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Tense and Negation in Serial Verb Construction of Student Pidgin English in Ghana

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Abstract:
This paper describes some aspects of the Serial Verb Construction in Student Pidgin English spoken by Ghanaian students. It focuses on the tense markers and negation in the Serial Verb Construction (SVC). Recorded interviews and focused group discussions on different issues discussed by some 20 selected students who are competent speakers of Student Pidgin English from the University of Ghana and Koforidua Polytechnic were transcribed for analysis of the phenomenon. The paper suggests that the Serial Verb Construction has a massive presence in Student Pidgin English (SPE) and shows tensing by the use of particles/words and, in some cases, the pitch placed on the particles. The study mentions that the particle 'dey' is used in Ghanaian SPE to indicate the present tense in structures while 'go' can be used to indicate the past and future tense depending on the pitch placed on it: a rising pitch on the particle 'go' signals the past tense while a falling pitch signals the future tense. Also, negation is always indicated by the use of the word 'no' and it is always placed before the verbs in the series.

Keywords: Tense, Negation, Serial Verb Construction, Pidgin English, Ghanaian Pidgin

1. Introduction

One of the significant linguistic codes that have emerged as an established language variety with the advent of English in Ghana is Pidgin English. Pidgin English manifests itself in two varieties in Ghana. These forms include the Ghana Pidgin English (GhaPE) and Student Pidgin English (SPE) (Rupp, 2013). SPE is described as an acrolectal manifestation of Ghanaian Pidgin English. SPE can be described as mesolectal/ acrolectal because its users are often educated Ghanaians while GhaPE can be described as basilectal which refers to a kind of Pidgin spoken by a cross section of people whose level of education is very low (Huber, 1999; Dako, 2002; Pipkins, 2004). This means that SPE is on the end of a continuum with the Ghanaian Pidgin English on the extreme low end.

Student Pidgin English has developed significantly in Ghana over the years. It started as a language spoken in Ghanaian secondary schools and it is believed to have entered there in the mid-1960s. Lately, it is also spoken in the universities and homes (Huber, 1999:2).It is extensively used by male students in the second cycle and the tertiary institutions in the country (Dako, 2002). SPE is even, on a smaller scale, used by junior high students outside their classroom. It has English as its superstrate language and a combination of the local languages in Ghana as its substrate though Akan is its predominant substrate. The Student Pidgin English uses the local vocabulary and sometimes the syntax of languages to supplement its vocabulary and structures (Dako, 2002:55). Ghanaian Pidgin English users have a shared sense of levels of competence and a good user can be noted as well as a poor user.

SPE has some features that identify it as such: the lexis, the structure and the Serial Verb Construction. Most researchers like Huber and Dako agree that English is the predominant lexifier. Indeed the data collected confirms this notion. The Serial Verb Construction (SVC) is a significant feature in SPE in Ghana and has its structure and unique functions. This project seeks to examine some aspects of the SVC including the tense markers, and negation which are interestingly expressed in Student Pidgin English. The main objective is to describe how the Present Tense, Past Tense and Future Time are expressed in Ghanaian SPE. Again, it is to describe how Negation is realized in the SVC of the SPE.

2. Attitude and Functions of Pidgin in Ghana

There has always been a cold and a disapproving attitude to the existence and the use of Pidgin in Ghana (Stoller (1979: 72) cited in Dako (2002:54). This explains why Pidgin in Ghana has not seen a massive approval. Pidgin is seen by parents and a big section of Ghanaians as 'yo-yo' (thug life language). Salifu-Asuro (2015) rightly indicates that even in the secondary school, students are

sanctioned for using the 'bastard' Pidgin English in the schools. Though it is often associated with illiteracy, it has now found its voice as a prestigious youth language of the educated even in the media. Pipkins (2004) indicates that Student Pidgin English (SPE) has more prestige than Ghana Pidgin English (GhaPE). For several reasons, SPE is highly patronized by the male population rather than females as mentioned by several scholars (Tawiah, 1998 & Dako, 1999).

Today, Student Pidgin English performs several functions in Ghana. Huber (1999) is of the view that it serves as an in-group language which serves to bond speakers and indicates that a person has had at least secondary school education. Rupp (2013) mentions that it establishes the students as members of higher institutions of learning and members of the local community, therefore, it functions as a social leveler. Rupp (2013) describes SPE as an intermediate language variety purposefully chosen as an alternative to other languages. Dako (2002) and Pipkins (2004) suggest that it is an easier form of communication between speakers as it is used by speakers to escape the pressure of speaking grammatically correct Standard English. This assumption is asserted by the findings of Rupp (2013) in her work. Pipkins (2004) argues that SPE still serves as a form of resistance to Standard English.

3. Serial Verb Construction (SVC)
From the available literatures, it appears defining Serial Verb Construction (SVC) is difficult but a thin line can be noticed when some of the definitions are observed carefully. A sentence with a SVC contains a noun phrase, two or more verb phrases (finite verbs) with a possible complement(s) (Schachter (1974: 254) quoted in Osam (1994). Here, SVC is seen in relation to a complete sentence. The important thing is that the verb phrase should have more than one finite verb in a given sentence. The emphasis should be on the presence of the serial verbs no matter where they are found. There should always be two or more predicates (Foley & Olsen, 1985:18). This is what the serial verb construction is all about. The focus is on the verbs whether in a clause or in a complete sentence. Importantly, the serial verbs act as a single unit (Durie, 1994:3). Minimally, an SVC must have two verbs with the same subject but not joined by conjunctions or complementizers (Huber, 1999:236-237 & Myers-Scotton, 2002). Though many scholars admit that defining SVC is difficult, they all agree on one thing. The common thing is that a Serial Verb Construction must necessarily consist of two or more verbs. From the readings, SVC can be summarized as the presence of two or more lexical verbs with or without other verbal particles in a given utterance or sentence.

SVC is common in Akan (Agyeman, 2002) and other local languages spoken in Ghana. Akan belongs to the Kwa origin of languages in Africa. It is clear here that SVC is not just a feature of Akan but the mother language Kwa (Myers-Scotton, 2002). Nevertheless, a broader survey reveals this cannot be said of Cape Verdian and Guiné-Bissau CP (Creole Portuguese) and PalenqueroCodeswitching (Creole Spanish) which were less influenced by Kwa languages (Holm, 2000:211).

SPE in Ghana has English as its predominant lexifier but its structure to a large extent is similar to the Akan language hence its substrate. Akan shows a significant feature in verb serialization. It is possible to have this statement in Akan: *Kofi kobobooAma* (which means Kofi go-past beat-past Ama). Notably, such statement can directly be structured in Ghanaian SPE like *Kofi go beat Ama* which means that Kofi went to beat Ama. Semantically, the verbs are connected; that is, the subject or object of one verb is the implied subject or object of the next in the string. With Akan often functioning as the substrateof Ghanaian SPE, there is a high presence of Serial Verb Construction in it: this is a reflection of Akan structures.

4. Methodology
It is undeniable that SPE is used extensively by male students on the various campuses of tertiary institutions in Ghana. For this reason, the researchers engaged only male participants for the study. Some 20 male students who use Student Pidgin English regularly comprising 10 students from the University of Ghana and 10 students Koforidua Polytechnic were identified by simple random sampling procedure. Focused group discussions were convened with them in SPE with the researchers as facilitators. The student participants had spent at least two years in the tertiary institutions and they informed the researchers how frequent they spoke pidgin through an earlier questionnaire administered to them. Again, there were one-on-one interviews with the students. These interviews and discussions in SPE were recorded and transcribed. Utterances with SVC were identified and selected to aide in the analysis.

5. Analysis and Findings

5.1. Tense
The study asserts that though the predominant lexifier of SPE in Ghana is the English language, it is possible that some words from the local languages are used. This is very common with all the verbs and clauses identified. In the Serial Verb Construction in example (1), like many other cases observed in the data, the Akan word "twee" is used in the SVC as one of the verbs in the series. It functions as the substantive verb in the SVC and it literally means 'to stretch' or 'to drag'.

1. **Why sey you <u>fit   twee</u>   de   word   inside   so?**
   Why that you able   stretch (Akan)   the   word   inside   so.
   Why do you stretch the word like this?

It is also possible to find the word 'fit' which is used as a very frequent verb in SPE's SVCs. The study indicates that it is not an Akan word or a particle but rather a word formed in Ghanaian SPE. Consistently, 'fit' is used to indicate ability. It will be appropriate to see it as the English word 'can'. This is exemplified in examples (2) and (3).

2. **A   dey   fit   copy   give   am   saa.**
    I   PART   able   copy   for   him   always (Akan)
    I can copy for him always.

3. **You   go   fit   mention   nickname.**
    You   go   able   mention   nickname.
    You can mention nickname.

5.1.1. Present Tense

More importantly, the study indicates that tensing in SVC in SPE is highly marked by the particles 'dey' and 'go' and, in some cases, the pitch placed on the particles.

In the examples (4), (5), and (6), the SVC consists of 'dey' which the study identified as a regular particle of the present tense indicator in Ghanaian SPE. It is widely used with verbs in a series to form the SVC anytime speakers intend to indicate that the activity in question is in the present tense. It is used to suggest the English verbs 'is' and 'am'. The verbs that are used with the particle are often in their pure form, without showing number.

4. **Right   now   dem   dey   take   give   the   mature   students.**
    Right   now   them   PART   take   give   the   mature   students
    They give it to mature students

5. **E   dey   chop   chop   the   money   nyafunyafu.**
    He   PART   spend   spend   the   money   anyhow
    He spends the money anyhow.

6. **I   dey   go   bring   come   riders.**
    I   PART   go   bring   come   right now
    I   am   going to bring it: I will come back

In example (4), the particle 'dey' is attached to the verbs: 'take' and 'give' to form the SVC and in example (5), it is used with a reduplication of the verb 'chop' in the SVC. In example (6) however, it is used as the English verb 'am'. In all the cases above, it is used with the other verbs in the SVC to indicate the time (present tense) of the activities.

However, to indicate habitual activities in the simple present tense forms, it was realized that the particle 'dey' is only used to signal the tense but not to indicate 'is' or 'am'. This is exemplified in (7) below.

7. **You   dey   like   talk   too much**
    You   PART   like   talk   too much
    You enjoy talking.

5.1.2. Past Tense

Past tense in SVC in SPE in Ghana is always indicated by the particle 'go' with prominence placed on the particle. When speakers use the particle, they often use a rising pitch on the particle or lengthen the pronunciation of the particle. The particle, in itself, is used as the English verb 'went'. Hence, it is possible to use the past tense indicator 'go' with another verb to form the Serial Verb Construction. In this case, the verb used with the indicator is not tensed as the rising pitch placed on the word 'go' carries the past tense.

Like in examples (8), (9), and (10) below, the individual verbs do not show past tense in themselves: they are rather put together to show it. Lexes like 'went', 'carried' and the like do not exist in SPE. If a speaker uses such words, it shows his low level of competence.

8. **A   go   see   say   the deal go happen.**
    I   PART   see   say   the deal go happen.
    I went to check if the deal could go through.

9. **Charley,   A   go   pick   do   some   ronning   for   DC.**
    Charley,   I   PART   pick   do   some   running   for   Dansoman
    Charley, I took it for some errands in Dansoman.

10. **Dem   go   take   come.**
    They   PART   take   come
    They went and brought it.

5.1.3. Future Tense

In English, future time or tense is expressed with the use of modal auxiliaries: *will/ shall* or *be going* to (Quirk & Greenbaum, 2000: 47- 48). On the other hand, future time in SPE is rendered with the use of the particle 'go' which is not the lexical verb whose past is 'went'. This particle can be said to do the work 'will' and 'shall' do in the English language. The difference in the use of this particle

for the future tense and the past tense is that in the case of the future tense, the particle 'go' receives a falling pitch while that of the past tense receives a rising pitch.

In examples (11) and (12), the first 'go' is the future particle which indicates 'will' to show that the action of 'going' in the second 'go' has not yet been done; it will happen later. In example (13), however, the particle is used with two other verbs in the Serial Verb Construction.

11. **A   go   go   do   am**
    I   PART   go   do   it
    I will go and do it.
12. **You   go   go   join   them   then   check them out**
    You   PART   go   join   them then check them out.
    You will join them and spy on them.
13. **A   go   take   give   am.**
    I   PART   take   give   him/her.
    I will give it to him/her.

5.2. Negation
To negate a word in English, there is the need to introduce 'not', 'never' or the construction 'do not' and its conjugations. For instance, 'I do not know' or 'I never knew' is possible in English. The negative marker in a SVC in Ghanaian SPE is also marked by the word or particle 'no' which is used to represent all the words that indicate negation in English. The word 'no' is therefore taken from the Superstrate language to indicate negation. This is illustrated in examples (14), (15), and (16) below.

14. **You   guys,   something   no   dey   go   jEjE   for   the   thing inside.**
    You   guys,   something   NEG   de   go   right (Akan)   for   the   thing inside
    Guys, something is not going right.
15. **A   no   go   call   am   chilling**
    I   NEG go   call   it   chilling
    I will not call it "chilling"
16. **Ye,   cos   A   no   go   talk   sey   me Abi   womanizer**
    Yes, because I   NEG   go   talk   that me, I'm womanizer
    Yes, I will not admit that I am a womanizer.

It is known that the placement of the negator in the verb phrase in English grammar is always after the first modal auxiliary. However, Ghanaian Student Pidgin English does not place the negator "no" after the first auxiliary but rather before the serial verbs. This is illustrated in examples (17) and (18) below (the negator is capitalized).

17. **Adjoa   NO   take   give   me   oo**
    Adjoa   NEG take   give me
    Adjoa did not give it to me
18. **Charlie, make   you   NO   go   take   join   am oo.**
    Charlie, make   you   NEG   go   take   join   it
    Friend, do not add it to it.

6. Conclusion
The findings from the research suggest that Serial Verb Construction is a regular feature of Student Pidgin English (SPE) as spoken by students in Ghana. The analysis of the data suggests that lexes such as 'went', 'carried', and all verbs in English that show past tense are not found in Student Pidgin English. 'Go', 'fit', and 'dey' play vital roles in the Serial Verb Construction in Student Pidgin English. The particle 'dey' is used to indicate the present tense in structures while 'go' can be used to indicate the past and future tenses depending on the pitch placed on it: a rising pitch on the particle 'go' signals the past tense while a falling pitch signals the future tense. Also, negation is always indicated by the use of the word 'no'.

Interestingly, studies into Nigerian Pidgin English and Cameroonian Pidgin suggest that the particles 'de' and 'go' influenced by pitch are also used to indicate tense in the varieties (Onovbiona, 2012; Bellama, Nkele & Yudom, 2006). However, Bellama, Nkele&Yudom (2006) suggest that Cameroonian Pidgin in the present tense makes use of another particle 'bi' in addition to 'de'. Onovbiona (2012) citing Ofuani (1984) indicates that 'de', 'bin', 'don', 'go', 'kom', and 'won/wan' are markers of different tenses in Nigerian English. What these two varieties of Pidgin English against Ghanaian Student Pidgin English suggest is that there may be particles which may be found in several varieties of the language despite the intrusion of local languages of resident countries influencing the variety. This may be easily explained by the assumption that since all Pidgins along the West African coast 'developed' from the single Portuguese contact, all the varieties show similarity even in tensing. However, the functional similarities of the particles may be different as each variety may have extra words or particles that perform other forms of tensing and negation

and the similar particles may be ascribed semantic connotations which are different in each variety. It is not surprising that all the varieties have different tense markers peculiar to the specific variety even in Serial Verb Constructions.

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