SOME YORUBA QUANTIFIER WORDS AND SEMANTIC INTERPRETATION: A CRITIQUE*

L. O. Adewole
Oバフェミ Awolowọ University

This work takes a close look at the Yoruba quantifiers, $púpọ$, $ọpọ$, and $ọpọlọpọ$ 'many', and concludes that, contrary to Lawal's [1986] claim, it is difficult to differentiate semantically between them.

1. Introduction

Lawal [1986:95] examines the Yoruba quantifiers, $pọ$, $púpọ$, $ọpọ$, and $ọpọlọpọ$, which she regards as the “four morphological encodings for the quantifier ‘many’” and concludes that the last three differ not only morphologically and syntactically, but also semantically.¹ She does not compare the first with the others because, according to her, it is the verb from which the others are derived. We agree that these three words differ both morphologically and syntactically, but we find it very difficult to differentiate semantically between them. The same applies to other native speakers we consulted. To support our argument, we shall use (i) Odell's [1984] paraphrastic criteria for determining whether “a linguistic expression has, in the same or a different linguistic context, the same sense as another linguistic expression” [Odell 1984:118] and (ii) one of the criteria for lexical relations proposed by Cruse [1986] to see if one could differentiate semantically between the

---

* I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer and the editor for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

¹This classification assumes that $ọpọ$ 'cheap' is distinct from $ọpọ$ 'many' and $ọgúnọgọ$, often glossed as 'many/several', is not a morphological encoding for 'many'. Note, too, that the three items can be used adverbially as in $ọ pọ$ $púpọ$, $ọ pọ$ $lọpọ$, and $ọ pọ$ $lọpọlọpọ$ 'they are too many'. Lawal does not discuss this use of the items and we shall not be concerned with them here.
items òpò, pùpò, and òpòlopò. We shall then present empirical evidence to support our argument.

2. Theoretical Consideration

2.1. Odell's [1984] paraphrastic criteria. Odell [1984:118-119] distinguishes between two kinds of synonymy, “the kind which exists between two tokens of the same type, and ... the kind that exists between two tokens of different types”. The former is referred to as monotypical synonymy while the latter is called multitypical synonymy. They are defined as follows:

An expression \( e \) in S1 is monotypically synonymous with \( e \) in S2 if \( e \) is used in the same sense in S1 and S2.

An expression \( e \) in S1 is multitypically synonymous with \( f \) in S2 if \( e \) and \( f \) are used in the same sense.

As the items òpò, òpòlopò, and pùpò are not three tokens of the same type, it is the latter definition that concerns us here. The criterion formulated by Odell [1984:119] for deciding whether some given items are multitypically synonymous is as follows:

An expression \( e \) in S1 is multitypically synonymous with \( f \) in S2 if (1) there is a word or phrase \( g \) which is a metaphrase of \( e \) in S1 and of \( f \) in S2, (2) there is no word \( h \) which is a metaphrase of \( e \) in S1 but not of \( f \) in S2, and (3) neither S1 nor S2 is odd.

If one applies this criterion to the use of the items òpò, pùpò, and òpòlopò in sentences, one would note that they are multitypically synonymous. Given a situation of a thousand people standing watching a play and only fifty people sitting watching the same play, consider the following sentences where

\[
pùpò = e \\
òpò = f \\
òpòlopò = g \\
dìè = h
\]

(1) a. ó rì ènìyàn pùpò ní ìdúrò 'he saw many people standing'  
he see people many in standing

b. ó rì òpò ènìyàn ní ìdúrò 'he saw many people standing'  
he see many people in standing

c. ó rì òpòlopò ènìyàn ní ìdúrò 'he saw many people standing'  
he see many people in standing
Some Yoruba Quantifier Words: A Critique

2.2. Cruse [1986] on lexical meaning. Cruse [1986] also provides some criteria for determining whether some items are logically equivalent. According to him, a useful semantic test for deciding the logical relations between items is to see if the items mutually entail each other [Cruse 1986:15]. If one applies this test to the quantifiers under discussion, one would note that they are logically equivalent. For instance, I can say (2a,b,c) but not (2d).

(2) a. ó bá ènìyàn पुपो ní i'èèro ní ibi eré nàà nítòri nínù
he meet people many in standing in place play the because inside
ègbèrùn ènìyàn, àádòta péré ni ó rí i’jókòò
one thousand people fifty only FOC he get seats

‘he met many people standing in the concert because out of one thousand people, only fifty were able to get seats’

b. ó bá ṃpòlọpò ènìyàn ní i'dúró ní ibi eré nàà nítòri
he meet many people in standing in place play the because
nínù ègbèrùn ènìyàn, àádòta péré ni ó rí i’jókòò
in inside one thousand people fifty only FOC he get seat

‘he met many people standing in the concert because out of one thousand people, only fifty were able to get seats’

c. ó bá ṃpò ènìyàn ní i'dúró ní ibi eré nàà nítòri nínù
he meet many people in standing in place play the because in inside
ègbèrùn ènìyàn, àádòta péré ni ó rí i’jókòò
one thousand people fifty only FOC he get seat

‘he met many people standing in the concert because out of one thousand people, only fifty were able to get seats’
d. ??ó bá ènìyān dùè ní ìdúró ní ìbi èrè náà nítorí nínú

he meet people few in standing in place play the because in inside
egbèrún ènìyàn, àádóta pérè ní ó rí ìjókòó

one thousand people fifty only FOC he get seat

‘he met a few people standing in the concert because out of one thousand people, only fifty were able to get seats’

Example (2d) is anomalous because in talking about people at a concert, nine hundred and fifty people would be an entailment of “many” not “few”.

From these tests, one can conclude that the quantifiers òpò, òpòlopò, and púpò are logically equivalent. To further support our argument, we shall check how these words are used in a Yoruba literary work. Our choice for this is Okediji’s [1983] Atótó Arére.

3. Empirical Evidence

3.1. Why Atótó Arére? As we have stated elsewhere,² this prose is of interest because it depicts not only real characters but also reflects real life experiences of some Yoruba cities and villages. The prose is also one of those few writings in Yoruba which adequately represent the standard language. The dialectal variation is minimal, and most tones are indicated. The author has also been described as one who “makes use of the reader’s cultural knowledge and linguistic competence to good stylistic advantage” [Iṣọla 1978:501]. In this work, references from the novel are put in brackets [ ]. Before we start quoting examples from the novel to justify our claim, let us summarize some of the points touched upon by Lawal.

3.2. Lawal [1986] in brief. The points raised by Lawal which concern us in this work are that:

The size of the set referred to by òpòlopò is greater than that of òpò and the one referred to by the latter is greater than that of púpò.

Púpò and òpò emphasize the number or largeness of the set, òpòlopò emphasizes variety within a set.

Púpò and òpò imply undifferentiated mass of people only while òpòlopò is used for individual interpretation of a given set of people.

²See Adewọle [forthcoming].
NP’s higher in animacy are quantified by ḍọpọlọpọ while those lower in animacy are quantified by ḍọpọ or púpọ. This supports Comrie’s view on animacy that “individuated objects … are viewed by humans as being higher in animacy than less individuated objects” [Lawal 1986:103].

In what follows, we shall examine these points one by one to see if they are justified by the facts of the language. We begin with size distinction.

3.3. The problem of size. Lawal states that the set referred to by ḍọpọlọpọ is greater than the one ḍọpọ refers to and that the one referred to by the latter is greater than the one referred to by púpọ. That this claim is not correct is shown by the following examples:

(3) a. ọ rí ḍọpọ ërò tí wón ń lu àwọn méjì kan [p. 249]
   he see many people that they PROG hit they two one
   ‘he saw a crowd of people hitting two people’

   b. nígbà tí àwọn ërò náà rí ọlọpáà, wón síwọ̀ lìlù àwọn
   in time that they crowd the see police they stop hitting they
   àlejò náà, ḍọpọlọpọ sì sá lọ [p. 249]
   stranger the many then run go

   ‘when the (crowd of) people saw a policeman, they stopped hitting the strangers, many of them ran away’

What should be noted is that these two sentences are referring to the same set of people who are all farmers. The example in (3a), in which ḍọpọ is used, refers to the whole set of people. The example in (3b), where ḍọpọlọpọ is used, refers to only some of these people. This is contrary to Lawal’s claim that ḍọpọlọpọ is used to refer to a set which is greater than the one referred to by ḍọpọ. If any of the two is greater in these two examples, it should be ḍọpọ because in (3b) where ḍọpọlọpọ is used, only some of the people ran away on seeing the policeman.

This is not to say that ḍọpọ cannot be used in place of ḍọpọlọpọ in (3b) and the latter in place of the former in (3a), but what we note is that when they are so used, they still give the same meaning. We still have more people in (3a) than (3b). Their use in sentences such as (3a) and (3b) depends on which of the two the speaker prefers.

3Context: A man has just been murdered in a village. The murderer escaped but some villagers, all middle-aged farmers, searching for the murderer/murderers saw two men loitering around. They concluded that the two men should be the murderers. They took the law into their hands and started hitting the men. A policeman came just in time to save the men from being lynched.
The two readings in the sentences are called forth by different types of contexts. The two items realize a common core meaning.

3.4. Largeness of the set and variation within the set. Lawal's claim that ópọlọpọ indicates variety within a set while púpọ and ópọ imply largeness of the set is also incorrect. Witness the following examples:

(4) ó léegun ju qmò olóbi lọ, sùgbón qmò olóbi
he has power more than child kola-owner but child kola-owner

mọ àyínìke ijà púpọ [p. 26]
know technique fight many

'he is stronger than the boy selling kola but the boy knows the technique of wrestling better than he does'

(5) Alábá gba ópọlọpọ sùgà [p. 106]
Alaba get much sugar

'Alaba collected a lot of sugar'

In (4), it is not the largeness of techniques of wrestling that the boy knows but the various types that are being discussed. In (5), on the other hand, we are talking about the amount of sugar and not different types of sugars. This is because all the sugars are plain, white cubes.

In addition, if one looks at sentences (3a) and (3b), one would note that the people are farmers, so the use of ópọlọpọ does not emphasize their background or discipline. The people are also all middle-aged, so, no distinction either of sex or age-group is made with the use of ópọlọpọ in (3b).

We also note that ópọlọpọ can mean 'much' or 'many' when applied to mass nouns or uncountable items. For example, both (6a) and (6b) are ambiguous between 'a lot of palm wine' and '(many) different kinds of palm wine' with no difference in preferred reading. The reading 'a lot of palm wine' applies when the same type of palm wine is used for the sacrifice and the other reading applies when different types of palm wine, e.g. iṣà 'a day old palm wine', àyọ 'palm wine tapped and drunk on the same day', ọgidì ẹmu 'a palm-wine not mixed with water', òjú-ọgún 'the first palm-wine to be tapped from a palm tree often used in sacrifice to Ogún, god of iron', etc., are used for sacrifice.

(6) a. ó fi ópọlọpọ ẹmu bọ àwọn ọrìṣà
he use many/much palm-wine sacrifice many gods

'he used many different kinds of/a lot of palm-wine to sacrifice to the gods'
3.5. Undifferentiated mass vs. individual interpretation. Lawal also claims that while ṣọpọlọpọ is used for individual interpretation, ṣọpọ and púpọ are used for undifferentiated mass. Our examples (3a) and (3b) counter this claim. As stated above, both ṣọpọ and ṣọpọlọpọ in (3a) and (3b) are used for the same set of people, ṣọpọ for all of them and ṣọpọlọpọ for some of them. There is no way one can know whether the people are differentiated or not. For one thing, the narrator of the story does not know any of the people hitting the men. What this means is that the set of people hitting the man is undifferentiated yet, as we have seen, both ṣọpọlọpọ and ṣọpọ can be used interchangeably.

3.6. The animacy property. The last criterion used by Lawal to distinguish these words from each other is that of animacy. According to her, NP's that are regarded as higher in animacy are quantified by ṣọpọlọpọ while those that are regarded as lower in animacy are quantified either by ṣọpọ or púpọ [Lawal 1986:102-103].

Most of the examples given by Lawal herself are counterexamples to this claim. Witness the following examples [Lawal 1986:101] (the numbering is ours):

(7) ṣọpọlọpọ ènì yàn lọ .ibi ókú náà
    many people went place-of funeral the
    ‘many people attended the funeral’

(8) ṣọpọ ènì yàn lọ .ibi ókú náà
    many people went place-of funeral the
    ‘many people attended the funeral’

(9) ènì yàn púpọ lọ .ibi ókú náà
    people many went place-of funeral the
    ‘many people went to [sic] the funeral’

As the glosses show, the three sentences have the same meaning, and they are all acceptable. Yet, in the three sentences, we have ènì yàn ‘people’, which is animate.

Other counterexamples to Lawal’s claim are the following popular Yorùbá sayings:
In (10-12), *èja* ‘fish’ is higher in animacy than both *ìràwò* ‘star’ and *iyann’ìn* ‘sand’ yet, while *òpò* is used to quantify *èja* ‘fish’, *òpòlopò* is used to quantify both *ìràwò* ‘star’ and *iyann’ìn* ‘sand’.

Also, examples (13-15) which Lawal [1986:103-104] marks as semantically anomalous are acceptable to some Yoruba speakers we interviewed (the numbering is ours).

(13) *òpòlopò iyanrin* ló ṣe é po síbẹ́ntí [sic]
many sands be do INF mix cement
‘many sands can be used to mix cement’

(14) *òpòlopò efọ̀n* máá ń kú ń ási kò ọyé
many mosquitoes habitual die at time cold
‘many mosquitoes die during the cold weather’

(15) wón kó *òpòlopò kórikó dà sí àjá*
they carried many grass throw at loft
‘they throw many grasses in the loft’

Other counterexamples to Lawal’s claim taken from *Atótó Aréré* are as follows:

(16) *òpò èni yàn àtì aláì lágbára tààrà kò jèkí Fóràwáì lè*
many people and powerless much NEG allow Forawai able

*sá ńo ní tirè* [p. 249]
run go in his own

‘Forawai could not escape because apart from the number of people around, he was also powerless’
(17) nígbà tí ó wo olúwa-rè, ó rí i pé èni kan tí
in time that he look person-his he see him that one person that

ó bá ṣun ra ḍpọlọpọ táyà ní Ilé-Ifè láìpẹ ni [p. 103]
he follow him buy many tyres in Ilé-Ifè in-not-long FOC

‘when he looked at the person, he saw that the person was the one who bought many tyres from him in Ilé-Ifè recently’

In (16), ènìyàn ‘people’ is quantified with ḍpọ, and in (17), táyà ‘tyre’ is quantified with ḍpọlọpọ. With the animacy principle the reverse should be the case.

3.7. Further comments on animacy. We quite agree with Palmer [1986:2] that linguists should look into different languages for items “identified and defined in terms of the formal characteristics of each of those languages” that could be used to illustrate some scholars' typological postulates. Such illustrations have recently become the subject of a number of scholarly works. Some proposed illustrations are entirely justified, but quite a few are not. Our detailed examination of the quantifiers ḍpọ, ḍpọlọpọ, and púpọ shows that the proposal that they could be distinguished on the basis of their animacy property falls into the latter category.

4. Conclusion

The quantifiers ḍpọ, ḍpọlọpọ, and púpọ, therefore, are semantically identical. We are quite aware of the fact that absolute synonymy is a rare phenomenon but, despite this, we have been able to provide both theoretical and empirical evidence to show that if these items differ in respect of some semantic properties,⁴ they are not the ones noted by Lawal.

⁴These still need to be investigated.
REFERENCES


