



A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF OPERATORS IN ETULO AND IGBO

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Abstract

*This paper presents a comparative analysis of tense and aspect (operators) in Etulo and Igbo using the Role and Reference Grammar (RRG) framework. It examines the morphosyntactic and semantic realization of tense and aspect in both languages, focusing on the functional layering of the clause. The study reveals that while both languages are aspect-prominent, they deploy distinct strategies for marking tense and aspect. Igbo relies on tonal patterns and prefixes, while Etulo utilizes auxiliary particles and adverbials; for instance the morpheme *wa* which marks perfective aspect in Etulo occupies the sentence final position in some cases while the morpheme that indicates progressive aspect occupies the clause medial position. The findings highlight the typological significance of operator placement in RRG and the diachronic divergence within Niger-Congo languages.*

Keywords: *Operators, Tense, Aspect, Role And Reference Grammar Etulo, Igbo*

1.0 Introduction

Tense and aspect have been extensively studied across world languages, particularly within the framework of morph syntax and semantics. In African linguistics, many studies argue that most Niger-Congo languages tend to be aspect-prominent rather than tense-prominent (Welmers, 1973; Comrie, 1976). This perspective holds particularly true for Igbo and may likely be the pattern for Etulo, although Etulo remains significantly under described. Some of the common distinction posited for tense across languages is the distinction between the past, present and future whereas for aspect, distinctions such as inceptive, progressive, perfective exist. Depending on the language(s) these distinctions are expressed morphologically, lexically or analytically and aspectual markings normally located in various positions of the clause (Payne, 2007).

Etulo and Igbo are Niger-Congo languages spoken in Nigeria. This study explores how these languages encode tense and aspect using the RRG framework, which integrates syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. In RRG, tense is treated as a core-layer operator, while aspect is a nuclear-layer operator. This classification guides the analysis of the placement and function of tense and aspect markers in both languages.

The paper is divided into five sections. Section one is the introduction while section two reviews literature relevant to the study. In section three, the methodology adopted in the work is discussed, section four goes into the thrust of the study which is a comparison of tense and aspect in Etulo and Igbo, while section five summarizes and concludes the study. In the section that follows, brief information on the two languages under comparison is provided.

1.1 Language Information

Etulo is an Idomoid group of the West Benue Congo of Niger Congo group of languages (Gordon, 2005). Igbo following the classification by Williamson and Blench (2000), belongs to the West Benue Congo sub family of the proto Benue Congo language family. The two languages are spoken in Nigeria; Igbo is one of the major Nigerian languages while Etulo belongs to the minority.

Both Etulo and Igbo refer simultaneously to both the language and the ethnic group. The Igbo language is primarily spoken by Igbos found in the South-eastern part of Nigeria: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states. Igbo is also spoken in some parts of Delta and River states



in the south-southern part of Nigeria. Igbo is a tone language with three distinctive tones: high, low and down step. The Etulo are found in Benue and Taraba States, Nigeria. The Etulo speakers in Benue are found in Adi, Buruku Local Government Area and parts of Katsina-Ala, Katsina-Ala Local Government Area. According to Tabe (2007:3) Etulo is one of the Jukunoid groups that formed the erstwhile Kwararafa kingdom in the Benue valley in the distant past. The Etulo as noted by Tabe live on both banks of the Katsina-Ala River, about 136 kilometres east of Makurdi, the Benue state capital. The author further avers that the Etulo land (Ikpese Etulo) stretches from 7°N to 9°N latitudes and lies 11°E and 13°E longitude. (Tabé 2007:1). With regard to tone, Ezenwafor and Mmadike (2012) classify Etulo as a register (terrace level) tone language with three level tonemes : The high, the low, the downstep and a rising falling tone.

The basic structure of Igbo and Etulo clause is SVO. The Etulo verb consists of a verb stem in combination with other optional constituents. Okoye (2021) cites the instances of transitive and intransitive clause in Etulo as follows:

1a. Àfè gbobu tasā
Afe break plate
Afe broke the plate
[do` (Àfè, θ)] CAUSE [INGR break` (tasā)]

b. Tasa gbobū
Plate break
The plate broke
INGR break` (tasā) (Okoye 2021:590)

As noted by Okoye (2021), 1a instantiates a transitive clause in Etulo and its logical structure while example 1b shows an intransitive clause in Etulo. The logical structure reveals the two arguments of the verb. In 1a Afe is the Actor, a willful agent who instigates an action while *tasa* 'plate' is the patient, an entity which undergoes a change of state and condition described by the verb *gbobu* 'break'. The patient is subsumed under the undergoer macro-role in RRG. This means that the core arguments function as subject and object regardless of their semantic roles. In 1b, the logical structure shows the verb's single argument which is the undergoer. Notice that the only argument of the intransitive verb is realized as the subject, its semantic role notwithstanding.

The effort in the present study is to compare tense and aspect in the Etulo and the Igbo languages using the Role and Reference Grammar theoretical approach. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews related literature and discusses the theoretical framework adopted in the study. In Section 3, the methodology is provided while section 4 with its subsections compares the realization of tense and aspect in Etulo and Igbo. Section 5 provides the summary and concludes the study. The next section goes into the review of tense and aspect.

2.0 An Overview of Tense and Aspect

Tense and aspect systems in African languages have long intrigued linguists due to their diversity, complexity, and typological uniqueness. While some African languages exhibit rich morphological tense systems, others rely more heavily on aspectual distinctions or pragmatic context.

Comrie (1985) and Chung & Timberlake (1985) laid the groundwork for understanding tense and aspect systems globally, including African languages, emphasizing the need to distinguish between grammatical tense and aspect. Comrie (1985:7) observes that locating situations in time is a conceptual notion and as such independent of distinctions made in any particular language. He thus views tense as the grammaticalization of location in time. The author distinguishes between absolute and relative tenses. Absolute tense takes the present moment as the deictic centre while relative tense does not include the present moment as part of its deictic meaning (1985:35).



According to Comrie, the present, past and future tenses are instances of absolute tense. The present tense is used to describe states and processes that hold at the time of speech but began before the time of speech and may likely continue beyond the speech time as in the expression *Ada is working on the Etulo language*. The past tense locates a situation prior to the present moment while the future tense locates a situation at a time subsequent to the present moment. Comrie (1985: 44-46) however posits that the controversy surrounding the future reference with respect to whether it should be subsumed under tense or mood remains an empirical question that can only be answered based on the investigation of future time reference across languages.

Frawley (1992:336) sees tense as the grammatical and morphological means employed by a language to locate an event in time. Frawley notes that languages vary in their assignment of tense locus and thus distinguishes between absolute and relative tenses. Frawley’s tense distinction aligns with that of Comrie (1985). According to Frawley (1992:343), absolute tense reaches directly into the speech event by relating the event to the present position of the speaker, i.e, it relies on here and now to determine the tense locus. He also observes that the tense locus is inherited from a point outside the moment of speech. With regard to relative tense, Frawley notes that it applies typically to events that are dependent on other events such as reported speech or indirect discourse. Frawley exemplifies with the Russian example below:

2. Ja spros- il počemu u nego trjasutsja ruki
I ask past why to him tremble/pres hands
I asked him why his hands were shaking

Frawley asserts that in example 2, it is ungrammatical for *trjasutsja* ‘tremble’ to be assigned past tense. The verb rather inherits its tense from the first verb *spros* ‘ask’.

According to Simango (2003) Bantu languages like *iciBemba*, *ciCewa*, and *Bamileke* are reported to have 8–10 tense distinctions, including fine-grained past categories like *hodiernal*, *hesternal*, and *pre-hesternal*. *Setswana* and *Swati* show fewer tense distinctions but compensate with aspectual and pragmatic markers

Chung and Timberlake (1985) opine that in many Kwa languages (e.g., *Akan*, *Ewe*, *Ga-Dangme*), tense is not grammatically prominent. Instead, aspect and modality dominate, with tense often inferred from context. The *Aspect and Modality in Kwa Languages* project highlights how these languages challenge Eurocentric grammatical models.

Studies on *Hausa*, *Wolof*, and *Igbo* dialects reveal dual tense/aspect systems that vary by clause type (e.g., main vs. relative clauses) and focus structure. In *Igbo* dialects like *Ògbahù* and *Ìmilikè*, tone and negation interact with tense and aspect marking, showing a deep integration of prosody and grammar

Dirven and Verspoor (2004:93) discuss tense with respect to what they termed the speech act time. According to them, tense is the grammatical category which relates an event in time with respect to the speech act time which is the moment of speaking. They further aver that events that take place at speech time act itself (present) and before the speech time (past tense) have reality status while events that take place after the speech act (future tense) have the status of potential reality. The authors opine that the category tense is one of the grounding elements of a sentence that aids to ensure successful communication.

Viveka (2012:194) views tense as the linguistic device used to show when an event took place. This device however excludes lexical items and expressions like *yesterday*, *tomorrow* though they indicate when an event occurred. Furthermore, the author opines that some languages lack grammatical marking for tense. That is, they appear to be without tense as seen in example 3 from the *Julhoan* language cited in Viveka (2012:196).

3. ha úá Tjùmlkúí
3SG go tsumkwe
He went/goes/will go to Tsumkwe



The translation of example 3 translates to past, future or present form except where further context is employed to achieve differentiation in the time of the event.

Another strategy pointed out by Viveka that can be used to mark a clearer grammatical distinction for time is by distinguishing between degrees of remoteness. Languages that employ this kind of difference code an event either having taken place in the near past or remote past and going to take place in the near immediate or remote future (Viveka 2012: 199). Moreover, Viveka submits that languages with remoteness in the past distinguish between today (hodiernal past) or not today (hesternal past).

The example in 4 below taken from Carlson (1994:329) cited in Viveka (2012:199) instantiates a language with both hodiernal past and hesternal past.

4a Mìni mu pyi di ye?
ISG REC.PAST 2SG tell how question mark
What did I tell you (earlier today)?

b. Jò u ná sá lí iwó ye?
who 3SG REM past go it take Q
Who went and took it?

The examples in 4a and b are both in the past. However *ni* in 4a is used to show that the inquiry is with respect to the recent past while *ná* in 4b shows that the question being asked is with regard to a distant past.

Alloway and Corley (2004) compare tense in Mandarin and Tamil verb forms and submit that the difference between the two languages is that whereas in Tamil tense changes are marked by adding suffixes to the verbroot, Mandarin, shows no explicit tense marker; rather adverbs like tomorrow, yesterday are included to situate an event within temporal parameters. Table1 below demonstrates the present, past and future tense inflections of the verb ‘to eat’ in Tamil and Mandarin

Table 1 Tense inflection in Tamil and Mandarin.

Verb-to eat	Present	Past	Future
Tamil	Saapeda ran	Saapetaan	Saapedu Vaan
Mandarin	Chi’h	Chi’h	Chi’h
Gloss	Eats	Ate	Will eat

(Alloway and Corley 2004: 322)

Table 1 shows obvious morphological endings for the different tense forms in Tamil while in Mandarin the verb remains invariable.

The Afranaph Project, a major initiative collecting tense and aspect data across African languages using structured questionnaire has revealed cross-linguistic variation in how languages encode temporal relations and aspectual nuances. Sibisi and Tappe (2020) conducted an intra-individual study comparing isiZulu and English tense and aspect usage. Their findings show that L1 isiZulu speakers simplify English tense and aspect morphology, especially avoiding the -en participle, highlighting L1 transfer effects.

Ralusahi (2015) examined Tshivenda-English bilinguals, showing that Bantu logic of temporal reasoning influences English usage, suggesting a substrate-driven evolution of Black South African English.

Dirven and Verspoor (2004:94) see aspect as a grounding element of a sentence, which represents how the speaker relates an event to what obtains at speech act time or at another specified time. According to Crystal (1992:29), aspect as a grammatical category marks duration or the type of temporal activity denoted by the verb.



Emenanjo (2015:447) submits that although both tense and aspect have to do with time, the former denotes static, atelic and definite time while the latter deals with dynamic, telic and extended time. Thus, he opines that tense is the grammaticalization of location of time in terms of past, present or future while aspect is the grammaticalization of duration in terms of inceptive, progressive, perfective etc.

For Frawley (1992:294), aspect as a category shows that an event is distributed through the period in which the event occurs. The author distinguishes among perfective/imperfective, telic/atelic, punctual/durative, iterative/semelfactive, progressive and habitual aspectual types. Whereas perfective aspect views event as a complete unit irrespective of whether the event has itself ended, imperfective aspect sees “an event as non unitized whether or not the event is finished”. Furthermore, the author observes that in the interpretation of perfective events, the internal properties such as the beginning, the middle and the end are less relevant; hence, the events are viewed from a distance while for the imperfective aspect, events are viewed from within and the internal properties are much relevant. Frawley exemplifies using the Kusaiean language in 5

5a. Eltahl kang ik ah
They eat/imper fish the
They are eating the fish (imperfective)

b. Eltahl kang- lah ik ah
They eat up -/ perf fish the
They ate up the fish (perfective)

(Culled from Frawley 1992:298)

Examples 5a and b show that for the imperfective, there is no morpheme attached to the verb *kang* ‘eat’, whereas for the perfective form, the morpheme *-lah* is suffixed to *kang* ‘eat’

The distinction between telic and atelic is with respect to goal-directedness. Frawley (1992:302) opines that telic events have built-in goal that must be reached, in order to be successfully affirmed while atelic events do not imply such goals. Punctual aspect shows momentous acts while durative aspect denotes events that occupy time. Events that consist of a single act is denoted by semelfactive aspect but where the events have multiple acts, it is in the iterative or frequentative. The instance in 6 below distinguishes between the semelfactive and iterative aspects.

6a. Ada shrugged

b. Ada wiggled

Example 6a is semelfactive while 6b is a case of frequentative. The next section sets forth the theoretical background for this study

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is the Role and Reference Grammar (henceforth RRG). RRG is a theoretical approach first proposed by Foley and Van Valin (1984). The theory was developed in Van Valin (1993) and further developed in Van Valin and La Polla (1997) and Van Valin (2005). RRG emphasizes the exploration of language systems based on their use in communication. The theory posits a Layered Structure of the Clause (LSC), comprising the nucleus (verb + nuclear operators), the core (arguments + core operators), and the clause (peripheral elements). According to Van Valin (2005), there are two aspects of clause structure and they are; relational and non-relational aspects. Whereas the relational aspect deals with the relations between predicate and its argument, the non-relational aspect deals with how phrases, clauses and sentences are organized in hierarchy. A component of RRG theory of clause structure which is relevant to this paper is the theory of operators. Operators in RRG refer to grammatical categories like aspect, tense, negation and illocutionary force. These operators modify specific layers of the clause. They represent grammatical categories, which are different from predicates and argument (Van Valin &



La Polla (1997:40). Illocutionary force is a universal operator that refers to whether an utterance is an assertion, a question, a command or an expression of a wish. Every language has illocutionary force as operator because it is possible to make statements, ask questions and give commands in all languages Van Valin (1997:41). Van Valin and La Polla (1997:45) also opine that different operators can modify different layers of the clause. Nuclear operators modify the verb directly (e.g., aspect) while core operators modify the core (e.g., tense). Having explained the aspect of RRG relevant to the present study, the next section provide the methodology for the study.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive comparative method and uses both primary data (Etulo) and secondary data (Igbo) to ensure a balanced approach to the analysis. Primary data were sourced from competent Etulo native speakers resident in Adi, Buruku Local Government Area of Benue State through elicitation sessions based on translation of temporal and aspectual sentences from English into Etulo and recording of natural narratives and dialogues for contextualized data. Data sourced from established Igbo grammars and descriptive studies (Emenanjo 1978; Nwachukwu 1983; Ndimele 1999) formed the secondary data for the study. Native Igbo speakers were consulted to verify examples and clarify ambiguities in interpretation. In the analysis of data, the realizations of tense and aspect are discussed and adequately exemplified. This discussion of tense and aspect in Etulo forms the basis for comparison with Igbo which is well documented. The comparison follows the RRG theoretical approach. The tone marking convention adopted is that of Green and Igwe (1963) where all but high tones are marked. Section 4.0 beginning with subsection 4.4.1 below discusses tense in Etulo and Igbo

4.0 Tense and Aspect in Etulo and Igbo

4.4.1 Tense in Etulo and Igbo

In Etulo, there is no change in the form of the verb that obviously distinguishes the present from the past form as shown in 7 below

7a. Àfè gya angwò
Afe buy yam
Afe bought yam

b. Èfu gbobū tasa
Efu break plate
Efu broke the plate

The sentences in 7a and b are appropriate expressions of both present and past in Etulo. The forms of the verbs remain invariant, as there is no morpheme attached to show time distinction with respect to the events being expressed.

However, sometimes in order to show that an event occurred prior to the time of speech, Etulo uses adverbials of time that are not attached to the verb to make the past very distinct. The words used to indicate past reference include *teyī* ‘first /previously’, *nosē* ‘before’, *tsekise* ‘already’ and *zika* ‘earlier today’. These words are instantiated in 9a-d.

9a. Efu *teyī* gyā mbwe mì idù
Efu first buy meat at market
Efu bought the meat at the market

b. Èfu *nosē* gyā mbwe mì idù
Efu before buy meat at market
Efu bought meat at the market before



c. Èfu tsekise yē̄ ungwō nwi Mfō kyō

Efu already know thing which Mfo do

Efu already knew what Mfo did

d. Èfu zika gyā mbwe mì idù

Efu earlier buy meat at market

Efu earlier today bought meat at the market

9a –d are instances of past expressions in Etulo. In 9a, the word *teyi* ‘first’ precedes the verb to show that the action was carried out before the time of speech. Another word, *nosē* ‘before’ also performs that same function of indicating a past action. With respect to *zika*, which translates to English ‘earlier’, it is only used if the past action was carried out or indulged-in the same day and at an earlier time before the speech time. If the action was performed on preceding days, *zika* renders the sentence ungrammatical. The use of the words in 9a-d to signal the past in Etulo is in consonance with Lyons (1977:67) observation that though some languages may lack tense as a clear verbal category, all languages have various deictic adverbs or particles of time that help to relate the time of a situation being described to the time of utterance.

The future tense in Etulo is solely expressed using the auxiliary *ka* ‘will’. This obligatorily precedes the verb in utterances and bears a low tone. Instances showing future actions are shown in examples 10 below:

10a O kà kye àwùyà mgban nu mā

3SG AUX take wealth Poss give 3PL

He will take his wealth and give them.

b. Èfu kà kè

Efu AUX go

Efu will go

c. Èyi kà gye mi òkwò

1PL AUX eat at farm

We will eat at the farm

d. Èyi kà kyìdò yi èkà

1PL AUX do work with together

We will work together.

From the analysis of tense, one observes that although tense is not overtly marked on the verb, there are salient distinctions made for the past time in Etulo. Thus, one can say that Etulo uses lexical time reference. *Teyī* ‘first /previously’, *nosē* ‘before’, *tsekise* ‘already’ and *zika* ‘earlier today’ can be said to reflect degrees of tense.

Igbo has been shown to have a minimal tense system and a rich aspect system (Emenanjo, 1978; Nwachukwu, 1983). Emenanjo (1978) and Nwachukwu (1983) argue that past/non-past tense can be marked through auxiliaries or particles and tonal shifts. In Igbo, the past is often marked by low tone or suffixes like -rV while the future is marked by the auxiliary “ga” as illustrated below

11a. ọ rì rì nri

3SG eat-PST food

He/she ate food

b. ọ ga e-ri

3SG FUT pre -eat

He/she will eat.



While tense refers to the time of an action (past, present, future), aspect describes the nature or structure of the action whether it's completed, ongoing, habitual, etc.

4.4.2 Aspect in Etulo and Igbo

Etulo distinguishes between inceptive, progressive and perfective aspect. In the instances in 12 below, the particle *wà* is used to indicate an action that had already been completed. The particle occupies the sentence –final position. It cannot be said that the particle marking perfective aspect immediately follows the verb owing to the exceptions observed in 12c and 12g below. In all instances, *wà* bears a low tone

12a. ònjà ná ba wà
Woman DEM come Perf
That woman has come

b. Ìngìsè ná kyé òzû mgbán gyā wà
Person DEM take house 3PLposs buy Perf
That person has bought his own house

c. Èfu fawā Mfo ànwutò wà.
Efu tear Afe cloth Perf
Efu has torn Afe's cloth.

d. Efu gbòze wà
Efu spoke Perf
Efu has spoken

e. Èyi kàkà wà
1PL arrive Perf
We have arrived.

f. A gyē wà
3PL eat Perf
They have eaten.

g. Èyi gyē (ungwò) mí òkwò wà
1PL eat (food) PREP farm Perf
We have eaten at the farm

h. Èyi bā wà
1PL come perf
We have come

i. Anì gye wà
ISG eat perf
I have eaten

j. A ngyēlū wà
3PL finish perf
They have finished



Other distinctions observed with reference to the duration of events are shown in 13 following. Examples 13 a-h show that the event expressed by the verb persists as at the time of speech. This is marked by *lè*. Example 13i represents a case of an unfulfilled event as indicated by the morpheme *ki*

- 13a. Anì lè lu òkwò
ISG PROG go farm
I am going to the farm
- b. Efù lè nunâ
Efu PROG sleep
Efu is sleeping
- c. Anì lè kyìdò
ISG PROG do work
I am working
- d. Èfù lè tsɛ ɔnyà kyè
Efu PROGrun race about
Efu is running about
- e. Á lè gbòdzɛ
3PL PROG talk/speak
They are talking
- f. Ánì lè gye ungwogyē
ISG PROG eat food to eat
I am eating
- g. A lè shiɔdzé
1PL PROG make noise
They are making noise
- h. Anì lè kyìdò ɔ̀nò neni
ISG PROG do work time now
I am working now
- i. Eyi ki lè gye ungwogyē
1PL PROG eat thing to eat
We would have been eating

It is observed that the morpheme, which marks perfective aspect in Etulo, occupies the sentence final position while the morpheme that indicates progressive aspect occupies the clause medial position.

In Igbo, aspect plays a more central grammatical role than tense. Aspect is typically encoded via verbal prefixes (na- for progressive), tonal distinctions, and auxiliary constructions. Ndimele (1999) emphasizes the role of serial verb constructions in marking aspectual nuances in Igbo, while Agbo (2003) discusses the prosodic and morphological cues that help distinguish different aspectual forms. Commonly attested aspects in Igbo include perfective (completed action), progressive (ongoing action), habitual, and retrospective or perfect (past event with present relevance). Examples 14a and b show perfective and progressive aspectual distinctions in Igbo.

14a Nwa a erielà nri ahu



Child this eat PERF food that
This child has eaten that food

b. Nwa a na eri nri ahu
Child this PROG eat food that
This child is eating that food

4.4.3 An RRG Comparison of Tense and Aspect in Igbo

Based on RRG, a functionally motivated grammatical theory that treats syntax, semantics, and pragmatics as integrated, we represent the central concepts relevant for this study as follow:

Nucleus: The verb and aspectual information (e.g., progressive, perfective).

Core: Includes the arguments (subject, object) and tense.

Clause: Includes the core plus peripheral elements (time adverbials, etc.).

Operators: Grammatical categories like tense, aspect, and modality.

Aspect → Nuclear Operator

Tense → Core Operator

In Igbo, tense is generally inferred but can be explicitly marked by auxiliary elements like *ga-* for future as shown in 15 below

15a. *Ọ riri nri.* “He ate food.” → Past

b. *Ọ ga-eri nri.* “He will eat food.” → Future

LS: *do'(ọ, [eat'(ọ, nri)])* & PAST/FUTURE

RRG treats *ga-* as a core operator, taking scope over the core and preceding the nucleus which is the verb *ri*.

For Etulo, there is no verb inflection to mark tense rather the past is inferred using temporal adverbials (*teyī, nosē, tsekise, zika*), and future is marked with the auxiliary *ka* as Illustrated in 16 below

Past (Lexical/Core Peripheral)

16a. *Efu teyī gyā mbwe* “Efu bought meat earlier.”

Time reference comes from deictic adverbials which are peripheral elements.

Future (Core Operator)

b. *Efu ka kè.* → “Efu will go.”

ka is an auxiliary with core-operator function, preceding the verb in line with RRG’s hierarchy.



Table 2 Comparative Table of Tense in Etulo and Igbo

Tense Features	Etulo	Igbo
Past Marking	Time adverbials (teyi,nose, zika)	Tonal / Contextual cues
Future Marking	ka (preverbal auxiliary)	ga (preverbal auxiliary)
Tense Morphology	No inflection; relies on lexical elements	Limited inflection
Temporal Adverbials	Essential for past distinction	Optional
Tense as Core Operators	Yes (future); past expressed lexically	Yes (especially future)

Aspect is highly grammaticalized and functions as a nuclear operator. In Igbo progressive *na-* prefix
Ọ na-eri nri. He is eating.

LS: do'(o, [eat'(o, nri)]) & PROG

Perfective: Tone + bare verb

Ọ riri nri. “He ate.”

LS: do'(o, [eat'(o, nri)]) & PERF

Habitual: *na-* + context often overlap with progressive in form.

In Etulo, aspect is more prominent than tense and follows nuclear operator placement.

Perfective: Sentence-final particle *wà*

Efu gbòze wà. “Efu has spoken.”

ònjà ná bawà. “That woman has come.”

wà functions as a nuclear operator, semantically akin to the English present perfect.

LS: do'(efu, [speak'(efu)]) & PERF

Progressive: Clause-medial morpheme *lè*

Efu lè nunà. “Efu is sleeping.”

Ani lè kyìdò. “I am working.”

lè appears before the verb, indicating nuclear-level scope.

Inceptive/Unfulfilled Aspect: *ki*

Eyi ki lè gye... We would have been eating

The above suggests an unrealized event, possibly at the boundary between aspect and modality.



Table 3 Comparative Table of Aspect in Etulo and Igbo

Aspect Type	Etulo	Igbo
Progressive	lè (preverbal particle)	na- (prefix)
Perfective	wa (post verbal particle)	Tonal/bare verbs
Retrospective	Encoded in wa	Serial verb
Inceptive Aspect	Ki	Not overtly marked
Aspect as Nuclear operator	Yes	Yes

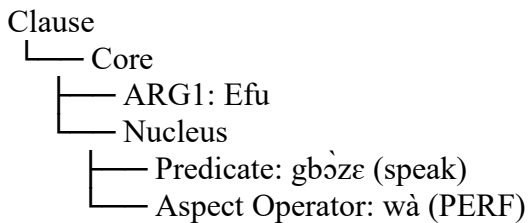
4.4.4 Structural Alignment (RRG Layered Structure)

The layered structure of the Etulo and Igbo clause is shown below:

Etulo Example (Perfective)

Efu gbòze wà. → “Efu has spoken.”

RRG Layered Structure



Igbo Example (Progressive)

O na-eri nri. → “He is eating.”

RRG Layered Structure

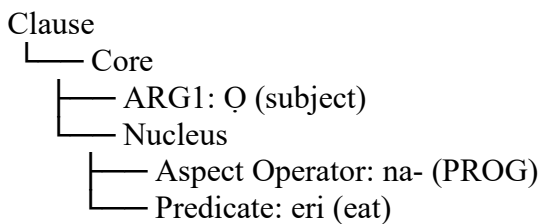


Table 4 Summary of RRG Comparison

RRG	Etulo	Igbo
Nuclear operators (Aspect)	Lè (PROG) wa (PERF)	Na, tonal shift
Core operators(Tense)	Ka (FUT)	Ga- (FUT)
Peripheral Tense Indicators	Teyi, nose, zika, tsekise	Adverbs (Contextual)



Unrealized/ Aspect	Inceptive	Ki	Not overtly marked
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5.0 Summary and Conclusion

This study explored operators (tense and aspect) in the Etulo and the Igbo languages from the RRG approach. The RRG based analysis reveals that both Etulo and Igbo prioritize aspect over tense. Whereas Igbo marks tense and aspect using a mix of tonal changes, verbal prefixes (e.g., *na-*, *ga*), and auxiliary constructions, Etulo shows less grammaticalized tense marking, often relying on temporal adverbials or auxiliary-like constructions. This divergence shows the various morphosyntactic paths that languages within the same family can take.

Tense in Igbo is minimally marked (primarily past vs. non-past), while aspect is robustly expressed across perfective, progressive, habitual, and retrospective domains. The Etulo aspect system appears more developed, with evidence for perfective, progressive, and habitual aspects. The analysis supports the view that tense-aspect systems in Niger-Congo languages are tilted toward aspectual encoding, with tense often being inferred from context or marked through minimal means. The comparison contributes to cross-linguistic studies of grammaticalization, illustrating how different languages within the same macro-family can evolve divergent strategies for encoding time.

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