one. Rather it is more like that of a facilitative or potential or capability passive. The two **nyá** modals seem to form a paradigmatic set that is why they are placed in a slot by themselves. The epistemic certainty marker can co-occur freely with other modals and tends to precede them. It can also occur after some members of the second modal class such as **gbé** 'just' (Ameka 2005:143). Example (6) illustrates this (see Table 1 above for the various modal and aspect forms).

(10) **Ési wò- hé- ɖá- nyá gbé ɖó ko- a é- ƒú du yi**
when 3SG- ITVE ALTRI- CERT MOD arrive only-TP 3SG run go

**fofó- á ƒé xɔme.**
father- DEF POSS room
'As soon as he eventually did arrive, he ran into the father's room.'

The VOICE marker however, does not easily collocate with other modal markers.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 PARTICIPANTS

20 monolingual Ewe-speaking children at the mean age of 2; 6; 3.; 5, 4 ; 5, 5.6 and 6.4 (4 participants per age group) and 5 adult speakers of Ewe were selected from Akrɔfu, a village on the fringes of Ho, the capital town of the Volta Region of Ghana, which is not too urbanised. The data used were taken from part of a larger corpus of 30 children and ten adults from five families. All participants were members of two parent families and Ewe is the primary language spoken in all the homes. Although I did not select participants systematically on the basis of socio-economic level, the demographic characteristics are such that the selection criteria resulted in a sample of lower-middle-class parents who in general exhibited variability in most of all the areas of the language under study (Ewe). Of course, it would be impossible to know exactly what input the child is exposed to without recording all the language the child hears.

I excluded the data for younger children (2;3) who although their language is interesting for many other reasons, exhibited few of the structures under study. For example, the **nyá** VOICE and **nyá** CERTAINTY modals were so rare in the production

of such participants that they did not reflect the **nyá** structures needed for the study. Eisenbeiss (2005:117) suggests that:

> One should try to make recordings in a small number of families who come from different social backgrounds and each have several children. In this way less time is required for travelling between recording sites and setting up equipment and one needs to record fewer adults for any analysis of children's input. In addition, the recording of all siblings provides a better basis for input analysis as it provides crucial information which is often neglected in studies where only the primary caretaker's conversations with the target child of the study are recorded and other sources of input are ignored. Moreover, factors of social group are easier to control if the sample involves several groups of children who share the same social and family background.

So most of the participants came from families – parents and siblings who fall into the age groups.

The recordings were carried out mostly on Sunday afternoons after church service and between November and December (a period when farming activities do not take place) in 2008 and 2010. They were carried out in the homes of the children, and their mothers, who are native speakers were considered to be equal participants in the adult-child-based conversations with mothers on topics such as bedwetting, daily routines, lunch, farming, hobbies etc.

Sometimes other children were present (friends, cousins, etc.). In general, adult and child recordings were informal, particularly as I became more of a friend than investigator. Some self-recordings were also made by the families, where a tape recorder was left with the family and the children were recorded at mealtimes, when they are playing and having discussion about school (teachers, sports, friends, etc).

As a way of varying the activities, I brought along toys such as cooking utensils, jigsaws, canoes, and picture books. Role play was also encouraged using toy medical kits, dolls etc. Other types of play provided a more language specific style of data, that is, elementary games (**ampe**, **aḍito**, etc), blocks and colouring activities resulted in language about the task. Sometimes toys were too interesting and the child became engrossed in the game with little language. Also, some children were naturally more outgoing and chatty than others.

## 2.2 RECORDING EQUIPMENT

A Sony TM Walkman Professional, powered by batteries was used with a boundary microphone. This provided excellent clear sound recordings and freedom to move about at random and was generally reliable, though a technical problem resulted in three blank recordings. Video recording was not used.

## 2.3 TRANSCRIPTION

A complete orthographic transcription of each recording was made using a CDE[3]. I did most of the transcriptions and those not transcribed by me initially were subsequently verified. In addition, samples of all transcriptions were verified by another graduate student who is a native speaker of the Ho dialect and whose dialect is closer to

[3] CDE = A compact disc that can have its contents erased and something else recorded onto it. Full form: compact disc erasable.

the dialect spoken in Akrɔfu. Overlaps and interruptions were largely ignored in transcription to save time, as my major interest was in the syntax. A very small quantity of data that might be particularly sensitive or personal has been removed from the transcript.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 2: Frequency of **Nyá** Constructions by Age

| **Nyá** Constructions | 2.5 | 3.6 | 4.4 | 5.5 | 6.4 | Adults |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Nyá** verb | 6 | 9 | 12 | 14 | 18 | 66 |
| **Nyá** modal 1 | 4 | 4 | 7 | 8 | 10 | 40 |
| **Nyá** modal 2 | - | - | 1 | 2 | 3 | 48 |

From the table above, we can establish the fact that 3 to 4 year old Ewe-speaking children already know something about the **nyá** verb 'come to know' even if they are not performing like adults as examples (7) and (8) show:

(11) **É- ná wa- wa.** [**Me- nyá wa– wa**]
1SG-know RED- do. [1SG- know RED- do]
'I know how to do it.'

(12) **É - nyá kpɔ́ ŋútɔ́**
1SG – VOICE see very much
'It is very nice.'

In studies which focus solely on production data, it is always possible that a form attributed to a child is a memorized and reproduced form rather than a productively analysed form. In light of the large sample of data available in this study, it is unlikely that all the forms evidenced could have been memorized. Several samples from the data of obvious productivity add credence to this intuition. To illustrate this, let us examine the utterance of a mother and a 4;8 year old when the group gathered for a discussion in one family; a younger sibling ran away when she saw the researcher approaching. The mother asked:

(13) Mother: **Fíne yi- í wò- le?**
where go- PROG 3SG- PROG
'Where is he going?'

(14) Kɔsi: **Á-nyá nɔ vɔ- vɔ́- ɔ́ bé wó- a- dó**
POT-VOICE PROG RED- fear PROG COMP 3PL- 3SG: POT inject
**abui né yi**[4]
needle DAT LOG
'Maybe s/he is afraid that they will inject her.'

[4] The participants used the inland dialect of Ewe spoken in Akrɔfu. Their language is the spoken form and hence does not necessarily conform to the expectations of someone familiar with the standard dialect; for instance the use of **fíne** instead of **afi ka** 'where' and **yi** instead of **ye** (logophoric pronoun) in (13) and (14) respectively exemplifies this.

The younger children hardly used the **nyá** modals, a finding that is perhaps not surprising, given that root meanings involve statements about the speaker's knowledge and beliefs about the world rather than inference based on such knowledge.

A survey of the data yielded the following general picture in Table 2 above. There are minor differences in the productions of the individual children, but the general pattern of emergence is quite plain. Only five children, two in the 5.6 and three in the 6;4 year groups used the **nyá** VOICE modal (see example (15a) and (15b) below).

(15) a. **Kofí nyá ɖɔ aɖuɖɔ ɖé tsítsé- é dzí.**
Kofi CERT urinate urine ALL mat- DEF POSTP:top/on
'Kofi did urinate on the mat = Kofi did wet the bed.' [6.4]

b. **Kofí á - nyá ɖɔ aɖuɖɔ ɖé tsítse- é dzí.**
Kofi POT- CERT urinate urine ALL mat - DEF POSTP:top/on
'Kofi might have wet the bed' [5;6]

This shows that the development and use of the full range of modal verbs is a process that might extend into middle childhood and later. However, it is plausible that the basic nature of the **nyá** modal system is in place even in pre-school age children, with problems arising from degrees of syntactic and semantic complexity of particular sentences in which the modal verb is embedded and the relative frequency of the various modals in the adult language (refer to Appendix A and B for sampled utterances in which the **nyá** verb and modals were used by both children and adults).

## 3.1 IMPLICATIONS OF THE EWE DATA ON **nyá** CONSTRUCTIONS FOR THE MATURATION HYPOTHESIS

The Maturation Hypothesis attempts to explain the ordering in acquisition by claiming that certain grammatical principles mature in the same fashion as biological functions such as secondary sexual characteristics. According to this theory, particular linguistic structures which do not occur at an early stage will suddenly fall into place once the relevant linguistic principle matures within the child and neither learning nor triggering needs to be invoked in the explanation of ordering of acquisition. The key example supporting this theory is the apparently late maturation of the principle governing A-chain formation implicated in the NP movement used in passives. Data from English and Hebrew (Berman, 1985) showing late acquisition of verbal passives serve well to support the maturation hypothesis, although various questions have been raised as noted in the introduction to this paper. Data from Bantu languages (e.g., Demuth 1989, 1992; Suzman, 1987) however show relatively early acquisition of the verbal passives and thus do not provide support for this theory.

The late production of the nyá modals especially the VOICE **nyá** modal discussed above seems to support the maturation hypothesis as formulated by Borer and Wexler (1987). It is most likely that the principle governing A-chain formation matures from 5;6+. Ewe-speaking children seem to have difficulty producing structures requiring A-chain formation when they are young. If we go by Collin's (1993) suggestion that the **nyá** construction is analoguos to the passive in English, the variability in age of passive acquisition crosslinguistically suggests that the acquisition of the passive is determined by maturation of the principle governing A-chain; this principle must either mature at an early age across all children but only become available for use at different times as determined by the idiosyncrasies of the language in question. The former option

according to Allen and Crago (1996:149) is clearly untenable biologically, while the latter removes the need for positing maturation in the first place since it would essentially mean that the principle governing A-chain formation is present virtually from the beginning of the acquisition process[5]. The relevance of maturation to the **nyá** VOICE acquisition then cannot be based on an argument requiring late acquisition of verbal passives since this does not hold crosslinguistically. So the question to ask is, what are the implications of the Ewe-speaking children's data for the status of the Maturation Hypothesis?

The data in this study shows that the comprehension and use of the **nyá** verb 'come to know' and the **nyá** certainty markers appear early. As early as 2;5 – 3;4, the children have access to the grammatical principles governing the formation, use and comprehension of these two forms. However, the **nyá** VOICE was more frequent in the productions of adults. The infrequent occurrence of the **nyá** VOICE marker in the spontaneous speech of the Ewe-speaking children may therefore have more to do with language-specific factors of how the construction functions in the language rather than the fact that prerequisite grammatical principles have not yet matured. The **nyá** verb, 'come to know' and the **nyá** certainty marker are more canonical while the **nyá** VOICE is a more marked construction since the grammatical contexts required for its use will be few.

## 3.2 ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

Before embracing the Maturation Hypothesis, however, let us consider some possible alternative explanation for our findings.

In place of a maturation hypothesis, many researchers subscribe to a position more consistent with a continuity hypothesis (e.g., Pinker, 1984, cited in Allen and Crago 1995: 149) in which all grammatical principles are available to the child from birth and remains constant throughout development, or with a more functionalist hypothesis (e.g., Slobin, 1985, 1992) in which grammatical principles are neither innate nor matured. With Ewe-speaking children, some possibilities of the delay in the use of the **nyá** modals especially the VOICE modal could be the adult input and the properties of the VOICE modal itself. In addition to the mothers' input, most of the interactions recorded in the data are with peers and siblings rather than with mothers. It must, however, be noted that even though input undoubtedly plays an important role in the acquisition of grammatical structure, it is generally accepted that the child also imposes some organization on his or her developing grammar. Also, some aspects of the constraints on the **nyá** constructions could be affecting their early acquisition. There are internal co-occurrence restrictions on elements in the **nyá** constructions. One such restriction is, where the subject NP is generic, the verb has to be generic too, that is habitual. Related to this is the fact that when the complements of canonical transitive verbs occur in the **nyá** construction without a determiner, it requires a habitual suffix as the following examples show.

(16) a. **ƒú nyá gba- na ná ɖeví sía.**
bone MOD crack-HAB DAT child PROX
'This child enjoys cracking bones (in the habit of).' [MOE][6]

[5] This argument has been articulated in greater detail in Demuth (1989) and Allen and Crago (1993).

[6] MOE = My own examples.

b. **Ƒú- a nyá gba ná ɖeví síá**
bone- DEF CERT crack DAT child PROX
'This child was able to crack bones.'

A second restriction is that core arguments occurring in subject position of the nyá construction select only the Theme and not the Recipient. Example (17) illustrates this.

(17) a. **Ga- nyá ná- (n)a Amí ná Kɔsí**
money- CERT give- HAB Ami DAT Kɔsi
'Kɔsi likes giving money to Ami.'

b. ***Ami- nyá ná- (n)a ga ná Kɔsí**
Am- VOICE give- HAB money DAT Kɔsi
'Kɔsi likes giving money to Ami.'

Just like the canonical Double Object Complement (DOC), only the Theme of the Inherent Complement Verb (ICV) counterparts can be the subject of the **nyá** construction as illustrated below. Example (18a) and (18b) which illustrate this are taken from Essegbey (2010: 188).

(18) a. **Kɔ́ nyá da- (n)á Kɔmi ná Kofí.**
fist MOD throw- HAB Kɔmi for Kofi
'Kofi likes throwing blows at Kɔmi.'

b. ***Kɔmi nyá da- (n)a kɔ ná Kofí**
Kɔmi MOD throw-HAB fist for Kofi
'Kofi likes throwing blows at Kɔmi'.

It must be noted however that structures involving the constructions that operate on the **nyá** modals did not feature much in the spontaneous data collected. Perhaps Ewe-speaking adults and children do not produce these structures because they are not essential for expressing a wide range of basic concepts in Ewe since there are simplier alternative mechanisms that can be used to express the same semantic concept(s).

## 4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, data drawn from Ewe-speaking children have been used to argue for a maturation hypothesis concerning the later maturation of the **nyá** CERTAINTY and the **nyá** VOICE modals in particular and (to a lesser extent) for a hypothesis that takes into account the constraints that operate on the **nyá** modals. The issue identified for the acquisition of **nyá** construction include the wide range of the **nyá** verb 'come to know' appearing as early as age 2;6. The late acquisition of the **nyá** modals supports the validity of the maturation hypothesis as put forward by Borer and Wexler (1987) that certain grammatical principles involving A-chain formation are not initially available to the child but "mature" in due course.

Alternatively, the findings also support the view in which the timing of acquisition is determined by language-specific factors, structural or functional. Some possible reasons for the late acquisition of the **nyá** modals could include relatively low frequency of these structures in adult inputs. Apart from these, the **nyá** VOICE construction constitute a distinct syntactic structure which is characteristically part of the semantic style of Ewe. The interpretation of the construction in a particular context is pragmatically determined. It is multi-functional and may be used to attribute a physical property or a propensity to the patient-subject of the event represented by the

predicate. The property may be presented as an objective one or as being based on the subjective evaluation of the Actor viewed as an experience and coded as an oblique dative. In performing this and other functions, the form interacts with the semantics of other members in the clause. Thus in (19a ) below, 'Adzo is beautiful' is presented as an objective fact. Everybody would agree that she is beautiful. In (19b) however, Adzo is presented as beautiful or nice from the speaker's point of view. The implication is that other people may or may not perceive her as such

(19) a. **Adzó nyá kpɔ́- ná.**
Adzó CERT see- HAB
'Adzó looks well' i.e. 'Adzó is beautiful'

b. **Adzó nyá kpɔ́- ná ná- m.**
Adzó VOICE see- HAB to- 1SG
'Adzó looks well to me' ie, I think Adzó is beautiful'

Another aspect of the **nyá** VOICE construction that is worth looking at is that it may occur with multi-valent affective verbs- verbs of mental, physical or psychological states and actions, whose experiencers are Actors and cause a change in valency. The interaction of such verbs in the **nyá** VOICE construction could pose a problem for its acquisition because these verbs require some maturity and experience to achieve a use and interpretation that are commensurate with those of proficient speakers of the language. With such a grammar, the acquisition of the **nyá** VOICE could pose a problem for the child. This means that the structure will be more or less available to the Ewe child for linguistic processing depending on the linguistic readiness of the child as well as how the construction interacts with the rest of the grammar.

Obviously, more research is needed to fully evaluate these proposals. It is hoped however, that the discussion presented in this paper will clarify some of the issues raised in the paper and will stimulate further research on the acquisition of the **nyá** constructions and other aspects of syntax in Ewe-speaking children.

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ACC | accusative | PAST | past tense |
| ALL | allative preposition | PFV | perfective |
| ALTRI | altrilocal | PL | plural |
| CERT | certainty modal | PRES | present |
| COMP | complementizer | POSS | possessive marker |
| DAT | dative | POSTP | postposition |
| DEF | definiteness marker | POT | potential |
| DIST | distal | PROG | Progressive |
| FOC | focus marker | PROX | Proximal demonstrative |
| GEN | genitive | Age | years;month |
| HAB | habitual marker | RED | reduplicative |
| IT | itive | S | subject |
| LOC | locative preposition | TP | terminal particle |
| LOG | logophoric pronoun | VOICE | voice marker |
| MOD | modal | 1 | first person |
| NEG | negative marker | 2 | second person |
| NOM | nominative | 3 | third person |

APPENDIX A: SAMPLES OF CHILDREN'S **nyá** CONSTRUCTIONS

(1) **E- ná wa- wa.**
1SG- know RED- do
'I know how to do it.' [2;8]

(2) **É- nyá kpɔ́ ŋútɔ́.**
3SG- VOICE see very much
'It is very nice.' [3;2]

(3) **Mé nyá nú o.**
3SG:NEG know thing NEG
'S/He is not intelligent.' [5;4]

(4) **Me- nyá du ʃú- ʃú.**
1SG- know race RED- run
'I know how to run.' [6;3]

(5) **Á - nyá ga ɖɔ́ aɖuɖɔ́ ɖé tsítsé- e dzí.**
POT- CERT REP urinate urine ALL mat- DEF POSTP:top/on
'Maybe he/she has urinated on the mat/ has wet the bed.'

(6) **Tɔ́kpó- ɔ́ nyá gba nyatefé.**
Bucket- DEF CERT crack truly
'The bucket has truly cracked.' [6;5]

(7) **Me nyá o**
2SG:NEG know NEG
'You don't know.' [3;2]

APPENDIX B: SAMPLES OF ADULTS' **nyá** CONSTRUCTIONS

(1) **E- vi- é - wé nyá vá etsɔ.**
3SG- child- DEF-PL CERT come yesterday
'The children did come yesterday.'

(2) **Đewómáhĩ nú ɖé á- nyá wɔ- e.**
Maybe thing INDF POT- CERT do- 3SG
'Maybe something has happened to him/her.'

(3) **Afɔdzí á- nyá sa ɖé é- ŋú.**
Faeces POT- VOICE knot ALL 3SG- skin/side
'It appears he/she is constipated.'

(4) **Tɔ́gbé Zì nyá fɔ́ dzó yí agble xóxó**
Tɔgbe Zi CERT get:up leave go farm already
'Tɔgbe Zi did leave for the farm already'='Tɔgbé Zi has already left for the farm.'

(5) **Elẽ nú nyá wa- a ní- í.**
Stupid thing VOICE do- HAB DAT- 3SG
'S/He likes doing stupid things.'

(6) **É- ʋu ze- é kpɔ́. Dɔ á- nyá nɔ é - wu- ú**
3SG open pot- DEF PFV hunger POT- VOICE PROG 3SG-kill- PROG
'He opened the pot. Maybe he is hungry.'

(7) **Ableŋgɔ́ nyá kpɔ́ ŋútɔ́**
Chair VOICE see very much
'The chair is very nice.'

(8) **Má à nyá dɔ́ alɔ̃ kpɔ́ égbé o.**
3SG:NEG POT VOICE sleep PRV today NEG
'It appears you have not slept the whole of today.'

(9) **Nú má (a)me mé - nyá tásí- é o.**
Thing used to person NEG- CERT stop HAB NEG
'It is difficult to stop old habits.'

(10) **Né me- nyá wa- wa o ɖe à- ɖó vǒ .**
If 3SG:NEG- VOICE RED-do NEG TP 2SG- develop hernia
'If you are not careful, you will develop hernia.'

(11) **Xé wó nyá ɖu nú- vɔ́ ko wó- sí dzó.**
When 3PL VOICE eat thing- PFV then 3PL- run leave
'The moment they finished eating they ran away.'

(12) **É- nyá nyá bé yí dze agɔ.**
3SG- CERT know COMP LOG at fault
'S/He certainly knew/knows that he/she was at fault.'

(13) **É- nyá nyó bé è- vá.**
3SG- CERT good COMP 2SG- come
'It is good that you came.'

(14) **Ƒú- ɔ́ á nyá lé v e ní- í.**
bone- DEF POT VOICE catch/hold throat DAT- 3SG
'The bone might have choked him/her.'