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Comparing phasal aspect in some West Chadic and West Benue Congo languages: Inching toward a crosslinguistic West African perspective

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Abstract

We undertake an initial crosslinguistic comparison of formal coding linked to the functions of phasal aspect in selected languages from West Chadic and West Benue Congo. Canonical phasal aspect types are semantically characterized as INITIATION, TERMINATION, and CONTINUATION. We consider phasal and non-phasal forms, the latter having similar positional limitations as phasal aspect expressions. In Hausa and Miya, phasal aspect is coded by verbs and an immediately following complement. Hausa phasal verbs take truncated sentence-complements, gerundives or participles, or sentence-complements, while those in Miya show truncation or parataxis. In the same slot as phasal aspect forms Hausa exhibits verbs that do not convey aspectuality. Instead, they provide either temporal interpretations of various kinds, frequency, duration, habituality, or meanings that are capacitive or quantitative in nature. In Emai of West Benue Congo, phasal aspect is coded by verbs with truncated complements and by grammatical morphemes. The latter code canonical phasal aspect and precede the main verb. In the same pre-verb position, Emai and other West Benue Congo languages exhibit grammatical morphemes that show non-canonical phasal aspect: temporal interpretations as well as capacitive, volitive, or quantitative meanings. We conclude that canonical phasal aspect forms and similarly positioned but non-phasal forms in West Africa provide fertile ground for further crosslinguistic comparison.

Keywords: Phasal aspect, Hausa, Miya, Edoid, Yoruboid, preverbs

1 Introduction

Variation certainly characterizes the Chadic language family from east to west. However, phasal aspect forms in West Chadic exhibit rela-

tively uniform syntax and semantics. They show forms and meanings linked most often to truncated complements, as analyzed by Newman (2000), Jaggar (2001), and Schuh (1998). Still, their findings have not been incorporated into a broader crosslinguistic assessment with non-Chadic languages of West Africa. To inch toward such comparison with West Benue Congo, we examine Hausa verbs that express phasal aspect and associated meanings. We outline their potential semantic classes, assess their grammatical complement types, and compare them to West Benue Congo Emai (Edoid) and Yoruba.

2 Aspectual verbs in Hausa of West Chadic

We begin with semantic classes. Investigations of phasal aspect by Dixon (1991: 172, 2010: 417) and Levin (1993: 274–275) have established an initial tripartite baseline of canonical semantic types. They identified three types: INITIATION, TERMINATION, and CONTINUATION. Based on Newman (2000), Hausa shows three phasal aspect verbs that are clearly canonical: *fara* ‘begin/start’, *gama* ‘finish’, and *rika* ‘continue’. Each of these verbs in a clausal structure is illustrated in (1–3).

- (1) Hausa (Newman 2000: 67)

Yā fārà yî-n màganā.
 3SG.M.COMP begin do-GEN talk
 ‘He began/started talking.’

- (2) Hausa (Newman 2000: 69)

Mâtā-tā gamà dafà àbinci-n rāna.
 wife.GEN-1SG.F-COMP finish cooking food-GEN midday
 ‘My wife finished cooking lunch.’

- (3) Hausa (Jaggar 2001: 549)

Zā mù rikà kòyo-n Hausa à jāmi’ār.
 FUT 1PL continue learn-GEN Hausa LOC university
 ‘We will continue to study Hausa at the university.’

Overall, forty-one phasal aspect expressions are identified for Hausa by Newman (2000), thirty-five by Jaggar (2001), and in Miya fourteen are found in Schuh (1998). Several of these forms are not as

strongly delimited in their meaning as the tripartite division of Dixon (1991) and Levin (1993) suggests. For instance in Hausa, there is *koma* ‘resume’ and *fasa* ‘postpone’. They characterize event INITIATION but only in terms of temporal resumption and delay, respectively. Both assume the existence and happening of an event. The verb *kara* ‘repeat/do again’ bears on CONTINUATION, albeit of a discontinuous sort, since it refers to repetition of an event. The verb *samu* ‘manage to/succeed in doing’ and its negative opposite *rasa* ‘not manage’ augment dimensions of TERMINATION, not simply confirm it. The verb forms *kusa* ‘almost, be about to’ and *nèṃā* ‘try to, be about to’ assume INITIATION as background for aspectually proximate meanings.

Further examination reveals verbs that hold the same position as Hausa phasal aspect verbs but do not convey either of the three canonical types, even when the latter are construed broadly. Forms in this second tier, the non-phasal forms, do not highlight an event edge (INITIATION/TERMINATION) or non-edge CONTINUATION. Second tier verbs characterize an event’s temporal nature regarding frequency, duration or habituality. Among non-phasal forms that characterize event frequency, there are verbal expressions in Hausa such as *cika* ‘do too much’, *faye* ‘do too often’, and *rage* ‘do less often’. Others signal the habituality of an event in the present or past: respectively, *fī* ‘do something usually’ vs. *sābá (dà) / saba da* ‘used to do’. Still other verbs characterize event duration that remains indefinite. Included are *jima da* ‘spend some time / a while’, *dade* ‘spend long time’, and *rabu da* ‘time has passed since’.

A third tier of non-phasal aspect forms in the West Chadic languages under review are oriented toward grammatical subjects. Relevant forms reveal meanings in Hausa that are capacitive (*isa* ‘be capable of’, *iya* ‘be able to’) or quantitative (*tara* ‘share doing, do together’). In addition to the broad semantic range of expressions included under phasal aspect in Hausa, there are collocations that evince a non-literal, conventional metaphoric character (‘eat at the front’), as in (4). We can conclude that there are verbs in Hausa that are syntactically positioned like phasal forms but are not confined to the canonical phasal meanings outlined by Levin (1993) and Dixon (1991).

- (4) Hausa (Newman 2000: 65)

Shāgāri yā ci gāba dà zamā
 Shagari 3SG.M.COMP eat front COMP being
shugàba-nmù.
 president-GEN.1PL

‘Shagari continued to be our president.’

We now briefly consider phasal aspect complements in the West Chadic languages under review. Overall, complement form and grammatical marking manifest some variation. Complements are often nonfinite and deverbal, with dominant examples being infinitives and gerundives, as in the examples of (1–3), rather than finite clauses. In Hausa, complements are marked by comitative *dà*; it has the sense ‘with’ when combined with deverbals but the sense ‘that’ when combined with sentence complements.

Complements of phasal aspect verbs in Hausa partially contrast with those in Miya. Schuh (1998) notes the absence of sentence-complement markers and the prevalence of simple juxtaposition (parataxis) or of adpositional phrases (prepositional) showing *à* ‘with’. This absence characterizes Miya phasal and non-phasal aspect verbs (5–7).

- (5) Miya (Schuh 1998: 354)

míy fārà táwàzə bānà.
 1PL begin planting yesterday

‘We began planting yesterday.’

- (6) Miya (Schuh 1998: 355)

míy sá mbá ghànakə súwày.
 1PL IPFV finish building tomorrow

‘We will finish building tomorrow.’

- (7) Miya (Schuh 1998: 354)

màn ā sákè bəsaka nakən ndúwul.
 1SG IPFV repeat washing this pot

‘I will wash this pot again.’

We can sum up as follows. The Chadic languages under review display verbs that code the canonical division of phasal aspect described

by Dixon (1991) and Levin (1993). In addition to phasality, Chadic verbs, positionally related to the canonical phasal aspect forms, code meanings that are neither edge-inclusive (INITIATION, TERMINATION) nor edge-exclusive (CONTINUATION). Instead, these additional verbs code event temporal frequency, temporal qualifications that are indefinite, conditions of negation as well as capacitive and quantitative attributes of a grammatical subject. And still other expressions of phasal and non-phasal aspect utilize conventional metaphor.

3 Phasal aspect in Emai of West Benue Congo

A crosslinguistic perspective may shed further light on the structural patterns gleaned from West Chadic. Among West Benue Congo languages, phasal aspect verbs can be identified. However, Edoid, Yoruboid, and *Okò* (where orthographic *o* = *ɔ*) of the Nupoid group code the phasal aspect domain in a slightly different fashion from West Chadic. They do so in Edoid Emai with grammatical morphemes, not simply verbs (Schaefer & Egbokhare 2007, 2017). For example, Emai verbs do not code the three canonical semantic classes of phasal aspect advanced by Levin (1993) and Dixon (1991). It is grammatical morphemes preceding the main verb that code each canonical phasal aspect type.

3.1 Phasal aspect verbs in Emai

Emai shows verbs with phasal aspect meanings that are intransitive, transitive, or labile. Among exclusively intransitive verbs is *bɛɛ* ‘start’, which refers to INITIATION. As its argument, *bɛɛ* takes a gerundive complement marked by adposition *vbi* (8a) or a sentence complement marked by indicative complementizer *khi* (8b–c). The latter imposes a same-subject relation on the complement clause relative to the matrix clause.

(8) Emai (Schaefer & Egbokhare 2007: 62)

- a. *ʒlí ʒmɔ̀hè bɛ́ɛ vbí é máé úèmí.*
 ART man:PRX PST:start:PFV LOC food eating
 ‘The man started eating food.’

(14) Emai (Schaefer & Egbokhare 2007: 282)

- a. òjè múzán-ì.
Oje:PRX PST:halt-PFV
'Oje has halted / stopped.'
- b. ʒlì òkpòsò nwú ʒlì ìmátò múzán.
ART woman:PRX PST:take:PFV ART car halt
'The woman has made the car stop / hailed the car.'
- c. òjè múzán-í vbí úkpódè.
Oje:PRX PST:stand-PFV LOC road
'Oje has stood on the road.'

Verbs of causative motion in Emai exhibit exclusively transitive forms. They include *khu* 'chase', *roo* 'release', and *gbaan* 'wind', which have phasal aspect meanings pertaining to TERMINATION ('stop' for *khu* in 15, 'cease' for *roo* in 16) or INITIATION ('start' for *gbaan* in 17).

(15) Emai (Schaefer & Egbokhare 2007: 248)

- a. ègè khú ójé vbí ényó údàmí.
Ege:PRX PST:chase:PFV Oje LOC wine drinking
'Ege stopped Oje from drinking wine.'
- b. ègè khú òjè.
Ege:PRX PST:chase:PFV Oje
'Ege has chased Oje.'

(16) Emai (Schaefer & Egbokhare 2007: 357)

- a. òjè róó óbó vbí ényó údàmí.
Oje:PRX PST:release:PFV hand LOC wine drinking
'Oje ceased drinking.' (Lit. 'Oje released his hand from wine drinking.')
- b. òjè róó égé óbò.
Oje:PRX PST:release:PFV Ege arm
'Oje released Ege.' / 'Oje left Ege alone.'

Each TERMINATION form in (15–16) allows adposition complements that contain a gerundive phrase. However, verb *gbaan*, which

otherwise has the meaning ‘wind’ (17b), and ventive preposition re collocate to express the phasal aspect meaning ‘start’, reflecting INITIATION. They take a gerundive in direct object position (17a).

(17) Emai (Schaefer & Egbokhare 2007: 145)

a. *yán* ^l*gbáán* *ǰká* *úkòmí* *é.*
 3PL:DST PST:wind:PFV maize planting VEN
 ‘They started maize planting.’ (Lit. ‘They wound up maize planting.’)

b. *òjè* *ǰ* *ǰ* *gbààn* *òú.*
 Oje:PRX SM:PRX PRS:PROG wind:IPFV thread
 ‘Oje is winding thread.’

Still other verbs that engage meanings related to canonical phasal aspect utilize a more complex syntax or exhibit a meaning related to the negation of CONTINUATION. The verb series complex *daa nyé* ‘detain’ with no gerundive or sentence complement shows an obligatory extensive structure, where extensive refers to a change of position that is determined to be maximal (18a–b).

(18) Emai (Schaefer & Egbokhare 2007: 71)

a. *ìsǰà* *dáá* *ǰì* *nyé* *vbí*
 soldiers:PRX PST:reposition:PFV 3SG constrain LOC
úkpódè.
 road

‘Soldiers detained him on the road / stopped him on the road.’

b. *òjè* *dáá* *áléké* *óbò* *nyé.*
 Oje:PRX PST:reposition:PFV Aleke arm constrain
 ‘Oje detained Aleke.’ / ‘Oje prevented Aleke from leaving.’

The Emai verb *hεε* in construction with itive form a has only an intransitive shape. Depending on its subject collocate it has the sense ‘dissipate’ or ‘evaporate’, both of which relate to negation of a CONTINUATION condition (19a–b).

(19) Emai (Schaefer & Egbokhare 2007: 166)

a. *ókhòìn* *héeé* *↓á.*
 fighting:PRX PST:dissipate:PFV ITV
 ‘The fighting has stopped. / The fighting has dissipated.’

b. *ólì* *àmè* *héeé* *↓á.*
 ART water:PRX PST:dissipate:PFV ITV
 ‘The water has evaporated. / The water has oozed away.’

Last among these verbs is *waa* ‘refrain from’ (as a taboo). It evinces only a transitive form. It does not exhibit an edge-inclusive sense or negation of an edge-inclusive sense. Instead, its meaning pertains to negation of an assumed durative condition, i.e. negation of CONTINUATION, where for example okra or some other food source, for instance, would normally be consumed and not be barred from consumption as a taboo item (20).

(20) Emai (Schaefer & Egbokhare 2007: 434)

óje *ó* *ò* *wàà* *íshànbó.*
 Oje:DST SM:DST PRS.HAB refrain:IPFV okra
 ‘Oje refrains from okra.’

3.2 Phasal aspect grammemes in Emai

In addition to verbs in the preceding section, Emai articulates meanings that reflect canonical phasal aspect with grammatical forms or grammemes. Relevant exponents are preverbal grammatical morphemes that express CONTINUATION (‘continue to’) or, in indicative mood, proximate relations of INITIATION (‘nearly started’) or TERMINATION (‘nearly finished’).

Of these, CONTINUATION is coded by the durative preverb form *se* ‘continue’ (21a–b).

(21) Emai (Schaefer & Egbokhare 2017: 118)

a. *ólí* *ómòhè* *sèè* *é* *vbí* *ólí* *émàè.*
 ART man:PRX PST:DUR eat:PFV LOC ART food
 ‘The man has continued to eat from the food.’

b. *ólí* *ómòhè* *ò* *ó* *sé* *kp*
 ART man:PRX SM:PRX PRS.PROG DUR wash:IPFV

ólì ìtásà.

ART plate

‘The man is continuing to wash the plate.’

Coding INITIATION and TERMINATION, respectively, are egressive *yà* ‘nearly started’ (22a–b) and ingressive *mɔ* ‘nearly finished’ (23a–b).

(22) Emai (Schaefer & Egbokhare 2017: 122)

a. ólí ómǎhè yà é ólí émàè.

ART man:PRX PST:IG eat:PFV ART food

‘The man nearly started eating the food (but didn’t).’

b. ólí ómǎhè yà gbé ólí ákhè á.

ART man:PRX PST:IG break:PFV ART pot itive

‘The man nearly started to break the pot (but didn’t).’

(23) Emai (Schaefer & Egbokhare 2017: 123)

a. ólí ómǎhè mɔ́ é ólí émàè lé.

ART man:PRX PST:EG eat:PFV ART food already

‘The man nearly finished eating the food already.’

b. ólí ùbèlè mɔ́ vò̀n.

ART gourd:PRX PST:EG be.full:PFV

‘The gourd is nearly full.’

Phasal aspect grammemes in Emai appear formally related to synchronic verb forms, all of which are intransitive. We assume the grammemes result from the grammaticalization of verbs that once expressed motion or change of state. Preverb *sɛ* ‘continue on’ is related in form to path-of-motion verb *sɛ* with the sense ‘move as far as / up to, reach’. It requires a locative marked oblique phrase as object (24). Corresponding to ingressive preverb *yà* ‘nearly start’ is the verb *ya* with the sense ‘commence, start’ (25). And egressive preverb *mɔ* ‘nearly completed’ is likely derived from a verb like *mɔ* ‘bear/produce fruit’, which conveys a two-stage change of state (26). These are provisional grammaticalization paths, but they strike us as promising.

- (24) Emai (Schaefer & Egbokhare 2007: 363)

òjè sɛ vbí édà.
 Oje:PRX PST:move.toward LOC river
 ‘Oje has moved as far as the river.’

- (25) Emai (Schaefer & Egbokhare 2007: 438)

óshàn yá-ì.
 journey:PRX PST:commence-PFV
 ‘The journey has commenced.’

- (26) Emai (Schaefer & Egbokhare 2007: 280)

ślí údúkù mǎ-ì.
 ART coconut.tree:PRX PST:bear.fruit-PFV
 ‘The coconut tree has borne fruit.’

The distributional class of grammatical forms that express canonical phasal aspect meanings in Emai includes two forms with an additive character relative to an entire event, thus articulating neither INITIATION, CONTINUATION, nor TERMINATION. The two forms are *che* ‘again’ (27) and *gbo* ‘also, too’ (28).

- (27) Emai (Schaefer & Egbokhare 2017: 118)

ślí śmǎhé ↓ché é émà.
 ART man:DST PST:REP eat:PFV yam
 ‘The man ate yam again.’

- (28) Emai (Schaefer & Egbokhare 2017: 118)

ślí śmǎhé ↓gbó é ślí émàè.
 ART man:DST PST:ADD eat:PFV ART food
 ‘The man also ate the food / ate the food too.’

4 Comparing West Benue Congo and West Chadic

We turn now to a brief comparison of the coding of phasal aspect and non-phasal aspect in the West Benue Congo language Emai and the West Chadic language Hausa.

4.1 Comparison of Edoid Emai and West Chadic Hausa

In this subsection we compare the coding of phasal aspect in Emai of Edoid and Hausa of West Chadic. An obvious difference to note from this preliminary analysis is that Emai codes phasal aspects with verb forms and grammemes, while Hausa relies primarily on verbs (although a reviewer reminds us that Hausa has at least one particle *ta* that follows optional pro-verb *yi* ‘do’ in *Yau an ta ruwa* ‘Today it keeps on raining’).

Relative to phasal aspect meanings and their coding, Emai verbs evince only partial coding. There is no verb in Emai that codes the phasal aspect notion of CONTINUATION. A second difference in coding patterns pertains to Emai usage of grammatical forms. With respect to these two devices there is a third difference. Emai conveys INITIATION and TERMINATION meanings with proximate forms that in the indicative translate with ‘nearly/almost’. Table 1 summarizes the most obvious comparative relations between Hausa and Emai with respect to coding canonical phasal aspect by verbs (V) and/or grammemes (G).

Table 1. Summary of coding patterns for the three canonical meanings of phasal aspect identified by Dixon (1991) and Levin (1993)

Hausa-V	Emai-V	Emai-G
INITIATION	INITIATION	INITIATION (nearly)
TERMINATION	TERMINATION	TERMINATION (nearly)
CONTINUATION	---	CONTINUATION

Although verbs in Hausa code the canonical phasal aspect notions INITIATION, TERMINATION and CONTINUATION, non-phasal aspect is also coded by Hausa verbs. Non-phasal aspect verbs in Hausa provide temporal interpretations of event frequency, event duration, or corresponding qualifications of temporal negation. As well some non-phasal aspect verbs in Hausa code quantitative or capacitive attributes of grammatical subjects.

4.2 Comparison of Yoruba and West Chadic Hausa

In this subsection we compare the coding of non-phasal aspect in West Benue Congo Yoruba and in West Chadic Hausa. Grammatical forms of a sort that express non-phasal aspect meanings are found in pre-verb position in WBC. They occur in Edoid, Yoruboid, and Okoid.

In Yoruba, non-phasal aspect forms are identified as grammatical preverbs (Bamgbose 1966, 1967; Rowlands 1969; Awobuluyi 1978). In large measure grammatical forms of this kind reflect verb qualifications discussed in a series of papers by Nuyts (2005, 2016). Preverb forms ascribe different types of properties to the grammatical subject. They express quantitative qualifications of an event such as ‘together’, and the mutually exclusive subcategories of dynamic modality, e.g. capacitive ‘can’, volitive ‘mistakenly’, capacitive ‘courageously’, temporal ‘earlier on’, in addition to boulomaic modality, e.g. ‘without reason’.

Appearing with some equivalency to these WBC preverb meanings are West Chadic verb forms from Hausa with non-phasal aspect meanings. Table 2 provides an initial crosslinguistic identification of these non-phasal meanings and their related forms, as found in Newman (2000) for Hausa and Awobuluyi (1978) for Yoruba. Aligned with a selection of Hausa verbs are semantically similar grammatical preverbs from Yoruba of WBC. Quite similar alignments can be formulated for WBC Emai and Okò.

Table 2. Non-phasal aspect forms and their meanings in Hausa and Yoruba

Category	Hausa	Yoruba
TEMP-FREQUENCY	<i>cikà</i> ‘do too much of’ <i>fayè/fiyà</i> ‘do too much’ <i>rage</i> ‘do often’	
TEMP-NEGATION	<i>fàsà</i> ‘postpone, fail’ <i>gazà</i> ‘lack’ <i>ragè</i> ‘do less often’	<i>tètè</i> ‘without delay’ <i>wulè</i> ‘in vain, to no avail’
TEMP-DURATIVE	<i>ràbudà</i> ‘time passed since’ <i>jimà dà</i> ‘be for a while’ <i>tabà</i> ‘ever do’	<i>jàjà</i> ‘at last, finally’ <i>kókó/kó</i> ‘first’
CAPACITIVE	<i>iyà</i> ‘be able to’ <i>isa</i> ‘be capable of’ <i>sāmù</i> ‘manage to succeed’	<i>lè</i> ‘be able’
NEG CAPACITIVE	<i>kàsà</i> ‘be unable to do’ <i>rasà</i> ‘be unable to’	
VOLITIVE		<i>dìdì</i> ‘intentionally’ <i>mòómò</i> ‘intentionally’

Category	Hausa	Yoruba
BOULOMAIC		<i>sàà</i> ‘without purpose’ <i>dédé</i> ‘without reason’
QUANTI-TATIVE	<i>tārā</i> ‘share doing’ <i>shā</i> ‘do often, much’	<i>dìjọ/jọ</i> ‘together’ <i>jùmò</i> ‘together’

5 Discussion

As the preceding has suggested, it is not necessarily only West Chadic forms from Hausa that convey meanings for canonical phasal aspect that may be ripe for crosslinguistic study. Non-phasal aspect forms that have been lumped together with phasal forms might also benefit from crosslinguistic study. West Chadic, more specifically Hausa, reveals event qualifications not limited to phasal notions as they are canonically construed. These include non-phasal temporal qualifications, both affirmative and negative, as well as qualifications that are capacitive or quantitative in nature. For purposes of simple comparison, we provide pre-verbal templates for Yoruba of West Benue Congo and Hausa of West Chadic.

Yoruba: PHASAL – BOULOMAIC – DYNAMIC – QUANTITATIVE

Hausa: PHASAL – TEMPORAL – CAPACITIVE – QUANTITATIVE

These templates may more sharply delineate the semantic types involved and their crosslinguistic standing relative to other event qualifications.

Obviously, we have lumped together and split up various verb meanings, many far-removed from our limited understanding of West Chadic. Whether this might be useful for crosslinguistic studies of form-function relations, and their linear order remains to be determined. But if nothing else, this exercise has called attention to areas of semantic and syntactic structure that are not uniformly aligned across languages in West Africa and so appear worthy of further crosslinguistic study.

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Abbreviations: Abbreviations for grammatical morphemes are generally in line with those of the Leipzig Glossing Conventions. Abbreviations used in this paper are: ADD additive, ART definite article, ASS associative, COM comitative, COMP completive, DST distal temporal distance, DUR durative, EG egressive, F feminine, FUT future tense, GEN genitive, IG ingressive, IND indicative, IPFV imperfective aspect, ITV itive, LOC locative, M masculine, PFV perfective aspect, PL plural, PROG progressive, PRS present tense, PRX proximal temporal distance, PST past tense, REP repetitive, SG singular, SM subject marker, VEN ventive.

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