

THE MODIFYING SERIAL CONSTRUCTION: A CRITIQUE

Oladele Awobuluyi  
College of Education  
University of Lagos  
Lagos, Nigeria

1. Linking and modifying serial constructions

It has recently been suggested that there are two types of serial constructions in West African languages.<sup>1</sup> One of them is referred to as the linking type of serial construction and is thought to be characterized by two unique features, namely, (i) the fact that each token of it is always derivable from two or more underlying sentences, and (ii) "reference", by which it is meant that it is always clear in the type of construction in question "which NP a verb refers to". Thus the sentence

- (1) Olú gbé aga wá (= B 18)  
'Olu brought a chair.'

is said to be derivable from

- (2) Olú gbé aga; Olú wá  
'Olu took chair; Olu came.'

and it is thought to be clear that the two verbs *gbé* and *wá* in the surface sentence refer to Olu, because "Olu, the subject, is the same person who carried the chair and came."

The other is called the modifying type of serial construction, and it is claimed that "the string of verbs [in it, unlike the one in] the linking type...cannot meaningfully be related to more than one underlying sentence" (pp. 23-24). An example of this latter construction type is believed to be

- (3) Ọbẹ nǎà dùn tó (= B 61)  
stew the is-delicious is-enough  
'The stew is delicious enough.'

---

<sup>1</sup>See Bamgboṣe [1972c]. For the sake of uniformity, all examples are cited in traditional Yoruba orthography, with those of them taken from the paper to be examined followed by their original numbers prefixed with the initial B, as in (= B 61).

The arguments marshalled to demonstrate the reality of the so-called linking type of serial construction, based as they are on more or less universally known and accepted facts, are extremely cogent. They seem to prove quite conclusively that tokens of the construction are all to be derived from two or more underlying sentences.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>The conclusion reached in the paper to the effect that the sentences in the deep structure of serial constructions are always coordinate in structure is, however, unacceptable. The paper argues (p. 20) that

(i) wọn mu ọ́tí yó (= B 28)  
'They were drunk.'

could not have been derived from

(ii) wọn mu ọ́tí tíńń wọn fi yó (= B 49)  
they drank wine until they drunk  
'They drank (wine) until they were drunk.'

because (i) can be negated, as in

(iii) wọn ò mu ọ́tí yó (= B 34)  
'They were not drunk.'

whereas (ii) cannot, as shown by

(iv) \*wọn ò mu ọ́tí tíńń wọn fi yó (= B 50)  
'They did not drink (wine) before they were drunk.'

For this reason, it is suggested that (i) comes rather from

(v) wọn mu ọ́tí; wọn ò yó (= B 35)  
'They drank (wine) but were not drunk.'

Example (i), however, is inappropriate, because there is a presuppositional relationship between yó 'be drunk' and mu 'to drink' such that one cannot be drunk unless he has actually been drinking, and all that (iv) in fact shows is that this relationship cannot be broken with impunity. Consider

(vi) wọn ò sáńé dé ilé  
they not run-race reach home  
'They did not run all the way home.'

where no such relationship necessarily exists between dé 'to reach' and sá 'to run', and which is the same kind of construction as (iii). For obvious semantic reasons, (vi) cannot be derived from

(vii) wọn sáńé; wọn ò dé ilé  
'They ran; they did not get home.'

## 2. The three arguments for the modifying serial construction

Turning now to the so-called modifying type of serial construction, one finds the case made for recognizing its separate existence less than compelling. For, of the three main arguments used, the first two are by admission inapplicable, while the third turns out to be entirely without foundation. Given such arguments, one finds it necessary to reject completely, at least for Yoruba where the arguments actually all come from, the suggestion that linking and modifying constructions are distinct.

---

which has exactly the same structure as (v), from which the paper would have (i) derived. It cannot be derived from (viii) either,

(viii) wọ̀n ò sáré; wọ̀n dé ilé

'They did not run; they got home.'

because, unlike this latter string, it presupposes that the subject, ran. But since no other coordinate structure exists from which (vi) might be said to have been derived, it has to be concluded that that sentence in fact comes from a noncoordinate structure. Such a structure is represented by (ix), which is a paraphrase of (vi).

(ix) wọ̀n ò sáré títí (tí) wọ̀n fi dé ilé

'They did not run all the way home' or

'They did not run before they got home.'

Sentences like (ix) are normally ambiguous, unless other factors intervene, as in (iv), to make ambiguity impossible. Their ambiguity is always due to the different orders in which the adverb ò 'not' and the adverbial títí (tí) wọ̀n fi dé ilé 'until they got home' modify the verb they accompany or occur with. (ix) has the first meaning and the semantic structure shown by bracketing below

(x) [wọ̀n [ò [sáré títí (tí) wọ̀n fi dé ilé]]]

'They did not run all the way home.'

when the adverbial modifies the verb first and the adverb ò second; otherwise, (ix) will have the second meaning and the structure shown in (xi).

(xi) [wọ̀n [[ò sáré] títí (tí) wọ̀n fi dé ilé]]

'They did not run before/until they got home.'

(For the semantic implications of the order of modifiers in Yoruba, cf. Oke [1972].)

Sentences like (xi) never seem to have serial construction paraphrases.

(x) and its paraphrase (vi) comes from

(xii) [<sub>S</sub> wọ̀n ò sá eré [<sub>ADV</sub> ní Rel [<sub>S</sub> wọ̀n fi títí dé ilé]<sub>S</sub>]<sub>ADV</sub>]<sub>S</sub>

in which the second sentence is embedded in the first.

From the above considerations it is clear that serial constructions do not all come from coordinate underlying structures; some of them, like

a. The first two arguments. Because the paper which makes this particular claim is not yet in wide circulation, three arguments just referred to will be quoted in full for the reader's convenience. The first two run as follows:

"The second type of serial verbal construction is the modifying type. Like the linking type it contains a string of verbs which share a common subject in surface structure; but unlike the linking type, the string of verbs cannot meaningfully be related to more than one underlying sentence.

Examples of the modifying type of serial verbal construction are:

- (4) Ó ñsùn lọ (= B 8)  
He sleeping go  
'He is falling asleep.'
- (3) Ọbẹ náà dùn tó (= B 61)  
stew the sweet enough  
'The stew is delicious enough.'
- (5) Ó sọ fún mí (= B 62)  
he said gave me  
'He told me.'

The main problem with such a derivation is that the transformation which will convert the structures underlying these sentences into the corresponding serial verbs will necessarily involve a change of meaning. For example,

- (6) 'He is sleeping and going.' (= B 9)  
--> 'He is falling asleep.'

---

(i), (iii), (vi) come from deep structure strings with one sentence embedded in the other.

Notice here, incidentally, that *títí* 'duration' in all the above sentences is a noun and not a conjunction as earlier thought in Awobuluyi [1967:89; 1970:38]. A noun is defined in the Yoruba grammar presupposed by the present discussion by its ability to function as Subject and as Object of verbs and/or prepositions. *Títí* adequately fulfills this necessary condition in (ix), (x), (xi) where it functions as the object of the preposition *ní* 'in', which has been deleted obligatorily (for the justification for claiming that *ní* once occurred in those sentences, see note 7 below), and in (xii) where it functions as the object of the preposition *fí* 'by means of'. Some purely surface structural indications of the nominal status of *títí* are that (i) it can be directly followed (optionally) by the relative marker *tí*, which only follows nouns (and any qualifiers accompanying them); and (ii) it contracts a mid tone junction with a following consonant initial genitival qualifier, as in

- (xiii) *títí* *i sátidé*  
'by Saturday at the latest' cf. *ọjọ ọ sátidé* 'Saturday'

- (7) 'The stew is delicious and it is enough.' (= B64)  
 --> 'The stew is delicious enough.'
- (8) 'He said and gave me.' (= B 65)  
 --> 'He told me.'

It is doubtful whether many people would subscribe to the view that a transformation should be allowed to effect such a radical change of meaning. In contrast to the change of meaning involved here, the same transformation will be used to produce the linking type of serial construction, and no change of meaning will be involved in its derivation. The question then is: if both types of serial construction have the same underlying structure, why should the transformation deriving them produce such different results?

Another problem with the proposed derivation is that it is likely to result in having several underlying sentences which break the normal selectional restrictions between noun and verb. For example, (66) will be derived from (67a) and (67b).

- (9) Oíú rìn tí (= B 66)  
 Olu walked fail  
 'Olu was unable to walk.'
- (10) Oíú rìn; \*Oíú tí (= B 67a, 67b)  
 'Olu walked; Olu failed.'

But (67b) is not a grammatical sentence in the language. Of course, it is possible to set up ungrammatical sentences in the underlying structure, but then there must be independent motivation for this other than to make possible the proposed derivation. Note that in the derivation of the linking type of serial construction, no selectional restrictions are violated, since each of the underlying sentences is well-formed.

If (66) were really a serial construction of the linking type, the reference of the verb tí 'fail' could only be to the only NP, which is the subject. The fact that there is no such reference is shown by the impossibility of (67b)" (pp. 23-25).

The really crucial point, which is passed over in silence in the above discussion, however, is that the particular derivation so much belabored there has never yet been suggested and is not in the least likely to be ever suggested by any really knowledgeable or serious student of the Yoruba language. Consequently, invalidating it is an idle exercise which neither advances the case for recognizing the separate existence of the modifying serial construction nor invalidates the opposite case for treating every token of this same construction having a string of verbs in the sense of the present paper (see §3 below) as a regular serial verbal sentence with two or more sentences in its underlying structure.

The objection just raised is fully and freely conceded at the beginning of the third and last main argument, which is directed at an analysis that has actually been suggested.<sup>3</sup>

b. The third argument. That argument (pp. 25-26) runs as follows:

"It may be though, however, that the underlying sentences (9), (64), (65) and (67) are not really appropriate, and that other underlying sentences may be found which are closer in meaning to the desired serial constructions in (8), (61), (62), and (66) respectively. For example, (61) may be seen as being derived from (68) and not from (64).

- (11) Ọ̀bẹ̀ nǎǎ dún; dídún ọ̀bẹ̀ nǎǎ tó (= B 68)  
'The stew is delicious; the deliciousness of  
the stew is enough.'

It is true that (68) is a possible paraphrase of (61), while (64) is entirely different from it in meaning; but there is no justification at all for postulating (68) as the source of (61). The rule that derives serial constructions from underlying structures always involves a deletion of one of two identical NP's. Thus, as shown in (37) and (38), the subject of the second sentence in (38), ọ̀mọ nǎǎ 'the child', which is identical with an NP in the first sentence, has to be deleted to yield (37).

- (12) Olú lé ọ̀mọ nǎǎ já.de (= B 37)  
Olu drove child the go out  
'Olu drove the child out.'
- (13) S<sub>1</sub>: Olú lé ọ̀mọ nǎǎ; S<sub>2</sub>: Ọ̀mọ nǎǎ já.de (= B 38)  
'Olu drove the child; the child went out.'

Notice that the same rule cannot be applied to the structure underlying [sic] (68) to yield (61), since the subject of the second sentence dídún ọ̀bẹ̀ nǎǎ 'the deliciousness of the stew' is not identical with any NP in the first sentence.

In order to derive (61) from (68), an ad-hoc and completely arbitrary rule of NP deletion will be required. Such a rule will differ from the regular Equi-NP deletion rule which will be used for deriving the serial constructions of the linking type. We would then be in the untenable position of deriving the same structure from the same type of underlying forms by two different sets of rules. Furthermore, several of the serial constructions will still have to be

---

<sup>3</sup>The analysis was suggested by the present writer when the paper was read at the Linguistics Seminar of the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1971.

derived from sentences which involve a change of meaning or unmotivated ungrammatical sentences. For example, (62) will still have to be derived from (65), and one of the sentences underlying (66) is bound to be ungrammatical.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>In fact, however, (B 62) will not come from (B 65) as misleadingly claimed, but rather from

- (i) Ó sọ kíńf kan; ó fún mí ní kíńf náà  
 he said thing some; he have me ní thing the  
 'He said something; he gave me the thing.'  
 cf. Ó sọ kíńf kan fún mí  
 'He told me something.'  
 Ó fún mí ní kíńf kan  
 'He gave me something.'

For its part, (B 66) will come from

- (ii) Ó rìn; rírìn náà tì  
 he (tried to) walk; walking the was-impossible  
 'He walked; the walk was unsuccessful.'

To be sure,

- (iii) Rírìn náà tì  
 'The walk was unsuccessful.'

does not occur in surface structure. Something like it is needed, however, to explain the meaning of the pronoun Ó '(impersonal) it' in (iv) which occurs, with the verb tì, in surface structure.

- (iv) Ó tì  
 'No.'

In this connection, consider the following dialogue:

- (v) Speaker 1: Ñjé o lọ  
 ? you go  
 'Did you go there?'  
 Speaker 2: Ó tì  
 'No.'

What the second speaker is normally understood to have denied with the verb tì in this dialogue is the idea or fact of going there--that is, the nominalization of the verb lọ in the first sentence. This fact suggests to the present writer that the real subject of the verb tì is always a nominalization derived from some preceding utterance, as in (ii). This is somewhat reminiscent of the relationship between which and the sentence preceding it in

- (vi) He ran all the way up, which made him feel tired and breathless.

The logical conclusion that can be drawn from the points raised above is that verbs such as *tí* 'fail' in (66), and *lọ* 'go' in (8), *tó* 'enough' in (61), *fún* 'give' in (62) ...are not really derived from an independent underlying sentence. What they appear to do in the above sentences is merely to modify the meanings of the other verbs with which they occur. It is for this reason that they are assigned to the category of 'modifying verbs'."

Like the two arguments preceding it, this third argument is also very seriously flawed. In the first place, notice that meaning is the only real justification there is for affirming, or for that matter denying, derivational relationship between deep and surface structures. For this reason, it is not logically possible to argue, as done in the passage just quoted, that "there is no justification at all for postulating (68) as the source of (61)", although "(68) is a possible paraphrase of (61)" (p. 26).

In the second place, the argument insists that only Equi-NP rules shall be used to derive serial constructions. But this is an arbitrary imposition. It is this writer's definite impression from what other grammarians actually do that once it has been agreed or shown that a particular underlying string has the same meaning as a given surface structure sentence, as is admittedly true of (3 = B 61) and (11 = B 68), one is free to apply any number and any kinds of transformational rules to such an underlying string that may prove necessary to derive the surface sentence from it. To the extent that this impression is right, there is no legitimate reason why (3) should not be considered as a "linking" type of serial construction, and be derived from (11) with as many different rules (including non-Equi-NP rules) as may be necessary.

---

Another factor suggesting that the subject of the verb *tí* is always a nominalization is the existence of an optional rule in the language which relates sentences as follows:

(viiia) *kí á lọ yá*                      ---> *ó yá kí á lọ*  
           that we go is-time                it is-time that we go  
           'It is time for us to go.'

(viiib) *pé òjọ lọ dára*                ---> *ó dára pé òjọ lọ*  
           that Ojo went is-good          it is-good that Ojo went  
           'It is good that Ojo went there.'

The functioning as subject in the variant sentences in (vii) is the same impersonal *ó* seen in (iv, v). Since the subject of those variant sentences stands for (transposed) nominalizations, it seems reasonable to assume that the subject of (iv), for instance, stands also for a nominalization.

Further proof of the arbitrary character of the condition that only Equi-NP rules shall be allowed in the derivation of serial constructions can be seen in the fact that the only reason given for imposing the condition is the fear that we might otherwise "be in the untenable position of deriving the same structure from the same type of underlying forms by two different sets of rules" (p.26). But consider what routinely happens under topicalization in the Yoruba language. They constitute "the same structure" in the sense of the above quotation.

- (14) Olè ní ó pa ọ̀ḍẹ̀  
 thief Emph-marker pronominalization killed hunter  
 'It was a thief that killed a hunter.'
- (15) Pípa ní olè pa ọ̀ḍẹ̀  
 killing Emph-marker thief killed hunter  
 'The fact is that a thief killed a hunter.'
- (16) Ọ̀ḍẹ̀ ní olè pa  
 hunter Emph-marker thief killed  
 'It was a hunter that a thief killed.'

From all that is known about topicalization in Yoruba at present, (14)-(16) have to be derived from the following three underlying forms in which a subject, a predicate, and an object, respectively, have been marked for topicalization by a subscripted x:<sup>5</sup>

- (17) Emph <sub>x</sub>olè pa ọ̀ḍẹ̀  
 'Emph thief killed hunter'
- (18) Emph olè <sub>x</sub>pa ọ̀ḍẹ̀  
 'Emph thief killed hunter'
- (19) Emph olè pa <sub>x</sub>ọ̀ḍẹ̀  
 'Emph thief killed hunter'

These three deep structure strings constitute "the same type of underlying forms" in the sense of the quotation under consideration. As even a

---

<sup>5</sup>For details of how this process operates and why it is thought to operate that way, see Awobuluyi [1967:chapter 6; 1972b].

cursory examination will reveal, (14)-(16) will have to be derived from them by three different sets of rules. This being the case, there is in fact nothing "untenable" or unusual in similarly deriving serial verbal sentences like

- (1) Olú gbé aga wá (= B 18)  
'Olu brought a chair.'
- (3) Qbè náà dùn tó (= B 61)  
'The stew is delicious enough.'

which are in effect the actual sentences referred to as "the same structure" in the quotation above, by two different sets of rules from

- (2) Olú gbé aga; Olú wá (= B 24a, 24b)  
'Olu took chair; Olu came.'
- (11) Qbè náà dùn; didùn qbè náà tó (= B 68)  
'The stew is delicious; the deliciousness of the stew is enough.'

which are not even as similar to each other as (17)-(19) are. In other words, then, the fear which prompted the condition excluding rules other than Equi-NP from the derivation of serial constructions is completely unfounded. From this it follows of necessity that the condition itself is totally unwarranted.

Finally, this same condition is not only unwarranted, but also much too strong. It is so strong in fact that it will exclude from the class of serial constructions not only all those sentences like (3) whose status appears to be in dispute, but also many sentences like

- (20) wọn ò sáré dé ilé  
they not run-race reach home  
'They didn't run all the way home.'

about whose status as a linking type of serial construction there is complete agreement (p. 20).

As already shown in note 2, (20) has to be derived from

- (21) wọn ò sá eré ní Rel wọn fi tífí dé ilé  
they not run race in Rel they with duration reached home

That surface sentence, however, definitely will not come from (21) as a result of the application of Equi-NP rules alone. Hence, a grammar which insists on only such rules will not be able to generate (20), even though the latter is considered to be a bona fide example of the so-called linking type of serial construction.

It may be suggested, however, that (20) should really be considered as a linking serial construction, since it has at least one Equi-NP rule in its derivational history. But if this suggestion is accepted, it will become all the more necessary to admit that (3), too, is a linking serial verbal sentence, since it can alternatively be derived from

- (22) Ọbẹ nàà dùn; ọbẹ nàà tó ní dídùn  
 stew the is-delicious; stew the is-enough in deliciousness  
 'The stew is delicious; the stew is sufficiently delicious.'

by means of one Equi-NP rule and another non-Equi-NP rule. In such an event, (3) will clearly be seen as a linking serial construction with two alternative derivational histories: one involving at least one Equi-NP rule (cf. (22)), and another involving no Equi-NP rule at all (cf. (11)). Since simplicity is too relative as well as too poorly understood a factor to be absolutely decisive in the matter, it is fair to say that, in the final analysis, it will be a simple matter of personal preference which of the above two derivational histories is associated with (3). Consequently, it will become possible to see Equi-NP as it really is--neither crucial nor diagnostic for serial constructions.

The foregoing considerations show that the third argument for recognizing the so-called modifying type of serial construction is completely untenable. Since the first two arguments are similarly untenable, it has to be concluded that no modifying serial construction in the sense of the paper under consideration exists in the Yoruba language. This same conclusion emerges very clearly below from consideration of the so-called modifying verbs.

### 3. The so-called modifying verbs

The paper postulates a new category of "modifying verbs" for Yoruba, partly on semantic grounds and partly on the basis of its claim that a modifying type of serial construction exists in the language: "What they appear to do...is merely to modify the meanings of the other verbs with which they occur. It is for this reason that they are assigned to the category of 'modifying verbs'...The term 'modifying verb' has been applied...to verbs that modify other verbs in serial construction" (pp. 26, 30). However, quite a number of strong reasons exist for considering this proposed category as having no real existence at all in Yoruba grammar. Thus, to begin with, as shown above, there is no such thing as the modifying serial construction as understood by the paper in the language; for what it calls the modifying type of serial construction is, in fact, the linking type, which involves plain verbs only. Hence, the so-called modifying verbs functioning in serial constructions are in reality plain verbs.

The paper supposes that a given Yoruba word is necessarily both semantically and categorially ambiguous just because it can be glossed in two different ways in idiomatic English. Thus in

- (23) Ọbẹ nàà tó  
'The stew is enough.'

the verb tó is said to be a plain or full verb meaning 'enough', whereas in

- (3) Ọbẹ nàà dùn tó (= B 61)  
'The stew is delicious enough.'

the same verb tó is said to be a modifying verb meaning 'sufficiently', because all it appears to do in the above sentence is, it is claimed, merely to modify the meaning of the other verb with which it occurs.

Some other similar pairs of glosses are (pp. 31-32):

	<u>full verb</u>	<u>modifying verb</u>
rọra	'be careful'	'carefully'
ṣáájú	'precede'	'before'

tì	'fail'	'unable to'
jù	'exceed'	'than'
kù	'remain'	'left'
pẹ	'be late, be long'	'for a long time'
gbẹ̀hìn	'be last'	'last'

As closer examination reveals, however, these supposed semantic differences are actually not present in the words to which they are ascribed; rather they are distinctions made solely as required in idiomatic English usage. Setting idiomatic English usage aside and considering them, as they should be considered, strictly from the Yoruba point of view, most of the so-called pairs of semantically differing plain and modifying verbs actually turn out to each have the same literal meaning, as in the following examples:

tó	'to measure up to (something)'
rọra	'to take care, be careful'
ṣáájú	'to be/come first'
tì	'to be impossible'
jù	'to exceed'
kù	'to remain'
pẹ	'to be a long time'
gbẹ̀hìn	'to be/come last'

Now, if meaning must be made the sole basis for a categorial distinction in any particular language, it is expected that such meaning would at the very least be that of the language being analysed rather than that of the one used for the purposes of exposition. But since, as just suggested, the overwhelming majority of the so-called pairs of plain and modifying verbs have the same meanings in Yoruba, it can be seen that they in no way permit any categorial distinction to be made between plain verbs and modifying verbs in the language. Hence it must be concluded once again that only plain verbs are to be recognized in Yoruba.

The above consideration apart, the English glosses given to each pair of plain and modifying verbs in the paper are, even on very cursory examination, so similar and so obviously related anyway as to suggest quite clearly that plain and modifying verbs are in fact the same. In which case, once again, only plain verbs are to be recognized in the Yoruba language.

The paper indeed agrees (p. 35) that each plain verb and its so-called corresponding modifying verb are one and the same thing, but nevertheless maintains that such a verb has one function as a plain verb and another, modifying, function when it occurs in a serial construction: "it seems reasonable to conclude that modifying verbs are in fact verbs. When they occur in a minimal sentence, they have all the characteristics of a full verb; but when they occur in a serial construction, they take on a modifying function..." (p. 36). To verbs like these Bamgboṣe proposes to assign "the feature [ $\pm$ MOD] since they can occur both as full verbs and as modifying verbs" (p. 45). To other verbs which never have a modifying function he assigns the feature [-MOD], and still others which always have a modifying function and this only, he similarly assigns the feature [+MOD]. Notice, however, that the feature specification for the verbs which, as the paper claims, function both as plain verbs and as modifying verbs, is internally contradictory, as it says in effect that such verbs are and are not plain verbs. This contradiction shows that the class of verbs characterized by [ $\pm$ MOD] is unnatural and, therefore, in effect nonexistent in the Yoruba language.

It should perhaps be added here for the sake of completeness that there is no way to avoid this problem of contradictory feature specification in any feature-using Yoruba grammar that recognizes modifying verbs. The only two methods that suggest themselves in this connection prove to be completely unworkable. The first is to consider plain verbs and their modifying verb counterparts as mere homophones. But in actual fact they are more than mere homophones, given the similarity and relatedness noted earlier in their meanings. The second method, which, unlike the first, will reflect the similarity in the meanings of such words, is to consider the so-called modifying verbs as derived from their plain verb counterparts. This method, too, fails, simply because no synchronic process exists for deriving verbs from verbs as required here in Yoruba.

Finally, all the so-called modifying verbs assigned the feature [ $\pm$ MOD] or [+MOD] have to be plain verbs (when they are verbs at all, that is; see below), because otherwise they would constitute an absolute contradiction in terms in the context of Yoruba grammar as a whole.

Even though it is quite obvious that whether a particular sentence is or is not to be analysed crucially on how the category of verbs is defined in that language, the paper under examination has no positive suggestion of any kind to make on how the Yoruba verb must be defined.<sup>6</sup> In correcting this oversight, it needs to be stressed right from the outset that Yoruba lexical items cannot be satisfactorily subcategorized for syntactic purposes on the basis of their shapes, or meanings, or morphophonemic behavior, etc., but rather on the basis of their functions in surface as well as deep structure sentences.

One rather obvious indication of this is the fact that there are several words in the language which cannot be subcategorized in any other way. Thus, as every Yoruba grammarian would readily concede, the words funfun 'white', pupa 'red', and pàtàkì 'important' display three different categorial affiliations as nouns, verbs, and qualifiers, respectively, in the following three sets of sentences, and the only indication there is of their categorial affiliation in each set is the function they perform there:

- (24i) Ó ra funfun                    'He bought a white one.'  
 (24ii) Ó ra pupa                    'He bought a red one.'

---

<sup>6</sup>In Bamgboṣe [1972b:56] the following definition of the Yoruba verb is suggested: "If we are asked to suggest a frame that will embrace almost all the verbs in the language, such a frame will be more like

(90) # NP \_\_\_\_ (NP) ( \_\_\_\_ (NP)) #"

However, as the author of the definition freely admits, it does not embrace all Yoruba verbs. Consequently, it is not a definition of the verbs in the language.

- (24iii) Ó se pàtàkì<sup>7</sup> 'It is important.'
- (25i) Ó funfun 'It is white.'
- (25ii) Ó pupa 'It is red.'
- (25iii) Ó pàtàkì ara rè 'He boosted his own ego.'
- (26i) Ó ra aṣọ funfun 'He bought white cloth.'
- (26ii) Ó ra aṣọ pupa 'He bought red cloth.'
- (26iii) Ó sọ ọ̀rọ̀ pàtàkì 'He said something important.'

Another indication is that no other criterion at all, be it semantic, syntactic, morphological, or morphophonemic, permits exhaustive and consistent subcategorization of even the words that

---

<sup>7</sup>In deep structure this sentence is represented by

- (i) Ó se ní pàtàkì  
'It turns out to be an important manner.'

where pàtàkì 'important manner' functions as the object of the preposition ní and is, therefore, by definition (see note 2 above) a noun.

The justification for the preposition ní in underlying strings like (i) is that the word itself actually shows up optionally in surface structure with some other nouns in the same class as pàtàkì. Thus, cf.

- (ii) Ó lọ kífá kífá  
'He left without delay.'
- (iii) Ó lọ ní kífá kífá  
'He left without delay.'

Indeed, this preposition occurs obligatorily with one particular member of the same class of nouns, namely, m̀lọm̀lọ 'smooth manner', as in

- (iv) Aiyé ní lọ ní m̀lọm̀lọ  
'Life goes smoothly.'  
cf. ?Aiyé ní lọ m̀lọm̀lọ  
'Life goes smoothly.'

remain in the language after the ones referred to above have been excluded. Thus, nouns and verbs can both name actions (cf. *kíkú* 'dying' and *kú* 'to die'); nouns and qualifiers can both name qualities (cf. *àánú* 'mercy, the quality of mercy', *rere* 'of good quality'); and nouns and adverbs can both name manner (cf. *mèlòmèlò* 'smooth manner' and *ń* 'habitual manner'). To consider them from the phonological standpoint, some nouns, all verbs, and most qualifiers share the characteristic of beginning with consonants (cf. *pákó* 'lumber', *pa* 'to kill', and *púpò* 'many'); some nouns, most verbs, and many adverbs or modifiers share the feature of monosyllabicity (cf. *bí* 'manner', *rí* 'to see', *kàn* 'simply, just'); they also share, this time with some qualifiers, the feature of disyllabicity (cf. *ilé* 'house', *kéré* 'be small', *tútù* 'cold', *kúkú* 'anyway'). Morphophonemically, nouns and verbs sometimes behave alike, for example, in respect of vowel elision, as in

- (27i) *lábè* (< *lábòbè*) 'to lick stew from one's fingers'  
 (27ii) *ewébè* (< *ewébòbè*) 'vegetables for making stew'

or of vowel assimilation, as in

- (28i) *Mo lé eyín* (< underlying: *mo lé iyín*)  
 'I chased you (pl.).'  
 (28ii) *ilé eyín* (< underlying: *ilé iyín*)  
 'your (pl.) houses'

And syntactically, both nouns and verbs can be made to undergo topicalization or relativization, while modifiers and most qualifiers cannot.

As against all the forgoing criteria, which are quite unreliable, function always permits the categorial status of any word in any kind of sentence to be unambiguously determined. Thus, no nouns and verbs, nor any verbs and modifiers, etc., ever perform the same function in a way analogous to the similarity in the behavior of verbs and nouns, for example, in respect of some of the criteria mentioned above. If any verbs and nouns ever perform the same function, they would have for that reason to be analysed as members of the same category rather than of different categories.

In the light of this finding, all the words which function singly as Predicate in the frame

(29) ## Subject \_\_\_\_\_ (Object) ##<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Bamgbose [1972b] urges that this definition be abandoned on the grounds that it excludes some verbs like *fi* 'to put' and *bẹ* 'to shine (of red objects)', which occur obligatorily with constituents not shown in (29). In particular, *fi* cannot occur without an Adverbial containing the preposition *sí* 'to', and *bẹ* similarly cannot occur without an Adverbial containing the onomatopoeic noun *yòdò* 'bright manner' and there is no indication of this anywhere in (29).

In fact, however, the definition does not exclude any such verbs, or any verbs for that matter. What it does is to mention the universal feature which these particular verbs share with all the other verbs in the language, leaving their idiosyncratic cooccurrence properties to be specified for each of them, as necessary, in the lexicon. In so doing, the definition claims that it is class properties, not idiosyncratic ones, that are crucial for the categorial identification of lexical items. Proof of the correctness of this claim can be seen in the fact that students of the Yoruba language have known for over a century that *wákàtí* 'hour' is a noun, although none of them apparently knew until it was pointed out recently that, like a few other words in its class, it never occurs without an accompanying qualifier.

Idiosyncratic properties do not form part of class definitions. For this reason, a definition of Yoruba nouns that mentions the idiosyncratic cooccurrence property of *wákàtí*, etc. would be as lacking in generality as a definition of verbs which similarly mentions the fact that *fi* and *bẹ* obligatorily cooccur with Adverbials.

The same critique argues that the definition under discussion is wrong because it denies verbal status to *tètè* 'quickly' and *mọ́mọ́* 'intentionally, deliberately', even though they can be employed as in

- (i) *ẹ tètè*  
you (pl.) quickly  
'Be quick.'
- (ii) *ó ẹ́ ẹ́, sùgbón kò mọ́mọ́*  
he did it, but not intentionally  
'He did it, but it was not intentional.'

The fact, however, is that these are surface structure sentences whose predicates have been deleted. This is why the sentences themselves cannot be used unless it is clear from the linguistic or the nonlinguistic context what verbs these words modify.

The only fruitful way that this writer can see to disprove the above definition of Yoruba verbs is to show that the many specific claims that have been made for it (for which, see note 9 below) are all false. Notwithstanding Bamgbose [1972a:3], which is very misleading, no serious effort of any kind has so far been made in this direction.

in Yoruba sentences have been defined as Verbs,<sup>9</sup> and all those that function as modifiers of verbs have similarly been defined as Adverbs. Given these definitions, the claim that some Yoruba words are "modifying verbs" can readily be seen to be internally contradictory, as it means that there are some verbs in the language which always function both in deep

---

<sup>9</sup>The reasons for defining the Yoruba verb in this way have been stated in some detail elsewhere; see Awobuluyi [forthcoming (a), 1972a: 112]. Briefly restated for readers' convenience, they are:

- (i) The definition conforms to the requirement that Yoruba lexical items be defined on the basis of their functions in sentences;
- (ii) It has no exceptions--indeed, it apparently cannot logically have any;
- (iii) It is grammatically real, as it is congruent with, and brings to light for the first time, the only process for forming new verbs in the language;
- (iv) It is psychologically real, as evidenced by
  - (a) intuitive claims that some words are "used as verbs", e.g. Bamgbose [1972b:47, note 31];
  - (b) the reaction of native speakers to sentences containing nonsensical words in the position of the predicate: cf. Bamgbose [1972b:56] and Awobuluyi [1971b:106, note 14];
  - (c) the treatment of English adjectives in colloquial Yoruba: cf. Awobuluyi [1972a];
  - (d) word play in conversations like the following (actually overheard by the writer in 1970):

Speaker 1: Aṣọ rẹ yí mà náìsì o  
 clothes your these indeed nice o  
 'What fine clothes you have on!'

Speaker 2: Ó ná a gan ni  
 It ná it really emphasis-marker  
 'Fine they certainly are.'

Speaker 1 considers náìsì, from English 'nice', as a verb, while Speaker 2 for comic effect chooses to consider it as a verb ná (which does not exist in Yoruba) followed by an object noun. This dialogue is said to demonstrate the psychological reality of the definition under consideration because the word play in it depends for its success on the following two factors, both of which must be present: (i) willingness on the part of the first speaker to consider what his interlocutor says as a well-formed Yoruba sentence, and (ii) an awareness on the part of both speakers of the structural significance of the position occupied by the otherwise nonsensical word ná in the second speaker's response (cf. point (b) above).

structure and in surface structure as adverbs--a phenomenon which is by definition completely impossible. Given the principle of lexical subcategorization pointed out above, if any verb-like elements actually function as modifiers, they are for that very reason to be analysed as Adverbs, and not as Verbs.

Of course, it is perfectly conceivable that an item could function as Predicate in deep structure but as Modifier in surface structure. The paper under examination indeed comes very close to making this kind of claim when it declares that "...it seems reasonable to conclude that modifying verbs are in fact verbs. When they occur in a minimal sentence, they have all the characteristics of a full verb; but when they occur in a serial construction, they take on a modifying function and do not have the full range of verbal characteristics" (p. 36). Notice, however, that it is not clear at all what is meant in this passage by a full verb that functions in a minimal sentence taking on a modifying function when it occurs in a serial construction. According to an earlier claim, the string of verbs in any modifying type of serial construction "cannot meaningfully be related to more than one underlying sentence" (pp. 23-24). In other words, any modifying serial construction is represented by one sentence in deep structure and also by one sentence in surface structure, with the result that any modifying verb that occurs in that particular construction will correspondingly function only as such both in deep structure and in surface structure, and there will be no stage at which such a modifying verb was a full verb.

But suppose for the sake of argument that such a stage existed, then the grammar envisaged by the paper under review would have to contain some mechanism for converting full verbs into modifying verbs. To the extent that the grammar contains such a mechanism, it would be more complex and, therefore, less natural and less desirable than an alternative grammar which is equally observationally adequate but yet contains no such mechanism.

#### 4. "Modifying verbs" that are plain verbs

It is not the intention here to claim that all the miscellaneous elements lumped together under the name of "modifying verbs" and listed in the paper under examination are Adverbs. Quite the contrary, most of

the tokens of the so-called modifying type of serial construction can, as already suggested, easily be traced to two or more well-formed underlying sentence where, for each such underlying string, a so-called modifying verb will actually be found operating as Predicate, thereby revealing its true status as a plain verb. This is the case with the following so-called modifying verbs:

sáré	'be quick'	jù	'to exceed'
yára	'be quick'	kárí	'to go round (of things)'
rọra	'be careful'	gbé	'be lost irretrievably'
ṣáájú	'be first'	pé	'be a long time'
ṣọ	'to watch'	wò	'to examine'
ṣì	'to miss'	kà	'be/rest upon'
jí	'to act stealthily'	dé	'be on the lookout for'
bá	'to accompany'		
tán	'to end'		
pọ	'be many'		
tó	'to measure up to'		
lù	'to hit, impinge upon'		
kù	'to remain'		
kírí	'to perambulate'		
jínnà	'be far, distant'		
nù	'be lost'		
kẹ̀hìn	'be last'		
gbẹ̀hìn	'be last'		
lé	'be/rest over or upon'		
tọ	'take a small quantity of'		
yọ	'to act stealthily'		
lọ	'be extensive, spread'		
fún	'give'		
ká	'to go round'		
wá	'come, come to a stage'		
bọ	'return'		
fí	'to put'		
tì	'to adjoin, be next to'		
tì	'be impossible, fall short of goal'		

### 5. "Modifying verbs" that are not verbs

The few putative tokens of the "modifying type of serial construction" which can in no way be traced to two or more underlying sentences are, in fact, not tokens of the serial construction. They are, among other possibilities that have to be recognized in any sensitive grammar of the language, simple sentences whose verbs are modified by Adverbs, in the case of sentences containing pre-verbal Adverbs in the sense of Awobuluyi [1967, chapter 7 and forthcoming (a)] and the post-verbal Adverbs

ná	'for a minute'	mọ	'ever again'
rí	'ever before'	şáá	'anyway, in vain'
rárá	'at all'	sé	'to be sure, for certain'

or by Adverbials introduced by the prepositions<sup>10</sup>

ti	'from'	fún	'for, on behalf of'
bá	'on behalf of'	sí	'to, at'
fi	'by means of'	ní	'in, on, at'

<sup>10</sup>Three of these prepositions have verbal homophones as follows:

<u>Preposition</u>	<u>Verb</u>
fi 'by means of'	fi 'to put'
fún 'for, on behalf of'	fún 'to give'
bá 'for, on behalf of'	bá 'to join, accompany'

This treatment of these words is thought to be justified by the following considerations:

The verb *fi* has the idiosyncratic syntactic feature [+\_\_NP [ADV si NP]<sub>ADV</sub>] which the preposition *fi* does not have.

The prepositions *bá* and *fún* are stylistically interchangeable, but this is not so with the corresponding verbs *bá* and *fún*.

The sentence

- (i) Ó bá mi lq  
'He went along with me; he went on my behalf.'

is ambiguous between the senses of *bá*, the verb, and *bá*, the preposition, just as

- (ii) Ó fà á fún mi  
'He sold it to me; he sold it for me.'

is ambiguous between the senses of *fún*, the verb, and *fún*, the preposition.

## 6. Conclusions

In other words, to summarize the foregoing, the category of "modifying verbs" does not exist at all in the Yoruba language,<sup>11</sup> most of the words referred to by that term being plain verbs, while the rest are Adverbs, Prepositions, and components of splitting verbs,<sup>12</sup> as the case may be. But then if modifying verbs do not exist, the so-called modifying type of serial construction which they are supposed to characterize cannot exist either. From this the more important conclusion follows once again that there is only one variety of serial construction in Yoruba, namely, the one that is always traceable to two or more sentences in deep structure.

Considered from a more general point of view, the modifying type of serial construction in the sense of the paper under consideration, and the so-called modifying verbs would add nothing but avoidable complication to a grammar like that of the Yoruba language, which could otherwise be simple and straightforward. In the first place, they would blur necessary distinctions between Verbs and Adverbs, in the case of the "modifying verbs", and between simple and complex sentences in the case of the modifying type of serial construction which, on the one hand, would be traced, like simple sentences, to only one sentence in deep structure, and, on the other, would contain more than one verb, as complex sentences do by definition. In other words, modifying verbs and modifying serial constructions are neither fish nor fowl, so to speak, and, as such, would add yet another element of complication to grammar by necessitating changes designed to accommodate them in the phrase structure rules of any languages like Yoruba possessing them. But matters would not end here. There would be the problem of contradictory feature specification mentioned earlier, from which there is no escape if features are used. And if they are not used, then those verbs which are said to be both plain and modifying and which can occur in serial

---

<sup>11</sup>For two earlier transferred categories emanating from the same source, see Awobuluyi [1970; forthcoming (b)].

<sup>12</sup>For these, see Awobuluyi [1971a].

constructions in both their modifying and their plain verb functions would necessitate adding to a grammar numerous specific supplementary statements to indicate when such verbs are being used in their plain verb function and when in their modifying verb function.<sup>13</sup> Finally, there would be the specific mechanism also referred to earlier, which would be needed to convert deep structure plain verbs into surface structure modifying verbs in any grammar that would derive one of the two sets of verbs from the other, facts invalidating such a derivation, as in Yoruba, notwithstanding.

All these complications together would make the modifying serial construction and modifying verbs a rather unattractive and very suspect set of constructs in any language of the kind envisaged here. This is not necessarily to say, however, that these constructs definitely do not exist in other West African languages. Actually, it would be both presumptuous and very foolhardy for the present writer to deny, and by the same token meaningless for him to agree, that they exist in languages of which he has little or no firsthand knowledge or experience. All that can be said safely at the present time is that, if the reasons for recognizing these descriptively costly linguistic constructs in those languages are anything like the ones advanced for them in Yoruba, then the effect of the present critique is to call the analysis of relevant aspects of those languages, too, into question.

---

<sup>13</sup>Cf. "Since the same verb may be a modifying verb in one case and a non-modifying one in another, it is necessary to find a way of keeping apart the two types of verbs. This is especially important in a serial verbal construction consisting of two verbs either of which is potentially capable of being a modifying verb" (p. 30).

## REFERENCES

- Awobuluyi, A. Oladele. 1967. Studies in the syntax of the Standard Yoruba verb. Doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Inc.
- Awobuluyi, A. Oladele. 1970. "High-tone-junction-contracting verbs in Yoruba". Journal of West African Languages 7:29-38.
- Awobuluyi, A. Oladele. 1971a. "'Splitting verbs' in Yoruba". Annales de l'Université d'Abidjan, Série H: Linguistique 1:151-164.
- Awobuluyi, A. Oladele. 1971b. "On the status of prepositions". Journal of West African Languages 8:101-111.
- Awobuluyi, A. Oladele. 1972a. "Predicative adjectives in Yoruba: a critique". In The Yoruba Verb Phrase. Edited by Ayo Bamgboṣe, pp. 103-118. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Awobuluyi, A. Oladele. 1972b. "On the nature of relativization". Mimeographed. Read at the Third Annual Conference on African Linguistics, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.
- Awobuluyi, A. Oladele. Forthcoming (a). "The Yoruba verb phrase". In Papers on Yoruba language and literature. Edited by Adebisi Afolayan. Ife: Ife University Press.
- Awobuluyi, A. Oladele. Forthcoming (b). "On the so-called infinitives in Yoruba". Journal of West African Linguistics.
- Bamgboṣe, Ayo, ed. 1972a. The Yoruba Verb Phrase. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Bamgboṣe, Ayo. 1972b. "What is a verb in Yoruba?" In The Yoruba Verb Phrase. Edited by Ayo Bamgboṣe, 17-59. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Bamgboṣe, Ayo. 1972c. "On serial verbs and verbal status". Mimeographed. Read at the Tenth West African Languages Congress, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana.
- Ọkẹ, D. Ọlatunbọsun. 1972. "On the construction and semantic interpretation of auxiliary clusters in Yoruba". In The Yoruba Verb Phrase. Edited by Ayo Bamgboṣe, 135-161. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.