

Uncompleted Aspect Marking from Standard English to Nigerian Pidgin:

A Comparative Study

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Abstract: Uttering involves using grammatical markers, that is, markers of tense, aspect and modality. Specific grammatical forms are used and marked operation types the utterer carries out. The aim of this paper is to highlight the complexity of uncompleted aspect marking from Standard English to Nigerian Pidgin and conversely. Basing on A. Culioli's "theory of enunciative operations," this paper analyses *be+ing* as uncompleted marker, identifies its NP equivalents and accounts for their use. NP markers involved in this uncompleted aspect marking process are presented as sufficiently different from SE *be+ing*; they are markers driving meanings by themselves and do not lend themselves to some language games as their SE equivalent would.

Keywords: Nigerian Pidgin, reference, Standard English, uncompleted aspect, utterer.

Introduction

Nigerian pidgin is an English-based pidgin widely used in Nigeria. IHEMERE (2006) estimates its second language speakers to more than 75 million. Nigerian Pidgin (NP) also has first language speakers; according to FARACLAS (1996:1), their number exceeds 1 million; IHEMERE (2006) estimates this number to be between 3 and 5 million. Therefore, some creolists find it misleading to continue referring to NP as a pidgin. Indeed, the Nigerian Pidgin-speaking community is considerably widening, as the language is well-carried on by young people at large. Such a language deserves interest.

The data sample this paper is based on consists of recordings of thirty to forty-five minutes speech, from each group of the fifty speakers we met from February to July 2012. Speakers were involved in guided conversations in groups of three or four, which allowed to create an almost natural situation of communication. They were selected on the basis of age, profession, sex, educational and ethnolinguistic background, daily NP use. Speakers' homes, their working offices, markets, restaurants, permitted to record conversations. They are Nigerians living in the urban cities of Lagos and Port Harcourt that we met.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the complexity of uncompleted aspect¹ marking from Standard English (SE) to Nigerian Pidgin (NP), and conversely. This raises some questions. How do SE and NP mark “uncompletedness”? Are SE and NP uncompleted aspectual forms identical, slightly different or completely different? Do they have the same referential value? Basing on A. Culioli’s enunciative operations theory, the paper suggests some answers by first recalling the concept of aspect, then identifying and comparing SE and NP uncompleted aspect verb forms.

I. Defining Aspect

For A. NIKLAS-SALMINEN,

Descriptive grammars often define aspect as the way the utterer sees the action in its progress. This apparently simple definition, gets complicated when it comes to define the different types of aspect. First, aspect has no proper inflectional marker. Second, aspect and chronology are often related. Third, aspect may depend on a verb’s lexical meaning, on its inflectional markers and on the grammatical construction.(A. NIKLAS-SALMINEN, 2012, 98)

Defining aspect probably implies considering different elements; H. GADOU refers to aspect as “a manner of construction of a predicative notion’s occurrence, an operation based on a number of parameters” (1992:444, our translation). COMRIE (1976:3) regards aspect as “different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation”. To define aspect with BOUSCAREN, J., CHUQUET, J., DANON-BOILEAU, L. (1987/1992:10) “the term aspect comes from the latin word “spex” which means “observer”; the category which we call aspect designates the way in which the utterer visualises an event”.

Linguists distinguish between lexical aspect and grammatical aspect. Lexical aspect or “Aktionsart”, concerns the different types of verbs. Indeed, each verb belongs to a semantic class. A verb describing an action is referred to as a dynamic verb; a verb describing a state, a stative verb. The event described by a stative verb shows no beginning, no end. A dynamic process, on the contrary, is a type of process defined by a status change, a process in which one can determine individualizable instants, a starting point and an end. Verbs like “to eat”, “to run” are viewed as dynamic, when “to own”, “to know” will be viewed as stative. Grammatical aspect on the other hand, shows how the utterer constructs an event relative to

¹ This expression and the word “uncompletedness” are borrowed from BOUSCAREN et al. (1987/1992).

the situation of utterance. R. HUDDLESTON describes grammatical aspectual forms as follows:

Aspect is employed for grammatical systems where the primary semantic contrast between the terms has to do with what has been called ‘the internal temporal constituency’ of the situation – whether it viewed as static (unchanging through time) or dynamic, as completed or incompleted, as habitual/iterative or not, as durative (stretching out over time) or non-durative, as in its initial stage, its terminal stage or neither – and so on: there is considerable variety of aspectual systems in the world’s languages. (R. Huddleston, 1984, 157)

Regarding uncompleted aspect, we turn again to R. HUDDLESTON:

As the name suggests, (...) this implies that the situation is conceived of as having a more or less dynamic character; as opposed to being wholly static. It also implies that the situation is viewed as having at least the potential for continuation and hence is being viewed not in its (potential) temporal totality but at some ‘subinterval’ of time, a point or period within that total interval of time (R. Huddleston, 1984, 157)

This aspectual subcategory is marked by the combination of two markers, *be* and *ing*. BOUSCAREN et al. (1987/1992:17) warns against referring to “uncompletedness” as a value *be+ing* conveys: “it is generally said that the specific value of *be+V-ing* is uncompleted aspect, that is to say, the action described by the verb is “in progress”. This view is oversimplified and often wrong.” *Be+ing*, indeed, has various values. “Uncompletedness” is one possible value and we agree with BOUSCAREN et al. (1987/1992:17) that it should be understood in these terms: “the term “uncompletedness” in no way implies duration, and that an action referred to with this form is in no way of longer duration than an action described by a simple form”. How NP marks “uncompletedness?”

II. Identifying NP Uncompleted Aspect Verb Forms

Consider the following SE utterances and their NP equivalents.

SE	NP
1- i) I <i>am going</i> to Lagos.	ii) A <i>de go</i> for Lagos.
2- i) We <i>are coming</i> .	ii) Wi <i>de come</i> .
3- i) Yemi <i>is eating</i> yam.	ii) Yemi <i>de chop</i> nyam.

The above SE utterances occur with *be+V-ing* with the present inflection and express “uncompletedness”. Their NP equivalents present the following structure:

S + *de* + verb base.

Take now these SE utterances and their NP realisations.

- | SE | NP |
|-------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4- i) Yemi <i>was cooking</i> when I came yesterday. | ii) Yemi <i>bin de kuk</i> wen a kom yestade.
iii) Yemi <i>bin kuk</i> wen a kom yestade. |
| 5- i) He <i>was reading</i> a book. | ii) I <i>bin de rid</i> won buk.
iii) I <i>bin rid</i> won buk. |
| 6- i) Ade was still crying when I saw him last month. | ii) Ade stil <i>de kra</i> i wen a si am las mont. |

Here, NP utterances reveal different forms. To the SE *be+V-ing* with past inflection, correspond three NP forms:

- *bin+de+verb base*; a marker, *bin*, combines with *de* as in (4ii), (5ii) and we have a complex marker *bin de* to express “uncompletedness” in the past. FARACLAS (1996:198) refers to *de* and *bin* respectively as “the incompletive aspect auxiliary *dè*, the past tense marker *bin*”;
- *de+verb base*; *bin* is dropped and *de* occurs with the *verb base* as in (6ii). In that case, a past time deictic adverb is used to avoid ambiguity;
- *bin+verb base*; *de* is dropped and *bin* occurs with the *verb base* as in (4iii), (5iii). In that case, an adverb of time is not needed.

now these NP utterances and their SE realisations.

- | NP | SE |
|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| 7- i) A <i>don de watch</i> TV for ma haus. | ii) I <i>have been watching</i> TV at home |
| 8- i) A <i>de watch</i> TV <i>sins</i> . | ii) I <i>have been watching</i> TV for long. |
| 9- i) I <i>don de kuk</i> . | ii) She <i>has been cooking</i> . |
| 10- i) I <i>de kuk sins</i> . | ii) She <i>has been cooking</i> for long. |

The above NP utterances present the following forms:
- a couple of markers *don de*, as in (7i), (9i). FARACLAS (1996) refers to *don* as “the completive aspect auxiliary”. ELUGBE & OMAMOR (1991) also asserts that “the perfective in NP is marked by the particle *don* which indicates completion.”

-the dislocation of the couple of markers *don de* as in (8i) and (10i); *don* is dropped and only *de* occurs with the *verb base*. In that case, the use of the adverb ‘*sins*’ is obligatory.

Have-en+be+ing with present inflection is the SE equivalent. Consider now the following utterances.

NP

SE

11- i) Wi *bin don de dans*.

ii) We *had been dancing*.

12- i) Wi *don de dans*.

ii) We *had been dancing*.

13- i) Onieka *bin sik. di palava*

na i *bin don de tchop* onli biskits.

ii) Onieka was sick. The problem is, she *had been living* on biscuits.

14- i) Onieka *bin sik. di palava na*

i *don de tchop* onli biskits.

ii) Onieka was sick. The problem is, she *had been living* on biscuits.

These NP utterances show two forms:

- the combination of *bin* and *don de* as in 11i), 13i);

- the couple of markers *don de* as in 12i), 14). Here, the past marker *bin* is dropped; taking into account the context is necessary to make the utterance unambiguous.

Have-en+be+ing with past inflection is the SE equivalent for these forms.

An observation of the SE and NP utterances shows that, to the SE *be+Ving* with past inflection, *Have-en+be+ing* with present or past inflection, corresponds two or three NP forms to express “uncompletedness.” The NP verb is identified as invariant; thus, using time adverbials or contextual cues becomes important, as they specify the location of the event in time and indicate how the event unfolds in time. The question of whether some forms are fluently used compared to others is really irrelevant. A speaker may, in a conversation, shift from one form to the other and be sure of being understood.

III. Uncompleted Aspect Marking in SE and NP: Some Remarks on the Referential Constructions

One fundamental question is the reference. Do *be-ing* as uncompleted aspectual marker and its NP equivalents refer to extra-linguistic universe the same way? Reconsider these examples.

SE

- 1- i) I *am going* to market.
 2- i) Yemi *is eating* yam.

NP

- ii) A *de go* for market.
 ii) Yemi *de chop* nyam.

In (1i) and (2i), we have a present with *be+ing*. The combination of *be* and *ing* signals a coincidence between T_2 and T_3 ². The location indicates identification between the time of the utterance and the time of the event, that is, the events “go to market”, “eat yam” are considered as not having reached their end yet. The glosses for (1i) and (2i) would be: “In Sit_0 (the situation of utterance), there is “I”, “He” involved in “go to market”, “eat yam”. An examination of the above NP utterances shows a similar operation type. *De+verb base* indicates a triple identity, $T_2=T_3=T_0$, that is, a coincidence between T_0 , T_2 , T_3 . One gloss for (1ii) would be: “In Sit_0 , there is “a” engaged in “go for maket”.

Other observation of these SE utterances and their NP equivalents reveals an important difference. The presence of *ing* in SE utterance is source of intensification on the activity of the subject. With *ing*, privilege is given to the activity and the utterer, in (1i), visualises “I” as not *just*, but *fully engaged* in “go to market”³. (1ii), the NP equivalent differs. In *de+verb base*, the verb occurs naked and the morpheme *de* used as uncompleted aspectual marker does not imply any idea of intensification. How far is “a” engaged in “go for market”? Nothing indicates. Stop a moment on the morpheme *de*. Indeed, the morpheme *de* used to express “uncompletedness” also performs as a copular verb; the following examples are some illustrations.⁴

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| 15- A <i>de</i> Benin. | I <i>am</i> in Benin. |
| 16- A: Haw yu <i>de</i> ? | How are you? |
| B: A <i>de</i> . Yu nko? | I am existing. And you? |
| A: A <i>de</i> like a no <i>de</i> . | I am existing as if I were not even existing. |
| 17- Ma pikin <i>de</i> smol. | My children are small (in age). |

The utterer identifies “a” to “localised in Benin”, “a” to “exist”, “ma pikin” to “smol”. Existence with copular verb *de* means something present, on-going, but, not permanent. In

² For CULIOLI, T_0 , T_2 , T_3 represent respectively the moment of utterance, the moment of the event, the moment associated to the point of view locator.

³ GABILAN (2008) argues that, an English utterance such as “I’m driving”, out of context, could translate into French as “Je suis effectivement en train de conduire”. The use of the French adverb “effectivement” meaning “actually”, where SE uses just *be+ing* justifies the idea of intensification *ing* drives.

⁴ These examples are borrowed from FARACLAS (1996).

(17) for example, “ma pikin *de* smol” does not mean “my children are short”, but, “my children are small in age” and this state is, obviously, temporary. FARACLAS (1996:49) demonstrates that *de* is a location/existence copular verb and “the semantic, morphosyntactic and phonological distance between *de* and the *dè* (auxiliary version) is quite small”. The intensification of the activity driven by SE *be+ing* does not appear in NP *de+verb base*.

Let us re-examine these examples.

SE	NP
4-i) Yemi <i>was cooking</i> when I came yesterday.	ii) Yemi <i>bin de kuk</i> wen a kom yestade. iii) Yemi <i>bin kuk</i> wen a kom yestade.
5-i) He <i>was reading</i> a book.	ii) I <i>bin de read</i> won buk. iii) I <i>bin read</i> won buk.
6-i) Ade <i>was still crying</i> when I <i>saw</i> him last month.	ii) Ade stil <i>de krai</i> wen a <i>si</i> am las mont.

Here, *be+ing* carries past tense inflection. The past tense inflection *-ed* marks a disconnection, that is, the event referred to by the verb has no link with T_0 . We thus have this identification operation $T_2=T_3=T_0' \neq T_0^5$. (4i), (5i) and (6i) are some illustrations. In (4i) and (6i), there is a construction of a past locator by “when I came yesterday”, “when I saw him last month” which, indeed, gives more information by specifying the precise time of the event. Consequently, the process “cook”, “read” or “cry” being described, can by no means occur in T_0 . Let us study now the NP equivalents.

In (4ii), for example, the marker *bin* combines with the uncompleted aspectual marker *de* and signals a disconnection between T_2 and T_0 ; the time of the event is past relative to another time, the time of utterance, which leads to this general relation $T_2 = T_3 = T_0' \neq T_0$. *Bin* is the trace of this translation operation and suggests that the event “kuk” being defined cannot under any circumstances take place at T_0 , the time of utterance. The structure *bin de+verb base* stands as the best equivalent to SE past with *be+ing* as uncompleted aspect marker. In fact, it involves no ambiguity.

In (6ii), *bin* is dropped and *de* occurs with the verb base followed by a past time deictic adverbial. We have the same operation type and here the trace of the translation operation is “wen a si am las mont”. “Wen a si am las mont” gives the time at which the situation of Ade’s

⁵ T_0' indicates the transferred initial locator.

crying is presented as taking place. Since *de* is “essentially a present tense”⁶ and cannot stand by itself and sustain an uncompleted aspect with past time interpretation, a locator is established in the past and it is because of this locator that the event “Ade/ stil *krai*” refers to the past.

In (5iii), *de* is dropped and *bin* occurs as the trace of both operations of identification and translation. Indeed, the morpheme *bin* used as past time marker is also identified as an adverb that translates into English as “actually”⁷ according to Elugbe and Omamor. *Bin* is able to express “uncompletedness” in the past probably because, semantically, it indicates both effectiveness and pastness. In (6ii) a past locator is to be constructed, while in (5iii) *bin* inherently marks the difference with the present. However, like *de*, its use is not without ambiguity. If with *de* a past time deictic adverb is necessary, with *bin* taking into account the context is necessary to avoid ambiguity in utterances such as⁸:

18- i) A *bin wash* ma car.

ii) I *was washing* my car.

iii) I *washed* my car.

iv) I *had washed* my car.

19-i) A *bin go* for market.

ii) I *was going* to the market.

iii) I *went* to the market.

iv) I *had gone* to the market.

Let us reconsider now these utterances.

7- i) A *don de watch* TV in ma haus.

ii) I *have been watching* TV at home.

8- i) A *de watch* TV *sins*.

ii) I *have been watching* TV for long.

Before analysing these examples, first examine these utterances with the marker *don*.

20- Ade *don chop* tu banana. Ade *has eaten* two bananas.

21- I *don go* for Abuja. He *has gone* to Abuja.

In these utterances, *don* indicates differentiation: in T_0 , the utterer constructs the events “Ade/chop tu banana”, “I/go for Abuja” from his present viewpoint, and assesses them as complete, finished, which leads to the relation $T_2 \neq T_3 = T_0$. T_3 functions here as the locator, and the events “Ade/chop tu banana”, “I/go for Abuja” are considered as complete, relative to this

⁶ In terms of tense, ELUGBE & OMAMOR (1991:100) identifies a three-way distinction illustrated by NP forms such as “(i) I de kom , (ii) I kom , (iii) I go kom”. The form with the marker *de*, “I de kom”, is presented as “essentially a present tense form with a specifically imperfective meaning”.

⁷ See ELUGBE & OMAMOR (1991:112)

⁸ *Bin* as a past marker is used with the verb base and indicates any past tense. FARACLAS (1996) provides examples.

locator. One gloss for (20), for example, would be: “When I say what I am saying, I am, at present, assessing Ade’s experience of having eaten two bananas.”⁹ When *don* combines with *de*, things get complicated and *don de* translates into SE as in the following utterances.

22-A *don de* kom. I have/had started coming. ELUGBE & OMAMOR (1991)

23-A *don de* wet yu. I have been waiting for you. FARACLAS (1996)

In (7i), the utterer constructs an event and assesses it as complete and still continuing. We have here a series of completed actions (*don* is the trace). These completed actions are taken in a continuity (*de* is the trace). We believe, it is the endless iteration of these completed actions which opens on an “uncompleted aspect synthesiser”. Indeed, the thing which has not reached its end yet is the iteration of the series of completed actions. If we had to draw a diagram, the right boundary would be opened, announcing the next completed action or actions. One gloss for (7i) would be: “When I say “A *don de* watch TV in ma haus”, that means, I have the experience of watching TV before now and this experience is still continuing and nothing, at present, indicates it will stop.” There is here a mismatch of NP *don de* and its SE equivalent *have-en+be-ing*. BOUSCAREN J. et al. attributes these values to *have-en+be-ing*:

“1) Assessment, taking stock of the past, for have-en; 2) for be+ing, pinpointing or re-identification of a predicative relation relative to a specific situation, emphasis on the activity of the subject related to the action (the right boundary is open).” (1987/1992:30)

(7ii), the SE equivalent for (7i), occurs with *have-en+be-ing* with present inflection and also indicates differentiation between T₂ and T₀. However, BOUSCAREN et al. (1987/1992:31) makes this precision about this aspectual form: “nothing indicates in this combined aspect that the action is still continuing at the moment of utterance. Only the context will indicate that”. Consider these examples¹⁰.

(24) *It has been snowing* for the last three days.

(25) Some people *have been fighting* here.

In (24), it is the phrase “for the last three days” which indicates that the action is continuing chiefly the preposition ‘for’ indicating how long something lasts, continues or extends. (25), does not indicate that the fight is continuing; it is the traces of the disorder which show that there has been a fight. The difference with NP lies here. *Have-en+be-ing*, by itself, does not imply the activity is continuing. It is the context which determines whether the

⁹ Utterances with *don+verb base*, could be interpreted as present or past, depending on the context. ELUGBE & OMAMOR (1991:101) asserts that, when in such utterances, “there is a clear marker of past time, the interpretation is past; otherwise it is invariably present.”

¹⁰ These utterances and their explanation are from BOUSCAREN et al. (1987/1992:31).

activity is still continuing or not. *Don de*, on the contrary, because of the presence of *de*, bears continuity by itself.

In (8i), *don* is dropped and *de* occurs with the temporal adverb *sins*. *Sins* performs here as a time locating operator, necessary to an assessment. *Sins* means, essentially, from long until the present, and entails the origin of an assessment. Indeed, it is the presence of *sins* that triggers an assessment and marks differentiation.¹¹ Otherwise, this utterance would have been similar to (1ii), in terms of operation carried out by the utterer. It will not be useless to recall that “*de* is essentially present tense with an imperfective meaning”. As such, *de* cannot express “completedness”; an assessment locator is established with *sins*, and “*Ade de watch TV*” now refers to an event that started before T_0 and extends forward to include T_0 , the moment of utterance. One gloss for (8i) would be, “When I say ‘*A de watch TV sins*’, that means, I have the experience of watching TV long before now, this experience is still continuing and, nothing, at present, indicates it will stop”. We can notice that:

- de* is closer to *de* existence/location copular verb;
- *de* inherently indicates continuity;
- de* is essentially a present tense with an imperfective meaning
and cannot stand by itself and express pastness or “completedness.

One may assert that *de* is somewhat semantically loaded, and cannot lend itself to some language games as *be+ing* would. Consider now these NP utterances and their NP realisations.

NP	SE
11- i) <i>Wi bin don de dans.</i>	ii) <i>We had been dancing.</i>
14- i) <i>Onieka bin sik. di palava na i don de chop onli biskits.</i>	ii) <i>Onieka was sick. The problem is, she had been living on biscuits.</i>

In (11i), the combination of the couple of markers *don de* with the past marker *bin* leads to this relation: $T_2 \neq T_3=T_0$. The past marker *bin* is the trace of this disconnection between T_0 and T_3 . In (14i), it is the context, “*Onieka bin sik*” that determines the disconnection and compels to interpret *don de* as describing a past event. Except the translation, the operation type in (11i) and (14i) is similar to the one in (7i). In (11ii) and (14ii) their NP realisations show *have-en+be-Ving* with past tense inflection; here, the utterer makes an assessment, in the past, of a past activity.

¹¹ It is worth mentioning that this form is interpreted only present.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the complexity of uncompleted aspect marking from SE to NP, and conversely. For SE *be+ing* as uncompleted aspectual marker, the study has demonstrated that, *de* stands as the essential equivalent in NP. Marking “uncompletedness” in NP means using *de*. If in the present, *de* performs well as *be+ing* equivalent, in the past, NP resorts to the use of the past marker *bin* or past time deictic adverbs to mark the difference with the present. *de* also combines with the completed aspectual marker *don*, and the whole expresses “uncompletedness”, while its SE equivalent does not, creating a sort of mismatch of the two forms. Besides, NP markers involved in this uncompleted aspect marking process, are presented as markers driving meanings by themselves. As a result, they do not lend themselves to some language games as *be+ing* would. Determination may also be too weak and bring about ambiguity in interpretation. Last but not least, these NP markers are identified as sufficiently different from SE’s, which emphasises the belief that NP is a language in its own right. NP should thus not be viewed, “as a poor version of English” as ELUGBE & OMAMOR (1991) denounces. NP is a language in its own and an undeniable means of communication. In fact, communicating in this language means being able to reach more than 75 million people in Nigeria – that is over half the present Nigerian population – which, indeed, is an essential factor for a sustainable development. NP, therefore, deserves more care and a favourable language policy.

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