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## A Prolegomena to the Oron Tense System

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| | There is no concurrence on the number of tense divisions in most tense analyses on Oron. Research in this area has recorded several dissimilar tense divisions ranging from three to nine. This paper re-assesses tense in general and its operation in Oron, a Lower Cross language (LCL) in Nigeria, in particular, using a descriptive framework. This is compared with what is already known of Ibibio, a sister language and English, Nigeria's official language. The Oron-Ibibio data were elicited from native-speakers, using a pool of structured sentences and some world list, while the library served as a secondary source for the three languages. The ultimate phonetic forms of the past and future tense allomorphs in Oron are syntactically and discursively conditioned, in a way that hones the phonology-syntax interface. Available data and our analysis indicate that the present tense is not grammaticalized in Oron. The past and future are demonstrably marked, instead. Part of the significance of this paper, with regards to its original contribution rest in refuting the orthodox thesis that tense in Oron yields a 'natural' triadic (of past, present and future) or multifarious division (cf. Simmons 1956; Essien 1990, 1991, 2006; Okon 2006; Essien 1999; Udosen 2004; Akaduh 1984). While our binary postulation is impelling, it is by a large extent prefatory. Hence, we encourage more analysis in this direction and in Oron morpho-syntax in general. This could be more productive if considered from the viewpoint of linguistic time. |

## Introduction

### Oron: The people and language

Oron is spoken in five Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The Oron people have for a long time been classified as a sub-group of the Ibibio (Simmons & Fennig, 2017; Udo, 1983; Talbot, 1968; Forde & Jones, 1950)[1]. This position is still maintained by some Oron and Ibibio people. However, few Oron people have, in the past three decades, claimed a distinct ancestry from Ibibio (cf. Uya, 1984; Akaduh,1984; for example). The Oron group comprises: Ilue, Idua, Okobo, Efiat-Mbo, Ebughu, Enwang and Ukpabang communities; with their corresponding dialects[2]. These communities lie on the West Bank of the Lower Cross River Estuary. They cover an estimated landmass of 2,196 square kilometers and share boundaries with some other Central Ibibio communities (such as Uruan and Nsit), Eket and the Bight of Bonny. Though speakers of the language call it *Ọrọ*, we will use Oron**, which is the more familiar form in the literature. It is classified as a Lower Cross language of the Cross River sub-family in the (New) Benue Congo sub-branch of the Niger-Congo Phylum (cf. Williamson & Blench, 2000; Simmons & Fennig, 2017). Earlier works on the language, though not devoted fully to tense, include Akaduh (1984); Kuperus (1978) and Simmons (1956, 1965).

Oron is mutually unintelligible to most Ibibio speakers. A unidirectional intelligibility exists; for while Oron speakers understand Ibibio perfectly, the reverse is not the case. Lewis (2009); Crozier & Blench (1992); Connell (1991) analyze the

Oron linguistic situation as multilingual, rather than multidilectal, with as many as six languages (Oro, Okobo, Ebughu, Ilue, Enwang-Uda and Efai). We think this distinction is padded. These speech forms are, ordinarily, inherently mutually intelligible at a functional level (cf. Lewis, 2009:9). The fact that data for this study, which were sourced primarily from Ilue (which is not the most socio-politically important community), were easily understood by other Oron language cluster speakers, who never lived, 'learnt' or had any sustained contact with Ilue, on play back, is one testimony to their dialectal status (and close mutual intelligibility; cf, Akaduh, 1984:xiii). In any case, the dialectal variation is hardly as pronounced as between Canadian and British English, for example.

With regard to the main focus of this paper, there can be no question of our intention or ability to give a full-blown analysis of the Oron tense system here. We can only attempt a prefatory but provoking sketch towards an eventual definitive treatment of the topic. Greater data collection, more research and analysis will define whether Oron has a definitive unary, binary, ternary or quarternary tense system. Time concept is complex, in the grammar of most languages. Various constituent resources utilized by languages to encode, express temporality may be referred to as linguistic time (comprising tense, grammatical/viewpoint, aspect and lexical aspect), Shirai (2007); Upor (2009). More of the introductory issues are contained in 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4.

This paper is structured into Introduction (which looks at the Oron people, language, Oron-Ibibio sound correspondence, the tense concept, misconceptions and generalizations. The second section examines the Oron tense system via a discursive syntax – phonology interface. The assumption of a present tense in the language presented in earlier analyses is investigated and rejected. Finally, the entire work is briefed in the third section under summary and concluding remarks.

***Oron-Ibibio Sound Variation***
In terms of phonological inventory, there does not seem to be any significant phonological difference between Oron and Ibibio, apart from some word/syllable initial alternations.  For instance, where Ibibio uses [a], Oron uses [e], as well as the [u] ~ [i], [l] ~ [d] [ɔ] ~ [i] alternations. These seem to be less pronounced for speakers who live near the Central Ibibio communities. In fact, much of our data do not present convincing evidence to suggest that these alternations are in the process of becoming phonemic. Generally, there does not seem to be significant semantic-syntactic differences between these two speech forms, either.

A superficial look at both Oron and Ibibio shows (structural) lexical differences. However, an analytic investigation reveals such a tremendous systematic sound correspondence that we are tempted to suggest that Oron is probably a dialect of Ibibio. This fact has already been enunciated by earlier scholars (Westermann & Bryan 2012 (1952): Jeffreys 1935; Forde & Jones 1950; Greenberg 1963; Udo 1983; Essien 1990, etc.). This in no way implies that the former is in any way inferior or a less complete speech form. Let us observe the phonetic alternation between the two speech forms:

| | | Oron | | Ibibio | Gloss |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | | **[e]** | | **[a]** | |
| | a) | èkè | | èkà | 'mother' |
| | b) | èbé | | èbá | 'breast' |
| 2. | | **[u]** | | **[i]** | |
| | a) | úkid | íkíd | | 'tortoise' |
| | b) | úkáñɔkpô | | íkáñɔkpɔ | 'catapult' |
| | c) | úbâ | | íbâ | 'crocodile' |
| | d) | ùdíɔk | | ídiɔk | 'bad' |
| 3. | | **[o]** | | **[e]** | |
| | a) | ódì | | édì | 'pig' |
| | b) | ódíébô | | édédéóbô | 'a market day' |
| | c) | ótím | | étím | 'millipede' |
| 4. | | **[l]** | | **[d]** | |
| | a) | lùɔk | dùɔk | | 'discard' |

b)    ùbɔ  (LH)              ùdɔ(LH) 'second son'
c)    ùbɔ̀ ̀ (LHH) ùbɔ̀ (LHH)    'ailment'

Observe the near perfect tonal correlation between Oron and Ibibio in the above nominal items that also exhibit these phonetic alternations.

### *Tense: Definitions, concept and generalities*
Tense, according to Lyons (1968), is derived from Old French, which is the Greek equivalent for 'time', *khronos*, translated into Latin as *tempus*. Tense expresses systematic time relations through formal grammatical contrasts. Lyons (1968) continues that tense essentially "relates the time of the action, event or state of affairs referred to in the sentence to the time of utterance" (p.305); (cf. Comrie 1985; Essien (1990, 1991; Shirai 2007; Haznedar 2007).

This paper, in consonance with the above background, looks at tense as a deictic category that relates the time of action, event, situation, process or state of affairs to the moment of an utterance, signing or writing. We claim that an objective treatment should be divorced from the notion that the 'natural' tripartite division of time into past, present and future is a necessary characteristic of any tense language. Similarly, we decline the notion that tense is universal or that where it occurs, it must necessarily be reflected through verbal inflections.

Though tense and time are intractably related, they express different categories; the former grammatical and the latter semantic, principally. In many languages, like Oron and English, there is no one-to-one correspondence between tense and time as in:

5.    'Okon leaves for Ebughu tomorrow' (which is future time, yet present tense).
6.    'Oil flows in water' (which is timeless, but present tense).

In other words, grammar and semantics are not necessarily isomorphic. To the extent that 'time' can be indicated by other devices (apart from tense morphemes), suggests that there can be a valid distinction between 'grammatical tense' and 'notional time'. This is evident in the use of lexemes such as: 'noon' *etaiekpei*, Sunday, *edere*, 'tomorrow/yesterday' *mkpǫñ,* in English and Oron respectively.

Similarly, though non-deictic, aspect is so closely related to tense that it is sometimes difficult to draw a neat line between them. This is especially so when recourse is made to the so-called secondary or relative tense. As a grammatical category, however, aspect deals with the internal structure of an action or situation, with regard to time distribution (Comrie, 1976; Barvodi-Harlig 2000). That is, aspect is situation-internal, while tense is situation-external. Compared to tense, aspect is a more widespread category in the world's languages. It may be marked morphologically on the verb in Ibibio or Oron, as in:

7.    Àmì m*me*ma ítíghá bǫ̂l
       'I love playing football'.

*Me*is the habitual aspectual marker in Oron in this context; but can be and is often easily misanalyzed, understandably, as a present 'tense' marker, based on the dominant literature[3]. English, conversely, uses periphrastic constructions as aspectual markers.

### *Misconceptions*
There are some misconceptions about the nature, realization, division and analysis of tense. This is possibly a hangover analysis from classical grammar (see Jesperson, 1924, for example). We bring some of these to the fore, attempt to remedy them. The most common misconceptions include the claims that:

i.      'Tense is a universal property of language'. Recent studies on grammatical tense have clearly discredited this. Many of the world's languages are, in fact, tenseless. Examples include Yala (an Upper Cross language in Nigeria), Burmese, Dyirbal (- in Northwest Queensland), Classical Hebrew, Malay and most Chinese languages[4].
ii.     'Tense is necessarily a 3-way contrast of: past, present and future'. On the contrary, the 3-way distinction is not essential to the notion of tense. In fact, even the 'classic' Greek and Latin instances of past, present and future are not entirely a matter of tense but a semantic notion of time. Also, languages such as Yoruba and English have two

tenses: future (and non-future) and past (and non-past) respectively (Bamgbose, 1983). A two-way tense dichotomy has been suggested for Ibibio too (cf.Oliviera, 2004).

iii. 'Tense markings must be born on the verb'. All that can be said is that (morphological) inflection of verbs is only one way of indicating tense. Languages may use devices such as affixation, reduplication, or particles and non-segmentals (auto-segments). Paraguan Gaurandii, Ejagham and Legbo (last two are Upper Cross languages in Nigeria) use principally affixation and tones respectively to represent tense.

iv. 'The use of 'will, must, shall', etc, express future tense in English'. However, we know that:

    a. 'Futurity' is not purely a temporal but also a modal concept. It essentially contains some element of prediction/uncertainty as in:
    'That must be Prof. Okon Essien[5]'.

    b. 'Will, must, shall', etc., combine with past or present tense verbs in English, instead of being exclusive (as it should be if they were absolute tense markers), as in: will + past – 'would'; will + present – 'will'; just as 'see + past –'saw' and 'see' + present (3ps) – 'sees' and 'saw' also holds between 'will see', and 'would see'.

    c. Also, the so-called future tense, according to Lyons (1977), is best used to express various kinds of non-activity, which commits the speaker to neither the truth nor falsity of a proposition. English does not grammaticalize future tense!

### *Generalizations*

Having said what tense is, and attempt to iron out some grey areas, we make some generalizations that will guide our further discussion. These generalizations derive from our knowledge of the Oron tense situation and general literature on the subject.

    a. Tense (in those languages that are tensed) is essentially part of the deictic component.

    b. Discussion of time is possible even in grammatically tenseless languages.

    c. The temporal concept of tense is most productive when time reference is grammaticalised, rather than with the use of lexical items like, *mkpǫñ* 'yesterday/tomorrow', *ulahami* 'now'. The Nigerian Pidgin, for example, uses pre-verb particles as tense markers, while the main verb forms are invariable (cf. Elugbe & Omamor 1991; Faraclass, 1996).

    d. Tense markings are commonly, but not invariably, borne by the verbs (via morpho-syntactic indicators).

    e. Time is also a relational, dynamic, concept. If it were not, we should be 'allowed' to say *The farmer killed-*s, to correspond to: 'The farmer kill-*s*'.

    f. Many of the languages that were earlier analyzed in the three-way tense division have, under close scrutiny, yielded a two-way contrast[6].

    g. The present tense is so elastic with regard to time that it can apply to the past and future, in many languages.

    h. Partly because of this, stative verbs are not adequately equipped to encode present tense in many languages due to their – Telecity feature and inelastic temporal span.

    i. The temporal status of gnomic or generic expression is largely non-deictic. It is therefore, usually expressed with the habitual aspect.

### **The Oron tense system and the syntax – phonology interface**

Phonology and syntax (grammar) are sometimes intractably interwoven. Apart from evidence from morpho-phonology, the tense system of Oron displays a glaring interface of this relationship, where syntax intervenes to determine the phonetic output of the Oron tense (/aspect) morphemes. Essien (2010) succinctly summarizes this phenomenon about African languages:

> the interplay between phonology and syntax is the intervention of syntax in the conditioning of tense/aspect phonetic forms in African languages. If the presence or absence of certain categories such as wh-question, negation, some form of emphasis or focus, some aspectual oppositions (depending on the language) appear to influence the selection of the ultimate phonetic tense forms of a verb of many African languages, then we maintain that there appears to be little doubt of the interaction of syntax and phonology in this aspect in such languages (p.101).

As will be shown soon, this syntax-phonology interface in the Oron tense system is exemplified thus: The phonetic form of the past tense allomorph: *ke* or *o* is determined by the presence (+) or absence (-) of such syntactic categories as: negation, Wh-question, mood, aspect and emphasis (or focus construction). Similarly, the choice of the future tense allomorph: *ma* or

*di* is regulated by the presence or absence of the following syntactic categories: negation, Wh-question, mood, aspect and emphasis (or focus construction).

We postulate a two-tense division: *past and future* for Oron. However, Oron also has tense distinctions for immediate and remote past and future, as is the case in a sister language, Ibibio (Essien, 1990, 1991; Emah 2008). The immediate/remote tense distinctions are conditioned by the corresponding allomorphs according to certain syntactic constructions and or discursive factors. But this is not focal to our discussion.

The Oron tense system has been given a five-way categorization: by Akaduh (1984): "present, past, perfect, future, continuous" (p:28), with further sub-categorization into: negative, immediate future, definite, indefinite, etc. Prior to that, Akaduh (1984) divides the same Oron tense system into: "imperative tense, negative tense, reduplicate tense, perfect tense, infinite tense" (pp. 16-19), etc.[7] Our position in this paper is different from Simmons (1956); Kuperus (1978); and Akaduh (1984). Though there would be palpable gaps in our hypothesized binary tense submission and its analysis, nevertheless, our position would serve as a beacon for further investigation. Perhaps, digging and harvesting the full resources of 'linguistic time' in Oron would yield more insightful conclusions; from the angle of lexical aspect, especially (cf. Upor 2009; Shirai 2007).

### *Past tense*
The past tense morpheme in Oron has two allomorphs: (1), *ke*-which occurs as a prefix preceded by a concord marker and followed by the verb root. This past tense allomorph, *ke*-is actually the base form [kV], which harmonizes to reflect different persons and verb roots. The second allomorph of the past tense morpheme is a *-o* suffix. The first *(past )* tense allomorph, *ke,* is syntactically conditioned and regulated by simple, neutral, declarative, modally unmarked sentences. The second allomorph of the past tense morpheme, the *–o* allomorph, is syntactically encoded by complex, modally marked, negative, emphatic sentences, and those with question items including Y/N questions. These two allomorphs are exemplified in 8 and 9 below:

8a.     Okon e*ke*lie ebire
        Okon C + Pst + eat yam
        'Okon ate yam'
b.      Okon e*ka*bak momo
        Okon C + Pst + Be + here
        'Okon was here'
9a.     Okon ekelie ebire *–o*
        Okon C + Pst + eat + yam Neg
        'Okon did not eat yam'
b.      Okon ekebak mono *–o*
        Okon C + Pst + Be+ here Neg
        'Okon was not here'

What differentiates *ekelie* (in 8a) from *ekelie-o* (in 9a), is that the *-o* suffix when attached to a verb marks negation and conditions that utterance to take on a rising intonation. It can also be affixed to the end of an utterance, as in the case above (9 a & b).

The past tense morpheme seems to operate differently in Oron, when compared to Ibibio, at a first glance. But a second look reveals a striking similarity. The slight difference is that the second past tense allomorph, *-o*, similar to Ibibio *ke-*, applies also to negative constructions like 9(a &b) above. This *o-* suffix, as a past tense marker in negative construction, applies in all persons as in:

10.     Ankanka-*o*
        Ips + C + Pst + go + Neg
        'I did not go'

Since the Oron past tense analysis seems generally straight forward, we will leave the matter at that. We, rather, turn our attention to the contentious so-called present tense in Oron and the consequent disparate analysis that seems to inundate most Lower Cross River languages.

### *The so-called present tense in Oron*

We have acknowledged the affinity of the Oron tense system to that of Ibibio above. In particular, the 'present' tense, unlike the past and future, is a bit tricky to analyze; if indeed it actually exists in these languages. Oron is said to have, heuristically, a 'present' tense which is constructed by two tense morphemes, one which has no (overt) phonological shape. These supposed two allomorphs are: (a) zero morpheme, and (b) the *me-* prefix. Such analysis re-echoes Essien's (1990, 1991) position of Ibibio tense, and the position of most scholars working on Lower Cross languages (cf. Udosen, 2004; Okon, 2006: Emah 2008).

Influenced by that analysis, the zero morpheme as a so-called present tense marker is supposedly used to construct simple, neutral declarative/affirmatives as well as Y/N interrogatives in Oron, as in:

11a.    Affiong elie semovita
        Affiong + C + Pre (?) + eat semovita
        'Affiong eats semovita'
b.      Uwe enwana ifuo
        Uwe + C + Pre (?) (+ Be ) + fighting  fight
        'Uwe is fighting (fight)'
c.      Onyi okwo ikwọ
        3ps + C + Pre (?)+ sing song
        He/she sings (song) [or she/he is singing]'

For the negative imperative, the *ku-* suffix is used. Observe that the *-o* suffixation to the root verb to form the (singular) negative imperative is optional. To construct the plural negative imperative, however, this *-o* suffix becomes obligatory, as in the following examples:

12a.    I*ki*ka-*o*
        'you (pl) do not go'
b.      *Ku*ka (or *ku*ka-*o)*
        'You (sg) do not go'
13a.    I*ki*nwana-o
        'You (pl) do not fight'
b.      *Ku*nwana (or kunwana-*o)*
        'You (sg) do not fight'

The present tense epitomizes the tense-aspect intricacy and to a lesser extent mood/modality[8]. It is not only unrestrictive time-wise, typically, but it also sometimes incorporates the habitual (aspectual) reference, interpretation. The concept of present time, while central to present time, essentially, extends into the past and future, in fact, almost *ad infinitum*.  For example, if someone states (14):

14.     Enyiñ omi odo Sediong (~ Omi ñkire Sediong)
        'My name is Sediong (~ I am called Sediong)';

it (14) has a semantic relevance for past, present and future time. Other instances of the present time expression being all-inclusive, time-wise, include:

15.     Akon áyèí (~ájèí)
        'Akon is beautiful'
16.     Mfínná éfóò
        'Trouble is not good'
17.     Lùhù síñí ìté ònú ìtáñàbà
        'Ten minus three is seven'

In fact, sentence 17 expresses a scientific truth (also called gnomic or omnitemporal expression), which holds for the three time (not tense) divisions[9]. However, sentence 18 below, though essentially of present time relevance, underscores the perfect (completive) aspect and incorporates the past.

18.     Òmì m*mé*fak íbàt

1<sup>st</sup>sg+ C + Compl + know + mathematics
'I know mathematics'

The aspectual division emphasized here (in 18) is Compl (completive/perfect), hence *past* time/tense. By all means, the fact of knowing mathematics or the 'situation time' is prior to the 'speech time', which coincides to the 'reference time'. In other words, sentence 18 and similar ones reflects a perfective aspectual construction, which 'situation time' precedes the 'reference time', though it effects continuous into the present time. The me- allomorph (essentially *m*V- where the following vowel is phonologically conditioned by the root verb) is not exclusive to tense in Oron or the present time for matter. It serves a bicameral or indeed multifarious function. It can also be employed in a subordinate, dependent clause – when the situation talked about is putative as in19a (cf. also the Ibibio data in 19b & c):

19a.     Anomo *mi*nie ufañ mugondi (Oron)
         'If I had the opportunity, I would have come'
b.       Akpedo m*mà*nié ufañ, mkpakede (Ibibio)
         'If I had the opportunity, I would have come'
c.       Akpedo m*mé*nié ufañ, mkpaadi (Ibibio)
         'If I have the opportunity, I would come'

Conceding but not accepting that *mé* or *mi-* (*mV*)is a tense indicator in example 19, it cannot be said to be a present tense marker. This is evident in 19 (above), where (a & b) express past time and (c) future, respectively, but employs the same *mV*. The time references apart, the utterances in 19 are *modally* coloured. Notice a conflation of three grammatical categories: aspect, tense and modality (in 18-19) with the use of *mé*. Perhaps, a more convincing point to make on the recent past cum perfective aspect status of *mé* is via the introduction of the lexical item *mma* ('finish') to a sentence with *mé*, as in 19d below:

19d:   Omi   m*me*ta            iyak   mma
       I      C + R.Pst/Perf. chew   fish   finish
       'I have (already) finished eating fish';
where *mma* ('finish') emphasizes completion (perfective aspect) and temporal past nature of the situation.

In addition, data seem to point that the –*kV* particle as in 12 and 13 above, is not necessarily a 'present tense' marker in negative construction. It occurs equally to mark *emphatic future* (or + focus), as in:
20.    Sọp di *ki*tem ebire
       Quick    come Emp cook food
       'Come quickly and cook yam' (free translation (FT): 'come quickly so that you will        go and cook yam '(instead of doing something else).

21.    Di ka a*ke*nam       mbied
       Come    go and do weed
       'Come so that you can weed (grass)' (FT: come so that you will go and weed – rather than doing something else).

Given these examples, and the ones in 12-13, 20-21, in particular, we cannot, convincingly, assign *ke* as a present tense (negative) marker in Oron. We cannot equally assign *me* as a present tense marker in the language either, especially, in stative verbs. Hence, our hypothesis is that Oron does not grammaticalize the present tense; because it does not seem to be a principled, categorical present tense marker, which corresponds to the time/tense parallel as have been illustrated in the past and future tenses in section 2.1 and 2.3, respectively.

### *Future Tense*
The future tense is, however, clearly grammaticalized in Oron, as is the case in Ibibio and Efik (but unlike English). There are two allomorphs: *ma-* and *di-* of the future tense morpheme in Oron, which are distinctly marked. Each of the phonetic output of the tense allomorphs is constructed to correspond to a particular set of syntactic construction. This is the clear case of the intervention of syntax in phonology.

The *ma*-(prefix) allomorph occurs in simple neutral affirmative, Y/No question sentence constructions, which usually have – focus. The vowel of the *ma*-allormorph varies, depending on the verb and person (Concord), similar to the *ke*- of the past

tense morpheme. Observe how the future tense marker, *ma-,* occurs in simple, neutral, affirmative sentences including Y/N questions, as in the following examples:

22a.    Uwe *ma*lie ñkpọ
        Uwe + Fut + C + eat something (food)
        'Uwe will eat something (food)'
b.      Emu *me*lo
        They + Fut + C + marry
        'They will marry'
c.      Ami *ma*nkid fi
        I + Fut + C + see you
        'I will see you' (~ 'meet you')
d.      Ofu *ma*lie ebre?
        (Y/N) Q you + Fut + C + eat food
        'Will you eat food?'
e.      Omi *ma*nka?
        I + Fut + C + go
        'Will I go?'/ 'I will go?'

This simple (Y/N) question construction (in 22e) goes with a falling intonation. In other words, Oron pronominal prefixes, except the 1st person singular, which takes a high tone, are marked by a falling tone.

The *di-* allomorph occurs in sentence constructions such as: wh-question, emphasis, negative, relative construction, subordinate clause, which is + focus in Oron, similar to the Ibibio situation (cf. Noah, 2004). Again, this intervention shows how discourse, syntax interweave with phonology to determine the ultimate phonetic form of the tense allomorph in Oron. Let us observe these as in the following instances:

23a.    Konun onyi e*di*wọk?
        Wh-Q (where) 3ps + C + Fut + swim
        'Where will he/she/it swim?'
b.      Bassey e*di*bak momu-o
        Bassey C + Fut + is here Neg
        'Bassey will not be there'
c.      Omi an*di*ka-o
        I + C + Fut + go Neg
        'I will not go'
d.      Omi  sun*di*kit?
        WH-Q + C + Fut see
        'Who will I see?'

It is plausible that the future constructions of the sentence types in (23) (a-d) can be best handled generatively. For instance, it can be reasonably suggested that the future tense is clearly marked at the underlying level and only becomes covert after some process of transformation, most likely, elision.

## Summary and Concluding Remarks

We make the following generalizations, submissions, based on the evidence from the study and our knowledge of the literature on the subject:
1.      Oron and Ibibio have great phono-syntactic similarities, even though some of these common features are not explicit in our current data. Much of these shared features cannot be merely accidental. It is extremely likely that they are of the same stock, Proto-Ibibio.
2.      Tense is a grammatical category that relates the time of an action, event or state of affairs to the moment of signing, speech or writing.

3.    Tense as a grammatical category does not exist in all languages, contrary to what has been popularly claimed. Where tense exists, it does not have to manifest a triadic division or realized through an inflexion on the verb.

4.    Speakers of tenseless languages can still make use of temporal notions; because time is a universal aspect of the human experience.

5.    A water-tight distinction between tense and aspect and to a certain extent between tense and modality is tenuous, in Oron at least. This intricate pattern of tense-aspect-mood – modality relationship urgently beckons on language analysts to devise a more semantic-based analysis than is presently differentiated, overtly, by systematic grammatical markers.

6.    Oron is clearly a tense language and its tense system bears great affinity to that of Ibibio and Efik.

7.    The Oron tense phenomenon evinces a fascinating syntax – phonology interface. The phonetic output of tense allomorph is syntactically or discursively determined by a particular sentence structure, in a kind of complimentary distribution, in the two attested, grammaticalized tense divisions: past and future.

8.    The *me* particle, generally analyzed as a present tense marker, is pragmatically more of a *completive aspectual and or past tense* indicator than otherwise.

9.    Similarly, the *kV* particle, though generally posited as a present tense marker in Oron negative construction, marks *emphatic future* (as well), if not primarily so (or + focus).

10.    Given all the above scenario, it is most persuasive to posit that Oron has a bi-partite tense distinction of: past/future, contrary to the tripartite and multifarious analyses dominant in the literature; which were anchored on *me and kV* as the so-called present tense morphemes.

11.    The opposition of present tense and non-present tense has not been established systematically in the Oron grammar, either by affixation or auto segment.

12.    Rigorous research effort, is required, however, to definitively anchor our putative, prefatory bipartite tense analysis, just as we recommend the entire phenomenon of 'linguistic time' in Oron and other Lower Cross languages for further investigation.

**End Notes**

[1] The Ibibio are the dominant ethnic group in Akwa Ibom State, in South-South Nigeria. They are the fourth largest ethnic group, after Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. The language is spoken by 4.5m (Essien 2001), which figure is an update of Connell's (1991) conjecture of 3.9m. Oron is spoken by an estimated number of 246,000 people, whose traditional occupation are fishing and farming. A sketch of the Oron-Ibibio sound correspondence is given in this paper's preamble (1.1) to emphasize the natural linguistic affinity of the two languages. If considered as separate languages (cf. Connell 1991 and others) the Oron cluster of languages have these approximate number of speakers (Oron: 75,000, 1989 est.; Okobo: 50,000, 1991 est. by Connell; Ilue: 5,000, 1988 est; Efai: 6,320, 2000 est., Ebughu: 5,000 1988 est., and Enwang: 15,000, 1998 est. by Connell).

[2] We have taken liberty to provide a rather generous background information on Oron, in 1.0 and 1.1. This is due mainly to the fact that it is the least known, studied, spoken of the three major Lower Cross languages (Anaang, Ibibio, Oron) in Akwa Ibom State. But Okobo people deny, vehemently, that they are Oron.

[3] The completive (perfect) aspect in Ibibio is marked by the *mé* morpheme, according to Essien (cf. 1990). Curiously, Essien (2006) asserts that in Ibibio: "the same set of environments that determine the occurrence of *màá* – and *yàá* also determine the occurrence of *ké* and *dí* also determine the occurrence of the zero allomorph of the past tense" (p.16).

[4]Such tenseless languages can still employ various deictic adverbs to indicate temporal divisions; otherwise the required information is derived from the context of expression.

[5] If this sentence is made with no string of epistemic modality, other conclusions are possible here, logically.

[6]The largest number of tense division ever reported is on Bamileke-Dschang. The revised version of this paper  that was originally read at the 1990 Linguistic Association of Nigeria (LAN) Conference in the University of Calabar, has benefited from Oliveira's (2014) work on Ibibio.

[7] Aside from the fact that we suspect Akaduh (1984) has not made much effort to distinguish tense from aspect and from other verb forms, like the infinitive, negative and reduplicative; what would have been tense markers are either not indicated

or are ambiguous. The enormity of complication contained in Akaduh (1984) cannot be sufficiently treated in this short paper; see pp.16-19, of that work, in particular.

[8] Mood versus modality distinction is unavailable in many languages. German and others exact clear differentiations between the two categories; such that a modal system of modal verbs is discernable. We use the two terms as virtual synonyms in this paper (cf. Ubels, 1983), with no attention paid to the grammatical implication. Please see Palmer (2001) for a great treatise. Languages that exhibit intractable tense-aspect-model categories may be termed TAM languages.

[9] It is entirely conceivable that some other languages may use other tenses, rather than the present, to express timeless or omnitemporal propositions (see Lyons, 1977: 680 ff, for an illuminating discourse on this).

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