

A FOUR-TERM PERSON SYSTEM AND ITS RAMIFICATIONS

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1. Introduction

It is the aim of this paper to present a description of the person system of Ekpeye, and to display the various means of identifying unambiguously the dramatis personae in indirect speech.

Ekpeye is a member of what Williamson [1968] calls the Lower Niger group of languages, whose best known representative is Igbo. It is spoken in the neighbourhood of Ahoada in the Rivers State of Nigeria, and the material presented here was gathered during a period of field work in 1965-66.<sup>1</sup>

2. The pronominal prefixes

The verb structure of Ekpeye is highly complex, and only those aspects of it which are directly relevant to the present theme can be dealt with here.<sup>2</sup>

The normal way of specifying the category of person in Ekpeye verbs is by means of a set of pronominal prefixes. These prefixes constitute a four-term system, whose members may be glossed 'I', 'we (exclusive)', 'you', and 'he/she/it'. The items which manifest these persons are listed below. Three of the four terms have forms which vary with the tense of the verb, and in addition manifest vowel harmony or homorganic assimilation.

|     |              |        |
|-----|--------------|--------|
| (1) | 'I'          | mV-/N- |
|     | 'we (excl.)' | a-     |
|     | 'you'        | l-/E-  |
|     | 'he/she/it'  | U-/V-  |

Of the above upper case symbols, N represents a syllabic nasal homorganic with the following consonant; l, E and U represent two-way

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<sup>2</sup>For a full description, see Clark [1969].

vowel harmony systems on a basis of tongue height; and V represents a five-way vowel harmony system involving both tongue height and tongue position.<sup>3</sup> In the appendix of this paper (section 5):

- (2) I is manifested by /i/ or /ị/  
 E is manifested by /e/ or /ɛ/  
 U is manifested by /u/ or /ụ/  
 V is manifested by /e/, /ɛ/, /a/, /ɔ/ or /o/  
 N̩ is manifested by /m/ or /n/

In their tense conditioning, the I- and U- forms occur with one set of tenses, and the E- and V- forms with another set. The tense distribution of mV- and N̩- is slightly different, but as the tense system is outside the scope of this article, no further details are given. The a- form is invariable in all tenses.

Thus far, traditional labels for the terms in the category of person have been carefully avoided. This is because such labels almost inevitably suggest misleading comparisons with European or other languages whose structure is quite different. Instead, the four terms of the Ekpeye system are labelled (in the same order as the forms given above) Speaker (S), Speaker's Group (SG), Hearer (H), and Referent (R). The category of number is relevant nowhere else in Ekpeye grammar, and its introduction here would complicate the description to no useful purpose.

### 3. The subject suffixes

The question now arises how Ekpeye handles those (notional) terms in the person system which are not covered by the forms shown in the previous paragraph. The answer lies in the co-occurrence potential of the pronominal prefixes with a certain order of suffixes.<sup>4</sup> Verbal suffixes, in addition to a functionally based division into classes and a phonologically

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<sup>3</sup>See Clark [1971b] for a full description of these and other systems.

<sup>4</sup>There are over sixty suffixes in Ekpeye, as described and discussed in Clark [forthcoming].

based division into tone groups, are on the basis of their co-occurrence potential, divided into orders. On these grounds, twenty-one orders are established. Within some of these orders, the members are semantically related to each other, and in order 17 in particular, the four members all have a semantic reference to the subject of the verb. For present purposes, the members of this order are referred to as subject suffixes. Their forms are as follows:

- (3)    -bè  
          -m̃  
          -mà  
          -nì<sup>5</sup>

-mà will be dealt with later, but the other three suffixes have a strictly controlled range of co-occurrence potential with the various pronominal prefixes. This is set out in (4) below, where filled cells indicate those combinations which may occur.

(4)

|    |        | -bè | -m̃ | -nì |
|----|--------|-----|-----|-----|
| S  | mV-/N- |     | x   |     |
| SG | a-     |     |     | x   |
| H  | I-/E-  |     |     | x   |
| R  | U-/V-  | x   |     |     |

The occurrence of -m̃ with the S term in the person system is obligatory in certain tenses, and does not cause any change in the semantic content. With -bè and -nì, however, it is a different matter, and their occurrence with the R or H/SG terms does alter the semantic content. (See examples (9) through (22) which are set out paradigmatically in section 5.) The observed co-occurrences may be glossed as follows:

- (5)    a-        + -nì    'we (inclusive)' (cf. examples 10 and 13)  
          I-/E- + -nì    'you people' (cf. examples 11 and 14)

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<sup>5</sup>In this paper, ' is used to mark high tone, ` low tone, ^ a high-to-low fall, and " a high-to-mid fall. Mid, or down-stepped, is left unmarked.

U-/V- + -bè 'they' (cf. examples 12 and 15)

Without the combination of a- with -nì, it would be a simple task to gloss -nì as pluralising the H term, and -bè as pluralising the R term. They would thus be morphologically conditioned allomorphs of a plural morpheme. However, the a- + -nì combination, reinforced by the fact already stated that the category of number is not otherwise relevant in Ekpeye grammar, renders such an analysis untenable. It is for this reason that the pidgin English form 'you people' has been given as a gloss in preference to the standard form 'you (plural)'. (It is perhaps comparable with the 'you all' of some varieties of American English.)

Can -bè and -nì, then, be allotted any coherent semantic domain? The most acceptable solution seems to lie in the concept of "group membership": thus -bè can be said to mean that the group of which the Hearer is a member is the subject of the verb (whether or not the Speaker is a member of the same group). There is no need for further definition of the "groups" involved, since the language does not employ contrasts of gender, animate/inanimate or the like.

This description avoids introducing an awkward and otherwise superfluous category of number, and instead makes explicit a concept which, though not part of conventional grammatical terminology, is both socially and psychologically appropriate to West Africa.

It can now be seen that by its combinations of pronominal prefixes and subject suffixes, Ekpeye can readily express the full range of person distinctions familiar in European languages.

#### 4. Indirect speech

One of the prominent characteristics of Ekpeye narrative is the very high proportion of indirect reported speech. Indeed, direct speech in narrative was recorded only from one informant, and he a man much more influenced by English than any of the others.

In Ekpeye, there are two particles which may introduce indirect speech, mɛ́ní and bú, both of which are glossed as 'that'. The choice between them is determined by the person term in the verb introducing the indirect

speech; if it is S or SG, *méní* occurs, and if it is H or R, *ḡú* occurs, as shown in (6).

(6)

| Person | Introductory Particle |           |
|--------|-----------------------|-----------|
|        | <i>méní</i>           | <i>ḡú</i> |
| S      | x                     |           |
| SG     | x                     |           |
| H      |                       | x         |
| R      |                       | x         |

The indirect speech following the introductory particle is either reflexive (examples (9) through (15)) or non-reflexive (examples (16) through (22)). Where it is non-reflexive, the position is relatively straightforward, as the full range of pronominal prefixes may occur with the verbs involved (examples (16) through (19)). The subject suffixes may also occur, co-occurring with the pronominal prefixes in the same combinations as outlined for direct speech in section 3 (examples (9c), (16c), (20) through (22)). The only limitation is semantic: some forms are very frequent, while others occur but rarely, or in artificial contexts. The possible combinations of introductory particle, pronominal prefix and subject suffix for non-reflexive indirect speech are summed up in (7).

(7)

| Indirect Person | Direct Person |        |           |        |     |
|-----------------|---------------|--------|-----------|--------|-----|
|                 | S             | SG     | H         | R      |     |
| S               |               | mV-/N- | mV-/N-    | mV-/N- | -ḡ  |
| SG              | a-            |        | a-        | a-     | -ni |
| H               | I-/E-         | I-/E-  |           | I-/E-  |     |
| R               | U-/V-         | U-/V-  | U-/V-     | U-/V   | -ḡè |
|                 | <i>méní</i>   |        | <i>ḡú</i> |        |     |

In (7), blank cells represent reflexive forms. There is no blank at the intersection of the R row and column, since the resultant meaning

is not necessarily reflexive. For example, in 'He said that he would come', the second 'he' may be a fourth person. In Ekpeye, there would be no ambiguity here since a reflexive meaning would be expressed differently. Compare (19) with (12).

When the indirect speech is reflexive (examples (9) through (15)) there are more restrictions. Only the S and SG pronominal prefixes may occur (examples (9) and (10)), and only the -nì subject suffix of the three dealt with above (example (13)). The possible forms are set out in (8).

| (8) | Direct Person<br>(No Sfx.) | Indirect Person | Particle | Direct Person<br>(With Sfx.) | Indirect Person |
|-----|----------------------------|-----------------|----------|------------------------------|-----------------|
| S   | mV-/N̄-                    | mV-/N̄-         | méní     |                              |                 |
| SG  | a-                         | a-              | méní     | a- -nì                       | a- -nì          |
| H   | I-/E-                      | (yá') (-mà)     | bú       | I-/E- -nì                    | a- (-nì)        |
| R   | U-/V-                      | (yá') (-mà)     | bú       | U-/V- -bè                    | a- (-nì)        |

The most notable feature is that when the H or R person of the direct speech combines with a subject suffix, the SG person must occur in the direct speech (examples (14) and (15)). Where the H or R person of the direct speech is not combined with a subject suffix, no pronominal prefix may occur at all in the indirect speech. The emphatic reflexive pronoun yá' 'self, himself/herself/itself' occurs instead (examples (11) and (12)). When this happens, the subject suffix -mà (section 3) is obligatory with certain tenses (examples (11c), (12c)). In (8), -mà is bracketed because its distribution is limited in this way. yá' is bracketed because it is not a person prefix, and the -nì forms in the right hand column are bracketed because they are not obligatory, but rather depend on the sense of the non-linguistic context.

Ekpeye is thus seen to have a definite and unambiguous system of representing any participant in a narrative in both direct and indirect speech. Difficulties in analysis and/or speaking mastery arise not so much from the multiplicity and complexity of the forms themselves as from

the fact that potential ambiguities of reference are resolved less by the occurrence of any given form than by the co-occurrences of person prefixes, subject suffixes and introductory particles. Such difficulties will always arise where any two languages employ items from different categories in their respective grammars to express the same semantic domain.

## 5. Appendix

As it is not possible to exemplify all the forms cited above from unelicited material, the following examples are given in paradigm form. In these examples, all prefixes and suffixes are marked off by hyphens, and the monosyllabic verb root *ze - go* is used throughout. The suffix *-lê* is tense-conditioned in its occurrence.

Examples (9) through (15) are reflexive:

- |      |    |                         |                                      |
|------|----|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| (9)  | a. | má-kà méní mè-zé        | 'I said that I would go'             |
|      | b. | má-kà méní mé-zè        | 'I said that I went'                 |
|      | c. | má-kà méní mé-ze-lê-m   | 'I said that I had gone'             |
| (10) | a. | à-kà méní à-zé          | 'We (excl.) said that we would go'   |
|      | b. | à-kà méní à-zè          | 'We (excl.) said that we went'       |
|      | c. | à-kà méní à-zé-lê       | 'We (excl.) said that we had gone'   |
| (11) | a. | í-kà bú yá' zé          | 'You said that you would go'         |
|      | b. | í-kà bú yá' zè          | 'You said that you went'             |
|      | c. | í-kà bú yá' zé-lê-mà    | 'You said that you had gone'         |
| (12) | a. | ù-kà bú yá' zé          | 'He said that he (himself) would go' |
|      | b. | ù-kà bú yá' zè          | 'He said that he (himself) went'     |
|      | c. | ù-kà bú yá' zé-lê-mà    | 'He said that he (himself) had gone' |
| (13) | a. | à-kà-nì méní à-zé-nì    | 'We (incl.) said that we would go'   |
|      | b. | à-kà-nì méní à-zè-nì    | 'We (incl.) said that we went'       |
|      | c. | à-kà-nì méní à-zé-lê-nì | 'We (incl.) said that we had gone'   |
| (14) | a. | í-kà-nì bú à-zé         | 'You people said that you would go'  |
|      | b. | í-kà-nì bú à-zè         | 'You people said that you went'      |
|      | c. | í-kà-nì bú à-zé-lê      | 'You people said that you had gone'  |

- (15) a. ù-kà-bè bú à-zé 'They said that they would go'  
 b. ù-kà-bè bú à-zè 'They said that they went'  
 c. ù-kà-bè bú à-zé-lê 'They said that they had gone'

Examples (16) through (22) are non-reflexive:

- (16) a. ù-kà bú mè-zé 'He said that I would go'  
 b. ù-kà bú mé-zè 'He said that I went'  
 c. ù-kà bú mé-ze-lê-m 'He said that I had gone'
- (17) a. ù-kà bú à-zé 'He said that we (excl.) would go'  
 b. ù-kà bú à-zè 'He said that we (excl.) went'  
 c. ù-kà bú à-zé-lê 'He said that we (excl.) had gone'
- (18) a. ù-kà bú è-zé 'He said that you would go'  
 b. ù-kà bú í-zè 'He said that you went'  
 c. ù-kà bú é-ze-lê 'He said that you had gone'
- (19) a. ù-kà bú è-zé 'He said that he (another) would go'  
 b. ù-kà bú ù-zè 'He said that he (another) went'  
 c. ù-kà bú è-zé-lê 'He said that he (another) had gone'
- (20) a. ù-kà bú à-zé-nì 'He said that we (incl.) would go'  
 b. ù-kà bú à-zè-nì 'He said that we (incl.) went'  
 c. ù-kà bú à-zé-lê-nì 'He said that we (incl.) had gone'
- (21) a. ù-kà bú è-zé-nì 'He said that you people would go'  
 b. ù-kà bú í-zè-nì 'He said that you people went'  
 c. ù-kà bú é-ze-lê-nì 'He said that you people had gone'
- (22) a. ù-kà bú è-zé-bè 'He said that they would go'  
 b. ù-kà bú ù-zè-bè 'He said that they went'  
 c. ù-kà bú è-zé-lê-bè 'He said that they had gone'

As other non-reflexive forms can easily be derived by permutation from the above examples, they are not given separately.



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