Verbal Affixes in Emai of the Edoid Group

Verbal affixes in the Niger-Congo phylum of Africa have been largely discussed relative to its geographic periphery (Schadeberg 2003, Nurse 2008, Hyman et al. 2019). There are Atlantic languages in the west, Kordofanian in the east, and Bantu in south and central areas. Less attention has been directed at affixes in languages near the Niger-Congo center, that is the Niger-Benue confluence and Niger Delta. Certainly, this includes the Edoid group of south-central Nigeria. Emai is among them. It is SVO and shows grammatical and lexical tone as well as complex predicates that construct as verbs in series or verbs with prepositions. In many respects Emai would be characterized as isolating and Kwa-like, in contrast to agglutinative and Bantu-like, in the scheme proposed by Hyman (2004). Nonetheless, Emai exhibits verbal affixes.

Our paper on Emai will assess three segmental affix types, each accompanied by tone. One is an inflectional suffix on the verb. It expresses a perfective (PFV) value with respect to viewpoint aspect. The two that remain are derivational; they express aspectual features that are not viewpoint oriented. One is a verb prefix that conveys a persistive (PERS) function. The other is a verb suffix that expresses a pluractional (PA) meaning. When attached to a verb along with the perfective suffix, the pluractional is non-final. Otherwise, PA is verb final. Except for PA, segmental realization of PFV and PERS is constrained by the presence of morphemes in either immediate before verb position, where auxiliaries, preverbs, and negative polarities occur, or immediate after verb position, where valency and aspectual changing elements appear.

Perfective *-í* alternates between high tone (*-í*), low tone (*-ì*), and a zero realization (Ø). Its segmental character is constrained by a following constituent's argument/adjunct status. It appears as high *-í* with intransitive verbs and following adjuncts (*ójé ꜜmúzán-í vbí úkpódè* [Oje PST.stand-PFV LOC road] 'Oje stood on the road') but as zero with intransitives and following arguments (*ójé ꜜó vbì èkìn* [Oje PST.enter LOC market] 'Oje entered the market'). Perfective appears as low *-ì* when clause final, regardless of verb subcategorization (*éꜜbé ójé ꜜmúzán-ì* [where Oje PST.stand-PFV] 'Where did Oje stand?') and (*ébé' ójé ꜜó-ì?* [where Oje PST.enter-PFV] 'Where did Oje enter?'). With transitive verbs and their following argument, PFV zero form is obligatory.

Persistive *Cí-* consists of close front vowel *í* preceded by a segment that copies the verb initial consonant. It is limited to distal past tense and perfective aspect (*ójé ꜜdí-díá vbì ɔ́lì èkpètè* [Oje PST.PERS-sit LOC ART stool] 'Oje still sat in the stool').

Pluractional has three morphophonemic -CV shapes. PA form is (*-lɔ*) except when verb vowel exhibits nasalization (*nɔ* in *shɛ̃-nɔ* 'sell-PA') or a front/back close value (*lo* in *fi-lo* 'hit-PA'). Functionally, PA distributes a verb feature across intransitive plural subjects (*é ꜜgbá-lɔ́-ì* [3PL PST.be.big-PA-PFV] 'They were each big'), transitive plural objects (*ɔ́lí ííhí ꜜsá-lɔ́ mài* [ART ant PST.sting-PA 1PL] 'The ant stung each of us') or verb subevents (*úkpûhì ɔ̀ ɔ́ sà-lɔ́ mè* [ant SM PRS.PROG sting-PA 1SG] 'A single ant is stinging me repeatedly').

We conclude by noting that Emai verbs show no valency changing affixes, as found in Bantu. We also note that a pluractional or perfective suffix along with a verb nominalizes. This is not so for the persistive prefix. This constraint as well as others noted suggest a pervasive asymmetry among Emai verbal prefixes.

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