

# Interpreting Yorùbá Bare Nouns as Generic\*

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## 0. Introduction

There are two relevant facts about Yorùbá nouns that I discuss in this paper. First, they lack obligatory determiners (contra Bámgbóṣé 1967, 2001, Awóbùlúyì 1978)<sup>1</sup>, and so they can be bare. Second, these bare nouns (BNs)<sup>2</sup> can be interpreted in at least one of these three ways: generic, indefinite, or definite.

- (1) a. Mo fẹ̀ràn **ajá**. *generic*  
1sg. like dog  
'I like dogs.'
- b. Mo rí **ajá**. *indefinite*  
1sg. see dog  
'I saw a dog.'

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<sup>1</sup> However, Manfredi (1992) claims that Yorùbá morphemes usually glossed as determiners, and (mis)translated as English definite articles, are both syntactically and semantically more like demonstrative adverbs or deictic nouns.

- (i) a. ìwée Ayò (náà)  
book of at that very
- b. ìwée Ayò (yẹn)  
book of that.one
- c. ìwée Ayò (yíí)  
book of this.one (Manfredi 1992: 207)

In Ajíbóyè (2005), I give a full account of *náà* and *kan*, and I demonstrate that these elements are neither determiners nor adverbs.

<sup>2</sup> The bare nouns discussed in this paper focus mainly on count nouns partly because mass nouns are not clearly distinguished from count nouns.

- c. **Ajá** gbó mi. *definite* (in discourse context)  
 dog bark me  
 ‘The dog barked at me.’

This paper is concerned with the first interpretation. There are two broad generalizations about the availability of a generic construal of bare nouns in Yorùbá. First, a bare noun cannot be construed as generic when it occurs as the subject or object of an eventive verb or as the subject of a stative verb.

- (2) a. Ajá rí mi. *subject of eventive*  
 dog see me  
 ≠ ‘Dogs see me.’
- b. Mo rí ajá. *object of eventive*  
 1sg. see dog  
 ≠ ‘I see dogs.’
- c. Ajá fẹ̀ràn mi. *subject of stative*  
 dog like me  
 ≠ ‘Dogs like me.’

These are the same environments which obligatorily require the presence of the imperfective *máa-ní* to mark genericity. The second generalization is that a bare noun can be construed as generic when it occurs as the object of a stative verb (3a) or the subject of a stative verb, but only if the object is also a bare noun (3b).

- (3) a. Mo fẹ̀ràn ajá. *object of stative*  
 1sg. like dog  
 ‘I like dogs.’
- b. Ajá fẹ̀ràn egungun. *subject and object of stative*  
 dog like bone  
 ‘Dogs like bones.’

These are the same environments which optionally permit the presence of imperfective *máa-ní* to mark genericity.

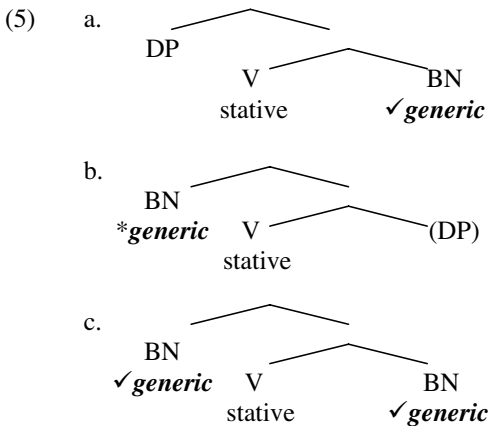
I demonstrate that generic construal of bare nouns in Yorùbá can be obtained in one of two ways: lexical conditioning (cf. Carslon and Pelletier 1995, Chierchia 1995) or grammatical conditioning (Déchaine 1993, Delfitto 2002, Longobardi 2000). I propose an operator-based analysis to account for the genericity of these bare nouns (cf. Chierchia 1995).

### 1. Lexically Conditioned Genericity

Lexically conditioned genericity is when the interpretation of a bare noun as generic is dependent on the predicate type. One characteristic feature of a lexically conditioned generic reading is that it does not require any special marking. As the examples in (3) and (4) show, genericity is encoded in stative verbs in Yorùbá.

- (4) a. Bòsẹ̀ kórira ológbò.  
 PN hate cat  
 ‘Bose hates cats.’
- b. Jẹnrólá bẹ̀rù ejò.  
 PN afraid snake  
 ‘Jenrola is afraid of snakes.’

The facts above are schematized in the structures in (5).

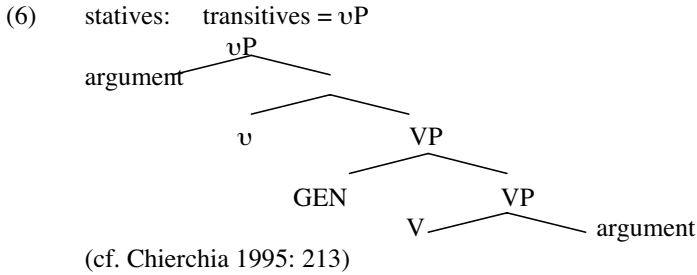


Several questions arise at this point:

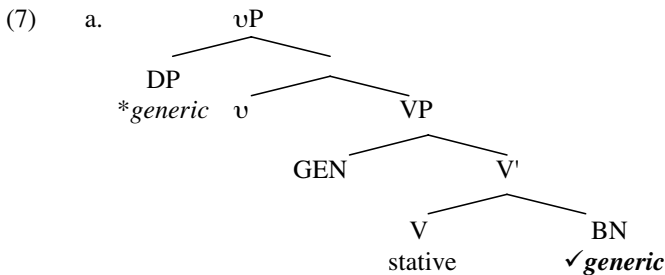
- ♦ Why is there a split between stative and eventive verbs?
- ♦ Why are BN objects of statives obligatorily construed as generic?
- ♦ Why do subject BNs need object BNs that are generic before they can be generic?

To answer the first question, following Chierchia (1995:219), I propose that stative verbs are inherently generic. However, as observed in Chierchia (1995:202), the idea that certain verbs “are somehow inherently generic cannot be straightforwardly implemented in strict lexicalist terms.” According to Chierchia, this is so because such verbs “cannot stand on their own and need to be operated

on by GEN” (1995:202). In light of this, I propose that stative verbs in Yorùbá require the presence of a generic operator (GEN) that binds any BN in its scope. I assume that this GEN is generated first in VP-adjoined position (Chierchia 1995: 213). It is this GEN that licenses bare nouns as generic, subject to certain other conditions that are discussed below. In pursuance of this proposal, I assume a vP-shell structure (6).



Thus, GEN is located in the lower part of the vP-shell, i.e. in Spec,VP. The fact that it is Spec,VP that hosts GEN explains why there is subject-object asymmetry in terms of how subject and object bare nouns can be interpreted as generic.



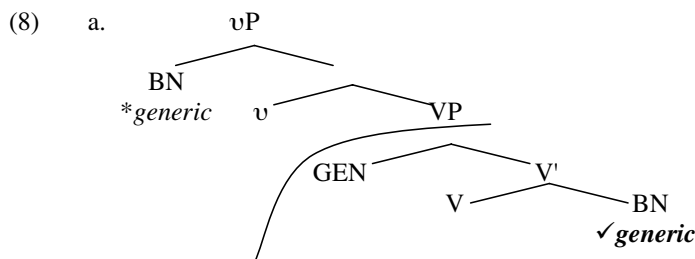
- b.    Mo fẹ̀ràn **ajá**.  
 ‘I like dogs.’

As shown in §1.1, despite the fact that both subject and object nouns are bare, the subject bare noun continues to be non-generic even with the presence of GEN. My claim as to why this is so is that the subject bare noun is not in a position where GEN can scope over it.

### 1.1.    Consequence 1: Subject-Object Asymmetry

This section accounts for why at LF (before covert movement of the generic operator takes place to a position where it can scope over the subject), even when both subject and object nouns are bare, only the object can be construed as

generic.



Given the structure in (8), it is assumed that GEN scopes over only the object bare nouns, since it is introduced within the VP and not outside. This then explains why only the object bare noun can be construed as generic in (7). I give a summary of my discussion up till this point in (9).

- (9) Absence of scope over subject of statives
- a. If bare N is OBJ, then GEN
  - b. If bare N is SUBJ, then \*GEN

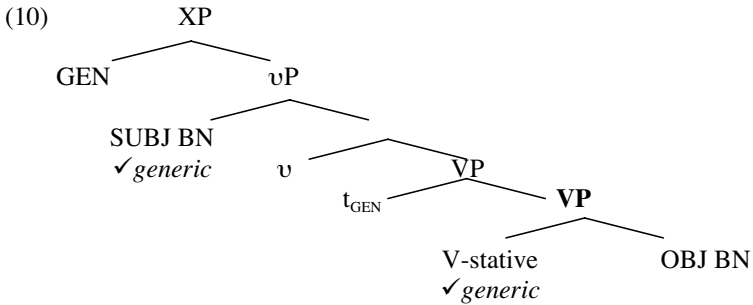
There still remains the issue of why the interpretation of subject bare nouns as generic has to rely on the type of nominal expression that occupies the object position.

## 1.2. Consequence 2: Object Dependency with Statives in Relation to Scope

What we have seen so far seems to suggest that the interpretations of bare noun subjects versus objects as being generic are independent of each other. However, we must also account for cases where both subject and object bare nouns are construed as generic, and particularly for the fact that the interpretation of bare noun subjects as generic is dependent on the interpretation of bare noun objects as generic. I propose that an account of this dependency can be carried out when we understand the scope relation between the generic operator and these bare nouns.

First I define the scope of an operator, along the lines of Szabolcsi (2000:607), as the domain within which it has the ability to affect the interpretation of other expressions.

I propose that the abstract lexical GEN operator undergoes Q-raising from Spec,VP to a position where it can scope over both the subject and the object BN, causing both bare nouns to be within the domain of the operator (cf. Diesing 1992, Szabolcsi 2000).



However, movement of GEN must satisfy one condition: the object must be bare. When the object is not bare, there is no genericity of subject bare nouns.

With this I conclude the discussion of genericity that is lexically conditioned and turn to grammatically conditioned genericity.

## 2. Grammatically Conditioned Genericity

This section looks at the occurrence of bare nouns in eventive predicates. The first observation is that when bare nouns appear as subjects and/or objects of eventive predicates, they cannot be construed as generic. This I show in (11) and (12).

- (11) a. **Ajá** rí mi. *subject of transitive eventive*  
 dog see me  
 ≠ 'Dogs see me.'
- b. **Ajá** hàn. *subject of intransitive eventive*  
 dog snore  
 ≠ 'Dogs snore.'
- (12) a. Mo rí **ajá**. *object of transitive eventive*  
 1sg. see dog  
 ≠ 'I see dogs'
- b. **Ajá** jẹ **egungun**. *subject & object of transitive eventive*  
 dog eat bone  
 ≠ 'Dogs eat bones.'

In order to obtain a generic reading, the imperfective marker *máa-n*<sup>3</sup> must be introduced.

<sup>3</sup> Barczak (2004) treats *máa-n* as grammatical particles that jointly mark a sentence as habitual. In this analysis, I treat the two as imperfective.

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- (13) a. Ajá **máa-n** rí mi.  
dog **IMP** see me  
'Dogs see me.'
- b. Ajá **máa-n** hàn.  
dog **IMP** snore  
'Dogs snore.'
- (14) a. Mo **máa-n** rí ajá.  
1sg. **IMP** see dog  
'I see dogs.'
- b. Ajá **máa-n** jẹ egungun.  
dog **IMP** eat bone  
'Dogs eat bones.'

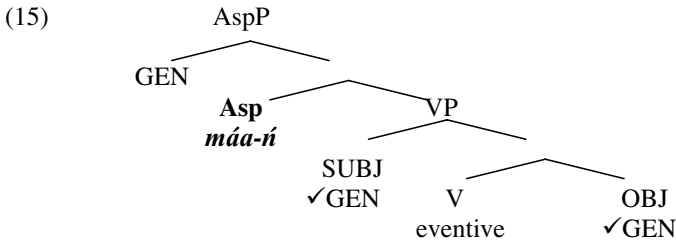
Based on these data, I argue that a subject or object bare noun of an eventive verb, or a subject bare noun of a stative verb, is generic if imperfective *máa-ń* is present. It follows that grammatically conditioned genericity is that which involves interpreting bare nouns as generic by the presence of an imperfective marker. Consequently, I assume that the imperfective morphemes *máa-ń* carry a quantificational feature [+Q] that forces the presence of GEN in its local environment, along the lines of Chierchia (1995:202).

In what follows, I develop an aspectual theory of genericity along the lines of Kamp and Reyle (1993) to address grammatically conditioned genericity.

### 2.1. Theory of Aspectually Conditioned Genericity

The theory of aspect and generic interpretation of bare nouns that I propose draws largely from the work of Chierchia (1995) and Kamp and Reyle (1993:569). Kamp and Reyle treat “progressive” and “perfect” as aspectual operators (Asp OP). The claim is that these operators transform the meaning of the underlying non-progressive or non-perfect verb, verb phrase or sentence into that of its progressive or perfect counterpart, respectively.

Adapting their aspect-model analysis, I propose that imperfective *máa-ń* is associated with the presence of the  $\nu$ P-external aspectual marker. This makes available the generic construal of bare nouns in either subject or object position.



The question that immediately arises is this: how do we motivate the interpretation of bare nouns as generic with the presence of the imperfective? To answer this question, I further propose that this imperfective is associated with a GEN, which is introduced in Spec,AspP (Déchaine 1993, Barczak 2004). What I am assuming is that whenever an eventive verb is accompanied by the IMP, a bare noun either in subject or object position can be construed as generic. Observe that GEN, which is introduced in Spec,AspP, is able to scope over both the subject and object bare nouns. I extend this analysis to the cases involving stative verbs discussed in §1.

## 2.2. Extending Aspectually Conditioned Genericity to Stative Verbs

Recall that in §1.1, we saw that in lexically conditioned genericity, a bare noun subject could not be construed as generic even with the presence of a null GEN. What I intend to do is to extend the grammatically conditioned approach that accounts for all cases involving eventive predicates to those that involve stative predicates. In doing so, I begin with those cases that cannot be construed as generic at all, i.e. subject bare nouns of statives.

- (16) a. **Ajá** fẹ̀ràn mi. *subject of transitive stative*  
 dog like me  
 ≠ ‘Dogs like me.’
- b. **Ajá** tóbi. *subject of intransitive stative*  
 dog be.big  
 ≠ ‘Dogs are big.’

The prediction is that with the presence of IMP, we should be able to have generic construal of these bare nouns.

- (17) a. Ajá **máa-ń** fẹ̀ràn mi.  
 dog **IMP** like me  
 ‘Dogs like me.’

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- b.    **Ajá**    **máa-ń**    **tóbi.**  
       dog    **IMP**        be.big  
       ‘Dogs are big.’

This prediction is borne out, since the bare noun in each of the examples in (17) is now interpretable as generic.

However, in grammatically conditioned genericity, the presence of the imperfective is optional, as expected. This is shown in (18).

- (18) a.    **Mo**    (**máa-ń**)    **fẹ̀ràn**    **ajá.**                    *object of stative*  
           1sg.    **IMP**        like    dog  
           ‘I like dogs.’
- b.    **Ajá**    (**máa-n**)    **fẹ̀ràn**    **egungun**                *subject of stative*  
           dog    **IMP**        like    bone  
           ‘Dogs like bones.’

I extend the analysis of Yorùbá data to English in the following section.

### 3.    **Extending Our Analysis to English**

First, I show that bare nouns in English (i.e. nouns without overt determiners), as in Yorùbá, can be construed as generic with stative predicates.

- (19) a.    Dogs like bones.                                    *stative*  
           GEN<sub>x</sub> GEN<sub>y</sub> [dog(x), bone(y), like(x,y)]
- b.    **Ajá**    **fẹ̀ràn**    **egungun.**                                    *stative*  
           dog    like    bone  
           ‘Dogs like bones.’

However, with eventives, Yorùbá contrasts with English in how bare nouns are construed as generic. While English bare nouns can be construed as generic, (20a) Yorùbá bare nouns cannot (20b).

- (20) a.    Dogs eat bones.                                    *generic*  
           GEN<sub>x</sub> GEN<sub>y</sub> [dog(x), bone(y), like(x,y)]
- b.    **Ajá**    **jẹ**        **egungun.**                                    *\*generic*  
           dog    eat    bone  
           ≠ ‘Dogs eat bones.’

So English does not show the kind of distinction that Yorùbá shows with respect to predicate type and generic reading. Thus, generic construal of bare plural noun (subject and object) is possible with both stative and eventive verbs in English but

not in Yorùbá. The generalization that emerges is the following: in English generic construal is always available, whereas in Yorùbá, it is sometimes available. As I argue below, this distinction is only at the surface level.

First, recall that despite what is shown above, Yorùbá has a way of obtaining a generic reading in eventive constructions. This is what I discussed under aspectually conditioned genericity. Note that I also revisited cases involving stative verbs using the same approach. My concern here is how to generalize the resolution of genericity in Yorùbá to English.

I propose that the English example in (20a) be interpreted as imperfective as shown in (21). If this proposal is correct, then Yorùbá and English converge.

(21) IMPERFECTIVE DOGS eat BONES

The fact that the two languages converge at some abstract level suggests that IMP is the source of GEN in both languages. Extending the analysis of Yorùbá bare nouns to English, I propose that the imperfective always introduces GEN, and that while Yorùbá has an overt imperfective, English has a covert imperfective. Note, however, that in English, based on the examples shown above, there is no overt imperfective marker present. The question that arises is how then do we harmonize the facts of Yorùbá, which shows overt presence of an imperfective marker, and the facts of English, which shows its absence. I seek to address this issue through the use of the default aspect theory.

#### 4. The Default Aspect Theory

In order to understand how English and Yorùbá converge on the generic construal of bare nouns, I propose a theory of aspect for the two languages. I claim that in Yorùbá, the default aspect/tense is the perfective/past, whereas in English, the default aspect is the imperfective/present.

I give the example in (22) to illustrate the case of Yorùbá. Observe that the sentence can only be interpreted as simple past (22a) or present perfective (22b), and neither as progressive (22c) nor as imperfective (22d).

- |      |                     |                      |
|------|---------------------|----------------------|
| (22) | Jímò jẹ ị̀ṣu.       |                      |
| a.   | Jimo ate yam        | PAST                 |
| b.   | Jimo has eaten yam  | (Present) PERFECTIVE |
| c.   | *Jimo is eating yam | *PROG                |
| d.   | *Jimo eats yams     | *IMP                 |

I also illustrate the English imperfective/present with the examples in (23). As in Yorùbá, there are only two interpretations to (23): either as habitual and imperfective (23a) or as a historical present<sup>4</sup> (23b).

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<sup>4</sup> This is in the context of story-telling when a series of successive events is encoded.

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- (23) Jimmy eats yam.  
a. habitual and imperfective  
b. historical present

The generalizations that emerge from the two languages are the following: the unmarked verb form in English is the imperfective, whereas the unmarked verb form in Yorùbá is the perfective. With this generalization, I argue that generic construal is closely linked to the imperfective. Generic construal is determined at least in these two languages through the use of the imperfective.

- (24) a. ENG default as (IMP) is equal to GEN  
b. YOR overt IMP is equal to GEN

To sum up, it has been established that in Yorùbá the imperfective is overtly realized through the use of *máa-ń*, whereas in English, the imperfective is covertly present.

- (25) a. Jímò [<sub>IMP</sub> *máa-ń*] jẹ̣ ị̀ṣù      *Yorùbá genericity*  
b. John [<sub>IMP</sub> Ø] eats yam      *English genericity*

### **5. Conclusion**

I have shown that a generic construal of bare nouns can be obtained in one of two ways: via lexical conditioning with stative verbs and via grammatical conditioning with eventive verbs through the use of the imperfective *máa-ń*. I have been able to reduce the two analyses to one by claiming that a bare noun can be interpreted as generic using the grammatically conditioned approach. This analysis has also contributed to our knowledge of genericity in Yorùbá and English. With the use of IMP, bare nouns in stative and eventive predicates can be construed as generic. This IMP can be overt, as in the case of Yorùbá, or covert, as in the case of English.

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