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# Acquisition of bare nouns by Yoruba children

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*Abstract*

This study is concerned with the acquisition of bare nouns by children acquiring Yoruba as their first language. The Minimalist Programme serves as the framework for our syntactic analysis of development of bare nouns by the Yoruba child. The database consists of longitudinal studies of a Yoruba child, Damilare, between the ages of fifteen (15) and thirty six (36) months. He was audio recorded daily by his mother within the period. Some of the data were also written directly. The results show that from a very early stage, the Yoruba child begins to acquire bare nouns as compared to other types of nouns and these nouns occur in different positions. It can be concluded that they use bare nouns where other types of nouns should be used but, with time, other nominal expressions are developed and are used appropriately.

Keywords: Language acquisition, Yoruba, bare nouns, minimalist program

## 1. Introduction

Bamgbose (1967, p. 8) defines a noun as ‘a word which can occur independently or with qualifiers in the nominal group’ while Arokoyo (2013a, p. 70) defines it ‘as a syntactic category that receives the grammatical features of number, person, gender and case. Nouns are classified into the classes of animate, inanimate, concrete, abstract, countable and uncountable nouns. The noun phrase typically functions as subject, object and complement of sentences, and as complements in prepositional phrases (Quirk and Greenbaum 1973, p. 59). The Yoruba NP has

received extensive attention in the overall inquiry into the Yoruba syntax. Some of the works on Yoruba NP include Awobuluyi 1979, Bamgbose 1966, 1967, 1990, Yusuf 1999, Ajiboye 2007, and Arokoyo 2010, 2013bc.

Bare nouns refer to a type of lexical NP that occurs without satellites. Bare nouns are determiner-less plural count and singular mass noun phrases (Zamparelli 2002, Lima, 2014). They do not have accompanying classifiers. Slabakova (2005, p. 219) says that in English, the subject bare NP has both a generic (Gen) and an existential (Ex) meaning, while in Italian it has only the existential meaning. Yoruba allows bare nominals more freely due to lack of plural morphology (see Ajiboye 2007) and like other languages characterised as [+argument, +predicate] (Ajiboye, 2007, Snape, Mayo and Gurel 2009), it allows bare nouns in argument position. According to Arokoyo (2010, p. 229) *mo ra ilé* could be interpreted as 'I bought (a) house(s)', whereby *ile* 'house' is a bare nominal.

Clark (1993) examines the notion of 'simplicity of form'. She notes that when children produce their first words, they typically take as their target only one shape for each word, and use it on all occasions, and that initially this shape will be a bare root or stem. Clark holds the view that the fact that children's earliest innovations all make use of bare stems without affixes offers broad support for the influence of formal simplicity in early acquisition.

Lopes (2006) studies the acquisition of bare nouns and Determiner Phrase (DP) number agreement in Brazilian Portuguese and assumes that children go through three different stages in the course of development until they converge to adult grammar. She claims that in the first stage, the child assumes a default singular value for DPs, and at this stage, the relevant features in D and Number are unspecified. During the second stage, the child begins to make number distinction leading to the plural being morphologically marked while the third stage involves a parametric marking due to the existence of a null determiner in the language.

The aim of this paper is to examine the acquisition of bare nouns in order to know the relevant stages involved in the acquisition and also examine how a

child acquiring Yoruba argument structure treats bare nouns. We observe that the children use only bare nouns at the initial stage. This is probably because they are yet to acquire the necessary agreement features. The question arises: do they see bare nouns as bare nouns or are they used as definite or non-bare nouns? The Minimalist Programme serves as the framework for our syntactic analysis.

This paper is divided into five sections. Section one is the introduction, while section two examines the theoretical framework. Section three deals with the method of data collection. Section four presents the discussion and findings while the paper ends in section five with the conclusion.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The Minimalist Programme introduces a new concept of language and adds new content to the innateness position concerning our linguistic capacity (Longa and Lorenzo 2008, p. 541). The constraint to reduce the theoretical and descriptive tools used in the description of language and the need to reduce the acquisition burden placed on the child and thereby maximize the learnability of natural language grammar led to the beginning of the programme (Radford 1997, p. 7). The major plan of the programme is that grammar should be as simple as possible. This is exemplified in the early speech of children as shown in the course of the development of bare nouns.

The Minimalist approach posits inflectional morphology in the lexicon. Chomsky claims that words emerge fully derived and inflected in syntax, i.e. a lexical item is inserted with its inflectional features (case, agreement, tense, etc.) where they must be 'checked' against the functional categories at Logical Form (LF) within their 'checking domain', generally, the specifier-head relation. Lexical items are fully inflected for the morphological features of tense, case, agreement, etc. Checking theory makes sure that the necessary features agree. It postulates that every lexical head has head features (its own features) and requires other features to be met by its specifiers and its complement (Schneider, 1998). The specifier-head relation is one that allows for features to be checked (Carsten, 2000). Differences between languages are attributed to differences between the

features of lexical items in the languages. Grammatical features are checked in the course of a derivation.

Yoruba language has a simplified morphology; it is not inflectional, which makes the issue of agreement not too relevant. Personal pronouns inflect for number and person only; gender is not marked. Case is structurally checked but also morphologically markd in personal pronouns. There are no inflectional features for the verb and the auxiliary is invariable; it does not inflect for agreement at all. For example, in the following sentences taken from Arokoyo (2010, p. 131),

(1) a. Mo ti dé
I have come
'I have arrived.'

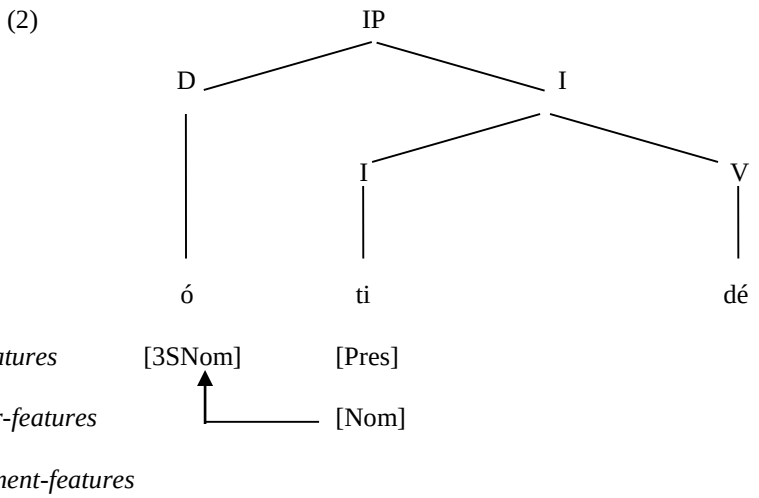
b. A ti dé
We have come
'We have arrived.'

c. Ó ti dé
he/she/it has come
'He/she/it has arrived.'

d. Wọ́n ti dé
They have come
'They have arrived.'

Number and person features are marked, case features are also marked. The auxiliary *ti* is invariable so it does not inflect for agreement at all neither does it require any type of participle form of the verb. The verb too is invariable. The diagram below indicates this.

(2)




## 3. Methodology

This study is based on the analysis of corpora collected through longitudinal methods from Damilare who 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 collection covered a period of fifteen (15) to thirty-six (36) months. The data were collected by the mother on a daily basis through audio recording and also written records. Damilare's data consist of questions, responses and utterances between him and the parents and other members of the family. They also include his utterances while playing alone. We could safely say that the exercise made it possible to know if at each point he has 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. The data were transcribed immediately after recording into a notebook. Thereafter, the data were typed and stored in the computer for further analysis.

All the utterances were coded for their lexical composition. We took into consideration the bottom-up fashion of building up structure by children. There

are very many instances where nouns function differently; we however rely on the primary description of nouns to make the classification. For example, there are situations when a child uses a noun but with a verbal reference; there are also structures where there are only nouns without verbs making up an utterance. The various pronouns found in different positions attested in the language are also coded.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

In the first stage, the Yoruba child assumes that all nouns in the language are singular. This means that all the lexical NPs acquired by the child at that stage are bare. The overt NPs that the child acquires at the early stage are names of people close to him, names of objects, things and food around him. O'Grady and Wan Cho (2004) claim that children choose the most informative word that applies to the situation at hand. The following are some of such NPs from Damilare at fifteen (15) months:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| (3) | màmá | 'mummy' |
| | omi | 'water' |
| | kẹ̀kẹ́ | 'bicycle' |

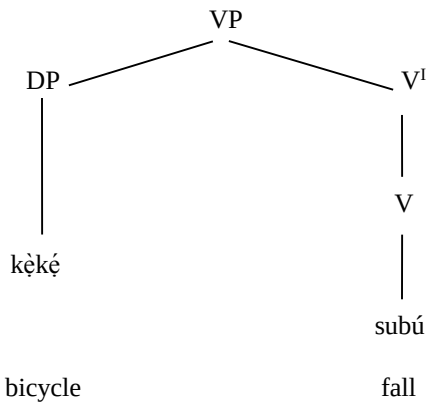
At the one-word stage, the only overt arguments present are bare nouns and these are only concrete objects as exemplified above. This means that at this stage, the child has not acquired any abstract concepts, he can only talk about things and people he can see or touch.

By the time the child moves to the two-word stage, he begins to merge words, to combine constituents. This stage marks the beginning of syntax. There are different combinations of overt bare noun arguments and verbs. The various constituents could be classified into different groups and so we begin to see the use of subjects, objects and to a lesser extent indirect objects. The following examples are taken from Damilare at eighteen (18) months.

| | **NP** | **VP** |
|---|---|---|
| (4) | a. màmá, | wẹ̀ |
| | mummy | bathe |
| | 'Mummy, I want to bathe.' | |
| | b. mọ́mì, | jẹ |
| | mummy | eat |
| | 'Mummy, I want to eat.' | |
| | c. màmá, | wá |
| | mummy | come |
| | 'Mummy, come. | |
| | d. kẹ̀kẹ́ | subú |
| | bicycle | fall |
| | 'My bicycle fell.' | |
| | e. mọ́mì | sùn |
| | mummy | sleep |
| | 'Mummy is sleeping.' | |

The examples above show the merger of bare nouns at subject position with verbs. These NPs occupy the subject position; however, they are not all subjects. Subjects in Yoruba occupy spec-TP and have nominative case. Following the VP-Internal Subject Hypothesis, the subject originates at spec-VP and then moves to spec-TP to have its Case checked. Only the bare nouns in (4d) and (4e) above are supposed to carry the nominative case. Nominative case is meant for NPs at the subject position and this is checked by TENSE. Example (4d) above is phrase marked in (5).

(5)




bicycle fall

'My bicycle fell.'

But this does not seem to be the case. It is claimed that early child nominals lack structural case (Radford 1991). It is assumed that a nominal expression is required to carry case only when it is the subject of a *feature*-complete T and not when it is the subject of a *feature*-defective clause (Radford 1991). We find that two factors support this claim in Yoruba. The first is the claim that children's early language only projects to VP. This means that the subject resides in Spec-VP and does not move to Spec-TP where the nominative case is checked as indicated in the diagram above. The other factor is that the children at this stage only use bare nouns. Their utterances lack personal pronouns especially in the subject position. In the object position, the only personal pronoun used is the third person singular and with the way it is used, there is no sign that children have acquired case.

All the other examples in (4) except for (4d & 4e) are vocatives, i.e. bare nouns that are used for calling. The child only calls in order to get the attention of the person he is talking to. The bare nominals, *mọ́mì* and *màmá* 'mummy' are vocatives which cannot be substituted by case marked singular personal pronouns like *ó* 'she'. This would be possible if they were nominatives rather than vocatives. If we try to substitute these bare nouns, they will give us the following sentences which do not have the same meaning as intended by the child.

(6) a. *ó wẹ̀
3SG bathe
'She had her bath.'

b. *ó, jẹ
3SG eat
'She ate.'

The sentence in (4c) and repeated below in (7) is imperative.

(7) màmá wá
mummy come
'Mummy, come.

Imperative sentences do not always take subjects except in some cases as this. Only vocatives and the second person plural pronominal can occur in the subject position of an imperative sentence in Yoruba.

At the two-word stage, bare nouns also appear at the object position in the utterances of the child. At this time, the subject is missing. The object position is a subcategorized position, a complement position of the verb. The structure is simply a verb phrase. Consider the following examples at eighteen months:

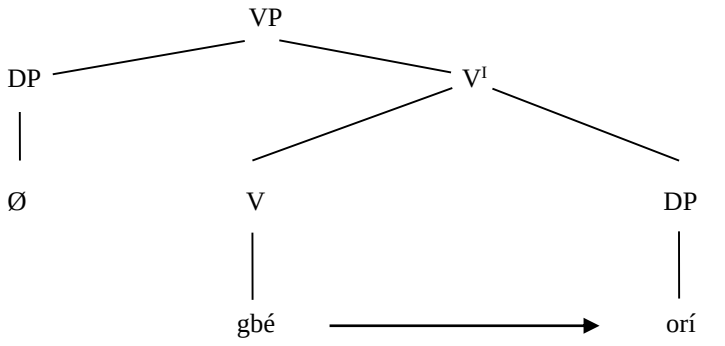
(8) a. gbe orí
remove head
'remove your head'

b. jẹ isu
eat yam
'I want to eat yam.'

c. yọ ọ́
remove it
'remove it.'

The bare nouns are the complement of the verbs and they are combined via the process of merger. The diagram below shows the merging of the verb with the object.

(9)




'carry your head'

The object is bare because there is no form of referent whatsoever. However, the object *orí* 'head' is assigned a thematic role by the verb *gbé* 'carry' as role assignment is done in a position of merger. The Case is also checked by the verb. We also assume that utterances of the Yoruba children lack Nominative Case and not Accusative Case as the objects occupy their logical position. Let us examine the following examples from Babatunde and Arokoyo (2012, p265)

(10) a. tẹ́ ẹ́
touch it
'I touched it.'

b. mummy, nà á
mummy beat her
'Mummy, beat her.'

The reason for this is that there is a more intrinsic relation between the verb and its object than the subject and the verb.

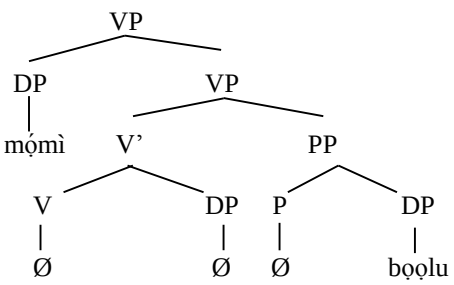
Another structure found in the utterances of the child at the two-word stage is the collocation of bare nouns. This is a situation whereby only nouns are combined to make an utterance in the child's speech. Consider these examples in (11).

(11) a. mọ̀mì bọ́ọlu 18 months
mummy ball
'Mummy gave me the ball.

b. Bàbá mọ̀tò 21 months
Daddy car
'Daddy has gone to the car.'

All the nouns that he used here are bare nouns. We believe that he assumes at this stage that the verb is given information and so does not need to be mentioned. Given information is information that is assumed to be shared by the speaker and the listener and does not need to be repeated. He makes use of arguments without the predicate. These utterances vary in their structure and meaning. For example, (11a) above has the argument structure of a three-place predicate with two arguments, the subject and the indirect object, as given in (12) below, with the adult equivalent following in (13).

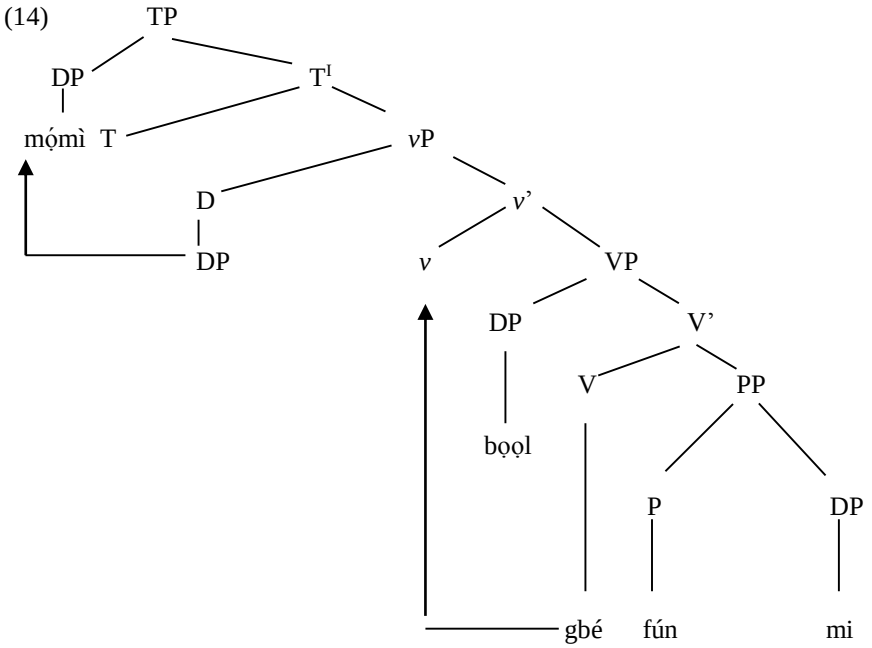
(12)




Mummy ball
'Mummy gave me my ball.'

(13) mọ́mì gbé bọọlu fún mi
Mummy gave ball to me
'Mummy gave my ball to me.'

(14)




Mummy ball give to me

'Mummy gave my ball to me.'

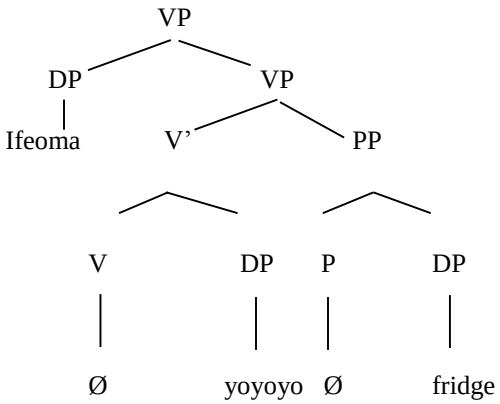
He does not seem to know any other referent apart from bare nouns at this stage. The use of bare nouns continues and we even found three-noun collocations in his speech.

(15) a. Ifeoma yoyoyo fridge 21 months
Ifeoma yoghurt fridge
'Ifeoma put the yoghurt in the fridge.'

b. Ifeoma fridge yoyoyo 21 months
Ifeoma fridge yoghurt
'Ifeoma put the yoghurt in the fridge.'

The three-bare noun collocation used by Damilare is quite interesting. The three bare nouns function as subject, object and indirect object of a three-place predicate. The examples above also show a rearrangement of the objects. The tree diagram below shows the structure of (15a).

(16)




These bare nouns are arguments of unrealized predicates marked as null in the diagram above. It should also be noted that these bare nouns are theta-marked. They have roles that they are playing in the sentences. *Ifeoma* is the AGENT; *yoyoyo* 'yoghourt' is the THEME while *fridge* is the assigned LOCATION. We believe that these predicates are covertly realized as the child takes them as *given* and does not need to be given overt spell-out.

The multi-word stage of the Yoruba child involves a lot of complexities and different structures. The first utterance in Damilare's data at the multi-word stage came at twenty (20) months with the following utterance:

(17) mọ́mì mu omi
Mummy, drink water
'Mummy, I want to drink water.'

This is followed in quick succession by other utterances. The noun at this stage is also still, to a large extent, bare and concrete. This means that there is no use of abstract nouns yet. This is illustrated below with other utterances from his transcripts, also at twenty (20) months.

(18) a. mọ́mì wọ asọ
mummy wear clothe
'Mummy, I want to wear my clothes.'

b. kóókì ti tán
coke has finish
'Coke has finished.'

We assume that the bare nouns that are used by the child are bare nouns that are interpreted as generic or existential. These bare nouns do not need any context for their interpretation (Ajiboye 2007, p. 151). For example, *mọ́mì*, 'mummy' and *kóókì* are generic or existential nouns. The child makes use of bare nouns whose interpretation are contextually determined and thereby interpreted as definite. For example:

(19) a. jẹ ẹran
eat meat
'ate meat.'

b. mọ́mì wọ asọ
mummy wear clothe
'Mummy, I want to wear my clothes.'

*Eran* 'meat' and *asọ* 'clothe' are bare nouns whose contexts make them to be interpreted as definite.

We assume that Yoruba children use bare nouns because they are yet to acquire the necessary agreement features. For example, Damilare used names and other nouns for self-reference and addressee reference rather than using pronouns. This is illustrated below.

(20) a. Dámiláre subú síà 25 months
Damilare fall chair
'Damilare fell from the chair.'

b. Inú dun Dámiláre 26 months
stomach pain Damilare
'Damilare is suffering from stomach ache.'

We can see from the foregoing examples that the child uses his name rather than the first person pronoun that is more appropriate in those situations. The child uses bare nouns like general nouns; he uses them in positions where definite nouns or non-bare nouns would have been used. However, soon after, other nominal expressions begin to appear in his utterances. With time, Yoruba-speaking children begin to use different nouns in different argument positions with qualifiers. This means that the hitherto bare nouns that were given no distinction begin to be specified.

## 5. Conclusion

In the acquisition of nominal expression, Yoruba children begin by using bare nouns which form the basis of all noun acquisition in all positions and then develop to have a good mastery of Yoruba nominal expressions. The children use only bare nouns at the initial stage because they assume that all nouns are singular and they are yet to acquire the necessary agreement features. We conclude that they use bare nouns where other types of nouns should be used but with time other nominal expressions are developed and are used appropriately.

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