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On the logical structure of the serial verbal construction in Yoruba

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Most accounts assume the coordinate basis of the two or more underlying sentences that make up what in surface structure is regarded as a serial verbal construction (Stewart 1963, Williamson 1963, Bamgbose 1974). The serial verbal construction (also referred to as "serial verbs", "verbal combinations", etc.) is quite common in the languages of West Africa. Examples of this kind of construction are:

- (1) Yoruba: Olu ti Femi ṣubu
Olu push Femi fall
(Olu pushed Femi down)
- (2) Ade nsun lẹ
Ade is sleeping go
(Ade is sleeping)
- (3) Nupe: Kuta la foma wa nyika
Kuta took net caught fish
(Kuta used a net to catch fish)
- (4) Twi: Ode sika ne maa me
he-take money that gave me
(he gave me the money)

According to most accounts, the serial verbal construction is made up of two sentences (S_1 and S_2) linked by AND in the deep structure. Thus, (1) would be analyzed as

(Olu ti Femi) AND (Femi ṣubu)
 S_1 + S_2

In his account on Yoruba, Bamgbose distinguishes between (1) and (2) as serial constructions. He describes (1) as a "linking type" serial verbal construction while (2) is a "modifying type". His argument is that (2) is not derived from

(Ade nsun) AND (Ade nlẹ)

because "the string of verbs cannot meaningfully be related to more than one underlying sentence". In this paper, I shall try to show that the coordinate approach (as presented by Bamgbose and others) fails to account for several factors, notably Causality, Reversability, Sequence, and Reference. I shall postulate a different logical structure which appears to explain these features

satisfactorily. Finally, I shall try to show that the division of the serial verbal construction in Yoruba into the "linking" and the "modifying" types is just an unnecessary complication of the grammar since (as I shall show) both types can be derived from the same logical structure.

Causality:

According to coordinate accounts, a logical structure like

(Olu ti Femi) AND (Femi subu)

could come out in surface structure in two forms:

- (5) Olu ti Femi, Femi si subu
 Olu push Femi, Femi and fall
 (Olu pushed Femi and Femi fell down)
- (6) Olu ti Femi subu
 (Olu pushed Femi down)

In (5), the predicate AND is realized as "si", whereas (6) results from the application of the conjunction reduction transformation on (5). One problem with this analysis is that (5) is not semantically equivalent to (6); there is therefore no justification for postulating the same logical structure

(S₁ AND S₂)

for both (5) and (6). The semantic difference between (5) and (6) is matched syntactically. If we apply T-relative to (5) and (6), we get (7) and (8) respectively:

- (7) * Femi ti Olu ti Femi si subu
 Femi WH- Olu push Femi and fall
- (8) Femi ti Olu ti subu
 Femi WH- Olu push fall
 (Femi whom Olu pushed down)

The ungrammaticality of (7) is explainable in terms of Ross' Coordinate Structure Constraint which blocks the movement by transformation of a conjunct in a coordinate structure. Whether this indicates that (5) but not (6) is a coordinate structure is not even important here. What is important is that the "intermediate" structure (5) from which the serial construction (1,6) is supposedly derived is not semantically equivalent to (6). It should therefore

- (14) o wa mi ti
 he find me fail
 (he looked for me in vain)
 (14a)*o ti mi wa

(15) and (16) are rare instances where reversability does not affect either grammaticality or meaning:

- (15) o lq kəhin gbogbo wa
 he go last all us
 (he went last)
 (15a) o kəhin gbogbo wa lq
 (he went last)
 (16) o soju wa jade
 he'before us go-out
 (he left in our presence)
 (16a) o jade nisoju wa
 (he left in our presence)

If we assume the logical structure to be S_1 AND S_2 without specifying the "meaning" of AND, we shall be missing an important generalization, and we shall not be able to predict when reversability is permissible.

Sequence:

There is usually a sequential relationship between the sentences in a serial verbal construction. Usually (but not always), the action described in S_1 logically precedes that described in S_2 . Thus, in (1), "ti" (push) logically precedes "subu" (fall). An adequate logical representation should indicate this fact. Again, the flaw in the coordinate approach lies in the non-specification of the nature of the conjunction. For example, (17) has at least three meanings, depending on the meaning assigned to the conjunction AND in the deep structure:

- (17) o njeun lq
 he is eating go
 DS 1: o njeun + o nlq
 he is eating he is going
 (he ate along the way)
 DS 2: o njeun + continuity
 (he continued to eat)
 DS 3: o njeun + o lq
 (he will eat before going)

Reference:

(1) Olu ti Femi subu
 is analyzed as Olu ti Femi + Femi subu. It is not

clear why "Femi", but not "Olu" is the subject NP of "şubu". Let us consider (18) which is ambiguous:

(18) Olu le Ade jade
Olu drive Ade go-out

meaning 1: Olu le Ade + Ade jade (Only Ade went out)

meaning 2: Olu le Ade + Olu jade + Ade jade (both of them went out)

We might claim that the subject NP of the second verb is assigned in accordance with the meaning intended; the only snag is that in coordinate formulations, the logical structures for meanings 1 and 2 (above) are identical. Let us consider (19):

(19) Olu gbe aga wa
Olu carry chair come
(Olu brought a chair)

This is analyzed as

Olu gbe aga + Olu wa
presumably because "aga" (chair) is marked (-animate) in the lexicon and cannot select "wa" (come). But consider (20) which does not contain any animate NP:

(20) Ategun gbe ewe wa
wind carry leaf come
(the wind brought leaves)

In this case, we cannot avoid structures like "ewe wa", or "ategun gbe ewe", or "ategun wa". Furthermore, (21a-c) are well-formed sequences in the language:

(21) a. Otutu mi ti lo
cold my has gone
(my cold is gone)
b. Ojo mbq
rain is coming
(it's going to rain)
c. Iji nja
storm is fighting
(a storm is raging)

Thus, there appears to be no regularity in the way the coordinate approach assigns NP's to surface verbs.

Proposed logical structure:

In the light of the above examples, it becomes necessary to seek a logical structure that would account for some or all of the facts mentioned here. The logical structure proposed here postulates that serial constructions contain embedded predications. The logical structure for (1) would be

(Cause) Olu, ((Subj) Femi)

There are several reasons why this logical structure is considered better than the coordinate type. For one

thing, it takes care of such features as causality, sequence, and reference. For example, the logical structure clearly shows "Olu" as the subject of "Cause", and "Femi" as the subject of "subu". Also, it explains the similarity in meaning of the following:

- (22) Olu ti Femi subu
Olu push Femi fall
- (23) Olu gbe Femi subu
Olu carry Femi fall
- (24) Olu je ki Femi subu
Olu let that Femi fall
- (25) Olu mu ki Femi subu
Olu hold that Femi fall
- (26) Olu fa Femi subu
Olu pull Femi fall

Since each sentence (from (22-26)) could be paraphrased as "Femi fell and this was caused by Olu", we may postulate CAUSE as a higher predicate which may be spelt out in different forms in the surface structure. It should be noted also that in (23),

Olu gbe Femi
is not a constituent, so it would be wrong to analyze it (23) as

Olu gbe Femi + Femi subu

Similarly, we analyze

- (19) Olu gbe aga wa
(Olu brought a chair)

as

(Cause) Olu, ((wa) aga)

- since the main point of the construction is not that "Olu took a chair" but that "the chair is here" and "Olu is the cause of that event". Let us consider (27) which is what is derived after the application of T-neg. on (19):

- (27) Olu o gbe aga wa
Olu neg. carry chair come
(Olu did not bring a chair)

In the coordinate approach, the deep structure of (27) would look like (28):

- (28) Olu o gbe aga + Olu wa
Olu neg. carry chair + Olu come

However, non-serialization of (28) yields (29) - an ungrammatical sequence:

- (29)* Olu o gbe aga, Olu si wa

Since serialization is optional, it means the deep structure postulated (in 28) is wrong. The proposed logical structure for (27) is as follows:

(NOT)((Cause) Olu,((wa) aga))
(i.e., it is not the case that Olu caused the chair to be here).

The so-called "modifying type" serial construction as exemplified below (2)

(2) Ade nsun lo

Ade is sleeping go
(Ade is sleeping)

is really not different in logical structure from all the others we have been considering; we only need to realize that "lo" in (2) has little or nothing to do with "going"; rather, it is a surface reflex of the aspectual predicate "Continuity" which is a higher predicate in the deep structure. Consider the following:

(30) O nsoro lo

he is speaking go
(he continued to speak)

(31)* O soro lo

he speak go

(32) O jeun lo

he eat go
(he ate before he left)

(33) O njeun lo

he is eating go
(he continued to eat)

It appears that wherever "lo" denotes continuity, the other verb must be marked for "progressiveness". Where "lo" is a true surface verb (32), this restriction does not apply. The proposed logical structure for (2) and other "modifying" serial constructions is as follows:

(Continuity)((sun) Ade)

The term "modifying serial construction" is therefore found to be not only unnecessary but utterly misleading.

Serialization appears to be a complex phenomenon (especially in surface structure) but it is quite possible that the complexity is in fact due to the lack of really deep studies of the phenomenon. What is urgently needed is a detailed analysis of the type of verbs that admit of serialization as well as the implications of that for word order. It could even be that there is a relationship between serialization and complexity in lexical rules - as pointed out in George (1976).

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