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Toward a notion of possible verb in Emai

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The categorization of events as verbs in natural languages remains a challenging arena of linguistic investigation. Although the general problem attracts explicit attention in some crosslinguistic studies (Croft 1990, Dowty 1979, and Levin and Rappaport Hovav 2005), it is explored less frequently in a single language, particularly one in Africa. For this paper, I explore semantic and syntactic underpinnings of possible verbs in Emai, an endangered West Benue Congo language of Nigeria's Edoid group. I examine field data gathered and analyzed for a collection of oral traditional texts, dictionary and reference grammar.

In the lexical typology of Talmy (1985) championed by Nichols (1992), precedence is a narrow relation holding between verb complement elements moving object (*hay*) and goal (*wagon*) in the basic precedence construction *John loaded hay onto the wagon*. English allows basic as well as reversed precedence (*John loaded the wagon with hay*), although not necessarily for all verbs. In contrast, Emai favors basic precedence and disallows reversed precedence: *òjè óón àmè ó vbi ògó* [Oje pour water CL LOC bottle] 'Oje poured water into the bottle'. Emai has no reversed precedence 'fill' verb; in fact, none of its motion verbs permits goal to precede moving object.

Strict precedence also governs Emai's causation domain. English allows contrasting verb pairs (*kill* and *die*) that allow the causee (*John*) to precede or follow the causing condition: *The fever killed John* and *John died of fever*. Emai requires strict precedence, where the causing condition (*úìn*) must precede the causee (*òjè*): *úìn gbé òjè* [fever kill Oje] 'A fever killed Oje'. Even additional layering of the causing condition requires strict precedence: *ólì èmàì ò ó rẹ̀ ùín gbè òjè* [the wound SC C make fever kill Oje] 'The wound is making the fever kill Oje'.

Precedence effects in Emai are not confined to dynamic events. They limit stative conditions of location and possession. While English allows paired location expressions not constrained by precedence (*Clouds are in the sky / The sky is cloudy*), comparable Emai expression requires basic precedence. The located entity (*óhùú*) must precede the location (*òkhùnmi*): *óhùú rí vbi òkhùnmi* [clouds be LOC sky] 'Clouds are in the sky'. Reversed precedence is unacceptable, even with another verb (**òkhùnmi m̀è óhùú* [sky have clouds] 'The sky has clouds'). And although English noncausal possession shows contrasting verb pairs (*have, belong*) that allow possessor *John* to precede or follow possessum *book* (*John has a book / The book belongs to John*), Emai requires that possessor precede possessum: *òjè m̀è ébè* 'Oje has a book'. Emai has no reversed precedence 'belong' verb. Noncausal 'receive' also exhibits strict precedence: *àlèkè míéé ójé ébé* [Aleke receive Oje book] 'Aleke received a book from Oje'.

A broad precedence constraint of the Emai type seems best interpreted with the constructs Figure and Ground (Croft 1991, Talmy 2000), Figure representing the moving, located, cause or possessor argument that precedes its counterpart Ground serving as goal, location, causee or possessum. These semantic argument types and precedence relations between them frame Emai's notion of possible verb. Precedence also provides insight into grammatical resources that are active in West Benue-Congo languages, where lack of inflectional morphology is often portrayed as a linguistic deficiency (Foley and Olson 1985, Lord 1993, Crowley 2002).