

# International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH)

Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

Vol. 9 (1), S/No 32, JANUARY, 2020: 80-86

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v9i1.8>

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## Aspects of the Grammar of Past Tense and the Present Perfective Aspect in English and Echie: A Contrastive Account

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### Abstract

The absence of a parallel equivalence in the grammar of past tense and perfective aspect in English and Echie is significantly responsible for the errors that occur in the related sentences of the Echie second language learners of English. This article is a contrastive analysis of the grammar of past tense and present perfect tense in English and Echie and it highlighted the structural specifics of each of the languages. Using the descriptive research design, the data for this study were gathered through the primary sources (ten competent native speakers of Echie were interviewed) and the secondary sources (examples generated from textual materials). Our description showed a complete range of morphological differences in past tense and present perfect tense of English and Echie as seen in the use of 1st, 2nd and 3rd persons singular and plural respectively. The paper concludes that the parametric variation in the past tense and perfective aspect of English and Echie languages show that every language is unique in some sort.

**Key Words:** Contrastive, grammar, tense, parametric, descriptive, interference; language.

### Introduction

Tense is one of the main grammatical categories associated with the verb. Etymologically, tense is derived from the Latin word 'tempus' (time) via old French, and it is used to show time reference, (Das 2009; Nwala&Obisike 2014). Tense is a non-linguistic concept, which is also not a universal attribute of human language (Allerton, 1979). The entire world languages are said to have time, but not all have tense. For instance, Burmese and Dyirbal languages are tenseless, but they make reference to time. Conversely, English and Echie have both tense and time.

According to Ndimele (1999) “tense is a grammatical category which is concerned with how a verb changes its form to respond to changes in time” (p.95). By this token, tense is deeply rooted in the morphology of the verb. In a related opinion, Nwala (2015) viewed tense as a concept which explains the relationship between actions or events and the time, they took place. The author points out that tense is primarily about the behaviour of verbs in sentences; that is, various forms taken by verbs to denote time. Thus, tense identifies the specific time of an action, event or even the state of being of the verb. It differs from aspect in that while aspect is non-deictic; tense is deictic. In other words, whereas aspect shows the internal temporal structure of a situation, analysed into phases or stages, tense connects the time of an action to speech time.

There are basically two types of tense in the English language: present tense and past tense (Nwala, 2004). The present tense describes events or actions that are on-going, i.e. events happening at the moment of speaking. The past (which is the focus of this article) describes events that occurred or took place before the moment of speaking. Both tenses (present tense and past tense) and a third one, called the future tense exist in the Echie language. Aspect is the function of the verb which defines the duration of the action of the verb as concerns its completion and continuation (Nwala,2004) or what Ndimele (1993) called the internal temporal organization of the situation described by the verb. In the opinion of Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), aspect is concerned with the manner in which the verbal action is experienced or regarded. The two types of grammatical aspects are the **Be** progressive and the **Have** perfect (which is the focus of this present article)

### Literature Review

#### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted in this research is the contrastive analysis. The theoretical foundations for what became known as the contrastive analysis hypothesis were formulated in Lado's *Linguistics Across Cultures* (1957). Lado claims that those elements which are different will be difficult; while this was not a novel suggestion, Lado was the first to provide a comprehensive theoretical treatment and the suggestion of a systematic set of mechanical procedures for the contrastive study of languages. This involved describing the languages (using structuralist linguistics), comparing them and predicting learning difficulties.

Contrastive study was extremely used in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) in the 1960s and early 1970s as a method of explaining why some features of a target language (TL) were more difficult to acquire than others. According to the behaviourist theories prevailing at that time, language learning was a question of habit formation and this could be reinforced or impeded by already existing habits. Therefore, the difficulty in mastering certain structures in a second language (SL) depended on the differences between the learner's mother-tongue (MT) and the language he or she is trying to learn.

The choice of this (contrastive analysis) theory was based on the singular fact that the researcher sets out to study the past tense and the Have aspect of the English and Echie languages, in order to find out possible similarities and dissimilarities.

#### Methodology

In this paper, the researcher adopted the descriptive design. The descriptive design according to Ndiyo (2015) sought to get information about the current status of a phenomena, while Kotharl and Garg (2016) note that descriptive research describes the characteristics of a particular individual or group. Working within this framework, the data which were got from

both the primary sources (ten Echie native speakers) and the secondary sources (examples got from textual materials) were analysed.

### Analysis

In this aspect of the work, results of the data collected for this study in English and Echie are presented in sentences and analyzed. We start with Echie.

#### Past Tense

1. Nwankwo gburuagwo  
[Nwankwo gbu-rv snake]  
Nwankwo killed a snake
2. Ucheechijereornu  
[Ucheechi je-rv farm]  
Ucheechi went to the farm
3. Njoku dereakwukwo [Njoku de-rv book]
4. ó garamirni  
[3psg ga-rv river]  
He/she went to the river
5. ó ruruweornu  
[3plp ru-rv-Agro-suffix work]  
They worked

#### English Examples

6. John killed a snake
7. Peter went to work
8. James wrote a book
9. He/she went to the river
10. They worked

The sentences show clearly that both languages have past tense forms used to locate or describe events that took place before the moment of reference. However, there are structural differences between both languages. The Echie language as sentences 1-5 show uses the Factative (r)V suffix, where the resultant V (for vowel) is a copy of the vowel of the preceding syllable or the same with the vowel of the host verb. The English language as shown in sentences 6-10 simply marks past tense with the -ed suffix affixed to the host verb. This is common for the regular verbs. What is remarkably different here is the existence and occurrence of determiners in sentences 6 and 8, the occurrence of the to-prepositional phrase, a complement in sentences 7 and 9, and the absence of either of them in sentence 10. The verbs of sentences 6 and 8 **kill** and **write** are transitive, hence they required the determiners which functionally specified and limited the action of the verbs. The verb of sentences 7 and 9 **went** is intransitive, hence takes a complement, the prepositional phrase in the sentences. The verb **work**, as used in sentence 10 is also intransitive; it can also be used transitively and with a complement as shown in sentences 11 and 12 respectively:

11. They worked ceaselessly
12. They worked hard.

The absence of a determiner in the Echie examples and the use of prepositional phrase in the English examples do not make the lect less linguistically adequate than the English language. The only problem is the difficulty the English structure would cause the Echie second language learner of the English language, who would want to transfer the structure of Echie to English, and maybe tempted to make sentences 13 and 14 respectively:

13. \*John killed snake
14. \*He wrote book

### Perfective Aspect

#### Echie

15. Njoku egbuoleagwo.  
[Njoku pre-gbu-ov-suffix, perf-suffix snake]  
Njoku has killed a snake
16. Alozieeriele ji  
[Alozie pre-ri-ex-suffix, perf-suffix yam]  
Alozie has eaten yam.
17. ó jeeleornu  
[3sgp je-ex- suffix-perf-suffix farm]  
He/she has gone to farm.
18. ó jeelewemirni  
[3plp je-ex-suffix-perf-suffix-Agro-suffix river]  
They have gone to the river.
19. Njoku naAloziearnuonaornu.  
[Njoku conjAlozie pre-work-ov-perf-suffix work]  
Njoku and Alozie have worked

#### English

20. James has killed a snake
21. Peter has eaten yam
22. He/she has gone to farm
23. They have gone to the river
24. John and Michael have worked

The data show that English and Echie have and implore perfect tense or what Welmers and Welmers (1973) cited in Emenanjo (2015) called complete to show aspectology (Emenanjo, 1975c), that is, actions that have been completed before the moment of discussion. The English language marks or shows complete or perfective aspectual reference with the Have auxiliary. The **has** of the **Have auxiliary** is used in singular subjects, **have** is used in plural subjects, while **had** is used to point to a far completed action, that is, one that has been completed a long time ago. **Has** and **have** are called present perfect markers, while **had** is

called past perfect or the pluperfect or past perfect marker. The root verb as shown in sentences 20-24 change their past forms in irregular verbs but retain them in regular verbs. This is why we have, **killed** and **worked** in sentences 20 and 24, but have **eaten** and **gone** in sentences 21, 22 and 23, instead of **ate** and **went** the past forms of the verbs **eat** and **go** respectively. In examples, 20-24, sentences 20-22, have the auxiliary **has** as the perfective operational marker because the subjects of the sentences are singular. But, sentences 23 and 24 have the **have** auxiliary because the subjects are plural. The English language to some extent is agreement rich, a situation where the verb of the sentence must agree in number with the subject of the sentence. So, it would have been absurd to have sentences, 23 and 24 take the **has** type of the **Have** verb in sentences 25 and 26 respectively.

25. \*They has gone to the river  
26. \* John and Michael has worked.

The Echie language marks perfect tense in a somewhat morphological complex form. The lect like most Igbioidlects is a verb-centred morphological language. The verb hosts a harmonizing prefix, a harmonizing open vowel in the case of verbs with that structure; the operational perfect marking suffixes, -le/-la/-na/-ne which agree with the vowel of the host or root. Generally, in Echie, the suffixes -le and -la are described as perfect tense markers; the suffixes -na and -ne occur in few selected cases.

27. ó meene  
[ 3psgp me-ex-suffix-perf-suffix  
He/she/it has happened

28. ó rnaana  
[ 3sgp rna-ex-suffix-perf-suffix  
He/she has sexed

The verbs also take what is generally called, extensional suffix, one which is semantically emphatic and which extends that duration of the action of the verb. In some cases, the suffix, **-we** comes after the perfect marker, especially when it is the third person plural pronoun or when it is a plural subject:

29. ó rielewehne  
[3ppl eat-ex-suffix-perf-suffix-num- suffix something.  
They have eaten [food]

30. Nwankwo naNwaadha ò jeeleweornu?  
[ Nwankwo naNwaadharesumpt. P je-ex-suffix-perf-suffix-Agro-suffix work  
Have Nwankwo and Nwaadha gone to farm?

The Echie language also uses the clitics, **cha**, translated as complete or total to further describe perfectiveness.

31. I meechala?  
[2psg me-ex-suffix-clitics-perf-suffix]  
Have you finished?

Any expression with the clitics, **cha** is usually emphatic and indirectly interrogative. The above sentence is emphatic and interrogative, but the use of the clitics is semantically optional since its omission or deletion will not necessarily affect the grammaticality and acceptability of the sentence.

The analyses or differences between the structural configurations of present perfective sentences of English and Echie languages explicitly show that the lects are unique grammatically. But the uniqueness of the structural configurations does not make one less linguistically; it only shows that languages exhibit structural parametrism at different levels of grammar.

In language acquisition, normal native speakers, come with the grammar of their language, which is naturally deposited (Chomsky, 1968a). They do not have any difficulty in acquiring their language, no matter the structure, as long as the linguistic mechanisms responsible for the manifestation of language are present, and as long as the acquirer interacts with the right linguistics environment. But in second language learning, the learner who has already mastered his/her first language or mother tongue, will find it difficult to learn the second language because of the existence of the features of his/her first language or mother tongue. This is usually the cause of interference and transfer of the features of one language into another. This is exactly what will befall either an Echie second language learner of English or an English second language learner of Echie.

### Conclusion

In this paper, the researcher has linguistically examined the past tense and present perfect aspectual formations in both the English and the Echie languages. The study has shown common universal principles and structural differences in both languages. One, both languages have these tenses and they are used to achieved same linguistic functions. Two, the structural configurations of the tenses in both languages are language-specific: the English language uses the –ed morpheme or suffix to mark past of regular verbs, while the Echie language uses the –(r)V suffix, in which case, the vowel must harmonise with the vowel of the root or host verb.

In the case of the present perfect, the English language uses, **has** or **have**, types of the **Have** verb. The choice of either **has** or **have** is determined by the number of the subject of the sentence. This is structurally different from the situation in Echie language, which is not an agreement rich language, except in the case of the third person pronoun, O, where the morpheme –weis used to show plurality as conceived in this paper. In Echie, the structural configuration is somewhat complex. The formation is verb-centred; the verb hosts prefixes and suffixes.

The realization of these tenses by non-native speakers and learners of either of these languages is bound to pose some learning difficulties, which readily manifest in the transfer and interference of the features of the learners' first languages or mother tongues. This paper therefore makes these discoveries, which are linguistically informative and pedagogically priceless.

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