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Ewe
(Kwa, Benue-Kwa)
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10.1 General

Nearly 2.5 million people (1,615,000 in SE Ghana, 860,000 in southern Togo, where it is the predominant language) speak Ewe as a first language. At least another half million speak it as second language. Ameka (p.c.) regards these figures as suspect and understated.

There are fourteen distinctive vowels: seven oral (/i, e, ɛ, a, ɔ, o, u/) and the same nasal. Ewe has five phonetic but two phonemic tones (rising and falling are viewed as sequences of H and L). High is marked below, by the acute accent; low is unmarked. Most verb roots are monosyllabic. In this chapter, a hyphen (-) represents a bound inflection, an equals sign (=) represents clitic status. The sources concentrate more on segmental than tonal features, and it is evident in bits of data below that some constructions may involve tonal details that we have overlooked. Ewe is one of Africa’s better documented languages. The following relies on Schadeberg (1985) and Pasch (2002), with much advice from Felix Ameka.

There appears to be a tradition of terminology for verbal categories in Ewe. We accept some parts of this but have modified other parts in line with the general practice in this book. The Introduction discusses this further.

10.2 Word order

Basic word order is S (AUX) V O, as in:

(1) a nyànű=a ṭe ᵃ̀le ᵃ̀łë
woman=DEF buy.FAC salt
‘The woman bought salt.’

b. ę=ná ɔgá nṳ́tu ́ lá
3s=give.FAC money man DEF
‘3s gave the man money.’

c mí ɗu-na nú ɔgá wóeve me
we eat-IPFV thing hour wóeve me
‘We usually eat at 12 o’clock.’

d Kofí tăși ná ɔkutsá m ètsɔ
Kofi aunt give.FAC sponge me yesterday
‘Kofi’s aunt gave me a sponge yesterday.’

1 We thank Felix Ameka for his generous help in providing detailed and useful comments on the first draft of this chapter.
In the Progressive and Prospective aspects, however, the order is S AUX O V, where the V appears to be a verbal noun, so:

(2)  

a. \text{me=le dò wò-ín}
1s=be.IPFV work do-PROG
‘I’m working.’

b. \text{me=le dò wò-gé}
1s=be.IPFV work do-PROS
‘I am going to work, intend to work.’

c. \text{me=nò-a dò wò-ín}
1s=be.FAC work do-PROG
‘I used to be working.’

Basic order can also be altered by emphasis/focus/topicalisation, which involve fronting:

(3) \text{edze yé nyɔnu=á fële}
salt FOC woman=DEF buy.FAC
‘The woman bought salt.’

10.3 Verb structure

All pre-stem material is analytic (AUX above). Ameka (p.c.) says his approach is analytic “with some agglutinative and fusional tendencies”. Schadeberg writes the verb and its satellites more analytically, Pasch more synthetically, presumably reflecting a difference in interpreting cliticised elements. The only bound elements are the suffixes PRG, PROS, and IPFV. All other categories are independent or cliticised. All extensions have been lost and their function largely taken over by “co-verbs” and AUXs. A schema for AUX and V combined, using subject and object pronouns, follows. Some details of cliticisation may be missing.

(4) \((\text{SP=} \text{NEG}_1=M_1=A_1 \# \text{DIR}_1 \# M_2 \# M_3 \# \text{DIR}_2 \# \text{be} \# \text{root}-A_2 (=\text{OP}) \# \text{NEG}_2\)

SP (cliticised to the right): 1s \text{me} (\text{me} preceding negative \text{mé} is realized as \text{nye}. See example 8(b)), 2s \text{e/ne}, 3s \text{é/wo} (\text{ye} logophoric), 1p \text{mìé}, 2p \text{mie}, 3p \text{wò}.

\text{NEG}_1 \text{ and } \text{NEG}_2 : \text{see §10.7, below.}

\text{M}_1 : \begin{tabular}{l}
\text{(I)á Potential, ná Subjunctive} \\
\text{A}_1 : \text{ga Iterative}
\end{tabular}
DIR₁: hé Iterative, qa Altrilocal. These may co-occur.

M₂: nyá voice, and certainty (some M₂ and M₃ morphemes are illustrated in (7) i, j and k, below)

M₃: gbé immediate, xa frustration

DIR₂: vá Ventive

A₂: Ø Factative, -ím Progressive (locative), -gé Prospective, -(n)a Imperfective

OP: m, wo, e, mí, mi, wó

All authors show additional “augmenting particles” between A₁ and root. In the Progressive and Prospective of intransitive verbs, the root is usually reduplicated. Serial verb constructions consist of two or more verbs juxtaposed asyndetically. Subject, object (and NEG) are only stated once on the first verb. Examples:

(5) a ́ =tró vá tó gbọ-nye yi aϕé
he=turn come pass place-my go home
‘He turned, came, passed my place, (and) went home.’

b mí qa fufu qu
we cook fufu eat
‘We cooked fufu and ate it.’

10.4 Aspects, and a “tense/mood”

This section deals with the six categories called Factative (the traditional term is Aorist), Imperfective (Habitual), Iterative (also Repetitive), Progressive (also Continuous), Prospective (Intentive, Ingressive), Potential (Future/Potential) in the sources, although as will be seen in §10.5, other, less grammaticalised, aspectual, modal, and directional categories occur also. These six are expressed as follows:

(6) Perfective, unmarked:

a ́=tó bọ=á
3s=stop.FAC car=DEF
‘3s stopped the car.’

b fufu ti=m
fufu tire.FAC=me
‘I am fed up with fufu.’

c ́-ná ga ɲútsu lá
3s-give.FAC money man DEF
‘3s gave the man money.’
Imperfective, suffixal -(n)a:

d me=wó-a dó
1s=do-IPFV work
‘I work.’

e ame kú-ná
person die-IPFV
‘Humans are mortal.’

Iterative, pre-verb ga:

f me=ga yi
1s=ITR go
‘I went again.’

g é=ga le dó wó-ím
3s=ITR be work do-PRG
‘3s is still working.’

h mé=ga yi o
NEG=ITR go NEG
‘Don’t go!’

Progressive, ‘be’ and -m:

i me=le dó wó-ím
1s=be.IPFV work do-PRG
‘I am working.’

j me=nó dó wó-ím
1s=be.FAC work do-PRG
‘I was working.’

Prospective, ‘be’ and -gé:

k me=le dó wó-gé
1s=be.IPFV work do-PROS
‘I intend/am about to work.’

l tsi le dzadza-gé
water be rain-PROS
‘It’s about to rain.’
Potential, pre-verb (I)a:

\[
m \quad m=a \quad yi \quad 1s=POT \quad go
\]

‘I’ll go.’

Pasch (2002:42) says that when the “aorist” is used with stative/inchoative verbs, it denotes the result of a past action, and thus is translated typically by using an English present (6b); with dynamic verbs, it typically denotes a past action (6a). In fact, she has examples where the translation has English past and present but does not comment further, as in (6c). She also says that other authors have claimed that the aorist characterizes situations as “perfectiv/accompli”. It seems to us that this is a classic factative and we will use that label. Of the “habitual”, she says that it is used of situations that occur regularly, repeatedly and in the same way. Since structurally (suffix, or lack thereof) and functionally this contrasts with the preceding category, we refer to it as Imperfective (6d, e).

With Factative, the Iterative refers to a past repeated once (6f), but with Progressive Pasch translates it as ‘be still verbing’ (6g). These might be best labeled by the general term Iterative. Iterative ga also occurs in negative commands, as in (6h), above. This resembles the use of suffixal (imperfective) -ag- in some Bantu languages.

The Progressive refers to a situation ongoing at the time of reference (6i, j). Pasch says the Prospective expresses that the speaker intends to do something or that the speaker is convinced that a situation will take place (6k, l). Traditionally and by Schadeberg, implicitly by Pasch, the a-form has been termed a Future (tense). However, Ameka calls it Potential (mood), following a new analysis 2.

This points up an interesting issue: many languages, Benue-Congo and also other non-Benue-Congo languages in West Africa, have been analysed as only having tenses in the future, that is, as having one or more future “tenses”, but is this a correct analysis? Worldwide, in languages with a single tense contrast, it is predominantly past versus non-past, not future versus non-future. So is this a West African areal feature or is it the result of in incomplete or incorrect analysis? Ameka (p.c.) feels the analysis as a Future tense in Ewe, at least, is incorrect and that it is better analysed as Potential mood, because “what we are calling the ‘prospective’ is an imperfective aspect construction that is used to express imminent future, purposive and approximative and attemptive meanings. The main argument for claiming that (I)a is not a future marker is that it can be used with both future and past time reference with ‘potential’ meaning. Furthermore, it is not predictive. There is a coercive reading of the future in some contexts but that is not the invariant meaning of the form.”

Given that Ameka and Essegbey are linguists and native Ewe speakers, we follow their lead here, and replace Future (tense) by Potential (mood). Consequently Ewe should be considered an aspect, not a tense-aspect, language.

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2 Ameka (2008); Essegbey (2008).
10.5 Other categories

It can be seen in (4) that the Ewe verbal complex encodes other verbal categories beside aspect. We cannot discuss them all here and restrict ourselves to directionals, focus, relativisation, imperative, mood, and voice. Each is discussed briefly below, and then all are exemplified in (7).

10.5.1 Directionals

The sources give hé/há (7d) Itive/serial, qa (7b,c) Altrilocal/goal, vá/vë Ventive (7a), and maybe others (e.g. yi, 7h) show the function of these, although not all in the template position of the verb complex.

10.5.2 Focus

Focused and topicalised constituents are moved left or fronted and often involve a particle (é, ýé) after the constituent affected (7e)). Only one constituent can be focused.

10.5.3 Relativisers

All relativised clauses, whether they involve subject or object of the relative clause, are flanked by post-nominal si and optional clause final lë (7f, g).

10.5.4 Imperative

The sources distinguish Imperative (2nd persons s and p) from Jussive (1st and 3rd). The 2nd person singular consists of the bare verb stem with certain tonal modifications (Schadeberg 1985:20). Jussives have a special set of subject pronouns (all high-toned except one) and are (optionally) preceded by ná/në. See (7h).

10.5.5 Mood

Beside ná/në, which Ameka calls subjunctive marker, there are other particles at M2 and M3 which might be better labelled modals, and translate roughly by English terms such as “bother/frustration, immediate, certainty, alleviating”. See (7i, j).

10.5.6 Voice

Ameka (2005) considers one of the functions of nyá (Ameka 2005) to be voice-related (illustrated in (7k), below), voice being defined as a strategy “for attaching the various participant roles (such as agent, patient, recipient) to the various grammatical relations (subject, object, etc)” (Trask 1997:234). Nyá is related to the verb ‘know’.

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3 In certain phonological contexts the second vowel of the preceding noun has a high tone.
(7) a  Kofi mé=mli  kpé=á  vê  o
Kofi NEG=roll.FAC stone=DEF come NEG
‘Kofi didn’t roll the stone here.’

b  wô=nyâ=e  qá  kaba
3p=chase.FAC=3s away quickly
‘They chased 3s away quickly.’

c  nyónu=a  yi  fiásé  me  qa=Φle  taku
woman=DEF go.FAC shop in there=bought shawl
‘The woman went into a shop and bought a shawl’

d  wô=á=e  tsi  á=qu  nú  á-há  mló  anyí
they=POT=bathe water POT=eat thing POT=Itive lie earth
‘They will bathe, eat, and lie down’

e  nûtsu=lá  é  me=wo  dô  ná
man=DEF FOC 1s=do.FAC work for
‘I worked for the man.’

f  atí  si  me=dó  lâ  kú
tree REL 1s=plant.FAC REL die.FAC
‘The tree which I planted is dead.’

g  amé  si  kpó  da=lá  lá  né  vá  wu=i
person REL see.FAC snake=DEF REL SBJ come kill-it
‘Person who saw the snake should come and kill it.’

h  yi ‘Go!(s)’  mi=yi ‘Go!(p)’

me=ga  yi  o  ‘Don’t go!(s)’  mi (mê)=ga  yi  o  ‘Don’t go!(p)’

(na=)má=yi ‘Let me go, I should go.’

(na=)yi ‘You (s) should go.’

(né=)yi or (ná=)yi ‘He should go.’

na=mî=dzô ‘Let’s depart.’

mê=ná=ga  yi  o  ‘He shouldn’t go.’

mî=má=ga  yi  o  ‘Let’s not go.’

i  me=xa  le  atîksê  wo-în
1s=in.vain be medicine take-PRG
‘I’m taking medicine for nothing.’
j  dolélé=á ká bóbó vié
sickness=DEF soften.FAC light slightly
‘The sickness has improved slightly.’

ek  nyó=a nyá kpó-ná (ná-m)
woman=DEF nyá see-IPFV (DAT-1s)
‘The woman is beautiful (to me).’
Lit: ‘the woman is seeable (to me)’

Compare to  me-kpó ny nyánu=a
1s-see.FAC woman=DEF
‘I saw the woman.’

10.6 Negation

All negation is encoded by mé, following the subject and preceding all verbal constituents, and clause-final o:

(8)  a   atí lá mé kó o
tree DEF NEG tall NEG
‘The tree is not tall.’

b  nye mé ga le tsitsi-m o
1s NEG ITR be.IPFV growgrow-PRG NEG
‘I’m no longer growing.’

c  mé ga yi o
NEG ITR go NEG
‘Don’t go!’

d  wó má ga yi o
3p NEG.POT ITR go NEG (ma < me+a)
‘They shouldn’t go.’

10.7 ‘Be’, “co-verbs”, auxiliaries

The PRG and PROS consist of ‘be’ and a nominalised verb with suffix. Le (Imperfective ‘be’) is used to refer to the present; no (Perfective ‘be’) is used to refer to the non-present (past or future). Pasch shows no as an independent verb, variously translated as ‘stay’ or ‘remain’ (verweilen)⁴. There are several other verbs (of motion) which belong in this category but are not discussed here.

A small set of words, referred to as “co-verbs” or “verbids”, function both as verbs or prepositions: le ‘be somewhere, at/in’, tsó ‘come from, from’, ná ‘give, to/for’, dè ‘reach, towards’, tô ‘pass, through’. So:

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⁴ Le and no ‘be and condition, quality, place, time’ contrast with nye ‘equational be’. 
Finally, other verbs occur in constructions similar to those involving serial verbs but the details differ somewhat, so they are treated differently: yi ‘go’ (direction there), vá ‘come’ (direction here), vo ‘finish’ (completive), kpó ‘see’ (‘already’, ‘yet’), and others. Thus:

(10) a ę=té zikpui lá yi
3s=drag.FAC chair DEF go
‘3s dragged the chair away’

b Kofi mé=mli kpé=á vê o
Kofi NEG=roll.FAC stone=DEF come NEG (vê < va and 3s)
‘Kofi didn’t roll the stone this way.’

c ę=wɔ=e vɔ
3s=do.FAC=it finish
‘3s has finished it.’

d égbe nye=mé=qu kpó o
today 1s=NEG=eat.FAC yet NEG
‘Today I have eaten nothing yet.’

References


Schadeberg, T.C. 1985. A small sketch of Ewe. *Special number of Afrikanistische Arbeitspapiere*.