Tense and agreement markers in Bekwarra

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Abstract

The concept of tense and agreement have remained a controversial issue particularly in languages that exhibit a close relationship between the two concepts. Studies have revealed that while some languages mark a distinction between the two concepts, they are closely knitted in languages that do not mark a clear distinction between the two concepts and it becomes difficult to separate them. This study examines the concept of tense and agreement in Bèkwárra, a language spoken in the Northern part Cross River State, Nigeria. The study adopts the descriptive model of analysis. Findings revealed that completed and ongoing actions make use of verbs in their base forms without any inflection with the agreement markers **a, e** and **o,** while progressive aspect is marked through verbal inflection by replacing the verb that ends with either **i, e**. **u** or **o** with **a** and the agreement marker **a** changes to **i.** Perfective tense is marked with the tense marker **ma** while future tense is marked with its marker **bá**.

Keywords: Tense, Agreement, Bèkwárra, Language Family.

Introduction

Bèkwárra is located at the Northern Senatorial district of Cross River state, Nigeria. The geographical area in which Bèkwárra is spoken is approximately 345 square kilometers. In the 1963 census according to Stanford (1967), the population of Bèkwárra was estimated to be 34,000 while Ejim says the population of Bèkwárra was estimated by the 2006 population census as about 70,000. Scholars like Ushie (2001) and Odey (2007) said that Bèkwárra people migrated from Obudu to the present place known as Èbèkwárra.

The language and the community are called Bèkwárra. Ushie (2001:3) stated clearly that Bèkwárra language is the language of the people called "Bèkwárra" and the land in which the

people live is also called "Bèkwárra" but in his argument, he claimed that "Bèkwárra" is an anglicized version of Èbèkwárra. Ushie (2001:4) stated that Bèkwárra language is understood by older generations of its neighbouring communities especially Afrike, Mbube East and Utugwang, but he did not tell us whether these are dialects of Bèkwárra. Talking about the dialects of Bèkwárra, it was discovered in this paper that Utugwang and Afrike are dialects of Bèkwárra. The evidence for this was on the basis that almost all the Utugwang and Afrike speakers understand and speak Bèkwárra language while only about 20 to 25% of Bèkwárra (mostly older speakers) understand and can speak Utugwang and Afrike while about 45% Bèkwárra speakers understand Utugwang and Afrike but cannot speak any of them and the remaining 30% do not understand any of the two dialects. They are therefore believed to be dialects of Bèkwárra based on this mutual intelligibility evidence.

Bèkwárra is a multilingual community. There are different languages that its speakers use apart from Bèkwárra and the English language. Presently, there are many that speak the Nigeria most popular languages: Hausa, Igbo, Yòrúba and the neighbouring languages like Yala, Obudu, etc.

Literature review

No work has been done on tense and agreement marker (TAM) in Bèkwárra but there are works on tense and agreement in other Nigerian languages like Hausa, Yorùbá, Ìgbò, etc. Tense in Bèkwárra language, just like in any language, is an indicator of the time of action. It tells us whether an action in a sentence takes place in the past, present or will take place in the future. Tense is the specification of event, that is, the time of speaking about it. Tense is a grammatical category that relates the time of an event to the moment of utterance. The notion of tense has to do with time relation between the events. (Maduagwu & Obiamalu, 2016:158). That is why Comrie (1985) considered tense as a grammaticalised expression of location in time. In a similar vein, Lyons (1968:9) states that 'the essential characteristics of the category of tense is that it relates the time of an action, event or state of affairs referred to in the sentence to the time of utterance being now'.

Solomon-Etefia & Evbayiro (2017:54) are of the opinion that 'tense /aspect' are derived from the Greek, Latin and Russia languages. Hence, the tense when it occurs simultaneously with the time or moment of speaking. The future tense is merely predicative. It usually makes use of modals to express anticipation of events in the future. The past tense, on the other hand, usually expresses an action that has taken place in the past. However, tense is seen as part of the verb in relation to time. It is referred to as a grammatical device which is used to locate a situation in time

in relation to the movement of speech as a point of reference or deictic center (Comrie, 1985; Solomon-Etefia & Evbayiro, 2017)

Theoretical framework

A descriptive analysis is adapted for this study to enable the researcher to present a vivid description of tense and agreement marker (TAM) in Bèkwárra. The basic linguistic theory falls under descriptive theoretical frameworks in Linguistics which is morpho-syntactic in nature (Solomon-Etefia & Evbayiro, 2017). The concept of descriptive analysis is, in principle, applicable to any form of data, provided the data represent the actual usage at a given time in any given speech community (C.F. Solomon-Etefia & Evbayiro). The descriptive theoretical framework analyses language by collecting data and describing the nature of the data using simplistic terms mostly from traditional grammar. It provides an in-depth description of linguistic data.

The data analyzed in this paper were collected through direct interaction with native speakers and oral interview with older speakers and young adults in Ukpah, Bèkwárra.

Bèkwárra language family

Bèkwárra language has been classified as one of the Benue-Congo languages and Bendi family (Talbot, 1969: 88). Talbot saw Bendi language family as extreme eastern linguistic cluster of the Bantu sub-group of the negritic stock. The present Bèkwárra language is the product of a blend between Bedi language and Bewo language (language of the aborigines of the land where the present Bèkwárra people live). Both the aborigines and their language are now extinct (Ushie, 2001:3-4).

Tense in Bèkwárra

Bèkwárra language marks two major tenses; the future and non-future. Under the non-future we have, completed action, the simple present tense, progressive/habitual and perfective tense.

Completed action in Bèkwárra

Vowel **a** is the only agreement marker that goes with all singular subjects in completed actions, be it noun or pronoun subjects except the second person singular *awo*. The agreement marker **e** can only combine with plural subjects in all tense type. Some examples are shown below.

1a.   Odey   **a**   bu

        Odey   AGR   run
        'Odey ran'

 b.   Uchom **a**   shi   ine

        House   AGR   burn   fire

        'A house burnt'

c.   Abe   **e**   ji   iriji

        They   AGR   eat   food

        'They ate food'

d.   Abere   **e**   chi   ki   itang

        We   AGR   sit   on   floor

        'We sat down'

e.   Ogar   aheno   Odey   **e**   shi   iriji

        Ogar   and   Odey   AGR   cook   food

        'Ogar and Odey cooked food'

f.   Awo   **o**   gwu   ubu

        You (sgl)   AGR   kill   goat

        'You (sgl) killed a goat'

g.   Awo   **o**   ye   kaate

        You (sgl)   AGR   go   to-market

        'You (sgl) went to market'

In the examples in 1a-g, the vowel **o** can only combine with the second person singular pronoun *awo* as in examples 1f and g, and, it is only in this context that it can function as agreement marker under past aspect.

Past continuous tense

a. Abe   **e**   ja   iriji   kin   mokpang   Ogar   ka-be

    They   AGR   eat   food   here before   Ogar   then-come

    'They were eating food before Ogar came'.

b. Ebwatung   ichicha   **e**   fuo   ashan mokpoang unàà iwon ka-be

    children   school   AGR   write paper before   law   POSS then-come

    'The students were writing before your instruction came'

c. Ochirishi   inang iten i sha okwulo kin mokpong ushie ihihe   ka-be

     Head cover chair POSS AGR do   work   here before   king   new then-come

    'Our chairman has been working before the arrival of the new king'

d. Ichicha   iten   **i**   faa   kin   mokpang abere ka-kpere

    Teacher   POSS   AGR   teach here   before   we   then-grow

    'Our teacher has been teaching before we grew up'

e. Omang   **i**   faa   ashan mokpang   Ogar   ka-mie   ichicha

    Omang AGR teach paper   before   Ogar   then-finish school

    'Omang has been teaching before Ogar completed his studies'

We should note that the main clause (which is usually the first clause) in past continuous tense in Bèkwárra is not a past tense but present continuous (or habitual) tense. What makes the examples in 5.1.1a-e past continuous tenses is the introduction of *mokpang* into the five sentences.

Moreover, the second clause (from *mokpang*) always depends on the first (main) clause to make meaning.

Simple present tense

As said earlier, verbs in their base form mark past and simple present actions. Consider the following simple present tense.

2a.   Ugbang   ibere   **a**   tan   unung

        Canoe   POSS   AGR   shine   beauty

        'Their car is beautiful'

b.   Odey   **a**   kan

        Name   AGR   tall

        'Odey is tall'

c.   Ukpin   **a**   mia   ru'bang

        Star   AGR   finish   with-world

        'Stars spread all over the world'

d.   Abe   **e**   dyem

        They   AGR   fat

        'They are fat'

e.   Echa   aheno   Ogar   **e**   ngwa   ebetuo   re

        Echa   and   Ogar   AGR   drink   palm wine   NEG

        'Echa and Ogar do not take palm wine'

f.   Awo   **o**   tan   unung

        You (sgl)   AGR   shine   beauty

        'You (sgl) are beautiful'

We have said earlier that the agreement marker **o** can only combine with *awo* in past and present actions as in examples 1g and 2f above.

Progressive tense

Progressive tense indicates actions or events that are currently taking place or that are on-going. Progressive tense in Bèkwárra language is marked through verbal inflections. Moreover, vowel **a** does not mark agreement in progressive tense, rather, vowel **i** replaces it and **e** and **o** still mark agreement under progressive tense. Consider the examples below. It is imperative to state here that, it is possible for these sentences to be interpreted in the habitual manner.

3a.   Amin   **e**   **ja**   iriji

        You (pl)   AGR   eat-PROG   food

        'You (pl) are eating food'

b.   Ogar   ahe n'   Odey   **e**   **ha**   abe   abo

        Ogar   and   Odey   AGR   put-PROGPRO they   hand

        'Ogar and Odey are supporting them'

c.   Abere   **e**   **gwa**   abwan

        We   AGR   cut-PROG   grass

        'We are cutting grasses'

d.   Omang   **i**   **ngwo**   umo

        Omang   AGR   drink-PROG water

        'Omangis drinking water'

e.   Ukwun   **i**   **cho** ushang

        Ukwun   AGR   share-PROG prayer

        'Ukwun is praying'

f.   Awo   **o**   **mo**   uchom

You (sgl)   AGR   mold-PROG   house

'You are building a house'

We should note that the agreement marker **i** only mark agreement with pronouns or nouns that end with nasal sound. Apart from pronouns, **e** can mark plural agreement with plural subject whether the two conjoined names end with nasal sound or not, as in example 3b above.

Perfective tense in Bèkwárra

The perfective marker that has been identified so far in Bèkwárra language is **ma,** which means 'already done or completed'. It usually comes at the end of every perfective statement except in a negative sentence where a negative marker comes after it.

Examples of perfective tense in Bèkwárra are presented below.

4 a.   Otom   **a**   be   **ma**

Otom   AGR   come   PERF

'Otom has come'

b.   Ogbéné   **a**   tuó   umó   ma

OgbénéAGR   fetch   water   PERF

'Ogbéné has fetched water'

c.   Abe   **e**   bu   **ma**

They   AGR   run   PERF

'They have run'

d.   Ushie   aheni   Igbe   **e**   gwu   ubu   **ma**

Ushie   and   Igbe   AGR   kill   goat   PERF

'Ushie and Igbe have killed a goat'

e.   Awo   **o**   nyie   alú   **ma**

      You (sgl)   AGR   buy   shirt   PERF

      'You (sg) have bought a shirt'

Vowel **i** cannot mark agreement under the perfective aspect because it marks progressive and habitual aspect with inflected verbs.

The Future Tense in Bèkwárra

Future tense indicates that an action or actions in speakers' utterances have not taken place but they are to take place sooner or later after such future utterances are made. In Bèkwárra language, the future tense is marked with the future marker **bá**. This future marker occurs immediately after the subject/agreement marker in every future sentence. Base on this explanation, some examples of future tense in Bèkwárra are given below.

5.a.   Abere   **e**   **bá**   ya   ká

       We   AGR   FUT   go   there

       'We will go there'

b.   Amin   **e**   **bá**   fuò ashan

       You (pl) AGR FUT   write   paper

       'You(pl) will write a book'

c.   Omang   **i**   **bá**   nam   uchi   ka   he

       Omang   AGR   FUT   judge   judgment   for   PRO

       'Omang will deliver judgment for him/her'

d.   Awo   **o**   **bá**   ya   ka

       You (sgl)   AGR   FUT   go   there

       'You (sgl) will gothere'

Apart from the plural agreement marker **e** and the second person singular marker **o,** future tense with singular subjects that are not pronouns and do not end with nasal sound can be constructed without any agreement marker. Let us consider the following examples.

e.   Adie   **bá**   nyie   alú

        Adie   FUT   buy   shirt

        'Adie will buy a shirt'

f.   Agbó   **bá**   sha   iriji

        Agbó FUT   do   food

        'Agbó will cook food'

g.   Agba   **bá**   káa   anangkere

        Agba   FUT   fry   groundnut

        'Agba will fry groundnut'

Unlike past continuous tense in Bèkwárra, the future continuous tense could be a single clause combining with the future marker *bá*. Consider the examples below.

a.   Amin   **e**   **bá**   kpekwu   ukwulo   ayeni   ufo

        You(pl) AGR   FUT   start   work   going   tomorrow

        'You(pl) will start going to work tomorrow'

b.   Abere **e** **bá** kpekwu abwan agbirini ki'chicha ri'te   ngĩn

        We AGR FUT start   grass   clearing   in school   with-morning this

        'We will start clearing grasses in the school this morning'

c.   Ekaani **e**   **bá** kpekwu ushan acheni ke he   ri'kwurukwu ngĩn   Elders
        AGR FUT start   prayer sharing give him/her with evening this

        'The elders will start praying for him/her this evening'

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d.   Ungwayi   **i**   **bá**   kpekwu ichicha ayeni   ufo

child-my AGR   FUT   start   school   going   tomorrow

'My child will start going to school tomorrow'

e.   Amin   **e**   **bá**   kpekwu   iriji ashini ke ebwaben ri'kwurukwu ngĩn

You(pl) AGR FUT   start   food   doing   give destitute with evening this

'You(pl) will start cooking for the fatherless this evening'

The only common feature that both past and future continuous tenses share in Bèkwárra is that the clause which contains the agreement marker is always the main clause that determines the meaning of each sentence.

Conclusion

Having examined tense and agreement marker (TAM) in Bèkwárra, we discovered that the vowels **a**, **i**, **o** and **e** are agreement markers while verbs (i.e. their base and inflected forms) mark tense. Inflected verbs are used in marking progressive tense but past and simple present actions make use of verbs in their base form. This study revealed that perfective tense in Bèkwárra language is marked with the perfective marker **ma** and the future tense is marked with the future marker **bá.**

Furthermore, we show that **i** and **a** cannot mark agreement or function as agreement markers in the same tense. While **a** marks past and simple present agreement, **i** marks progressive agreement. Moreover, **a** can combine with all subject but **i** can only combine with subject nouns that end with nasal sounds. **e** can combine with pronouns and also nouns that end with nasal sounds but when two names or subjects are joined together by *and***,** it combines with any name or subject.

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