

## Combinatorial Constraints of Peripheral Verbs and Adverbials in Kâthemne

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### Abstract

*Peripheral verbs are commonly known as preverbal markers. These help lexical verbs of the Themne language to form what are traditionally referred to as ‘tenses’ in English. Added to these particles, are other grammatical elements called adverbs or adverbials which also help lexical verbs in locating time or events spatially or temporally. Peripheral verbs are non-finite. That is, they cannot make a predicate or sense on their own. Their function or distribution is therefore limited within the verb phrase. Lexical verbs are finite. That is, they can make sense on their own. As regards their distribution, they can occupy any of the three sentence positions (initial, medial, and final). This explains why Fyle and Jones (1980: XLiii) refer to them as free verbs. In Kâthemne, below are the following peripheral verbs and adverbials:*

- i. ‘bakə’ (have to x-something or somebody)
- ii. ‘po’ (have/has)
- iii. ‘ba təkə/thambe/tha’ (must/ought to)
- iv. ‘bɔ’ (used to)
- v. ‘tə’ (will/shall)
- vi. ‘yi rəkə’ (be in the act of/progressive action)
- vii. ‘yi təkə’ (should)
- viii. ‘tente’ (often)
- ix. ‘thɔ’ (already)

*As pointed out above, the peculiarity of the Themne lexical verb resides in the fact that it is invariable in form and meaning. What lead to the changes in the form, meaning, and ‘tense’ of the Themne verb*

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*are the above-mentioned morphological particles. This work, therefore, discusses peripheral verbs and adverbs that sequentially go together to produce meaningful utterances in Kâthemne. It seeks to know which peripheral verb precedes the other, which immediately follows, and what position (initial, medial, final) do the adverbials 'tente' (often) and 'tho' (already) occupy amidst the above-stated peripherals.*

**Keywords:** Peripheral Verbs, Themne language, Kâthemne, Combinatorial Constraints, Mandinka.

## 1. Introduction

In Serry A.G. (1993:9-11) M.A. Thesis, on 'A Morphosyntactic study of the Themne Language' (unpublished), states that, according to the annals of history, it is believed that the Themne people are not indigenous to Sierra Leone. They are said to have migrated from Futa Jallon Mountains in present-day Guinea. At about 1233, internal rifts culminated into a religious war which broke out between the Susus who non-Muslims and the Mandinka's were who were largely Muslim. the Susu refused to accept Islam. Notably, the Mandinka were known jihadists who wanted to forcefully convert the non-Muslim Susu to Islam. The Mandinka emerged victorious. This defeat forced the Susus to move southwards in search of a new settlement. it was this move that led them to encounter the Themne and other MEL-Language groups like the Kissi, Landuma, Krim, Baga, Gola and Bullom in the Futa Jallon region. The Susu subsequently clashed with the Themne and the Themne were conquered. This conquest forced the Themne to flee from Futa Jallon, their ancestral homeland and settled in the Northern Part of Sierra Leone, especially the Coastal Forests, which were very economically attractive areas around the 14th century. This permanent stay in the Northern Part of the country gave the present day Themne the feeling that 'Rothɔɔɔ' (the North- East) is their original home.

Thus, the most important tribe that inhabited the land around the Sierra Leone estuary for a very long time, were the Themne. Since the Sierra Leone estuary was then the best natural harbour and watering place on the West African Coast. The existence of the Themne and their language was therefore well known to Europeans during the voyages of discovery in the 15th century.

Today, the Themne occupy a wide area in the centre of Sierra Leone stretching eastwards from the Portloko, Kambia, Bombali and Tonkolili Districts.

They share a common boundary with the Mendes in the South of the country. Other areas in the North include: Marampa, Konəke, Tane (Tanɛ), Konəke Gbarina, Bandajuma, karene (Karəne), and Masimra chiefdoms.

Added to the above, the Themne are also found in the Koya Chiefdom, the former administrative headquarter of Freetown during the colonial period. The writing of the Language come about because of the advent of the European Missionaries who wanted to propagate Christianity in the Themne speaking areas. This effort was complemented with the establishment of the Provincial Literature Bureau in 1937.

Greenberg (1963), classified Themne as a language belonging to the West Atlantic sub-group of the Niger-Congo language family. It was sub classified by Dalby (1966), as a MEL Language belonging to the southern branch of the West Atlantic Languages.

Regarding demographic importance of languages in Sierra Leone, two Languages; Themne and Mende, stand out. The latest figure available by statistics Sierra Leone Housing and Population Census (2015), indicates that each is spoken as a first language by over a million people. However, Statistics also indicate that Themne has slightly higher number of speakers than Mende. Thus, Themne is the largest ethnic group in Sierra Leone.

Given its social standing, Themne is a viable language that is widely spoken by both natives and non-natives. Hence, it is one of the ‘major’ national languages in the country. As a language, it is not only an aspect of the Sierra Leone culture, but also spoken in most occasions be it commercial, social or political. It is therefore common to speak Themne in marriages and naming ceremonies, in political debates, in mass media and in advertisements.

Further importance of Themne language is that it is one of the national languages incorporated in the educational curriculum that are taught at Junior Secondary School level and even at colleges/universities.

## **2. Literature/Body of the work**

Peripheral verbs are commonly known as preverbal markers. These help lexical verbs to form what are traditionally referred to as ‘tenses. Added to these particles, are other grammatical elements called adverbs or adverbials which also help lexical verbs in locating time or events spatially or temporally. Peripheral verbs are non-finite. That is, they cannot make a predicate or sense on their own. Their function or distribution is therefore limited within the verb phrase. Lexical verbs are finite. That is, they can make sense on their own. As regards their distribution, they can occupy any of the three sentence positions (initial, medial, and final). This explains why Fyle and Jones (1980: XLiii) refer to them as free verbs.

In Kãthemne, below are the following peripheral verbs and adverbials:

- i. ‘bakə’ (have to x-something or somebody)
- ii. ‘po’ (have/has)
- iii. ‘ba təkə/thambe/tha’ (must/ought to)

- iv. ‘bɔ’ (used to)
- iv. ‘tə’ (will/shall)
- v. ‘yi rəkə’ (be in the act of/progressive action)
- vi. ‘yi təkə’ (should)
- vii. ‘tente’ (often)
- viii. ‘thɔ’ (already)

As pointed out above, the peculiarity of the Themne lexical verb resides in the fact that it is invariable in form and meaning. What lead to the changes in the form, meaning, and ‘tense’ of the Themne verb are the above-mentioned morphological particles.

This work discusses peripheral verbs and adverbs that sequentially go together for the production of meaningful utterances in Kåthemne. It seeks to know which peripheral verb precedes the other, which immediately follows, and what position (initial, medial, final) do the adverbials ‘tente’ (often) and ‘thɔ’ (already) occupy amidst these peripherals. The peripherals in question are: ‘bakə’ (have to); ‘ba təkə’/ ‘thambe/tha’ (must/ought); ‘bɔ’ (used to); ‘pɔ’ (have/has); ‘tə’ (will/shall); and ‘yi təkə’ (should).

Kanu (2009), ‘Suffix Ordering in Temne. A Case for Morphotactics’ talks about verbal suffixes. He first looks at the Structure of Verbal Suffixes in Kåthemne. In doing so, he identifies nine verbal suffixes which include: -i, -s, -s, -r, -ɔ, -ɔnɛ, -ɔnɛ, -nɛ, -ɛ and states the effect each one has on the valence of their base.

He further states that up to five suffixes can occur as extensions on the same verb stem. Witness the examples below:

**Kóθ-i-r-ɔ-nɛ-yɛ**

**Tie-REV-DIR-BEN-REFL-NEG**

The other aspect of verbal suffixes Kanu focuses on is Constraints on Suffix Ordering. Even though he maintains that up to five suffixes can occur as extensions on the same verb stem, yet, there are restrictions on the order in which suffixes combine. Hence, he substantiates both the co-occurrence possibility and the co-occurrence restraints of suffixes in a table form. For example, the order of suffixes CAUS-RECIP as in: ‘θonkɔ+s+ɔnɛ’ is grammatical, but \*RECIP-CAUS such as: \*‘ɔnɛ+θonkɔ+s’ is not. Similarly, CAUS-INSTR is possible. For example: ‘rɔm+ɔnɛ’, but \*INSTR-CAUS is not as in: \*‘ɔnɛ+rɔm+ɔ’. He further notes that the same suffix cannot occur more than once in the verb stem. For example: \*‘gbal+əs+ɔ+nɛ+əs). Continuing with his Suffix Ordering in Temne, Kanu also states that, the Themne suffix can take Complementarity and Semantic scope. By this, he notes that some Themne suffixes can

complement each other based on the valence of the verb stem; but yet, can result to different meaning. Witness this example:

(a) /Λnɛ/. Άη fɛθ άη fɿm- Λnɛ.

The- children they fight BEN-REFL.

(The children fought for themselves/ The children fought for each other).

(b) /Λnɛ/. Άη-təη yi κΛ-yèk άη ηάηs Λnɛ κΛ-wóθó.

The-dog and the-monkey-they-bite CAUS-RECIP-the-baboon.

(The dog and the monkey caused each other to bite the baboon). (Kanu, 2009:141-150).

Indeed, Kanu has done a masterpiece analysis of suffix ordering in Temne. He should therefore be greatly commended. In this analysis, Kanu clearly shows that Themne suffixes do not occur haphazardly. This is because there are constraints in suffix ordering, co-occurrence of suffixes, complementation and semantic scope. This notwithstanding, the work could have been much more valuable if Kanu had formulated the morphological rules that clearly illustrate the above constraints that he spoke about. For instance:

(i). If the base verb ends with a consonant, it takes an extension suffix whose initial phoneme is a vowel as in: θ□k□s (learn) + λ (CAUS) = θ□k□sλ (learn-CAUS).

‘gbal’ (write) + ‘ər’ (to) = ‘gbalər’ (write to);

‘gbək’ (cut) + ‘á’ (for) = gbəká (cut for) etc.

(ii). If the base verb ends with a vowel, it takes an extension suffix whose initial phoneme is a consonant. For example: ‘bempa’ (make) + ‘ər’ (well) = ‘bempaər. Here, two vowels: ‘a’ and ‘ə’ are found side by side. When this happens, Themne phonology dictates that the ‘ə’ of the extension suffix be deleted, leaving the consonant ‘-r’ which is then suffixed to the base ‘bempa’, forming the word ‘bempar’ (decorate). The ‘a’ and ‘ə’ are homogeneous vowels in the sense that both are central vowels. Because of this, they produce a cacophonous sound when pronounced as a single unit.

Having reviewed what Kanu says about suffix ordering in Temne, we now go into what is aimed at this write-up, which is combinatorial constraints. That is, combinatorial constraint is the act of ordering peripherals and adverbials in a sequence that forms a morphological unit, which when pronounced, conforms to the sound pattern of the Themne language. We start by analysing the sequences of selected peripheral verbs and lexical verbs.

### 2.1. ‘Combination of ‘la/sa + bakə’ with the lexical verb ‘Rám’ (pay)

We would use these elements in sentences to clearly bring out their meanings.

(a) ‘Ádamãη ɔ la/sa bakə rãm mi.’

Adama-she-had-have to-pay-me

(Adama had to pay me).

The combination of the peripherals ‘la/sa’ and ‘bakə’ is attested in the Themnɛ language. Hence, the sentence is grammatical, euphonious and meaningful. Likewise, when the particle ‘bakə’ (have to), is put before ‘la/sa’, the sentence derived is also meaningful and acceptable in the language. For example:

(b). Ādamāŋ ɔ bakə la/sa rām mi.

Adama-she-have to-had-pay-me

(Adama had to pay me).

From the two sentences above, it is realised that both ‘la/sa’ and ‘bakə’ can immediately follow or precede each other sequentially in terms of syntactic position.

Apart from these combinatorial constraints, any other is ungrammatical and unacceptable in the language. See illustration below:

\* (c) Ādamāŋ ɔ la/sa rām bakə mi.

Adama-she-had-pay-have to-me

(Adama had have to pay me).

## 2.2. Combination of ‘la/sa + po’ with the lexical verb ‘Kɔ’ (Go)

Used in a sentence, we have the structure:

(a) ‘Alɛŋ ɔ ‘la/sa’ po kɔ ro Makeni’

Alie-he-had-have-go-to-Makeni

(Alie had been to Makeni).

This is an acceptable utterance in the Themnɛ language.

Note: One interesting thing about these morphological elements is that the meanings they have in isolation completely differ when combined with others. Sentence (a) above attests to this fact. Furthermore, also that in this sentence, if ‘po’ (have/has) is placed before ‘la/sa’ (had), the sentence would still be grammatical, meaningful and acceptable to native Themnɛ speakers because it conforms to the sound patterns of the language. For instance:

(b) ‘Alɛŋ ɔ po ‘la/sa’ kɔ ro Makeni.’

Alie-he-have-had-go-to-Makeni

(Alie had been to Makeni).

This utterance shows that both ‘la/sa’ and ‘po’ can immediately precede or immediately follow each other sequentially in a sentence.

## 2.3. Combination of ‘tə+ po+ thɔ’ with the lexical verb ‘Kɔ’ (Go)

To see how this combination operates in structure, we use it in the following sentence:

(a) ‘Abɔŋ ɔ tə po thɔ kɔ ro Makeni.’

Abu-he-will-have-already-go-to-Makeni

(Abu shall have already gone to Makeni).

This sentence is acceptable to native speakers of the language. Aside from this combination, any other peripheral combination is unacceptable and meaningless. Examples of sentences in which these three morphological particles cannot be permuted are as follows:

\* (b) ‘Alɛŋ ɔ po tə thɔ kɔ ro Makeni.’

Alie-he-have-will-already-go-to- Makeni

(Alie he has will already gone to Makeni).

\* (c) ‘Alɛŋ ɔ tə thɔ po kɔ ro .’ Makeni

Alie-he-will-already-have-go-to- Makeni

(Alie he will already have go to Makeni).

\* (d) ‘Alɛŋ ɔ thɔ po tə kɔ ro Bo.’

Alie-he-already-have-will-go-to- Makeni

(Alie he already have will go to Makeni).

The ill-formed examples above show that these pre-verbal markers cannot be used haphazardly because there are phonological and semantic constraints which govern their use and syntax. Example (a) tells us that when ‘tə’, ‘po’ and ‘thɔ’ are used in a sentence ‘tə’ occupies initial position, immediately followed by ‘po’, followed by the adverb ‘thɔ’. Any other sequence is unacceptable.

#### 2.4. Combination of ‘bɔ’ + ‘ba təkə’ with the lexical verb ‘Mar’ (Help)

We again use this combination in the following sentence to see how it functions.

(a) ‘Yenka Sɛdɔŋ mə tey mǎpanth-e, ɔ bɔ ba təkə mar su.’

Before-Saidu-he-leave-the-job, -he-had-had-help-us

(Before Saidu could retire, he had had to help us).

This construction is acceptable to the native speaker of Kāthemne. Apart from this sequence, any other is unacceptable. A typical example is the following construction:

\* (b) ‘Yenka Sɛdɔŋ mə tey mǎpanth-e, ɔ ba təkə bɔ mar su.’

Before-Saidu-he-leave-the-job, -he-must-had-help-us

(Before Saidu he leave the job, he must had to help us).

This construction also brings to light the fact that when ‘bɔ + ba təkə’ are used in a sentence, ‘bɔ’ always precedes, followed by ‘ba təkə’. Any other order sequence is unacceptable.

2.5. Combination of po+tho+bo +ba təkə with the lexical verb ‘Mar’ (Help).

We use this combination in the sentence below to show how it operates in structure:

(a) ‘Suleŋ ɔ po tho bo ba təkə mar ɔŋfəm ropet.’

Sullay-he-on the verge of-help-the-people-in- the-town

(Sullay was almost at the point of helping the town’s people).

Any other sequence is unacceptable because it would be meaningless.

2.6. combination ‘tə la/sa tho po’ with the lexical verb ‘Chim’ (fight)

This sentence illustrates how this combination is used in structure.

(a) ‘Okrugba ɔ tə la/sa tho po chim ri.’

the-soldier-he-shall-have to-fight-there

(The soldier might have already fought there).

Similarly, the interchangeable combination of these peripherals to ‘tə po tho la/sa’ with the lexical verb ‘Chim’ (Fight) is also in the language. For example:

(b) Obây ɔ tə po tho la/sa der nɔ.

the-chief-he/she-shall-on the verge of-to come here

(The chief might have already come here).

Apart from these sequences, any other does not make sense. Hence, would be rejected by native speakers. See example below:

\*(c) Obây ɔ po tho tə la/sa der nɔ.

the-chief-he/she-shall-had-have to come here

(The chief might have had come here).

As is almost always pointed out, if all the auxiliaries were deleted from the above sentences, the sentences would still make sense. The only thing that would be lacking is the specificity that is embedded in them (auxiliaries). If on the other hand the main verbs were deleted, the sentences would make no sense. To support this assertion, let’s take the following illustrations:

(d) Obây ɔ der nɔ.

the-chief-he/she-come here

(The chief comes /came here).

\*(e) Obây ɔ tə po tho la/sa nɔ.

the-chief-he/she-shall-on the verge of- here

(The chief might have already here).

## 2.7. Combination of tə + ‘tente’ with the verb ‘Rusəm’ (Take care of)

Like the other combinations, we use these in a sentence to see how they function.

(a) ‘Abəŋ ɔ tə tente rusəm aŋfəth.’

Abie-she-will-often-take care of-the-children

(Abie will often take care of the children).

In this sentence, if ‘tente’ (often) is put before ‘tə’ (will), the structure we get is ill-formed.

\*(b) ‘Abəŋ ɔ tente tə rusəm aŋfəth.’

Abie-she-often-will-take care of-the-children

(Abie she often will be taking care of the children).

On the whole, what this tells us is that the combinatorial constraints of peripheral verbs in sentences is rule governed. That is, the peripheral verbs always come before the lexical verbs. Hence, the lexical verb does not move in terms of syntactic position.

2.8. One other rule is that sentences denoting the future begin with the peripheral verb ‘tə’ combined with others. Any other sequence is unacceptable. For example: ‘tə’ (will/shall) + ‘po’ (have) + ‘thɔ’ (already) = ‘tə po thɔ’ (will have already). In a sentence, we have:

(c) ‘Mbalɔŋ ɔ tə po thɔ der.’

Mbalu-she-will-have-already-come

(Mbalu will have already come).

2.8.1. Sentences denoting perfective actions begin with the peripheral verb ‘po’ combined with others. Any other sequence is unacceptable. For example:

‘po’ (have/has) + ‘gbo’ (just) = ‘po gbo’ (have/has just). Let us look at the following sentence:

(d) ‘Kɔnthəŋ ɔ po gbo kɔnɛ ro Makeni.’

Conteh-he-have-just-go-to Makeni

(Conteh has just left for Makeni).

2.8.2. Sentences denoting recent or habitual actions begin with the peripheral verb ‘bɔ’ combined with others. Any other sequence is unacceptable. For instance: ‘bɔ’ (recently) + ‘thɔ’ (already) + ‘po’ (have/has) = ‘bɔ thɔ po’. In a sentence, we have:

(e) ‘Kɔnthəŋ ɔ bɔ thɔ po kɔ ro Makeni.’

Conteh-he-recently-already-have-go-to-Makeni

(Conteh has already been to Makeni recently).

2.8.3. Sentences denoting recent or habitual actions begin with the peripheral verb ‘bɔ’ (recently), immediately followed by ‘tente’ (often) = ‘bɔ tente’. Any other sequence is unacceptable. The following sentence illustrates this fact:

(f) ‘Yeməsāŋ ɔ bɔ tente kɔ ro Lonsar.’

James-he-recently-often-go-to-Lunsar

(James recently often goes to Lunsar).

2.8.4. Sentences denoting imperative actions begin with the peripheral verb ‘ba təkə/thambe/tha/’(must/ought) combined with others. Any other sequence is unacceptable. The sentence below illustrates this fact:

(g) ‘Yɔnɔŋ ɔ ba təkə po thɔ mun ɔŋtɔl.’

Sese-he-must-have-already-drunk-the medicine

(John must have already drunk the medicine).

2.8.4. Sentences that denote progressive actions begin with the peripheral verb ‘yi rəkə’ (be in the act of/progressive action). Any other sequence is unacceptable. For example:

(h) ‘Hawaŋ ɔ yi rəkə po thɔ bəkəs ɔŋbil.’

Hawa-she-prog-finish-already-loading-the boat

(Hawa is already on the verge of finishing to load the boat).

2.8.5. Sentences that give pieces of advice begin within the peripheral verb ‘yi təkə’ (should) followed by others. Any other sequence is unacceptable. The example below illustrates this fact:

(i) ‘Beŋ yema sheth-e, ɔŋ yi təkə po thɔ ba ɔkala.’

If-you-want-build, you-should-past-already-have-money

(If you want to build a house, you should already have had money).

Note: The adverb ‘thɔ’ (already) is a floating modifier. On its own, it makes no sense. Its full meaning only comes out when combined with the peripheral verbs listed on page 3.

### **Conclusion**

The work began by briefly looked at the etymology of the Themnɛ people in Sierra Leone, went on to discussing the demographic importance of the Themnɛ language and in the educational system in Sierra Leone. It further defined, highlighted and stated the functions of peripheral verbs commonly known as preverbal markers in the language.

Additionally, this work discussed the peripheral verbs and adverbs that sequentially go together for the production of meaningful utterances in Kâthemnɛ. That is to say, it brought out which peripheral verbs preceded the other, which immediately followed, and what positions (initial, medial, final) do they occupy.

Furthermore, this work clearly explored the combinatorial constraints of peripheral verbs and Adverbials, co-occurrence possibility, phonology complementation, semantic scope and formulated the morphological rules that clearly captured the combinatorial constraints in Kâthemnɛ as in:

If the base verb ends with a consonant, it takes an extension suffix whose initial phoneme ‘gbal’ (write) + ‘ər’ (to) = ‘gbalər’ (write to); ‘gbək’ (cut) + ‘à’ (for) = gbəkà (cut for) etc. If the base verb ends with a vowel, it takes an extension suffix whose initial phoneme is a consonant. For example: ‘bɛmpa’ (make) + ‘ər’ (well) = ‘bɛmpaər. Here, two vowels: ‘a’ and ‘ə’ are found side by side. When this happens, Themne phonology dictates that the ‘ə’ of the extension suffix be deleted, leaving the consonant ‘-r’ which is then suffixed to the base ‘bɛmpa’, forming the word ‘bɛmpar’ (decorate). The ‘a’ and ‘ə’ are homogeneous vowels in the sense that both are central vowels. Because of this, they produce a cacophonous sound when pronounced as a single unit.

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