

Tense and Aspect Markings in Usen

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Abstract

Tense and aspect are grammatical categories used in expressing the concept of time in languages. They are important grammatical categories cross-linguistically, given that time is a universal phenomenon. However, their manifestation has not received adequate attention in Usen, a dialect of Yoruba spoken in Ovia South West Local Government Area of Edo State. Hence, the present study seeks to present a descriptive account of tense and aspect markings in declarative sentences in Usen. The data for the study was elicited from ten native speakers of the dialect through structured interview method. The study adopts the descriptive framework for its data analysis. It was found in the study that tense in Usen is bipartite, namely; non-future and the future. The non-future tense is marked by a high tone syllable “ó” while the future tense is marked by “á”. It was also found that the aspectual system of the dialect is tripartite, which include; the perfective aspect which is marked with “tí”, the imperfective habitual aspect which is marked with “ka”, and the progressive aspects which is marked with “é”.

Keywords: *Tense, Aspect, Grammatical categories, Usen.*

Introduction

Tense is one of the grammatical categories exhibited by languages of the world, now referred to as functional elements in generative syntax, Radford (1997a&b), Chomsky (1995) and Pollock (1989). Comrie (1985) define tense as a grammaticalized expression of location in time. It is a deictic functional category which is marked when the verb depicts time reference. Studies have shown that many languages employ morphemic markers in specifying temporal information, but not all languages mark tense in this manner. Languages have various deictic adverbs or morphemes of time by which temporal specification is made and there are languages which do not mark tense. Hence, languages which have no overt correlation between verbal morphology and time are said to be tenseless (Lyons 1977:679, Comrie1976:2). Omamor (1982) asserts that there are three tenses basically, which are; the present, the past and the future, and that all people have the same concept of time, but this claim negates the fact that not all languages mark tense using this time specification. The present study is concerned with the tense and aspect in Usen. The goal is to examine the manifestation of tense and aspect markings in the dialect.

Usen Linguistic Area

Usen is spoken in Ovia South West Local Government Area of Edo State. It is located on the co-ordinates of longitude 5.23° east of the Greenwich Meridian and latitude 6.48° North of the equator. The community covers an area of about 1500sqkm. It is bounded to the West and North by Ondo state, on the East by Ovia North East Local Government Area and on the South by Iguobazuwa community (UNDA, 2002).

Around Usen town are some other smaller towns which are outside its authority. One of such towns is Okada that was founded by the Olu Awure of Usen and is now the headquarters of another Local Government Area in Edo State, Others include; Utese, Egbeta, Uhen and Iguobazuwa which are related to Usen commercially and whose speech forms are similar with that of Usen although with slight dialectal differences which do not in any way hinder mutual intelligibility. The main occupation of men at Usen is farming,

although the womenfolk assist the men in farm work, majority of the women do some petty trading and also weave local clothes and mats, whose production has now been abandoned.

Although Usen is historically, traditionally and geographically related to Edo, the two are not mutually intelligible. Ikhimwin (2015:170) drawing upon linguistic evidence argued that Usen is better referred to as a Yoruboid language and not a dialect of Edo or Yoruba. However, Ogbeifun and Taiwo (forthcoming) using the lexicostatistics method, and more dialects of Yoruba (within the South Eastern Yoruba) in its comparative studies assert that Usen is a dialect of Yoruba, classifying it under the SEY dialects of Yoruba. It is imperative to note that Usen is used to refer to the dialect, the people and the place.

Tense in Usen

Tense is grammaticalized in Usen and polarizes into non future and future tense. The non-future tense specifies time reference before a future time, while future tense specifies future time reference.

Non-Future Tense in Usen

The non-future tense in Usen is marked by the high tone syllable “ó” which comes after the noun and precedes the verb. The verb does not undergo any morphological change, thus it is neither inflected for tense nor does the tone affect it, as has been reported in the neighbouring Edo language, wherein tone is used to account for tense in the language Omoregbe (2012). In what follow, examples illustrating the manifestation of non-future tense in Usen are shown;

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|--------|------|---------|-----------|-------------|---|
| 1a. | Àyò | ó | jín | ìwé | mí | |
| | Àyò | HTS | steal | book | poss | “Ayo stole my book.” |
| b. | Mo | ó | hè | iréhì | | |
| | 1sg | HTS | cook | rice | | “I cooked rice.” |
| c. | Olú | ó | kórè | | lùkà | |
| | Olu | HTS | harvest | | plenty | “Olu harvested bountifully.” |
| 2a. | Ajá | yí | ó | kpa | ìdégbè | |
| | Dog | dem | HTS | kill | goat | “This dog killed the goat.” |
| b. | Ashàké | ó | dá | ìjókò | lànàá | |
| | Ashake | HTS | break | chair | yesterday | “Ashake broke the chair yesterday.” |
| c. | Iye | mí | ó | ra asọ | li ojà | Abúdù |
| | mother | poss | HTS | buy cloth | prep market | Abúdù |
| | | | | | | “My mother bought a cloth at Abudu market.” |
| 3a. | Adé | ó | yú | omi | | |
| | Adé | HTS | go | water | | “Ade went to the river.” |
| b. | Olú | ó | rí | ẹ | | |
| | Olú | HTS | see | 2sg | | “Olú saw you” |
| c. | Olè | yí | ó | jín | eghó | mí |
| | thief | dem | HTS | steal | money | poss |
| | | | | | | “This thief stole my money.” |

In example (1a) *Ayó ó jín iwé mí* “Ayo stole my book”, the book was already stolen before the point of speech, that is, it refers to the retrospective point when the book was stolen and not an event that is to occur in a future time, the occurrence of the HTS “ó” indicates a non-future event. Likewise, the events depicted in examples (2-3) are all in retrospective point. The non-future tense marker precedes the verb, even where there was a demonstrative as seen in (2a and 3c), intervening between the NP and the VP. It was observed that the HTS “ó” marks non future tense in Usen and is marked before the verb. The high tone syllable “ó” in the examples (1-3) above function as an agreement marker, and thus do not change the form of the last syllable of the NP preceding it.

The manifestation of the non-future tense markers as a high tone syllable “ó” in Usen differs in function with what obtains in Yoruba high tone syllable (HTS), the HTS in Usen is marked only by “ó”, it functions as a non-future tense marker and do not assimilate the final vowel of the subject NP. However, in Yoruba and some of its dialects, the HTS assimilates the final vowel of the subject noun phrase as claimed in Awobuluyi (1992:32), Bamgbose (1990:180) and Olumuyiwa (2009) (2013:133). The HTS in Usen which marks the non future tense in Usen, retain its form except when it occurs before a short pronoun, which takes the form of the tense markers before it in rapid speech. For example;

- 4a. Mí ó hè irèhì = Mó ó hè irèhì = “I cooked rice.”
 1sg HTS cook rice
- b. Mí ó dá igín rẹ̀n = Mó ó dá igín rẹ̀n = “I broke the stick.”
 1sg HTS break stick det

From (4a-b) above, the vowel of the short pronoun is assimilated by the non future tense marker and takes its shape in rapid speech. However, despite the phonological process observed, it still functions as non-future tense marker.

Contrary to the view of Edigin (2016) and Ogbeifun (2017) that tense in Usen is divided into the past, present and future tense, and that the past tense and present tense is marked by “ó” and “é” respectively, this study refute this claim based on further investigation on the tense system, as it was observed that tense in Usen is polarized into non-future and future tense, and the non-future tense is marked by an HTS “ó” which function as an agreement marker between the noun and the verb, and the supposed present tense marker is actually one of the aspectual markers in Usen. Let us consider the examples below;

- 5a. Ídàdà ó gwò uwòwò
 Ídàdà HTS break calabash
 “Ídàdà broke the calabash.”
- b. Ídàdà é gwò uwòwò
 Ídàdà prg break calabash
 “Ídàdà is breaking the calabash.”
- c. Ídàdà á gwò uwòwò
 Ídàdà fut break calabash
 “Ídàdà will break the calabash”
- 6a. Ọlá ó hẹ̀ngwà
 Ọlá HTS beautiful “Ọlá is beautiful”

- *b. Ọlá é hénɡwà
 Ọlá prg beautiful
 “Ọlá is beautifuling”
- c. Ọlá á hénɡwà
 Ọlá fut beautiful
 “Ọlá will be beautiful.”
- 7a. Àyò ó gùn
 Àyò HTS tall
 “Àyò is tall.”
- *b. Àyò é gùn
 Àyò prg tall
 “Àyò is talling.”
- c. Àyò á gùn
 Àyò fut tall
 “Àyò will be tall.”

From examples (5-7) above, two morphemes differentiate between an event prior to the future and an event expected to take place in the future. When “ó” is seen it depicts a non-future event, “á” depicts an event that will occur in the future, while “é” depicts an ongoing or a progressive event. Going by what we have in example (6a,c & 7a,c) wherein we have state verb such as; hénɡwà “beautiful” and gùn “tall”. We cannot call “ó” a past tense marker in the construction since we cannot say beautiful or tall is a past event. Moreso, (6b & 7b) is ungrammatical, as “é” do not depict a present event or a progressive event, and we do not have any word like “talling” or “beautifuling”. Hence, contrary to Edigin and Ogbeifun’s claims we assert that Usen tense is polarized between future and non-future tense and the claim for a present tense marker is seen as a progressive aspectual marker.

The non-future tense in Usen is marked with a high tone syllable (HTS), which shows agreement between the noun and the verb. Although, there have been several arguments as to ascertaining the status of the HTS in Yoruba language and some of its dialects, as some scholars term it; an agreement marker, concord marker, tense marker etc, Adesuya (1991) Awobuluyi (2001a), Ajòngòlò (2005), Olumuyiwa (2009) among others. However, the non-future tense is marked by ó a high tone syllable in Usen.

Future Tense in Usen

The future tense in Usen denotes events that are yet to take place as at the point of speech but will take place at an anticipated point. In Usen the future tense is marked with “á” and it precedes the verb. It is important to note that the verbs do not inflect for future tense, that is, there is no change on the verb form and neither do we mark future tense with the use of grammatical tones. Let us consider the examples below;

- 8a. Ùwà á gélé iye mí
 Ùwà fut follow mother poss “Ùwà will follow my mother.”
- b. Awá á kọ orin
 we fut sing song “We will sing.”

- c. Dúpẹ́ á gbójú olóshà rẹ̀n
 Dupe fut recognize thief det “Dupe will recognize the thief.”
- 9a. Títí á fọ asọ yì
 Títí fut wash cloth dem “Títí will wash this cloth.”
- b. Ọpẹ́ á gwò uwòwò lílá yì
 Ọpẹ́ fut break calabash big dem “Ọpẹ́ will break this big calabash.”
- c. Dúpẹ́ á gháré lóla
 Dúpẹ́ fut run tomorrow “Dúpẹ́ will run tomorrow.”

Example (8b) Awá á kọ orin “We will sing a song” shows that the song performance will occur later in the future, the point of speech precedes the time of the event denoted by the verb, thus reference is made to an event that is yet to take place. Hence, the event of singing a song is expected to occur later after the moment of speech. Also example (9c) Dúpẹ́ á gháré lóla “Dupe will run tomorrow” shows “á” and the time adverbial “lóla”, “á” indicate that the event is yet to take place, but will take place at a future time that is not specified, but when the future time adverbial is used with a future tense marker, it shows the exact timing the event is expected to take place in future.

Aspect

Aspect is defined as the different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation Comrie(1976). It makes non-specific, indefinite reference to time, reflects the temporal relationship between either point of initiation of speech or the internal temporal structure of a specific background situation described by one element and the totality of the situation referred to, Omamor (1982:104-105). Aspect also denotes the duration of event described by the verb in a given clause to show whether such an event is ongoing (progressive) or has been completed (Ilori 2010:150). There are three types of aspects which are functionally lexicalized in Usen. They are; “tì” (perfective), “ká” (past habitual), and “è” (progressive).

Perfective Aspect

Perfective aspect indicates the view of a situation as a simple whole, without distinguishing the various separate phases that make it up, it is used to refer to an event conceived as bounded and unitary, without reference to any flow of time Comrie (1976). Let us consider the examples below;

- 10a. Tópẹ́ ó tí lọ
 Tope HTS perf go “Tope has gone.”
- b. Bọ́lá ó tí gho asọ rẹ̀n
 Bola HTS perf see cloth det “Bola has seen the cloth.”
- c. Àyọ́ ó tí kpa idégbè
 Ayo HTS perf kill goat “Ayo has killed a goat.”
- 11a. Aghán ó tí jẹ usu
 2pl HTS perf eat yam “They have eaten the yam.”

- b. Tòlá ó tí kàkùn lí ùgbà mèta.
 Tòlá HTS perf knock prep time three “Tòlá has knocked thrice.”
- c. Àwá ó ti gbé aga megwa
 1pl HTS perf carry chair ten “We have carried ten chairs”

The particle “tí” is used to mark perfective aspect in Usen, illustrating event which has been completed as at the time of reference. The NP thus precedes the non future tense marker “ó”, followed by the perfective marker and the verb. In example (10a) above, Tópé ó tí lọ “Tope has gone”, shows that the event of going has been completed and do not make any reference to the flow of time it lasted, but rather shows that the event has been completed.

Imperfective Aspect

Imperfective aspect is used for situations conceived as existing continually or repetitively as time moves and focuses on the internal structure of the situation. It could be characterized as expressing a progressive, continuous or durative situation, as well as habitual situation occurring over an extended period of time Ilori (2010:150). Usen exhibits both habitual and progressive imperfect aspect. Consider the examples below;

- 12a. Òsàhòn é ka bá iye rẹn jà.
 Òsàhòn prog dur prep mother dem fight “Òsàhòn used to fight with his mother.”
- b. Èmi é ka múlé ko ò bá díro
 1sg prg dur believe whenever he prep lie “I used to believe him anytime he lies.”
- c. Évbàde é ka jùdìn lálalé
 Évbàde prg dur wrestle nightly “Évbàde used to wrestle nightly.”
- 13a. Òní é ka ta asọ lí èkó
 Òní prg dur sell cloth prep Lagos
 “Òní used to sell cloth in Lagos.”
- b. Isọlá é ka họ ọkò
 Isọlá prg dur drive car “Isọlá used to drive.”
- c. Mo é ka gwẹ li omi
 1sg prg dur bath prep water “I used to bath at the river”
- 14a. Èmílọlá é họn ọkà
 Èmílọlá prg roast corn “Èmílọlá is roasting corn.”
- b. Èhì é hẹ usu
 Èhì prg cook yam. “Èhì is cooking yam.”
- c. Ọdẹ e lo uli
 hunter prg go home “The farmer went home”
- 15a. Ìyámu é fọ asọ
 Ìyámu prg wash cloth. “Ìyámu is washing cloth.”
- b. Amẹ é kọrin
 Amẹ prg sing “Amẹ is singing”

| | | | | | | |
|----|-----|-----|-------|----|------|-----------------------|
| c. | Olú | é | gharé | lọ | ùlí | |
| | Olú | prg | run | go | home | “Olú is running home” |

In Usen habitual aspect is marked by “ka”, indicating events that took place over a period of time (durative), with no reference to an end point, but as at the time of reference it is not ongoing. Example (12a) *Osáhòn é ka bá ìyè rẹ̀n jà* “Osahon used to fight the mother”. The above sentence shows that there was a period when the event was continuous but no reference to the fact that the event was completed. Osahon used to fight with his mother, but does not any more. While progressive aspect is marked with “é” indicating an ongoing, progressive and incomplete event.

Conclusion

From our study analytical description of tense and aspect marking was done. It was observed that Usen manifests non-future and future tense, the non-future and future tense are morphologically marked with the particles “ó” and “á” respectively, while the non-future tense is marked by an HTS “ó”, the future tense is marked by “á”. Furthermore, Usen has three lexicalized aspectual markers; “tí” perfective, “ka” habitual and “é” progressive marker.

List of Abbreviations

| | | | |
|------|-----------------------|------|------------------------|
| 1sg | first person singular | 2sg | second person singular |
| 1pl | first person plural | 2pl | second person plural |
| asp | aspectual marker | dem | demonstrative |
| det | determiner | dur | durative aspect |
| fut | future tense | hab | habitual aspect |
| HTS | high tone syllable | impf | imperfective aspect |
| NP | noun phrase | perf | perfective aspect |
| poss | possessive pronoun | prep | preposition |
| prg | progressive aspect | SEY | South Eastern Yoruba |
| tns | tense | | |

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