

## 9

# Ejagham

(Ekoid Bantu)

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### 9.1 General

Ejagham is an Ekoid Bantu language spoken, according to Grimes (2005), by “60,000 to 70,000 speakers in (South East) Nigeria, 45,000 to 50,000 in (South West) Cameroon”. Some 220,000 people speak Ekoid languages, and Ejagham counts for some 120,000 of these, in a single community living astride the border between Nigeria and Cameroon. The source of our data is a PhD thesis by J.R. Watters (1981). We are also grateful to John Watters personally for correspondence, information, and advice.

### 9.2 Word Order

Word order is S V O X, as in the following example from Watters (1981:363).

- (1) àyûk à-kí<sup>1</sup>-súm ðbí  
Ayuk 3s-PRG-hit Obi  
‘Ayuk is hitting Obi.’

When a verb is used with a dependent infinitive, however, the object immediately precedes the infinitive, as in (2), from Watters (1981:402).

- (2) yε à-érɲè è-kpà è-t èɲ-óm  
3s 3s.PFM-know 5-sleep.mat 5-weave-INF  
‘She knows how to weave sleeping mats.’

### 9.3 Verb Structure

The structure of the Ejagham verb is as follows:

- (3) SM-NEG-A-REP-ROOT-SUF-FV

All verbs have a subject prefix marked for person and number. As will be seen in the following paradigms, aspect is mostly marked by tones, but there is a pre-stem marker **-kí-** for Progressive aspect, and a post-posed marker **-ág** used for an Imperfective/Habitual (simply **-g** after vowels, and **-a** after consonants). There are also auxiliary modal markers **tíg** and **kám**, representing possibility and ability, respectively, separate units that precede the verb.

Another more unusual prefix (**kpó** ‘again’) is referred to by Watters as a “Repetitive”<sup>1</sup>. This formative appears to have the meaning of something added: either

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<sup>1</sup>Abbreviated in this chapter as REP.

another event or another mention. It has two main functions: (i) representing the repetition of the act as in (4), and (ii) mentioning the event for a second time as in (5). It is also used with a variety of aspectual and modal forms.

- (4)    **à-kpó-gbǔ**                            **à-kí<sup>1</sup>-kpó-gbǔ**  
           3s-REP-fall.PFM                    3s-PRG-REP-fall  
           ‘3s has fallen again.’            ‘3s is falling again.’
- (5)    **à-kpò-fág**  
           3s-REP-sweep.IPFV  
           ‘he having swept’ (from previous mention)

Aspectual distinctions are mostly formed by tone contrasts. There is a tone on the subject marker, and one tone or more on the verbal root, depending on the number of syllables (typically one or two). There are three patterns of tone on the subject marker: (i) all high, as in Conditionals (§9.4.4 below); (ii) all low or high except 3p, as in (§9.4.2, 9.4.3, 9.4.3.1); (iii) all low or high except 3s as in §9.4.1. The patterns are complicated by floating tones left over after the segmental material to which they were attached has been lost.

There are two patterns of tone on the verb root, LH or H. The verb **gbǔ** ‘fall’, used in the paradigms as a lexical element, has a LH tone. Sometimes the verb roots retain their lexical tones; at other times the tones may be either rising or falling (the result of the collision of floating tones), depending upon the particular paradigm. Only in the Perfect (§9.4.1) is there a difference of *lexical* tone within the paradigm: the 3s is different from the rest.

## 9.4 Aspect

Since tense is not marked (1981:364), i.e. there are no tense distinctions, just a single Vast Present that represents the whole of time, this section deals exclusively with aspect. The information reported here is from section 6.3 of Watters (1981). His original ordering of material has been retained for ease of cross reference, although we have changed the actual numbering of sections.

### 9.4.1 Perfect

This form is characterized by a high tone on the subject prefix (excepting the 3s), a low tone on the verb root. With verbs of resultant state and body orientation (*sleep, sit, stand,* etc) these forms have the value of a simple present tense, a usage which is common throughout the Niger-Congo phylum for this set of verbs. The perfect can also be used to “express the recent past” (1981:370) “during the current day”. The verb is - **gbǔ** ‘fall’.

#### (6) Retrospective (Perfect)

Singular	Plural
<b>Ń-gbò</b> ‘I fell/have fallen’	<b>é-gbò</b> ‘We fell/have fallen’

<b>ó-gbò</b> ‘You fell/have fallen’	<b>á-gbò</b> ‘You fell/have fallen’
<b>à-gbò</b> ‘3s fell/has fallen’	<b>á-gbò</b> ‘They fell/have fallen’

### 9.4.2 *Performative*

The Performative (“Factative” in Welmers (1973:347)) normally represents complete events in the past, and is used as the main narrative form, but it can also be used for representing present states, as in (2) above, where *know* is a stative verb with present reference, a usage which is not possible for a Perfective, but normal for a Performative. The form is also used in “procedural discourse”, where instructions are given on how to carry out a certain activity: “...you go out and cut sticks, you carry them home. You gather those sticks and keep them” (1973:375), another usage where you it is common to use Performatives, but not Perfectives.

There is a low tone on the subject prefix (except 3p), HL (falling tone) on the root. The Performative in Ejagham can be used to represent the recent past, but only after a lapse of four to six hours. When used with the preposed modal particle **tíg** it represents an imaginary event, and the combined form is used to represent events in the future (Watters 1981:373), as exemplified in (7):

(7) <b>Performative</b>	<b>‘Future’/Potential</b>
<b>Ñ-gbò</b> ‘I fell’	<b>tíg Ñ-gbò</b> ‘I will fall’
<b>ò-gbò</b> ‘2s fell’	<b>tíg ò-gbò</b> ‘2s will fall’
<b>à-gbò</b> ‘3s fell’	<b>tíg à-gbò</b> ‘3s will fall’
<b>è-gbò</b> ‘We fell’	<b>tíg è-gbò</b> ‘We will fall’
<b>à-gbò</b> ‘You fell’	<b>tíg à-gbò</b> ‘You will fall’
<b>á-gbò</b> ‘They fell’	<b>tíg á-gbò</b> ‘They will fall’

The element **tíg** may also be used adverbially, following the verb in the usual position for adverbs, with the meaning ‘perhaps’. Preposed to the verb it has the same effect as a modal auxiliary, creating a representation of an event in imaginary time, and hence here labelled “Potential”. Since the Potential category does not allow for internal aspectual contrasts, the evidence indicates that this is a modal, rather than a tense category.

### 9.4.3 *Imperfective*

Watters uses the term “imperfective” in a generic sense to refer to two different forms, the Habitual/Concomitant marked by a suffix **-ág**, and the Continuous, marked by a prefix **kí**!

There is evidence that the first of these can be interpreted as simple Imperfective, which has an habitual or generic sense because, for lack of any tense contrasts, it represents, as a linguistic form, the whole of undivided universal time as a Vast Present.

These forms are quite common, especially in languages that lack tense contrasts, and are sometimes mistakenly called “aorists” because of their habitual or generic sense<sup>2</sup>.

(8) **Imperfective**

Singular		Plural	
<b>Ñ-gbǒ-g</b>	‘I fall (habitually)’	<b>è-gbǒ-g</b>	‘We fall (habitually)’
<b>ò-gbǒ-g</b>	‘you fall (habitually)’	<b>à-gbǒ-g</b>	‘you fall (habitually)’
<b>à-gbǒ-g</b>	‘3s falls (habitually)’	<b>á-gbǒ-g</b>	‘They fall (habitually)’

In the case of high tone verb roots, 3p has a following downstep feature.

9.4.4 ‘Continuous’/Progressive

There is also evidence that the continuous aspect, formed with the prefix **kí**<sup>1</sup>, may be a Progressive. As with the IPFV, subject prefixes are low toned (except for 3p). Verb roots have their lexical tones. It may be noted at this point that there are three positions for aspect and mode markers: (i) before the subject prefix (e.g. Potential), (ii) after the subject prefix but before the root (Progressive), and (iii) after the root (IPFV).

(9) **‘Continuous’/Progressive**

Singular		Plural	
<b>Ñ-kí-gbǒ</b>	‘I am falling’	<b>à-kí-gbǒ</b>	‘We are falling’
<b>ò-kí-gbǒ</b>	‘you are falling’	<b>à-kí-gbǒ</b>	‘you are falling’
<b>à-kí-gbǒ</b>	‘3s is falling’	<b>á-kí-gbǒ</b>	‘They are falling’

There is considerable overlap in the usage of the IPFV and the PRG, as is to be expected. Watters reports (1981:389) that both are used “in relative clauses, clauses with a focus particle, interrogative word questions, answers to interrogative word questions, and sentences with contrastive focus on an argument or predicate.”

A contrastive distribution emerges, however, between representations of the Habitual and the Continuous. Both may be used to represent the continuous, as in English *I am eating right now*, but only the Imperfective can be used to represent the habitual as in *On Fridays he always ate fish* where the English Progressive is not suitable: *?On Fridays he was always eating fish* but the French Imperfective *must* be used: *Le vendredi il mangeait toujours le poisson*.

<sup>2</sup>An aorist being, by definition, a Perfective, not an Imperfective (Comrie 1976:17).

### 9.4.5 Conditional

The Conditional seems to be of a Situative type. The subject prefixes are all high, and there are no exceptions (consequently 3s and 3p forms are identical). The lexical tone is that of the verb root.

#### (10) ‘Conditional’/Situative

Singular	Plural
Ñ-gbǎ ‘If I fell’	é-gbǎ ‘If we fell’
ó-gbǎ ‘If you fell’	á-gbǎ ‘If you fell’
á-gbǎ ‘If 3s fell’	á-gbǎ ‘If they fell’

A Situative aspect is a representation of an event that is either a possibility, just about to start, just starting, or just perceived (it is quite often found after verbs of perception where it represents the initial moment of the perception). Instead of representing the subject in the middle of the event (Imperfective) or at the end of the event (Perfective), the subject is represented in initial position, ready to begin the event.

## 9.5 Other verbal categories

### 9.5.1 Imperative

The simple imperative of LH verbs maintains the lexical tone in the singular, e.g. **sũ** ‘wash (them)’, but shifts to L before the plural inflection: **sũ-ɛn** ‘Wash (pl) (them)’.

### 9.5.2 ‘Hortative/Optative’/Subjunctive

This appears to be an ordinary subjunctive. Tone on the subject pronouns is low, but like the Retrospective (Perfect), the tone on 3s is different from that on the other subject pronouns. With LH verb roots, the lexical tone occurs only with this 3s form; in all the other persons “the lexical tone is altered to a surface tone of a high followed by a downstepped high” (Watters 1981:396). Because the verb ‘fall’ is unlikely to be used as either an imperative or hortative, we have used the verb **-sũ** ‘to wash’, which is also LH.

#### (11) Subjunctive

Singular	Plural
Ñ-sũ ‘I should wash (it)’	è-sũ ‘We should wash (it)’
ò-sũ ‘2s should wash (it)’	à-sũ ‘You should wash (it)’
á-sũ ‘3s should wash (it)’	à-sũ ‘They should wash (it)’

## 9.6 Negatives

There is a general negative marker, as in **á-kà-gbǔ** ‘3s didn’t fall/hasn’t fallen’, with a high subject tone for all persons, and a basic tone on the root of LH verbs. High tone verbs on the other hand, have a high tone on the prefix **ka-** followed by a downstep feature on the root. A special prefix **bǔ** is used only with the Imperfective: the subject prefixes have high tone and the verb roots have their lexical tone, as in (12), from Watters (1981:425).

- (12) **á-bǔ-gbǔ** ‘(S)he isn’t falling, they aren’t falling’  
**á-bǔ-fág** ‘(S)he isn’t sweeping (it), they aren’t sweeping (it)’

There is also a cessative negative with the negative prefix **rǔ-** and the sense of ‘no longer’, which negates the Habitual. It is also used with Conditionals (representations of events which, not having started, cannot possibly be ongoing), with examples in (13). There is a high tone on all persons except 3s.

- (13) **à-rǔ-fág** ‘(S)he no longer sweeps (it).’  
**á-rǔ-fág** ‘They no longer sweep (it).’

There are also two negative copulas, one (**ǎŋ**) to deny existence (‘there isn’t any ...’), the other (**àsíg**) to deny identity (‘that’s not a ...’), as exemplified in (14), from Watters (1981:422).

- (14) **ɛ-gòmé ǎŋ**                      **N-jòg àsíg**  
 5-plantain NEG:EXISTENCE      9-elephant NEG:IDENTITY  
 ‘There are no plantains (here).’      ‘It is not an elephant.’

## 9.7 Auxiliaries ‘come’ and ‘go’

There are two verbs **jǐ** ‘to go’ and **bá** ‘to come’ which have a high frequency of usage in what appears to be an auxiliary role. These two verbs are irregular in a variety of interesting ways.

First of all there are morphological irregularities. The verb **jǐ** forms an irregular Imperfective with the suffix **ág**: it adds the full suffix, deleting the vowel of the root to accommodate it: **jág**. The verb **bá**, in turn, forms an irregular Progressive, changing the prefix **kí** to **kó** to create the irregular form **kó-bá**. These irregularities, in a language which has very few irregularities, suggest some kind of grammaticalization in progress, where *go* is somehow related to the notion of Imperfective, and *come* to the notion of Progressive. There is, in fact, curious usage of these forms which also amounts to a kind of syntactic irregularity.

Both verbs are used in their Imperfective forms, for example, when Performative forms are expected, especially when they are used as directional verbs as in (15), from Watters (1981:387).

- (15) a **à-j-ǎg**            **à-jî-bôŋ**            **ò-čú**  
 3s-go-IPFV    3s.PFVgo-pick    14-bitter.leaf  
 ‘(S)he went and picked bitter leaf.’
- b **à-bá-g**            **à-bâ-gúdì**            **ì-sú**  
 3s-come-IPFV    3s.PFV-come-sell    19-pepper  
 ‘(S)he came and sold peppers.’

The use of the IPFV forms of these verbs before their directional usage with a PFM is an indication that the going and coming are preliminary, incomplete parts of the full event seen as a whole. Where other verbs use a PFM after **tíg** (the marker of future time) these two verbs use IPFV forms, as in (16). The usage indicates the emphasis on orientation, to and from the here and now, that is an integral part of the usage of these two verbs.

- (16) a **tíg**    **à-j-ǎg**            **ó-jò'**  
 FUT    3s-go-IPFV    14-tomorrow  
 ‘S/he will go tomorrow.’
- b **tíg**    **à-bá-g**            **kǎ**    **Ń-jù**            **é-yǎ**  
 FUT    3s-come-IPFV    at    9-house            9-your  
 ‘S/he will come to your house.’

## 9.8 Focus

Both the PFM and IPFV aspects have constituent focus forms that are used in relative clauses, clauses with a focus particle, with an interrogative word, and with answers to interrogative words.

The constituent focus PFV has a suffix with a front vowel that assimilates to the height of the first root vowel. The tone on the subject prefixes is low except for the 3p, which is always high, as in (17):

- (17) **à-gbò-é**                            **á-gbò-é**  
 3s-fall-PFM (FOC)            3p-fall-PFM (FOC)  
 ‘(S)he fell.’                            ‘They fell.’

In the IPFV it is the prefix tone that distinguishes the constituent focus forms. All persons have a high tone followed by a downstep feature, except the 3p which has simply high tone, as in (18):

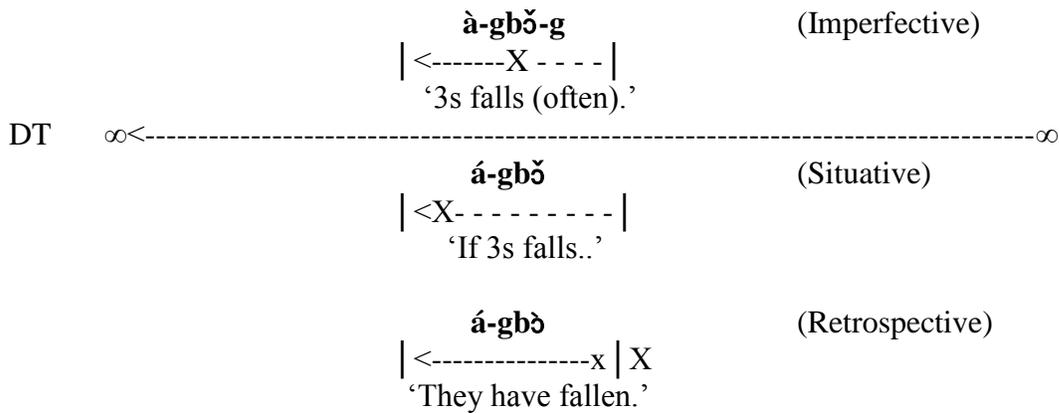
- (18) **á'-gbò-g**                            **á-gbò-g**  
 3s.FOC-fall-IPFV    3p.FOC-fall-IPFV  
 ‘(S)he falls, is falling.’    ‘They fall, are falling.’

## 9.9 Conclusion

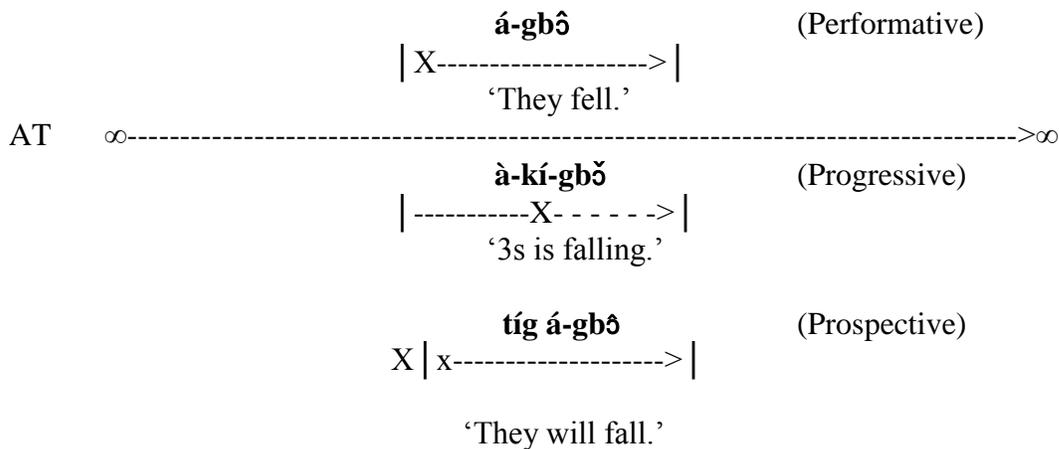
Tone patterns are an important feature in the marking of aspectual and modal contrasts. As illustrated in (3), there are also certain fixed positions: three before the root and one after. The subject prefix occupies the first position before the root, the Progressive prefix **kí** may occupy the second, and the third may be occupied by the Repetitive prefix **kpó**. The final position may be occupied by either the focus suffix of the PFM (a front vowel determined by the height of the first root vowel), or by the IPFV suffix **-ág**.

## 9.10 Diagrammatic Representations

### (i) Forms in Descending Time



### (ii) Forms in Ascending Time



## References

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