

# THE SYNTAX AND SEMANTICS OF TENSE MARKERS IN ESAN

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This article examines tense as a deictic grammatical category used in temporal specification. Our data is taken from Esan, a North-Central Edoid language, spoken in four Local Government Areas in Edo State. The syntax and semantics of the tense markers show that there are morphemes for past and future tenses, hence tense is said to be grammaticalized. The present tense has no particular morpheme. Instead, there is a particular syntactic structure, together with a particular tone, that is used. It usually has a habitual or frequentative or 'ability to VP' meaning. A subclass of verbs, many of which are stative, do not occur in this syntactic structure. The concept of 'immediacy' is also grammaticalized, because Esan has morphemes to express it.

Finally, the interaction between tense and deictic adverbs shows that there is a strict co-occurrence restriction between them such that the meanings of tense and adverb in the same construction must not clash. Thus, a past-referring adverb occurs with the past tense, and a future adverb with future tense.

Cet article examine les temps comme catégorie déictique grammaticale servant dans la spécification temporelle. Nos données proviennent de l'esan, langue édoïde du Nord Centre, parlée dans quatre circonscriptions administratives de l'état nigérian d'Edo. La syntaxe et la sémantique des marqueurs de temps font constater qu'il y existe des morphèmes à sens passé et à sens futur, ce qui rend évident que le temps est grammaticalisé. Le présent, par contre, n'a aucun morphème particulier. Il existe plutôt une structure syntaxique et un comportement tonal particuliers, dont le sens est généralement habituel ou fréquentatif ou 'capable de SV'. (En sont exclus une sous-catégorie de verbes, dont plusieurs statifs.) Le concept d'immédiateté est également grammaticalisé, car l'esan a des morphèmes pour l'exprimer.

Finalement, l'interaction entre les temps et les adverbes déictiques temporels fait ressortir la stricte restriction de co-occurrence qui exclut une incompatibilité entre le sens du temps verbal et celui de l'adverbe déictique. En effet, un adverbe à sens passé ne peut accompagner qu'un temps verbal passé, et de même un adverbe à sens futur ne peut accompagner qu'un temps futur.

## 0. INTRODUCTION

When we speak, what we say is usually located in time. In Reichenbach's analysis (1947) based on the English language, time relations in a sentence are specified in terms of the value of and the relationship between three temporal notions: Point of Speech (Speech Time or ST), Point of Event (Event Point or ET) and Point of Reference (Reference Point or RT), being the time indicated by a sentence. These three temporal notions do not necessarily coincide. ET and RT are defined relative to ST. Thus, in the past tense, ET and RT coincide and precede ST, in the present tense ET, RT, and ST coincide while in the future tense, ST and RT coincide and occur before ET.

Tense and aspect are two different but closely related grammatical categories used in temporal specification. According to Lyons (1968:314) and Comrie (1976:82), they are difficult to define clearly. Though both relate to temporal specification, tense is deictic, making specific or definite reference to time while aspect is non-deictic, making non specific or indefinite reference to time. Many African languages distinguish between them, e.g., Ibibio (Essien 1983), Isekiri (Omamor 1982), Yala (Oko 1986), and Esan (Ejele 1986). Tense and aspect are so close that they very often impinge on each other.

Tense relates the time of a situation to the time of an utterance (ST), the latter being "now" (cf. Lyons 1968:314, Comrie 1976:2). SITUATION is used as a cover term for action, event, or state of affairs. This relationship is said to be deictic because it locates the time of the situation with speech time and is referred to as ABSOLUTE

TENSE. Sometimes instead of relating to ST, the time of situation is related to some other time. This time reference is non-deictic.

Tense as a deictic grammatical category exists when the form of the verb reflects or specifies time reference. When this situation obtains, tense is said to be grammaticalized and such a language is said to be tensed (Lyons 1977:679). Though not all languages have tense, many have various deictic adverbs or morphemes of time by which temporal specification is made. Languages which have no overt correlation between verbal morphology and time are said to be "tenseless" (Lyons 1977:679, Comrie 1976:2). In such languages, when time adverbs or time particles may be used to indicate temporal specification, tense is said to be lexicalized. In Esan, tense is grammaticalized, based on the evidence that it has distinct grammatical morphemes for past and future time reference in addition to tones.

In what follows, we examine the syntax and semantics of tense markers as they relate to temporal specification. Our data is taken from the Ekpoma dialect of Esan, a North-Central Edoid language in Nigeria (Elugbe 1986), spoken in Esan West, Esan Central, Esan North-East, and Esan South-East Local Government Areas in Edo State. The language is also classified as a member of the Kwa sub-family of the Niger-Congo (Greenberg 1963) and in the latest classification as New Benue-Congo (Elugbe in Bendor-Samuel and Hartell 1989), spoken by a population of about 500,000 (1963 Census).

## 1. ESAN TENSE SYSTEM

Esan has verbal morphemes corresponding to the past and the future tenses, though not the present tense. This situation suggests that instead of the traditional grammatical tripartite distinction on the deictic temporal reference scale, the basic distinction in the tense system may be between future and non-future, or past and non-past, or both. In the rest of this article, we discuss the tense markers, followed by the immediate tense markers, and finally, we investigate the co-occurrence of temporal adverbials and the tense markers.

### 1.1 SIMPLE PRESENT TENSE

- (1) **ẹhi ọ gùà**  
 NP he swim  
 Ehi swims.
- (2) **ẹhi ọ wẹnná**  
           work  
 Ehi works.
- (3) **ẹhi ọ hoẹmọ íkhuò**  
 NP he like women  
 Ehi likes women.

Examples (1)–(3) show that the present tense is not segmentally, morphologically represented since there is no specific morpheme associated with it. Thus, in the syntactic structure of the sentence NP ọ VP, the subject NP (**ẹhi**) is directly followed by an appropriate pronoun (**ọ**) coreferential with the subject. In context, the lexical NP (**ẹhi**) can be omitted, since the appropriate referent can be identified independently of

it. Semantically, sentences (1)–(3) have a range of interpretations including habitual, frequentative, and ability to VP.

Phonologically, the tonal pattern of the sentence is important. The pronoun *ê* ‘he/she/it’ must have a falling tone in the structure NP *ê* VP for the present tense meaning. Also the verb (or the first syllable) has a non-high tone, being low in (1) and (2) which are active verbs and mid in (3), a stative verb. For some other verbs like *dághe* ‘see, spot, recognize’ and *vae* ‘come’ which are events (being dynamic momentary situations), the tone is high, as in (4).

(4) **êhi ê dághe**

Ehi sees/spots/recognizes.

From examples (1)–(4), it is clear that the tone on the verb is inconsistent. Thus, tense cannot be fully discussed with reference to either the verb or verb phrase alone since these, on their own, do not give enough evidence or clues for accounting for the nature of tense in the Esan language. Obviously, any comprehensive study of the tense system must be made with reference to the sentence as a whole. Consequently, tense is syntactically and semantically a sentential category (Lyons 1977:678 and Ejele 1986:123), despite our initial identification of tense in terms of verbal morphology.

Esan has a subclass of verbs, mainly statives like *mọ* ‘have’, *khọ* ‘resemble’, *lẹn* ‘know’, and *yaan* ‘own’, which do not occur in the NP *ê* VP structure and do not have the range of interpretations associated with non-stative verbs in this structure. This is similar to the case in English where, although the temporal reference of a sentence containing the present tense is, in general, determined either contextually or by the presence of adverbials, it is clear according to Smith (1981:255) that the present tense has different preferred interpretations with different semantic classes of verbs, most specifically active verbs as opposed to stative verbs.

Examples (5)–(7) illustrate the behavior of some statives.

(5) (a) **êhi mọ**  
has

Ehi has

(b) **êhi mọ íghǒ**  
has money

Ehi has money.

(c) **\*êhi rẹ mọ íghó**  
PERF has money

Ehi has money.

(d) **êhi rẹ á-mọ íghó**  
PERF.ing have money (= Ehi has money  
= imperfective = Ehi used to have money)  
Ehi did/used to have money.

(6) (a) **êhi khọ abá-le**  
resemble father-his

Ehi resembles/resembled his father.

(b) **êhi rẹ khọ abá-le**  
PERF resemble father-his

Ehi did/used to resemble his father.

- (7) (a) **ẹhi lẹnlẹn/lẹn**  
Ehi knows/knew.
- (b) **ẹhi lẹn ení**  
know there/the place  
Ehi knows the place.
- (c) **ẹhi rẹ lẹn**  
PERF know  
Ehi did/used to know.

The rising tone in (5a) is normally associated with progressive present (Ejele 1986) but here it is actually a result of the loss of I+V suffix in the full verb form **mọlen** 'have', (see Ejele 1994). Similarly the high tone in (6a)–(6b) and (7a)–(7c) is associated with simple past. As for the ambiguity between present and past in (6a), (7a), and (7b), context disambiguates. However, whenever the past is specifically referred to, the perfective morpheme **rẹ** alone or imperfective **rẹ á-VP** is used, as in (5d), (6b), and (7c), the exception being (5c), because the verb **mọ** 'have' does not occur with the perfective morpheme **rẹ**.

On the whole then, the present tense is a conceptual category that is not morphologized but is expressed via a particular syntactic structure as well as tone.

## 1.2 SIMPLE PAST TENSE

- (8) (a) **ẹhi gúá-le**  
swam-PAST  
Eli swam.
- (b) **ẹhi dâ gúá**  
PAST swim  
Ehi swam.  
(\*ẹhi dâ guale)
- (c) **ẹhi gúá**  
swam  
Ehi swam.
- (9) (a) **ẹhi hóémọ íkhuò**  
like women  
Ehi liked women.
- (b) **ẹhi dâ hóémọ íkhuò**  
PAST like women  
Ehi liked women.
- (10) (a) **ẹhi dághe**  
saw
- (b) **ẹhi dâ dághe**  
Ehi saw.

Basically, Esan has three ways of expressing the simple past, but only two are morphosyntactically represented. These are:

- (i) Using the unmarked/zero verb form in conjunction with the high tone on the first syllable of the verb, as in (8c, 9a, and 10a). Most verbs occur in this form. For example **yen ébàè** 'cook (food)', **le ébae** 'eat (food)', **ghe** 'look', **gue** 'cover', **guanọ** 'look for', **se** 'reach/get to'. These do not occur with the suffix verb form. It is only the presence of the high tone on the verb that fixes time as past.
- (ii) By means of suffixation (I+V) in conjunction with the high tone on the verb as in (8a), typical of intransitive use of verbs, e.g., **wénnále** 'worked', **viéle** 'cried', **úlu** 'dead/died', **wili** 'be lost', **hónlọn** 'heard', and **yolo** 'went'. These verbs often exhibit vowel harmony, predictable in most cases. See Ejele 1982:45 and Ejele 1986:22, 126 for further details on intransitives with I+V suffix, and I+V suffix in simple past.
- (iii) Using **dâ** as a free morpheme directly before the verb, as in (8b), (9b), and (10b). All verbs occur with **dâ** as **dâ VP**. Generally, the presence of **dâ** has no tonal effect on the verb, as seen in examples (8b) and (9b), though (10b) suggests otherwise. Interestingly, **dâ**, when it precedes a modifier, influences the tone of the modifier preceding the verb. The general effect is to lower the tone on the modifier, as in (11).

- (11) (a) **ọ wô gbé**  
 he really dance  
 He really danced.
- (b) **ọ dâ wò gbé**  
 he PAST really dance  
 He really danced.

The suffixed verb form never occurs with **dâ**, hence they are mutually exclusive. This explains why **gúále** in (8b) is ungrammatical. Even though we have said that suffixation is typical of intransitives, we cannot really generalize because there are intransitives that do not take the suffix form for tense. Examples include **fafa** 'fade' **ti** 'boil', **dere** 'fall', and **tue** 'hot'.

Semantically, there is no difference between the three ways of expressing the simple past since they all refer to recent past situations. However, they differ pragmatically: **dâ VP** (as in (8b), (9b), and (10b)) is usually associated with a description of a report of recent past situation whereas the suffix verb form is a statement used exclusively for more recent past situations. This distinction between reportive and assertive sentences is similar to that drawn by Lyons (1982:116) between the experiential and the historic as modes of description and the relationship to the markedness of particular aspects and tense as exemplified in the opposition between the perfective and imperfective in Russian and other Slavonic languages, the imperfect and simple past in literary French, the imperfective versus historic perfect in Latin, and the past progressive versus simple preterite in English. The **dâ VP** form correlates with Lyon's experiential mode of description. However, the case in Esan is different because there are lexical constraints on which verb can occur with which suffix, unlike in French and Slavonic languages where there are, in general, no such constraints.

## 1.3 FUTURE TENSE

The future tense in the Esan language is usually temporal, with modal overtones of prediction. There are two different free particles used for expressing the future tense: **â** and **kĩ**. Both particles occur with the zero or unmarked verb form, that is, with no affixes, and are found directly before the verb. The **â** is illustrated in (12)–(14) and the **kĩ** in (15)–(17). Neither particle occurs with the suffix verb form.

(12) **ẹhi ọ â gùà**  
           he FUT  
 Ehi will swim.

(13) **ẹhi ọ â hòèmọ íkhuò**  
           he FUT  
 Ehi will like women.

(14) **ẹhi ọ â dághe**  
           he FUT  
 Ehi will see.

Phonologically **â** must have a falling tone if used as future tense marker. This is important because **a** is a very versatile morpheme in Esan, being used in other grammatical constructions like subjunctive, imperative, and conditional, depending on the tone (Ejele 1995:261). There is no doubt that **â** is [+FUTURE] because if it is excluded from (12)–(14), the interpretation of the sentence is changed to something close to simple present. However this change is possible only if the tone on the pronoun is adjusted to falling (**ọ**) instead of high (**ọ**) in (12)–(14).

(15) **Ehí kǐ gúá**  
           FUT swim  
 Ehi will (then) swim.

(16) **Ehí kǐ hóémó íkhúó**  
           like women  
 Ehi will (then) like women.

(17) **Ehí kǐ dághe**  
           see  
 Ehi will (then) see.

In (15)–(17), **kĩ** essentially expresses the consequential relation between two clauses and means something like ‘...will as a result...’. Note the change in tone on the subject **ẹhi** → **ẹhí**, and the tone on the verb becoming high (where it was low in constructions with **â**) except in **dághe** ‘see’ in (17) which remains low.

Semantically, there is not much difference between **â** and **kĩ**. The difference between them is pragmatic. Thus, the use of **â** is anticipatory while **kĩ** expresses a consequential relation with a preceding clause as in (18a), or performs a connective function with a preceding clause that depicts an event that fixes time reference, as in (19a).

(18) (a) **Ose à khọ ẹhi éhí kǐ fí ọlé úbí**  
           if insult FUT hit him slap  
 If Ose insults Ehi, Ehi will slap him.

- (b) \***Ose à khọ ẹhi ẹhi fí ọlé úbǐ**  
 \*If Ose insults Ehi, Ehi slapped him.
- (c) **Ose à khọ èhǐ èhǐ â fí ọlé úbǐ**  
 if insult FUT hit him slap  
 If Ose insults Ehi, Ehi will slap him.
- (19) (a) **dèní ọmọ rẹ riọ bhiówẹ ọ kǐ kẹ**  
 by.the.time child use wake.from sleep it FUT quick  
**mẹn rẹ khọ-á**  
 me PERF bath  
 By the time the child wakes up, I will have already had my bath.
- (b) \***dèní ọmọ rẹ riọ bhi ówẹ, o kẹ mẹn rẹ khọ-á**  
 PERF  
 By the time the baby wakes up, I had had my bath.
- (c) **dèní ọmọ rẹ riọ bhiówẹ ọ â kẹ**  
 by.the.time child PERF wake.from sleep it FUT quick  
**mẹn rẹ khọ-á**  
 me PERF bath  
 By the time the baby wakes up, I will have had my bath.

If **â** is used in place of **kǐ** as in (18c) and (19c), an anticipatory relation is established between the two clauses, and expresses the speaker's confidence or certainty about what will happen.

In (19a), **dèní ọmọ rẹ riọ bhi ówẹ** 'by the time the baby wakes up' describes an event which functions temporally for the second clause, and it is the use of **kǐ** that links the two clauses. If **kǐ** or **â** is excluded in the second clause as in (18b) and (19b), the future interpretation is lost, the situation is located in the past with the result that the temporal relation between the two clauses is destroyed. This kind of usage is found in other languages like Yoruba (Bangbose 1983), Işekiri (Omamor 1982), and Yala (Oko 1986) which have tense distinction of future and non future. Note that even though the future morphemes are said to have modal overtones because of their predictive or uncertainty quality, this is in fact a secondary function since, as we have seen, their primary function is to indicate the future tense.

Before ending this section, it is important to point out that categories like negation and question do not influence tense. Rather tense influences them. In negation, for instance, Esan has two markers namely **ii** used for non-past and **bha** for past tense (see Ejele 1985 for further details).

#### 1.4 IMMEDIATE TENSES

Esan has what can be described as "immediate" past and future tenses. The term immediate is used here to refer to situations that have only just happened or will soon happen or take place after the sentence has been uttered. The morpheme used to express immediacy is **laa** (not **lá** as earlier claimed in Ejele 1986:145). Examples (20) and (21) illustrate its use in the immediate past and (22) the immediate future.

- (20) **ẹhi láa gúá**  
 Ehi has gone to swim.  
 (Ehi is going to swim.)

- (21) **ghi láà guá**  
Ehi has just swum.
- (22) **ghi láá gua**  
Ehi will swim. = it is Ehi who will swim

The two representations of immediate past are different in the sense that **láa** in (20) describes an action that has been initiated (but not yet completed) with the meaning 'NP has gone/is going to VP (but has not yet VP-ed)'. Thus in (20), Ehi has gone/is going to swim but has not returned, while in (21) Ehi has gone and has only just returned from swimming. In contrast with the immediate past tenses, the immediate future, represented by **láá** in (22) explicitly expresses the speaker's confidence/certainty that 'it is Ehi that will swim'. In all the immediate tenses, **laa** represents immediacy while its tones express the tenses, being high-mid (**láa**) or high-low (**láà**) for past tense, and high-high (**láá**) for the future. Also of interest are the aspectual and modal overtones accompanying the immediate tenses as observed in the notion of completion, initiation, and certainty. This confirms our earlier comment that tense and aspect impinge on each other.

## 2. TENSE AND TIME ADVERBIALS

Time adverbials are used in Esan only when explicit reference to time is intended. Evidence shows that there is a co-occurrence constraint operating between tenses (or aspect) and the time adverbials they allow. This is illustrated in the past and future in (23) and (24), respectively, with anchored adverbs **éḷenà** 'today', **ode** 'yesterday', **ewiè** 'tomorrow', and **ewiè nà** 'this morning'. The term "anchored" adverbs (Smith 1978; Ejele 1986) is used to refer to deictic temporal adverbials which make specific reference to a point in time, while "unanchored" temporal adverbials make reference of a general kind to time, e.g., **bhi ikpe èvá** 'at/in/for two years'. Thus **éḷenà** 'today and **ewiè nà** 'this morning' are explicitly present, **ode** 'yesterday' is explicitly past, and **ewiè** 'tomorrow' is explicitly future, since reference time depends on speech time. That is its interpretation depends on when it is said.

- (23) **ehi (dâ) guá éḷenà / òdè / ewiè nà / \*ewiè**  
Ehi swam today / yesterday / this morning / tomorrow.
- (24) **ehi ó â guà elenà / ewiè / ewiè nà / \*òdè**  
Ehi will swim today / tomorrow / this morning / yesterday.

In (23), **dâ** is in parentheses indicating its optionality. Semantically its absence does not change the meaning of the sentence, presumably because of the presence of the high tone on the verb which always marks the simple past. Pragmatically the presence of **dâ** is associated with a descriptive or reportive rather than an assertive account as already mentioned.

Syntactically the adverbs occur sentence finally. All the temporal deictic adverbs except **ewiè** 'tomorrow' occur with the past tense as in (23). Similarly, they all, except **ode** 'yesterday', occur in the future tense, as in (24). The ungrammaticality and unacceptability of these deictic adverbs in these tenses is due to the co-occurrence restriction operating between them. Consequently **ewiè** 'tomorrow' is disallowed in the past tense because of the incompatibility of meaning between the past tense and an adverb



with an inherent future meaning. For the same reason, **ode** ‘yesterday’ does not co-occur with the future tense, precisely because of the conflict in meaning between the future tense and the past-referring adverb.

In contrast with the past and future tenses, the temporal adverbs behave differently with the present tense, as shown in (25).

- (25) **ehi ọ̀ gùà èlènà / ?òdẹ́ / ?ewiẹ́ / èwiẹ́ nà**  
Ehi swims today / yesterday / tomorrow / this morning.

While the explicitly present time adverbs **èlènà** ‘today’ and **éwiẹ́ nà** ‘this morning’ are usually allowed with the present tense, by the principle of co-occurrence restriction, the adverbs **éwiẹ́** ‘tomorrow’ (explicitly future) and **ode** ‘yesterday’ (explicitly past) are not. However, they are allowed with the present tense only if they are interpreted as a particular day of the week, or point of the day as in ‘this morning’, in which a habitual action is carried out, with the time adverbs being fixed or determined by the time of utterance. In other words, when these two adverbs occur in the present tense, the sentences are interpreted as [+past +habitual] for **ode** ‘yesterday’ or [+future +habitual] for **ewiẹ́** ‘tomorrow’. In general, the past tense or the future tense is used instead of these forced combinations. In fact, (25) with **ewiẹ́ nà** ‘this morning’ is interpreted as [+present habitual]. A comment on the “explicit” nature of the adverbs is necessary at this point. When adverbs are said to be explicit in terms of their specific temporal reference, they are deictic. Thus, adverbs that explicitly refer to the present such as ‘today’ or ‘this morning’ are explicitly present, ‘yesterday’ refers to the past and is explicitly past, and ‘tomorrow’ is explicitly future. These three temporal adverbs are anchored adverbs because they have a specific anchored interpretation and they contrast with unanchored adverbials such as ‘at/in/for X months/years’ typical of durative structures (see Ejele 1986:141 for further details).

In (25), the fact that **ode** ‘yesterday’ and **ewiẹ́** ‘tomorrow’ in the present tense are acceptable only when contextualized shows this as a marked use. This behavior shows that the present tense in Esan is different from that in languages like English. More significantly, it shows that the Esan equivalent of these time adverbs can be used non-deictically, as in the present tense structure whose habitual interpretation overrides their deictic function. Consequently in the present tense, these deictic time adverbs behave more like English non-deictic adverbials ‘the day before’ and ‘the day after’ corresponding to **ode** and **éwiẹ́** (see ago in English as described by Smith 1978).

Note that although adverbials occur sentence finally, they can occur initially in the sentence when they are topicalized as in (26)–(28) for present, past, and future tenses, respectively.

- (26) **èlènà / ?ode / ?ewiẹ́ éhĩ gùà**  
It is today / yesterday / tomorrow Ehi swims.
- (27) **èlènà / ódẹ́ / \*ewiẹ́ éhĩ gùá**  
It is today / yesterday / tomorrow Ehi swam.
- (28) **èlènà / \*ode / éwiẹ́ éhĩ á gùà**  
FUT  
It is today / yesterday / tomorrow Ehi will swim.

These examples reinforce the principle of co-occurrence restriction between tenses and time adverbs as seen from the ungrammaticality and unacceptability of **ewiẹ́**

'tomorrow' in the past (27) and **odę** in the future (28). In the present as in (26) **ęlęnà** 'today' is allowed. **odę** 'yesterday' and **ewię** 'tomorrow' when allowed to occur in the present tense are interpreted as fixing the time (reference time) when a habitual action is carried out.

Topicalization of the adverbs results in the absence of the pronouns **ę** and **ę**, respectively, in the present and future tenses. The tone on the verb remains low in the present and future while it remains high in the past tense. In contrast, the tone on the lexical NP changes from Ehi to Ehí in the future tense and to Ehĩ in the past and present tenses. It is important to note that these changes are a result of topicalization not necessarily because of the time adverbs, since the same effect is achieved when other lexical items are topicalized.

### 3. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion, certain conclusions can be drawn and need to be highlighted. Tense is grammaticalized in Esan since it has particular morphemes at the morphosyntactic level for expressing both past and future tenses. Thus, the past tense is expressed in three ways:

- (i) by suffixation,
- (ii) by the preverbal free morpheme **dâ**, and
- (iii) by zero verbal morpheme with the high tone on the first syllable of the verb.

Further both (i) and (ii) require high tone on the verb. The future tense is expressed by using either **â** or **kĩ**, both being preverbal free morphemes. Semantically there is no difference between them but pragmatically **â** can be said to be anticipatory while **kĩ** is consequential, used only in relation to a preceding clause.

In addition to the simple tense, Esan has a grammatical morpheme **laa** for expressing immediacy in tenses. Different tones are used on it to indicate the particular tense. Thus, **lâa** (high-mid tone) expresses situations (being) initiated but not yet completed, **lâà** (high-low tone) expresses situations that have just taken place, and **lâá** (high-high tone) expresses futurity, as well as the speaker's confidence or certainty about what is expressed. Thus, tense interacts here with aspect and modality. **laa** is treated as one morpheme for expressing immediacy in tenses with different tones indicating the different tenses instead of being treated as three separate markers. This position can be justified, because although there is no diachronic evidence that they came from one original marker, synchronic use of the morpheme shows that it expresses immediacy whenever it is used. Thus, the situations are semantically related. Treating it as three separate markers suggests that we are dealing with three different morphemes, a counter intuitive position to take, given their obvious semantic relatedness.

Finally, Esan has a strict co-occurrence constraint between tenses and the adverbs they use. In fact, mixing of tenses and adverbs in terms of their meaning is prohibited. Hence, past-referring deictic adverbs occur in the past tense and future-referring deictic adverbs occur with future tense.

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