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COMPLEX PREDICATES IN THE EARLY SPEECH OF YORUBA CHILDREN

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Abstract

This paper examines early complex predicates of Yoruba-speaking children. The paper addresses the question of whether complex predicates are available to children in the early stages of grammatical development and also the types of complex predicates available. Serial verb constructions and splitting verbs were examined. The paper studies the early complex predicates of children acquiring Yoruba in terms of the Uniformity of Theta Assignment Hypothesis couched in the Minimalist Programme. The database consists of longitudinal studies of three children, Damilare, Temiloluwa and Tola who were between the ages of eighteen (18) and thirty-six (36) months. These children were recorded daily by their parents. The paper finds that Yoruba-speaking children begin to use complex predicates from age two and by age three, they had acquired almost adult-like competence in the use of these predicates. The paper accounted for the co-occurrence of serial verb constructions and splitting verbs in the early speech of Yoruba-speaking children. The paper concludes that before the children can begin to use complex predicates, they must have acquired a good knowledge of the semantic classes of verbs and of thematic roles.

Keywords: complex predicates, acquisition, verbs, serial verbs, splitting verbs, thematic roles,

1.0 Introduction

There are many studies that discuss the process of acquisition of complex predicates in first language (L1) and second language (L2) (Snyder, 1995, Snyder and Stromswold, 1997). Predication is the central theme of linguistic theories (Saeedi, 2016), it permeates every linguistic study. Müller (2006:697) describes complex predicates as predicates which are multi-headed and composed of more than one grammatical element (either morphemes or words), each of which contributes part of the information ordinarily associated with a head. Alsina, Bresnan and Sells (1997) also believe that complex predicates are composed of more than one grammatical element, each of which contributes a non-trivial part of the information of the complex predicate. Argument sharing is an important component of complex predicate. Chang (2006) describes argument sharing as a possible basis for complex predicate formation. It refers to the process whereby the semantic system combines at least two sets of arguments by matching as best as it can their independent properties (Pinango, Mack and Jackendoff, 2006). Argument sharing is described as being rooted in syntax and semantics; triggered by mismatch between semantic roles and

syntactic arguments and is a “recycling” process as no semantic roles are added (Wittenberg and Pinango, 2008). Serial verb constructions, splitting verbs, causative constructions, resultative constructions, ergative constructions, double-object constructions and *put* locatives are some of the complex predicates identified by Larson (1988), some of which are also attested in Yoruba. We will investigate the acquisition of serial verb constructions and splitting verbs as complex predicates in Yoruba. One major difference between splitting verbs and serial verbs is that splitting verbs are made up of a verb split into two while serial verbs are a concatenation of different verbs.

Snyder (1995) investigates the acquisition of complex predicates and compounds by English-speaking children. He examines the relationship between the ages of the first acquisition of complex predicates and compounds in English. He reports a significant relationship in the ages of acquisition of Noun-Noun compounds and the ages of acquisition of various “complex predicate” constructions. The Snyder’s prediction is that English-speaking children would acquire compounds as early as, or earlier than, complex predicates.

Snyder and Stromswold (1997) investigate the acquisition of various complex predicates in English. They observe that English-speaking children acquire some complex predicate constructions at around the same time, claiming that they are a family of constructions acquired as a group by fixing a value of a single parameter. These complex predicates include double object-constructions, *to* datives, *make* causatives, *put* locatives, V-NP-Particle constructions and V-Particle-NP constructions. They discover a significant correlation in the emergence of some complex predicates in English. They therefore argue that these complex predicates are acquired as group by English-speaking children. Following their predictions, we need to know if there is any significant correlation in the acquisition of various complex predicates by the child acquiring Yoruba.

Demuth (1998) examines the early acquisition of applicative constructions in the Southern Bantu language, Sesotho. Demuth studies the spontaneous speech of two Sesotho-speaking children between the ages of two and three. She believes that for children to use the applicative construction correctly, they must have some knowledge of both semantic verb classes and thematic roles. She looks at how the children would recognize and acquire the applicative morpheme. Her findings indicate that by the age of two years and six months, the two children are already using the applicative productively. She also states that by age 2-3, Sesotho-speaking children are using the applicative in appropriate syntactic and semantic contexts.

1.1 Uniformity of Theta Assignment Hypothesis (UTAH)

The Uniformity of Theta-Assignment Hypothesis (UTAH), the conceptual framework adopted for this study, was proposed by Baker (1988). It is attempt to link thematic roles expressed by DPs to the verb. The hypothesis assumes that principles of UG correlate thematic

structure with syntactic structure in a uniform fashion. The hypothesis states that identical thematic relationships between items are represented by identical structural relationships between those items at the level of D-structure (Baker, 1988:46). An updated version of this hypothesis is presented in Baker (1997). It states that:

“Arguments bearing similar thematic roles are expressed in similar initial structural positions both within and across languages [...]. [T]he alternations in the realization of arguments of a predicate that one does find are either the result of different conceptualizations of the event, or the result of syntactic movement processes”.

Baker (1997:104-105).

The account assume that there is just one underlying structure for a certain thematic relation. It states that each theta –role assigned by a particular type of predicate is canonically associated with a specific syntactic position. For example, spec-*vp* is the canonical position associated with an AGENT argument (Radford, 2004). In essence, it means that two arguments which fulfil the same thematic function with respect to a given predicate will occupy the same underlying position in the syntax. For example, Radford (1997:199) gave the following examples:

- (1) a. We **rolled** the ball down the hill.
- b. The ball **rolled** down the hill.
- (2) a. He **broke** the vase into pieces.
- b. The vase **broke** into pieces.

The ball in (1b) above clearly originates as the subject of *rolled*, then it must also originate as the subject of *roll* in (1a) as it occupies the position in the syntax. This is also exemplified in the following Yoruba examples in (3 and 4) below:

- (3) a. Ó fọ àwo sí wẹwẹ
He break bowl into pieces
'He broke the bowl in pieces.'
- b. àwo fọ sí wẹwẹ
bowl break into pieces
'the bowl broke into pieces.'
- (4) a. Ó pọn omi kún inú péèlì
He fill water full inside bucket
He filled the bucket with water.

- b. omi kún inu péèlì
water fill inside bucket
'The bucket is filled with water'

If *Àwo* in (3b) above originates as the subject of *fó*, then it also originates as the subject of *fó* in (3a). It should be noted that the theta role of these arguments do not change. For example, *àwo* 'bowl' has the THEME role in both positions.

Radford (1997, 2004) adopts UTAH in his analysis of predicates. UTAH has been used to analyse complex predicates (Müller 2006). Verbal particles incorporate into their matrix verb and this incorporation may take place either overtly or covertly (Müller 2006). According to UTAH, passive subjects must originate in the same position as active complements and are then raised in a successive cyclic fashion to become the subject. Arokoyo (2010:268) concludes that:

"UTAH is especially useful in accounting for the complex predications where internal movement had taken place. Complex predicates are not easily acquired by Yoruba children, but when they do, UTAH comes in handy to account for the well-formedness of the utterance".

In this paper, we examine the acquisition of the argument structure of complex predicates by Yoruba children. Complex predicates are assumed to be acquired late cross-linguistically (Arokoyo, 2010). We seek to know the stage that the children acquiring Yoruba start to acquire complex predicates. We also want to know those that are attested in their speech. The analyses were carried out under the minimalist programme. This means that UTAH works well under the program as it imbibes the principles. In the following sub-sections, we will examine the acquisition of the argument structure of serial verbs and splitting verbs.

1.2 Methodology

This data for this study were collected through longitudinal methods. 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 were collected from three children, Damilare, Temiloluwa, and Tola who were recorded daily from 18 months to 36 months. Damilare's data was primary while Temiloluwa and Tola's data were supplementary. Damilare is the first child of educated middle class Yorùbá speaking parents while Temiloluwa and Tola are a set of female twins of educated middle class Yorùbá speaking parents.

1.3 Acquisition of Serial Verb Constructions by Yorùbá Children

Serial verb constructions always contain at least two verbs and each of them functions as the predicate of an original full sentence (Awobuluyi 1982:234). Verb serialization is a situation whereby two or more finite verbs are strung together. Serial verbs occur in many African

languages, Yorùbá, Igala, Igbo, and Ewe inclusive. Tallerman (2005:87) describes verb serialization as a strategy whereby verbs are strung together in a sequence in which no verb is subordinated to the other. Larson (1991) describes verb serialization as a phenomenon whereby notions that would elsewhere be expressed through conjunction, complementation, or secondary predication are rendered uniformly by means of a sequence of verbs or verb phrases. The verbs in a serial construction belong to the same clause

Argument sharing is a feature of serial verb construction (Gruber 1995). Baker (1989) describes argument sharing as a necessary occurrence in serial verb constructions; Collins (1997:461) also states that internal argument sharing is a necessary property of serial verb constructions in Ewe. The argument that is shared determines the meaning of the sentence. Using argument sharing as criteria for classification, we identify three types of serial verb constructions in Yorùbá. These are subject sharing, subject and object sharing and subject-object alternation sharing. Subject sharing describes situations where the verbs share the same subject as illustrated in (5) below:

- (5) a. ó mú ìwé wá (Bamgbose, 1974)
 He take book come
 'He brought the book.'
- b. mo ka ìwé gba oyè òjògbón
 I read book take chief learned
 'I studied to become a professor.'

As illustrated above, each of the verbs has objects but they all have the same subject. The internal arguments range across different roles. The second type of serial verb construction is characterized by subject and object sharing. For example:

- (6) a. Adé mú òbẹ gè isu jẹ (Yusuf, 1997)
 Ade take knife cut yam eat.
 'Ade used knife to cut yam and eat.'
- b. Bólá se ẹran tà (Lord, 1974)
 Bola cook meat sell
 Bola cooked some meat and sold it.'

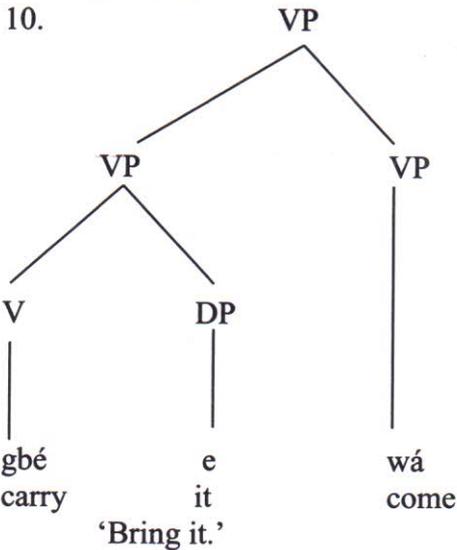
We can see that the verbs share the same subject and the last verb shares the same object as the preceding verb. Subject-object alternation types are serial verb constructions whereby the object of the first clause functions as the subject of the second clause.

- (7) Olú ti ọmọ nàà subú
 Olu push child the down
 'Olu pushed the child down.'

- e. gbé e wá powder
bring it come powder
'Bring the powder.'

Damilare 23 months

In all the examples above, the subjects are null. Most of these verbs were used in imperative constructions, i.e. without subjects. Assuming the examples above were reconstructed with their subjects, they are all the type of serial verbs with the same subjects. We will have the following structure using (9c) above:



The first verb in the diagram above requires an object which is, *e* 'it' in this construction. The second verb however is intransitive and so does not require any complement. The children seem to have a good knowledge of the internal arguments of serial verbs. However, there were instances where the supposed internal arguments were placed in the logical position of the subject as illustrated in (11) below:

- (11) a. ìwé mú u wá
Book bring come
'Bring the book.'
- b. tébù gbé e wá
table carry it come
'Bring the table.'

From the examples above, it seems *ìwé* 'book' and *tébù* 'table' are the subjects but they are not. The children in our study have actually produced two objects and moved the lexical-NP to the subject position. The sentences could read:

- (12) a. mú un wá
bring it come
'Bring the book.'
- b. mú ìwé wá
bring book come
'Bring the book.'
- (13) a. gbé e wá
carry it come
'Bring my table.'
- b. gbé tébù wá
table carry come
'Bring my table.'

Following UTAH, we could see that despite the fact that *ìwé* 'book' and *tébù* 'table' are not in their logical positions since they have antecedents in those positions, they still maintain their theta role. We could say that at this stage, the children have still not acquired overt arguments as the external argument is still missing. Over a period of time, we discover that the children have acquired overt arguments and their use of serial verbs has almost approximated that of the adults.

- (14) a. bàbá gbé e wá
daddy carry it come
'Daddy brought it.' Damilare, 24 months
- b. mómì mú u wá biro
mummy bring it come biro
'Mummy give me biro.' Damilare, 24 months
- c. Ó gbé moto lẹ
He carry motor go
'He took the car away.' Damilare, 28 months
- d. ó gbé omi sá eré
he carry water run race
'He ran with the water.' Temiloluwa, 20 months
- e. Tola gbé ọmọ mi wá
Tola carry child my come
'Tola bring my child.' Temiloluwa, 33 months
- f. ọmọ kùù sá eré lẹ
child school run race go
'The student ran away.' Tola, 24 months

- (21) a. *bàbá tì mí*
 Daddy push me
 'Daddy pushed me.'
- b. *mo subú*
 I fall
 'I fell.'

The semantic role of the argument, 'THEME' remains the same but the syntactic functions are different, i.e. subject and object. According to Baker (1997) arguments bearing similar thematic roles are expressed in similar structural positions. This argument *mí* 'me' has its ACCUSATIVE role checked by the first verb. The reason for this is that there is usually one tense and aspect specification for all the verbs in the construction (Baker, 1989; Yusuf, 1999). This type of serial verb construction is complex and does not come early in the acquisition of serial verbs construction by the Yoruba child. In summary, we conclude that the children have acquired the argument structure of Yoruba serial verbs by age three.

1.4 Acquisition of Splitting Verbs

Splitting verbs are idiomatic phrases formed from extant or obsolete items (Awobuluyi, 1982:234). They are sometimes split in two when they are used with objects, and the object is inserted between them (Awobuluyi, 1978). These verbs include: *báwí* 'to scold', *túnse* 'to repair', *bàjé* 'damage or spoil', *yípo* 'to surround', *padé* 'to close', *túká* 'to scatter'. This is illustrated with the following examples in (22):

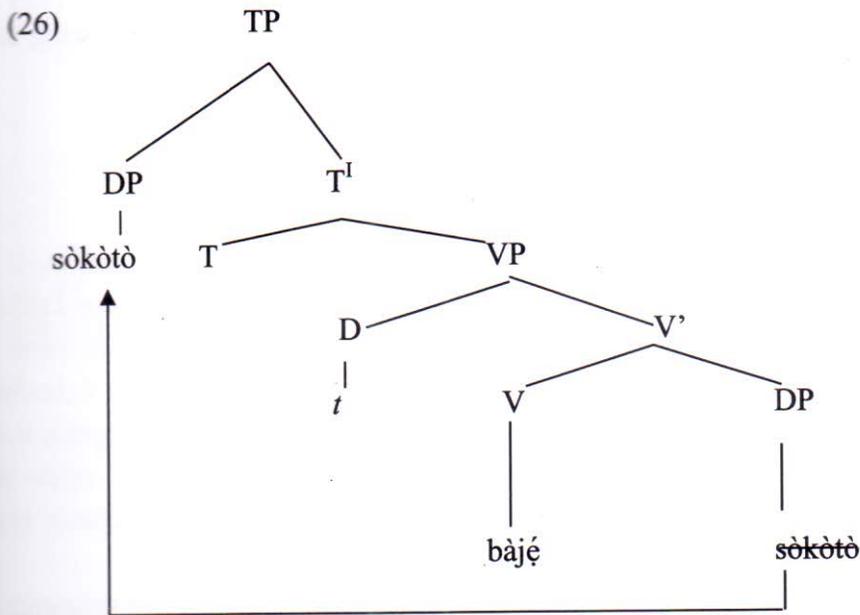
- (22) a. *Agogo náà bàjé*
 Timepiece the spoil
 'The timepiece got damaged'.
- b. *Adé ba agogo náà jé*
 Ade spoil clock the spoil
 'Ade spoilt the timepiece.'

Looking at (22b), we see that *agogo* 'timepiece', is the internal argument playing the role of theme. This is illustrated in (23) below:

The acquisition of the argument structure of splitting verbs is interesting and as observed from our data the principles involved are quite complex. The children acquiring Yorùbá in their move towards adult linguistic competence also have to acquire the argument structure of Yorùbá splitting verbs. The data collected in this study show this process appears difficult for the children. The fact that they are idiomatic phrases could make it quite complex for them. We also discover that the children at the initial stage do not split the verbs. In all the initial usages recorded for the children, objects were not inserted. Examples of this are given below in (25).

- | | | |
|------|--|---------------------|
| (25) | a. padé
close
'Close it.' | Damilare, 21 months |
| | b. mómì padé
mummy close
'Mummy close it.' | Damilare, 22 months |
| | c. phone bàjé
phone spoil
'The phone is spoilt.' | Damilare, 23 months |
| | d. sòkòtò bàjé
trouser spoil
'My trouser is spoilt.' | Damilare, 26 months |

The first example (25a) shows a splitting verb without any argument. Subsequently, we see them used with an argument each. In example (25b), *mómì* 'mummy' is the external argument of the verb. However, splitting verbs are not used only with external arguments. Looking at (25c, 25d), we see that internal arguments playing the role of Theme are occupying the subject position. This is illustrated in (26) below:



This means that these subjects originate as the complements of splitting verbs. It should be noted that External arguments of splitting verbs are always AGENTS. When the verbs are split into two parts, the internal argument is now positioned between the split counterparts.

There are instances when the children do not position the internal argument at the logical position, which is between the splitting verbs. It now comes at the end like other verbs. For example:

- (27) Mọ̀mì Dàmọ̀lá bàjé biro Dàmìlárè 27 months
 Mummy Damola spoil biro
 'Mummy, Damola has spoilt the biro.'

This utterance i.e. example (27) shows that at this point the children do not yet have a perfect grasp of the argument structure of splitting verbs and have used it like other verbs especially the serial verbs. Maybe at this stage, the peculiar features of the splitting verb are still uninterpretable to the children. This structure would have read

- (28) Mọ̀mì Dàmọ̀lá bà biro jé
 Mummy Damola spoil biro
 'Mummy, Damola has spoilt the biro.'

At some point children acquire the ability to judge that certain sentences are unacceptable or lack interpretations that they might otherwise be expected to have. An example is given in (28) above. The children in our study begin to use these constructions correctly at a later stage when they were more cognitively developed and had acquired the necessary features to make

- (31) a. *ilẹ̀kùn ti padé*
 Door has close
 'The door has closed.'
- b. *ibon ti bàjé*
 gun has spoil
 'The gun is spoilt.'

ilẹ̀kùn 'door' and *ibon* 'gun' now function as Subject but according to UTAH, they still maintain the THEME role that they are assigned at the point of merger before being displaced by internal move. Since the external AGENT arguments of splitting verbs occupy the position of maximal prominence, it is the last to be theta-marked and made visible following the bottom-up fashion of operation merge of the minimalist programme. Over a period of time the usage of splitting verbs become more frequent. We conclude that the Yoruba-speaking children have acquired the argument structure of splitting verbs by age three.

3.5 Conclusion

We find that the process involved in the acquisition of these complex predicates is complex and so are not easily acquired as the children would need to know the relationship among the various constituents and also be aware of the internal movements that take place. The literal and idiomatic meanings of these verbs play a significant role in their acquisition. We therefore conclude that before the children can begin to use complex predicates, they must have a good knowledge of the semantic classes of verbs and of thematic roles.

We found that Yorùbá-speaking children began to use serial verbs at the early multi-word stage. It was noted that the children had actually started using the verbs before they started using them in serial constructions. The acquisition of the argument structure of splitting verbs is interesting and, as observed from our data, the principles involved are quite complex. We assume that the acquisition does not come easy for the children. We discover that the children at the initial stage do not split the verbs. In all the usages recorded for the children at the initial state, no objects were inserted. There are also instances where the children do not position the internal argument at the logical position, which is between the splitting verbs; they place it at the end like other verbs. With time, the usage of splitting verbs becomes more frequent and we could safely say that the children have acquired the argument structure of splitting verbs.

With empirical evidence from our data, we conclude that the Yorùbá child acquires the argument structure of serial verb constructions and splitting verbs shortly before their second birthday i.e. by 24 months and by their third birthday i.e. 36 months, they already have a good mastery of the argument structure of some of these complex predicates. We also discover a significant correlation between the acquisitions of complex predicates in Yorùbá. They acquire serial verbs and splitting verbs at about the same time.

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