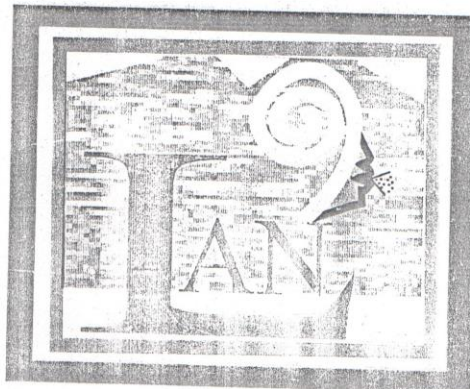


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Stages in the Acquisition of Yoruba Syntax

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The paper examines the stages in the syntactic development of a Yoruba child. The major objective is to see how and when they set the three language parameters. The data used is collected from three children, Damilare, Temiloluwa and Tola between ages 09 and 36 months. We start by examining the normal course of human language development. We look into the stages of the acquisition of syntax from the babbling stage to the multi-word stage. It is discovered that in the course of acquiring syntax, children move from simple to complex structures. They are also able to set the parameters which make language acquisition easy for them despite its complexity.

Introduction

The human language is a very complex system. It is the mirror of the mind. Young children acquire language without much effort, and this is as a result of the presence of the language acquisition device. According to Chomsky (1975):

A human language is a system of remarkable complexity... A normal child acquires this on relatively slight exposure and without specific training... It is a product of human intelligence, created anew in each individual by operations that lie far beyond the reach of will or consciousness.

Many researchers have hypothesized that young children are predisposed to the acquisition of language and that this acquisition is unique to children (Grimshaw, Adelstein, Bryden and Mackinnon, 1998). Children show their dexterity when acquiring language which shows that they are not merely imitating the speech of adult. Children pass through different stages in the acquisition of language.

In the paper, we present a paradigm of the various stages in the acquisition of Yoruba syntax. The paper draws attention to the fact that the age of passing through particular stages might differ from child to child but all children pass through each of the stages.

Sample Population

We examined the corpus of children's early speech. The data consist of a set of spontaneous longitudinal speech of children produced during interactions with parents, siblings, caregivers and other family members. The longitudinal data are collected from three children, Damilare, Temiloluwa, and Tola who were recorded at home from 18 months to 36 months. The two basic criteria used for the selection of the children are that the children must be native speakers of Yoruba and the parents must be native born Yoruba.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted here is that of principles and parameters syntax.

Acquisition grammar is concerned with how and when children acquire grammars of their native language. It is also concerned with stages they go through in the

development of grammar. How much of this knowledge is innate and how much is learned during life? It is generally accepted that the meaning of words and the details of how they are used is learned. Research has also shown that there is a deep grammatical structure in place in the brains of newly born children. The development of language in children is guided by a set of "innate ideas and principles" (Akmajian, Demers, Farmer and Harnish, 2004).

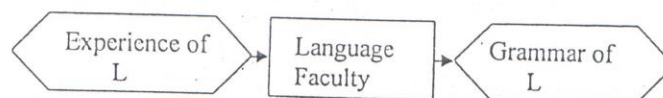
Chomsky accounted for language acquisition by positing a linguistically specific system of principles and parameters that every healthy child is genetically endowed with a system he refers to as UG (Universal Grammar) or LAD (Language Acquisition Device) (Radford, 2004). He developed a theory of language based on the idea that there are universal, innate rules of grammar that can be seen in all human languages. This theory is based on the observation that children appear to use correct forms of language without much use of incorrect forms. He believes that children need not be exposed to adult speech in order to attain competence because they produce speech that do not occur in adult's speech which most often are full of errors. According to Chomsky (1965:200-1) 'children acquire... language quite successfully even though no special care is taken to teach them and no special attention is given to their progress.' Children's speech is creative, it is not a case of imitation, neither is it a matter of just learning rules and then following them.

Chomsky's view on the innateness of language has been challenged (Harris and Coltheart, 1986:36). Putnam, an empiricist, (1967:12) and Steinberg (1999:140) believe that Chomsky's claim on the ease and speed with which children acquire language might not be as he claimed. They believe that the time put into language acquisition is much; hence, it is not so easy. Putnam believes that a child learning language is actually exposed to more hours and eventually more years of language learning than an adult learning a second language. He compared the number of hours spent by a child in acquiring language with that of an adult learning a second language. Steinberg in agreement with him, claims that a child by four years will have been exposed to language for about fourteen thousand, four hundred (14,400) hours at an average of ten (10) hours per day. However, an adult in a language class, will have an average of eight hundred and ten (810) hours per year compared to three thousand, six hundred and fifty (3,650) hours that the child spends in a year. They do not believe that there is a language acquisition device that makes language acquisition easy.

Peng (1975:16) also does not believe in the fact that language is innate. He states that the fact that a four-year old child is able to 'command a very complex system of communication does not mean that the process was easy or justify that he has the system at birth'. He believes that language acquisition is strenuous.

However, Radford (2004) states that the child's linguistic experience serves as input into the child's language faculty which also provides the child with a procedure for analyzing the experience and devising a grammar of the language being acquired. The acquisition process as visualized by Chomsky is represented below:

1.



Radford (2004:11)

The principles and parameters theory was developed by Chomsky in the 80s (Chomsky 1981). This model, henceforth referred to as the PPT model reduces the complexity of the acquisition task which children face. Children need only to learn language specific aspects of grammar as part of the task of acquiring their native language. According to Radford (2004),

... the obvious way to determine just what aspects of the grammar of their native language children have to learn is to examine the range of parametric variation found in the grammars of different (adult) natural language.

Three major parameters along which languages of the world can vary have been identified (cf. Chomsky 1981, Ndimele 1992, Radford 2004). These are the Head-Position Parameter, *Wh*-Parameter and the Null-Subject Parameter. The grammatical variations between languages are classified along these parameters, and the language faculty specifies a binary choice of possible values for each of the parameters. Let us, however, mention here that Ndimele (2003:854) has questioned the universal validity of the binarity principle. He draws ample examples from a number of African languages to show the *wh*-parameter may not be expressed "in terms of absolute binarity" in all languages. What Ndimele (2003), however, admits is that some languages "exhibit certain characteristics that tend more towards one of the binary values" of a particular parameter. He further states that it appears that a normal child first acquires the dominant value of a parameter in a given language (whether plus or minus) and then overgeneralises.

The deviant cases, i.e. those structures that do not follow the regular, more predominant values of a given phenomenon, are now gradually learned as the child continues to be exposed to the linguistic data" (Ndimele 2003:855).

The Head-Position Parameter determines the relative positioning of heads with respect to their complements. The Yoruba language positions all heads before their complements. The examples below illustrate this:

2. VP

- | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| a. Ra ile
'Suy house' | b. Ta apo
'Sell bag' |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|

NP

- | | |
|--|---|
| c. Ilé nàà
house the
'the house' | d. bàbá àgbà
father old
'the old man' |
|--|---|

PP

- | | |
|--|--|
| e. inu ile
inside house
'inside house the' | f. ori aga
on chair
'on the chair' |
|--|--|

ADJP

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| g. pupa fòò
red very
'very red' | h. dudu gan
black very
'very black' |
|---------------------------------------|---|

In the Yoruba verb phrase, *ra* 'buy' and *tà* 'sell' precede their complements, *ilé* 'house' and *àpò* 'bag' respectively. The Yoruba prepositional phrases also have the prepositions, *inú* 'inside' and *orí* 'on' preceding their complements. *Ilé* 'house' and *bàbá* 'father' are nouns while *pupa* 'red' and *dúdú* 'black' are adjectives in the language also preceding their complements. Yoruba is therefore a head-first language as it consistently positions heads before complements.

The Wh-Parameter determines whether Wh- expressions can be fronted or not. Wh-elements in Yoruba are fronted. They are moved to the front of the sentence, out of the phrases containing them. For example:

- 3a. *Kí ni orukọ rẹ* 'What is your name?'
What name you
- b. *Ta ni Olu* 'Who is Olu?'
- c. *Nibo ni o lẹ* 'Where did you go?'

In the examples above, Wh-elements are fronted in the language.

The third parameter is the Null-Subject Parameter. This parameter determines whether a language is a null-subject language or not. A Null-Subject language allows finite clause to have a null *pro* subject. Yoruba is a non-null subject language. This means that the language does not allow null subjects; finite verbs only have overt subjects and no null subjects.

The Acquisition of Syntax

Language development takes place during a specific period of development of a child; it is regarded as analogous to other biological developments in human growth (Akmajian et al. 2004). The first word is spoken at about 9-12 months, but some could be as early as six months; from 18 months onwards, most children have moved to the multi-word stage. Acquisition of complex language after 18 months is very rapid. Children use syntactically correct sentences by the age of three and highly complex constructions by the age of five.

Normal infants possess neurological systems that detect and store speech sounds, permit reproduction of these sounds, and eventually produce language. Children develop their native languages in sequence of recognizable stages. The age at which children will pass through a given stage can vary from child to child; however, the sequence of stages appears to be the same for all children acquiring a particular language. These stages can be broadly divided into three. These include the babbling stage, the one-word stage and the multi-word stage. A natural language can be analyzed at a number of different levels: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. The level of analysis for this research is syntax.

Babbling Stage

This stage is prior to the development of language and it occurs between 4-6 months. Infants utter all known speech sounds, sound sequences and syllables. These are meaningless but they are recognizable. They are also more language-like than the infant cries.

The One-Word Stage (Holophrastic)

As mentioned earlier, the units of languages are morphemes and words. Children begin using recognizable words by late first year or early second year, between 09 and 18

months. There have actually been reports of children mouthing their first words as early as four months. According to Fromkin and Rodman (1978), 'the words in the holophrastic stage serve three major functions: they are either linked with a child's own action or desire for action... or are used to convey emotion..., or serve a naming function...'. These words include names of familiar people, animals and objects in the child's environment. The following examples are taken from Damilare's transcripts at 1; 4:

4.	mama	"grandma"	Amina	"name of the elder sister"
	daddy	"daddy"	bingo	"name of toy"
	ayán	"cockroach"	bàtá	"shoe"
	ojú	"eyes"	síbí	"spoon"
	tiga	"golden morn"	pinpin	"car"
	aporo	"local antidote"	owó	"hand"
	ajá	"dog"	Aliu	"name of a person"

Words indicating certain actions which the child participates in and demands like eat, sleep, come, etc. are also used. For example:

5.	kojá	"pass"	wè	"bathe"
	gbe	"carry"	jáde	"go out"
	subú	"fall down"	gòkè	"go up"
	gbà	"take"	sùn	"sleep"
	jẹ	"eat"	mu	"drink"

Words used to indicate emotion include negatives like 'no'. At this stage, negation is also expressed by single negative words, e.g.

6.	titán	"finished"	kòsi	"none"
	ún hùn	"no (with shaking of head)"		

Functions words are almost absent at this stage. Questions at this stage are indicated by intonation and or context.

It is not really clear what the meanings of words are at this stage as a single word could be used in different contexts with possibly different meaning e.g. *bàtá* "shoe" refer to shoe and also means that the child wants the shoe to be tied or even be picked up. *Ayán* "cockroach" refers to all crawling insects while *ajá* "dog" refers to dogs as well as goats. *Pinpin* "car" is the sound made by the horn of a car but which the child now uses to name the car. A child calls Golden Morn "*tiga*". The source of this is not clear but surely this must be from something the child picks from the environment. The basic thing about this stage is that the child uses only one word to express concepts or predication that will later be expressed by complex phrases and sentences (Fromkin and Rodman 1978).

Multi-word Stage

This stage begins from the second year of life and extends to the fifth year. The children begin to form elementary two-word structure at the early multi-word stage. Children begin to express a variety of grammatical and conceptual relations (Akmajian et al, 2004). It is at this stage that the structure of language and especially the forming of parameters begin. It marks the beginning of building up of syntactic structures, of merging complements and heads via the process of merger. According to Fromkin and Rodman (1978), 'the child's utterances are not simply randomly strung together words but, from a

very early stage, reveal his or her grasp of the principles of sentence formation'. Nomination, noticing, possession, location, requests and imperatives are some of the concepts expressed. Negative words occur at the beginning of expressions; they do not occur between other words. Wh-questions are rarely used; *dà* "where" is the only predominant form used at the end of expressions. These are exemplified in the table that follows:

7. Common types of utterances found in the early multi-word stage (Adapted from Akmajian, et al. 2004.)

S/No	Semantic Characterisation	Syntactic Characterisation	Forms	Examples
1.	Nomination (naming, noticing)	Existential	{ this see } + Noun { that his }	wo Kẹinde 'see Kehinde' wo ajá 'see dog'
2.	Possession	Noun Phrase	{ Noun } + Noun { Pronoun }	Qwọ mi 'my hand' orí mi 'my head' mommy bàtà 'mommy, my shoe'
3.	Actor-Action	a. Subject + Predicate b. Subject + Predicate c. Predicate	Noun + Verb Noun + Noun Verb + Noun	Mommy nọọ 'mummy beat her' N nọọ 'I will beat her' Mommy kọja 'Mommy, I want to pass' Mommy geje 'Mommy she bit me' Mommy wẹ 'mummy, I want to bathe' Amina jade 'Amina has gone out' Mama fọwọ 'Mommy, I want to wash my hand' Amina tantain 'Amina is eating plantain' Mommy sòkòtò 'Mommy, my trousers' Yọọ pampers 'remove the pampers' Yọ ọ 'remove it' Wọ asọ 'wear cloth' Sì i 'open it'
4.	a. object location b. action toward location	Subject + Prepositional Phrase Verb + PP	Noun + PP Phrase Verb + PP	Amina kuu 'Amina has gone to school' Mommy shop 'mommy has gone to shop' sùn table 'slept on the table' mu cup 'drank with cup'
5.	Requests & Imperatives	Verb + Object	Verb + Noun	mamu tiga 'I want golden morn' Mu omi 'I want to drink water' filẹ 'leave me' Tóbi óyá 'Tobi, let us go'
6.	a. Non-existence b. Denial	Neg + Sentence Neg + Sentence	Neg + { Noun } { Noun }	kòsì 'none or finished' titan omi 'water is finished' titan tiga 'my golden morn is finished'
7.	a. Requests and imperatives b. Information requests	Yes/No Question Wh-Question	Same word order as statements and imperatives, signaled only by rising intonation	Mummy dà? 'where is mummy?' Tobi dà? 'where is Tobi?'

It is seen clearly that the children are very productive in their use of language. From the data above we can see clearly that heads are positioned before the complements from the earliest stages. This is illustrated in the following VPs:

- 8a. Yọọ pampers (Damilare, 1;6)
'Remove pampers'
- b. Wọ asọ (Damilare, 1;6)
'Wear cloth'
- c. Mu omi (Damilare, 1;6)
'Drink water'

The heads, yọọ 'remove', wọ 'wear' and mu 'drink' are positioned before their complements, pampers, asọ 'cloth' and omi 'water' respectively. The Head-Position Parameter seems to be the only one that is set at this stage. There are some sentences that appear without their subjects making it to look like they are **null-subjects**. For example:

- 9a. mu cup (Temiloluwa, 1;4)
drink cup
'drank with cup'
- b. Wọ asọ (Damilare, 1;6)
'Wear cloth'
- c. Yọọ ọ (Damilare, 1;6)
'Remove it'

The language still remains non-null subject, but the child has used the truncated subjects. This is an operation whereby a sentence is shortened by omitting one or more unstressed words at the beginning, (Radford, 2004).

It should be noted that the Yes-No question is not yet developed at this stage; this is only signalled by rising tone. The Yoruba language, however, does not use inversion for its Yes-No questions.

There is a rapid progression from the two-word stage. The children begin to express more complex concepts and ideas and the structure also becomes expanded. The data in (10) taken from Damilare's transcripts from 1;9-1;11 will exemplify this:

- 10a. Mama, Tobi Adija "Mama, Tobi has gone to Adija's house."
Mummy Tobi Adija
- b. Mummy geje Tóbi "Mummy, Tobi has bitten me."
Mummy cut eat Tobi
- c. Margaret wọ bàtà "Margaret wear your shoe."
Margaret wear shoe
- d. Mummy nọ ọn Amina "Mummy should beat Amina."
Mummy beat her Amina
- e. Mummy Amina nọ ọn "Mummy Amina beat me."
Mummy Amina beat me

- | | | |
|-----|---|---|
| f. | Amina lọ kuu
Amina go school | 'Amina has gone to school.' |
| g. | Anti Bola subú toilet
Anti Bola fall toilet | 'Anti Bola, I fell down in the toilet.' |
| h. | Mummy Anti Bola sùn
Mummy Anti Bola sleep | 'Mummy, anti Bola is sleeping.' |
| ii. | Mummy kọná, anti Bola
Mummy pinch Anti Bola | 'Mummy, anti Bola pinched me.' |
| j. | Anti Bola, jade bag
Anti Bola remove the bag | 'Anti Bola, remove the bag for me.' |
| k. | Mama sòkalẹ Tobi
Mama come down Tobi | 'Mama, Tobi has gone downstairs.' |

The structures at this stage vary. There are instances where we have the merging of only NPs. For example:

- | | | |
|------|--|---|
| 11a. | Mummy, rice sòkòtò
Mummy rice trouser | 'Mummy see rice on my trousers.' |
| b. | Mama, Tobi Adija
Mummy Tobi Adija | 'Mama, Tobi has gone to Adija's house.' |
| c. | Mummy, ọbẹ sòkòtò
Mummy soup trouser | 'Mummy see soup on my trouser.' |
| d. | Anti Sola mummy
Anti Sola Mummy | 'Anti Sola, I want to go to mummy.' |

Where there are VPs, we discover that the order is peculiar to that particular stage, e.g.:

- | | | |
|------|---|---|
| 12a. | Anti Bola subú toilet
Anti Bola fall down toilet | 'Anti Bola, I fell down in the toilet.' |
| b. | Mummy asọ pọn
Mummy cloth back | 'Mummy, take cloth to back me.' |
| c. | Mama sòkalẹ Tobi
Mama come down Tobi | 'Mama, Tobi has gone downstairs.' |

There are also instances where the correct order is followed. For example:

- | | | |
|------|---|-----------------------------|
| 13a. | Mummy nọ ọn Amina
Mummy beat her Amina | 'Mummy should beat Amina.' |
| b. | Amina lọ kuu
Amina go school | 'Amina has gone to school.' |

The issue of null subjects and even the use of truncated null subjects have disappeared giving credence to the fact that the language is a non-null subject language. At the later

multi-word stage, sentence structure is almost perfect. Function words also begin to appear as seen in the following Temiloluwa's transcripts between 1;9 and 2;2.

- 14a. Maa sọ fún daddy mi 'I will tell my daddy.'
I will tell to daddy my
- b. Mo fẹ yàgbè 'I want to pou pou.'
I want pou pou
- c. Mo ti jẹun 'I have eaten.'
I have eaten
- d. Mo fẹ jẹun 'I want to eat.'
I want eat food
- e. Mo fẹ lọ sí ilé 'I want to go home.'
I want go to house
- f. Maa gbá ẹ 'I will hit you.'
I will hit you

Negative words now occur at the correct position within the sentence and the pronominal are also correctly inflected. Auxiliaries are also used at this stage. Yes-No and Wh-questions are also more developed. The table that follows exemplifies this:

15. Development of negative sentences, auxiliaries & questions in child language (Adapted from Akmajian et al. 2004)

Stage	Negative Sentences	Questions	
		Yes/no questions	Wh-questions
Later multi word stage	Negative word occurs inside expression, between subject and predicate	Continued use of intonation; auxiliaries now occur in positive sentences: mo lè gbe "I can carry it" mo ti jẹun "I've eaten"	Additional wh-words now develop to include <i>kini</i> "what", <i>tani</i> "who" and <i>báwo</i> how; no inversion of word order
	omi titan "water is finished"		tani yèn? "who is that"
	Mi ò jẹ "I'm not eating" Mi ò fẹ "I don't want"	baby ti sùn "baby is sleeping"	kini o jẹ? "what did you eat"
	Mi ò wẹ "I am not bathing" Daddy kò lọ "daddy did not go"	mummy ti lọ "mummy has gone" Yes-no questions begin to appear with the affixing of the question marker at the sentence initial position	mommy mi dà? "where is my mommy" onjẹ mi dà? "where is my food" kini yèn? "what is that?"
		sé o ti jẹun "have you eaten?"	
		sé ká lọ "can we go?" sé wá á fún mí "will you give me?"	

We can see that children continue to acquire more complex grammar from this stage onwards. The various parameters have also been set. The Wh-Parameter has fully been set. For example:

- | | | |
|------|---|------------------|
| 16a. | kìni o jẹ?
What you eat
'What did you eat?' | Temiloluwa, 1;10 |
| b. | tani yẹn?
'Who is that?' | Tola, 2;0 |
| c. | níbo ní o wà
where foc you are
'Where are you?' | Temiloluwa, 1;10 |

This has to do in part with the widening of their experiences, a clear phenomenon that underlie adult linguistic competence (O'Grady and Whan Cho, 2004).

Conclusion

Acquisition of syntax involves a complex skill but young children still acquire it without much effort. We have so far looked at samples of children's spontaneous speech in order to determine the patterns of acquisition of Yoruba syntax. This research reinforces the fact that there are universal rules which children follow in the acquisition of their first language. The stages of the acquisition of syntax that children pass through are clearly mapped out. They progress from very simple general rules to more complex and specific ones. Once the parameters are set, language acquisition becomes rapid and error free. Their environment and experiences clearly have an impact on the acquisition of syntax. The more the experience, the more complex the speech becomes.

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