

The Influence of the Dagbani Imperfective Verb Form on Dagomba's Use of the English Tense

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Abstract—This paper analyses the influence of the imperfective verb form of Dagbani a Mabia (Gur) language, spoken in Northern Ghana- on the English tense. Dagbani and English have been in contact for decades; they exhibit differences grammatically and phonologically. Scholars have discussed the grammar of Dagbani. However, no scholar addressed the influence of Dagbani imperfective on the use of English. Considering the fact that there is a strong interplay between English, as the official language of Ghana, and Ghanaian languages in the socio-economic, political and educational sectors of the country, teachers and curriculum developers need to pay attention to how these languages influence each other with specific focus on how to cater for these influences during classroom interactions. This paper, therefore, analyses the influence of the Dagbani imperfective form on English tense, taking into consideration the progressive aspect and the habitual present tense of Dagbani. The study sets to find out if educational levels of people affect the influence of the Dagbani imperfective on English tense. Data for the study were collected through sentence translation and picture description from (89) students in Tamale and Yendi. The data were analysed within the framework of grammatical replication theory by Heine and Kuteva, based on Weinreich languages in contact. The data are analysed based on the respondents' levels of education (Basic, Secondary, and Tertiary). Findings indicated that the progressive aspect of Dagbani imperfective verb form overshadows the habitual present, as Dagomba(s) speak English. Irrespective of Dagomba's educational level, they replicate the Dagbani imperfective use in English; however, the influence minimally reduces as speakers climb the academic hierarchy.

Index Terms—Dagbani, grammatical replication, imperfective, Mabia (Gur) language.

I. INTRODUCTION

Dagbani belongs to the Mabia group of languages, formerly referred to as Gur languages. Mabia languages are part of the Niger-Congo group of languages. It is also referred to as Western Oti Volta languages; Mabia languages are spoken in many countries in the West African sub-region, See [1]. Most of these languages are aspect prominent languages. According to [2], aspect concerns different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation. Comrie assigns the perfective and imperfective as the categories of aspect. He explains that perfectivity indicates a view of a situation as a single whole, and imperfective as viewing a situation, with essential attention to the internal structure of a situation. [3] defines tense as the grammaticalization of location in time.

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Reference [4] also discovers that there are tense prominent and aspect prominent languages where tense is expressed differently from aspect. Thus, tense is “an inflectional marker of the verb used for denoting the temporal location of an event (or situation)” [4].

According to [2], in some languages, the imperfective aspect includes both habitual present and the progressive aspect, where the progressive and habitual present are not distinguished. Confirming [2] and [4] position, [5] observes that Dagbani has two verb forms, the perfective and imperfective verb forms. Within these two subcategories, no distinction is made between past and present perfect, and no distinction is made between the progressive and the habitual/ present tense in Dagbani. With the imperfective aspect as the focal point of this paper, the arising question is, does the imperfective form of Dagbani influence the way Dagomba(s) express tense in English? Thus, this paper aims at investigating how the imperfective verb form of Dagbani influences Dagomba's use of the English tense. The paper is in 5 sections: 1) introduction; 2) methodology 3) the influence of the Dagbani progressive aspect on the use of English; 4) the influence of the Dagbani habitual present on the use of English tense, and 5) summary and conclusion.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

1SG=1st person singular, 3SG=3rd person singular, OBJ=object, IMPFV=imperfective, FOC= focus marker, DCP= discourse particle, EMP=emphatic marker GhE= Ghanaian English, DagbanE=Dagbani English

II. METHODOLOGY

The sample for the study is made up of 89 original Dagbani speakers from Tamale and Yendi in 2018. Respondents were made to translate three simple progressive sentences and four habitual Dagbani sentences into English. This was meant to determine how the imperfective aspect influences Dagomba's expression of English tense. Respondents were asked to describe three pictures, and two pictures that depicted progressive and habitual meanings, respectively. This exercise was meant to authenticate the sentence translation exercise. The analysis was done based on [6] replication theory grounded on [7], [8] grammatical theory, which involves a transfer of grammatical structures from a model language to a replica language. With this paper, Dagbani imperfective is transferred /replicated in expressing the English tense.

The paper used a quantitative method to analyse the data. Data is presented in graphs; the analysis is based on respondents' levels of education. The goal is to determine whether the influence reduces as speakers go higher in education.

III. THE INFLUENCE OF THE DAGBANI PROGRESSIVE ASPECT ON DAGOMBA'S USE OF ENGLISH TENSE

The subcategories of the Dagbani imperfective verb form (progressive and habitual) are expressed with the same aspectual suffixes. However, some writers associate some suffixes with either the progressive or the habitual present tense. Some of progressive tenses are seen in the sentences (1) below that were given to respondents to translate.

1. **Ò pùhì-rì Náá mì.**
3SG greet-IMPFV chief DCP
S/he is greeting the chief too.

In sentence (1), for instance, the base form of the verb, *pùhì* is suffixed with the aspectual suffix *-rì* which [8], [9], [10], [11] associate with the expression of the progressive aspect. For this reason, it was termed as a progressive tense.

2. **Tì dí-rì mì.**
1PL eat-IMPFV EMP
We are eating.

Sentence (2) has *dì* as the bare infinitive form of the verb; *dì* is suffixed with the aspectual, *rì* and the emphatic marker, *mì*. In [10] Dagbani book for teacher training colleges, he attributes the suffixes *-rì* and the post verbal particle, *mì* to the progressive aspect in Dagbani. Sentence (3) of the progressive sentences is:

3. **Ò ò-rá.**
3SG eat-IMPFV
S/he is eating.

Reference [10], [11] also associate the imperfective completive aspectual suffix, *rá*, in the above sentence (3) with the progressive aspect of Dagbani.

An overwhelming majority of 88% of the respondents showed in their translation that sentence (1) expressed the progressive aspect in English. Besides, in translating the progressive sentence (2) from Dagbani to English, all the (89) respondents, except one respondent from the tertiary level, showed in their translations that the sentence expressed the progressive aspect. The findings further showed that that all (89) respondents demonstrated in their translations that sentence (3) also expressed only the progressive meaning. These responses suggest that sentences (1), (2) and (3) can mostly be interpreted as the progressive aspect in Dagbani and English by Dagomba(s). It also means that the progressive aspect is frequently used to express the progressive, not the habitual present. The average scores of respondents' responses to the three sentences are presented in Fig. 1 below:

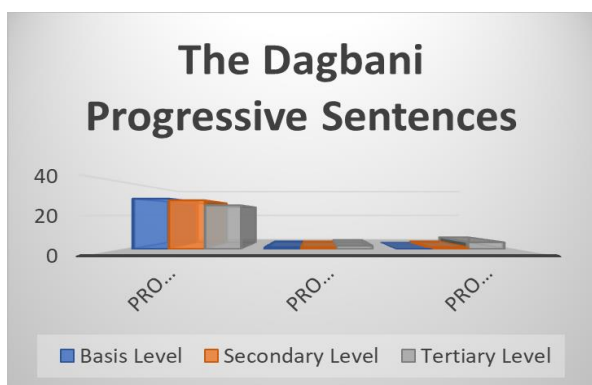


Fig. 1. Graph showing the average score of the progressive.

Generally, even though there are high chances of the progressive being interpreted with a habitual meaning, as indicated in Fig. 1, in all the three simple Dagbani progressive sentences, respondents realised them as progressive in English and not habitual. This is because speakers can also interpret the sentences as habitual present contextually in Dagbani. However, respondents only interpreted them as progressive in their translations. As demonstrated in Fig. 1, the above three sentences, therefore, go to confirm the claim that the progressive is normally frequently used in place of the habitual present.

Consequently, the progressive aspect of the Dagbani's imperfective form is as well frequently used when people in the speech community present a context with the present tense meaning in English. The dominance of the progressive aspect over the habitual in the imperfective form, as it is used in Dagbani, is replicated in English. In this case, there is no way the progressive will be overshadowed by the habitual present when Dagomba(s) speak English.

As the habitual present tense is dominated by the use of the progressive aspect in English, habitual utterances presented are context-interpreted with progressive semantic interpretation. This makes the expression inappropriate and not ungrammatical. Although such statements are not ungrammatical, they can lead to misunderstanding when the interpretation is taken out of context. [6] also observes similar replication with grammatical items in several languages. Next is the analysis of the responses to the picture description that depicts the progressive aspect.

A. Picture Description on the Dagbani Progressive Aspect

The Picture description was done to authenticate whatever translation and interpretation respondents gave to the sentences they translated in the sentence translation section. The pictures presented situations that portrayed progressive events. Below is the Picture 'A,' which depicts the progressive aspect.

1) Picture 'A' of the progressive aspect

As shown, the picture 'A' presents a woman engaged in an activity that depicts a situation in progress.

All (89) respondents described the activity in the picture 'A' in Fig. 2 as a situation that depicts progressive interpretation. As indicated in the graph below, not even one respondent tended to denotatively describe the activity as an event that shows the habitual present. Consider the summary of the responses of picture 'A' on the bar chart below.



Fig. 2. The Dagbani simple progressive picture 'A' (Author's Construct).

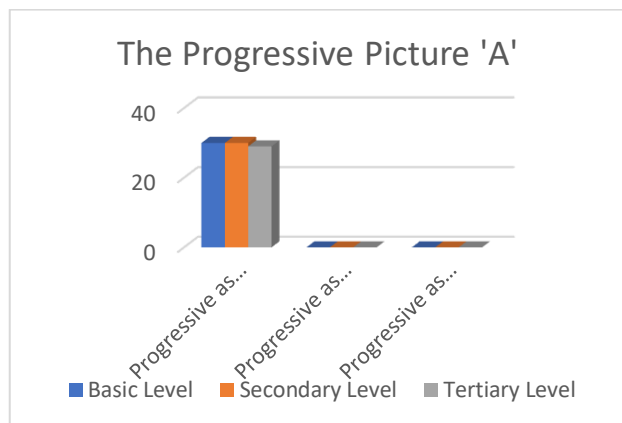


Fig. 3. Bar chart of number responses for the progressive picture 'A' (Author's Construct).

The summary of responses in Fig. 3 suggests that an activity of this nature will always be interpreted as the progressive aspect and not habitual meaning. It confirms that the progressive is always interpreted as progressive and not habitual. This point suggests that progressive tense is preferred to the habitual. Below is picture 'B' of the progressive aspect.

2) Progressive picture 'B'

Picture 'B' also presents a man and a queue of people in front of him. The event portrays an activity that is ongoing at the time of speaking.



Fig. 4. Progressive aspect picture 'B' (Author's Construct).

Only one person from the tertiary level described the picture 'B' as both progressive and habitual. The rest of the respondents, 98.9%, showed in their description that the picture in Fig. 4 depicts a situation that is associated with the progressive aspect. Obviously, almost all the respondents, irrespective of their educational levels, interpreted the picture 'B' as progressive. This is expected since the progressive always overshadows the habitual present tense in the sentence translation exercise. Clearly, the picture has confirmed and authenticated the frequent use of the progressive aspect. The picture has confirmed that progressive is a better option than the habitual in the description of the picture and for the expression of the progressive aspect. The summary of the responses for picture 'B' is presented in the graph on Fig. 5 below:

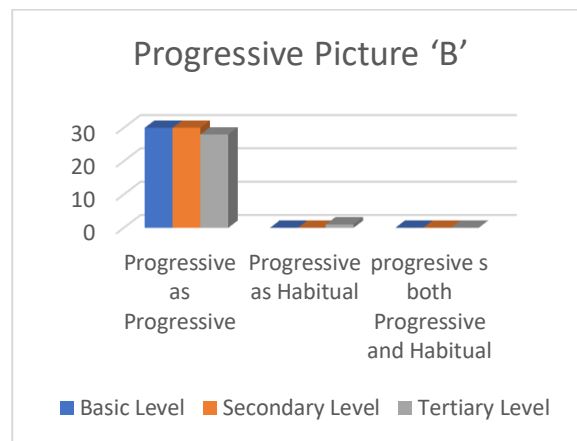


Fig. 5. Graphical presentation of the number of responses for picture 'B' (Author's Construct).

The description given to picture "B" suggests that usually, Dagomba(s) will not refer to an activity of this nature as a habitual present when they are looking for an English translation equivalence. The results, as indicated in Fig. 5, confirms that the progressive is used as progressive and could possibly be used as habitual since the progressive aspect is frequently used when the people in the speech community express habitual in the L1. Next is picture 'C' of the progressive aspect.

3) Progressive picture 'C'

Fig. 6 below presents picture 'C' displaying a woman teaching in the classroom, with one student attempting to say something.



Fig. 6. Picture 'C' of the progressive aspect (Author's Construct).

Almost all the respondents demonstrated that the activity in the picture depicts a progressive situation. Less than 4% described the drawing in both progressive and habitual present. Those who saw the activity as both progressive and habitual demonstrated that the progressive aspect could be used to express the habitual present tense. Nevertheless, all these responses suggested that people in the study area would describe a picture of this nature as progressive and not as habitual present activity. As stated above, this indicates that Dagomba(s) do not frequently use the habitual present when tense/aspect is expressed in the English language.

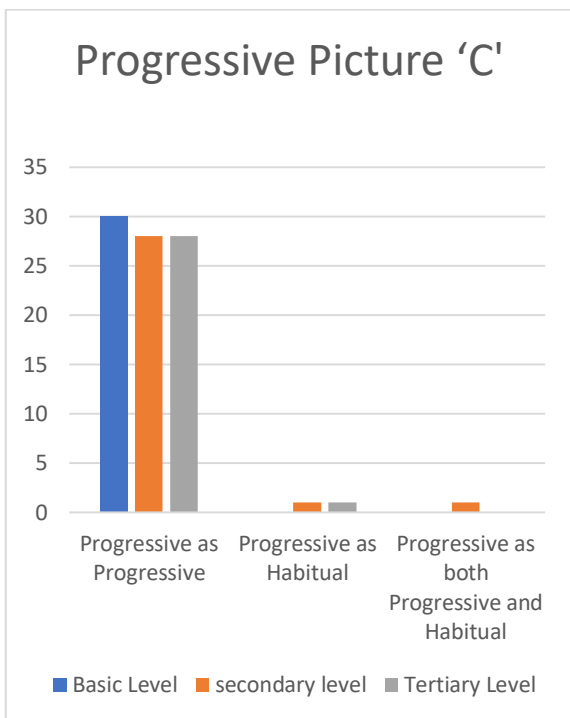


Fig. 7. The Graphical presentation of the results of picture 'C' (Author's Construct).

Even though respondents with tertiary level qualification lead in interpreting progressive situations as habitual, it is still obvious that all respondents' interpretations, as indicated in Fig. 7 above show that irrespective of respondents' educational levels, the progressive aspect is considered as progressive and not habitual in English. Therefore, taking respondents' interpretations and their descriptions of the pictures into consideration, one would conclude that the picture description authenticates the interpretations of the sentence translation. These responses show that the progressive aspect always depicts the progressive meaning in the English Dagomba(s) speak. Therefore, the indication is that Dagomba(s) will not use the habitual when they intend to use the progressive, as they speak English.

In summary, the findings on pictures A, B, and C confirm that the progressive is not usually overshadowed by the habitual meaning in Dagomba's use of the English tense, even though they are expressed with the same aspectual suffixes in Dagbani. Judging from the sentence respondents translated and the pictures they described, there is consistency in respondents' interpretations. All responses from both sentence translation and the picture description greatly tilted towards the progressive aspect. Thus, in both the sentence translation and the picture description, almost all 89 respondents, provided semantic interpretations in favour the progressive aspect. However, there is one explanation for the progressive being interpreted as progressive. Drawing inference from [5], [12], the subcategories of the Dagbani imperfective verb form have no distinction: the progressive and the habitual are used interchangeably. The import is that once all interpretations go to the progressive meaning, the progressive is likely to be used in place of the habitual. Well, the analysis of the habitual present in the next section of the examination will confirm this.

VI. THE INFLUENCE OF THE DAGBANI HABITUAL PRESENT TENSE ON THE USE OF THE ENGLISH TENSE

This part of the paper analyses the results of the Dagbani simple habitual sentences that respondents were made to translate. These simple sentences reveal how Dagomba(s) interpret and use the habitual present; and how it reflects in the way Dagomba(s) use the present tense in the English language. Through these sentences, one can tell whether the habitual present of the Dagbani imperfective form is replicated in English and used as it is used in Dagbani. Sentence (1) *Ō yūr ìkóm* ('He drinks water') was given to respondents to translate because the main verb *nyù* is suffixed with the post-verbal aspectual suffix *rì rì* in [5] interpretation/ glossing of a sentence depicts that *rì* helps express the habitual present of the imperfective form in Dagbani, see [5]. Sentence (2) (*Ṁbá dūhìrìlá lóórí ñ-ch áñ ì shìkùrù*. 'My father drives a car to school') was given to respondents to translate from Dagbani to English because the probability of it being contextually interpreted as habitual is higher than it being interpreted as progressive. Thus, this sentence naturally carries a habitual meaning than a progressive meaning. The habitual sentence (3) (*Sán à bārìlá wáhù*. 'Sana rides a horse.') was selected as a habitual sentence because [10] listed it among sentences that carry a present tense meaning. Sentence (4) (*Sán à bár Í á ó w áhù* 'Sana rides her horse.') was also picked, based on the fact that [10] uses it as one of the illustrations of the present tense sentences in Dagbani.

88% of the respondents indicated in their translation that sentence (1) carries progressive meaning. As many as 78% translated the habitual sentence (2) to progressive, only 17% indicate that it expressed habitual meaning. Moreover, as 82% of the respondents showed in their translations that sentence (3) depicted the progressive meaning, only 15.7% of the 89 respondents showed that sentence 3 expresses the habitual present. Sentence 4 also went for the progressive aspect in respondents' translation and not the habitual present. The average score and summary of the four sentences in this section is presented on the graph below:

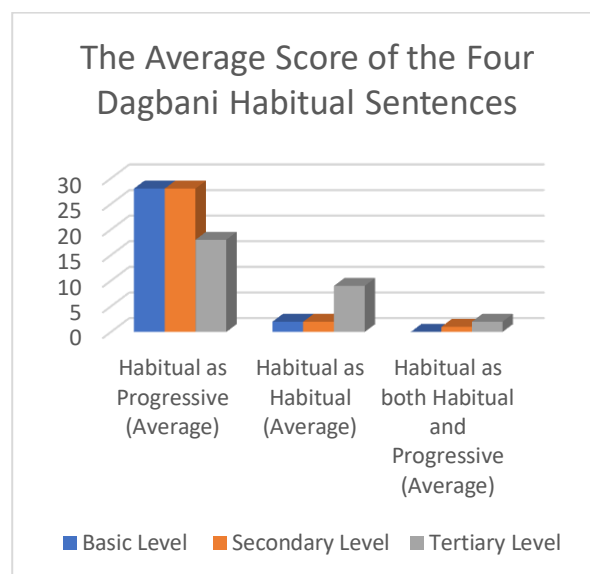


Fig. 8. A Bar chart of an average score of the habitual sentence 4 (Author's Construct).

It is indicated in Fig. 8 above that although all the education levels interpreted the habitual present tense as a progressive aspect, the overwhelming majority is from the basic and the secondary levels. The tertiary level, however, leads in interpreting the sentences as habitual present. Besides, many respondents from the same level show in their translations that the sentences express both habitual present and progressive aspect. This interpretation means that the tertiary respondents' extended exposure to language use in higher settings probably played a role in their interpretations of the sentence. Thus, maturation, improvement in respondent's linguistics and communicative competence seem to be the driving forces of their interpretations. These respondents always interpreted a sentence as both the progressive and habitual present tense. This interpretation shows the lack of distinction between the two subcategories in the surface meaning. The responses to the sentences also show that the use of the progressive in the expression of the habitual present in Dagbani has influenced Dagomba's use of the English tense. I conclude that Dagomba(s) use the progressive in place of the habitual present, even when the deep meaning of what they intend to say carries a habitual meaning.

B. Picture Description on the Dagbani Habitual Present

Here, the results of the two pictures that were given to respondents to describe. In this section, the picture description also authenticates data collected through simple sentence translation. Data is presented in two graphs; the picture 'D' is presented below.

1) Picture 'D' of the Dagbani habitual present

Picture 'D' presented a repetitive activity that takes place for a one-week duration. The drawings presented the same picture of a man sitting on a chair, with a queue of people in front of him. The image portrayed an activity of receiving or giving out money. The description of the picture denotes that the man works in a bank.



Fig. 9. Habitual picture 'D' (Author's Construct).

It is demonstrated that despite all indications that the series of activities in Fig. 9 point to a habitual situation, most of the respondents did not show in their responses that

the activities indicated a habitual situation. The majority of the respondents, 73%, showed in their description that the series of activities on the image depicted progressive action. However, only 26% of the respondents related the activities in the picture to the habitual present. A graphical presentation of the results on the picture 'D' is presented below:

Comparatively, the tertiary level always has the least number of responses for the 'habitual' as 'progressive.' The graph in Fig. 10 showed that respondents with Tertiary level qualification had the majority of responses for the 'habitual as habitual' than respondents at Basic and Secondary levels. Though insignificant, the tertiary level respondents were still the only group that responded to both progressive and habitual descriptions of this picture. Nonetheless, most of the respondents from Basic School, Secondary School and Tertiary institutions translated the Dagbani habitual to progressive in English. This interpretation indicates that the people in the speech community use the progressive when there is the need to use the simple present tense or the habitual present. Therefore, the imperfective form in Dagbani influences speakers' use of the English tense. For example, the series of one activity of a man in the bank, in BrE depicts habitual present, as, He works in a bank. However, the same activity is realised in the English Dagomba(s) speak, as in the habitual present being influenced by L1 of Dagomba(s) as *He is working in a bank*. This usage is a complete replication of the imperfective use from Dagbani to English. Similarly: *She cooks for her family*; in BrE will be captured as *She is cooking for her family*; in Dagomba's version of the utterance. These statements are grammatically correct but not grammatically appropriate, which can lead to misunderstanding in Communication.

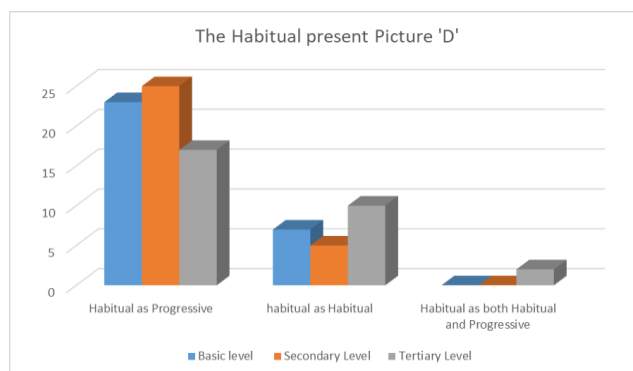


Fig. 10. Bar chart for the responses of the picture 'D' of the habitual present (Author's Construct).

2) Dagbani habitual present picture 'E'

Picture 'E' also presents a series of the same activity of a lady teacher from Monday to Friday. The picture denotes a lady teacher with school children in a classroom. One of the students raises his hand to say something. The series of one activity was used for respondents to get the idea that the situation they were to describe was an iterated situation that holds as a habit. Consider Fig. 11 with the habitual picture 'E' below:

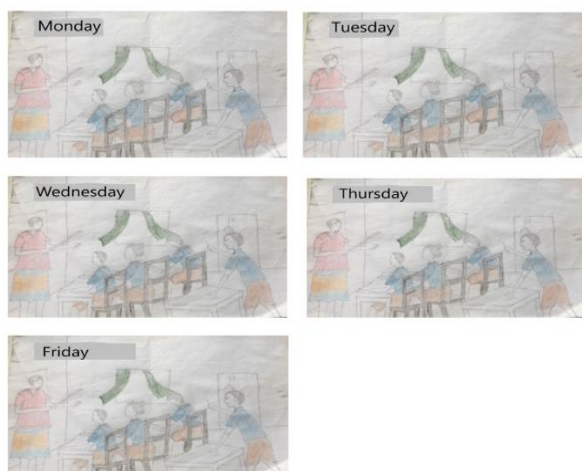


Fig. 11. Habitual picture 'E' (Author's Construct).

It is demonstrated that as many as 73% of the respondents described the picture as progressive. (65) respondents from (89) subjects described the series of activities in the picture as progressive. Only (23) indicated in their description that the repetitive activities in the picture all together denote the habitual present. Consider the responses for picture 'E' on the graph below:

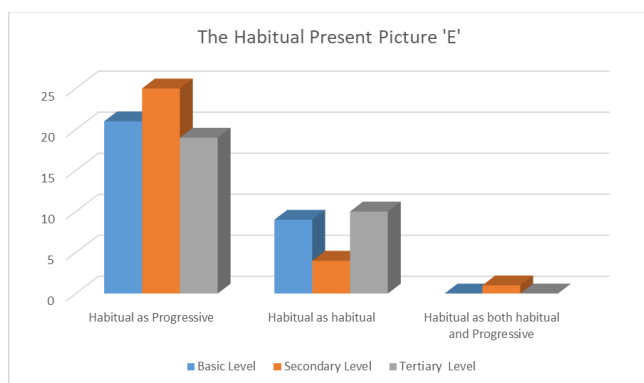


Fig. 12. The graph for the habitual Picture 'E'.

As shown in Fig. 12, the Secondary level registered most of the respondents, who saw the activity in the picture as a progressive activity while respondents from the Basic and the Tertiary levels did not analyse the picture activity as such. The findings showed a change in function in the grammatical subcategories. The change in function falls under [13] innovative process, exaptation, a phenomenon that involves linguistic items that perform functions they initially do not perform. Besides, [14] notice the extension of the progressive in particular to other functions, including the habitual present in GhE. The author explains that the extension of grammatical function is usually common in the new English varieties and that such usage is considered substrate to the native varieties of English. Given this, extending the progressive aspect to the imperfective, in general, is not encouraged in standard English [14]. However, events and habitual situations, when expressed by the Progressive aspect usually is of restricted short-term duration [15], [16] In some languages, 'the aspectual meaning 'progressive' is indeed inherent in the vast majority of situations the progressive refers to' [14]. The

findings of this paper confirm that the function of the progressive does not only include situations that are in progress, but it has a wide range of functions, which affects Dagomba's English. This finding implies that languages that share similar features with Dagbani could express tense and aspect as speakers of Dagbani will express it. It also implies that in classroom situations, teachers should consider teaching the imperfective aspect in both English and Dagbani as different subcategories of grammar in different language.

Conclusively, respondents from the tertiary level lead in translating the sentences and describing the pictures in the 'habitual present as habitual,' and in both 'progressive aspect and habitual present. For instance, respondent number (48) from the tertiary level's responses to all habitual and progressive sentence translation and picture description, are all in the progressive and both habitual and progressive aspects. None of his translations or descriptions went for the habitual present alone.

This shows how progressive use has overshadowed the habitual use in the English the people in the speech community speak. Hence, a sign of ethnic features dominance in the English the people in the speech community speak. Starting from the simple Dagbani habitual sentence (1), consider respondent (48) responses below:

- Ò yùrì kóm
3SG. drink.IMPF. water
He drinks water.

His response to the habitual sentence one was: He is drinking water. The simple Dagbani sentence 2, reads as seen as in:

- M̃ bá dùhirlá lóorí n-cháni
1SG. father drive.IMPFV car DCP-go.IMPFV
shíkùrù.
school

My father drives a car to school.

He again interpreted this sentence as both a progressive and habitual situation, as; *My father drives a car to school.* Or: *My father is driving a car to school.* The simple Dagbani habitual sentence three also reads

- Sána bári wáhu.
Sana ride.IMPFV horse.
Sana rides a horse.

He responded in the progressive in his translation of this sentence, as; *Sana is riding a horse.* Sentence (4), which reads almost the same as the sentence 3, as seen below:

- Sána bári-là ò wáhu.
Sana ride.IMPFV-FOC 3SG.OBJ horse
Sana rides her horse.

Sentence (4) was also given the progressive interpretation in respondent (48) response: *Sana is riding her horse.* His response to the habitual picture 'D,' as; *He works here;* or: *He is working here.* Also, respondents described Picture 'E' as progressive and habitual, meanings as in; *The madam is teaching here;* Or: *This is where this madam is teaching.*

Another respondent from the tertiary level who did an interesting translation was respondent number (84). She

translated all sentences from on the habitual to habitual present and translated all sentences on the progressive aspect to progressive. She also described all the pictures except picture 'E' appropriately. A critical observation of these two respondents' responses showed how advanced most tertiary users of English in the study area were in using the progressive and the habitual present tenses. [17] observes that in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) that age, aptitude, cognitive style, motivation, and personality are the five factors that influence second language learning and use. Moreover, [18] observes a more obvious sign in Cameroon Ethnolect. Thus, level of education aids human use of complex structures. This also shows that the habitual meaning and the progressive meaning exist in the deep meaning of every imperfective form, but their difference is not just possible in the surface meaning since the aspectual suffixes that are used in expressing the progressive are used for the habitual present. Respondent (48) responses also revealed the intensity of the influence of the Dagbani imperfective form on speakers' use of the English tense. The implication is that teachers should consider the age of students in planning lessons related to imperfective use.

Respondents' interpretations also showed the covert existence of the distinction between these two subcategories, but they can only be overtly expressed with the same structure. In this case, the two subcategories dovetail into each other, making the expression of these two subcategories of grammar more contextual than morphological. Evidence of this usage in Dagbani is demonstrated in [12] illustration of verbal alternations in Dagbani; see also [19], [5]. Moreover, [20] adds that the progressive and habitual are expressed when the suffixes *-da*, *-di*, and their variants are suffixed to the Dagbani verb. Therefore, the progressive aspect becomes the most influential subcategory of grammar that dominates the other category (the habitual present), as Dagomba(s) speak English. There is, therefore, a heavy influence of the L1 of the speakers on the English they speak.

V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The paper demonstrated that Dagomba's use the progressive aspect to express habitual present tense when they speak in English. Hence, the simple the present habitual tense or the present tense is usually presented or expressed as if it carries a progressive meaning in English. Therefore, the progressive aspect is the influential subcategory of the two subcategories of the Dagbani imperfective form. The findings of this study also demonstrate that the multiple interpretations of sentences as both progressive and present could lead to misunderstanding when people in the speech community engage in a conversation with native speakers of English and other English speakers. The study further finds out that there is a minimal reduction of the progressive aspect's influence on the habitual present as speakers move from the basic and secondary level to the tertiary level of education. Consider the ethnolectal retention of the imperfective below.

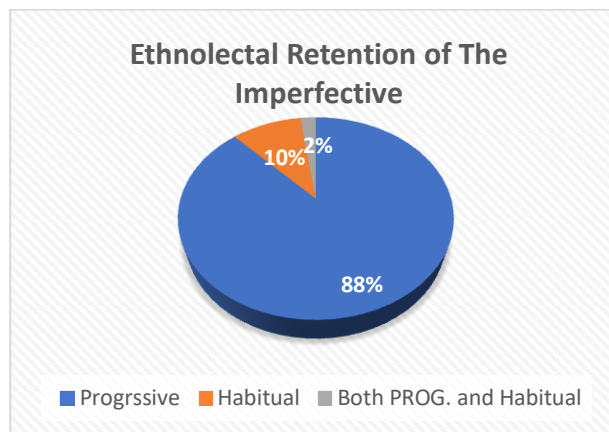


Fig. 13. A graph for the ethnolectal retention of the imperfective.

Hence, Dagbani imperfective form is replicated in English. The progressive aspect is used to express both progressive and habitual present tense in the English Dagomba(s) speak.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Author is responsible for all documented information in this paper and has approved the final version.

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