

# TEMPORAL DISTINCTIONS AS BASES FOR THE SEMANTIC CLASSIFICATION OF VERBS: INSIGHTS FROM ESAN

P. E. Ejele

Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies  
University of Port Harcourt, Choba  
Rivers State, Nigeria

The semantic classification of verbs in terms of their inherent meaning, to a large extent, determines the role they play in syntactic co-occurrence possibilities and the semantic interpretations they allow. This means that the aspectual classification of a verb as a state, process/action, or event influences the syntactic and the semantic possibilities it allows in interaction with other constituents.

This classification is essentially based on temporal distinctions. Consequently, the paper examines temporal reference/ordering as a crucial basis of categorization of the aspectual character in terms of the inherent qualities of verbs, with a view to providing a better understanding of their behaviour when in construction with other items.

La classification sémantique des verbes basée sur leur signification inhérente détermine en grande mesure leur rôle dans les contextes syntaxiques où on les trouve, et les interprétations syntaxiques qu'ils admettent. Il en résulte que la classification aspectuelle d'un verbe comme état, procès/action, ou événement, influence les possibilités syntaxiques et sémantiques qu'il admet en interaction avec les autres composantes d'un syntagme.

Une telle classification repose essentiellement sur des distinctions temporelles. C'est pourquoi notre étude examine les références ou les séquences temporelles comme base cruciale pour établir les catégories aspectuelles d'un verbe d'après ses qualités inhérentes, afin de mieux comprendre son comportement lorsqu'il apparaît dans des constructions accompagné d'autres éléments.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The data for this article is taken from Esan, a North-Central Edoid language of the Benue-Kwa grouping (Elugbe 1986), originally classified as a Kwa language of the Niger-Congo grouping (Greenberg 1963), but now classified as New Benue-Congo (Bendor-Samuel 1989). The language is spoken in five Local Government Areas of Edo State, Nigeria, namely Esan West, Esan Central, Esan North East, Esan South East and Igueben. Data is mainly from the Ekpoma dialect.

This paper examines the temporal distinctions that underlie the classification of verbs in terms of the inherent properties expressed by their aspectual character.<sup>1</sup> Thus in what follows, we discuss deictic and non-deictic distinctions as the basis for aspectual distinctions, focusing on the latter; and the categorization of verbs based on temporal distinctions. Finally we look at areas in our classification highlighting insights from Esan.

## 2. DEICTIC AND NON-DEICTIC DISTINCTIONS

In the literature, a distinction is made between deictic and non-deictic temporal reference, first observed by Aristotle, followed by Ryle (1949), Kenny (1963), and Vendler (1967), amongst others (cited in Lyons 1977:111).

According to Lyons (1977:637), deixis is used to refer to the location and identification of persons, objects, situations such as events, processes and activities being talked about, or referred to, in the utterance, and the participation in it typically of a

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single speaker and at least one addressee. The situation takes place in time. Temporal reference involves deictic and non-deictic notions some of which may or may not be morphologized in a particular language.

Deictic temporal reference is a universal feature of language in the sense that all languages have ways of expressing temporal notions. Tense, a deictic category, is expressed in the verb form which reflects or specifies time reference. A language that exhibits this correlation between verbal morphology and time reference is said to have 'tense'—such as English, Latin, Greek and French, to mention a few. Not all languages have tense. For instance, Chinese and Malay are said not to have tense and are termed 'tenseless'. Such languages do not have an overt correlation between verbal morphology and time (see Lyons 1977:679, Comrie 1976:2). In such languages, time adverbs, particles or morphemes may be used to indicate temporal specification.

Non-deictic temporal reference, of which aspect is a category, is common in languages. Lyons (1977), following Vendler (1967) among others, makes a distinction between deictic and non-deictic temporal behaviour of verbs. Tense overtly involves the concept of time, while aspect, more subtly, also depends on this concept.

Although tense and aspect are grammatical categories used in temporal specification, which according to Lyons (1968:314) and Comrie (1976:82), are difficult to clearly define, they can be distinguished. Thus, while both involve temporal specification, the deictic nature of tense makes specific or definite reference to time, in contrast to aspect which, being non-deictic, makes non-specific or indefinite reference to time. Many African languages distinguish between these categories. Examples include Ibibio (Essien 1983), Isekiri (Omamor 1982), Yala (Oko 1986) and Esan (Ejele 1986). However, there is no doubt that tense and aspect are so close that they indeed very often impinge on each other (see Ejele 2000a, 2000b).

Certain semantic conceptual categories are associated with the concept of the aspectual character of verbs. These include stativity, progressivity, duration, completion, habituality, iteration, momentariness, inception and termination. All of these are non-deictic temporal notions. In what follows, we examine the types of verbs on the basis of their inherent semantic properties, defined on temporal grounds.

### 3. CATEGORIZATION OF VERBS BASED ON TIME

Vendler (1967:97–121) provides 'time schemata' presupposed by various verbs in their dominant use, using these as models of comparison to classify vague verbs. Using mainly syntactic criteria, he classifies verbs into four distinct categories: states, activities, accomplishments and achievements. On the basis of progressivity, he groups states and achievements together (as the genus disallowing the progressive form); and activities and accomplishments as another class (allowing the progressive form). Vendler further distinguishes between the four categories solely on the basis of temporal distinctions. Thus activities involve time periods, a time stretch when the situation depicted by the verb obtained; accomplishments also take place over a period, the time stretch being unique and definite; achievements involve unique and definite time instants, while states involve time periods which are indefinite or non unique. Vendler distinguishes between activities and accomplishments on grounds that accomplishments move towards a terminus which is logically necessary to their being what they

are. On temporal grounds, activities, accomplishments and states involve time intervals while achievements involve time instants. Vendler's classification has problems because he uses mainly syntactic criteria (see Ejele 1986 for further details).

Chafe (1970:98–100) makes a general distinction between states, processes, actions and process-actions based on semantic structures. Van Dijk (1977:168–177) treats events, actions and processes as part of the theory of action (under pragmatics), with process being the basic concept, as continuous events occurring during a period of time. For him, in courses of events of a specific type such as action, further intricacies like agency, intention, purposes and goals become relevant. Ikoro (1996) makes a general distinction between stative, action and locative verbs in Kana, using tone as distinctive, with statives taking a uniform tone pattern of low-mid. In Esan, verbs do not have (underlying) tones, but depend on other factors like the tone on the surrounding constituents, the tense, aspect or mood in which they are used. For instance, it is generally the case that non-high (usually low) tone is used for both the present and future tenses and high tone for the past tense. In this paper, we adopt a semantic approach such as that proposed by Lyons, since it has fewer problems and is more insightful.

Lyons (1977) classifies verbs into three major classes, i.e. events, processes and states. He makes a general distinction between static (non-dynamic) and dynamic verbs, with most verbs in all languages being inherently dynamic. He classifies acts with events, being agent-controlled events; and activities with processes, being agent-controlled processes. However, he treats acts and activities as distinguishable kinds of actions. As he observes (1977:710), the sub-classification of situations expressed by verbs in their dominant use into events, states and processes is based on temporal distinctions. Thus he defines events as NON-EXTENDED dynamic situations that occur momentarily or instantaneously in time. By contrast processes are EXTENDED dynamic situations that endure through time; while states, like processes, endure through time but, unlike processes, are homogeneous throughout the period of existence.

From his classification, events and processes are dynamic while states are non-dynamic. Also events involve time instants or moments, while processes like states involve time periods. Apart from the dynamic/non-dynamic criterion, processes are further distinguished from states on the basis that only states remain invariably homogeneous and unchanging throughout the situation depicted by the verb. We also observe that Vendler's activities and accomplishments are Lyons' processes, as they both involve situations that go on in time, consisting of successive phases that follow one another in time. On the basis of these distinctions, the following are examples of verbs in their unmarked or dominant use:

STATIVES: know, contain, have, look, own, stare, resemble, be, live.

EVENTS: see, spot, recognize, remember, forget, take, fall, shoot, die, be born, reach, bite.

PROCESSES: cook, dance, pray, read, walk, work, smoke, come, whistle, sweep, wash, carry, run, build, eat, go.

Although Vendler's and Lyons' classifications are similar, there are some differences. Thus Vendler's achievement is an event for Lyons; and his accomplishment is, for Lyons, a process which has an event as its end-point. Lyons separates states from

events and processes, unlike Vendler who groups states and achievements together (as the class not allowing the progressive form).

In spite of these differences, it is clear that temporal reference or ordering forms the basis of the distinctions made. Lyons (1977) uses stativity, progressivity and duration to classify English verbs. In what follows, we look at the case in Esan. We shall use the temporal semantic conceptual non-deictic notions of stativity, progressivity, completion, inception and habituality to classify verbs.

### 3.1 STATIVITY

Stativity involves the aspectual character of particular verbs denoting the class of statives. States are situations that last through time and are homogeneous or unchanging throughout their period of existence. On the basis of the ontological distinction between static versus non-static situations, states are static or non-dynamic, and therefore do not normally occur in the progressive (this being dynamic). Examples include **ni** 'survive', **ka** 'agree', **gua** 'contain', **yan** 'own/possess', **hi** 'wish', **ribho** 'be' (existential and locative). Below we illustrate with **yan** 'own/possess', and **ni** 'survive'.

- (1) a. **èfě yán ébè**  
Efe owns/owned the book (It is Efe who owns/owned the book).
- b. **\*èfè yan ébè**  
\*Efe is owning the book.
- c. **\*efe dâ á-yan ébè**  
Efe PAST PROG-own book  
\*Efe was owning the book.
- (2) a. **èfè ní**  
Efe survived.
- b. **\*èfè ni**  
Efe is surviving.
- c. **\*efe dâ á-ní**  
Efe PAST PROG-survive  
Efe was surviving.

The ungrammaticality of (1b–c) and (2b–c) shows that these verbs do not occur in the progressive. For this subclass of the very few statives that do not occur in the progressive, stativity can be said to be lexicalized in Esan, since it is part of the aspectual character of these verbs. As Lyons noted for English, Spanish, Italian, Irish, etc., stativity is grammatically relevant because it is incompatible with progressivity, which is grammaticalized in Esan, as in the aforementioned languages. However, many statives can occur in the progressive under certain conditions, as we shall see when we look at other semantic categories like progressivity, inception and habituality.

### 3.2 PROGRESSIVITY

In the aspectual system of Esan, the progressive present is not overtly represented by a morpheme but is realised in the tone, being non-high (usually low) as in (3b),

compared with a high tone in the simple past as in (3a) and (4a). However, the tone is not reliable because it is inconsistent, as seen in (3b), where it is non-high, compared with (4b) with a rising tone. In contrast the progressive past is morphologized, being realised as **á-VP**, where **á-** is a prefix and VP the verb phrase with the verb in its base form (as in (3c) and (4c)). Syntactically no distinction is made between progressive, continuous or repetitive (iterative) situations, since they are all represented by the form **á-VP**, meaning 'be VP-ing'. Hence the progressive in English referring to a situation in progress is not equivalent to the progressive in Esan, and this fact has important consequences for the progressive criterion. Generally, only dynamic verbs occur in the progressive. Typically, processes occur in the progressive, being extended dynamic situations that last through time. This is by far the largest class of verbs. Examples include **rie únẹ̀** 'run (a run)'; **le ébàè** 'eat (food)'; **viẹ** 'cry'; **mun** 'carry'; **guanọ** 'look for, search for, seek'; **je** 'laugh'; **van** 'quarrel'; **gbe** 'dance'; **wenna** 'work'. We shall illustrate with **le ébàè** 'eat (food)' and **van** 'quarrel'.

- (3) a. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ lé ébàè**  
Efe ate / has eaten.
- b. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ le ébae**  
Efe is eating.
- c. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ dá á-lé ébàè**  
Efe PAST PROG-eat food  
Efe was eating.
- (4) a. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ vánle**  
Efe quarrelled / has quarrelled.
- b. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ vǎn**  
Efe is quarrelling.
- c. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ dá á-vǎn**  
Efe PAST PROG-quarrel  
Efe was quarrelling.

The situations referred to by the verbs in (3b-c) and (4b-c) are seen in progress, as dynamic processes.

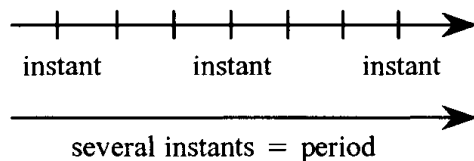
In the case of events which are also dynamic, they are normally not expected to occur in the progressive since they are non-extendable, but rather occur momentarily or instantaneously in time. Examples include **daghe** 'see, spot, notice'; **dere** 'fall'; **sẹ** 'reach'; **yere** 'remember'; **yelea** 'forget'. It is interesting to observe that they can occur in the progressive form in Esan, as seen in the examples of eventive verbs **dere** 'fall' and **yelea** 'forget' below.

- (5) a. **Odedé dére**  
Odede fell / has fallen.
- b. **odedé gbo déré (\*odedé deré)**  
Odede again fall  
Odede fell / has fallen / is falling again.

- c. **odedé dâ á-déré**  
Odede was falling.
- (6) a. **odedé yéléá**  
Odede forgot / has forgotten.
- b. **odedé yèleá**  
Odede is forgetting (Odede repeatedly forgets).
- c. **odedé dâ á-yèleá**  
Odede PAST PROG-forget  
Odede was forgetting (Odede repeatedly forgot).

Of importance in these examples is the fact that the situation depicted by the eventive verbs are interpreted as ‘continual’ in the sense of occurring repeatedly, as opposed to ‘continuous’, which refers situations that continue without stopping or interruption. In fact, **dere** ‘fall’ has to be overtly modified by an appropriate temporal adverb **gbo** ‘again’, otherwise the sentence (5b) would be ungrammatical for most speakers. The situations, in essence, are instants which are seen as a whole over a period of time, as informally represented on the temporal scale below.

Figure 1. Temporal Specification Scale



When so used, the eventive verbs are used as processes. Thus in (5b,c) and (6b,c) ‘falling’ and ‘forgetting’ are processes, whereas ‘fell / has fallen’ and ‘forgot / has forgotten’ which are events, are the terminal phases which occur at a point in time.

As for statives, there are a very few that do not occur in the progressive; but most statives can be used progressively. Examples are **mọ** ‘have’, **ka** ‘agree’, **khọ** ‘resemble’, **lẹn** ‘know’, and **ghe** ‘look’. The latter two are exemplified.

- (7) a. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ lẹ̀n ẹ̀bẹ̀**  
book  
Efe knows / knew book (Efe is brilliant).
- b. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ lẹ̀n ẹ̀bẹ̀**  
Efe is knowing book (Efe is becoming brilliant).
- c. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ dâ á-lẹ̀n ẹ̀bẹ̀**  
Efe PAST PROG-know book  
Efe was knowing book.
- (8) a. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ ghé ọ̀nı́ ẹ̀bẹ̀**  
Efe (has) looked at the book.
- b. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ ghè ọ̀nı́ ẹ̀bẹ̀**  
Efe is looking at the book.

c. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ dā́ á-ghẹ̀ ọ̀nı́ ẹ̀bẹ̀**

PAST

Efe was looking at the book.

Cases where statives can be progressivized involve a change in the situation such that semantically a new phase is emerging, though it is not lexically/morphologically expressed, as in **lẹ̀n** 'know' in (7b-c). This is similar to the consequence of using the concept of inception. However, sometimes no new phase is involved. The situation depicted by the verb is homogeneous but is interpreted as a continuous phase, as in **ghe** 'look' in (8b-c). Such progressive statives depict stative situations that are conceptualized as dynamic, their temporal schema being like those of other progressives. In such situations, progressive stative sentences have successive stages and are expected, in principle, to move to a final end point. Like other progressives, progressive statives have a temporary flavour which have an eventual termination. Thus progressive statives are conceptualized as events. States in English can also be endowed with dynamism, under some pragmatic principles like continuum, limited duration, variability and when mental behaviour (e.g. looking, staring and thinking) are taken as activity. Under such pragmatic conditions, the temporal schema of a state can be shifted to that of an event. The difference, though, is that in English the morphological category progressive encodes situations that are seen in progress, while in Esan it encodes situations that are in progress, continuous, or continual/iterative/repetitive.

Apart from expressing states, of interest are stative verbs which express quality. These are verbs that function semantically as adjectives. Examples are **mọ́ ọ̀sẹ̀** 'beautiful', **soṅo** 'ugly', **ghoṅghoṅ** 'happy'. These can occur in the progressive, as in examples (9) to (11).

- (9) a. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ mọ́ ọ̀sẹ̀**  
have beauty  
Efe has beauty, *i.e.* Efe is beautiful.
- b. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ wố á-mọ́ ọ̀sẹ̀**  
really PROG-have beauty  
Efe was really having beauty, *i.e.* Efe was very beautiful.
- (10) a. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ soṅo**  
ugly  
Efe is ugly-ing (progressive), *i.e.* Efe is ugly.
- b. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ wố á-soṅo**  
very PROG-ugly  
Efe was very ugly-ing (progressive), *i.e.* Efe was very ugly.
- (11) a. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ ghoṅghoṅ**  
Efe was happy-ing (progressive), *i.e.* Efe was happy.
- b. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ wố á-ghoṅghoṅ**  
very PROG-happy  
Efe was very happy-ing (progressive), *i.e.* Efe was very happy.

What is interesting about these examples is that it is the continuous state of the verb that is expressed rather than the iteration or progressivity. This is one of the implications of the *á*-VP structure representing progressive, continuous and continual/iterative situations. However it is generally the case that when states are used in the progressive as progressive stative, an inceptive meaning is involved.

Apart from expressing states and quality, stative verbs also function as colour predicates and the progressive form is used inchoatively for instance, to describe a change in colour—as in (12).

- (12) a. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ dâ á-bí bho**  
           PAST PROG-black more  
           Efe was getting darker (in complexion).
- b. **ẹ̀fẹ̀ dâ á-bhàlá**  
           PAST PROG-red  
           Efe was getting light (in complexion).
- c. **ètò dâ á-fúá**  
           hair PAST PROG-white  
           The hair was getting whiter.

These colour adjectives are expressed syntactically by stative verbs depicting progressive stative situations that have successive stages (darkness/lightness/whiteness), progressing towards a final endpoint. Thus ‘getting darker/lighter/whiter’ becomes ‘very dark/light/white’ and this final stage (stative) can in fact be expressed in Esan, as in (13).

- (13) a. **ẹ̀fe wô bì-á**  
           really black  
           Efe is/was very dark (in complexion).
- b. **ẹ̀fe wó bhàlá**  
           very red  
           Efe is/was very light (in complexion).
- c. **ètò wó fúá**  
           hair (**wô fuá**)  
           The hair is/was very white.

On the whole then, processes, events and states take the progressive form in Esan, since they all occur in the *á*-VP structure. However they differ in the interpretation they have in this structure. Thus processes typically are interpreted as situations in progress; events as situations that are continual, iterated or repeated, each occurrence being momentary, with several instants over a period of time; and states as situations conceptualized as continuous in time, sometimes involving a change initiating a new phase in the temporal schema.



## 3.3 COMPLETION

The notion of completion is lexically expressed by **fo**<sup>2</sup> 'finish', and it is a very important criterion for processes, as it can change their status, as in the following examples.

- (14) a. **ẹfe gbòṅọ**  
Efe is sweeping.
- b. **ẹfe gbónọ**  
Efe (has) swept.
- c. **ẹfe gbónọ fo**  
Efe has swept / has finished sweeping.
- (15) a. **ẹfe rie únẹ**<sup>3</sup>  
run  
Efe is running.
- b. **ẹfe rié únẹ**  
Efe ran / has run.
- c. **ẹfe rié únẹ fo**  
Efe has run / has finished running.
- (16) a. **ẹfe wǎnré**  
Efe is growing up.
- b. **ẹfe wânre**  
Efe has grown up.
- c. **ẹfe wânre fo**  
Efe has finished growing up.
- (17) a. **ẹfe kanọ agá**  
carve chair  
Efe is carving a chair.
- b. **ẹfe kánọ agá**  
Efe (has) carved a chair.
- c. **ẹfe kánọ agá fo**  
Efe has finished carving a chair.

The verbs **gbòṅọ** 'sweep' and **rie únẹ** 'run' are activities, being agent-controlled processes, while **wânre** 'grow up' and **kanọ agá** 'carve chair' are accomplishments. Esan seems not to make a distinction between activities (as in (14) and (15)) and accomplishments ((16) and (17)), but treats both as processes, since they behave in the same

<sup>2</sup> The morpheme **fo** 'finish' is distinct from **fó**, which is used as an intensifier to mean 'extremely' or 'very' as in **ẹfe lén èbè fó**, 'Efe is very brilliant'.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase **rie únẹ** 'run' is a complex verb; see Ejele 1990.

way to the concept of completion.<sup>4</sup> This contrasts with English in which accomplishments are a subset of processes for which the notion of completion is obligatory. In fact what is implicit from the examples above is that in the processes, the terminal point can be argued to issue in events. This is seen in the comparison of all the (a) examples with the respective (b) and (c). In essence completion can change a process into an event.

As for verbs that are inherently events, the notion of completion is implicit in their definition, since the situation depicted by an event must be completed for it to be so classified. Recall that events are non-extended dynamic situations that occur momentarily in time. When completion is applied to events, it enforces an emphatic interpretation, as seen in the examples (18a) and (19a) compared with (18b) and (19b), the emphatic correlates.

- (18) a. **ẹfe yéléá**  
Efe forgot / has forgotten.
- b. **ẹfe yélea fo**  
finish  
Efe has completely forgotten.

- (19) a. **ẹfe dére**  
Efe fell / has fallen.
- b. **ẹfe dére fo**  
fall finish  
Efe has already fallen (Efe has definitely fallen).

In contrast to processes (and events), the notion of completion cannot normally be applied to states because by their very nature, they are static homogeneous unchanging situations that endure throughout the period of their existence. Hence the ungrammaticality of (20) and (21).

- (20) **\*ẹfe lén ébè fo**  
Efe has finished knowing book.
- (21) **\*ẹfe yán ébè fo**  
Efe has finished owning the book.

When completion is applied to states, the static situation is brought to an end. Once the situation changes, the stative status also changes, as in (22a) and (23a) compared with (22b) and (23b).

- (22) a. **ẹfe ghé ébè**  
look book  
Efe (has) looked at the book.

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<sup>4</sup> This needs further investigation of Esan data. In the meantime, we draw attention to the fact that completion is an important criterion for establishing what in the literature is called the Imperfective Paradox. See Dowty 1979.

- b. **ẹfe ghé ẹ̀bè fo**  
 look book finish  
 Efe has finished looking at the book.

- (23) a. **ẹfe ní**  
 survive  
 Efe (has) survived.

- b. **ẹfe ní fo**  
 survive finish  
 Efe has already survived (Efe has definitely survived).

### 3.4 INCEPTION

The concept of inception is lexically represented in Esan by **muhen** 'start, begin, commence', which itself is an event. All the classes of verbs occur with inception. Thus with processes, it does not induce progressivity since they normally occur in the progressive, as in (24). This is in contrast to its behaviour with events and states which generally, in an inceptive interpretation, can occur with the progressive, as illustrated by events in (25) and states in (26).

- (24) a. **odedé muhen á-lé ébae**  
 start PROG-eat food  
 Odede has started eating.

- b. **odedé muhen á-gbonó**  
 start PROG-sweep  
 Odede has started sweeping.

- c. **odedé muhen á-gbe**  
 start PROG-dance  
 Odede has started dancing.

- (25) a. **odedé muhen á-yeré**  
 PROG-remember  
 Odede has started remembering.

- b. **odedé muhen á-yeleá**  
 Odede has started forgetting.

- c. **odedé muhen á-déré**  
 Odede has started falling.

- (26) a. **ẹfe muhen á-len ẹ̀bè**  
 Efe has started knowing book (Efe has started being brilliant).

- b. **ẹfe muhen á-mọ íghǒ**  
 have  
 Efe has started having money.

- c. **ẹfe múhẹn á-khọ abá-le**  
resemble father-her

Efe has started resembling her father.

The examples in (25) are progressive events depicting processes. Thus they are conceptualized as processes that move towards a terminal phase (an event) and with inception, the beginning of the process is focused on. Similarly, the examples in (26) are progressive statives depicting events. They are conceptualized as events that are dynamic and have successive stages that move towards a terminal phase. However, with inception, it is the beginning of the new phase that is being focused on, rather than the end. The terminal phase of a progressive event (depicting a process) is an event, while that of a progressive stative is a state. Thus the progressive stages of these events and statives are indeed temporary, unlike the normal process verbs as in examples in (24).

### 3.5 HABITUALITY

The habitual is used to express situations that take place regularly or frequently as a habit. This can be in the present or past. In Esan, the present tense structure and its associated tonal pattern express habituality or ability. In what follows, we examine processes, events and states in the present and the past tense.

Typically, processes and events occur in the present tense structure (NP) PRO VP where the pronoun (PRO) is in agreement with the noun subject or its reference. It has a habitual or ability meaning, as in examples (27) for processes, and (28) for events.

- (27) a. **ẹfe ọ rie únẹ**  
Efe she run  
Efe runs.
- b. **ẹfe ọ tie ébè**  
Efe<sub>i</sub> she<sub>i</sub> read book  
Efe reads.
- c. **ẹfe ọ gbòńó**  
Efe she sweep  
Efe sweeps.
- (28) a. **odedé ọ sẹ ená**  
Odede she reach here  
Odede reaches here.
- b. **odedé ọ deré**  
Odede she fall  
Odede falls.
- c. **íbhokhàn ê ye-emi-ré<sup>5</sup>**  
children they remember-things  
Children remember things.

<sup>5</sup> The verb *yere*, 'remember', is a splitting verb; see Ejele 1990.

While most statives like **lẹn** 'know' **mọ** 'have' **ni** 'survive' and **ka** 'agree' can occur with appropriate contexts in the present tense structure, one exception is **yan**, 'possess'. Hence the ungrammaticality of (29e).

- (29) a. **ẹfe ọ lẹn ẹbè**  
           she know book  
           Efe knows book (Efe is brilliant).
- b. **ẹfe ọ mọ íghǒ**  
           she have money  
           Efe has money.
- c. **ẹfe ọ ká**           (**ẹfe ọ kà na lu ekó bhi isi ọlé,**  
           she agree       Efe agrees that we hold the meeting at her place.)  
           Efe agrees.
- d. **ẹfe ọ ni**           (**ẹfe ọ ní éghèéghé ni ọ ré guá,**  
           she survive     Efe survives every time she swims.)  
           Efe survives.
- e. \***ẹfe ọ yan ẹbè** (cf. **ẹfẹ yán ẹbè**, 'It is Efe that owns/owned books'.)  
           Efe owns books.

Sometimes habituality or frequency can be expressed by the use of a suitable time adverb, e.g. **éghèrèbhé** 'all the time'; and all verbs can occur in this **éghèrèbhé NP<sub>1</sub> rẹ VP** structure, as in examples (30)–(32).

- (30) **éghèrèbhé ẹfé rẹ vié / lé ẹbàè / gbọ̀nọ**           (*processes*)  
       It is all the time that Efe cries / eats / sweeps.
- (31) **éghèrèbhé ẹfe rẹ ní / mò íghǒ / lẹn ẹbè / kǎ**   (*states*)  
       It is all the time that Efe survives / has money / knows book / agrees.
- (32) **éghèrèbhé ẹfé rẹ yeré / yeleá / sẹ ẹnà / bié**   (*events*)  
       It is all the time that Efe remembers / forgets / reaches here / bears children.

The habitual past is expressed via the imperfective. The imperfective is expressed by a sequence of the perfective and the progressive morphemes **rẹ** and **á-VP** meaning 'used to VP'. All the classes of verbs can occur in this structure, as illustrated by states in (33) with the exception of **yan** 'own', events in (34), and processes in (35).

- (33) a. **ẹfe ọ rẹ á-lẹn ẹbè**  
           Efe<sub>i</sub> she<sub>i</sub> PERF PROG-know book  
           Efe used to know book (Efe used to be brilliant).
- b. **ẹfe ọ rẹ á-mo íghǒ**  
           PERF PROG-have money  
           Efe used to have money.
- c. **ẹfe ọ rẹ á-ní**  
           PERF PROG-survive  
           Efe used to survive.

- d. \***ẹfe ọ rẹ á-yan ébè**  
 PERF PROG-own book  
 Efe used to own books.
- (34) a. **odedé ọ rẹ á-déré**  
 PERF PROG-fall  
 Odede used to fall.
- b. **odedé ọ rẹ á-yeré**  
 PERF PROG-remember  
 Odede used to remember.
- c. **odedé ọ rẹ á-se ená**  
 PERF PROG-reach here  
 Odede used to reach here
- (35) a. **ẹfe ọ rẹ á-rie únè**  
 PERF PROG-run  
 Efe used to run.
- b. **ẹfe ọ rẹ á-vié**  
 PERF PROG-cry  
 Efe used to cry.
- c. **ẹfe ọ rẹ á-lé ébàè**  
 PERF PROG-eat food  
 Efe used to eat.

While no special comment is needed on processes (35), as they occur in all tenses and aspects, it must be mentioned that statives in the imperfective (33) are seen as occurring over a long time in a continuous sense, hence habitually, during which period or phase they are homogeneous or unchanging. This contrasts with processes, which are also periodic but not homogeneous. It is also pertinent to point out that although events in the habitual past (34) appear to depict situations occurring over a period of time, in actual fact the period for events is not a stretch of time as for statives or processes, but rather the iteration or repetition of the event on different occasions over a period of time, as already observed in §3.2.

#### 4. SUMMARY OF INSIGHTS FROM ESAN

From the above discussion, certain insights can be drawn from the approach of using temporal distinctions as bases for the semantic classification of verbs. These include:

1. Stativity in Esan is indeed the aspectual character of a subclass of verbs, just as in English and other languages. This very small class of verbs do not normally occur in the progressive. However most statives can occur in the progressive under special conditions like inception and habituality.
2. The interpretations associated with the progressive form in the structure **á-VP** has implications for the classes of verbs. Thus processes have a progressive reading,

states a continuous reading, and events a continual/iterative/repetitive reading. One effect is that on the surface, it seems that all verb classes allow the progressive form with a progressive reading; whereas in actual fact, the interpretations given to them are quite distinct in terms of their temporal schema.

3. It is obvious that the three verb classes, states, events and processes, are not strictly compartmentalized as such. Although they are classified in terms of their dominant use, they can be used as members of other classes to which they normally or naturally do not belong, under certain conditions such as progressivity, completion, inception and habituality.
4. Processes normally allow the progressive. However when applied to states and events, it changes the normal class to progressive statives and progressive events respectively. These are temporary phases during which they depict events and processes respectively.
5. When completion is applied to some processes, they can be used as events (which are, in fact, the terminal points of such processes).
6. The concept of inception is relevant to states and events because it marks the beginning of a new phase, thereby allowing the verb to be used as a member of a class which it normally does not belong to. Thus statives can be used dynamically and events as processes.
7. The concept of habituality applies to processes, states and events with a habitual or ability interpretation in the present tense structure. The habitual past is expressed by the imperfective structure, which in Esan involves using the progressive morpheme, with its possible interpretations depending on the verbs. Thus processes occur in the habitual past with a progressive meaning which is periodic; events occur in the habitual past with a continual/iterative/repetitive meaning which is momentary; and statives occur in the habitual past with the interpretation of the duration as continuous, unchanging or homogeneous throughout the period. This behaviour is in line with the three interpretations associated with the *á*-VP structure, namely progressive, continuous and continual/iterative/repetitive. What is of interest is that the three interpretations are associated with the three semantic classes of verbs, each class being associated with its particular interpretation and therefore clearly well defined.

These highlights may not necessarily be peculiar to Esan, but it is hoped that this paper, in contributing to the literature, will shed more light on our understanding of verb classes and their behaviour.

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