

The Syntax of Yorùbá Proverbs

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Abstract

Yorùbá people relish in interspersing their utterances with proverbs. Hardly can a typical Yorùbá man or woman utter three sentences without putting in a proverb. Hence, Yorùbá say: *‘Òwèl’ in’ r’ ,’ r’ l’ in’ òwè, b’ r’ ba’ s’ nu’ , o’wè la fi n’ wa’* translated to mean that ‘proverb is the vehicle through which issues are resolved. However, Yoruba proverbs are not just strung together haphazardly; they follow some particular syntactic rules of the grammar of the language. These syntactic rules give some aesthetic values to proverbs usage in the language. This paper is set to discuss the various syntactic forms that many of the Yorùbá proverbs manifest. We also look at the implication of the syntactic rules upon which these proverbs are hinged and how these rules are applied to structures to conform to the wellformedness condition of Yoruba grammatical sentences

Index terms— proverbs, yorùbá people, wellformedness condition, strong pillar.

Proverbs are the sayings that are very common in languages. All peoples of the world have a repertoire of proverbs in their languages. Cultures, norms and traditions of any people are preserved in their proverbs. Proverbs are regarded as the sayings of the wise. It is the wise that say proverbs and it is also the wise that understand it. Yoruba people relish in proverb sayings and they say it a lot. It is believed that it is the elders that have the monopoly of saying proverbs in the Yoruba culture because the elders are believed to be wise; hence the saying that *‘nuagba’ lobi’ ti n’ gbo*. In literal terms this means that it is the elders that can tell whether a *kolanut* is ripe or not. In its figurative notion, it means that the elders are the custodians of wisdom. We need to say though, that it is not that the young ones also do not give proverbs in Yoruba culture, a young person can give proverbs among his/her peer group. However, if a young person will have to say a proverb before the elders, he must know the language to use before saying the proverb. In other words, he must pay homage to the elders. Some of the words for paying homage include *toto’ o’ ?e bi’ o’e; ki’ o’ej’ ? tia’ nagba; a’ nagba’ b’ ? w’ ns’ pe...* Such sayings are made as a way of acknowledging the ancestors and the elders and crediting them with such proverbs (cf. *Obidun 2000*). The words of this homage may be said either at the beginning before saying the proverb or at the end after the proverb has been said. Every setting in Yoruba has a proverb attached to it. This is why it is said that *‘O’el’ in’ ?r’ ? , ? ?r’ ? l’ in’ o’e; b’ ?r’ ? ba’ s’ nu’ , o’e la fi n’ wa*. This is translated to mean that ‘proverb is the vehicle of words, if words get lost; it is the proverb that is used to search for them.’ All this goes to show that the Yoruba people are fond of and they relish in saying proverbs.

Proverbs, as we pointed out gives aesthetics value to speech. *Shipu (2013:11)* notes this fact when by saying that “Of the proverbs in many African societies we are told that they are consciously used not only to make effective points but also embellish their speeches in a way admired and appreciated by their audiences. It is part of the art of an accomplished orator to adorn his rhetoric with apt and appealing proverbs. Proverbs are also used to add colour to everyday conversation. Proverbs are essential to life and language: ‘without them, the language would be but a skeleton without flesh, a body without soul.’ For every situation, Yoruba have a proverb that is appropriate for that situation. Proverbs are used to warn, instruct, direct, rebuke, praise, command, etc. However, proverbs are not just said in a haphazard manner, there are grammatical rules that the structure of proverbs follows. That is, in terms of sentence structure, there are various types of Yoruba proverbs structurally. In terms of structure, proverbs can be in the form of simple, complex or compound sentences. Not

only this, Yoruba? proverbs can also be pragmatic in nature. Except somebody knows the background of a particular matter, he may not be able to understand what the speaker meant by the proverb he uses.

In addition, every Yoruba? proverb has its sociolinguistic implication. This is to say that every proverb has a relevance to the social togetherness of the people. Every situation calls for a proverb that is appropriate to it. However, the focus of this paper is on the syntactic analysis of Yoruba? proverbs. The paper is divided into five sections. Section one deals with the introduction. Section two discusses the theoretical framework used for this study. Section three looks at the various syntactic formations of some of the selected Yoruba? proverbs. We look at the implications of the syntax of proverbs in section four; while section five concludes the discussion.

in its earlier version as the Government and Binding (GB) Theory. As proposed by Chomsky (1981) Chomsky (, 1982 ??homsky (, 1986)), GB as a theory is composed of some other subtheories. One of these sub-theories brought to GB from the earlier modifications of Transformational Grammar of Chomsky (1957) Chomsky (, 1965)) is the X-bar Syntax. X' Syntax which was first introduced by Chomsky (1970) and made popular and expanded by Jackendoff (1977) seeks to capture the similarities between different categories of phrases by assigning the same structural analysis to them. One important innovation brought into the grammatical analysis through X' Syntax is the binary branching.

Binary branching replaces and is an improvement over the earlier ternary branching of grammatical analysis. The information carried by X-bar theory is schematised in the configuration labelled (1) below.¹ X?? = XP Spec X? X? Adjunct X Complement

This sub-theory is relevant to this work, hence our adoption of the sub-theory of GB for the analysis of sentences in this work.

The Yoruba? proverbs follow a pattern that is unique in terms of grammatical and syntactic ordering. There seems to be no Yoruba? proverbs that are of simple sentence in its structure. If there are, such are not presented in this work. Virtually all proverbs in the Yoruba? language are of complex sentence. In fact, hardly can there be a Yoruba? proverb that has less than two verbs. This does not mean that Yoruba? proverbs are of Serial Verb Construction in nature, they are not. But they are of different structural grammatical types. Many of the Yoruba? proverbs are of the following structures: negation, interrogation, focusing, topicalisation, subjunctive, etc. We shall discuss the structure of each of these Yoruba? proverbs. For some, we shall draw a representative structural tree where they become relevant.

1 a) The structure of Yoruba? proverbs

As we have said, Yoruba? proverbs in virtually all cases do not exhibit simple sentence structure. They are always of the complex sentence structure. The complex structural nature of Yoruba? proverbs is what makes them to be in negative, interrogative, relative, focus and subjunctive forms. We shall take each of these sentence structures as are found in the Yoruba proverbs one after the other for proper analysis.

2 b) Negative structure type

The following proverbs The early rising sun appears as if it will not generate heat.

3 h) Ap? ?nle? ko? si? f? ?bati? o? lo?ori?

There is not honour for a king that does not have a queen. i) Aà?? ? l?ja, ko? ?e e? du?o? wo? Morning shows the day; do not stand akimbo. j) Gbogboohuntoju? ba?i? k? ? l?nu n? s?.

Not all that the eyes witness that the mouth utters.

The proverbs in (2, a -j) above are all of negative structure form. The negative markers in the proverbs are in various positions within the structure and of different forms. Some are placed at sentence initial position, some at the sentence medial, and some have more than one negative marker within them. The morphological forms of the negative markers are also different. This is based on the fact that Yoruba? language has various types of negative markers. While some are clearko, 'not' some are of the form ki? i, 'never' or not used to.' In some case, the consonant /k/ in ko observed that ki? i? occurs in the environment where a particular action or incident may not happen ordinarily happen; while ko? occurs only in an environment where a particular element is being negated. Another issue relating to these types of structures in Yoruba? proverbs is that the negative markers can occur more than once. When it is like this, it is used only to make emphasises and to press home the information the proverb user is trying to put to the fore. The structural configuration of the proverbs is given in (3).

4 IP

5 Spec I' I NEGP k) Interrogative structure type proverbs

In this type of proverbs, various types of interrogative markers are used to turn the supposed positive statement to an interrogative one. In Yoruba? language, there are different types of interrogative markers.

Each marker is used for a specific interrogative sentence. Sonaiya (1988) gives the type of interrogative markers in Yoruba as listed in (4). Such items are used as interrogative markers in some of the proverbs in Yoruba? language.

i. The one who scoop water from the water pot says he saw a masquerade, how about the person that went to the river to fetch the water? These and very many others are the interrogative proverbs in Yoruba.

Virtually all the interrogative markers that are there in the Yoruba? language are made use of in Yoruba? interrogative proverbs. But not all of those listed in (4) above are used here. It needs to be said that the interrogative markers in Yoruba? are very sensitive to humanness and animateness this informs the reason why ta'who' and ki? 'what' are seen to be used. Ta 'who' is selected when the questioned entity has the feature [+human] while ki? 'what' is used when the questioned entity has the feature ??±animate].

Certain things are to be noticed and explained in the interrogative proverbs we presented in examples (5a -o) above and many of them that are not presented. The interrogative markers can be at the initial, medial or final positions. For instance, (5e, f, g, h) above have their interrogative markers at the initial position. When the interrogative markers are placed at the initial position, it is the whole structure that is being questioned. In such instances, only one NP actor/agent is always made conspicuous in such a question.

However, when the interrogative marker is at the medial position, it is the concept within the proverb that is being questioned. For example, in (5i), it is the issue of gathering together that is the focus of the question. In (5j) the issue focused for questioning is the act of singing. In (5k) it is the time or period that is the focus of the interrogation. It is also pertinent to note that in interrogative proverbs, the information being sought can relate to human or non-human, location, quantity, quality, when, manner etc.

The examples in (5k, l, m, n) above are instances of proverbs where n?? ? 'how' is used. As we said earlier, the marker always comes at the end of the sentence. There are two markers of this type that are assumed to be syntactically and semantically the same; and that is da? 'how/where' 3 Questions are asked to clear doubt and to seek for clarification. That is why questions are answered when asked. But interrogative proverbs can in most cases not be answered. In fact, the one who says such proverb does not expect to receive an answer. Such questions are rhetorical. Olu?uýi?a? (2012) rightly notes this fact when he says that "the content word questions demand phrasal or clausal answers. However, this is not so with Yorùbá interrogative proverbs.

Thus, the question in each Yorùbá interrogative proverbs has important rhetorical dimensions. The question is asked for a purpose other than to obtain information." However, as valid as Olumuyiwa's assertion is, we want to posit that interrogative proverbs go beyond mere rhetorical. Such proverbs show that the world itself is full of mysteries and that questions that are begging for answers abound in the world. This is the import these types of proverbs are trying to bring to the fore. Hence the proverb "Aye? lokun, e?i?a?l? ?sa, ? ?da? ti? Olu?aba? la? lo? le? kaýe? ja?eaning "the world is an ocean it is only those guided by the Lord that can swim across to the shore." aptly confirms the mysteries that are in the world. The configurational tree below captures the structure of interrogative proverbs. IP Spec I'

6 I CP o) Focus construction structure type proverbs

Apart from the foregoing syntactic devices that we have noted and have discussed so far, there are still some other syntactic devices employed in Yoruba? proverbs. Focus construction is another device noticed in Yoruba? proverbs. ??ones (2006:143) defines focus as "a grammatical means of marking the organisation of information in discourse." She goes further to say that focusing "divides sentences into a focus and an open proposition corresponding to background information." Another phenomenon that looks like focusing is topicalisation. Focusing and topicalisation are two grammatical phenomena that are similar. They are similar in that the two involve movement. However, while focusing is a syntactic device that foregrounds new information or the new material that contains such information in a sentence, topicalisation foregrounds old information (cf. ??yelasan 1990:2). The examples below are proverbs that have the structure related to focusing. a) Ile? ni a? n? wo? ki? a? to? s?m?lo?u??.

The circumstances dictate what name a child will bear b) Fila? niobirin, ?ni to? ba? w? ? lo?i? niyoó? de. Women are like caps, it is he that it fits that wears it. c) Gbogboe?i?a?niAde?umi? n? wu, ?l? ?run?baniif? s?nini? Ad? ?y?mi? Everybody loves to wear a crown but it is only God that crowns a person. I?? ? ni a? n? ?eki? a? to? jareo?i? We work in order to avert poverty.

In these examples, the focused NP is moved from a particular position in the sentence to the initial position. The reason for this movement is to show the item in the utterance. Therefore, he focused that item for emphasis. In doing this, he will be able to drive home his point to his audience. Not only this, his audience will be able to recognise the import of the item focused in the speech of the one saying the proverb.

7 e) Relative clause construction proverbs

In relative clause construction proverbs, like its focus construction counterpart, move-? rule is normally made use of.

These two types of constructions resemble each other in that it is the NP in the two constructions that are moved to Spec CP. But they are different in that while focus construction uses ni as the marker, relative construction uses ti? as its marker. The noun or clause relativised is normally moved from some point in the lower clause to the Spec CP of the matrix clause. The lower clause will then serve as a modifier for the noun or the clause that is moved. The proverbs in (8a -e) are examples of relative clause construction type proverbs. a)

161 Ijo? ti? o? ba? ka? nila?ani a? n? ?u? ??? ? jo? A dance that interests is danced with fisted hands. b) Ibiti?
162 w? ?nba? gbe? iy? ? si? ib? ? ni? i? s?mi? i? si.

163 Wherever salt is put, it melts there. c) Iku? ti? o? pa ?l? ?wu? ?tu, oùnniyoó? pa ?niti? o? jogun? ? ?wu?
164 ?tu.

165 The death that killed the wise is coming to kill the foolish. d) Kokoro? ti? n? jobi? inu? obi? lo? wa.

166 The insect that destroys kola nut resides in it. e) Kokoro? ti? n? j? ?f? ? jare? ?f? ?, i?? ?nlewe?o n?
167 da?am?.

168 The attraction of the vegetable calls for its destruction by insects. The proverbs listed in (8a -e) above, and
169 some like them, are relative clause construction type proverbs. Like the focus construction type ones, the NPs
170 at the initial positions of the sentences are moved from somewhere in the sentences. It means then that the
171 positions where the NPs are placed are the landing sites.

172 Like the focus construction counterpart of relativisation, the elements so moved are for emphases. A
173 kind of premium is placed on such item for proper identification. But unlike focus construction, the aspect
174 relativized cannot be meaningful except it derives its meaning from the totality of the sentence; whereas, in focus
175 construction, the element focused can be meaningful on its own. We will take one example from each of these
176 structural types of proverbs for proper understanding of this observation. a) Fila? niobirin, ?ni to? ba? w? ?
177 lo?i? niyoó? de. (7b)

178 Women are like caps, it is he that it fits that wears it.

179 b) Kokoro? ti? n? jobiinu? obi? lo? wa. (8e) The insect that destroys kola nut resides in it.

180 In the examples above, (9a) is a focus construction, while (9b) is a relative clause. It is observed that while the
181 bold part of (9a) is meaningful independent of the whole clause, the same thing cannot be said of (9b) where the
182 bold part does carry meaning on its own; it can only derive its meaning from the totality of the structure. This
183 buttresses the fact that focus constructions are IPs while relative clause constructions are NPs (cf. Awobuluyi
184 1978a, 1978b, Owolabi 1987 ?? 1989b).

185 8 c) Subjunctive clause construction type proverbs

186 Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines subjunctive as an event "relating to, or constituting a verb form or set of
187 verb forms that represents a denoted act or state not as fact but as contingent or possible or viewed emotionally
188 (as with doubt or desire)." In Yoruba, subjunctive clauses normally begin with bi.

189 This morpheme is the one consistently used in clauses of such type. The proverbs in (10a -d) below are all
190 subjunctive construction types. a) Bi? i?a? obata?la??? ?j? ?kiita?le?a?na? As long as there are lice on the
191 cloth, the finger nail will not cease have blood. b) Biébiti? oba?eku, a? f?yi?f? ?l? ?yi? If trap does not kill a
192 rat, it will release the palm kernel to the owner. c) Bi? ir? ?ba? l?lo?u??du??j? ?kanniotit? ? nba? a.

193 Lie may go for more than twenty years; it takes only a day for the truth to catch up with it.

194 9 d) Biá oku, i?e o? tan

195 When there is life, there is hope. Subjunctive clauses, in most cases, combine with negation to make a full
196 statement. The negative marker for this type of proverbs is normally ko? or the shortened form of it /o/. This
197 is why we see in (??0a, b, and d) that the final part of these proverbs have negative markers within them.
198 However, it is not all subjunctive clauses that have this attribute of negation marker, some do not (see 10c). But
199 we need to say that majority of the subjunctive clauses exhibit negative marker within their structures.

200 Subjunctive proverbs normally express what should be the norm, i.e. if x is like this, then the outcome will
201 be y. However, in some cases, the case may not be so straightforward. There can be another eventuality that
202 may not go by the norm. rule-governed. Just like any other utterance is rule based, so also are the Yoruba?
203 proverbs. Besides this, the Yoruba? proverbs are said in such syntactic manner so as to show the aesthetics of
204 language. There is no doubt that language is not beautiful if it is well used. Therefore, the various syntactic ways
205 by which proverbs in Yoruba? are rendered give a kind of stylistic device to them. If the proverbs are said in a
206 manner that does not follow the syntax of Yoruba? language, it will be difficult for the audience to attach any
207 meaning to such proverbs; because they (the proverbs) may bring out the intended meaning that the user expects
208 to manifest. This paper has revealed the fact that all the proverbs in Yoruba? are rule governed and that proverbs
209 are not just said, they have the structures which they follow. The proverb that the speaker intends to use will
210 dictate which syntactic structure the form will take when it is said. Based on this, we have therefore divided
211 some of the selected proverbs in the language to various structural types. The proverbs chosen for analysis are
212 just representatives of other proverbs that are in Yoruba? language. There are therefore no special criteria used
213 in selecting those proverbs we have used. We also noted in the paper that in the interrogative proverbs, there is
214 no one rendered within the structure where da is used as the interrogative marker. We want to posit that the
215 reason for this may not be unconnected with the fact that da? as a question marker is used to elicit information
216 on concrete rather than abstract things. It is also said in the paper that the various structures within which
217 Yoruba? proverbs are said bring out the aesthetics of the language. ¹

¹See Akanbi (2012) for his argument on the syntactic and semantic difference of these two markers.

[Note: Mercy does not depend on blood relation; those who are sent by God are the ones that do mercy onto man. e) Aj?j?ko? du?, bi? ?nikanko? ni? Partnership cannot be enjoyed if one lacks good fortune. f) Ko? du? mi, ko? du? mi, aya n b? ?p?l? ???m ?fa? I do no bother, I do not bother, the housewife continues emphasising the offence. g) A? s? ?s? ? y?ooru?, o? dabi? ?nipe? ko? ni? i? ta nila?a]

Figure 1:

n) A buomila?u? reé?u?, ?ni to? l?p? ?nlodo? n?? ??
Ta Ki? Ba?o (N)ibo Ni?ba?o Ki?ode? Me?oò/elo? Da? N?? ? All the markers in (4) are known as WH que
play with us, how about before he was born?
m) ?niseb?at? ? a ni? ki? ? ?biti? pa, ?nitiko? se? n?? ??
Somebody who cooked saltless soup is wished
dead how about the one that did not cook
anything?
?kunrin ? fi ?w?kantú?òkòtò, ó ? fi ?w?kejìt?ní.
Obìnrinníkòrítòunmúgb?; bí ó báf?rítí?
múgb??k??
A man is loosing his trousers with one hand and
preparing the bed with the other and the woman

Figure 2:

.1 Year 2015

The question to be asked on the various syntactic ways of forming proverbs in Yoruba?is 'what is the implication.' The implication is that the Yoruba?do not just utter proverbs, every proverb that is uttered is

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