

THE LETEH GIVE-VERB *nɛ* IN MULTIPLE SYNTACTIC CONTEXTS

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Abstract

The Leteh (South Guan: Kwa) GIVE-verb *nɛ* occurs in various syntactic contexts in Leteh discourse. This paper conducts a synchronic analysis of its multiple occurrences, using grammaticalization theory as its analytic basis (Hopper and Traugott 2003). The morpheme occurs in five different syntactic environments as: the main verb of an unmarked clause; a causative verb in a serial verb construction; a benefactive verb in a benefactive/goal serial verb construction; a complementizer of a complement clause, and a resultative marker in a cause-effect serial verb construction. The paper demonstrates that in each of the environments, the morpheme acquires a different meaning and function whilst maintaining its form. Data for the study are sourced from a database of Leteh wordlists, folktales and elicitations from language speakers. The paper contributes to literature on the linguistics of the GIVE-verb in African and Kwa languages specifically.

Imu

Leteh (Guan atɔɛ: Kwa) mmiri *nɛ* ɛbùè esumi bo ɔkpe ahorow so bo mmiri a nte. Nanso a, owure mɔ kyɛ mmiri *nɛ* a, kesi búé esumi saa ɔkpe ahorow a so. Esumi mɔ yiré bo Grammaticalization so (Hopper and Traugott 2003). Mmiri *nɛ* a tɔkyi bo ɔkpe ahorow nu so: ete dégyè mkpe gyi etebue bɔ mmiri a nte. Ete de fè so nyo gyi mmiri ete déké eke mmuè ne tɔko si; sa so a, gyi mmiri a ete déké nkemmue ne ɔsɔko nyé tɔko. Ne, élè mmiri ete édéboa mmiri ɔko dégyè mkpe. Ete de fè so nu gyi mmiri ete déké mmoa ete; ɔsɔko déyéhóé bóà mɔ obirehu. Owure mɔ kɛ bɛe ane a, mmiri ete *nɛ* débò te mɔ pɛe a, mmiri *nɛ* a békyé, nso ɛnné saa mmiri mɔ pɛe aseke ohue. Owure mɔ yiré bo Leteh mmiri nko so; anansesem so, ne ete enumde nko yéyè so. Owure a bóà ne éká mmiri ete déyiré bɔ *nɛ* so bɔ Abibiman ne Kwa mmiri pɔtee so.

KEYWORDS: Kwa, grammaticalization, causative verb, complementizer, verb serialization, preposition

1. Introduction

The GIVE-verb in African languages has received some good attention where its grammaticalizing feature has been identified. Some notable works are Lord (1993); Osam (1994); Newman (1996, 1998) and Duah (2013). Newman (1996, 1998) discusses the morphological, syntactic and semantic properties of the GIVE-verb in languages like Zulu, Nahuatl, and Chipewyan among others. In those languages, he demonstrates that the GIVE-verb has both literal and figurative senses in varied syntactic contexts. Lord (1993) also reports on the phenomenon in West African languages, Caribbean creoles and some Asian languages. She notes that in those languages where verb serialization features, the GIVE-verb occurs in varied syntactic environments, manifesting invariable forms, but performing various functions. In syntactic slots, other than the prototypical ones, the morpheme is used in ways that render themselves more useful as grammatical elements.

This paper offers a synchronic analysis of the GIVE-verb in Leteh, using grammaticalization theory as its analytic foundation (Hopper and Traugott 2003: 2). What this paper seeks to do is to show the current or contemporary use of the GIVE-verb in five different syntactic environments in Leteh discourse. As a lexical entity, the morpheme *nɛ* ‘give’ functions as a full verb inflecting for all known verbal categories in Leteh. It also functions as a causative verb in a causative serial verb construction where it takes on the meaning ‘make’ or ‘let’. Still as a serial verb, it marks the goal in a benefactive/goal serial verb construction. As a complementizer, it occurs with manipulative and cognition-perception verbs to mark a sentential complement clause. Furthermore, in an indirect ditransitive construction, similar to a benefactive/goal SVC, the morpheme *nɛ* functions as a preposition, ‘to, for’, marking the recipient argument. Finally, in a cause-effect SVC, the morpheme, *nɛ* plays the role of a resultative marker. The work therefore describes its functions in current Leteh discourse, and at the end of the paper we argue that *nɛ*, the GIVE-verb may still be in a state of flux and going through the process of grammaticalization.

Leteh, (also known as Larteh or Latɛ in the literature and elsewhere) is a South-Guan language of Ghana which has not been researched adequately; hence the significance of a study of this nature. Data for the study form part of a larger Leteh corpus which spans a wide range of genres collected during the author's Ph.D. research work within 2007-2008. The data which is made up of Leteh-English wordlists, audio-recorded and transcribed folktales and elicitations were collected within the speech community from language speakers. Subsequently, they have been deposited at the University of Ghana Digital Collections (UGSpace). The paper corroborates existing findings and adds to what is already known about the linguistics of the Give-verb in African languages (Lord 1993; Osam 1994; Newman 1998; Ameka 2006; Güldemann 2008; Duah 2013).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: an overview of Leteh grammar follows immediately in section 2. This is followed by a demonstration of the occurrence of *nɛ* 'give' in the five syntactic environments. The discussion is concluded in section 4.

2. Related features of Leteh Grammar

Guan (Kwa, Niger-Congo) is sub-classified into two language clusters: North Guan and South Guan (Eberhard, Simons and Fennig 2019). Leteh, the language under discussion, belongs to the South-Guan group. The language is spoken in only one town, Larteh, located in the South-eastern part of Ghana, West Africa. The language does not possess an official orthography; in the few studies that have been conducted on the language, the Akan orthography which is based on seven¹ vowels has been applied; Leteh's high vowel variants are not differentiated here, except where the principle regarding vowel harmony needs to be illustrated.

The language seems to have a symmetric set of nine vowels: 4 vowels: /i, e, o, u/ produced with an advanced tongue root [+ATR], paralleled by four other vowels, /ɪ, ɛ, ɔ, ʊ/ which are produced with a retracted tongue root [-ATR]. The ninth vowel, the low central vowel, /a/, is unpaired. There is an indication of some tongue-root vowel harmony principle operating in Leteh; this is manifested in the allomorphs of the verbal prefixes: *bɛ/bɛ* (future tense prefix); *dí/dí* (progressive aspect); *yé/yé* (perfect aspect prefix) and *bé/bé* (negation). Furthermore, in words which are constituted by two or more syllables the principle of tongue root harmony is operational. There are however a few exceptions of co-occurrences of advanced and unadvanced vowels in certain stem words, but even in such cases, it has been observed that advanced vowels seem to precede unadvanced vowels (Akrofi Ansah 2009). It has also been noted that similar to a related language like Akan, specifically Akuapem Twi, pronominal vowels do not harmonize with vowels in verb stems. Yet, as has already been mentioned, there is vowel harmonization between vowels of verbal prefixes and those belonging to verb stems they occur with. Leteh is a tone² language with two level tones: high and low. The lexical tone helps to distinguish meanings of words which otherwise are the same in terms of their constituents. The grammatical tone³, coupled with verbal prefixes, is employed in marking tense and aspectual distinctions. The morphology of the language is largely agglutinating.

An unmarked Leteh clause has SVO syntax. Morphological case is not marked; constituent order marks grammatical relations. A simple Leteh noun phrase has the structure: NP → N (Adj) (Qt/Num) (Det). As depicted, the quantifier and the numeral are mutually exclusive. The determiner covers the definite and indefinite articles and the demonstrative. In the case

¹ The Akan orthography which is based on seven vowels is employed in this paper. These are /i, e, o, u, ɛ, ɔ, a/. It is possible to use the Akan orthography, because of phonological and syntactic similarities the two languages share.

² Lexical tone is marked only to distinguish meaning.

³ All verbs in the data presented are tone-marked to indicate tense and aspectual distinctions

of the adjective, it could be one or several, arranged in a particular order (see Akrofi Ansah 2014). Complex constructions in Leteh that have been described include coordinated structures; serial verb constructions; comparative constructions and complementation constructions (Akrofi Ansah 2009). There is a productive verb serialization system with functional types like causative, motion, instrumental, benefactive/goal (1) and posture serial verb constructions. We summarise pertinent properties of Leteh serial verb constructions as follows (Akrofi Ansah 2009: 218-219):

- i. Each constituent verb of a SVC is able to occur independently as a full lexical verb outside a SVC. The verbs could be contiguous or non-contiguous.
- ii. The sequence of verbs may denote a single macro event which is socio-culturally determined.
- iii. Negation, tense/aspectual values are generally shared where the value is marked once on the initial verb. There is uniform mood for the entire construction.

1. **Kofi bɛ-ké kúé á nɛ Ama.**
 PN FUT-pay debt DEF give/for PN
 'Kofi will pay the debt for Ama.'
 (Akrofi Ansah 2009: 221)

The Leteh complement clause functions as a sentential object to a main verb. Complementation in Leteh is basically by matching a complementizer to a particular complement-taking predicate. Three complementizers are identified in Leteh: **yè**, **nɛ**, **bɛɛ**; they mark a clause as a complement clause (2).

2. **Ama wòrè Kofi [nɛ à bùè èsúmì].**
 PN PRES.force PN COMP 3SG PRES.do work
 'Ama forces Kofi to work.'
 (Akrofi Ansah 2009: 232)

Two types of ditransitive constructions operate in the language: the double object construction and the indirect ditransitive construction. In the double object construction, the recipient argument, **Kofi**, precedes the theme, **lé** (3a), whereas in the indirect construction, the order is reversed, the theme, **eteeni**, precedes the recipient argument, **Nkónóré** (3b).

- 3a. **Ama dé-ké Kofi lé.**
 PN PRG-teach PN song
 'Ama is teaching Kofi (a) song.'
 (Akrofi Ansah 2009: 158)

- b. **Ananse bétè eteenì nɛ Nkónóré.**
 PN PST.take money BEN/PREP PN
 'Ananse took money to Nkónóré.'
 (Akrofi Ansah 2009: 159)

Major word classes in the language include nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs whereas minor word classes comprise quantifiers, intensifiers, determiners, including demonstratives, utterance particles, interjections, adpositions and conjunctions. In Leteh, it is possible to have a co-occurrence of prepositions and postpositions in a clause.

Leteh is largely prefixal; nouns are categorized based on common prefixes, and they inflect for number by replacing singular prefixes with those that denote plurality. Verbal categories in the language are tense, aspect, negation mood and motion which are signaled by tone and verbal prefixes. Adjectives in Leteh are categorized as derived and underived. The underived class is constituted by eight monomorphemic items, and in the case of derived adjectives, they originate from nouns and verbs. There is number agreement between monomorphemic adjectives and the nouns they modify.

3. Nè in Multiple Leteh Syntactic Contexts

In this section, we illustrate the five syntactic environments of the morpheme **nè** ‘give’. The paper demonstrates that each occurrence of the morpheme in a new syntactic environment connotes a new meaning and a different function.

3.1 Nè as a full lexical verb in an unmarked clause

The morpheme, **nè** ‘give’ is a ditransitive verb, taking three arguments: the giver (NP₁); the recipient (NP₂) and the object (NP₃). It occurs in the following V-slot as a full lexical verb in a double object ditransitive construction: NP₁ V NP₂ NP₃ (4a). The morpheme inflects for all verbal categories in Leteh: tense/aspect, negation and mood (imperative, subjunctive, conditional). Here, the verb carries a benefactive meaning, ‘give’. In (4a-4e), the verb occurs as the main verb in a ditransitive clause where it is marked⁴ for the present, past and future tense and also for the progressive and perfect aspect.

- | | NP ₁ | V | NP ₂ | NP ₃ |
|-----|----------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 4a. | Kofi | nè | ámó | sìká. |
| | PN | PRES.give | 3PL | money |
| | ‘Kofi gives them money’. | | | |
| b. | Kofi | né | ámó | sìká. |
| | PN | PST.give | 3PL | money |
| | ‘Kofi gave them money’. | | | |
| c. | Kofi | bé-è-né | ámó | sìká. |
| | PN | NEG-FUT-give | 3PL | money |
| | ‘Kofi will not give them money’. | | | |
| d. | Kofi | dí-nè | ámó | sìká. |
| | PN | PROG-give | 3PL | money |
| | ‘Kofi is giving them money’. | | | |
| e. | Kofi | yé-né | ámó | sìká. |
| | PN | PERF-give | 3PL | money |
| | ‘Kofi has given them money’. | | | |

⁴ When verbal prefixes are used to mark categories, there is harmonization of vowels, between vowels of the prefixes and those of verb stems. To illustrate the phenomenon, Leteh high vowel variants are differentiated in such examples.

As a full transitive verb, the morpheme is marked for tense and aspectual distinctions. Whereas present and past tense is distinguished by a tone pattern change in the verb stem, the rest are signaled by prefixes: **bè -/bè -** (future tense); **dí-/dí-** (progressive aspect); and **yé-/yé-** (perfect aspect). It must be noted that whenever the negative marker, **bé/bé** co-occurs with the future prefix, **bè -/bè -**, the latter loses its initial consonant **/b/** (5c). In each case, the verb stem selects an allomorph, depending on the tongue root quality of its vowel. This results in a harmonization of the vowels in the verb complex. The verb in the present tense is marked for negation⁵ with **bé/bé** as follows:

5. **Kofi** **bé-nè** **ámó** **sìká.**
 PN NEG-PRES.give 3PL money
 ‘Kofi does not give them money.’

Furthermore, the verb **nè** is marked for the imperative, subjunctive and conditional mood with the prefixes, **é-/é-** ; **dè-/dè-**; **ń-** respectively (6a-c). In each instance, there is vowel harmonization between prefix vowels and the verb stem vowel.

- 6a. **É-nè** **ámó** **sìká.**
 IMP-give 3PL money
 ‘Give them money!’
- b. **Wó** **dè-nè** **ámó** **sìká.**
 2SG SUB-give 3PL money
 ‘You may give them money.’
- c. **Wó** **ń-nè** **ámó** **sìká** **á** **bàálè.**
 2SG COND-give 3PL money PART enough
 ‘If you give them money, it is (enough) good.’

Furthermore, whenever there is co-occurrence of prefixes, especially, the negation prefix and any other, the former occurs first, followed by other preverbal affixes (7a-b).

- 7a. **Kofi** **bé-dí-nè** **ámó** **sìká.**
 PN NEG-PROG-give 3PL money
 ‘Kofi is not giving them money.’
- b. **Kofi** **bé-è-nè** **ámó** **sìká.**
 PN NEG-FUT-give 3PL money
 ‘Kofi will not give them money.’

From the foregoing data, we have illustrated the status of the morpheme **nè** ‘give’ as a full lexical ditransitive verb in an unmarked clause.

⁵ It must be noted that in the negative past, the **/b/** of the negation marker becomes a nasal (see example 5b).

3.2 Nè in Leteh serial verb constructions

The morpheme **nè** ‘give’ occurs as the initial verb in a causative serial verb construction (SVC) (8a-b). The Leteh causative SVC is asymmetrical; the causative verb, **nè**, must initiate the series of verbs. The order may be represented as ([NP₁ **nè** NP₂ V₂ (NP)]).

- 8a. **Ananse** **nè** **Nkɔ̃nɔ̃re** **sù.**
 PN PRS. let/make PN cry
 ‘Spider lets/makes/ causes Nkɔ̃nɔ̃re to cry.’
- b. **Ananse** **bè-nè** **Nkɔ̃nɔ̃re** **bùè** **èsúmì** **á.**
 PN FUT-let/make Name do work DEF
 ‘Spider will let/make/ cause Nkɔ̃nɔ̃re to do the work.’

In this syntactic frame, the meaning of the verb, **nè** shifts from the literal meaning of ‘give’ to that which expresses the abstract notion of causation where an agent influences an activity to take place. Here, there is an extension of the meaning of verb **nè** to causative meaning. The semantic difference between the literal meaning of **nè** and the causative meaning is that whereas the former indicates an act of giving and a transfer of possession, the latter does neither of the two. Similar to **má** ‘give’ in Duah (2013), **nè** here does not specify any particular causing event; it connotes the abstract notion of causation. Furthermore, the action of the verb, **nè** brings about an activity which is carried out by NP₂. There is therefore a functional divergence from its use as a lexical verb to that of an analytic causative verb. Example (8b) demonstrates that the causative verb exhibits verbal properties by inflecting for the future tense. However, although in that syntactic environment, **nè** retains some lexical properties, it undergoes some amount of desemanticization. It is important to remember that in a Leteh SVC, tense/aspect is marked only once on the initial verb. Although the remaining verbs are expressed in the same tense/aspect form, they are not overtly marked; consequently, the second verbs, **sù**, ‘cry’; **bùè** ‘do’ remain overtly uninflected.

Additionally, the morpheme, **nè** occupies the V₂ slot in a benefactive/goal serial verb construction to mark the beneficiary, NP₃ (9a-b). In that syntactic frame: ([NP₁ V₁ NP₂ **né** (NP₃)]), the meaning of **né** is similar to that of ‘for’. It is interesting to note that the tone of **nè** changes to high, to commensurate its grammatical role. This construction resembles an indirect ditransitive construction⁶ where the morpheme marks the recipient argument, the entity that benefits from the action of V₁. In a literal English translation, the meaning is synonymous to ‘for/to’ and its function in the ensuing sentences (9a-9c) is similar to that of a preposition⁷.

- 9a. **Kofi** **bè-só** **àtálé** **né** **Ama.**
 PN FUT-buy dress give PN
 ‘Kofi will buy a dress for Ama.’
- b. **Kofi** **bùè** **èsúmì** **né** **Ama.**
 PN PST.do work give PN
 ‘Kofi worked for Ama.’

⁶ It must however be noted that the sequence of verbs in a SVC may denote a single macro event whereas in an indirect ditransitive construction it may not necessarily be the case. In both constructions, however, there is an R-argument, marked by a preposition, **nè**.

⁷ See Akrofi Ansah (2021) on ‘Account of Leteh Adpositions’.

- c. **Wó** **wùrì** **sìká** **né** **Kofi.**
 2SG PRS.steal money give PN
 ‘You steal money for Kofi.’

The phenomenon is in line with Aikhenvald’s observation, that ‘verbs with the semantics of ‘give’... develop into benefactive...’ (2006: 32). Similarly, it has been noted that the Ewe verb **ná** ‘give’ is evolving into a benefactive preposition, ‘for’ (Heine et al 1991). Ameka (2006: 2) further corroborates this finding by reporting that although the Ewe verb **ná** is not fully grammaticalized yet, it has the potential to grammaticalize into a ‘valency changing morpheme.’ Although these comments have been made from a diachronic perspective, they confirm that the Give-verb has the potential of extending its prototypical functions in Leteh discourse as this paper seeks to demonstrate. We can therefore say that similar to the Leteh GIVE-verb, the Ewe verb **ná** plays multiple functions, lexical and grammatical in Ewe discourse.

In another type of SVC, cause-effect, the morpheme **nè** occupies the V₂ position and functions as a resultative marker. The action of V₁ results in V₃ where the morpheme marks the result of the action of NP₁. In this state of affairs, the NP₁ applies force signaled by V₁ which results in the action connoted by V₃ which is felt by NP₃. NP₂ is co-referential to NP₃. The elements of the construction are ordered as follows: (NP₁ V₁ NP₂ **nè** NP₃ V₃). The tone pattern is that of the verb, **nè**, in its uninflected state.

- 10a. **Kofi** **dé** **Ama** **nè** **à** **sù.**
 PN PST.hit PN cause/result/make 3SG weep
 ‘Kofi hit Ama to make her weep.’
- b. **Ama** **súńkyì** **Kofi** **nè** **à** **dáńsè.**
 PN PST.push PN cause/result/make 3SG fall
 ‘Ama pushed Kofi to make him fall.’

3.3 Nè in a Complement Clause

The morpheme **nè** links a complement clause to a main clause whose verb usually belongs to the class of manipulative verbs⁸ (11a-b). In other words **nè**, functioning as a complementizer, marks a complement clause.

- 11a. **Ama** **wòrè** **Kofi** **[nè à bùè esumi.**
 PN PRES.force PN COMP 3SG PRES.do work
 ‘Ama forces Kofi to work.’
 (Akrofi Ansah 2009: 232)
- b. **Ama** **bìrím** **Kofi** **[nè à búè**
 PN PST.beat up PN COMP 3SG PST.do
 esumi á].
 work DEF
 ‘Ama beat up Kofi to do the work.’

⁸ A manipulative verb codes an action that must be carried out by a direct object which is animate. The verb refers to an event/state which results from the influence of a higher controlling agent on a lower agent (Akrofi Ansah 2009: 230).

The syntax may be represented as: NP₁ V₁ NP₂ [**nè** NP₃ V₂ NP₄]. In this construction, **nè** cannot be marked for any verbal category, for example, tense/aspect; (11c) is therefore ungrammatical. Here, the morpheme is more grammatical than lexical, hence deplete of meaning.

- c. ***Ama wórè [bè-nè Kofi búè esumi a].**
 PN PST.force FUT-COMP PN PST.do work DEF
 ‘Ama forced will give Kofi to do the work’.

The cited examples show that the form of the morpheme remains intact in the various syntactic frames. Its function however changes based on its syntactic environment. Its tone pattern also varies depending on the tense/aspectual form. In summary, the following table depicts the five syntactic environments, form, function and meaning of the morpheme, **nè** ‘give’.

Table 1 The syntactic environments of **nè, ‘give’.**

Summary of phenomena

Syntactic slots	Form	Function	Meaning
S → NP ₁ nè NP ₂ NP ₃	nè	full lexical verb	‘give’
S → NP ₁ nè NP ₂ V ₂ (NP)	nè	Causative	‘make/let/cause’
S → NP ₁ V ₁ NP ₂ né NP ₃	né	benefactive marker/preposition	‘to/for’
S → NP ₁ V ₁ NP ₂ nè NP ₃ V ₃	nè	resultative marker	‘lead to/result in’
S → NP ₁ V ₁ NP ₂ [nè NP ₃ V ₂ NP ₄]	nè	complementizer	‘so that/in order that’

4. Conclusion

The paper has described the functions of the GIVE-verb, **nè**, in five syntactic frames in Leteh discourse. The paper has demonstrated that in Leteh discourse, it is possible for the morpheme **nè** ‘give’ to occur in five diverse syntactic environments, performing different functions from lexical to grammatical and bearing various meanings whilst maintaining an invariant form. It is observed that tone pattern changes only occur when **nè** ‘give’ is expressed in different tense/aspectual forms. The literature which discuss the linguistics of the GIVE-verb have usually accounted for its multiple functions, from lexical to grammatical, by appealing to the theory of grammaticalization as a diachronic phenomenon. In this paper, we have applied a synchronic viewpoint of grammaticalization which studies a structure at a single point in time and explores the alternative uses of the same form. The paper concludes that **nè** ‘give’ may still be in a state of flux and going through grammaticalization. The paper corroborates findings in Kwa languages which also describe the linguistics of the GIVE-verb. Furthermore, it serves as an invaluable reference for future studies of the grammaticalization of the GIVE-verb from a diachronic perspective.

List of Abbreviations

ADV	adverbial	PRES	present
COMP	complementizer	PROG	progressive
DEF	definite article	PST	past

FUT	future	S	sentence
NEG	negative	SVO	subject verb object
NP	noun phrase	V	verb
PN	personal name	V	verb phrase
POSTP	postposition	1SG	1 st person singular
PREP	preposition	2SG	2 nd person singular

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