

# THE ASPECTUAL CHARACTER OF A VERB AND TENSE IN IBIBIO

Okon E. Essien  
University of Calabar, Nigeria

Following Essien (1983) in which it is demonstrated that tense marking in Ibibio is a function of the syntax of the language, this paper considers stativity and nonstativity, which constitute the aspectual character of a verb in the language, and asserts that the dichotomy between the two is relevant to tense marking. In particular the selection of the so-called contrastive markers  $\emptyset$ , *ké-* and *dí-* in certain sentences which have no overt emphatic or contrastive marking is traceable to the fact that when nonstative verbs are used progressively, emphasis or contrast is implied. And because emphasis (or contrast), grammaticalized or not, plays a role in tense marking, the selection of the contrastive markers  $\emptyset$ , *ké-* and *dí-* in such sentences is explainable. Since verbs are inherently stative or nonstative and since these aspectual features of verbs participate in tense marking, verbs will have to be assigned the feature [+stative] or [-stative] to enable the correct tense markers to be selected in certain constructions.

Selon Essien (1983) qui a démontré que la marque du temps en Ibibio est une fonction de la syntaxe de la langue, cet article considère la stativité et la non-stativité constituant le caractère de l'aspect d'un verbe dans la langue, et affirme que la dichotomie entre les deux est pertinente à la marque du temps. Particulièrement la sélection des marqueurs ainsi nommés contrastifs  $\emptyset$ , *ké-* et *dí-* dans certaines phrases qui n'ont pas de marques absolues ou contrastives évidentes, peut être remontée au fait que, quand les verbes non-statiques sont employés progressivement, l'accentuation ou le contraste est impliquée. Et comme l'accentuation (ou contraste) grammaticalisée ou non, joue un rôle en marquant le temps, la sélection des marqueurs contrastifs  $\emptyset$ , *ké-* et *dí-* dans ces phrases est explicable. Depuis que les verbes sont statiques ou non-statiques par inhérence et depuis que ces traits de l'aspect des verbes participent en marquant le temps, il faut assigner aux verbes le trait [+statique] ou [-statique] afin de permettre de choisir les marqueurs du temps correct dans certaines constructions.

## 0. INTRODUCTION

Essien (1983) has shown that tense marking in Ibibio, a Niger-Congo language spoken in the Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria by about four million people, is a function of the syntax of the language. Tenses have allomorphs which are determined by the presence or absence of the following categories: negation, wh-question, emphasis (or focus) and mood. At the time the paper was written, little attention was paid to the fact that some aspectual features of Ibibio verbs have implications for tense marking. Two such features are stativity and nonstativity and they constitute the aspectual character of a verb.

Before we define stativity, nonstativity and the aspectual character of a verb, we will define aspect to which the former are both related.

Following Comrie (1976) and Lyons (1977), we can say that aspect is concerned with the various phases of the time components of a situation. Commonly such phases or components are the beginning, the middle, termination, or some other phases that may be important to the speaker of a particular language. This is a semantically based view or definition of aspect. However, as Essien (1986:152) has pointed out, when a language makes a systematic contrast in its structure in regard to what Hockett, according to Lyons (1968:315), calls 'temporal distribution or contour' (in contrast with temporal location), aspect is grammaticalized.

The term 'aspect', then, according to Lyons (1977:705):

is intended to cover a wide variety of oppositions, in so far as they are grammaticalized in the structure of particular languages -- opposition based upon notions of duration, instantaneity, completion, etc.

Stativity and nonstativity are both aspectual features commonly ascribed to verbs or the verbal category. While stativity is inherently durational, nonstativity is not. Stativity describes a state or static non-changing situation for a period. Stativity, therefore, implies duration. On the other hand, non-stativity expresses the non-static character of verbs. Non-stative verbs are, therefore, active, 'doing' verbs expressing activities (cf. Huddleston 1976:241) and describing what has come to be known as dynamic situations (cf. Comrie 1976:48 and Lyons 1977:706ft).

Expatriating on static situations expressed by stativity and dynamic situations expressed by nonstativity, Comrie says that the phases of a state are typically identical involving little or no change whereas the phases of a dynamic situation are different, characteristically changing and above all, in his own words 'requiring a continual input of energy if they are not to come to an end' (p. 13). Moreover dynamic situations may be events or processes. Events are punctual, or 'viewed as complete whole', while processes are durative, or 'viewed in progress' (Comrie *ibid*) in so far as they are not unchanging for the period (cf. Lyons 1977:711).

In so far as stativity and nonstativity refer to the kind of situation inherently portrayed by a verb, they constitute what Lyons (1977:706) refers to as its aspectual character. According to him, the aspectual character of a verb is 'that part of its meaning whereby it (normally) denotes one kind of situation rather than another'.

Although stativity is concerned with states, which are characteristically durative and unchanging (at least for a period of time), there are some languages, such as English, in which stative verbs can be used nonstatively or dynamically (cf. Comrie 1976:36-37). There has been no evidence yet that stative verbs in Ibibio can be used nonstatively. However, like English, the stative-nonstative dichotomy is not grammaticalized, though it has some grammatical relevance. In English, that relevance shows up in the incompatibility of the progressive marker *-ing* with a verb used statively (cf. Lyons 1977:707). The grammatical relevance or stativity/nonstativity in Ibibio will be apparent as we present the data.

Unlike other aspectual distinctions (such as inception, habituality, completion discussed in Essien 1986), stativity and nonstativity are inherent in the verbs themselves; a verb is either inherently stative or inherently nonstative. In this regard, stativity or nonstativity as an aspectual character of a verb constitutes part of the meaning of the verb, according to Lyons.

Let us now turn to tense, the other key term in the paper. This category is concerned with time reference. In particular, tense grammaticalizes the relationship between the time of a situation and the moment of speech concerning the situation. Tense is therefore grammaticalized time reference.

As we have already said, Essien (1983) has shown that tense marking is a function of the syntax of the language and that categories such as negation, wh-question, emphasis and mood determine the form of a tense morpheme.

Recently, in the course of our research on Ibibio, we have discovered that the aspectual character of a verb as defined above has implications for tense marking. This

paper<sup>1</sup> is then an in-depth examination of the role of the aspectual character of a verb in tense marking and the implications of this for the analysis of the Ibibio tense system.

## 1. THE TENSE SYSTEM OF IBIBIO AND THE ASPECTUAL CHARACTER OF VERBS

### 1.1 THE TENSE SYSTEM OF IBIBIO

A full description of the tense system of Ibibio will not be attempted here. That has already been done in Essien (1983). We will, however, give a summary that is relevant to the main concern of this paper.

The tense system is characterised as follows:

- 1) There is a three-way contrast of past, present and future.
- 2) The past is represented by the allomorph **màá-** or **ké-**, the occurrence of which is determined by the absence or presence of categories such as negation, mood, wh-question and emphasis.
- 3) The future tense is represented by **yàá-/yaa** or **dî-**, the occurrence of which is conditioned by the absence or presence of the same set of categories -- negation, mood, wh-question and emphasis -- that condition the occurrence of the past tense allomorphs **màá-** and **ké-** respectively.
- 4) The present tense is represented by **mé-** or zero allomorph. Interestingly, the same set of environments that determine the occurrence of **màá-** and **yàá-/yaa-** also determine the occurrence of **mé-** and the environments that determine the occurrence of **ké-** and **dî-** also determine the occurrence of the zero allomorph of the present tense. In the case of the present tense, therefore, the alternation is between the presence and absence of an overt marker.
- 5) There is a contrast between the immediate past and the indefinite past as well as between the immediate future and the indefinite future. This is marked by **mé-** and **yáá-**, respectively.
- 6) There is a distributional equivalence of some of the tense allomorphs such that **mé-** (as a present tense marker) is to  $\emptyset$  what **màá-** is to **ké-** and **yàá-/yaa-** is to **dî-** i.e. **mé-** (as a present tense marker) is to  $\emptyset$  what **màá-** is to **ké-** and what **yàá-/yaa-** is to **dî-**.

In the next two sections, we will consider the role of stativity and nonstativity in tense marking.

### 1.2 STATIVITY AND TENSE

#### 1.2.1 Stative Verbs

The following are examples of sentences with a stative verb in the three major tenses:

- |                         |                       |                    |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 1a. (àmì) m- mé-yàiyá   | I C - pres - pretty   | 'I am pretty'      |
| 1b. (âfô) à- màá- yàiyá | You C - past - pretty | 'You were pretty'  |
| 1c. (àmì) ñ- yàá- yàiyá | I C - fut - pretty    | 'I will be pretty' |

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a substantially revised version of the paper presented at the Regional Conference of African Linguistics in Morocco in October, 1988. The dialect of Ibibio used here is General Ibibio, which approximates to the dialects spoken in and around Uyo, the capital of Akwa Ibom State.

In Ibibio, there is concord (abbreviated as C) between the subject and the verb of the sentence. This concord is indicated by a homorganic nasal in the first person singular (1a and 1c) and a vowel in all the other persons. The tense markers follow the concord marker and the root of the verbal adjective is *yàiyá*.

In the three examples of a stative verb given above the verb occurs with *mé-*, *màá-* and *yàá-*, commonly referred to as neutral tense markers. But what are stative verbs in Ibibio and how can they be identified? As in other languages and as pointed out in the introduction, stative verbs express states or static situations. In Ibibio, they include all verbal adjectives such as *yàiyá*, 'be pretty', *nyóon̄*, 'be tall', and *sáná*, 'be clean', as well as a sub-class of verbs referred to as 'verbs of inert perception' by Comrie (1976:35) such as *dìd̄n̄ó*, 'know', *kòp*, 'hear', and *kíd*, 'see'. Like verbal adjectives, these verbs easily and readily take on the neutral tense markers *mé-*, *màá-* and *yàá-* representing the present tense, past tense and future tense, as the following examples show:

- 2a. (*àmì*) *ń-mé-kòp*  
I C-pres-hear 'I hear it'
- 2b. *àfò à-màá-kòp*  
you C-past-hear 'you heard it'
- 2c. (*àmì*) *ń-yàá-kòp*  
I C-fut-hear 'I will hear it'

As a sub-class of verbs, verbal adjectives behave syntactically like ordinary verbs in that they agree with the subject of the sentence in number and person, (3a and 3b), but differ from ordinary verbs by occurring as modifiers before a noun with which they agree in number (4a and 4b). Adjectives, as we know, are characteristically nominal modifiers and precede or follow the noun they modify, depending on the language.

- 3a. (*àmì*) *ń- mé- m̀gho*  
I C-pres-short 'I am short'
- 3b. (*n̄nyìn*) *ì-mí-m̀ghó*  
we C-pres-short 'we are short'
- 4a. (*àmì*) *ń- d̄ó ìmák ówò*  
I C-be-short person 'I am a short man'
- 4b. (*n̄nyìn*) *ì-d̄ò ñmák ówò*  
we C-be short persons 'we are short men'

Observe that in 3 the concord marker *ń-* alternates with the concord marker *ì* to distinguish the first person singular from the first person plural where the word meaning (short) behaves like an ordinary verb. On the other hand, in 4, where the same word behaves like a pure adjective, *ímák* is the singular form while *ñmák* is the plural.

The so-called verbs of inert perception appear to resist ordinary imperative use, unlike their non-stative counterparts. Thus the following are ungrammatical:

- 5a. \**dìd̄n̄ó*, 'know it'
- 5b. \**kóp*, 'hear it'
- 5c. \**kíd*, 'see it'

The imperatives in 5 can, however, occur if they are followed by some adverbs or some NP, as the examples in 6 show:

- 6a. *dìdòńó ñdín,* 'know it then'  
 6b. *kòp sé ñtáń,* 'hear what I say'  
 6c. *kíd ké ídém ñfò,* 'see it yourself'

In fact, even the verbal adjectives do not normally occur in the imperative unless accompanied by some adverbial expressions, as the questionable status of the examples in 7 and the grammaticality of 8 show:

- 7a. ? *im gho,* 'be short'  
 7b. ? *fɔn,* 'be good'  
 8a. *mághòidáhá,* 'be short in height'  
 8b. *fɔn má,* 'be good completely'

In English, stative verbs do not normally occur in the imperative. It would appear that this restriction is language independent.

### 1.2.2 Tense Marking in Stative Verbs

Let us now return to tense marking in stative verbs. The examples in 1 and 2 above show that in simple positive modally unmarked and unemphatic sentences, stative verbs select the present tense marker *mé-*, the past tense marker *màá-* and the future tense marker *yàá-*, all of which are commonly referred to as neutral tense markers, as already pointed out. If, however, the sentence is negative, emphatic, modally marked, or contains a wh-question word, the alternants  $\emptyset$ , *ké-* and *dí-*, often referred to as contrastive markers, are selected e.g.:

- 9a. (*àmì*) *ń- yàiyáké*  
 I C-pretty-NEG 'I am not pretty'  
 9b. *àmì ké ídém ñmì ñ-ké-yàiyá*  
 I self my C-past-pretty 'I was the one (not any other person) who was pretty'  
 9c. *ànìé ówò í-dí-yáiyà?*  
 which person C-fut-pretty 'who will be pretty'

So the examples in 1, 2, 3 and 9 indicate that stative verbs occur with *mé*, *màá-* and *yàá-*, the so called neutral markers as well as with  $\emptyset$ , *ké*, and *dí*, the so called contrastive markers, depending on the absence or presence of certain grammatical categories in the sentence.

### 1.3 NON-STATIVE VERBS AND TENSE MARKING

Unlike stative verbs which can occur with the neutral present tense marker to indicate a present situation (cf. 1a, 2a, 3a, 3b), nonstative verbs occur with no tense marker at all, where a present meaning is intended. That is non-stative verbs occur with  $\emptyset$  instead of *mé*, where a present meaning is intended. The reason for this will be given later. For the moment consider the following examples:

- 10a. (*àmì*) *ń-féghè ìtók*  
 I C-run run 'I am running (rather than doing something else)'  
 10b. (*àmì*) *ń-díà èdèèsì*  
 I C-eat rice 'I am eating rice (rather than yam)'  
 10c. (*àmì*) *ń-tém ùdíá*  
 I C-cook food 'I am cooking food (rather than being idle)'

10d. (àmi) *ń-támmá ńtámmá*

I C-jump jump

'I am jumping (instead of playing tennis)'

In Ibibio verbal forms such as *ńfēghè*, *ńdīà*, *ńtēm* and *ńtámmá* combine temporal (i.e. present) progressive (i.e. aspectual) and emphatic or contrastive meanings or interpretations. It appears, therefore, that nonstativity, progressivity and emphasis or contrast are inseparable grammatically in so far as they are expressed by one verbal form. To be more accurate, it appears that when nonstativity and progressivity (both of which are unmarked grammatically) are combined together, they imply emphasis or contrast. This is also applicable to the past and future tenses, as the selection of the contrastive tense markers *ké-* and *dī-* in 11 show:

11a. (àmi) *ń-ké-fēghè ìtók*

I C-past-run run

'I was running (instead of doing something else)'

11b. (àmi) *ń-dī-fēghè ìtók*

I C-fut-run run

'I will be running'

Therefore verbal forms like *ńkéfēghè* and *ńdīfēghè* parallel the verbal form *ńfēghè* in that they all combine temporal (i.e. tense) and progressive (aspectual) meanings with emphasis. In 11a and 11b above it is clearly *ké-* and *dī-* which perform the triple function - tense, progressivity and emphasis - just as the zero morph in the examples in 10. If *ké* and *dī-* are deleted from 11a and 11b respectively, 10a is the result and if these tense markers are replaced by the neutral tense ones *màá-* and *yàá*, the progressive and contrastive meanings are lost, as the examples in 12 show:

12a. (àmi) *ń-màá-fēghé ìtók*

I C-past-run run

'I ran'

12b. (àmi) *ń-yàá-fēghé ìtók*

I C-fut-run run

'I will run'

Clearly therefore from the examples in 10 and 11 compared with 12, the tense markers  $\emptyset$ , *ké-* and *dī-* carry not only temporal but also progressive and emphatic meanings in nonstative verbs. It appears that nonstativity and progressivity imply emphasis but nonstativity and non-progressivity do not. If that is the case, then an explanation can be offered why nonstative verbs have no tense marking in the present. Emphatic or contrastive sentences as demonstrated in Essien (1983) occur with a zero tense marker in the present tense. Since nonstativity and progressivity imply emphasis, the selection of the zero morph in a present situation (instead of *mé*) is explained in the context of this implied emphasis or contrast. It is for the same contrast or emphasis that the contrastive *ké-* and *dī-* are selected by nonstative verbs with progressive meaning in the past and future, respectively. Once again the distributional equivalence of  $\emptyset$ , *ké-* and *dī-* observed in Essien (1983) shows up.

It should be emphasized that it is not nonstativity per se that is responsible for the zero marking of the present tense observed in sentences such as those in 10, but the implied emphasis or contrast. However, the emphasis arises from a combination of nonstativity and progressivity.

In essence, then, tense marking in both stative and nonstative verbs is very similar. The only difference is that the contrast or emphasis that causes the selection of the markers  $\emptyset$ , *ké-* or *dī-* is overt or explicit (i.e. grammaticalized) in the case of the former (cf. 9b) but implicit in the case of the latter.

2. THE MARKERS *mé-* AND  $\emptyset$ 

So far, we may have given the impression that *mé* occurs with stative verbs in non-emphatic or non-contrastive situations to indicate a present tense but disappears to indicate the same tense together with progressivity and emphasis or contrast in nonstative verbs. In fact, the situations are not so simple and straightforward. Consider the following examples with stative verbs but without the marker *mé*, even though no emphasis or contrast is meant.

- 13a. **Inì ó-dìòṅó Ekàéte**  
 Ini C-know Ekaete 'Ini knows Ekaete'
- 13b. **Ǿmmọ é-yàiyá étíétí**  
 they C-pretty very much 'they are very pretty'

In these examples, the subject is in the third person. Third person verbal forms do not require the present tense marker *mé-* as the examples in 13 without emphasis show. In the third person, therefore, stative verbs behave like non-stative verbs in regard to tense marking: they bear non-overt tense markers in the third person.

Historically, however, Essien (1983:338) has pointed out that in Efik, a very closely related language, *mé-* must have occurred even in the third person but has been lost synchronically by a process of deletion. He went on to suggest that even the second person is in process of losing *mé-*, as evidenced by the following alternative expressions:

- 14a. **(àfò) è-mé-dìòṅó íbád**  
 you C-pres-know mathematics 'you know mathematics'
- 14b. **(àfò) Ǿ-dìòṅó íbád**  
 you C-know mathematics 'you know mathematics'

While *mé* disappears in the third person verbal forms of stative verbs in simple declarative sentences, it may occur in nonstative verbs, as the following examples show:

- 15a. **(àmì) ñ-mé-féghè itọk**  
 I C-in past-run run 'I have run'
- 15b. **(àmì) ñ-mé-tèm ùdíá**  
 I C-in past-cook food 'I have cooked food'

As even the English translations show, *mé-* no longer performs a present tense function, rather, it combines two functions: a recent past function with a perfect function, in which the completion of a situation as well as its recentness is emphasized. This is a modification of our 1986 analysis in which we tended to play down the aspectual function of *mé-*.

We can therefore say that *mé-* performs two functions namely, marking the present tense in stative verbs and the immediate past combined with the perfect function in nonstative verbs. Because *mé-* performs a recent past function in the latter category of verbs, it can occur with adverbs that indicate recentness, as in 16:

- 16a. **(ṅnyìn) ì-mí-tán íno ènyé idáháémì idáháémì**  
 we C-in past-tell to him/her now now  
 'we have told him just now'
- 16b. **(ṅdùfò) è-mè-kpé ènyé ọkák ñfìn?**  
 you C-in past-pay him/her money today  
 'Have you paid him/her money today?'

In 16b, it is possible to replace *mé-* with *màá-*, the indefinite past marker if, in the mind of the speaker, a sufficiently long time has elapsed since the payment of the money and the time of asking the question, even though it is still today. In that case 16b can be expressed as 16c:

16c. (*ndùfò*) *è-mà-é-kpè ènyé òkák òfín?*  
 you C-past-C-pay him/her money today 'did you pay him money today?'

As in the stative verbs *mé-* also disappears in non-stative verbs in the third person, thus leaving the immediate past and perfect functions to be performed by the zero morph, as in 17:

17a. (*ènyé*) *e-fèghè*<sup>2</sup>  
 he/she C-run/escape 'he/she has run/escaped'

17b. (*ommò*) *e-kpè ènyé òkák òfín?*  
 they C-pay him/her money today 'have they paid him/her money today?'

Just as *mé-* performs the present tense function in stative verbs and the immediate past and perfect functions in the first and second persons of nonstative verbs,  $\emptyset$  performs the same functions respectively in the two classes of verbs in the third person<sup>3</sup>. This observation shows the complexity of some verbal forms in the language.

### 3. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In summary we have made the following important points:

- 1) Stativity and nonstativity, defined above, constitute the aspectual character of a verb.
- 2) Stative verbs can occur with either the neutral or contrastive tense markers depending on sentence type or the absence or presence of the grammatical categories negation, wh-question, mood or emphasis.
- 3a) Nonstative verbs can also occur with either set of tense markers. However, the emphasis or contrast implicit in nonstative verbs used progressively causes such verbs to select a zero tense marker in the present tense and corresponding contrastive *ké-* and *dí* in the past and future tenses, respectively.
- 3b) It should be emphasized that nonstativity in itself is not solely responsible for the selection of the contrastive set of markers but the combination of it and progressivity which produces emphasis or contrast.
- 4) In addition to temporal functions, the markers  $\emptyset$ , *ké-* and *dí-* can also perform aspectual and emphatic functions.
- 5) When the marker *mé* occurs in nonstative verbs, it performs a recent past together with a perfect function.
- 6) The same marker is deleted in the third person forms regardless of whether the verb is stative or nonstative.

These findings have implications for the analysis of the tense and verbal systems of Ibibio.

<sup>2</sup> A combination of high tone (´) and downstepped tone (ˆ) on the same syllable is unmarked.

<sup>3</sup> This observation is applicable to simple positive declarative sentences and Yes/No questions. In negative, wh-question, emphatic and modally marked sentences, the  $\emptyset$  marker indicates present tense whether in stative or nonstative verbs (cf. Essien 1983).



1) Although the aspectual character of verb is not grammaticalized in the language, it is relevant to tense marking since the selection of tense markers may depend on it to some extent. In addition, the verbal character of a verb confirms earlier assertions that the tense system of Ibibio is a tripartite one and there is a distributional equivalence between the neutral markers *mé-*, *màá-* and *yàá-/yáá* and the contrastive ones  $\emptyset$ , *ké-*, and *dí-*, respectively. This distributional equivalence is limited to the first and second person verbal forms and when *mé* performs a present tense function.

2) Although as observed by Essien (1986) tense and aspect in Ibibio are generally distinguishable and grammaticalized, aspectual distinctions like the progressive and the perfect are not distinguishable from tense grammatically since one verbal form can express tense + progressive or tense + perfect meaning. In other words, certain aspectual distinctions are grammaticalized and distinct from tense while others are inseparable grammatically from tense.

3) For the purposes of correct tense marking, verbs have to be subcategorized as stative or nonstative. Therefore among the syntactic features that are required by verbs in the lexicon of the Ibibio grammar are [+ stative] and [- stative].

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