

In the Linguistic Paradise

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56. The Inverse Construction in Yorùbá*

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(CORRECTED PROOF)

Abstract

Báńgbósé 1995 has drawn attention to a productive ‘middle ground’ between theory and description in African linguistics. A potential example, which forms the basis of this paper, is the familiar paradigm of Case, Person, Number and Tense in Standard Yorùbá (section 2 *infra*). My argument is that the licensing of person agreement in pronominal clitics, subject and object, reflects the interaction of agreement and Case at a representational level which determines both pronunciation and interpretation. Such a level, which Rizzi & Savoia 1992 dub *phonosyntax*, is hypothetically excluded in Minimalist frameworks (Chomsky 1995). Thus, regarding inferences from data to theory, Yorùbá may be taken to support Rizzi’s non-Minimalist architecture of grammar (section 1.3), together with extensions of Hale and Keyser’s (1993) category framework which I believe to be incompatible with Minimalism (section 1.2). Equally crucial to my account, though more neutral between *phonosyntax* and Minimalism, is a large corpus of work in the phrase structure of closed-class elements, a.k.a. functional categories (section 1.1). As for theory-to-data inferences, which are also indispensable to Báńgbósé’s middle ground, there are far more questions than answers for now, but I hope to have reduced the set of problems which Yorùbá inflection poses to learnability. At a sociological level, this paper has the goal of reducing the alienation between phonological and syntactic communities, as well as between AAA linguists (African Africanists in Africa) and theoreticians.

1. Theoretical context

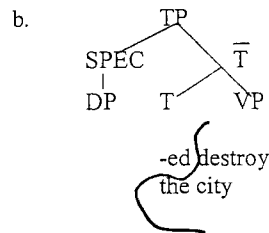
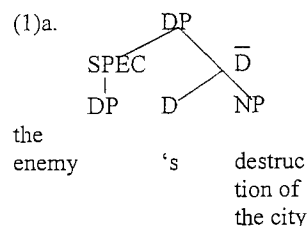
Analogous changes have appeared in phonology and syntax since the first major syntheses of generative, rule-based work in the two areas (SPE = Chomsky and Hale 1968, LGB = Chomsky 1981). In both cases, derivational complexity was swiftly traded in for enriched structural representations, in the form of autosegmentalism and functional categories respectively. In the past decade, despite growing professional distance between syntacticians and phonologists, economic pressure from the privatization of research and tertiary education sectors has driven both subfields into more computation-friendly frameworks guided by (appropriately-named) economy principles, yielding OT (optimality theory, associated with Paul Smolensky and Alan Prince in a burgeoning literature of the *email-samizdat*) and Minimalism. Along with this ongoing decampment into AI labs and cognitive science programs, however, have come a number of retreats from explanatory goals which classically defined the dialectical tension between theory and data. For example, the concept of underlying representation, which is inconvenient to implementation by massively parallel distributed processors, is fully dispensed with in OT and – at least ‘virtually’---in Minimalism, while the latter has shed a list of empirical domains such as morphology, head-movement (which had become the same thing by the late 1980’s) and relative clauses, to name the first few bags tossed over the side.

This paper asks whether the above parallelism is accidental, i.e. driven purely by sociological considerations, or whether the representational revolutions in the two fields

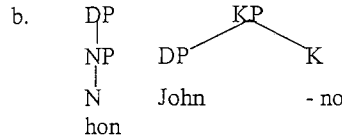
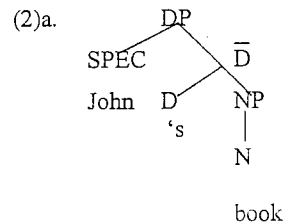
opened the beginnings of an alternative path which can be tested through the **igbo irúnmalè** of data. Consider some recent developments in syntax.

1.1 Phrase structure

The goal of LGB –following Edmonds 1976, Jackendoff 1977, Stowell 1981— to reduce phrase structure to the projection of grammatical categories required a fuller theory than the skeletal $\pm V, \pm N$ of Chomsky 1970. Fukui 1986 and Abney 1987 exploit the divide between open-class (lexical) and closed-class (functional) items. Abney develops insights of Lyons 1977 and Brame 1981, 1982 on similarities between articles and pronominal clitics, leading to the DP-hypothesis: English possessive NPs are both endocentric and clausal, directly expressing the homology between nominalizations and their sentential counterparts without violating lexicalist assumptions, cf. (1)

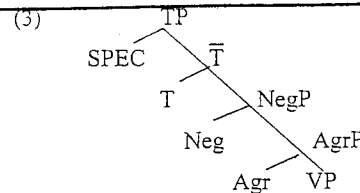


Fukui on his part married functional categories to parameters, holding that lexical categories (V,N,A,P.) are universal, but functional categories differ cross-linguistically in the ability to license specifiers, giving a principled difference between **John's book** and its Japanese counterpart **hon... John -no**, cf. (2)



Fukui also broached a **generalization** across the lexical/functional divide, to the effect that Case (assigned to a lexical complement) and agreement (assigned to a functional specifier) are manifestations of a single property Kase.

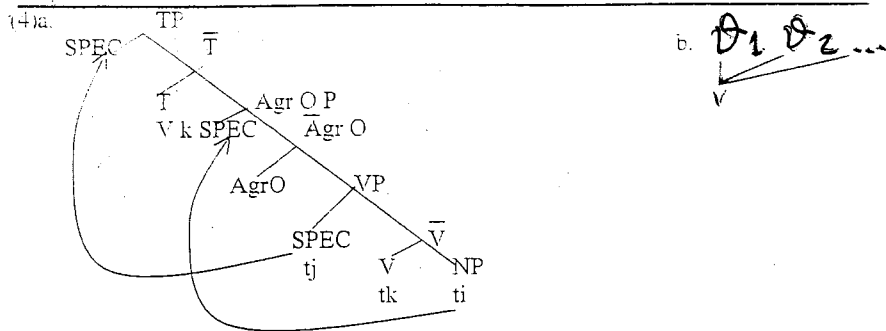
Work of this kind stimulated the search for more f-cats, preparing the way for Pollock's (1989) exploded-IP treatment of affix-hopping in English and French in terms of distinct maximal projections of Tense, Agreement and Negation, cf. (3)



In English, a lexical verb always follows negation in finite context (**do**-support), and adverbs precede a finite verb or follow the VP, but in French all finite verbs precede negation (**pas**) and adverbs, a lexical infinitive follows negation and precedes or follows adverbs, but a non-lexical infinitive also optionally precedes negation. This distribution follows in (3) if movement to finite Agr is abstract in English, whereas movement to finite Agr and T is concrete in French, crossing both the head of NegP and the presumed adjunction site of VP-adverbs. French lexical infinitives raise overtly and optionally, in this schema, to Agr, while infinitive auxes can raise overtly all the way to T. In this way, the intricate differences in linear order of verbs, Neg and adverbs in two languages can be expressed in terms of simple differences in overt movement, which in turn are reducible to 'strength' parameters: English finite Agr is weak, French nonfinite Agr is weak but finite T and Agr are strong. The price of this marked simplification is accepting that the left edge of the sentence contains more than one or two phrasal projections of closed-class items.

Such a price was driven down in the syntactic market of the late '80's and early '90's as newly-coined f-cats flooded in: ForceP, FiniteP, FocusP, TopicP, PredicateP, AssertionP, ModalityP, OuterAspectP, InnerAspectP, SubjectAgrP, ObjectAgrP, Indirect ObjectAgrP & c. With less proliferation, including DemonstrativeP, NumberP, DegreeP, and KaseP, the nominal extended projection looks underdeveloped by comparison. Another popular option was to let functional phrases iterate, suggesting to Elan Dresher (in his column in the newsletter GLOT) a comparison with so-called junk DNA, those apparently meaningless gene sequences which enfold informative genetic material.

Fukui's original idea was to restrict specifiers to a parametric subset of f-cats, but a countervailing drive to uniformity begot the VP-internal subject hypothesis, which has the subject of VP project in its SPEC, whence it raises to surface subject position (e.g. SPEC of IP). Commensurately, Case theory was uniformitized to apply only in the SPEC-head configuration (later, Chomsky's "checking domain"), wiping out Fukui's Kase theorem aforementioned. At a stroke, syntactic government lost a major **raison d'être** as the head-complement relationship became irrelevant to Case. The most pressing motivation for VP-internal subjects (4a) was the proper formulation of theta theory, representing the valency (argument structure) of a predicate as an ordered list of theta roles attached to a lexical head (4b).



Something forces the subject to project higher than the object within VP, so that this base asymmetry can be reproduced in the functional domain (i.e. above VP) via Case-driven movement. The standard solution was to posit a universal hierarchy of roles, plus a battery of (partly language-specific) linking rules to effect alternations like dative shift. Clearly, the drive to X-bar uniformity across the lexical/functional divide placed an ever-greater burden on theta-theory, and opened a new vista of A-movements from SPEC to SPEC. Paradoxically, however, this move made D-structure increasingly irrelevant, since it became an arbitrary way-station between lexical properties and functional superstructure. Before reviewing these implications, let me present an alternative.

1.2 Origins of argument structure

Stowell's project had been to derive D-structure from theta-roles. The embarrassment was that the list of such roles remained arbitrary, open-ended and resistant to clear ordering such as was indispensable to asymmetric projection. Turning the problem on its head, Hale & Keyser 1993 deny the primacy of theta-roles vis-à-vis syntax, in the view that it may be easier to catalogue them as surface interpretive labels. This leads them to reinvigorate Fukui's principled dichotomy between the X-bar properties of lexical and functional heads. Their category theory attributes lexical SPECs only to prepositions and adjectives, which are thereby (+predicate). A second lexical feature (+complement) picks out P and V. The resulting matrix is non-isomorphic to Chomsky's, cf (5a) vs. (5b).

(5a).

p	complement	
r	+	-
e		
d +	P	A
i		
c		
a -	V	N
t		
e		

b.

	verb	
	+	-
n +	A	N
o		
u		
n -	V	P

(Other recent proposals, of largely independent motivation, generate matrices which are homologous to Hale & Keyser's: Déchaine 1993, Wunderlich 1995.) The framework of (5a) entails that at least some subjects originate outside of the lexical domain, e.g. the causative agent (or instigatory) as well as the sole participant of unergatives like *laugh* and *sneeze*. Another difference concerns the status of P, which in (5b) is the most inert or propertyless category (cf. Edmonds 1985 for whom P is no lexical category at all), but which in (5a) has the **most** lexical properties. In place of theta-roles, H&K account for lexical meaning in terms of predicate decomposition, reviving part of the corpse of 1970's generative semantics but constraining it in a way uncountenanced by Ross & Co, e.g. by appeals to principles like Full Interpretation and the Head Movement Constraint. *Shelve* for example is the pronunciation of a lexical structure which can be paraphrased as cause to become on the shelf, with null lexical heads corresponding to causative, eventive and locative operators of a type-shifting predicate calculus such as Montague grammar. Unlike some lexical semantics mavens, however, such as Jackendoff, H&K insist that the core of lexical word meanings is narrowly syntactic, rather than broadly cognitive or conceptual. This point provides an opportunity (not sanctioned by H&K) to translate their proposal into an alternative grammatical architecture.

1.3 Streamlining the T-model

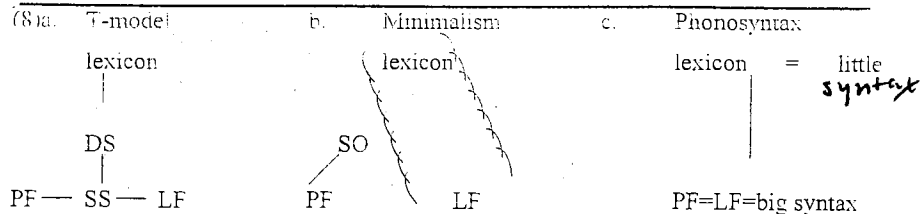
As with cars, so with grammars: it doesn't matter where the engine is, so long as the wheels turn. But also like automotive design, not every new model is different under the hood (bonnet). Continuing the logic of section 1.1, Minimalism denies the existence of properties which would motivate the derivational Levels of DS and SS (recall Halle's dismissal of the phoneme 40 years before). Linear order is a phonetic property determined without regard to scope (c-command), so that (6a) is synonymous to (6b), while by Adéwolé (1993), (7) is ambiguous. This move is computation-friendly, and was anticipated by GPSG; a counter-move by Kayne 1995 would reduce linear order to scope, since after all the two correlate unproblematically most of the time.

(6a). Kíni ó rí mbẹ?

b. Ó rí kíni mbẹ?

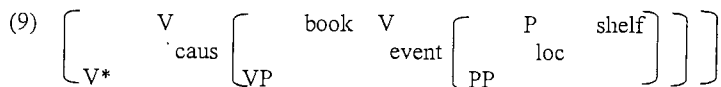
(7) Gbogbo wa kò dé

At stake is the flow-chart which succeeds to the T-model of LGB (8a). If the specifically syntactic levels (DS, SS) are to go, the result is a horizontal reduction as in (8b), where the derivational terrain shared by pronunciation and meaning ends at an arbitrary point Spellout (SO). But if the lexicon contains the syntax of lexical heads (informally, "little syntax") then the syntax of functional heads ("big syntax") defines a second, specifically syntactic, representational level. Embedding Hale and Keyser within Minimalism brings us back to (8a), whereas detaching it gives (8c).



The above maps are to be used with caution. Hornstein (1995) warns that the LF of LGB (defined by the application of QR) is not the Minimalist LF, which is more like a hybrid of the old LF and SS. The more reliable conclusion is that phonology and syntax have less in common in (8b) than in either of the others. Two corollaries of (8b): morphology is a species of phonology (Halle & Marantz 1993), and there is no room for a specifically syntactic principle such as government. Indeed, as Hornstein recounts, a prime motivation for Minimalism was recalcitrant arbitrariness in the definition of the Empty category principle (the Holy Grail of the '80's).

As to (8c), I label it phonosyntax because it leaves open the possibility that the more superficial syntactic level directly feeds both pronunciation and interpretation. For Hale & Keyser, the only requirement is that Spellout follow little syntax, i.e. after the noun shelf has conflated with the causative operator to become *shelve*:



The further claim, that phonological and syntactic licensing are interwoven, rebuts a very productive research tradition which assumes that the relationship is indirect (Nespor & Vogel 1986). Rizzi & Savoia 1992 tie the distribution of [u] in Italian dialects to the relation of syntactic government, and not to some mediating prosodic categories. More radically, an influential non mainstream tradition (practiced mainly in Montréal, Leiden, London & Vienna) holds that phonological representations are not merely influenced by syntactic government, but that they are themselves constituted by government relations among phonological elements. Vigorously contested by Halle, this doctrine that "phonology is not different" also underpins (8c).

Summarizing, while 1970's generativists were much exercised over the status of *inaudibilia* (traces and other phonetically empty items), in the '90's it is audibility (SO) that carries the largest conceptual burden. Where deletion rules once ruled, now it is the era of defaults, resumptives and other last resorts. These at least are among the theoretical concerns which orient the following discussion. From this perspective, the best outcome would be if evidence from Kwa languages can be brought to bear on the choice between (8b), (8c) and other modularization of the language faculty.

2. Descriptive Issues

Consider the pattern in (10) - (13) below. With a bare verb root (10) or a verb-like aux (11), a non plural first person subject is pronounced *mo*, but this is not possible with other auxes as in (12) and (13). In the latter instances, the same subject

specification spells out as *mi* or its ordinary reduced variant (*u*)*n* -- a presumptive accusative which is correspondingly impossible in the former context. Correlated with this split in 1s is the absence/presence of *pro*-drop in 3s, as well as the presence/absence of tonal subject agreement (H) in 3p. The second singular, by contrast, is uniform across this inflectional divide. The asymmetry is explicitly stated in (14).

- (10) Mo lọ. * Mi lọ. O lọ. Ó lọ. Wọ̀n lọ.
1s go I go 2s go 3s. AGR go 3p. AGR go
'I went' 'You went' 'S/he went' 'They went'
- (11) Mo máa lọ. * Mi máa lọ. O máa lọ. Ó máa lọ. Wọ̀n máa lọ.
1s FUT go 1s FUT go 2s FUT go 3s. AGR FUT go 3p. AGR FUT go
'I'll go' 'You'll go' 'S/he'll go' 'They'll go'
- (12) * Mo yóò lọ. Un/ń óò lọ. O óò lọ. Yóò lọ. Wọ̀n óò lọ.
1s FUT go 1s IS FUT go 2s FUT go pro FUT go 3p FUT go
'I'll go' 'You'll go' 'S/he'll go' 'They'll go'
- (13) * Mo kò lọ. Mi/ń (k) ò lọ. O (k) ò lọ. Kò lọ. Wọ̀n kò lọ.
1s NEG go 1s IS NEG go 2s NEG go pro NEG go 3p NEG go
'I didn't go' 'You didn't go' 'S/he didn't go' 'They didn't go'
'I won't go' 'You won't go' 'S/he won't go' 'They won't go'

- (14) a. Nominative 1s subject = overt 3s subject = 3p tonal subject agreement
b. Accusative 1s subject = 3s subject *pro*-drop = no 3p tonal subject agreement.

The empirical status of this pattern can be approached from several angles.

2.1 Synchronic generality

According to Oyèlárán 1982/92, the contrast between *máa* and *yóò/kò* exemplifies a more systematic bifurcation among standard Yorùbá auxes, on the basis of which Déchaine (1992, 1993) proposed a structural distinction. One set (15a) is apparently compatible with material in T⁰ (the head of TP), assuming that this is the location of subject tonal agreement (traditionally called HTS), while a second set (15b) would by this reasoning occupy T⁰. A third type (15c) excludes all clitic subjects, for reasons yet obscure.

- (15)a. future *máa* (?<mi-á)
progressive *n*
perfective *ti*
modals: potential *lè*
obligatory *gbọ̀dò*
- b. future *yóò, (á)*
negative *kò*
'never' *kíí*
conditional *ì bá*
- c. habitual *a máa*

Here, it would be well to verify that the triple correlation in (14) extends to all items in (15a-b) consistently. In addition, Oyèlárán points out some likely areas of underanalysis in the identity of the items themselves. For example, while (15a) seems like a heterogeneous collection, (15b) are all semantically irrealis, a property which may be mirrored in the presence throughout of an item *i* or *ò*. Along the same lines, the gloss of 'future' for three of the items calls for greater semantic precision e.g. regarding modal force. (Section 3 below is the proper place to expand on the analysis in terms of default material in T°.)

Another descriptive area of relevance concerns the relationship between clitic and nonclitic (lexical) pronominals. The standard analysis of the latter (Bámgbóṣé 1966) treats them as nouns, but all are not equally distinct from their clitic counterparts. The 1p *àwá* and 2p *èyìn* are somehow fully decomposable into the respective subject and object clitics, while this putative property fails for the other persons and numbers. This may justify the suspicion, based *inter alia* on the situation in Igbo (Émènanjò 1978) where 1p and 2p are gaps in the clitic paradigm, that these items are 'heavier' in feature content than the rest: if, following Benveniste, third person is unspecified, i.e. unmarked, and ascribing the same status to singular, then 1p and 2p are the only items with full or double feature content (one person feature, one number feature). 1s, 2s and 3p have one feature each, while 3s has none at all. (Again see section 3.)

2.2 Diachronic generality

Learnability does not profit from evidence which is not part of the child's linguistic environment, but there are still reasons to consider dialect evidence in the matter at hand. First, the literature on standard Yorùbá is not consistent as to at least one of the correlated properties, namely the appearance of HTS before certain auxes (notably future *á*). This may reflect real variation, or the fact that the phenomenon is relatively subtle indeed lacking in some contexts e.g. after a lexical subject with final H, or indeed it may show that the standard language itself is somewhat abstract for speakers of various origins, so that it is not a proper object for analysis based on learnability considerations (i.e. a mental grammar). Similar variation can be observed in the case form of 1s with some items in (15a) e.g. the Èkò form *Mí n bọ*. Dechaine cites Fresco's observation (1970, 66) that HTS occurs with 1s and 2s subject clitics in *Òghò* ("Òwọ̀") and *Òbà*, and one wonders if this is just in context (15a) or in both sets. She further notes Oyèlárán's (1980/91) description of *Òwọ̀rọ̀* in Ookun (or northeast) Yorùbá as apparently lacking any contrast between items analogous to (15a) and altogether. Taken together, these issues suggest a type of argument referred to by Kiparsky (1968) as external evidence. In the specific instance, failure of auxes to be sensitive to subject agreement potentially falsify the structural proposal that HTS occupies T°, since the correction in standard Yorùbá would appear accidental. On the other hand, the same analysis would actually be more probable, if dialects where the correlation fails display independent differences in agreement phenomena (this is Déchaine's tentative response to *Òwọ̀rọ̀*). The more general point is that such argumentation requires much greater empirical coverage than currently available. Meanwhile, we are left with Awóbúlúyì's (1992) doctrine that dialect facts are essential heuristics for the analysis of synchronic problem where imagination fails.

3. Typological claims

- Three theoretical puzzles have been alluded to thus far, based on (10) – (13):
- (16) a. Why does accusative appear rather than nominative in (12) and (13) with a 1s subject?
 - b. Why does it appear only with the putative T° auxes?
 - c. Why does it appear only with a 1s clitic subject?

To begin with, the appearance of any accusative subjects at all in a language falsify the claim that it has a conventional, Latinesque nominative-accusative case system. Unlike Latin, Yorùbá lacks overt case forms of any kind with lexical arguments (as opposed to clitics), at least where structural case is concerned (genitive is audible before a consonant-initial noun). Thus, for the learner, evidence about the Case type of Yorùbá is sparse indeed, so its assignment to a type is not obvious. This circumstance should encourage us to be radical in approach.

Talking up (16c), a first observation is that not every pronominal clitic has distinct accusative form. If 3s is in essence epenthetic, then the phonetic difference between nominative and accusative should be derivable entirely from context; at least the phenomenon of 3s object contraction (*Mo ri* 'I saw 3s') encourages this view. As for 2s, the difference in vowel harmonic class between nominative *o* and accusative *o* may not be very strong, given that harmony has a syntactic dimension, and that one hears things like *Ò dáá* (e.g. in *Òyọ̀*). I have already speculated that 1p and 2p clitics are parasitic on their nonclitic counterparts, so case is not needed to account for the distinction. And there is no distinction in 3p to account for.

If we are prepared to go this far, then we are effectively claiming that any available accusative appears with a T° aux, which brings us to (16b). Why could it be the other way around, i.e. accusative appearing with set (15a) and nominative with (15b)? Now, we already accept that the T° auxes are the ones which block default agreement (HTS), so suppose that it is default agreement which assigns nominative to SPEC, TP, then the failure of subject agreement blocks the licensing of nominative. Then, the appearance of accusative is consistent with several scenarios. Perhaps a non-nominative subject simply inherits the case-domain of the verb. The same outcome would also follow if we rebaptize Yorùbá as an ergative-absolutive system, wherein absolutive is always the default. Some independent evidence along these lines includes the generalization of *mi* subjects after the *kí* complementizer (Awóbúlúyì, p.c). A more conventional view of the latter effect would be to say that imperative Comp itself assigns accusative analogous to English *for*, but it is also true that imperative complements are nonfinite, mimicking the effect of a T° aux. This begins to answer (16a) or its reformulation in ergative-absolutive terms.

A residual mystery is why everything boils down to 1s as opposed to 2s in particular. Here I have no answer, but some consolation in that Yorùbá is not alone. Algonkian languages like Cree are famous for the inverse construction, where a 1 subject with a 2 object, or a 3 subject with either a 1 or 2 object, is morphologically marked (apologies if I am misrepresenting the facts). This reduces to a person hierarchy of 2>1>3. We have seen that Yorùbá 3s acts like a zero, and 2s is opposingly robust or uniform in its phonosyntax across all tense configurations. The sensitivity of 1s to the content of T° is less dramatic than that of 3s, but important in a different way because it opens the only morphological window into structural case in the language.

nominative

and (15b)

Notes

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