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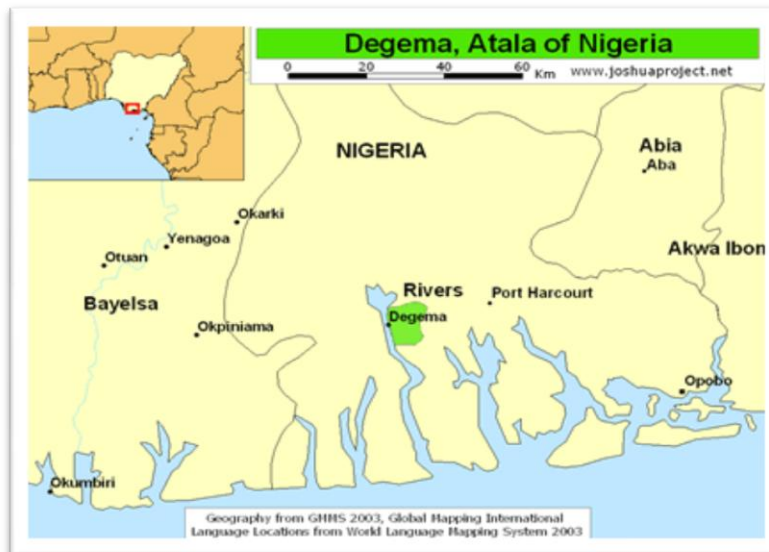
Degema

(Delta, Edoid, Atlantic-Congo)

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6.1 General

Degema is a Delta Edoid language spoken by some 22,000¹ people in two communities, Usokun-Degema (Usokun) and Degema Town (Atala), in the Rivers State region of Southern Nigeria, quite near the town of Port Harcourt. This chapter is based on the Usokun dialect, analyzed by native speaker Kari (1997, 2002, 2003). Other languages in the Delta Edoid sub-group include Engenni and Epie-Atisa, of which the former is more similar to Degema than either is to the latter. Kalabari (Ijoid) is a second language for some speakers.



Map source: Joshua Project

Degema has a ten vowel system (five tense (or in Kari's terms "wide"), five lax ("narrow"))². In simple words, tense vowels occur with tense, lax with lax. Vowel harmony is pervasive. There are two basic tones, H (´) and L (unmarked), as well as a down-stepped high tone (-). Tone is important in Degema, distinguishing lexical items (as in (1)) as well as some sentence types (as in (2)):

- (1) **úgo** 'butterfly' vs. **ugó** 'palm-nut vulture' vs. **úgō** 'kind of stew'

¹ Not 50,000 as reported in Kari (1997) (Kari: p. c.)

² In the examples, I have modified Kari's orthographic convention to the more easily recognizable IPA system. Thus, with reference to the vowels, Kari's [j] equals IPA [ɪ], [e] equals [ɛ], [a] equals [ə], [ɔ] equals [a], [ɥ] equals [ɯ], [ɔ] equals [ɔ]. See Kari (2004:368ff) for a full inventory.

- (2) Statement: **ɔʝɪ mɔ́-tá** vs. Question: **ɔʝɪ mɔ-ta**
 3s 3s-go 3s Q-go
 ‘He/she is going.’ ‘Is he/she going?’³

Degema has a thirteen-member noun-class system, (five singular, three plural and five single classes). “Modifying nominals” bear noun class agreement markers:

- (3) **ɔ-godó ɔ́-mómosi** vs. **e-godó í-mómosi**
 tall man ‘tall men’
 ‘a tall man’ ‘tall men’

Kari describes Degema morphology as “quite elaborate”, partly agglutinating and partly isolating. Derivation often involves prefixation, suffixation, or both:

- (4) Noun from verb: **-mɛsɪné** ‘dream’ (verb) > **ɪ-mɛsɪné** ‘dream’ (noun)
 Verbal noun from verb: **-dér** ‘cook’(verb) > **u-dér-əm** ‘cooking’(noun)
 Agent noun from verb: **-dí** ‘eat’ (verb) > **ɔ-dí-ām** ‘eater’ (noun)

Certain inflectional categories, such as perfect aspect (5a), inceptive aspect (5b) and factative⁴ aspect (5c), as well as the negative imperative, are marked at suffix. (More examples are to be found in the section on verbal morphology).

- (5) a perfect aspect: **ɔ-nú-té eni**
 3s-hit-PFT us
 ‘3s has hit us.’ (1997:58)
- b inceptive aspect: **nɔ b́áw-a**
 hit them-INCE
 ‘Begin to hit them!’ (1997:58)
- c factative aspect: **ólóló o-wú-ūn**
 bottle 3s-die-FAC
 ‘The bottle broke.’ (2004:268)

³ Kari identifies two types of clitic elements: those that precede their host (proclitics = PROCL) and those that follow (enclitics = ENCL). He notes that proclitics “function as pseudo-subjects” (1997:54). As in example (2), proclitics may occur with an overt pronominal subject (for emphasis, or when the subject is known) or alone, as in (5). The latter is, according to Kari, the preferred utterance for most speakers. For clarity, I have glossed what he terms PROCL as person subject markers. See Kari (2005b) for fuller discussion. Enclitics (analyzed by some authors as inflectional suffixes) are considered clitics by Kari, because of their “freedom of attachment to more than one grammatical category, and their phonological dependence on the hosts, i.e. their vowels agree with those of the host depending on whether the host has expanded or non-expanded vowels” (1997:56). Whereas Kari generally uses the symbol (=) to link proclitic person markers and enclitics, for the sake of uniformity of format, I have marked all morpheme boundaries with a dash.

⁴ Kari (p.c.) prefers the label factative (rather than perfective or imperfective) for call the enclitic **-Vn** because: “In Degema (Edoid) and Kalabari (Ijoid) [...] the factative marks past in dynamic verbs but past/non-past in stative verbs. Given this situation, one can really not describe factative as perfective, since in stative verbs factative could have a non-past or timeless meaning/interpretation”. I have glossed this suffix as FAC.

An extensive inventory of independent auxiliaries marks such categories as aspect (imperfective, inceptive), modality (imperative, unfulfilled, optative, obligation), negation and emphasis. (See Kari (2005a) for full discussion of auxiliaries and their role in grammar). Each of these is exemplified below in the section on verb structure.

6.2 Word Order

The basic word order in Degema is S V O X:

- (6) a **ɔʝi mó-dér ʊ́sóm**
 3s 3s-cook soup
 ‘3s is cooking soup.’ (1997:60)
- b **mó-nó mé**
 3s-hit me
 ‘3s hits/will hit me.’ (1997:32)⁵

This order may be altered by the preposing of the focused constituent (7). Note that the focus marker is identical to the relative pronoun (translatable as ‘that or ‘who’) which introduces a relative clause (8)):

- (7) **esen nó Óhóso o-kú-ūn**
 fish FOC Ohoso 3s-catch-FAC
 ‘It is a fish that Ohoso caught.’ (1997:59)
- (8) **ólóló nó ɔ-fíjǎ-n ʊ́bo méɛ**
 bottle that 3s-cut-FAC hand my
 ‘the bottle that cut my hand.’ (1997:34)

6.3 Verb Structure

Degema is an aspect-based language. There are two types of verbal structures, simple, involving one main verb (as in (9)) and serial, involving two verbs (as in (15)). Modality employs an analytic structure involving a modal auxiliary and a main verb (see examples in §6.5).

6.3.1 Simple verbs

The structure of a Degema simple verb is as follows:

- (9) SM-ROOT-EXT-ASP-IMP.NEG

In position 1 appears the subject marker - Kari’s “proclitics” - directly followed by the verbal root in position 2 - what Kari calls “simple stems” (i.e., forms without extensions), all of which

⁵ Kari says that “the present and future time seem to be expressed in the same way ... unless there is a specific time phrase to distinguish them” (1997:45). In subsequent examples, I will generally provide only the translation as given by Kari with the proviso that there is room for alternate interpretations of time frame. See also §6.4.2.

begin with a consonant (1997:40). Roots with an extension are referred to as “complex stems”. See Kari (1997:41) for tone patterns of the verb stem. Certain SMs differ aspectually (2004:333): third person singular allomorph [ɔ-/o-] appears with PFV/FAC and PFT aspect, whereas [mɔ-/mo-] appears with IPFV aspect:

(10) a Subject marker with factative aspect

ɔ-dí-ĩn

3s-eat-FAC

‘3s ate.’ (2004:284)

b Subject marker with perfect aspect

ɔ-dí-tē

3s-eat-PFT

‘3s has eaten.’ (2004:293)

c Subject marker with IPFV aspect

mó-dí...

3s-eat.IPFV

‘3s eats/is eating/will eat.’

There are seven extensions in Degema, which appear in position 3, directly after the root:

(11) **gbe** + EsE > **gbesé**
 ‘go (home)’ causative ‘cause to go (home)’

The maximum allowable is three, which must appear in a certain order: reciprocal/benefactive/pluraction + causative + iterative/habitual. Thus:

(12) [lɔŋɪnɛsɛ́j]
 /lɔ + vEnɪnE + EsE + vIrIj/
 shout + reciprocal + causative + iterative
 ‘cause to shout by itself many times’ (1997:42)

In position 4, after any extensions, appear certain aspect markers (discussed more fully in the following section). These include the “factative enclitic” -(V)**n** which marks “past time” with dynamic verbs “non-past time” or timeless situations with stative verbs. The tone pattern of root + “factative enclitic” is high-downstep:

(13) verb **dí** ‘eat’

a **mɪ-dí-ĩn**

1s-eat-FAC

‘I ate.’ (1997:44)

verb **tá** ‘go’

- b **mi-tá-ān**
1s-go-FAC
‘I went.’ (1997:44)

The negative imperative clitic may appear at final (see also §6.5):

- (14) **é-ta-tu**
2s-go-NEG.IMP
‘Don’t go!’ (Kari 1997:47)

6.3.2. *Serial verbs*

Kari (2003:271, 272) defines serial verbs as “two or more verbs strung together without an overt connective morpheme”(after Ndimele 1996:127) which may “share a common surface subject and one or more common aspectual/tense/polarity markers” (after Williamson 1989:30). The structure of a serial verb is as follows:

- (15) SM-ROOT ROOT-EXT-ASP

Generally, serial verb constructions in Degema are of the “concordial” type, where each verb in the series refers back to the subject by means of a pronoun or concordial marker. In this type of sentence, the single subject clitic appears on the initial verb:

- (16) **Tatane mʊ-tá dʒ ísén**
Tatane 3s-go buy fish
‘Tatane will go and buy fish.’ (2003:273)

Kari analyses multi-verbed constructions as arising from two (or more) independent sentences. Thus:

- (17) a. **Ohoso ɔ-tá-ān** b. **Ohoso ɔ-dʒ-n ísén**
Ohoso 3s-go-FAC Ohoso 3s-buy-FAC fish
‘Ohoso went.’ ‘Ohoso bought fish.’

combine to form:

- c. **Ohoso ɔ-tá dʒ-n ísén**
Ohoso 3s-go buy-FAC fish
‘Ohoso went and bought fish.’ (2003:275, 276)

A serial verb construction differs from a complex sentence, as in (18), where the subject clitics do *not* refer to the same person:

- (18) **Ohoso ɔ-kpérí báāw é-jī**
 Ohoso 3s-tell them.FAC 3p-come
 ‘Ohoso told them to come.’ (2003:276)

Kari observes that, for semantic reasons, the sequence of verbs in a Degema serial construction may not be reversed. The reason is that a typical serial verb consists of an action and subsequent result, comprising a single event. Thus, (19) is grammatical, since the “action of the non-initial verb (finishing) results from that of the initial verb (buying) ... It is not natural for the Degema people to finish off what is bought before buying it”(2003:277). (20) is, consequently, ungrammatical.

- (19) **Tatane ɔ-dé Bírésé-tē**
 Tatane 3s-buy cause to finish-PFT
 ‘Tatane has bought the quantity available of something.’(2003:277)

- (20) ***Tatane o-Bírésé dé-tē**

Whereas Degema does have a verbal extension which can, among its various meanings, be construed as “benefactive” or “applicative” (Kari 1997:42), the usual method of expressing these notions is via a serial verb construction:

- (21) **Ohoso ɔ-gbǐjé-n énam ɔ-kǐjé-n ɔji**
 Ohoso 3s-kill-FAC animal 3s-give-FAC him
 ‘Ohoso killed an animal for him.’ (2003:274)

- (22) **Breno ɔ-dé ké-n ɔji ɔsama**
 Breno 3s-buy.FAC give-FAC him shirt
 ‘Breno bought a shirt for him.’ (2003:280)

6.3.3 *Tense and Aspect Marking of Serial Verbs*

Unlike such constructions in other languages which “set” parameters on the first verb for all following verbs in the series, some serial verbs in Degema may be marked for two different aspects. In the following example, the first verb is marked FAC; the second is IPFV (by the IPFV allomorph of the SM, and by default, by the lack of overt PFV marking at suffix):

- (23) **Tatane o-kótú-n ɔji mɔ-pé rí ínúm**
 Tatane 3s-call-FAC him 3s-tell something
 ‘Tatane called him and is telling him something.’ (2003:280)

Typically, though, a single aspect marker which appears on the last (rightmost) verb, sets the relevant parameter for all (previous) verbs (“Tense and aspect markers [...] are shared by the verbs in series”). That is, the (unmarked) verbs which precede the final verb depend on the last verb for their interpretation:

(24) **Imanete o-jí kótú-n óji**
 Imanete 3s-come call-FAC him
 ‘Imanete came and called him.’ (2003:284) (both construed as PFV)

(25) **Ohoso o-jí kótú-té óji**
 Ohoso 3s-come call-PFT him
 ‘Ohoso has come and called him.’ (2003:285) (both construed as PFT)

Sometimes, both verbs are marked. Note also that both verbs bear a subject marker:

(26) **Tatane o-kótú-n óji ɔ-kpári-n ínúm**
 Tatane 3s-call-FAC him 3s-tell-FAC something
 ‘Tatane called him and told (him) something.’ (2003:285)

6.4 Aspect

The following is a summary of the main aspect and mood markers in Degema. There are no overt tense contrasts in Degema; as we have already seen, time reference is carried or implied by aspect.

6.4.1 Factative aspect

This aspect “...is used to denote a fact, which may be a dynamic situation that has already been completed or a state that once existed or still exists at the present time” (Jenewari 1980:133). With dynamic verbs, the factative indicates past time:

(27) **mi-dí-ín**
 1s-eat-FAC
 ‘I ate.’

With stative verbs, it indicates a state which has come into existence or that still exists (see also this usage in modal examples (38) and (40)):

(28) **o-mí-ín**
 3s-be wet-FAC
 ‘It became wet/It is wet.’ (Kari 2002:179)

The **-n** is deleted if the stem ends in a consonant. The unspecified vowel metathesises with the stem-final consonant:

(29) **ɔ-sóɔl** (Verb **sól** ‘jump’)
 3s-jump.FAC (**sól** + **ɔn** > **sólɔ** > **sóɔl**)
 ‘He jumped.’ (1997:44)

The factative marker can appear on non-verbal elements. In the following example, the first singular object pronoun **mɛ** ‘me’ is the host:

- (30) **ɔ-kó mé-^hén**
 3s-give me-FAC
 ‘3s gave me.’ (2002:179)

6.4.2 Imperfective aspect

This aspect is unmarked. Generally, the interpretation of an unmarked verb is imperfect present:

- (31) **ɔjɪ mó-máŋíné ínúm**
 3s 3s-learn something
 ‘3s studies/is studying’ (2002:188)

However, the only way to tell the difference between the “present” and the “future” is via the use of a specific time phrase. Thus, the utterance in (32a) can mean either present imperfective ‘is going’ or future ‘will go’ to market. The utterance is disambiguated by such words as **mína** ‘now’ (32b), or **úde** ‘tomorrow’ (32c):

- (32) a **mó-tá m’éki**
 3s-go to market
 ‘3s goes/is going/will go to market.’ (1997:45)
- b **mó-tá m’éki mína**
 3s-go to market now
 ‘3s is going to market now.’
- c **mó-tá m’éki úde**
 3s-go to market tomorrow
 ‘3s will go to market tomorrow.’

6.4.3 Perfect aspect

Perfect aspect is marked by **-té/-te ~dè/-de**. The marker may appear either on the verb (33), or on an associated argument if the perfect appears in a serial verb (34):

- (33) **ɔ-nó-té éni**
 3s-hit-PFT us
 ‘3s has hit us.’ (1997:58)
- (34) **ɔ-dé kó mé-^hté**
 3s-buy give me-PFT
 ‘3s has bought it for me.’ (2002:179)

The marker appears last if there are other elements such as extensions (35) or other enclitics, such as the “excessive enclitic” **bíré** (36):

- (35) **o-tá-sé-^lté**
 3s-go-CAU-PFT
 ‘S/he has caused (somebody or something) to go’ (adapted from Kari 2002:185)
- (36) **o-kótú wó-βíré-^lté**
 3s-call you- too much-PFT
 ‘3s has called you too much.’ (2002:179)

6.5 Mood

Modality in Degema is expressed analytically, via the use of a modal auxiliary (‘want’, ‘have’, ‘be necessary’) plus a main verb.

6.5.1 Optative

A wish is expressed by the use of the verb **biné** ‘want’ plus **ókono** which Kari interprets as **ók-** ‘way’ + **-no** ‘that’.

- (37) **mi-βíné-n ókono mú-ji béne**
 1s-want-FAC way-that 2s-come here
 ‘I want you to come here.’ (adapted from Kari 1997:46)

6.5.2 Obligation

Obligation ‘must’ is expressed by the auxiliary **nan** ‘have’ plus **ókono**:

- (38) **mi-nan ókono mé-mon wó**
 1s-have way-that 1s-see you
 ‘I must see you.’ (1997:46)

6.5.3 Ability

The ability to do something is expressed by auxiliary **η^wéné** ‘be able’ plus a main verb. Note that this construction does not use **ókono**:

- (39) **mi-η^wéné mī-náη ókó**
 1s-be able 1s-drive vehicle
 ‘I can drive a vehicle.’ (1997:47)

6.5.4 Necessity.

Necessity is expressed by **kpé** ‘be necessary’ plus **ókono**

- (40) **i-kpé-n** **ó kɔ-nó** **mó-mesé**
 it-be necessary-FAC way-that 2s-sleep
 ‘It is necessary that you sleep.’ (1997:47)

6.6 Auxiliaries

Degema has a large arsenal of auxiliaries, which may have aspectual or modal meaning⁶:

The structure of this type is :

- (41) SM-AUX (SM)V

6.6.1 *Inceptive imperative auxiliary: **bɔka** (ma) ‘begin to do something’:*

- (42) **á-bɔka** **tá**
 2p-AUX go
 ‘You (p) should begin to go!’ (1997:37)

6.6.2 *Inceptive non-imperative auxiliary: **ɔ́á** ‘about to do something’*

- (43) **ɔ-ɔ́á** **mō-gbé**
 3s-AUX 3s-go
 ‘He is about to go’. (1997:37)

6.6.3 *Unfulfilled auxiliary: **ɲ^wáɲkɪ** (suggesting that the action was not carried out as intended):*

- (44) **ɔ-ɲ^wáɲkɪ** **gbije** **ó mó** **jo**
 3s-AUX kill child the
 ‘He was about to kill the child.’ (1997:38)

6.7 Negation

Degema has many strategies for expressing negation. The following are the most common.

6.7.1 *Default negation*

Negation in Degema is signalled by a high tone (2003:278, 286). In simple sentences, the tone anchors on the subject clitic:

⁶ Kari (2004:133) reanalyzes **kɔ** ‘not’ as a negative adverb that participates in constituent negation, not as “a particle used for focus and emphasis” (as in Kari (1997:37ff)). See also Kari (2005a).

- (45) **Ohoso ó-βon élege**
 Ohoso 3s.NEG-take knife
 ‘Ohoso did not use a knife’ (2003:286)

Compare the tonal differences between the positive utterance in (46a) and the negative in (46b):

- (46) a **mi-βínén ókɔ-nó mú-yi βéne**
 1s-want way-that 2s-come here
 ‘I want you to come here.’
- b **mí-βine ókɔ-nó mó-ta m’éki**
 1s-want.NEG way-that 2s-go market
 ‘I don’t want you to go to the market.’ (Adapted from Kari 1997:46)

In serial verbs, the tone marking negative anchors on the SM of the first verb, but negates the entire predication:

- (47) **Jzakume ó-tam ídfjɔm ɔ-ɔ́ɔ**
 Jzakume 3s.NEG-chew food 3s-swallow
 ‘Jzakume did not chew food and (did not) swallow.’ (2003:278)

6.7.2 *Negative adverb kɔ́*

This element, essentially a negative copula, appears in sentence-initial position:

- (48) **kɔ́ ɔji nó o-méné-ēn**
 NEG him that 3s-do-FAC
 ‘It was not he that did it.’ (1997:47)

There is as well a negative imperative auxiliary which appears appended to the second person plural SM in this initial position:

- (49) **á-máɲki méné úmene**
 2p-NEG.IMP do work
 ‘Don’t work!’ (Kari 1997:38)

6.7.3 *Negative imperative*

The negative imperative clitic **tu/tɔ** appears after a single verb (50) or appended to an object in either a single verb or a serial verb (51):

- (50) **é-ta-tu**
 2s-go-NEG.IMP
 ‘Don’t go!’ (1997:47)

- (51) **é-dɛ kɔ mɛ-tɔ**
 2s-buy give me-NEG.IMP
 ‘Don’t buy (something) for me!’ (2002:179)

6.7.4 Not yet

A morpheme meaning ‘not yet’ (**ma**) (described by Kari as an “imperfective auxiliary”) may indicate that an action is ‘not yet’ accomplished.

- (52) **mí-ma sire**
 1s-not yet run
 ‘I have not yet run’ (2002:181)

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