

THE MODIFYING SERIAL CONSTRUCTION: A REPLY

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1. Introduction

On the kind invitation of the Editor, I am pleased to comment on Awobuluyi's critique of my paper on serial verbs which appeared in the March issue of the journal.¹

The main points arising from the critique which I would like to take up are as follows:

- (a) Is the linking type of serial construction always coordinate or not?
- (b) Is it true that there is no case for setting up the modifying serial construction?
- (c) Is the basis for establishing a category of modifying verbs untenable?
- (d) How is the verb best defined in Yoruba?

2. The linking serial construction: serial or not?

The author of the critique is of the opinion that the linking serial construction does not always derive from a coordinate structure. He would like to recognize certain serial constructions in Yoruba which are derived from a sentence with an adverbial clause introduced by *títí...fi* 'until'. Confronted with the impossibility of deriving (i) from (ii),

- (i) wọṅ ò mu ọ́tí yó
'They were not drunk'
- (ii) wọṅ ò mu ọ́tí títí wón fí yó
'They did not drink (wine) until they were drunk'

¹The paper entitled "On serial verbs and verbal status" was read at the Tenth West African Languages Congress, University of Ghana, Legon, March 21-27, 1972. It is to appear in the Journal of West African Languages 9:1, 1973. The critique entitled "The modifying serial construction: a critique" appeared in Studies in African Linguistics 4:1, 87-111 (March 1973).

he concludes that this type of example "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" (page 88n). It is difficult to know what is meant by saying that an attested example is "inappropriate". The question is: how does one derive (i)? Given that the author of the critique has ruled out

- (iii) *wọn mu ọtí; wọn ò yó*
'They drank (wine) but were not drunk'

as the source of (i), he is only left with (ii) which, as I have pointed out in the original paper, is "clearly a contradiction of the 'consequence' principle", since one cannot be drunk unless one has been drinking. On this count, the derivation of (i) from (ii) fails, and the original suggestion that it comes from (iii) is sustained.

It is suggested in the critique that (iv) cannot be derived from (v) or (vi), and that it can only be derived from (vii):

- (iv) *wọn ò sáré dé ilé*
'They did not run all the way home'
(v) *wọn sáré wọn ò dé ilé*
'They ran; they did not reach the house'
(vi) *wọn ò sáré; wọn dé ilé*
'They did not run; they reached the house'
(vii) *wọn ò sáré tí tí wọn fi dé ilé*
'They did not run until they reached the house'

It is true that (iv), in the meaning given, cannot be derived from (v) or (vi), but neither can it be derived from (vii).² Sentence (iv) states that the subjects did run and did reach the house but that they had stopped running by the time they reached the house. Sentence (v) states that they

²In actual fact (iv) is ambiguous. It could either have the meaning given above or the meaning 'They did not run before they reached the house.' With the latter meaning, it could be derived from either (vi) or (vii).

ran but did not reach the house. Both sentences (vi) and (vii) state that the subjects did not run at all before they reached the house.³ The source for (iv) is therefore not (vii) as stated in the critique but rather

(viii) wọn sáré; wọn ò dé ilé ní sísáré
 they ran; they not reach house in running
 'They ran but they did not reach the house running'

This, as can be seen, states exactly what is stated by (iv).

The attempt to introduce an adverbial clause with *títí...fi* into the derivation of serial constructions can therefore be seen to be not only unnecessary but unlikely to provide an adequate source for the particular construction in question. Besides, why isolate only this clause? As shown in the original paper, there are many sentences with adverbial clauses which are paraphrases of serial constructions. One would like to know why the author of the critique does not include such sentences as sources of serial constructions, and what solution he proposes for the problems outlined in the original paper which such a derivation is bound to pose.

3. The case against the modifying serial construction

It is stated in the original paper that if the modifying serial construction were treated as a linking type, the underlying sentences from which it is to be derived would be different from it in meaning and would involve a violation of normal selectional restrictions between noun subject and verb.⁴ The author of the critique objects

³The critique states that (vii) could mean that the subjects ran (pp. 88-89). I find myself unable to agree with this, and in fact in the original paper, I give examples to show that negation affects the verb of the matrix sentence, and not that of the adverbial clause which cannot be negated in such a sentence. For instance, *Ojú ò jlyá títí ó fi kú* 'Olu did not suffer until he died' states that no suffering took place, just as (vii) states that no running took place. Similar examples are *wọn ò sùn títí ilẹ̀ fi mó* 'They did not sleep before dawn' which cannot possibly mean that the subjects slept, and *wọn ò jẹun títí ilẹ̀ fi sù* 'They did not eat before dusk' which positively asserts that no eating took place before dusk.

⁴The critique attempts to explain an example of the breaking of selectional restrictions by claiming that the impersonal pronoun *o* 'it' which is the

to this argument on the grounds that the derivation being rejected "has never yet been suggested and is not in the least likely to be suggested by any really knowledgeable or serious student of the Yoruba language" (p. 91). This type of objection misses the whole point of the argument. It is irrelevant whether the proposed derivation has been suggested or not. What is important is that treating the modifying serial construction as a linking type implies the postulation of the same type of underlying structure for both constructions. Hence, the postulated underlying structure.⁵

In fact, contrary to the assertion made above, the derivation in question has been suggested, and by no less a person than the author

only subject that can occur with the verb tì 'fail' in ó tì 'No' must have come from an underlying noun phrase. If this is so, there will be no way of making any distinction between a 3rd person singular pronoun which has to be derived from a noun phrase, and an impersonal pronoun. The latter, like an expletive 'it' in English, is best generated directly in the base. If this analysis is valid, it will be seen that there is no way of deriving ó rín tì 'He was unable to walk' from two underlying sentences, since the verb tì can only take an impersonal subject.

⁵Even in this critique, the author spent a lot of time trying to prove that "Yoruba lexical items cannot be satisfactorily subcategorized for syntactic purposes on the basis of their shapes, or meanings, or morphophonemic behavior, etc." (p. 101). It is pertinent to observe that "no really knowledgeable or serious student of the Yoruba language" is likely to propose such criteria for subcategorization. Also in Awobuluyi [1971:155-157], the author postulates certain underlying sentences and "semantic transformational rules" which no one has ever suggested and, even without justification, attributes them to some scholars on the grounds that such are the implications of their analysis. Does he therefore consider this type of thing "an idle exercise", since he will only be invalidating what has never been suggested? I think that an analyst should have the freedom to point out the implications of particular analyses even if the actual underlying forms used to show such implications have not been previously proposed. This is what I believe the author of the critique was doing in the reference cited above, and this is what I also did in the original paper.

of the critique himself. He proposes (p. 93) to derive

- (ix) ó sọ fún mi
'He told me'

from

- (x) ó sọ kíńf kan; ó fún mi ní kíńf náà
'He said something; he gave me the thing'

Notice that (x) is not really different from

- (xi) ó sọ; ó fún mi
'He said; he gave me'

(which the author of the critique is objecting to), for in order to derive (ix) from either (x) or (xi), a rule will be required to convert 'He said (something) and gave me (the thing)' to 'He told me (something)', i.e. a drastic change of meaning will be required in the derivation. This is the objection raised in the original paper which has now been amply justified by the proposed derivation of (ix) from (x).⁶

It is thought by the author of the critique that the mere existence of a paraphrase is evidence for deriving one string from the other. He says:

"...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. 94)

Hence, since (xiii) is a possible paraphrase of (xii), the former must serve as the source for the latter

- (xii) ọbẹ náà dùn tó
'The stew is delicious enough'

⁶ Notice that if (ix) is allowed to be derived from (x) from which it differs radically in meaning, there is no reason why many of the so-called mono-morphemic "splitting verbs" in Awobuluyi [1971:152] cannot be derived from two underlying sentences. For instance, ó gba ọrọ náà gbọ 'He believed the matter' could, by the same token, be derived from ó gba ọrọ náà; ó gbọ ọrọ náà 'He accepted the matter; he heard the matter'

(xiii) ọbẹ nàà dùn; dídùn ọbẹ nàà tó

'The stew is delicious; the deliciousness of the stew is enough'

It is difficult to share such a view, and, in fact, I suspect that the author of the critique does not really believe this, as shown by his statements in another similar context. For instance, in Awobuluyi [1967:229-230], he says:

"Indeed, although [x] and [y] appear to be semantically equivalent, we need not assume that they have exactly the same deep structure. As a matter of fact, it is simpler to account for the facts by positing different sources for the sentences."

In other words, paraphrases need not be related to an identical source nor indeed derived from each other.⁷

In the case of the derivation of (xii) from (xiii), it can even be shown that the position taken by the author of the critique is contradictory. He accepts the characteristics of the linking construction as outlined in the original paper as "more or less universally known and accepted facts". One of these characteristics which he himself highlights is "reference". To argue that (xii) is derived from (xiii) is to give the false impression that the reference of tó 'be enough' in (xii) is to the subject ọbẹ nàà 'the stew', since its original subject is not identical with this subject and therefore not recoverable.

Given "reference" as a characteristic of the linking serial construction, it follows that equi-NP deletion will be required at some point in the derivation of this type of construction, otherwise the NP to which the non-initial verb in the serial construction refers will not be recoverable. The requirement of such a deletion rule is, therefore, not an arbitrary imposition. It is, of course, possible to set up all sorts of underlying strings and derive serial constructions from them by making use of all sorts of rules such as the author of the critique proposes to

⁷On this, see also Jackendoff [1969:200] which is quoted as Note 19 in the original paper.

do. The implications of this approach are:

- (a) That there will be two types of linking serial constructions: one type that regularly involves equi-NP rules in its derivation, and another type that is derived by other rules.⁸
- (b) That for the latter type there will be as many ad hoc rules as there are underlying sentences.⁹
- (c) That there will be no principled way of knowing when reduction of underlying sentences to serial constructions will take place and when it should not.

4. The basis for modifying verbs

The author of the critique would like to think, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, that the distinction between modifying and non-modifying verbs is based on the English glosses of the items. Thus, we are informed that the original paper "supposes that a given

⁸In a comment on my argument that this situation would lead to the derivation of "the same structure from the same type of underlying forms by two different sets of rules", the author of the critique cites the example of topicalization in Yoruba where he believes this already happens. Unfortunately his examples with different elements marked for topicalization with "a subscripted x" (p. 95) show that we are not dealing with the same type of underlying forms. An underlying form in which the subject is marked for topicalization is not the same as one in which the object is so marked. Proof of this is that in Awobuluyi [1967:216], different base forms are provided for sentences in which different elements are topicalized. This being the case, the example of topicalization goes to confirm that it is only when there are different types of underlying forms that derivation with different types of rules is justified.

⁹The author of the critique admits this much when he refers to derivation "with as many different rules (including non-Equi-NP rules) as may be necessary" (p. 94). The underlying sentences he proposes to set up are diverse in nature, and even so, they will not take care of all the possible tokens of this construction. For example, from what sentences will ó ñsùn lọ 'He is falling asleep' be derived? The critique is completely silent on this and for good reason too; for, on the basis of the derivation proposed for the other tokens, it would appear that the underlying form could only have been' ó ñsùn; sísùn náà híọ 'He is sleeping; the sleeping is going' which bears no semantic relation to the serial construction purported to be derived from it.

Yoruba word is necessarily both semantically and categorically ambiguous just because it can be glossed in two different ways in idiomatic English" (p. 98). To say the least, this type of comment is most disappointing, as there is no basis for it in the paper in question.¹⁰

The grounds on which the distinction between the two types of verb is based are fully stated in the original paper. To put the matter beyond any reasonable doubt, an ambiguous sentence is even supplied to illustrate the distinction i.e.

- (xiv) (a) Olú sáré wá ilé (Linking type)
 'Olu ran and came home'
 (b) Olu sáré wá ilé (Modifying type)
 'Olu came home quickly'

In (xiv)(a) sáré 'run' is a non-modifying verb with a cognate object, whereas in (xiv)(b) sáré 'quickly' is a modifying verb. There are four syntactic differences between the two sentences: the former can be traced to two underlying sentences, whereas the latter cannot; either of the two verbs in (xiv)(a) can be negated, whereas only the modifying verb in (xiv)(b) can be negated; sáré can be topicalized in (xiv)(a) whereas it cannot in (xiv)(b); the cognate object eré 'race' in can be separated in (xiv)(a), whereas this cannot be done in (xiv)(b). All these differences are outlined in the original paper, and different underlying structures are then established for the two types of serial constructions.

The author of the critique finds it convenient to gloss over the crucial basis for the distinction between the two types of verbs, and to pretend that the distinction is based on English glosses. To prove that the glosses are irrelevant to the analysis, it is possible

¹⁰In the original paper, similar glosses showing "full" and "modifying" meanings for verbs in other West African languages are quoted from articles by Pike, Bendor-Samuel, and Stahlke. It would, of course, be presumptuous to say in respect of the analyses by all these scholars that "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" (p. 99).

to find paraphrases in the language showing the difference of meaning between the verbs. For example, (xiv)(b) has the paraphrase

(xv) Olú wá ilé kífá kífá
'Olu came home quickly'

whereas (xiv)(a) has no such paraphrase. This shows conclusively that the semantic distinction between the modifying and the non-modifying verbs is a real one and is not dependent on any real or imaginary English glosses.

It is suggested in the critique that to specify a verb as [\pm MOD] is "internally contradictory, as it says in effect that such verbs are and are not plain verbs" (p. 100). I find this criticism baffling, especially as it has been demonstrated that such verbs belong to a dual category. When they function in a minimal sentence (i.e. a sentence with only one verb) or in a linking serial construction, they are non-modifying, and when they function in a modifying serial construction, they are modifying.¹¹ I see no difference between this use of features and the analogous use of features by the author of this critique for a class of verbs which he calls "transitive-intransitive verbs" and which are [\pm NP].¹² Is this also "internally contradictory", and does it imply that such verbs are and are not transitive?

The conclusion is drawn in the critique that what the original paper has called modifying verbs are in fact verbs, adverbs, prepositions, and components of splitting verbs, and that to persist in establishing this category of verbs is to "add nothing but avoidable complication" to the grammar and to "blur necessary distinctions" (p. 109). I take the view that the categories enumerated above are not immanent in the language,

¹¹ Notice that a verb which has the feature [-MOD] will never at any stage have to be converted into [+MOD] and vice versa. Even in the case of a verb marked [\pm MOD], no conversion will be required. Such a verb selects the "minus" feature in a minimal sentence and in a linking serial construction (which, of course, is derived from a combination of minimal sentences), and the "plus" feature in a modifying serial construction. Since derived from two or more minimal sentences, there will be no question of converting a "minus" into a "plus" feature. Hence, the grammar will not need "to contain some mechanism for converting full verbs into modifying verbs".

¹² See Awobuluyi [1967:16-18].

and that a distinction can only be said to be "necessary" if it can be justified on functional grounds. The fear that "necessary distinctions" would be blurred should therefore not prevent us from assigning to the same category items which can be shown to behave syntactically alike.¹³ This is precisely what the original paper has sought to do.

5. Definition of the verb in Yoruba

The criteria proposed for defining the verb in Yoruba have been reviewed in the original paper and more exhaustively in Bamgboṣe [1972b]. It has been shown that none of the criteria hitherto put forward can truly be regarded as diagnostic. Even the minimal sentence frame which has been made of and which the author of the critique says "has no exceptions" (p. 105) has been shown to be totally inadequate. To say that some of the exceptions have "idiosyncratic co-occurrence properties" (p. 104) is to beg the question. If the frame were used as a diagnostic criterion, the fact is that it will exclude many true verbs. This point was generally accepted by the Seminar on the Yoruba Verb Phrase, the proceedings of which were published in Bamgboṣe [1972a].¹⁴ The author of the critique was one of the leading participants at this Seminar and he agreed to the Seminar's conclusion which is recorded as follows:

"...on the question of the definition of the verb, it [the Seminar] agreed unanimously to accept as verbs not only those items that occur in minimal sentences, but also others which do not, but can be established as verbs on the basis of other criteria. The text of the agreed definition reads:

'All words that occur in the frame ##NP - (NP)## are verbs. If for any other reasons there are words which appear to be members of the verb class but do not fit into the frame, such words will be regarded as exceptions'.¹⁵

¹³I believe that the author of the critique shares this view too, for he says, "function always permits the categorial status of any word in any kind of sentence to be unambiguously determined...If any verbs or nouns ever perform the same function, they would have for that reason to be analyzed as members of the same category rather than of different categories" (p. 103).

¹⁴The Seminar on the Yoruba Verb Phrase took place at the University of Ibadan on April 1-2, 1971, under the auspices of the Yoruba Studies Association of Nigeria.

¹⁵See Bamgboṣe [1972a:13-14].

It is surprising that the author of the critique should now be discussing the definition of the Yoruba verb without any reference at all to the above conclusion. The only justification for re-opening the issue would have been the production of new evidence or new arguments. Since the critique merely repeats the same old arguments which have been duly considered before the Seminar came to the above conclusion, it is difficult to see how an inadequate definition can be considered acceptable. The minimal sentence frame is not and cannot be diagnostic for the verb in Yoruba.

6. Conclusion

I have tried in this paper to show that the modifying serial construction and the modifying verb cannot be dismissed lightly by mere assertions such as that they "do not exist", are "non-existent in the Yoruba language", or that they have "no real existence at all in Yoruba grammar" (pp. 98, 100, 109). As long as there are verbal strings which cannot meaningfully be related to two or more underlying sentences, and as long as there are syntactic differences between such strings and others which can be so related, there will be need for two categories of serial constructions: the linking type and the modifying type, with the concomitant distinction between non-modifying and modifying verbs.

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