The Dialectological Functional Categories (Tense and Aspect): The Bull's Approach

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Abstract

Dialect variation uniquely blends language synchrony and diachrony (Walt W. and Natalie S., 2017). This study focuses on the Oǹdó dialect of Yorùbá, conducting a case study using data collected from selected native speakers. It identifies and analyzes the dialect's Tense and Aspectual markers and explores the interplay between Tense and Aspect in Oǹdó. To thoroughly examine this topic, the research utilizes Bull's (1963) Analysis of Tense and Aspect, which assesses markers for these functional categories and their interpretations in relevant sentences. Additionally, the study looks at how negators in Oǹdó interact with Tense and Aspect. Bull's framework is particularly valuable for this analysis because it emphasizes the meaning behind Tense and Aspect rather than just their forms. The findings indicate that Tense and Aspect are closely interconnected, making it challenging to distinguish one from the other.

Key words: Dialectology, Functional Categories, Tense and Aspect, Bull's Approach.

1.0   Introduction

Each language has its unique rules, known as grammar that its speakers must adhere to. When examining two or more languages or dialects at any point in linguistic study, it's common to find similarities and differences between them. These aspects help us understand the structures of the languages or dialects in question. (Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., & Hyams, N., 2018).
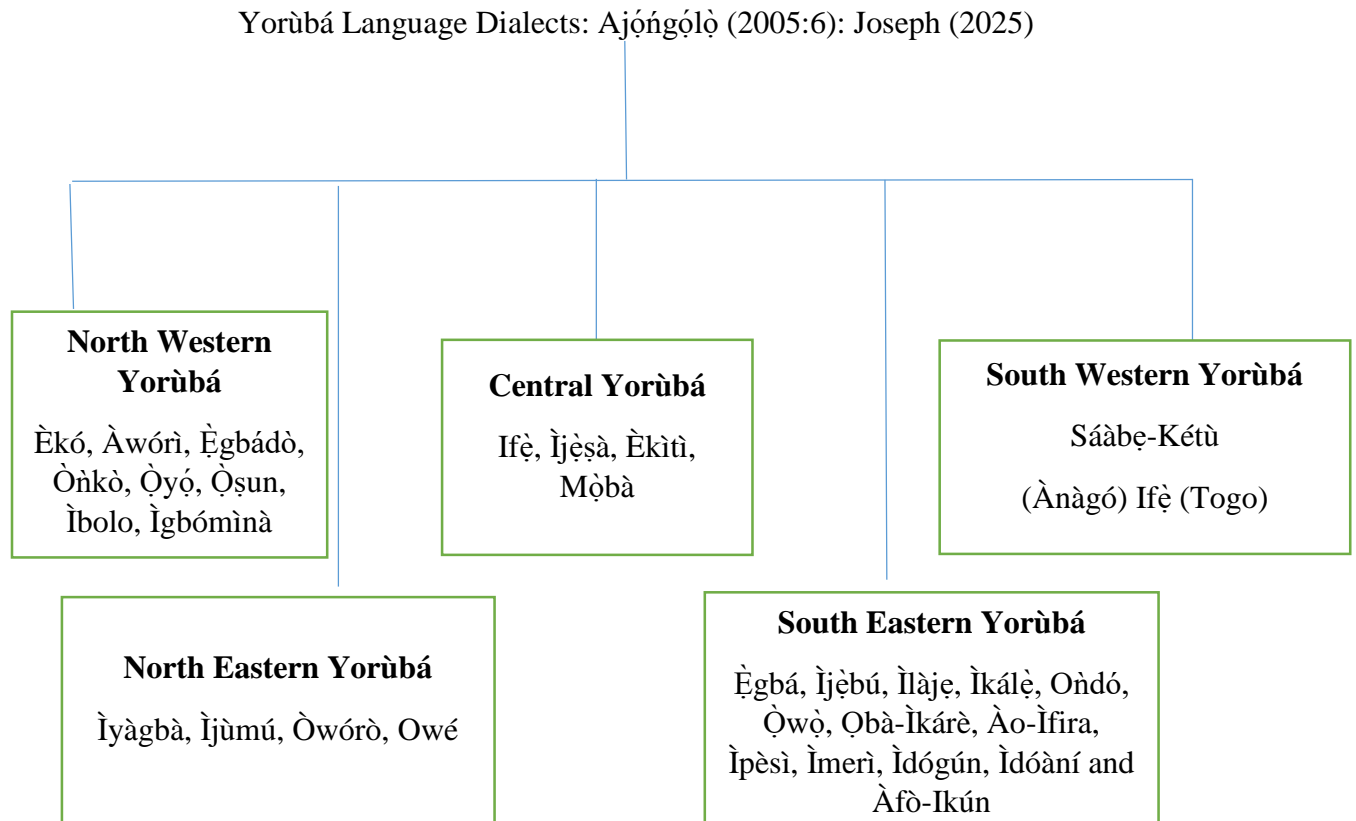
Researchers in the field of the Yorùbá language have conducted numerous studies on its dialects. Nonetheless, there is an ongoing effort to further investigate Yorùbá dialects in order to uncover new insights within the language. Awobuluyi (1992:71) suggests that examining Yorùbá dialects could enhance our understanding of certain aspects that may not be clear in the standard version of the language.

This research seeks to investigate the Tense and Aspect of the Oǹdó dialect. It intends to identify the Tense and Aspect markers present in the dialect and analyze their co-occurrence in both affirmative and negative sentences. By doing so, the study aims to establish a clearer framework for understanding Tense and Aspect in the Oǹdó dialect of Yorùbá.

1.1   The Dialect of a Language

A dialect refers to a specific form or variation of a language that is associated with a particular regional, social, or ethnic group. It differs from other forms of language through unique characteristics, such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, or a combination of these elements. It is crucial to recognize that, from a linguistic perspective, a dialect is primarily a theoretical concept; it represents a variation within a language. Language variation is so widespread that every language exists as a continuum, with differences among speakers and groups, making it challenging to draw clear boundaries between various forms or varieties of a language (Ayeomoni 2011).

1.1.1 The Classification of Yorùbá Dialects

Yorùbá Language Dialects: Ajóṅgólọ̀ (2005:6): Joseph (2025)

North Western Yorùbá

Èkó, Àwórì, Ẹ̀gbádò, Òṅkò, Ọ̀yó, Ọ̀sun, Ìbolo, Ìgbómìnà

Central Yorùbá

Ifẹ̀, Ìjẹ̀sà, Èkìtì, Mọ̀bà

South Western Yorùbá

Sáàbẹ-Kétù

(Ànàgó) Ifẹ̀ (Togo)

North Eastern Yorùbá

Ìyàgbà, Ìjùmú, Òwórò, Owé

South Eastern Yorùbá

Ẹ̀gbá, Ìjẹ̀bú, Ìlàjẹ, Ìkálẹ̀, Oṅdó, Ọ̀wọ̀, Ọbà-Ìkárè, Ào-Ìfira, Ìpèsì, Ìmerì, Ìdógún, Ìdóàní and Àfò-Ikún

The schema above shows that there are five regional categories formally exemplified in the Yorùbá linguistic jurisdictions. These are: North Western Yorùbá, Central Yorùbá, South Western Yorùbá, North Eastern Yorùbá, and South Eastern Yorùbá. Our main focus will be on the South Eastern Yorùbá, hence (SEY) which hosts: Ẹ̀gbá, Ìjẹ̀bú, Ìlàjẹ, Ìkálẹ̀, Oṅdó, Ọ̀wọ̀, Ọbà-Ìkárè, Ào-Ìfira, Ìpèsì, Ìmerì, Ìdógún, Ìdóàní and Àfò-Ikún. Oṅdó dialect of Yorùbá is the main dialectal focus of this research.

1.2   Oǹdó and Its People

Oǹdó is a state in the southwestern region of Nigeria, primarily inhabited by the Yorùbá ethnic group. The state is known for its rich cultural heritage, vibrant traditions, and diverse communities. Oǹdó town, the state capital, is historically significant and recognized for its role in the spread of Western religion in the region.

The people of Oǹdó are often engaged in agriculture, trading, and crafts, with cocoa farming being particularly prominent in the area. Festivals and cultural events, such as the Oǹdó Cultural Festival, showcase their traditional music, dance, and art, reflecting the community's pride in their identity and history. The dialects spoken in Oǹdó vary, with the Oǹdó Yorùbá dialect being the most prevalent. Generally, the people of Oǹdó are known for their hospitality, rich traditions, and strong sense of community.

1.2.1   The Oǹdó Dialect of Yorùbá

The Oǹdó dialect belongs to the category of South Eastern Yorùbá and is primarily spoken in several towns and villages within Oǹdó State, Nigeria. Oǹdó State is divided into eighteen local government areas, five of which predominantly speak the Oǹdó dialect: Òdìgbó, Òkè-Igbó (Ilẹ̀-Olújìí), Ìdànrè, Oǹdó West, and Oǹdó East. This dialect plays a significant role in the study of the Yorùbá language and linguistics, attracting the attention of various researchers. For instance, Adétúnjí (1988) examined the word-formation processes in the Oǹdó dialect, Adesuyan (1991) highlighted the use of respectful pronouns, and Akinola (2014) focused on its morphological features, among other studies.

As previously noted, there is currently limited formal linguistic research focused on the functional grammar of the Oǹdó dialect, particularly regarding Tense and Aspect, with no specific studies

available on the subject at the time this research is conducted. Ayeomoni (2011) explored the lexico-syntactic characteristics of the Oǹdó and Ìkálè̩ Dialects of the Yoruba Language, presenting a comparison of randomly selected sentences from both dialects.

1.2.2 The Oǹdó State Map

Source: https://images.app.goo.gl/XnK3uSpMMw8omEYA9
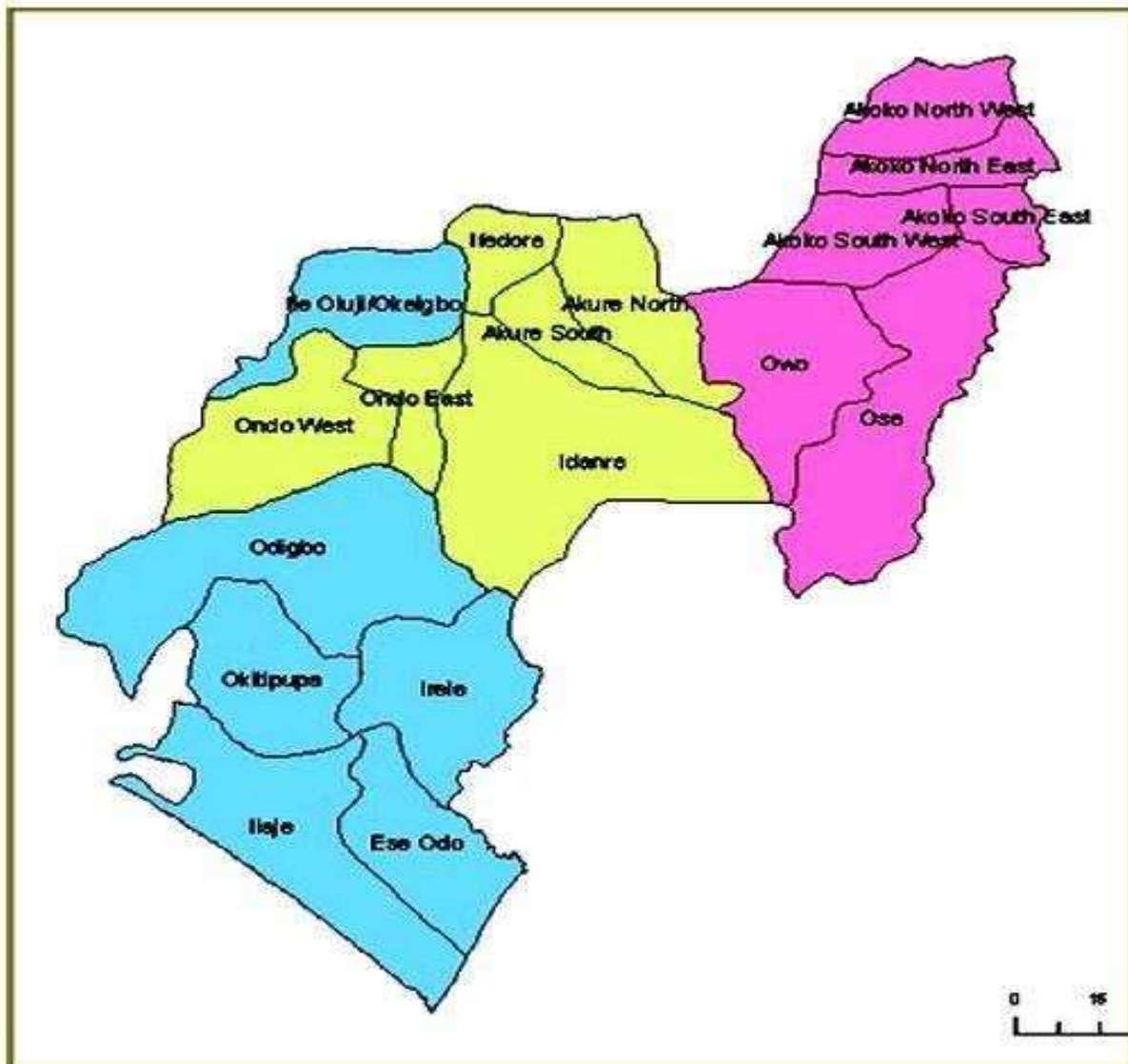
1.2.2.1   A Map of the Oǹdó Dialect Speaking Area

Map of ONDO Dialect Speaking Area.
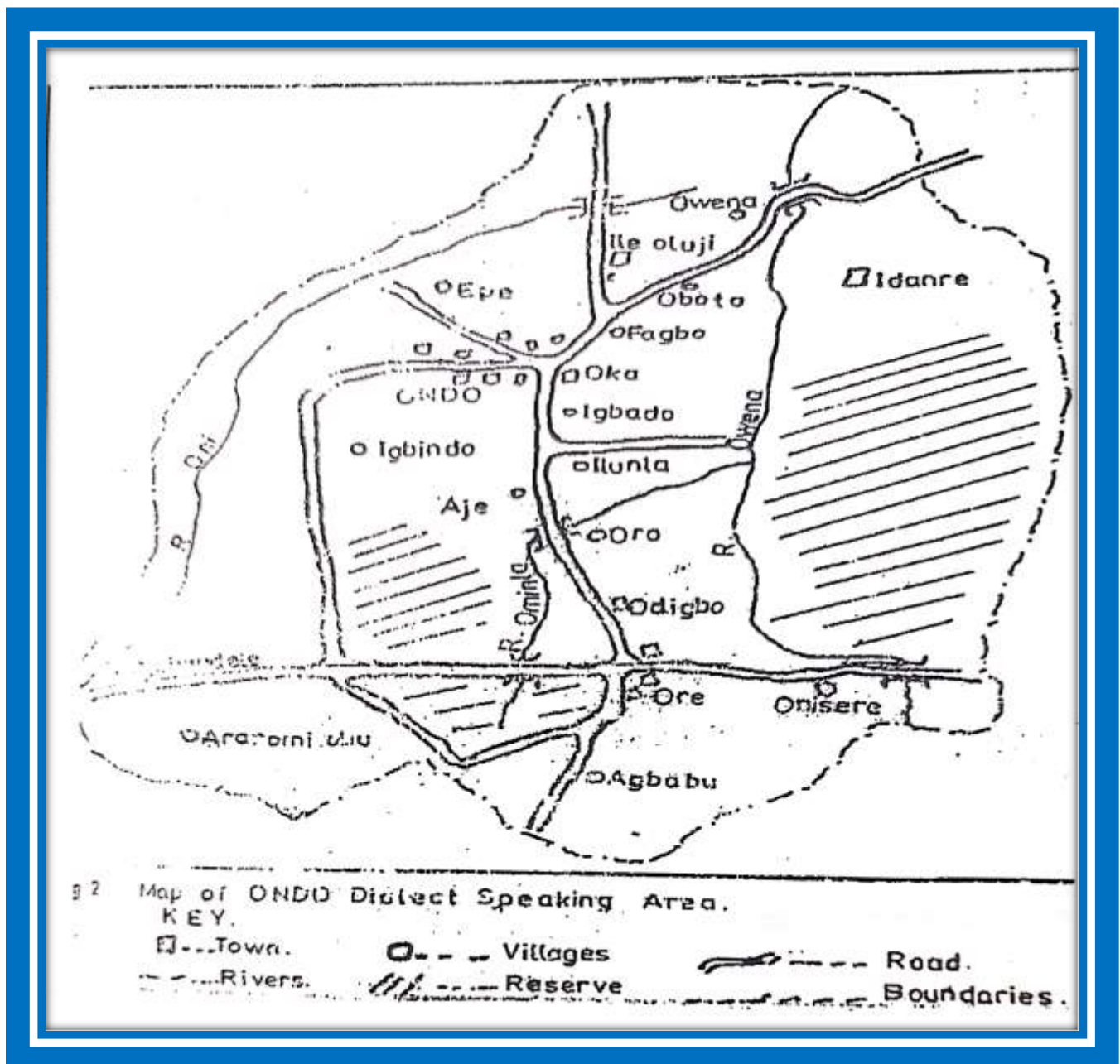
Source: Akinola (2014): Joseph (2005)

2.0   Literature Review

This section focuses on the works that are relevant to this study. It explores Tense and Aspectual issues, synthesizing and analyzing the research of established linguists. The theoretical framework selected to guide this formal approach will include an explanation of Bull's (1963) Analysis of Tense and Aspect. Numerous scholars, both international and local, have engaged with Tense and Aspect concepts. Additionally, there are existing studies on Tense and Aspect in Yorùbá as well as other Nigerian and African languages.

2.1   The Notion of Tense and Aspect

Scholars have extensively examined the concepts of Tense and Aspect in various languages, including the Yorùbá language. Tense refers to the time of an action or event, typically indicating whether it is occurring in the past, present, or future (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Aspect, on the other hand, provides additional information about the nature of the action, such as whether it is completed (perfective) or ongoing (imperfective). In the context of the Yorùbá language, researchers like Awobuluyi (1992) have emphasized the significance of understanding Tense and Aspect markers in different dialects, as they play a crucial role in conveying the temporal and aspectual nuances of sentences. Such studies aim to clarify ambiguities in the standard language and highlight the intricate structures within dialects, particularly in Oǹdó, where specific markers co-occur in negative sentences and contribute to the overall meaning.

Langacker (1972) opines that the distinction between tense and aspect is subtle and, in practice, it is sometimes difficult to make. Bamgbose (1990:67) believes that tense and aspect are inseparable in the Yorùbá language, Olusa (2017). Taiwo (2003) opines that the notion of tense and aspect has to do with the time relationship between the event and the time of utterance. Tense specifies whether an action described by the verb is present, past, or future.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Bull's framework (1963) offers an analysis of Tense and Aspect that focuses on meaning rather than solely on grammatical structure. It illustrates that there are only three potential relationships between events and any orientation axis. According to Bull, a model can project either backward or forward in time, extending infinitely. Notably, a model can also perceive, remember, or anticipate an event. Bull (1963) effectively outlines the sequential order of these relationships, which reflects the Aspect (perspectives) concerning events, points, and time.

A model has the ability to observe, remember, or predict any event. The diagram below illustrates the various possible sequences of relationships that the aspects (or perspectives) of events, points, and time intervals can have about a designated orientation axis. Each arrow indicates a time interval corresponding to one of the three aspects of an event: its beginning, middle, or end.

2.3 The Order Relationship of Aspect Points and Time Intervals to an Axis

Bull(1963); Omamor (1982:100)
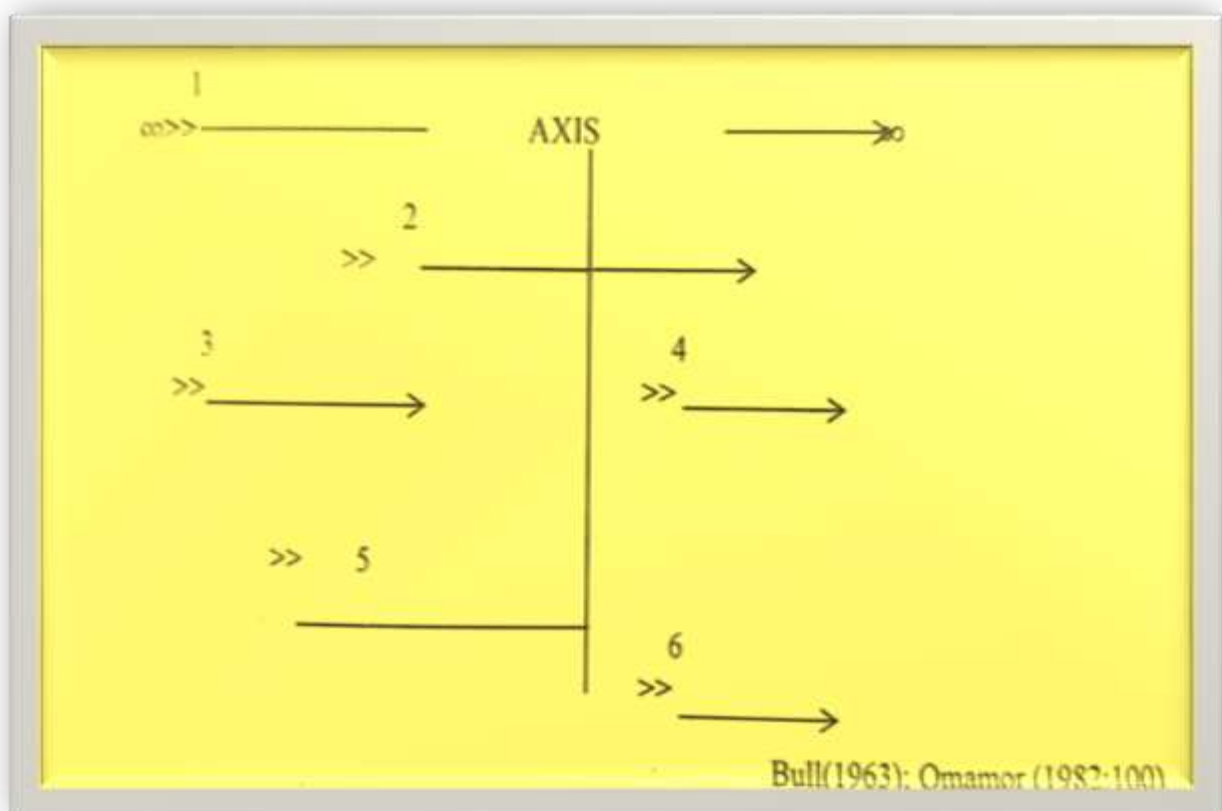
The schema above is interpreted below:

1. The end of this event is simultaneous with PP. Its beginning and its middle are anterior to the PP.

2. All three aspects are posterior to PP.

3. All three aspects of this event are anterior to PP.

4. The beginning of the action (its initiative aspect) is anterior to PP, i.e., the time of speaking with which its middle is simultaneous. Its end (the terminative aspect) is posterior to PP.

5. The speaker at "Axis" (the "now" of the utterance of Lyons (1968) can look backward or forward.

Olusa (2017:25): Joseph 2025

Considering the notions above, Omamor (1982) establishes three points of reference:

a. **Point Present** (PP): The point of initiation for speech, which serves as the primary axis of orientation, is the point present (PP) of a tense system (Taiwo 2003:773).

b. **Retrospective Point** (RP): This is the point that serves as the point at which speech is initiated, sometimes before the actual time of speech. It is a point in time anterior to the point of imitation of speech. For instance, if I say, "I saw a man", what I am saying is that at a point in time before that moment of utterance, the event of seeing had taken place.

c. **Anticipated Point** (AP): This is the time posterior to the point of initiation of the utterance. It shows the future point in time when it is anticipated that an event will take place.

The choice to utilize Bull's framework is motivated by its comprehensive consideration of the Tense and Aspect system in the Oǹdó dialect of Yorùbá. This framework recognizes Tense as a universal category. Despite the Oǹdó dialect, similar to Standard Yorùbá, lacking morphological distinctions between past and present, it still possesses a Tense system. This contrasts with Chomsky's (1957, 1965) Analysis of Tense and Aspect, which led some scholars—such as Banjo (1974), Adewole (1988), Awoyale (1986), and others—to argue that the Yorùbá language is tenseless due to the absence of morphological oppositions between past and present, as illustrated below in Chomsky's analysis of Tense and Aspect in English.

Verb ⟶ AUX + V

The Auxiliary element is then expanded by the following rule:

AUX ⟶ C (M) (have + en) (be +ing) (be + en)

Chomsky (1957:39): Olusa (2017: 28)

This analysis is revised slightly in Chomsky (1965:106)

Pred. Phrase ⟶ AUX VP (place) Time

AUX ⟶ Tense (M) (Aspect)

The illustrations above show that there are morphological inflections for verbs (and auxiliaries), which indicate tenses in the English language.

Whereas, Bull's (1963) Analysis of Tense and Aspect in the aspect of meaning has made scholars like Omamor (1982) and Taiwo (2003) establish the notion that all languages have Tense and Aspect at the deep structure, but the surface structure might appear differently.

The Oǹdó dialect of Yorùbá, just like the Standard Yorùbá, does not have the opposition between past and present in terms of morphological inflection, yet it has a tense system as illustrated below:

   1a. Tolú jẹ ohun-jíjẹ.

    Tolú eat some-edible

     "Tolu eats food."

   b. Tolú jẹ ohun-jíjẹ.

    Tolu eat some-edible

     "Tolu ate food."

   2a. Adé wọ ulí.

    Ade enter house

    "Ade enters a house."

   b. Adé wọ ulí.

    Ade enter house

    "Ade entered a house."

The examples provided demonstrate that there is no morphological contrast between the present and past forms, which aligns with Chomsky's analysis of tense and aspect in English. We

have chosen to adopt Bull's framework for our research because it emphasizes a semantic approach to tense rather than focusing on morphological inflection..

3.0   Tense and Aspect in Oǹdó

In this section, we aim to provide a detailed overview of the Tense and Aspect in affirmative sentences in Oǹdó. We will explore the Tense and Aspectual markers, analyzing their meanings within different sentences where they appear.

3.1   Tense in Oǹdó

According to Bull's analysis of tense, there is a clear distinction between future and non-future or past and non-past forms. The Oǹdó dialect, similar to Standard Yorùbá, also differentiates solely between future and non-future tense. In the following sections, we will examine these tense categories within the Oǹdó dialect.

3.1.1   Non-Future Tense

A non-future tense is a grammatical tense that differentiates a verbal action as having occurred in the past or just happening (present). This refers to an event before the moment of utterance. These are instances below:

3a.   Ọlá jìghẹsì.

Ọlá eat rice.

"Ọlá ate rice."

b.   Olú tò.

Olú talk

"Olú talked."

The examples provided in (3a-b) demonstrate that the actions described by the verbs occur before the moment of speaking. This indicates that the scenarios conveyed by the verbs are retrieved at the present point (PP). As noted in (3a-b), the Oǹdó dialect does not have explicit markers for the non-future tense.

3.1.2 Future Tense

A future tense describes an event that has not yet happened, though it is expected to happen in the future. It expresses a future event or a future state of being. Examples of the future tense are illustrated below:

4a. Èmi áa lọ.

I   Fut go

"I will go."

b.   Ùwọ áa lọ.

You Fut go

"You will go."

c.   Olú á jẹ uṣu.

Olú Fut eat yam

"Olú will eat yam."

The examples provided in (4a–c) illustrate that the actions expressed by the verbs occur after the time of the statements. This implies that the events are anticipated at the point of the utterance; they have not occurred yet but are expected to happen in the future. In Oǹdó, the primary marker for the future tense is áa/á, which closely resembles the future marker used in Standard Yorùbá.

3.2   Aspect of Oǹdó

The Oǹdó dialect shows the difference between perfect and imperfect actions. This means that it shows the difference between completed actions and ongoing actions.

3.2.1   Imperfective Aspect

This is an aspect that is used to describe a situation viewed with internal structure, such as ongoing, habitual (repeated), and small semantic roles, whether that situation occurs in the past, present, or future (Olukogbe 2014: 42). The Imperfective aspect can further be divided thus:

3.2.2   Progressive Imperfective Aspect

This aspect is used to describe a situation or event that is simultaneous with the moment of utterance. The marker for this aspect in Oǹdó is "é," as seen in the sentences below:

5a. Adé   é   jẹun.

   Adé Prog eat

   "Adé is eating."

b. Èmi   é   tò.

   Isg   Prog speaking

   "I am speaking."

The progressive marker "é" in sentences (5a–b) indicates that events are currently unfolding. This reflects a sense of incompleteness, as the start and end points of the situations are understood concerning each other (Taiwo 2003). Essentially, the timing of these events coincides with the moment the statements are made. Although the events began before the utterance, they remain ongoing.

3.2.3   Habitual Imperfective Aspect

This aspect describes a situation that is seen as characteristic of an extended period or repeated over some time (Taiwo 2003:778). The marker for habitual imperfective aspect in Oǹdó is mainly "mẹ́ẹ́" as shown in the examples below:

6a. Ayò̀   mẹ́ẹ́   lọ.

Ayọ̀   Hab   go

"Ayọ̀ usually goes."

b. Dede wan   mẹ́ẹ́   jẹun.

   All   them Hab   eat

  "They all usually eat."

Through the examples above, we have been able to exemplify the Oǹdó habitual marker in sentences (6a–b). The instances above illustrate events that take place often.

3.3   Perfective Aspect

The perfective aspect conveys the idea of a situation being complete. It refers to events that occur prior to the moment of speaking but still hold relevance in the present. Essentially, it indicates that the onset of a problem or an event predates the time of utterance. In Oǹdó, the perfective aspect also has a subcategory of the terminative aspect. In the following section, we will explore this subcategory of perfective aspect in more detail.

3.3.1   Terminative Perfective Aspect

This perfective aspect describes a situation that has been completed before the time of the utterance. It usually describes a situation that is anterior to the moment of the utterance. The marker for the terminative perfective aspect in Oǹdó is "ti" as exemplified in the examples below:

7a. Ó   ti   jẹun.

   He/she Perf   eat

   "He/she has eaten."

b. Òjò   ti   ghọ̀.

   Rain Perf   fall

   "Rain has fallen."

In sentences (7a–b) above, the actions of the verbs are completive. In other words, the actions have been completed at the time of the utterances. We can now say that the events explained in the instances above are anterior to the moment of the utterance. This section has been

able to examine the Tense and Aspect of the Oǹdó dialect. It presents the types of Tense and Aspect with their peculiar markers in the dialect and how each of these markers is analyzed in sentences.

3.4 Conclusion

SN	Aspect	Non-future Tense	Future Tense
1	Neutral i. Affirmative ii. Negative	Adé tò "Olu talked." Adé è tò "Olú did not talk."	Adé á tò "Adé will talk." Adé è ní tò "Adé will not talk."
2	Imperfective a. Continuous i. Affirmative ii. Negative b. Habitual i. Affirmative ii. Negative	Bólú é lọ "Bólú is going." Ọlá é è lọ "Ọlá is not going." Ìgè mẹ́ẹ́ sùn `Ìgè usually sleeps." Ìgè è mẹ́ẹ́ sùn "Ìgè does not usually sleep."	Ìgè á mẹ́ẹ́ sùn Ìgè will be sleeping."

3	Perfective a. Terminative i. Affirmative	Bánjí ti dé "Bánjí has arrived."	Bánjí á ti dé "Bánjí would have arrived."
	ii. Negative	Bánjí è ti dé "Bánjí has not arrived."	

The Exhibition of Tense and Aspect System in Oǹdó (Joseph 2025)

The table above shows all the parameters discussed in this research. There are also sentential illustrations, which are affirmative and negative.

This study aims to explore the functional categories of Tense and Aspect in the Oǹdó dialect of Yorùbá. Adopting the framework established by Bull (1963) and utilized in the works of Omamor (1982), Taiwo (2003), Olusa (2017), and Joseph (2025), this research has identified that the Oǹdó dialect, similar to Standard Yorùbá, differentiates between Non-Future and Future Tense. The findings indicate that the Oǹdó dialect is not devoid of tense, as evidenced by its clear distinction between Non-Future and Future tense, particularly at a deeper linguistic level.

We found that the Oǹdó dialect uses "é" as a marker for the Progressive Aspect in both affirmative and negative sentences. Additionally, "méé" serves as the Habitual Aspect marker in affirmative sentences, while "éé" is used in negative sentences. Similar to Standard Yorùbá, the Terminative Perfective Aspect marker in Oǹdó is "ti," applicable in both affirmative and negative contexts. Our observations indicate that Tense and Aspect are closely interconnected in the Oǹdó dialect, making it challenging to consistently differentiate between them.

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