
Toward a notion of possible verb in Emai

Ronald P. Schaefer & Francis O. Egbokhare

Proceedings of Conference on
Language Documentation & Linguistic Theory 2

Edited by Peter K. Austin, Oliver Bond, Monik Charette,
David Nathan & Peter Sells

13-14 November 2009 School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project
Department of Linguistics
School of Oriental and African Studies
Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square
London WC1H 0XG
United Kingdom

Department of Linguistics:
Tel: +44-20-7898-4640
Fax: +44-20-7898-4679
linguistics@soas.ac.uk
<http://www.soas.ac.uk/academics/departments/linguistics>

Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project:
Tel: +44-20-7898-4578
Fax: +44-20-7898-4349
elap@soas.ac.uk
<http://www.hrelp.org>

© 2009 Ronald P. Schaefer & Francis O. Egbokhare

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, on any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author(s) of that part of the publication, except as permitted by UK copyright law.

ISBN: 978-0-7286-0392-9

This publication can be cited as:

Ronald P. Schaefer & Francis O. Egbokhare. 2009. Toward a notion of possible verb in Emai. In Peter K. Austin, Oliver Bond, Monik Charette, David Nathan & Peter Sells (eds) *Proceedings of Conference on Language Documentation and Linguistic Theory 2*. London: SOAS.

or:

Ronald P. Schaefer & Francis O. Egbokhare. 2009. Toward a notion of possible verb in Emai. In Peter K. Austin, Oliver Bond, Monik Charette, David Nathan & Peter Sells (eds) *Proceedings of Conference on Language Documentation and Linguistic Theory 2*. London: SOAS. www.hrelp.org/eprints/ldlt2_27.pdf

Toward a notion of possible verb in Emai
RONALD P. SCHAEFER¹ & FRANCIS O. EGBOKHARE²
SIU Edwardsville¹ & University of Ibadan²

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).¹

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 *oon* with a complement marked by the change of locational state (CL) particle is a case in point.² 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).³

² Orthographic conventions for Emai reflect Schaefer (1987), Schaefer and Egbokhare (1999) and Schaefer and Egbokhare (2007), where ‘*ɔ̄*’ represents a lax mid back vowel, ‘*ɛ̄*’ 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) *òjè óón àmè́ ó vbi ògò.*
 Oje pour water CL LOC bottle
 ‘Oje poured water into the bottle.’
- (b) **òjè óón ògò ó vbi àmè.*
 Oje pour bottle CL LOC water
 ‘Oje poured the bottle full of water.’
- (c) **òjè óón ògò àmè.*
 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 *vóon* ‘fill’ positions Figure *éànmì* ‘meat’ as subject and Ground *ùwàwà* ‘pot’ as direct object (4a). Like other change of locational state verbs, *vóon* does not permit goal to precede moving object (4b). Emai favors basic precedence.

- (4) (a) *éànmì vóón ójé ùwàwà.*
 meat fill Oje pot
 ‘Meat filled Oje's pot.’
- (b) **òjè vóón ùwàwà (vbi éànmì).*
 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 (*ikìtìbẹ̀*) or as moving object (*èràìn*) is unacceptable. Instead, Emai requires a complex transitive complement (6b), specifying both moving object (*èràìn*) and goal (*ikìtìbẹ̀*); moreover, reversed precedence, goal followed by moving object, is unacceptable.

- (6) (a) *òjẹ̀ *ré* *èràìn* / *ikìtìbẹ̀*.
 Oje take fire pipe
 ‘Oje lit a match / pipe.’
- (b) òjẹ̀ *ré* *èràìn* *ó* *vbì* *ikìtìbẹ̀*.
 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 (*úbì*) and goal (*áléké vbì èò*). Equally important, Emai expression requires basic precedence, not reversed precedence (8b). And as (8c) indicates, one cannot grammatically express only moving object (*úbì*) or only goal (*áléké èò*).

- (8) (a) òjẹ̀ *gbé* *úbì* *ó* *áléké* *vbì* *èò*.
 Oje hit slap CL Aleke LOC face
 ‘Oje slapped Aleke’s face. / Oje thrust a slap onto Aleke’s face.’
- (b) *òjẹ̀ *gbé* *áléké* *èò* *ó* *vbì* *úbì*.
 Oje hit Aleke face CL LOC slap
 ‘Oje hit Aleke’s face with a slap.’
- (c) *òjẹ̀ *gbé* *úbì* / *gbé* *áléké* *èò*.
 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 (*úgbàyèyè*) and its goal (*èmàì*) 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 rɛ́ úgbàyèyè ɔ́ vbì èmàì.*
 Oje take powder CL LOC wound
 'Oje applied healing powder onto the wound.'
- (b) **òjè rɛ́ èmàì ɔ́ vbì úgbàyèyè.*
 Oje take wound CL LOC powder
 'Oje applied to the wound a healing powder.'
- (c) **òjè rɛ́ úgbàyèyè / rɛ́ èmàì.*
 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 *fɛna* alone does not carry the meaning 'urinate' (12a) nor does the verb *tu* without a direct object convey the meaning 'spit' (12b). Both verb and direct object must be expressed

overtly. Emai verbs thus disallow incorporation of motion and moving object concepts.

(12) (a) *òjè féná àhìèṅ.* / **òjè féná.*
 Oje pass urine Oje pass
 ‘Oje passed his urine / urinated.’

(b) *òjè tú èsèṅ.* / **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. *féna* in (13a) positions moving object (*áhìèṅ* ‘urine’) before goal (*òò* ‘pit’). Similarly, *tú* in (13b) places a moving object (*èsèṅ* ‘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 féná àhìèṅ kú ó vbi òò.*
 Oje pass urine cast CL LOC pit
 ‘Oje passed his urine all over the pit.’

(b) *òjè tú èsèṅ ó fí 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 *rè* ‘take’, *gbulu* ‘roll’ allows basic precedence of moving object (*ègbé* ‘body’) and location (*èkèṅ* ‘sand’) but not reversed precedence. In grammatical (15a), *ègbé* as Figure precedes *èkèṅ* 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) *òjè ò ó rẹ̀ ègbé gbùlù èkèn.*
 Oje SC C take body roll sand
 'Oje is rolling in the sand with his body.'
- (b) **òjè ò ó ré èkèn gbùlù ègbé.*
 Oje SC C take sand roll body
 'Oje is using the sand to roll his body in.'
- (c) **òjè ò ó gbùlù ègbé èkèn / gbùlù èkèn ègbé.*
 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 (*ùìn*) must precede causee (*òjè*). 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 *ùìn*, as direct object of *rẹ̀*, precedes causee *òjè*, the direct object of *gbé*, while the ultimate cause, *òlì èmàì*, precedes both.

- (17) (a) *ùìn gbé òjè.*
 fever kill Oje
 'A fever killed Oje.'
- (b) **òjè ú (vbí) ùìn.*
 Oje die LOC fever
 'Oje died from fever.'

- (c) *ólì èmàì ò ó rẹ̀ ùín gbè òjè.*
 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 (*ényò*) precedes causee (*òjè*). Reversed precedence is ungrammatical (19d).

- (19) (a) *ényò ò ó nwú òjè.*
 wine SC C take.hold Oje
 ‘Oje is becoming drunk.’
- (b) *ényò gbé òjè.*
 wine overtake Oje
 ‘Oje was dead drunk.’
- (c) *ólì ényò ókhó ó ójé vbí égbè.*
 the wine settle CL Oje LOC body
 ‘Oje is drunk with wine. / The wine made Oje drunk.’
- (d) **òjè ò ó nwú ényò.*
 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/full of clouds.*

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

- (21) (a) *óhùú rî vbí òkhùnmi.*
 clouds be LOC sky
 ‘The sky is very overcast. / The sky is cloudy.’
- (b) **òkhùnmi rî vbí óhùú.*
 sky be LOC clouds
 ‘The sky is cloudy / overcast.’
- (c) **òkhùnmi mòè óhùú.*
 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 (*ólì ùkhùànkhùàn*) precede the Ground (*òjé vbí àwé*). (23b), with the verb *mòè* ‘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) *ólì ùkhùànkhùàn sέ rî òjé vbí àwé.*
 the scar DUR be Oje LOC leg
 ‘The scar is still on Oje’s leg.’
- (b) **àwé ísì òjé mòè ùkhùànkhùàn.*
 leg ASS Oje have scar
 ‘Oje’s leg has a scar.’

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.

REFERENCES

- Clark, Eve V. & Herbert H. Clark. 1979. When nouns surface as verbs. *Language* 55: 767-811.
- Croft, William. 1990. *Syntactic categories and grammatical relations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Crowley, Terry. 2002. *Serial verbs in Oceanic: a descriptive typology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dowty, David. 1979. *Word meaning and Montague Grammar*. Dordrecht: Reidel.
- Dixon, R.M.W. 1989. The priority of transitive verb forms in Fijian. MS, Australian National University.
- Levin, Beth. 1993. *English verb classes and alternations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Levin, Beth & Malka Rappaport Hovav. 2005. *Argument realization*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lord, Carol. 1993. *Historical change in serial verb constructions*. Philadelphia: Benjamins.
- Foley, William A. & Mike Olson. 1985. Clausehood and verb serialization. In Johanna Nichols & Anthony Woodbury (eds.), *Grammar Inside and Outside the Clause*, 17-60. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Nichols, Johanna. 1992. *Linguistic diversity in space and time*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schaefer, Ronald P. 1987. *An initial orthography and lexicon for Emai: an Edoid language of Nigeria*. Bloomington: Indiana University Linguistics Club.
- Schaefer, Ronald P. & Francis O. Egbokhare. 1999. *Oral tradition narratives of the Emai people*, Parts I and II. Hamburg: LIT Verlag.
- Schaefer, Ronald P. & Francis O. Egbokhare. 2007. *A dictionary of Emai: an Edoid language of Nigeria*. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag.
- Schaefer, Ronald P. & Francis O. Egbokhare. An Emai Reference Grammar. Mouton Grammar Library Series. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Talmy, Leonard. 1985. Lexicalization patterns: semantic structure in lexical forms. In T. Shopen (ed.), *Language typology and syntactic description III*, 57-149. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Talmy, Leonard. 2000. *Toward a cognitive semantics*, Vol 1 and 2. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Tenny, Carol. 1994. *Aspectual roles and the syntax-semantics interface*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Williamson, Kay & Roger Blench. 2000. Niger Congo. In Bernd Heine & Derek Nurse (eds.), *African languages: an introduction*, 11-42. New York: Cambridge University Press.