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Toward a notion of possible verb in Emai

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1. INTRODUCTION

The categorization of events by verbs in natural language remains a challenging arena of linguistic investigation. Although verb categorization has attracted attention in some crosslinguistic studies (Croft 1990, Dowty 1979, Levin & Rappaport Hovav 2005), it is explored less frequently in a single language, particularly one from Africa. For this paper, we explore semantic and syntactic underpinnings of possible verbs in Emai, an endangered West Benue-Congo language of Nigeria’s Edoid group (Williamson & Blench 2000). We examine field data gathered and analyzed for a collection of oral tradition texts, dictionary and reference grammar (Schaefer & Egbokhare 1999, 2007).

Central to the notion of possible verb is argument structure and its potential for alternation (Levin 1993, Tenny 1994, Levin & Rappaport Hovav 2005). For instance, Nichols (1992) incorporates Talmy’s (1985) initial lexical typology regarding the verb arguments ‘moving object’ and ‘goal’ into a narrow precedence relation. Constituents expressing these arguments can show variable arrangements consistent with basic precedence (moving object [paint] precedes goal [wall] in George sprayed paint on the wall) or reversed precedence (goal precedes moving object in George painted the wall with paint). For this paper, we pursue a broader precedence relation defined in terms of FIGURE and GROUND (Talmy 2000). Figure represents a clause argument conceptually dependent on an anchor concept (thus encompassing moving object as well as located object and causing condition). Relative to Figure, Ground represents an anchor or reference point argument (thus incorporating goal or location for a moving object, location for located object, and causee impinged on for causing condition).

Using Figure and Ground, I redefine basic and reversed precedence. Basic precedence holds that Figure precedes Ground; reversed precedence stipulates that Ground precedes Figure. Across domains of motion, stationary location and causation, Emai verb constructions allow only basic precedence: Figure precedes Ground. No Emai verb permits Ground to precede Figure. Thus constraints on argument order and the virtual absence of argument alternation shed light on how Emai frames the notion possible verb.

1 Data for this paper derive from research sponsored by the National Science Foundation (BNS #9011338 and SBR #9409552), although it should not be held responsible for our interpretations.
2. CHANGE OF LOCATIONAL STATE FOR MOVING OBJECT

In the lexical typology of Talmy (1985, 2000), the verb arguments for moving object (hay as Figure) and goal (wagon as Ground) show an order relation. In a language like English, some change of locational state verbs allow basic precedence (1a) as well as reversed precedence (1b).

(1) (a) John loaded hay onto the wagon.
     (b) John loaded the wagon with hay.

For other English verbs, either of two patterns occurs. Basic precedence dominates (water as Figure and bucket as Ground in 2a), reversed precedence being disallowed (2b), or reversed precedence dominates (bucket as Ground and water as Figure in 2c) and basic precedence is disallowed (2d). Among English change of locational state verbs, the order between Figure and Ground can be variable (load) or fixed (pour, fill), depending on verb choice. English thus accepts both basic and reversed precedence.

(2) (a) John poured water into the bucket.
     (b) *John poured the bucket with water.
     (c) John filled the bucket with water.
     (d) *John filled water into the bucket.

When we turn to Emai, we discover a strict precedence template. For all verbs, Emai favors basic precedence of Figure and Ground over reversed precedence. Emai has no change of locational state verbs that allow alternations of the hay-wagon/wagon-hay type or of the wagon-hay type alone; instead it shows verbs that express only hay-wagon basic precedence.

The verb oo with a complement marked by the change of locational state (CL) particle is a case in point. It allows basic precedence (àmè as Figure and ògò as Ground 3a) but not reversed precedence (3b). It also does not permit a double object complement (which occurs in domains like possession transfer), where a verb sense akin to English ‘fill’ might surface (3c).

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2 Orthographic conventions for Emai reflect Schaefer (1987), Schaefer and Egbochare (1999) and Schaefer and Egbochare (2007), where ‘q’ represents a lax mid back vowel, ‘q’ a lax mid front vowel, ‘vb’ a voiced bilabial approximant, and where acute accent marks high tone, grave accent signals low, and acute accent with apostrophe designates high downstep. Tone is grammatically conditioned by syntactic position as well as inflectional categories mood, aspect and polarity.

3 Abbreviations in this paper include: ASS=associative, C=continuous, CL=change of location, DUR=durative, LOC=locative and SC=subject concord.
(3) (a) ójè óón âmè̀ à vbì ógò̀.
    Oje pour water CL LOC bottle
    ‘Oje poured water into the bottle.’

(b) *ójè óón ógò̀ à vbì ómè̀.
    Oje pour bottle CL LOC water
    ‘Oje poured the bottle full of water.’

(c) *ójè óón ógò̀ ømè̀.
    Oje pour bottle water
    ‘Oje filled a bottle with water. / Oje poured the bottle full of water.’

Emai has no agentive reversed precedence ‘fill’ verb. Its verb voon ‘fill’ positions Figure èànmì ‘meat’ as subject and Ground òwàwà ‘pot’ as direct object (4a). Like other change of locational state verbs, voon does not permit goal to precede moving object (4b). Emai favors basic precedence.

(4) (a) èànmì vóó ójé òwàwà.
    meat fill Oje pot
    ‘Meat filled Oje’s pot.’

(b) *ójè vóó òwàwà (vbì èànmì).
    Oje fill pot LOC meat
    ‘Oje filled the pot in meat.’

The broad reach of Emai’s precedence constraint involving moving object and goal appears with translational equivalents to English verbs where grammatical expression of a moving object can be covert. Emai construal of corresponding events requires overt grammatical expression of moving object and goal. Moreover, the resulting structures must reflect basic precedence, not reversed precedence. Moving object in Emai, in fact, appears privileged, revealing how a strict precedence template may also affect the occurrence of transitivity types.

The event of lighting a pipe is encoded in English by a verb that is simple transitive (direct object complement) or complex transitive (direct object and prepositional phrase complement). Complex transitives such as (5a-b) overtly express moving object (match) and goal (pipe) in contrasting precedence relations, whereas a simple transitive grammatically expresses a moving object (match), with no overt articulation of goal, or it expresses a goal (pipe), with no overt moving object (5c).

(5) (a) John lit a match for his pipe.
    (b) John lit his pipe with a match.
    (c) John lit a match / a pipe.
There is no Emai complement counterpart for light-a-pipe where only moving object or goal is expressed (6a). Simple transitive expression of a pipe-lighting event with direct object specified as goal (ikitibé) or as moving object (èràìn) is unacceptable. Instead, Emai requires a complex transitive complement (6b), specifying both moving object (èràìn) and goal (ikitibé); moreover, reversed precedence, goal followed by moving object, is unacceptable.

(6) (a) *øjè ré èràìn / ikitibé.
Oje take fire pipe
'Oje lit a match / pipe.'

(b) ojè ré èràìn ó vbi ikitibé.
Oje take fire CL LOC pipe
'Oje put a match to his pipe.'

There is further evidence in Emai that covert expression of moving object relative to a location change is not acceptable. Using a diverse set of verbs, English grammatically encodes a slapping event as either transitive or complex transitive. In (7a-c), the verb complement consists of either the goal (Mary’s face) alone (7a) or the moving object (slap) and goal, arranged according to basic precedence by throw (7b) or reversed precedence by hit (7c).

(7) (a) John slapped Mary’s face.
(b) John threw a slap onto Mary’s face.
(c) John hit Mary’s face with a slap.

A comparable range of structures expressing slapping events is not available in Emai. For a slapping event in which a moving object undergoes a location change relative to a goal (8a), Emai requires expression of both moving object (ùbì) and goal (àlékè vbi è). Equally important, Emai expression requires basic precedence, not reversed precedence (8b). And as (8c) indicates, one cannot grammatically express only moving object (ùbì) or only goal (àlékè è).

(8) (a) ojè gbé ùbì ó ìlékè vbi è.
Oje hit slap CL Aleke LOC face
'Oje slapped Aleke’s face. / Oje thrust a slap onto Aleke’s face.'

(b) *ojè gbé àlékè è ó vbi ùbì.
Oje hit Aleke face CL LOC slap
'Oje hit Aleke’s face with a slap.'

(c) *ojè gbé ùbì / gbé àlékè è.
Oje hit slap hit Aleke face
'Oje threw a slap / slapped Aleke’s face.'
Emai’s precedence template and the restrictions it imposes are also revealed by the lexical structuring of healing events. The latter can be encoded in English with verbs exhibiting contrasting complement structures: moving object and goal in basis or reversed precedence relations (9a-b), moving object alone (9c) or, with a different verb, reversed precedence (9d) or only goal (9e).

(9) (a) John applied healing powder to the wound.
(b) John applied to the wound some healing powder.
(c) John applied healing powder.
(d) John healed the wound with powder.
(e) John healed the wound.

For comparable event expression, Emai requires a complement where a moving object (úgbàyè yè) and its goal (è màì) are both expressed. And as in previous examples, Emai requires a complement that exhibits basic precedence (10a), not reversed precedence (10b). Simple transitive expression of healing events with only moving object or goal as verb argument is not available (10c). Emai distinctly favors basic precedence in addition to overt expression of moving object, thus ruling out simple transitive verbs in the manner of English heal shown in (9e).

(10) (a) òjè ré úgbàyè yè ó vbi è màì.
    Oje take powder CL LOC wound
    ‘Oje applied healing powder onto the wound.’

(b) *òjè ré è màì ó vbi úgbàyè yè.
    Oje take wound CL LOC powder
    ‘Oje applied to the wound a healing powder.’

(c) *òjè ré ãgbàyè yè / ré è màì.
    Oje take powder take wound
    ‘Oje applied healing powder / healed the wound.’

Additional evidence points to the privileged status of moving object. Passing of body-fluid events are encoded in English by intransitive verbs with an optional goal (my leg) (11a-b). The verb urinate semantically incorporates not only a component of motion but a moving object (urine or spit) (Clark and Clark 1979).

(11) (a) John urinated (on my leg).
(b) John spat (on my leg).

Corresponding events in Emai are structured by obligatory expression of moving object, regardless of whether goal is expressed overtly. The verb féna alone does not carry the meaning “urinate” (12a) nor does the verb nà without a direct object convey the meaning ‘spit’ (12b). Both verb and direct object must be expressed.
ovely. Emai verbs thus disallow incorporation of motion and moving object concepts.

(12) (a) òjè fé ná ààhìè n. / *òjè fé ná.
      Oje pass urine      Oje pass
      'Oje passed his urine / urinated.'

(b) òjè tú èsèn. / *òjè tú.
      Oje spit saliva      Oje spit
      'Oje spewed his saliva / spat.'

Each of these Emai verbs also shows a complex transitive complement expressing moving object and goal. fé na in (13a) positions moving object (ààhìè 'urine') before goal (òò 'pit'). Similarly, tú in (13b) places a moving object (èsèn 'saliva') before a goal (àgá 'chair'). Thus Figure and Ground arguments are expressed according to basic precedence; but, if only one of these argument types is conveyed, it is moving object.

(13) (a) òjè fé ná ààhìè n kú òbì òò.
      Oje pass urine cast CL LOC pit
      'Oje passed his urine all over the pit.'

(b) òjè tú èsèn à fì vbi àgá.
      Oje spit saliva CL throw LOC chair
      'Oje spat onto the chair.'

3. CONFINED MOTION FOR MOVING OBJECT

Precedence effects also constrain motion-confined-to-a-location events. Object movement in confined motion structures is not goal directed, as in previous examples, but is specified with respect to a location (Talmy 2000). In (14), English roll has a complement consisting of moving object (body) and location (sand) that reflects basic and reversed precedence: moving object precedes (14a) or follows (14b) location.

(14) (a) John is rolling his body in the sand.

(b) John is rolling in the sand with his body.

To express corresponding events, Emai shows only basic precedence. In series with the verb re 'take', gbulu 'roll' allows basic precedence of moving object (ègbé 'body') and location (èkèn 'sand') but not reversed precedence. In grammatical (15a), ègbé as Figure precedes èkèn Ground, while in ungrammatical (15b) Ground precedes Figure. Moreover, double object constructions, which otherwise occur in Emai and provide at least the potential for location to precede
moving object, are ungrammatical with gbulu (15c). Emai’s confined motion domain, contra English, thus shows the absence of variable precedence relations for Figure and Ground with individual verbs and the absence of verb pairs with contrasting precedence relations.

(15) (a) Ṡọjẹ ọ gbẹ gbụlụ ẹkịn.
Oje SC C take body roll sand
‘Oje is rolling in the sand with his body.’

(b) *ọjẹ ọ gbụlụ ẹkịn gbụlụ ẹgbẹ.
Oje SC C take sand roll body
‘Oje is using the sand to roll his body in.’

(c) *ọjẹ ọ gbụlụ ẹgbẹ ẹkịn / gbụlụ ẹkịn ẹgbẹ.
Oje SC C roll body sand roll sand body
‘Oje is rolling his body in the sand / in the sand with his body.’

4. CAUSATION

Strict precedence constrains Emai expression of another event kind. Causation events consist of Figure as causing condition and causee as Ground. English allows contrasting verb pairs (kill and die) where causee (John) precedes or follows causing condition (fever) in (16a-b).

(16) (a) John died of fever.
(b) The fever killed John.

Corresponding Emai expression favors strict precedence (17a), where causing condition (ụiịn) must precede causee (ọjẹ). Reversed precedence, where causee precedes causing condition, is unacceptable (17b). Even a more articulated causing condition requires strict precedence. In (17c), the immediate causing condition ụiịn, as direct object of ọ, precedes causee ọjẹ, the direct object of gbẹ, while the ultimate cause, ìlì èmà, precedes both.

(17) (a) ụiịn gbẹ ọjẹ.
   fever kill Oje
   ‘A fever killed Oje.’

(b) *ọjẹ ā (vbì) ụiịn.
   Oje die LOC fever
   ‘Oje died from fever.’
(c) òlí èmài ã ã rè ììì gbè ọjè.
the wound sc c take fever kill Oje
‘The wound is making the fever kill Oje.’

English also shows contrasting precedence relations between causee and causing condition framed by copula, adjective and preposition (be drunk with) relative to causative verb and past participle (make drunk). Both basic and reversed precedence thus characterize the relation between causing condition (wine) and causee (John) in English (18a-b).

(18) (a) John is drunk with wine.
(b) The wine made John drunk.

Emai limits the expression of causation with its precedence template, just as it did motion events. Emai allows only basic precedence where Figure/causing condition precedes Ground/causee; it disallows reversed precedence. In (19a-c), regardless of transitive or complex transitive complement, causing condition (ènyò) precedes causee (ọjè). Reversed precedence is ungrammatical (19d).

(19) (a) ènyò ã ã nwú ọjè.
wine sc c take.hold Oje
‘Oje is becoming drunk.’
(b) ènyò gbé ọjè.
wine overtake Oje
‘Oje was dead drunk.’
(c) òlí ènyò ìkhù ã ọjè vbi égbè.
the wine settle cl Oje loc body
‘Oje is drunk with wine. / The wine made Oje drunk.’
(d) *ọjè ã ã nwú ènyò.
Oje sc c take.hold wine
‘Oje is becoming drunk.’

5. STATIVE LOCATION AND POSSESSION

Precedence effects in Emai are not confined to dynamic events. Precedence limits stative events of location and possession. English allows paired expressions where Figure and Ground are not constrained by precedence. Figure (clouds) precedes Ground (sky) in basic precedence (20a), while Ground precedes Figure in reversed precedence (20b).
(20) (a) Clouds are in the sky.
(b) The sky is overcast/cloudy/filled of clouds.

To encode a comparable event with its verb ri, Emai requires basic precedence (21a). The Figure as located entity (óhùù) must precede the Ground as location (ókhùnmì). Reversed precedence is unacceptable (21b), even with another verb, e.g. moe ‘have’ (21c).

(21) (a) óhùù rìì vbí ókhùnmì.
    clouds    be   LOC   sky
    ‘The sky is very overcast. / The sky is cloudy.’

(b) *ókhùnmì rìì vbí óhùù.
    sky    be   LOC   clouds
    ‘The sky is cloudy / overcast.’

(c) *ókhùnmì mòè óhùù.
    sky  have   clouds
    ‘The sky is cloudy / overcast.’

Along these same lines, English allows basic and reversed precedence in contrasting lexical frames. BE constructions (20a) order Figure (a scar) before Ground (John’s leg), while HAVE constructions (20b) order Ground before Figure. Precedence and lexical contrasts correlate: basic precedence is associated with BE and reversed precedence with HAVE.

(22) (a) A scar is on John’s leg.
(b) John’s leg has a scar.

Turning to Emai, we again find only basic precedence. Relative to the event articulated in (22), Emai exhibits acceptable (23a); the verb ri ‘be’ requires that the Figure (óli ókhùánkhùán) precede the Ground (ójé vbí áwè). (23b), with the verb moe ‘have’ and a converse order of Figure and Ground, is ungrammatical. Figure and Ground arguments in Emai’s stative domain are ordered in a manner that excludes reversed precedence and favors basic precedence.

(23) (a) óli ókhùánkhùán sè rì ójé vbí áwè.
    the scar    DUR   be   Oje  LOC   leg
    ‘The scar is still on Oje’s leg.’

(b) *áwè misi ójé mòe ókhùánkhùán.
    leg   ASS   Oje  have   scar
    ‘Oje’s leg has a scar.’

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Moreover, English has verbs that lexicalize reversed precedence of spatial location constituents (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 2005). Ground (The huge pillars) precedes Figure (the causeway) with the English verb 'support.' Emai has no comparable verb.

(24) The huge pillars supported the causeway.

6. CONCLUSION

Precedence constraints in Emai reflect limitations on the linear order of the semantic argument types Figure and Ground (Croft 1991, Talmy 2000). Figure represents a directional or confined moving object, a cause or a located argument that precedes its Ground serving as a goal or location, a causee or a location. Lexical structuring in each of the domains location change, confined motion, causation and stative location suggests that Emai favors basic precedence over reversed precedence. The semantic argument types Figure and Ground and precedence relations between them limit Emai’s notion of possible verb. Although Emai precedence constrains the inventory of transitivity types in individual domains à la Dixon (1989), it is not simply the transitivity of verb forms that is limited or augmented. It is the linear arrangement of particular argument types that is constrained. Precedence also provides insight into grammatical resources that are active in West Benue Congo languages (Williamson & Blench 2000), where lack of inflectional morphology and non-use of prepositions to express grammatical functions are often portrayed as a linguistic deficiency (Foley and Olson 1985, Lord 1993, Crowley 2002). While typologically accurate regarding the syntactic and lexical inventory, this perspective provides little insight into what linguistic resources are active or how they pattern. For Emai, at least, it appears that linear order in the form of a precedence template affecting Figure and Ground is active in the framing of its verb lexicon.

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