

Preverbs: Their syntax and semantics in West Africa

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Abstract. Preverbs are positionally delimited grammatical forms that remain understudied. We examine their semantic classes in West Benue Congo (WBC) and its minor language Emai, which until recently was undocumented. Preverb classes in Emai display a subset of semantic categories identified in Dixon (1991, 2006, 2010) and Nuyts (2001, 2005, 2006, 2016). There are five semantic classes for 30 odd preverb forms. They are apportioned primarily according to their qualitative or quantitative character. Preverbs do not include traditional auxiliary categories of aspect, tense, and modality, which exhibit distinct diachronic and synchronic character. Common to preverbs is their orientation toward either grammatical subject or utterance speaker. Members with a quantitative character in particular ascribe a property to clausal subject. Preliminary evidence suggests that preverbs of a similar semantic nature exist in other West African languages.

Keywords. preverb; dynamic and boulomaic modality; phasal aspectuals; Emai

1. Introduction. Preverbs are positionally delimited grammatical forms that remain understudied. They reflect two semantic types. In Indo-European, they have a sustained history (Beekes 1995, Booij 2003), referring to direction of motion or location, as they do in the Southern Caucasus (Harris 2003) and Northern Australia (Schultz-Berndt 2003). In contrast, Tongan (Polynesia) preverbs reflect a distinct meaning set, viz. aspectual, temporal, and modal (Broschart 2000).

Against this background, we examine semantic classes that underlie preverbs in West Benue Congo (WBC) and Emai, a minority language that until recently was undocumented. Emai is SVO and verb serializing with lexical and grammatical tone. As a grammatical category in Africa, preverb was advanced by Bamgbose (1966, 1967) for Yoruba, another WBC language, although with little more than passing attention to meaning.

2. Background. Preverbs in Emai reflect semantic classes that can be discerned in Dixon (1991, 2006, 2010) and Nuyts (2001, 2005, 2006, 2016). Dixon discusses secondary semantic concepts. They are linguistically bi-categorical since they are realized by grammatical forms in some languages and lexical forms in others, e.g. ‘begin’ as suffix *-yarra-* in Dyirbal but verb in English. Secondary concepts contrast with primary concepts, which are consistently realized as verbs.

In the papers by Nuyts, semantic classes underlying clausal modifiers are ordered in a linear fashion according to their scope relations in a small sample of Germanic languages. Among those most deeply embedded in pre-verb space are modifiers he characterizes as either qualitative or quantitative.

3. Emai preverbs. Emai shows roughly 30 preverb items that we apportion according to their order and semantic character as qualitative or quantitative. Preverbs spread across five primary semantic classes, sometimes requiring an obligatory tone on the subject that is low [ˊ] or high [ˋ]. Within each class except aspectual, forms are mutually exclusive.

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ASPECTUAL > BOULOMAIC > TEMPORAL > DYNAMIC > QUANTUM

Qualitative preverbs articulate concepts that modify a verb event and express a judgment by the speaker. They reflect three types: aspectual, boulomaic modality, and temporal rate/distance.

ASPECTUAL	BOULOMAIC MODALITY	TEMPORAL RATE/DISTANCE
` yà ‘nearly started’	dìùù ‘for naught’	tùà ‘hastily’ ¹
’ yà ‘used to’	wòò ‘preferably’	gùà ‘jerkily’
` m̀ ‘nearly completed’	kùkù ‘appropriately’	kpàò ‘earlier on’
’ m̀ ‘at one time’		b̀b̀ ‘promptly’
s̀ ‘continue’		gùè ‘suddenly’
chè ‘again’		
gb̀ ‘also, too’		

Example constructions with qualitative preverbs are shown in (1) - (3). There are five preverbs that express seven aspectual values. Two, ingressive yà and egressive m̀, have meanings in the proximal (PRX) past (PST) that align, respectively, with either the onset or coda of an event. When these forms occur in the distal (DST) past, their meanings also contrast as habitual past (HP) versus non-habitual or absolute past (NHP), respectively. The remaining aspectual categories, durative s̀, repetitive chè, and additive gb̀ do not exhibit this phasal nature.

- (1) a. òjè yà é ólí émàè.
 Oje:PRX PST:IG eat ART food
 ‘Oje almost started eating the food.’
- b. ójé yà khúéé ìbè ní áamáí.
 Oje:DST PST:HP play drum APP 1SG
 ‘Oje used to play a drum for us.’
- c. ólì ùbèlè m̀ò v̀ò̀n.
 ART gourd:PRX PST:EG be.full
 ‘The gourd is almost full.’
- d. ólí úbélé ↓m̀ v̀ò̀n.
 ART gourd:DST PST:NHP be.full
 ‘The gourd at one time was full.’
- e. òjè s̀é é vbí ólí émàè.
 Oje:PRX PST:DUR eat LOC ART food
 ‘Oje has still eaten / has continued to eat from the food.’
- f. ójé ↓ché é émà.
 Oje:DST PST:REP eat yam
 ‘Oje again ate yam.’
- g. ójé ↓gb̀ é ólí émàè.
 Oje:DST PST:ADD eat ART food
 ‘Oje also ate the food / ate the food too.’

¹ Orthographic forms for Emai and other West African languages in this paper are essentially consistent with IPA conventions except for the use of <ɔ> for [ɔ], <ɛ> for [ɛ], and <vb> for [v]. Regarding tone, <’ > represents high, <` > designates low, and <’↓ > identifies high downstep.

Preverbs that express boulomaic modality are shown in (2). They indicate speaker like/dislike of a state of affairs (Nuyts 2016), seemingly with respect to some cultural value. One member of this class (*dùù* ‘for naught, no reason’) appears to reflect Dixon’s “negator” class among secondary concepts. The two other members identify that a verb event for some socio-cultural reason is either preferable (*wòdò*) or suitable/appropriate (*kùkù*).

- (2) a. òjè dúù gbé ólí ófè.
 Oje:PRX PST.FOR.NAUGHT kill ART rat
 ‘It is for naught that Oje has killed the rat.’
- b. òjè ò ó wóó è ólí émàè.
 Oje SM PRS:PROG PREFERABLY eat ART food
 ‘It is preferable for Oje to be eating the food.’
- c. òjè kùkù é ólí émàè lé.
 Oje:PRX PST:APPROPRIATELY eat ART food already
 ‘It is appropriate that Oje has already eaten the food.’

Preverbs of a third qualitative character identify temporal conditions of two subtypes. All reflect judgments of the speaker about the verb event. Two preverbs refer to temporal rate or temporal manner, e.g. *tùà* ‘hastily’ and *gùà* ‘jerkily.’ The other three designate temporal distance with some relation to cultural expectations of the verb event, e.g. *kpàdò* ‘earlier on,’ *bòbò* ‘promptly,’ and *gùè* ‘sooner than expected.’

- (3) a. ójé túá' é ólí émàè.
 Oje:DST PST.HASTILY eat ART food
 ‘Oje ate the food hastily.’
- b. ójé ↓gúá shòò ré.
 Oje:DST PST:JERKILY arise VEN
 ‘Oje arose in a jerky fashion.’
- c. ójé ↓kpàdò é vbí ólí émàè.
 Oje:DST PST:EARLIER eat LOC ART food
 ‘Oje ate from the food earlier on.’
- d. ójé ↓bòbò é ólí émàè.
 Oje:DST PST:PROMPTLY eat ART food
 ‘Oje ate the food promptly.’
- e. òjè ò ó gúé è ólí émàè.
 Oje SM PRS:PROG UNEXPECTEDLY eat ART food
 ‘Oje was eating the food sooner than expected.’

Quantitative preverbs express concepts that align with dynamic modality or with a quantum condition. Terms for dynamic modality ascribe to grammatical subject a character that effectuates a state of affairs (Nuyts 2016). Dynamic modality distinguishes between forms that relate to volition and capacity. Quantum conditions pertain to grammatical subject directly or indirectly.

VOLITION
dábò ‘deliberately’
dóbò ‘mistakenly’
dúdà ‘defiantly’

CAPACITY
dégbè ‘carefully’
gbúdu ‘courageously’
tòtóbò ‘intensely’
kàkégbè ‘perseveringly’
mìtì ‘able’

QUANTUM
gbà ‘together’
dòbò ‘self’ pro
zèmì ‘very much’
zèzè ‘not quite’

Constructions with quantitative preverbs appear in examples (4) - (6). Preverbs that pertain to dynamic modality are illustrated in (4) and (5). They tend to be oriented toward the non-physical, mental character of the grammatical subject, either through a judgment by the speaker about subject volitionality (*dábò* ‘deliberately,’ *dóbò* ‘mistakenly,’ *dúdà* ‘defiantly’) or capacity (*tòtóbò* ‘with intensity,’ *dègbé* ‘with caution,’ *gbúdù* ‘with courage,’ *kàkégbè* ‘with perseverance,’ *mìtì* ‘with ability’). Preverbs that express a volitional nature appear in (4) and those that convey a capacity occur in (5).

- (4) a. ójé ↓*dábò* fí òlì èkpà fí à.
 Oje:DST PST:DELIBERATELY threw ART bag extend ITV
 ‘Oje deliberately threw the bag away.’
- b. ójé ↓*dóbò* é ólí émàè.
 Oje:DST PST:MISTAKENLY eat ART food
 ‘Oje mistakenly/accidentally ate the food.’
- c. ójé ↓*dúdà* é ólí émàè.
 Oje:DST PST:DEFIANTLY eat ART food
 ‘Oje defiantly ate the food.’
- (5) a. ójé *tótò'bò* nwú òlì èkpà móé.
 Oje:DST PST.INTENSELY take ART bag have
 ‘Oje held the bag with great intensity.’
- b. òjè ò ó *dègbé* è ólí émàè.
 Oje SM PRS.PROG CAUTIOUSLY eat ART food
 ‘Oje is eating the food with caution.’
- c. òjè *gbúdù* é ólí émàè.
 Oje:PRX PST:COURAGEOUSLY eat ART food
 ‘Oje has eaten the food with courage.’
- d. ójé *kàkégbè* ón ólì àgbó.
 Oje:DST PST:PERSEVERINGLY drink ART potion
 ‘Oje drank the malaria potion with perseverance.’
- e. ójé ↓*mìtì* gbé ólí éwè.
 Oje:DST PST.ABLE kill ART goat
 ‘Oje was able to kill the goat.’

There is a second class of quantitative preverbs. It consists of forms that reflect a general quantum character. Preverbs of one subclass ascribe a quantitative value directly to the grammatical subject (collective *gba* ‘together,’ emphatic reflexive *dòbó* ‘by self’). Preverbs of another subclass ascribe their quantitative value more indirectly. They ascribe to the non-subject argument a quantitative value that bears on the differential effect of the verb event on the grammatical subject, e.g. absolute intensification *zèmi* ‘a lot, a great deal’ versus non-absolute intensification *zèzè* ‘a good bit but not quite a lot.’

- (6) a. éí ímóhé ↓*gbá* hían ólí óràn.
 ART men:DST PST.COL cut ART wood
 ‘The men cut the wood together.’
- b. òjè *dóbó* òì hían ólí óràn.
 Oje:PRX PST:EMR 3SG cut ART wood
 ‘Oje by himself (alone) cut the wood.’

- c. ójé ↓zémì é ólí émàè.
 Oje:DST PST:ABI eat ART food
 ‘Oje ate a lot of the food.’
- d. ójé ↓zézè é vbí ólí émàè.
 Oje:DST PST:NABI eat LOC ART food
 ‘Oje ate a good bit of the food.’

A final and sixth preverb class consists of manner-demonstratives. There are two: proximal *iná* ‘this way’ and distal *iyó* ‘that way.’ They frame emphatic constructions in narrative discourse that highlight or focus a given preverb or group of preverbs, except for aspectual and boulomaic forms. In doing so they precede the affected preverb.

- (7) a. ójé ↓íná gbé ólí ákhè á.
 Oje:DST PST:PMD break ART pot ITV
 ‘Oje broke the pot this way.’
- b. ójé ↓íyó gbé ólí ákhè á.
 Oje:DST PST:DMD break ART pot ITV
 ‘Oje broke the pot that way.’

4. Discussion. Preliminary evidence suggests that preverbs of similar character exist in West Benue-Congo languages other than Emai and Yoruba, as mentioned at the outset. Nupe is one of those language groups. A suggestive set of potential preverb forms appears in grammars of the Nupe languages Gwari (Hyman and Magaji 1970) and Okò (Atoyebi 2010). We have selected those in Table 1. They reflect the preverb classes aspectual, temporal, capacity and quantum. Not represented are boulomaic modality and volition of dynamic modality. Perhaps the latter classes do not occur in Nupe languages. But since these grammars did not focus on the range of grammatical forms that might precede verbs, it is not surprising that relatively few preverbs were identified in our assessment.

	Hyman and Magaji	Atoyebi
ASPECTUAL	<i>la / ya</i> start	<i>mín</i> begin / start <i>wé</i> begin / start
	<i>zo</i> finish	
	<i>fwa</i> cease	
	<i>shni</i> used to	<i>táyè</i> used to
	<i>je</i> again	<i>de</i> again <i>pilà</i> again
	<i>i / yi</i> still	<i>kí</i> still, continue
	<i>ace/ce</i> also	
TEMPORAL	<i>kmi</i> first	<i>táyè</i> earlier
	<i>kma</i> last	
	<i>nyi</i> hurry	<i>cáná</i> quickly <i>cècè</i> just then
CAPACITY	<i>mi</i> able	<i>dí</i> can
QUANTUM	<i>knu</i> together	<i>bile</i> together

Table 1. Preverb forms gleaned from grammars for the Nupe languages Gwari (Hyman and Magaji 1970) and Okò (Atoyebi 2010)

Before proceeding to our final points, we present preverb forms identified as such in different grammars of Yoruba. They are presented in Table 2. We have assigned each preverb to a semantic class based on the lexical data provided in the grammars. As can be seen, each major preverb class is represented, as are manner demonstratives. We emphasize that the assignment of preverbs to the semantic classes in Table 2 reflects our judgment, not that of a Yoruba speaker. Before we can place confidence in such assignments, and indeed the entire set of semantic classes, further investigation of preverbs in Yoruba will be required. The same can be said of the Nupe data and of West Africa in general.

	Bamgbose	Rowlands	Awobuluyi
ASPECTUAL	<i>shì</i> still <i>férèé</i> almost <i>tún</i> again <i>máa</i> continue <i>sábàá</i> usually	<i>sì</i> still <i>férèé</i> almost <i>sálo</i> away	<i>shìn</i> still <i>túbò</i> / <i>tún</i> again <i>sábà</i> in habit of
BOULOMAIC	<i>kúkú</i> in fact, rather <i>dédé</i> by chance <i>sáà</i> just <i>tiè</i> even	<i>kúkú</i> in fact, rather <i>dédé</i> suddenly, by chance <i>wulè</i> for no reason <i>sá</i> at least, at any rate <i>tilè/tèè</i> in fact	<i>kúkú</i> had better, rather <i>dédé</i> with no reason <i>wulè</i> in vain <i>sáà</i> for no purpose <i>tilè/tiè</i> even
TEMPORAL	<i>kókó</i> / <i>kó</i> first <i>sèsè</i> have just <i>tètè</i> quickly <i>jàjà</i> managed to	<i>kókó/kóó</i> first, earlier <i>sèsè</i> just now, just then <i>tètè</i> early <i>ha</i> then <i>rora</i> gently <i>yára</i> quickly	<i>kókó</i> / <i>kó</i> first <i>sèsè</i> just now <i>tètè</i> without delay <i>bá</i> then <i>jàjà</i> at last, finally
VOLITION	<i>lè</i> able, can <i>mòómò</i> intentionally	<i>lè</i> can <i>mòómò</i> deliberately	<i>lè</i> be able <i>mòómò</i> intentionally
QUANTUM	<i>jùmò</i> together <i>nìkan</i> only, alone <i>kàn</i> only, alone <i>túnbò</i> further	<i>jumo</i> / <i>jò</i> together <i>kàn</i> merely, just <i>túbò</i> further, more	<i>jùmò</i> / <i>jò</i> together <i>nìkan</i> only, alone <i>kàn</i> simply
MANNER		<i>báyí</i> like this <i>báun</i> like that	

Table 1. Preverb forms gleaned from grammars of Yoruba by Bamgbose (1966), Rowlands (1969), and Awoboluyi (1978)

Preverbs may also occur in other Niger-Congo families such as Gur and Bantoid of East Benu Congo, where they are referred to as secondary auxiliaries or hybrid adverbials. Although scattered hints of cognate relations among preverbs and/or borrowings exist across languages, none yet appears convincing.

Excluded from Emai preverbs are traditional auxiliary categories of aspect (perfective, imperfective), tense (relative, absolute), and modality (epistemic, deontic). Auxiliary categories in Emai precede preverbs and differ in diachronic and synchronic character.

Synchronically, auxiliaries do not occur in imperatives, whereas preverbs tend to do so. Additionally, preverbs do not correspond to information question words, and do not occupy sentence-initial position in cleft constructions, as do adverbs and adverbials.

Diachronically, preverbs in Emai tend to reflect a verbal heritage, as judged by their concurrent standing as preverb and verb/verb phrase. Forms for dynamic modality as well as temporal rate/distance show verb-noun univerbation. Remaining preverbs have lexicalized from individual verb forms.

In large measure, preverbs in Emai appear to reflect the general category types that Broschart (2000) identified for the Austronesian language Tongan, namely aspectual, temporal, and modal. Further investigations of clausal modification in other languages may help determine the nature and extent of preverb syntax and semantics.

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