

Perfectivity Exponents in Bantu and Edoid

Nurse and Philippson (2003) advocate for a historical classification of Bantu that is non-lexically based. The largest subgroup to emerge in their framework is Western Bantu. Although group members share two innovations, one centers on suffixal form *-i* with an ‘affirmative anterior, near past’ function. Another suffix with this same function, *-ile*, fails to appear in Western Bantu, i.e. zones A, B, and C; instead, it occurs most clearly in zones outside these three.

For this paper, we explore two constituents that appear related in form and function to the Bantu suffixes that Nurse and Philippson identify. They occur in Emai (Edoid, West Benue Congo of Nigeria). Its form *-í* is a verbal suffix, while form *lé* is a post-verbal particle. Both relate to an ‘affirmative anterior, near past’ function, although each exhibits constraints that suggest further innovation to such a base function. Syntactically, the two Emai forms are mutually exclusive.

In Emai an *-í* suffix glossed as Perfective aspect attaches to simple predicates only in contrastively tone marked Remote Past and Near Past, never in imperfective aspect. Suffix *-í* imposes two additional conditions. For a transitive verb like *shén* ‘sell,’ one constraint pertains to obligatory displacement of its direct object argument to focus position, as in *ólí é mà lí ójé shén'-ì* [the yam PF Oje RPST.sell-PFV] ‘It was yam that Oje sold’ and *émé' ójé shén'-ì?* [what Oje RPST.sell-PFV] ‘What did Oje sell?’. Another constraint stipulates that a verb, transitive or intransitive, exhibit no further grammatical qualification beyond the perfective. Suffix *-í* never co-occurs with an auxiliary or a preverb. In addition, predicate complexity is restricted. Suffix *-í* never attaches to a verb with a post-verbal particle, double object complement, or verb in series. Not constraining suffix *-í* are post-verbal adjuncts like *èghèèná* ‘recently’ and *òdè* ‘yesterday.’

Emai also shows post-verbal particle *lé*, glossed Temporal (TL), which has an iambitive function. It reflects speaker viewpoint on event termination and inception. With high tone under Near Past Perfect, *lé* denotes termination, i.e. ‘already has finished’ (*òjè é ólí é mà è lé* [Oje NPST.eat the food TL] ‘Oje has already finished eating the food’). In contrast, *lě* with low-high tone under imperfective Continuous denotes inception, not termination, i.e. ‘is already doing’ (*òjè ò ó è ólí é mà é lě* [Oje SC C eat the food TL] ‘Oje is already eating the food’).

We assume these resemblances between Emai and Bantu forms with anterior functions are not coincidental. There is highly comparable grammatical coding for functions related to perfectivity. Nurse and Philippson and Nurse (2007) propose that their Bantu suffixes differ in diachronic status but derive from a Niger-Congo *-i* suffix. Bantu *-i* is a retention and *-ile* an innovation. In part this duality is grounded to constraints on the geographic distribution of the Bantu suffixes and verbal responses to their initial queries about *-i* occurrence in non-Bantu speaking West Africa (e.g. West Benue Congo and Kwa). The Emai data, where forms related to both *-i* and *-ile* appear, suggest that dual exponents of perfectivity probably existed in the ancestor of East and West Benue Congo, i.e. Proto Benue Congo, and perhaps late-stage ancestors in Niger Congo that preceded the Benue Congo split into East and West.