

Prosodic Asymmetry in Emai: Tense-Aspect Tone

Asymmetric properties of noun and verb categories have attracted attention over the years (Albright 2007, Kelly 1992, Leach 2010). Similarly, prosodic asymmetry of noun and verb phrases has gained attention (Hubbard 1992, Hyman 2022), especially for African tone. Less often examined is the prosodic clause where subject noun phrase abuts predicate phrase. Here we examine tonal asymmetries that characterize tense-aspect expression in an under-described Edoid language of southern Nigeria. Emai clauses, canonically SVO, reflect lexical and grammatical tone. They rely on two level tones, H (high) and L (low), which can float as ^H or ^L, combine as a falling contour HL ([^]), or in the case of high exhibit down-step ([↓]H). As in other Edoid studies (Amayo 1975, Elugbe 1989), Emai subject proforms and verbs are treated as lexically toneless, receiving prosodic tone from grammatical morphemes.

Aspect and tense in Emai differ in their clausal position and prosodic effect. Viewpoint aspect realizes as a verb suffix, exhibiting a perfective (PFV)/imperfective (IPFV) contrast. Signaled by H tone *-í*, PFV spreads its tone onto a preceding verb. It expones in three patterns reflective of metatony in Bantu (Hyman and Lionnet 2014). Before a verb argument, *-í* deletes; before a verb non-argument, *-í* remains; before a clause-final boundary, *-í* tone shifts from H to L. IPFV, with no segmental co-exponent (^L), floats as L tone and spreads onto its verb.

In contrast, tense precedes the verb or any auxiliary/preverb and follows a proform subject. Tense engages a two-slot predicative complex (Creissels 2005) where temporal distance precedes tense proper. Within the complex, tone is contrastive, regardless of whether there are segmental co-exponents. Temporal distance values, exclusively tonal, are proximal (PRX) low ^L and distal (DST) high ^H. Tense values also express asymmetrically: past (PST) is exclusively tonal (^L or ^H), while present (PRS) and future (FUT) have segmental co-exponents. The values for PST coalesce with verb left edge, as below, setting aside present and future. On the right, underlying forms appear within forward slashes /x/, while on the left, prosodic forms are bracketed [x]. As shown, PST expones asymmetrically. Floating low ^L of PST with DST links with verb-initial syllable; down-step high ([↓]*dú*) results. No additional tonal effect is evident for PST ^H with PRX, the verb already showing high.

[[↓] dúmé émà]	<	/ ɔ	^H	^L	dumɛ -í	émà /
‘She pounded yam.’		3SG	DST	PST	pound-PFV	yam
[[↓] dúmé émà]		/ ɔ	^L	^H	dumɛ -í	émà /
‘She has pounded yam.’		3SG	PRX	PST	pound-PFV	yam

When an auxiliary/preverb occurs at predicate left edge, e.g. additive (ADD) *gbò* ‘also,’ its lexical low tone raises to high. Tense then conditions prosodic asymmetry. PST with DST displays down-step high ([↓]*gbò*), while PST with PRX shows a high low contour (*gbò*).

[[↓] gbò dúmé émà]	<	/ ɔ	^H	^L	gbò dumɛ -í	émà /
‘She also pounded yam.’		3SG	DST	PST	ADD pound-PFV	yam
[[↓] gbò dúmé émà]		/ ɔ	^L	^H	gbò dumɛ -í	émà /
‘She has also pounded yam.’		3SG	PRX	PST	ADD pound-PFV	yam

We conclude by assessing present and future tense, each of which exhibits asymmetry with respect to predicative complex tonal values and tonal effect of predicate phrase left boundary. It is only DST FUT that violates the contrastive principle of the predicative complex, suggesting that diachronic emergence of future in Emai is more recent than past or present.

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