

**SOME YORUBA QUANTIFIER WORDS AND SEMANTIC  
INTERPRETATION:  
A REPLY TO A CRITIQUE\***

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It is now an uncontroversial fact that if a linguist is to describe a language, the data on the basis of which he formulates his hypothesis should be the natural "speech" of native speakers of that language. Thus, in present day linguistics native informant tests and judgements are considered as more significant than text data. Native informants are considered the last arbitrament on questions of empirical fact. This requirement forces the linguist to observe the way people really do speak their language. He thus avoids basing his description on what he thinks they say. A linguistic description thus reflects the language of speech, not writing.

The empirical support for Adewole's critique of my paper (in this issue), "Some Yoruba quantifier words and semantic interpretation" [Lawal 1986], comes from a literary text *Atótó Arére* [Adewole p. 4]. Adewole's approach, which is characteristic of traditional or taxonomic linguistics, has been found to be most unreliable in dealing with questions of empirical fact and is strongly rejected in present day linguistics. Our study of the semantic interpretation of some Yoruba quantifier words was based on native speaker judgements/tests, specifically Yoruba speakers in Ilorin township of Kwara State of Nigeria. The account of Yoruba quantifier 'many' given by Adewole is very simplified. We examine his arguments below.

### **1. Logical Equivalence**

Adewole disagrees with us as to the semantic differences which we say exist among the quantifiers *òpòlòpò*, *òpò*, and *púpò*. According to Adewole the quantifiers are logically equivalent. If we say two linguistic items are logically equivalent it means they can be interchanged without affecting the validity of the argument. Now consider the following examples:

- (1) a. *ó ni agbára púpò* 'he has a lot of power'  
 he has power a lot
- b. *ó ni òpòlòpò agbára* 'he has many powers'  
 he has many powers

For native speakers, the above sentences (1a) and (1b) do not mean the same thing. In (1a) we are saying that the subject has a lot of physical power, i.e. he is very strong, while in (1b) we are saying that he has many different powers. According to native speakers *òpòlòpò* will be used when talking of a person who has metaphysical powers apart from physical power. *Púpò* cannot be used in such a context. Again consider the sentences below:

- (2) a. *òpòlòpò ẹranko ló wa nínú igbó*  
 many wild animals emph be inside jungle  
 'there are many wild animals in the jungle'
- b. \**ẹranko púpò ló wa nínú igbó*  
 wild animals many emph. be inside jungle

In (2b) the substitution of *púpò* for *òpòlòpò* renders the sentence unacceptable. Speakers do not accept *púpò* in this context because apart from the large quantity of animals found in the jungle, they are also of many different types, and this is not reflected in (2b), where we have *púpò*. When one describes a situation which involves both quantity and types, the appropriate quantifier that will be used in natural speech is *òpòlòpò*, not *púpò*. This explains the ungrammaticality of (2b).

The above examples show that contrary to what Adewole says the quantifiers are not logically equivalent since they cannot be interchanged without affecting the validity of the argument. Many other examples abound which support our claim.

## 2. Size of Set

Adewole also disagrees that *òpòlòpò* refers to a larger set than *òpò*. However, Adewole's claims are based on sentences taken from a literary text and not on natural speech. As we pointed out earlier, in present day linguistics, linguistic descriptions are based on natural speech, not written language. Our claim with regards to the size of the set denoted by *òpò* and *òpòlòpò* is based on native speaker judgements about the way these quantifiers are used in natural speech.

### 3. Variation Within the Set

Another semantic difference which we pointed out in our study is that  $\dot{\text{o}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}\text{l}\text{o}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$  points to variation or types/kinds within the set while  $\text{p}\acute{\text{u}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$  and  $\dot{\text{o}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$  points just to quantity. Adewole sees no such difference between  $\dot{\text{o}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}\text{l}\text{o}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$  and  $\text{p}\acute{\text{u}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}/\dot{\text{o}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$ . His claim is again based on a sentence taken from the literary text *Atótó Arére*. However, native speakers consulted disagree with Adewole on this. For example, speakers did not see his examples (5) and (6) as being ambiguous. They said  $\dot{\text{o}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}\text{l}\text{o}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$  does not refer to quantity only. More than that, it points to the fact that different kinds are involved. Our examples (1) and (2) above and (3) below support this claim:

- (3) a.  $\dot{\text{o}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$   $\text{w}\acute{\text{a}}\text{y}\grave{\text{a}}$   $\text{ni}$   $\text{ewu}$   $\text{p}\acute{\text{u}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$   
 pole electric has danger much  
 ‘electric poles have great danger’ or ‘electric poles are very dangerous’
- b.  $\dot{\text{o}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$   $\text{w}\acute{\text{a}}\text{y}\grave{\text{a}}$   $\text{ni}$   $\text{ewu}$   $\text{l}\acute{\text{o}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}\text{l}\text{o}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$   
 pole electric has dangers many  
 ‘electric poles have many dangers’

For speakers, (3a) and (3b) are not synonymous. The interpretation given to (3b) is that the dangers are of many types. For example, it can destroy houses by falling on them, it can give an electric shock to a person, it can cause fire outbreak, it can cause damage to electrical installations, etc.

In (3a) on the other hand we have a different interpretation. According to speakers, what (3a) means is that the danger in an electric pole can be very devastating. The quantifier  $\text{p}\acute{\text{u}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$  describes the danger in terms of its devastating effect whereas  $\dot{\text{o}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}\text{l}\text{o}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$  points to the different types of dangers that can result from an electric pole. These are the interpretations given to these quantifiers in natural speech. Our argument is not that  $\dot{\text{o}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}\text{l}\text{o}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$  does not indicate quantity. It certainly does, but it also points to different types of items. In other words, that  $\dot{\text{o}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}\text{l}\text{o}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$  indicates ‘large quantity’ is already established, but more than that it also points to variation within the set. It is this additional semantic property that distinguishes  $\dot{\text{o}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}\text{l}\text{o}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$  from  $\text{p}\acute{\text{u}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$  and  $\dot{\text{o}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$ .

### 4. Animacy/Undifferentiated vs. Individual Interpretation

Our final point which Adewole questions is the semantic property “animacy”. Adewole disagrees with our statement that NP's quantified by  $\dot{\text{o}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}\text{l}\text{o}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$  are treated as more animate than those quantified by  $\text{p}\acute{\text{u}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$  and  $\dot{\text{o}}\text{p}\dot{\text{o}}$ . The problem is that Adewole took animacy here in its literal sense, that is, in terms of human > non-

human/animate > inanimate. The linguistic notion of animacy is not concerned with animacy in its literal sense. It involves an extension of the notion of animacy [Comrie 1981:178-193]. For example, some of the examples cited by Comrie are of languages that treat first and second person pronouns as more animate than third persons, although, as pointed out by Comrie, strictly speaking, the first person is more animate than the third person.

One of the ways in which animacy is reflected in language is in morphological systems [Comrie 1981:198]. In Yoruba there is a morphological split between *òpòlópò*, *púpò*, and *òpò*, and we suggest that this split correlates with degree of animacy.

Our claim is strengthened by the fact that the above split tends to correlate with another relevant opposition, viz. number distinction. Entities of higher animacy tend to have number distinction while those of lower animacy tend to be viewed as undifferentiated mass [Comrie 1981]. Such a distinction is manifested in *òpòlópò* in terms of “types/kinds” [Lawal 1986]. Of course both *òpòlópò* and *púpò* may be used to quantify human or inanimate entities. Our argument however, is that the choice of one quantifier rather than the other depends on how the entities within the set are viewed. If speakers view the entities within the set in terms of types, i.e. individuals then *òpòlópò* will be used, but if the entities are viewed solely in terms of their number or quantity, i.e. undifferentiated, then *púpò* or *òpò* will be used. This would explain why Adewole finds some of our starred examples acceptable.

## 5. Conclusion

Before a descriptive statement can be applied to whole speech communities must be referable to data beyond the written text. The need for linguists to be fully aware of how the language is actually spoken cannot therefore be over-emphasised

## REFERENCES

- Comrie, B. 1981. *Language Universals and Linguistic Typology*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Lawal, N.S. 1986. ‘Some Yoruba quantifier words and semantic interpretation’ *Studies in African Linguistics* 17:95-107.