



Posture verbs in Ewe: A Cross-linguistic overview



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Abstract

According to Ameka and Levinson (2007), posture verbs are the prototypical verbs which define a language type, namely, the type in which a small set of contrastive verbs occur in locative constructions. This study, however, looked at posture verbs in Ewe, especially on how the Ewe people describe location of entities. Mixed designs methods were used in the data collection, these include interviews and observation. Four students taking Ewe as their elective course were chosen purposively for the study. After going through series of activities with the participants, 36 verbs were identified as posture verbs in Ewe. The findings showed that almost all the verbs identify as posture verbs appear with objects, preposition and post position in sentences. This means that posture verbs cannot do without them. It was also realized that different posture verbs can have the same meaning while the same verbs can also have different meaning unless they are put into context before their differences can be shown clearly.

Keywords: Ewe, posture verbs, picture series



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1.0 Introduction

Ewe is a Gbe (Kwa, Niger-Congo) language spoken in southeastern Ghana across to southern Togo and just across the Togo–Benin border, by about 2¹/₂ million people in West Africa (Duthie, 1996). According to Ameka (2006) Ewe is a tone language. It is isolating with agglutinative features and constituent order marks grammatical relations. It has AVO and SV order and syntax. It is an aspect prominent language and does not have grammatical tense. Major word classes include nominal, adjectival, adverbial, and verb. Ofori (2002) notes that the nominal, adjectival, and adverbial classes are open and are constantly augmented through affixation, compounding, reduplication, and triplication. In contrast to these classes, 'there are no productive morphological processes for the formation of new verbs'. Verbs belong to a closed class of about 600 items. (Ameka, 1994, p. 57).

Verbs as a word class have been study in Ghanaian languages by several linguists (Ameka & Essegbey 2013 worked on Serializing languages: satellite- framed, verb-framed or neither; Essegbey (1999) revisited Inherent complement verbs towards an account of argument structure in Ewe; Ameka (2003) worked on situational anaphors in multi-verb constructions in Ewe; Ameka (2006) looked at the Ewe serial verb constructions in their grammatical context. Verbs of position have also been studied by different scholars in different languages for example Atintono, (2013) in Guren1; Lemmens & Perrez (2010) in Dutch; Evans (2015) in Nen and Newman (2009) in English. According to Atintono (2013), the coding of spatial information is not restricted to postpositions alone but largely involves a combination of both the positional verbs and the postpositions. The spatial configurational space is much broader and the postpositions or spatial grams only cut up part of this space.

Recent typological studies on the posture and positional verbs suggest that, there is diversity in the way speakers use posture verbs to describe the location of objects which reflects their cognition of space (Levinson 1992; Newman and Rice 2004; Newman 2002a, 2002b; Levinson and Wilkins 2006a; Hickman and Robert 2006; Ameka and Levinson 2007). To understand how speakers think about and describe space, a detailed investigation into the semantics and grammar of the posture verbs in a particular language can be particularly insightful (Schaefer and Egbohkhare 2008, p. 215). The focus of this study seeks to contribute to the typology of posture verbs by examining the posture verbs in Ewe and their uses. The study examined the grammar and semantics of the posture verbs in Ewe largely from a descriptive and cognitive linguistics perspective drawing on concepts such as image schemas, domains, and conceptualizations to explore fully the meanings of these verbs.

2.0 Literature Review

The review looked at the concept of posture verbs and what other people have done as far as the current study is concerned. It also looked at how posture verbs have been treated in works such as (Lemmens, 2001, 2002; Newman, 2002a; Hellwig, 2003; Levinson & Wilkins 2006a; Ameka, & Levinson, 2007a; Lemmens, & Perrez, 2010; Atintono, 2013). In particular, a significant portion of my discussion of the basic and extended uses of the Ewe posture verbs follows that of Atintono (2013).

2.1 Posture verbs

The amount of literature on verbs used in locative description according to Frostad (2006) is relatively small. Posture verbs such as *sit*, *stand*, and *lie* basically denote particular postures of individuals. According to Ameka and Livinson (2007), virtually all languages have posture verbs and, in addition, often exhibit extended locative uses. For example, the English verb “*sit*” in Ameka and Livinson refers to the posture of an individual resting on the buttocks and also allows for specifying the location of this individual by means of a locative position.

Newman (2002); Grinevald (2006) and (2007), said the use of posture verbs to describe human posture is considered the prototypical use of verbs like *sit*, *stand*, *lie*. Beyond their prototypical use, these verbs happen to be used in discourse in other constructions. Newman (2002) points out that in French language, a combination of copula and adverb or participle indicating bodily posture is used to indicate posture. He continues that posture verbs have a strong stativity and as such are less verb-like and being encoded as adjectives or past participles is consistence with this.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 6) claim that part of “the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined.” This means that we tend to metaphorically conceptualize certain aspects of life in a systematic way. Posture verbs are claimed to be used to conceptualize the positions of entities surrounding us. In other words, people do not only use the posture verbs *sit*, *stand*, *lie* to denote their own posture, but they extend the concepts to the ‘posture’ of things other than themselves. This claim ties in with Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980:7) observation that many conceptual metaphors “have a basis in our physical and cultural experience”. Newman (2002: 7) considers the use of posture verbs to describe the location and spatial configuration of inanimate entities to be an extension of their central meaning, namely to describe human posture.

Positional verbs denote postures like ‘be sitting’ or ‘be standing’, or spatial dispositions of a figure with respect to some ground, like ‘be in a fork’, ‘be immersed’, or ‘be wedged’, (Evans, 2012). Posture verbs in Ewe are verbs that describe the static position of animate and inanimate objects. The posture verbs in Ewe and other

languages often combine with postpositions to describe the location of a Figure in relation to a Ground in a spatial relation. The Figure designates the object that is located (Talmy, 1985:60-61; 2000a: 311-315, 2007:70; Levinson 1992:11). Ground acts as the reference point or the place where the Figure is located (Talmy, 2000a:312; 2000b:25 Cited in Atintono, 2014).

3.0 Methodology

Descriptive approach of qualitative study was used because it seeks to describe the problem in its natural stage. According to Best and Khan (1998) cited in Amedahe, (2010), descriptive research is concerned with the conditions or relationships that exist; such as determining the nature of prevailing conditions, practices and attitudes; opinions that are held; processes that are going on; or trends that are developed. Although this method is time consuming and demands the involvement of the researcher, the data collected by this design offers detailed information of the study. Four students who are elective Ewe students were chosen for the study because the researcher wants them to acquire knowledge on the verbs to be able to teach them correctly. In order to identify the posture verbs in Ewe, the researcher adopted the stimuli-based techniques to collect data. They involved the use of various picture stimuli sets with the aim of motivating the participants to engage in observation and description of pictures and real objects. In all 15 pictures and 18 location of objects were used to collect the data. The data collected is descriptively analyzed.

4.0 Results and Discussion

The researcher asked the participants to look at the pictures bellow and describe the posture of the items. After going through the picture series the best answers out of the lot were selected.

Picture Series of Posture Verb (PSPV)

Picture 1



Gbe la **vu** de kpɔ la ŋu

Plant det spread prep garden det post

The plant has spread on the garden

From the first picture "vu" which means spread was chosen as the best posture of the grass therefore "vu" has been selected as a posture verb in Ewe.

Picture 2



nutsu la **tsyio** akɔ anyi de kplɔ la dzi
man det put chest down prep table det post

The man put his chest on the table

In the second picture, "**tsyi4**" was selected as the best posture of the man therefore it is also a posture verb.

Picture 3



Nyɔnuvi la **dra** afɔ
Girl det stretch legs
The girl has stretch her legs

In the 3rd picture, "dra" which means to stretch was selected as the sitting posture for the girl. Therefore "dra" is a posture verb in Ewe.

Picture 4



Nyɔnuvi la **dze** ɲe de aba la dzi
Girl det lying back prep bed det post

The girl is lying on her back on the bed
In the 4th picture “dze” was selected as a posture of the girl on the bed therefore it can be accepted as one of the posture verbs in the Ewe language.

Picture 5



`utsuvi la **ku** 2e gli la `uti
Boy det hang prep wall det post

The boy hangs on the wall
Picture five shows the hanging posture of the boy therefore “ku” which means hang was selected as the posture verb.

Picture 6



`utsuvi la **via** 2e zikpuia `u

Boy det lean prep chair det post

The boy leans against the chair

In picture 6, "via" was chosen as the sitting posture of the boy therefore it is also one of the posture verbs in the Ewe language.

Picture 7



Ka la **bla** 2e kpememea `uti

Rope det coiled prep pillar det post

The rope is coiled on the pillar

Picture seven also came out with "bla" as the posture of the rope on the pillar. "bla" is therefore one of the posture verbs in Ewe.

Pictures 8



Av4 la **ke** 2e anyigba

Cloth det spread prep ground

The cloth is spread on the ground

In picture eight, "ke" as a verb shows the posture of the cloth on the ground. It can therefore be classified as a posture verb of the language.

Picture 9



Ati la **nyr4** 2e ak42uti la me

Stick det pricked prep banana tree det post

The stick has pricked into the banana tree

In picture nine, the stick shows a posture of pricking which is "nyr4" in Ewe. It is therefore clear that "nyr4" is also one of the posture verbs in Ewe.

Picture 10



Kawo **lia** ati la

Rope pl climb tree det

The ropes have climbed the tree.

Picture ten shows the climbing posture of the ropes on the tree and the verb for this posture in Ewe is "lia" so this verb is also one of the posture verbs in the language.

Picture 11



Wog**l7** ga la 2e 3u5oa `u

3pl fixed stuck rod det prep board det post

The rod is fixed on the board

Picture eleven shows the posture of the rod on the board and the verb for this posture is "gl7" in Ewe which means fixed. Therefore "gl7" is a posture verb in Ewe.

Picture 12



`utsuvi la **b4b4** 2e nunyanya `uti
Boy det bend prep washing post
The boy bends to wash

Picture 12 shows the bending posture of the boy and this verb is called “**b4b4**” in Ewe which means bend so this verb can also be classified as one of the posture verbs in the language.

Picture 13



~utsuvi la **bè** 2e glia xa
Boy det hid prep wall det post
The boy hid beside the wall

Picture thirteen shows a posture of a boy hiding beside the wall and the verb for this posture is “**bè**” in Ewe which means hid therefore “**bè**” is a posture verb in the language.

Picture 14

̀utsuvi la **n4** anyi.

Boy det sitting

The boy is sitting

The boy in picture fourteen shows a sitting posture and the verb for the posture in Ewe is "n4" therefore "n4" is another posture verb in Ewe.

This picture was also displayed for the participants to describe



After observing the picture for sometimes, they came out with the following:

1. Kese la n4 atil4 la dzi

Monkey det sit tree branch det post

The monkey sits on the branch of the tree

2. Kp- la le z4z4m le atikpo la dzi

Leopard det t v v a prep log post

The leopard is walking on the log

3. Ahl-e la t4 2e atil4 la dzi

Deer det stand prep tree branch det post

The deer is standing on the branch of the tree

4. Da la bla 2e atil4 la `u

Snake det coiled prep tree branch det post

The snake has coiled on the branch of the tree

5. Adoglo la ml4 atil4 la dzi

Lizard det lie tree branch det post

The lizard is lying on the branch of the tree

From the descriptions above it is clear that "n4, z4, t4, bla and ml4 are verbs that show the posture of the animals in the picture they are therefore posture verbs in the language

Description of location of objects

After the picture description, the participants were taken round to observe and describe the position as well as location of some items in some shops on the campus. This has given me the opportunity to see how they view position or location of things. They participants were also taken round the campus to observe and tell the position of other things. After observing the items for some time they came out with the following:

1. Akutuawo **ka** 2e anyigba

Oranges det pl. scatter prep. ground

The oranges are scattered on the ground.

2. Ka la **xatsa** 2e ati la `u. Rope det. Coil prep tree det post.

The rope has coiled on the tree

3. Gbea **vu** 2e x4 la ta

Grass det spread prep building det post

The grass has spread on the building

4. Agut4 la **ts]** 2e ati la `u

Bat det hang prep tree det on

The bat hangs on the tree

5. @evia **`14** 2e aba la dzi

Child det bowed prep mat det post

The child has bowed on the mat

6. Ama **dze** klo 2e anyigba

Ama kneel knee prep ground

Ama knelt down

7. @evi la **gba** 2e anyigba

Child det relaxed prep ground

- The child relaxed on the ground
8. Bagiawo **ku** 2e gatagbadze la `u.
Bagi det pl hang pre nail det post
The bags are hanged on the nail.
9. Wotu k4 ak42uawo 2e wo n4ewo dzi
3pl mound banana det pl prep 3p p pl post
The bananas are mound on each other
10. Wots4 awuawo **5o** 5u 2e anyigba
3pl take dress det pl gather prep ground
The dresses are gathered on the ground
11. Zi`gi la **tu** anyi
Roofing sheet det standing ground
The roofing sheet is in standing position
12. Wogl7 nu`l4kpe la 2e glia `uti
3pl fixed writing board det prep wall det post
The writing board is fixed on the wall
13. Ak42u la **da** k4 2e ati la dzi
Banana det throw neck prep tree det post
The banana is hanging on the tree
14. Wo**2o** agbal8wo 2e fli me
3pl arrange books prep line post
The books are arranged in line
15. Wotu 3uawo 2o 2e wo n4ewo nu
3pl arrange drum det 3pl prep p pl post
The drums are arranged on each other.
16. Anyiawo **5o** k4 2e sukli la dzi
Bee det pl mounted prep sugar det post
The bees have mounted the sugar
17. Atiawo **tr=**2e wo n4ewo nu
Tree det pl follow prep 3pl p pl post
The trees follow each other
18. Avu la **mimi** e2okui 2e atia `u
Dog det lean 3ps p prep tree det post
The dog leans itself against the tree

After the exercise the following verbs were identified as posture verbs:

"tu, 5o, ka, xatsa, vu, ts], `l4, dze, gba, ku, tu, 5o5u, gl7, da, 2o, 5o, tr=, mimi"

After the participants were taking through the activities it was realized from the data gathered that almost all the verbs identify as posture verbs appear with objects, preposition and post position in sentences. This means that posture verbs cannot do without them. It was also realized that different posture verbs can have the same meaning while the same verbs can also have different meaning unless they are put into context before their differences can be shown clearly. For example 'da' as in "ak42u la da k4" the banana is hanging and 'ts]' as in "agut4 la ts] 2e ati la `u" the bat is hanging on the tree are all talking about hanging. Also, "`l4" as a coiling posture and "ke" as a spreading posture for distributive verbs eg. "ka la `l4 2e ati la `u" the rope has coiled on the tree "gbe la ke 2e anyigba" the grass has spread on the ground and "`l4" bowed as a sleeping posture and "ke" spread as a sitting posture for body position verbs eg. "2evi la `l4 2e aba la dzi" The child has bowed on the mat and "ny4nuvi la ke ata 2i" the girl has open her legs.

Conclusion

This work has examined the posture verbs in Ewe. It looked at how people view and describe position of entities. Looking at the information given by the participants it is very clear that the Ewes have words that tell position of entities. The table below displays some of the posture verbs identified. In the presentation of the posture verbs in Ewe, I classified them according to body position or posture of the Figure, elevation of the Ground and the Figure, attachment of the Figure to the Ground and distribution of the Figure on Ground. The last column, animacy of Figure refers to the class of animate or inanimate entities that a positional verb selects or describes in the locative relation as done by Atintono (2013)

Table 1: List of some Ewe posture verbs

Posture verbs	Verb	Meaning	Animacy
Body position	mI4	Be in a Lying posture	Animate/inanimate
	N4	Be in a Sitting posture	Animate
	`l4	Be in Lying posture	Animate/inanimate
	Dze	Be in a kneeling posture	Animate
	Gba	Be in a sitting posture	Animate
	Ke	Be in a sitting posture	Animate
	dra	Be in the sitting posture	Animate

	Tu 2o	Be arrange posture	inanimate
	dz4	Be in standing posture	Animate/inanimate
	tsyi4	Be in standing posture with the chest on something	Animate
	zi4	Be in leaning posture	Animate/inanimate
	Tu	Be in standing posture	inanimate
	mimi	Be in leaning posture	Animate/ inanimate
	Via	Be in a leaning posture	Animate
	tu	Mound/pack	Animate/inanimate
	2o	Arrange	Animate/inanimate
	5o5u	gather	Animate/inanimate
	bè	To hide	Animate/inanimate
	Tr=	Be in line	Animate/inanimate
	6la	To hide	Animate/inanimate
	T4	Be in standing posture	Animate
Verbs of elevation	ku	Be in a hanging posture	Animate inanimate
	Ts]	Be in a hanging posture	Animate/inanimate
	da	Be in a hanging posture	Animate/inanimate
Attachment verbs	KI7	to fix something	Inanimate
	Lé	Be stuck on something	inanimate
	Nyr4	Be pierced into something	Inanimate
	GI7	Be stuck on something	inanimate
	5o	To sorround	animate
	dra	To paste	inanimate
Distributive verbs	vu	Spread out on something	inanimate
	Xatsa	To coil	Animate/inanimate
	Bla	To coil	Animate/inanimate
	ʼl4	To coil	Animate/inanimate
	Ke	To spread	Inanimate
	Ka	To scatter	inanimate

The following abbreviations are used in the interlinear glosses:

- Pl plural
- Prep preposition
- Post postposition
- Det determinant
- 3pl third person plural
- P pronoun
- T tense
- V verb
- A aspect

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