

Headedness in Yorùbá: An Examination of the Deviant Value of Determiner Phrase

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The issue of “headedness” is a product of Chomsky’s (1988) notion of UG (Universal Grammar) that led to the development of a framework known as P&P (Principles and Parameters) theory. It is this theory we have adopted for our analysis in this paper. The purpose of this paper is to examine the inconsistency in the value of Head Parameter with reference to the value of DP (determiner phrase) in Yorùbá. As a native speaker of Yorùbá, the author has adopted an introspective method of data collection and used the intuitive knowledge of other native speakers of the language for necessary clarifications. Despite the fact that English and Yorùbá are both head-initial, the structure of the NPs (noun phrases) in English shows that the head noun is always pre-modified, making the NP “head-final”—a violation of the value of Head Parameter in the language. This necessitated the need for Abney’s (1987) DP hypothesis; in which the determiner heads its own phrase, thereby making a NP in English head-initial. This solves the problem of Head Parameter in English. However, since nouns in Yorùbá are post-modified, adopting “DP-analysis” will automatically produce head-final—a violation of the value of Head Parameter in the language. Given the inconsistency in the specification of head-complement order among the noun phrases in English and Yorùbá, this paper proposes to set a parameter for SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) languages with pre-modification (like English) to adopt “DP-analysis”, and those with post-modification (like Yorùbá) to adopt “NP-analysis”. This will ensure “head-initial” value for the two categories of SVO languages.

Keywords: headedness, pre-modification, post-modification, DP-analysis, NP-analysis, English, Yoruba

Introduction

In parameter setting, only two values are normally set for a given parameter, and every human language is expected to be described based on only one of the two set values. For example, the value of Head Parameter in any natural language is either “head-first” or “head-last”. However, empirical evidence has shown that there are variations in the value of a given parameter across languages. It is this variation, as it affects the value of Head Parameter among the NPs (noun phrases) in Yorùbá¹, that will be the focus of our discussion in this paper.

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¹ Yorùbá refers to the language and its speakers. According to Atanda (1980, p. 1): “The Yorùbá constitute one of the major ethnic groups in modern Nigeria and they effectively occupy the whole of Ogun, Ondo, Oyo and Lagos States and a substantial part of Kwara State. A considerable number of Yorùbá people also inhabit the south-eastern part of the Republic of Benin (former Dahomey). All these areas referred to, formed what was known as the Yorùbá country, before the European partition of Africa. The Yorùbá country lies roughly between latitudes 60 and 90 North and longitudes 20 301 and 60 301 East, with an estimated area of about 181,300 square kilometers. Pockets of the Yorùbá are found in other parts of Nigeria, in some West African countries and even in the West Indies and South America, but the area defined above is regarded as the traditional homeland of the Yorùbá people”.

On the Notion of Headedness

The fact that languages vary as to the relative position of the “head” within the phrase demands a study of head-modifier or head-complement order in a given language. Considering the fact that headedness is a key concept in the x-bar theory, and since x-bar theory is one of the modules of grammar within the P&P (principles and parameters) theory, it could be said that headedness remains of interest in the syntactic analysis of a given language. In the syntactic analysis of a phrasal category, the phrase is said to be a projection of the head.

In his description of the concept of a “head”, within a phrasal category, Sells (1985) remarked as follows: “A fundamental and central concept in all contemporary syntax is the concept of a head. The head of a linguistic unit is that part of the unit that gives its essential character” (p. 25).

As could be deduced from the above remarks by Sells (1985), it is the fact that a noun heads a NP that the phrase is called a NP. Similarly, a determiner heads a DP (determiner phrase), a verb heads a verb phrase, a preposition heads a prepositional phrase, a postposition heads a postpositional phrase, and so on for other phrases.

While considering the issue of headedness as being very crucial in the syntactic analysis of a given language, Stowell (1981, p. 27) made the assertion that, the grammar of each language must specify whether the head appears at the left or right boundary of x-bar (i.e., whether it is “head-first” or “head-last”).

Using Spanish and Miskito as “mirror images”, Chomsky (1988) illustrated the values of Head Parameter in the two languages as follows:

The order of head and complement is one of the parameters of universal grammar, as we can see by comparing Spanish and Miskito for example. In Spanish the value of the parameter is “head first”; each lexical head precedes its complement. In Miskito the value of the parameter is “head last”; each lexical head follows its complement. Miskito and Spanish are “mirror images” in this respect. (p. 70)

Given the impression created from the above quoted sources, one may form the opinion that a language has the heads on the same side in all its phrases. However, empirical evidence from natural languages like English and our language of study—Yorùbá has shown that there is no cross-categorical consistency in the specification of head-complement order. There are variations across languages. It is this problem that we intend to examine in the parametric analysis of headedness in Yorùbá.

The Deviant Value of Head Parameter: Evidence From English and Yorùbá NPs

As noted in the literature (see Mufwene, 1988), the issue of language specific or peripheral value(s) in parameter setting, within the framework of P&P theory, is attested in many languages. For instance, despite the fact that the value of Head Parameter in English is empirically shown to be “head-first” as evident in its verb phrases, prepositional phrases, etc., NPs in English display “head-last”—a violation of the value of Head Parameter in the language. For example, the following NPs in English illustrate such a violation of the value of Head Parameter (see Example 1):

- Example (1) (a) This very small *boy*
 (b) A young medical *doctor*
 (c) My new cooking *pot*
 (d) The honourable *Principal*
 (e) Our elder *brother*, etc.

In other words, the head noun in an English NP, as shown in Example (1) above, is always pre-modified by its determiner(s) making such an NP “head-last”. This causes a violation of the value of Head Parameter in English. It

was this problem that brought about Abney's (1987) hypothesis in which the determiner (D), rather than the head noun, heads its own phrase (DP). And the analysis in which D heads a NP is called the "DP-analysis".

According to Abney (1987),

Importing the DP-analysis into English yields an immediate solution for the problem of the poss-ing gerund: Poss-ing gerunds (and by extension, noun phrases generally) have a more sentence—like structure than hitherto thought, namely, [_{DP} DP's D VP ing]. (p. 2)

Despite the fact that both English and Yorùbá exhibit SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) as the basic order of constituents in their basic clause structures; and display "head-first" as the value of Head Parameter among their phrases, it could be observed that NPs in the two languages have different values of the Head Parameter.

Following Koopman (2000), Carnie (2006), and Sanusi (2007), we can use the x-bar schema in Examples (2a)-(2b) below to illustrate the contrast between headedness among English and Yorùbá NPs respectively:

- Example (2) (a) XP → Comp. X, or
 XP → YP X
 (b) XP → X Comp., or
 XP → X YP (where in both Example (2a) and Example (2b), X stands for the lexical head of an NP/DP and YP stands for the complement).

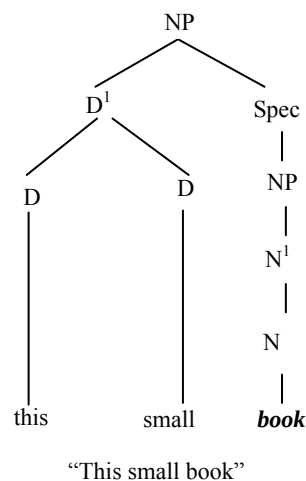
The above x-bar schema in Examples (2a)-(2b) can be exemplified with the English NP in Example (3a), and rendered as Yorùbá NP in Example (3b);

- Example (3) (a) English: This small *book*
 (b) Yorùbá²: *Ìwé kékéré yíí*
 book small this
 "This small book."

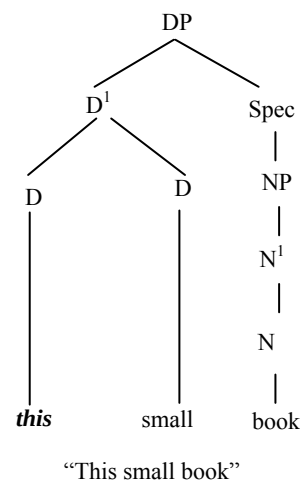
The structure of the English NP in Example (3a) shows how the head noun—"book" is pre-modified, while the same NP rendered in Yorùbá has its head noun—"Ìwé" "book" being post-modified.

The structure of the NP, in each of the two languages can be diagrammatically illustrated with the phrase-markers in Examples (4)-(5) respectively:

Example (4) English: (a) "NP-analysis"



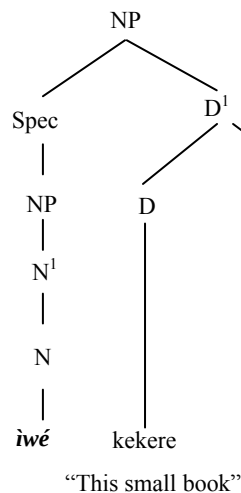
(b) "DP-analysis"



² Yorùbá is a tone language with *three* discrete tone levels: (1) High [H]; (2) Mid [unmarked]; and (3) Low [L].

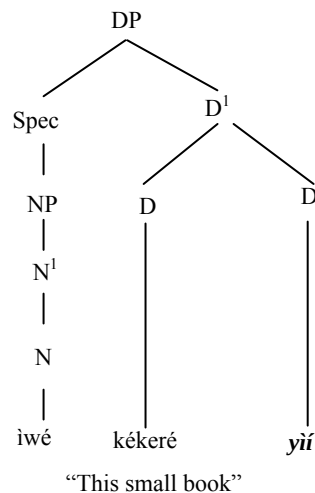
The value of Head Parameter in Example (4a), where the lexical head—“book” heads its own phrase (NP), is “head-last”—a violation of Head Parameter in English. Using “DP-analysis” in Example (4b), where D heads its own phrase, produces “head-first” the correct value of Head Parameter in the language.

Example (5) Yorùbá: (a) “NP-analysis”



“This small book”

(b) “DP-analysis”



“This small book”

The value of Head Parameter in Example (5a), where the lexical head—“iwé”, “book” heads its own phrase (NP), is “head-first”, while the value of Head Parameter in Example (5b), where D heads its own phrase (DP) produces a violation.

To show how lexical heads are consistently post-modified in Yorùbá NPs, ample and illuminating data are presented in section “Co-occurrence of Yorùbá Nouns With Determiners” below.

Co-occurrence of Yorùbá Nouns With Determiners

To form a NP in Yorùbá, different nouns can co-occur with different categories of determiners in the language. Such possible combinations are shown in Examples (6)-(11) below:

Example (6) Common Nouns Plus Article

(a) <i>iwé</i>	<i>náà.</i>	“The book”
book	the	
(b) <i>owó</i>	<i>náà.</i>	“The money”
money	the	
(c) <i>omọ</i>	<i>náà.</i>	“The child”
child	the	
(d) <i>omi</i>	<i>náà.</i>	“The water”
water	the	
(e) <i>óúnjẹ</i>	<i>náà.</i>	“The food”
food	the	etc.

Example (7) Common Nouns Plus Deictics

(a) <i>iwé</i>	<i>yíí.</i>	“This book”
book	this	
(b) <i>omọ</i>	<i>yẹn.</i>	“That child”
child	that	

- | | | |
|----------------|---------|------------------|
| (c) <i>omọ</i> | wònyí | “These children” |
| child | these | |
| (d) <i>ìwé</i> | wònyẹn. | “Those books” |
| book | those | |

Example (8) Common Nouns Plus Cardinal Numerals

- | | | |
|-----------------|-----------|----------------|
| (a) <i>omọ</i> | kan. | “One child” |
| child | one | |
| (b) <i>ìwé</i> | méjì. | “Two books” |
| book | two | |
| (c) <i>ilé</i> | mẹ́ta. | “Three houses” |
| house | the | |
| (d) <i>ìsu</i> | mẹ́rin. | “Four yams” |
| yam | four | |
| (e) <i>ọsàn</i> | márùn-ún. | “Five oranges” |
| orange | five | etc. |

Example (9) Common Nouns Plus Ordinal Numerals

- | | | |
|---------------------|---------|--------------------|
| (a) <i>ọjọ</i> | kejì. | “The second day” |
| day | second | |
| (b) <i>ìwé</i> | kẹ́ta. | “The third book” |
| book | third | |
| (c) <i>ilé</i> | kẹ́rin. | “The fourth house” |
| house | fourth | |
| (d) <i>ẹ̀rù</i> | kejọ. | “The eighth load” |
| load | eighth | |
| (e) <i>ọ̀gẹ̀dẹ̀</i> | kẹ́fà. | “The sixth banana” |
| banana | sixth | etc. |

Example (10) Common Nouns Plus Adjectives

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|----------------|---------|--------------------|
| (a) <i>ìwà</i> | rere. | “Good character” |
| character | good | |
| (b) <i>omi</i> | tútù. | “Cold water” |
| water | cold | |
| (c) <i>epo</i> | pupa. | “Red oil/palm oil” |
| oil | red | |
| (d) <i>ẹja</i> | gbígbe. | “Dried fish” |
| fish | dry | |
| (e) <i>omọ</i> | tuntun. | “A new-born baby” |
| child | new | |

Example (11) Common Nouns Plus Adjective Plus Deictic Plus Article

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|----------------|--------|------|------|------------------------|
| (a) <i>ìwé</i> | kékeré | yíí | nàà. | “This same small book” |
| book | small | this | the | |

- (b) *omọ kékeré yèn.* “That small child”
 child àgùntàn small that
- (c) *àgùntàn funfun wọnyèn.* “Those white sheep”
 sheep white those etc.

It could be observed that each of the lexical heads in Examples (6)-(11) above is post-modified by a determiner or determiners. It would be ungrammatical for such a lexical head to be pre-modified by a determiner or determiners as exemplified in Example (12) below:

- Example (12) (a) *³ *wọnyèn ìwé.* “Those books”
 (b) * *kékeké yìí nàà omọ.* “This same small child”
 (c) * *kẹta yìí ilé.* “This third house”
 (d) * *tutu omi.* “Cold water”
 (e) * *rere iwà.* “Good character”, etc.

Proposing “NP-analysis” for SVO Languages With Post-modification and “DP-analysis” for SVO languages With Pre-modification

Just as we have some languages with prepositions and prepositional phrases, and some with postpositions and postpositional phrases; we have observed in this paper that despite the fact that English and Yorùbá share the same basic word order (i.e., SVO), they have their head nouns being differently modified by determiners. While English head nouns are pre-modified thereby yielding “head-last”; Yorùbá head nouns are post-modified thereby producing “head-first”, as the value of Head Parameter.

It was the deviant value of “head-last” in English NPs that necessitated the need for Abney’s (1987) “DP-analysis” hypothesis. Despite the fact that the hypothesis solves the problem for English, it does not work for Yorùbá. Therefore, “NP-analysis” rather than “DP-analysis” will produce the correct value of Head Parameter in Yorùbá—which is “head-first”. Based on the empirical evidence provided in this paper, the writer is of the pinion that all SVO languages with pre-modification like English should adopt “DP-analysis”, while SVO languages with post-modification like Yorùbá should adopt “NP-analysis”.

Some Pedagogical Implication

Following Fromkin and Rodman’s (1978) analysis of the stages in child-language acquisition, it was observed that at the telegraphic stage, a child’s acquisition strategy is devoid of inflections and functional categories like determiners. As it could be deduced from our discussion in this paper, a Yorùbá child learning the structure of an NP in his/her language will first of all acquire the lexical head in a given NP and probably ignore the associated determiner or determiner(s). The pedagogical implication of this is that making determiner the “head” of a NP in Yorùbá will have no pedagogical value in the acquisition process.

Conclusions

Going by the assertion made by Chomsky (1988) that: “A language has the heads on the same side in all its phrases” (p. 70), one might be tempted to believe that all languages of the world appear to obey a cross-categorical consistency in the specification of head-complement order (i.e., having one and only one value of the parameter).

³ The Yorùbá noun phrases with asterisks in Example (12) above are ungrammatical/unacceptable, because each of the head nouns is pre-modified instead of being post-modified by determiner(s).

We have shown in this paper that despite the fact that English and Yorùbá share the same basic word order (i.e., SVO), lexical heads in the two languages are differently modified by determiners in their NPs, thereby producing different values of the Head Parameter. As Abney's "DP-analysis" can work for English NPs, it cannot work for Yorùbá NPs. Therefore, we are of the opinion that "DP-analysis" should not be over-generalized for the syntactic analysis of every human language. While it works for English, "NP-analysis" works for Yorùbá. In other words, for the sake of both descriptive and explanatory adequacies, universality in grammars must not be attained at the expense of individual language peculiarities. As neat as parameter setting is, there is a big price to pay for it. The price to pay for it is the inability of parameter setting to account for some peculiar linguistic features among human languages.

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