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A Syntactic Analysis of the Early Verbs of Yorùbá Child Language Acquisition

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Abstract

This paper reports on the development and make-up of the early verb lexicon of the Yoruba child. It also examines the syntactic structure of some peculiar verbs that are associated with the argument structure of the utterances produced by the Yoruba children under investigation. In their developmental stages of language acquisition, the children moved from a stage of no verb at all to a perfect command of the grammar of the language. The categories of verbs that were examined in the utterances of the children include verbs that opaquely theta-mark their object NP's, anti-causative verbs, and adjectivisable verbs. The corpus for this study was taken from the children's utterances recorded over a period of eighteen to thirty-six months. The Minimalist Programme (MP) is adopted as a theoretical framework for our analysis. A major finding of this study is that the degree of complexity of a verb determines whether or not the construction involving such a verb will be acquired very early or late by the children. However, it was observed that the children began to use adjectivisable verbs at an early stage, whereas evidence from available literature does not support early acquisition of adjectivisable verbs by Yoruba children.

1.0 Introduction

Acquisition of verbs requires that children engage in both semantic and syntactic analysis of the forms that are involved in a discourse (Nelson, 1995:223). Learning verbs is learning the structure of language (Scherf 2005). The verb constitutes a universal lexical category (Hopper & Thompson 1984, Langacker 1987, Robins 1966, Uziel-Karl 2001); it is a very important lexical category. Awobuluyi (1978:114) says that verbs play a central role in sentences and that they are almost always present in sentences. Verbs especially play a very important role in language structure, in linguistic form-function relations, and in processes of language acquisition and language development (Uziel-Karl 2001). Argument structure is a very important aspect of verb knowledge. This paper is aimed at examining the make-up of the early verb lexicon of the Yoruba child. We attempt to capture the syntactic structure of the argument structure of the early utterances of the Yoruba child. What type of verbs does the Yoruba child initially acquire? What motivates the use of particular verbs at the initial point of acquisition?

Hale and Keyser (1999:453) see argument structure as "the syntactic configuration projected by a lexical item. Argument structure is the system of structural relations holding between heads (nuclei) and the arguments linked to them". Fromkin (2000:685) defines argument structure as 'the specification of the number of arguments that a lexical predicate (such as a verb) has, as well as the θ -roles associated with each of these arguments.' According to Grimshaw (1990:1), argument structure 'refers to the lexical representation of grammatical information about a predicate.' She further states that argument structure represents a complex of information that is critical to the syntactic behaviour of a lexical item (Grimshaw, 1990:1). The argument structure of a lexical item is part of its lexical entry and this is predictable from its meaning. The argument structure of a verb determines the elements of a sentence that are obligatory (Haegeman, 1994:44). Argument structure is derived from meaning and the specification of the realization of the arguments. As Bresnan (2001:304) submits, argument structure is an interface between the semantics and syntax of predicates (which we may take to be verbs in the general Case)... Argument structure encodes lexical information about

the number of arguments, their syntactic type, and their hierarchical organization necessary for the mapping to syntactic structure.

Argument structure determines the argument position to be induced by a lexical head in syntactic structure. It involves the semantic relations that hold between the verb and the noun phrases that are involved in the state or event described by the verb.

Awobuluyi (1978:56) classifies Yoruba verbs in terms of the constructions in which they operate. He classifies them into different classes, with some verbs belonging to more than one class. Bamgbose (1990) also carried out an extensive study of Yoruba verbs. He then distributed them into different classes. Awoyale (1994:6) classifies Yoruba verbs according to the kind of objects with which they can co-occur. He classifies the verbs into five groups based on their relation to the object. Based on their classification, we will examine the acquisition of verbs that opaquely theta-mark their objects, verbs that anti-causativise without new objects and adjectivisable verbs. They broadly belong to the family of transitive and intransitive verbs.

In the course of acquiring the syntax of a language, children master argument structure patterns. Acquisition of the argument structure marks the transition from single words to word combinations (Uziel-Karl, 2001:173). Alishasi and Stevenson (2005) observe that argument structure is a complex aspect of language for children to master, as it requires learning the relations of arguments to verbs and how those arguments are marked into valid expressions of the language.' Several studies have made the claim that from a very early stage, children possess some rudimentary knowledge of argument structure; they grasp argument structure regularities at a young age (MacWhinney, (1995), Demuth; Machobane and Moloi (2000); Alishasi and Stevenson (2005)).

Pinker (1989) examines the acquisition of argument structure. He states that every verb has an "argument structure": a specification of what kinds of phrases it can appear with (Pinker, 1989). He further explains that a familiar example of what children have to learn is the distinction between a transitive verb like *devour*, which requires a direct object, you can say: 'He devoured the steak' but not just 'He devoured' and an intransitive verb like *dine*, which does not; you can say, 'He dined' but not

A Syntactic Analysis of the Early Verbs of Yorùbá...
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 'He dined the steak'. He also examines the development of verb meaning and syntax.

The Minimalist Programme (MP) is the theoretical framework employed for our analysis in this research. It was developed in the 1990s by Noam Chomsky (Chomsky 1995, 1998, 1999, 2000). The Minimalist Programme takes language to be part of the natural world (Chomsky, 1995: 166). It introduces a new concept of language and adds new content to the innateness position concerning our linguistic capacity (Longa and Lorenzo, 2008:541). According to Chomsky (1995: 7), 'there is a single computational system (C_{HL}) for human language and only limited lexical variety'. The C_{HL} is the part of the mind that builds up sentences and filters out ill-formed sentences. In the earlier version of Generative Grammar, Phrase Structure Rules, Transformational Rules, Deep-structure and Surface-structure determine how sentences are generated. MP has done away with all these.

In MP, the C_{HL} generates sentences from a lexical array in a principled and economical fashion. The computational system consists of two operations: Merge and Move/Attract. These operations are used in mapping lexical information into interface representations at phonetic Form (PF) and Logical Form (LF) (Chomsky 1995:387). These two operations are used in the built-up of Yoruba argument structure. Sentences are built up in a bottom-up fashion unlike in earlier versions of TG where it is top-down. This means that before MP, sentences are projections of Phrase Structure Rules and lexical items are added as terminal nodes but in MP, sentence generation begins with lexical items which are merged.

This paper is divided into six sections. Section one is the introduction while section two examines the method of data collection. Section three discusses the acquisition of verbs that opaquely theta-mark their object. Acquisition of verbs that anti-causativise without new objects by Yoruba-speaking children is the focus in section four while section five discusses acquisition of adjectivisable verbs. The paper ends in section six with the conclusion.

1.2 Methodology

This study is based on the analysis of corpora collected through longitudinal methods. Longitudinal approaches are naturalistic studies that examine language development in a child or a group of children over an extended period of time (O'Grady and Cho 2004: 311). 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 are primary while Temiloluwa and Tola's data are supplementary.

Damilare is the first child of educated middle class parents. The parents live and work in Ilorin, the Capital City of Kwara State, Nigeria. The data were collected by the mother (the researcher) on a daily basis. Damilare's data consist of questions, responses and utterances between him and the parents and other members of the family. It also included his utterances while playing alone. We could safely say that the exercise made it possible to know at what point he had acquired anything linguistically significant. The best form of longitudinal data collection should be between a child and any of the parents or someone who lives with the family. This enables close interaction with the child which aids easy data collection. This also removes most possible constraints that may arise.

Temiloluwa and Tola are a set of female twins of educated middle class parents. The parents live and work in Ilorin. The subjects have two older siblings, a brother, and a sister. The data were collected by their father daily at home and in other possible situations. The data consist of utterances, responses, questions between the two of them, with their parents and siblings and other members of the family.

1.3 Acquisition of Argument Structure of Verbs that opaquely Theta-mark the Object

The verbs that opaquely θ -mark their objects do not freely permit the object to move to another argument position (Awoyale, 1994:6). They are transitive verbs. The verbs are described as being eventive and the

objects are the theme. The examples in (1) are adapted from Awoyale (1994:6):

- (1) a. Olú jẹ isu
Olu eat yam
'Olu ate yam.'
- b. Olú kọ ìwé
Olu write book/letter
'Olu wrote a book'

Moving the object to another argument position will give these ill-formed sentences:

- (2) a. *isu Olú jẹ
b. *ìwé Olú kọ

Awoyale observes that only movement to a non-argument position can dislodge them. For example, these objects can be focused, moved to a non-argument position as in (3).

- (3) a. Isu; ni Olú jẹ t_i
yam FM Olu eat
'It is yam that Olu ate.'
- b. Iwé; ni Olú kọ t_i
book FM Olu read
'It is book that Olu wrote.'

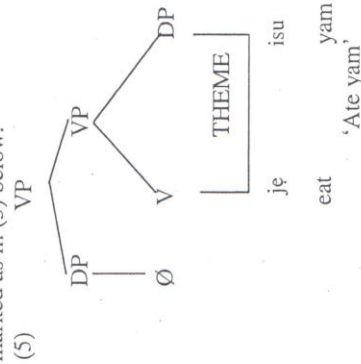
The object in each of the examples in (3) above has been moved to the focus position. There is however a trace at the extraction site to show that movement has taken place.

The children in our study easily acquire the argument structure of verbs that opaquely theta-mark their objects. They belong to the first set of verbs acquired by the Yoruba child. These verbs are transitive verbs with AGENT subjects and PATIENT/ THEME objects. At the one word stage when the children use null arguments, these verbs appear alone. With time, the children begin to use them with objects. It should be noted that object omission is not common in the language of the children acquiring

Yoruba because the language does not allow object omission. The following examples are taken from the utterances of the children from eighteen (18) months

- (4) a. gbà à
'Take it'
- b. jẹ isu
'Eat yam.'

At this stage, these verbs are used without subjects. However they all have objects which they theta mark. Example (4b) above can be phrase-marked as in (5) below:



From our data, we discover that there are instances where the children use nouns in the subject position. We however discover that these nouns are not subjects even though they occupy the subject positions. They are vocatives. For example:

- (6) a. mọmi, wọ asọ
mummy wear clothe
'Mummy, I want to wear my clothe.'
- b. bàbá, mu omi
Damilare, 19 months

daddy drink water

'Daddy, I want to drink water.'

- c. mòmì, jẹ ẹran Damilare, 19 months
mummy eat meat

'Mummy', I want to eat meat.'

In these examples, the subjects are still missing. We have instances where the child addresses the person whom he wants to assist or carry out the action for him. *mòmì* 'mummy' and *bàbá* 'daddy' are vocative expressions. These NPs do not occupy the Spec of VP neither can they be moved to the position of the Spec of TP.

At the multi-word stage, subjects begin to appear in the utterances of the three children. For example:

- (7) a. Dàmólá kọ one Damilare, 27 months

Damola write one

'Damola wrote one.'

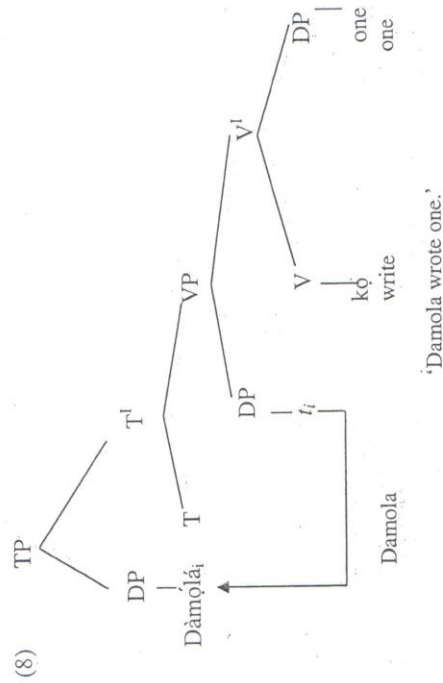
- b. Mo ti yàgbẹ Temiloluwa, 19 months
I have poupou

'I have poupoued.'

- c. Ó ti kà ìwé Tola, 21 months
You have read book

'You have read the book.'

From the data above, we can see that the children acquire the argument structure of these verbs at an early stage. These sentences contain simple verb phrases headed by a verb with a single complement (Radford 2004:336). Example (7a) above is given in the tree diagram in (8) showing the derivation of the sentence.



However, there are instances where the children still have a mix-up of the arguments. Let us consider the following examples from Damilare at twenty-four (24) months.

(9)

- a. Lará pè é mòmì
Lara call her mummy

'Mummy is calling Lara.'

- b. Mótò umbrellà mu
Car umbrella take

'Take the umbrella from the car.'

- c. Mòmì mú u mótò umbrellà
Mummy take it car umbrella

'Mummy took the umbrella from the car.'

- b. ta ojà : ojà tà
sell market
'sold wares'
- c. fọ̀ igò : igò fọ̀
break bottle
'break the bottle'
- d. mú oyẹ́ : oyẹ́ mú
grip harmattan
'gripped harmattan'

Column A represents the causative interpretation while Column B is anti-causative/inchoative interpretation. According to Awoyale (1994), the theme of ergative verbs occupies the object position in the original verb phrases as indicated in Column A above. The themes of these verbs, as shown in Column B are moved to the subject position and the object position is left empty.

There exists cross-linguistic evidence that shows that children begin to use unaccusatives before they are two (Birger 2008, Friedman 2007, Lorusso, Caprin and Guasti 2005, Tomasello 1992, Pierce 1989). The children in our study, however, began to use these verbs shortly after their second birthday. We present the following data from their transcripts.

- (11) a. Ó fọ̀ 25 months
It break
'It is broken'
- b. igò ti fọ̀ 26 months
bottle has break
'The bottle has broken.'

- d. ẹ̀fọ̀n Dámọ̀lǎ jẹ́ ẹ́
mosquito Damola eat it
'Mosquito bit Damola.'

Looking at (9a) above, we can see that there is a rearrangement of the arguments. *Lara* is the PATIENT while *mọ̀mí* is the AGENT. AGENTS have always been equated with the subject position but, in this Case, it is in the object position. The same is the Case in the other two examples. *Umbrella* is supposed to be the direct object of the verb *mú* 'take' but it is not placed in those positions. This is not a Case of movement as this type of verbs opaquely theta-mark their objects and can only be moved to an A-position. In (9c) above, there is a juxtaposition of the direct and indirect object position. These examples show us that children acquiring language are constantly processing the data at their disposal. This shows that they are active participants and their language improves as they develop and mature cognitively.

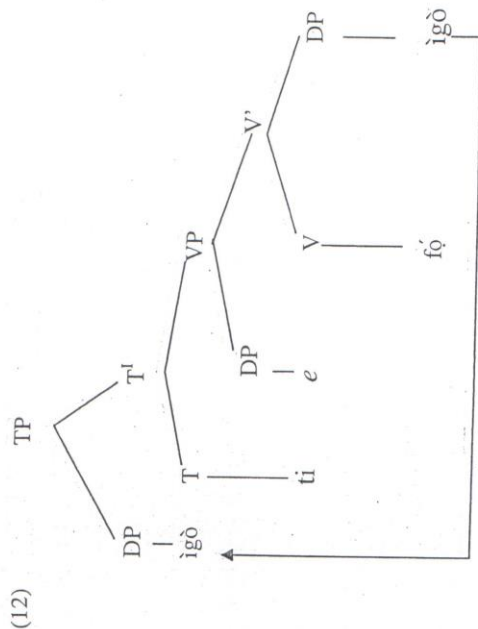
1.4 Acquisition of Argument Structure of Verbs that Anti-causativize without New Object

Anti-causative verbs are intransitive verbs that show events affecting the subjects without giving any semantic or syntactic indication of the cause of the event. These verbs anti-causativize their logical objects and do not create or permit new ones (Awoyale, 1994:6). They are ergative (unaccusative verbs). The anti-causative verb has a single argument, the subject of which is the patient or theme. This subject is however not the logical subject. Awoyale (1994) provides the following examples:

- (10) a. A se isẹ́ : B isẹ́ se
do work work do
'did the work' 'work gets done'

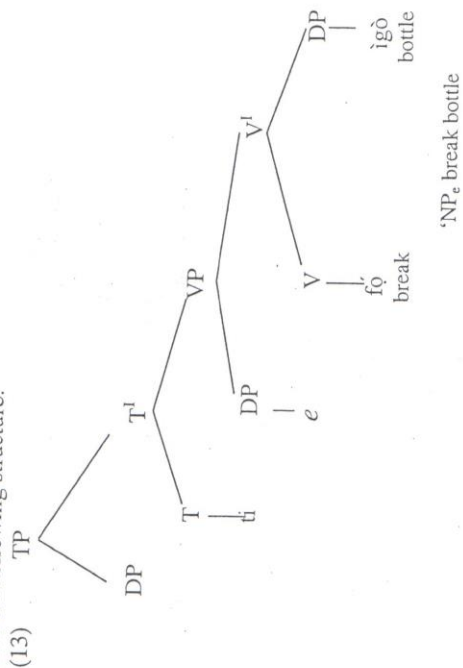
- c. biscuit rún 27 months
biscuit scatter
'The biscuit is scattered.'
- d. *biscuit fò 25 months
biscuit break
'Biscuit is broken.'

The subjects in the examples above are assumed to occupy the object position in the original verb phrases as shown in the tree diagram in (12).



Evidence from the children show that the argument structure of these verbs is not acquired early. Baker's (1988, 1997) Uniformity of Theta-Assignment Hypothesis (UTAH) confirms the fact that the logical

object occupies the subject position but it still maintains its theta role. UTAH is an 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 account assumes 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. The example phrase-marked above would have the following structure:



We can see from the diagram above that the object is still in its logical position, as complement of the verb. We can also see that the subject position is base-generated empty. It is this position that the object will move into to have its Case checked.

1.5 Acquisition of Argument Structure of Adjectivisable Verbs

Adjectivisable verbs are verbs that can be turned to adjectives. Awobuluyi (1978:57) describes adjectivisable verbs as "verb phrases from which adjectives can be formed". These verbs are originally adjectives before becoming adjectivised. They tell us more about the quality of the subject. They include *pupa* 'red', *dádá* 'black', *dára* 'to be good', *tútù* 'to be cold', *ga* 'to be tall', etc. as exemplified in (14):

- (14) a. *Okò Adé dúdú bí kóró isin.*
Car Ade black like seed fruit
'Ade's car is as black as the seed of a fruit.'
- b. *Omọ náà dára bí egbin*
Child the good like egbin
'The child is as handsome as the antelope.'
- c. *Omí náà tutu nini*
Water the cold
'The water is cold.'

Adjectivisable verbs are one-place predicates, they only take external arguments. From the examples above, *Okò Adé* 'Ade's car', *Omọ náà* 'the child' and *Omí náà* 'the water' are the external arguments of their various verbs. These external arguments serve as the head of the noun phrase when they function as adjectives. For example:

- (15) a. *Mo rí okò Adé dúdú yẹn*
I see car Ade black that
'I saw Ade's black car.'
- b. *Mo mu omi tutu*
I drink water cold
'I drank cold water.'

In the examples in (15) above, *okò Adé* 'Ade's car' and *omi* 'water' which head the noun phrase were the external arguments in (14a) and (14c) respectively.

The Yoruba child begins to use adjectivisable verbs at an early stage, however, evidence from our longitudinal data shows that adjectivisable verbs do not form one of the first sets of verbs acquired by Yoruba children. Before a child can use an adjectivisable verb, he must have reached the cognitive stage where he can distinguish, judge and probably place values on some things either animate or inanimate concepts.

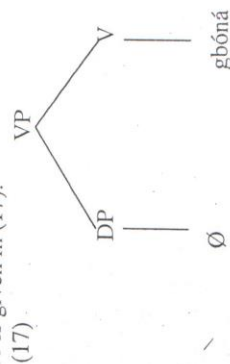
The first adjectivisable verb recorded in the utterances of Damilare is *gbóná* 'hot' at nineteen months. He has been exposed to this verb right from time but he referred to it as *jójóó*. We deduced that the first set of adjectivisable verbs the children acquire are the ones that have to do with what they can feel, touch or taste. These verbs include *gbóná* 'hot' *tutu* 'cold', and *dùn* 'sweet/delicious'.

As mentioned earlier, adjectivisable verbs are one-place predicates taking only external arguments. The following utterances exhibiting the use of adjectivisable verbs were recorded for the children.

- (16) a. *gbóná*
hot
'It is hot.'
- b. *tutù*
cold
19 months
- c. *Dùn*
Sweet
'It is sweet.'
23 months

The adjectivisable verbs in (16) above are used without their arguments. This is taking into consideration the fact that null arguments

form part of the properties of early child language. The structure of the utterance is given in (17).



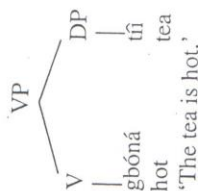
The phrase-marker in (17) above shows that nothing has merged with the adjectivable verb as the position of the external argument is null. Adjectivable verbs cannot be used in an imperative construction. This means that any use of these verbs without the subject is purely a Case of a sentence with a null subject and not an imperative construction. The next sets of adjectivable constructions are exemplified (18) below.

(18) a. gbóná tî
hot tea
'The tea is hot.'

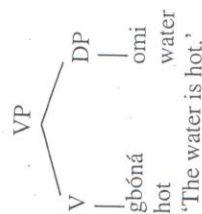
b. gbóná omi
hot water
'The water is hot.'

In these examples, *gbóná* 'hot' is used but this time with internal arguments rather than external arguments which adjectivable verbs are presumed not to have.

(19) a.



b.



At this stage the children could not recognise different grammatical relations. The most important thing is getting their message across. This is however in consonance with *merge* which simply forms pair without imposing any restrictions on the output order of the two elements that are merged. As discussed earlier, Merge is formulated as:

Merge $(\alpha, \beta) := [\lambda \alpha \beta]$ (where λ is the label of the resulting tree)

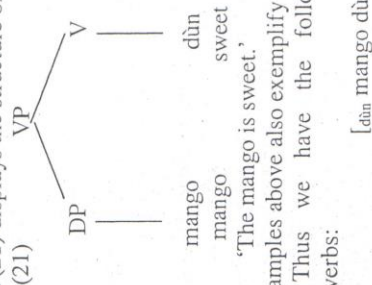
At the initial stage there seems to be no hard and fast rule for the children, hence structures in (16-19) above. The construction can be formalized as is formulated as

[gbóná gbóná omi]

where α is instantiated by the verb *gbóná* 'hot' and β by *omi* 'water'. With time, the children began to use adjectivable verbs with external argument. The number of adjectivable verbs in their lexicon has also increased. The following is taken from Damilare's transcripts:

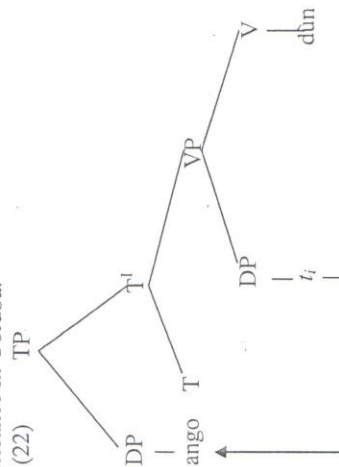
- (20)
- | | | |
|----|---|-----------|
| a. | mango dùn
mango sweet
'The mango is sweet.' | 23 months |
| b. | àmàlà gbóná
amala hot
'the amala is hot.' | 24 months |
| c. | mómì burú
mummy wicked
'Mummy is wicked.' | 24 months |
| d. | asò dótí
cloth dirty
'The cloth is dirty.' | 26 months |

At this stage, the argument structure in the children's utterances started to resemble that of the adult speakers of the language. The only difference is that the children have not fully acquired tense and so most of their structures are not finite. We must however note that Yoruba language does not mark tense as other languages like English, French, etc. do. The tree diagram in (21) displays the structure of example (20a) above.



The examples above also exemplify the merging of elements in the construction. Thus we have the following merge operation for adjectivisable verbs:

Adjectivisable verbs are intransitive permanent state verbs. Permanent state verbs refer to verbs that express a permanent state of affairs or quality that do not undergo change over time (Ajiboye, 2007:117). They do not denote actions that take place as no activity is involved. The implication of this is that adjectivisable verbs are not transitive verbs; neither are they marked for finiteness. It means that once the external argument is present, the structure is complete. The structure in (22) shows how the use of adjectivisable verb is manifested in a grammatical utterance in Yoruba.



Following the VP-Internal Subject Hypothesis, *mango* appears in the Spec of VP and is moved to the Spec of TP to have its Case checked.

However, Ajiboye (2007), in analysing intransitive permanent state verbs proposed that they are unaccusatives and that the subjects originally originate as the internal argument before being raised to the subject position to have its Case checked. He states that the subject occupies the object position at LF before it raises to the subject position at S-syntax (Ajiboye 2007:130). Ajiboye's (2007) analysis takes us back to the data in (18) repeated here as (23):

(23) 19 months

a. gbóná tî
hot tea

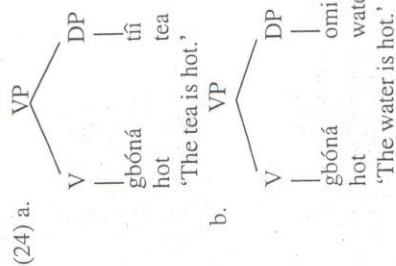
'Tea is hot.'

(23) 19 months

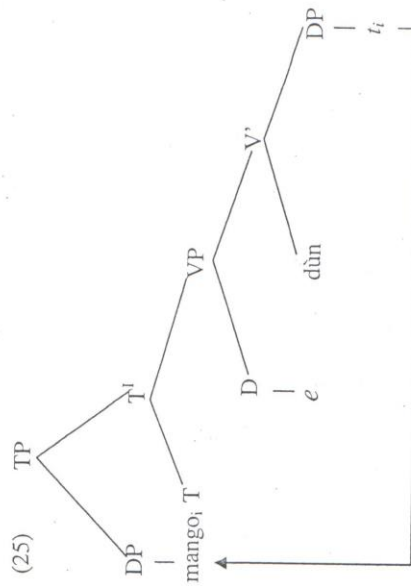
b. gbóná omi
hot water

'The water is hot.'

Going with the fact that the verbs are unaccusatives, then it means that these initial structures of the children are correct. The logical object has not moved from its position of merger. Let us examine the structures in (24).



The internal arguments *tî* 'tea' and *omi* 'water' still remain in-situ. They have not being moved to check their Case at spec-TP. The fact that at this stage, the children have not yet acquired Case gives credence to this claim. The internal argument cannot move because there is no tense to licence its Case yet. A reanalysis of adjectivisable verbs as unaccusatives would now be as follows:



This shows that the subject originates from the object position and then moves to spec-TP to have its Case checked. Another fact that gives credence to this analysis is that adjectivisable verbs are not marked for finiteness and once the external argument is acquired then the structure is complete. The explanation for this is that once the child has raised the internal argument to Spec-TP, it means that the structure is finite. The argument structure of adjectivisable verbs is quite easy to acquire compared to other types of verbs. Evidence from our data shows that by age two, Yoruba children have produced grammatical utterances with evidence of proper acquisition of adjectivisable verbs.

1.6 Conclusion

Our syntactic analysis of early verbs in the utterances of Yorùbá children is quite revealing. We have been able to discover that acquisition of some Yorùbá argument structure came very early, while others came much later. Many psycholinguistic factors accounted for this. Most importantly, the degree of complexity of a verb determines whether or not it will be acquired very early or late. Verbs with simple argument structure and simple semantics were acquired early while complex verbs and complex semantics were acquired later, when the children were cognitively matured to understand the concepts.

The children in our study easily acquired the verbs that opaquely theta-mark their objects and they also began to use unaccusative verbs shortly after their second birthday. The children began to use adjectivisable verbs at an early stage, however, evidence from our longitudinal data shows that adjectivisable verbs do not form one of the first set of verbs acquired by Yorùbá children. The merging and building up of structures are initially done haphazardly following their own deductions. Radford (2000) refers to children as perfect learners of an imperfect system.

We discovered in this study that the chronological age that a child begins to acquire verbs, like other lexical categories, may vary from child to child and that the nature and emergence of different word meanings in early speech differs. We found that certain verbs are acquired before others (Gopnik and Choi, 1995, Ninio (1999), Uziel-Karl, 2001). In conclusion, we believe that acquisition is a process that requires continuity, and that the Yorùbá child like any other child, moves from a stage of no verb at all to a perfect command of the grammar of Yorùbá.

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Case Assignment in Arabic and Fulfulde: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

This paper discusses grammatical Case assignment in Arabic and Fulfulde. The theoretical framework adopted is Government and Binding theory. In both Arabic and Fulfulde, grammatical Case is assigned concurrently with morphological Case. Grammatical Case is assigned in the two languages at the D-Structure before any movement. The trace of the moved item forms a chain with the moved item as such it bears the Case of its antecedent. It was also discovered in this study that a subject-NP in Arabic receives its nominative Case at the sentence-initial NP position and not at Comp position as earlier argued by scholars like Homeidi (1993).

Introduction

This paper intends to discuss grammatical/abstract Case assignment in Arabic and Fulfulde. Although both Arabic and Fulfulde are from different language phyla, Fulfulde has borrowed many lexical items from Arabic due to the religious affiliation between the two languages. Arabic is a Semitic language while Fulfulde is a Niger-Congo language. Case can be assigned morphologically or grammatically or both depending on the