

## Aspects of French-Gbe verbal constructions

This paper investigates aspects of French-Gbe verbal constructions in Porto-Novo and environs. Benin is a francophone country in which multilingualism and code-mixing/switching is a normal conversational practice (cf. Meechan & Poplack 1995, Amuzu 2014, Amuzu & Singler 2014, Aboh 2020, Aboh & Parafita Couto 2024). Beninois multilinguals commonly use French verbs in their Gbe (Kwa) utterances as indicated in (1) in which the speaker mixes Fongbe and French. Such mixed phrases seem to be favored by the status of French as official language. In this example (1), the French verb is finite.

- (1) Ûn                      *comprend*                      xó              tòwè              bè.                      [Fongbe-French]  
      1SG                      understand.PRS.3SG              word              POSS.2SG              PCL  
      ‘I have understood your point/opinion.’

In the examples in (2), the French verbs are non-finite, and are combined with regular Tense, Mood, and Aspect (TMA) markers which also occur preverbally in Gbe.

- (2) a. À              *comprendre*                      xó              Í              dìn              à?                      [Fongbe-Gungbe-French]  
          2SG understand.INF              word              DET              now              QM  
          ‘Did you understand now?’  
      b. Gbègbè              é              ná              wá              *surprendre*              wè.                      [Gungbe-French]  
          day                      3SG              FUT              come              surprise              2SG  
          ‘The day s/he will surprise (i.e., catch) you.’  
      c. Ví              lé              nò              *s’entend-ent*                      yédèlé              mè              gànjí.  
          child PL              HAB              REFL=get.along-PRS.3PL              3PL.REFL              ADP              well  
          ‘Children get along each other well.’

This paper studies the distribution of French verbs and what determines the finite versus non-finite variation in Gbe utterances. In studying this variation, Tossa (1998: 10) argued that only French verbs of the third class are finite in Gbe utterances and represent only 5% of his data set. He further claimed that patterns like (1) are instances of switching, meanwhile non-finite French verbs in (2) are borrowed items, albeit they are more diverse and frequent than finite ones. This distinction seems to be incomplete as it suggests that all non-finite French verbs occurring in Gbe utterances are borrowed items. Based on naturalistic data recently collected in Porto-Novo and environs, this study investigates what syntactic conditions constrain +/-finiteness distinction on French verbs and their distribution in Gungbe/Fongbe-French mixed utterances. Indeed, a more promising hypothesis that this paper explores is that this variation is triggered by a competition between TMA-marking system of these typologically distinct languages: the Gbe languages are isolating with no verbal morphology, since tense, mood, and aspect specifications are encoded by free standing morphemes in a preverbal position. In French, however, these notions are merged within a single morpheme that is suffixed to verb roots. As a result, the form of French verbs occurring in Gbe utterances seems to be determined by a combination of the Gbe TMA and French inflectional patterns in what Aboh (2020) refers to as ‘ hybrid structures’ or Amuzu (2014) as ‘Composite-2 switching’ they co-occur with. To wit, structures in (2) above result from recombination processes where the finite or non-finite (and agreement) properties of the French verb depend on a higher functional item in the structure (e.g., AspP) under which VoiceP, which contains vP, is embedded.

## References

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