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# In Honour of Professor Ayo Bamgbose

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# GRAMMAR AND MEANING IN TWO YORUBA TEXTS: A SYSTEMIC LINGUISTIC DESCRIPTION

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

A piece of language use or "text" can be described from different points of view using different levels of language as tools of description. A description of text along a semiotic dimension is perhaps the widest viewpoint of studying language use in social situation, a study along this dimension will cater for all features of language pertaining to the pragmatic, linguo-pragmatic and linguistic levels of a text. At the level of pragmatics, relevant features of situation(s) and uses of the text are accounted for as they can relate to and stimulate the selection of formal items of language in the text. At the level of linguistics, the meaning and form of the text are focused as they can respectively represent and realise the features of situation and use mentioned above. Lastly, at the linguo-pragmatic level, the message content and communicative functions<sup>1</sup> of the text are the point of attention as they represent the interaction of the pragmatic and linguistic features in socio-communicative transactional events.

In this study, only a part of the linguistic level of textual description is considered as we analyse and interpret the occurrences of grammatical features in two Yoruba texts. Interpretation here simply refers to an explanation of how the grammatical features in the texts can indicate social and pragmatic meanings. The features themselves are analysed via the framework of Systemic Linguistics as postulated by, especially, Halliday (1970, 1973 and 1985), Berry (1975 and 1977). Although this framework can throw much light on the description of language form as a representation of human behaviour, its application to the analysis of Yoruba texts has been very minimal. Those who understand the framework for one reason or the other do not apply it to Yoruba, beyond grammar, while many of those who understand the language are yet to fully understand the concept and workability of the theory. This paper thus, in a way, attempts to show that one can demonstrate the efficient application of Systemic Linguistics to the description of Yoruba texts. Since it is, however, the grammatical features of texts that are analysed in the work, it is pertinent to delimit grammar by identifying some of its categories and recognizing relevant previous descriptions of these categories in Yoruba grammar.

## 2. SOME GRAMMATICAL CATEGORIES IN SYSTEMIC LINGUISTICS

Grammar in the sense of lexicogrammar constitutes the form of language. And through its various formal categories, it realizes the several meaningful options or terms in the semantic structure or system of language. In Systemic Linguistics, it is the category of "system" which mediates between the form and use of language. The system represents experience by organizing and codifying it in form of options in grammatical and lexical systems of language. These options are later realized in surface grammar via certain categories of grammar and lexis. The claim of systemic linguistics is therefore that since the grammar of a language derives from experience, it is logical and reasonable to suppose that one can gain access into the social beliefs and behaviour of a group of people by describing the grammar of a text in which the people's experience are recorded.

Although Systemic Linguistics has not been applied so much to textual analysis of Yoruba studies, the theory has however influenced the description of Yoruba grammar. The monumental work by Ayo Bamgbose, viz. A Grammar of Yoruba (published in 1966) is, for example, carried out within the framework of this theory. So also is the comparative study by Adebisi Afolayan, viz. "The Linguistic Problems of Yoruba Learners and Users of

English" done using the same framework. In these two studies, several useful grammatical categories are identified which can be recognized in text analysis, e.g. transitivity, mood, modality, tense, polarity, etc. Some of these are utilized in this study, but with significant modifications in some respects.

First, the description of transitivity features goes beyond the surface description of transitive and intransitive verbs by Bamgbose (1966) into a deep grammar description of process, participant and circumstance roles of the transitivity category. Also this study prefers the more semantic labels of the "process" sub-category employed by Berry (1975 and 1977) and Halliday (1970, 1973 and 1985), to the syntactic labels employed by Afolayan (1968). Thus, the terms of the process category used here are material (Mat), relational (Rel), mental (Ment), verbalized (Verb) and behavioural (Beh) depending on whether the processes indicate physical, attributive, equative and existential, sensing, saying and behaving actions. Also, the terms of the participant category include actor (Ac), goal (G.), token (TK), value (Vl), etc. Second, the analysis of tense features follows Odunuga's (1982) description which identifies two tenses (non-future and future) and four aspects (neutral, durative, ingressive and terminative). The tenses and aspects are conflated in a description of the tense system of Yoruba. Third, this study does not agree with the contention by systemic linguists that only the indicative clause provides the environment for the selection of tense options (see Afolayan 1968). With respect to Yoruba, our observation shows that the imperatives too enter into tense description though they are pragmatically related to the future time. For example, the indirect imperative marker *ki'* "let" is a modal item which should mark future tense like all other modal auxiliaries in the language. Hence, both of the sentences *Won yoo lo* "They will go" and *Ki' won lo* "Let them go" are variants which should be assigned the future tense. Similarly, the form *o lo* with its respective interpretations as "You went" (declarative) and "(You) Go" (direct imperative) should be seen as expressing the non-future neutral tense irrespective of the pragmatic references to time each of them may make. And lastly, this study also identifies the features of cohesion in the Yoruba texts analysed. These features are analysed via the cohesive categories earlier suggested by Halliday and Hassan (1966), viz. reference, substitution, ellipsis, lexical cohesion, etc.

### 3. THE GRAMMATICAL FEATURES OF TWO YORUBA TEXTS

#### 3.1 THE TEXTS

The texts analysed in this study derive from literary and oral sources respectively. Text 1 is an extract from a divinatory text. The text is an extract (poetic) monologue from an Ifa configuration - *Oyèkú mejì* (Abimbola 1972:12). It evokes easy child delivery in a speech event involving a herbalist-client in the practice of Yoruba traditional medicine (YTM). Text 2 is another YTM text which represents a dialogue between the participants on the diagnosis and treatment of an ailment. Both texts are presented below with the main clauses in them numbered.

#### 3.2 THE ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

The basic unit of analysing the grammatical features in this study is the free (or main) clause. The main clause has a finite verb and it represents a sense unit in a text. A simple proposition thus has one main clause; a compound proposition has two or more main clauses; and a complex proposition has one or more main clauses and a number of subordinate clauses.

Text 1

Ó yè pèè, i	: It opens wide, i
Ó bọ pọrọ ii	: It drops briskly. ii
A diá fun òyèlè òkòkò	: Ifa was cast for Oyele Owoxo
Ti wón n pè ládíè	: Which they call hen
Ti n bímo rẹ lálgbèbí iii	5 : Which bears her offspring unaided. iii 5
Bwé olọyèrè kii jẹ orúkọ miiṣán àfi ayùnré iv	The oloyeere leaf bears no other name apart from ayunre. iv
Yiyè nìí sè tabo, v	: Opening is the female's lot, v
Èbò nìí sè takọ vi	: Inserting is the male's role. vi
Yèdì pèè, (vii) o wàà bọ, viii	10 : Open the birth passage wide and come down, viii
Ọmọ tuntun lèrè àyèbò. ix	: A new child is the fruit of copulation ix 10
Àyèbò a' ọmọ. x	: Sexual intercourse results in procreation, x
Bókan ò yè,	Without one opening,
Ọkàn ò lèè rí bí xi	The other cannot produce ix
Ládunládun là a' balé oyin. xii	It is sweetness that one encounters in the 'house of honey' (beehive). xii

Text 2

Ìyá Ọmọ: È káààrọ ná. i	: Client (Mother): Good morning Madaa! i
Oniṣẹ̀gùn: È káàrọ o.ii È wolé iii jókòó. iv	: Herbalist: You're welcome. ii Come in iii and (Léyìn ìgbà díè, ó n yẹ ọmọ wò.) sit down. iv How do you feel? v
Báwo ló sè n' sè è? v	: Mother: (To daughter) Aren't you being asked a question? vi 5
Ìyá Ọmọ: (Sì ọmọ) Iwọ kó n' n' bí ní? vi	: Daughter: My body is aching. vii
Ọmọ: Ara n' ro mí. vii	: Herbalist: Is your urine any yellow? viii
Oniṣẹ̀gùn: Sè 'tò è ọ pón? viii (Sì Ọmọsẹ) Ganiyaa!	(Calls an attendant) Ganiya!
È wá dá a lóhùn. ix	Come and attend to her. ix
Ìyá Ọmọ: Ó kàn maa n sùn kalé ní. x	: Mother: She just sleeps on the ground. x
Oniṣẹ̀gùn: Èn en. Ó wó o lara ní. xi	: Herbalist: Yes. It deadens her nerves. xi 10
Ìyá Ọmọ: Mo dè ti gbé e lọ sí hospitu, tí mo ti bèrè 10	: Mother: And I've taken her to the hospital, abéré, tí wón ti kòògún fun un. xii
Oniṣẹ̀gùn: Abéré ò ranbàa. xiii Agbo lăă kà fun e	to the extent that she has started getting injections and they have prescribed medicines for her. xii
àti àgúnmu. xiv	
(Ọmọsẹ gbé nńkan agbo dé.)	
Ọnà mēta ní o ó dá a sí. xv Kó o lona kan	15 : Herbalist: Injections cannot cure fever xiii
lálé yíi. xvi Tó bá tún dótunla, kó o tún	It is herbs we shall prescribe for you, and herbal powder. xiv
lona kan. xvii Tó bá tún dótunla mí in, kó o	(Attendant comes in with medicinal ingredients). You will divide it into three places. xv Use one 15
lona kan. xiii	part tonight. xvi When it is the day after tomorrow, use another part. xvii When it is yet another
Ìyá Ọmọ: Bléyí ní yóó maa mu? xix	
Oniṣẹ̀gùn: Èn en. Múu lásán ní, xx wón ò á fi wé o. xxi 20	
Yóó maa mu ún gégé bí omi ní gbogbo ìgbà. xxii	
(Sì ọmọ) Sọ o tí gbọ? xxiii Yéló fifà lo wà	
lára e o. xxiv Kó o ya maa ló o dáadàa o. xxv	
Ó maa n kọyàn lóoyi o. xxvi Kó o má tan'ra.	

e o. xvii

two day's, use one part. xviii  
 :Mother: Is this the one she will be  
 drinking? xix  
 :Herbalist: Yes. It is only for drinking xx,  
 they don't bathe with it. xxi 20  
 She will drink it like water all  
 the time. xxii (To daughter) Do you  
 hear? xxiii Yellow fever is what  
 you're suffering from xxiv. So you  
 had better use it well. xxv It  
 sometimes causes dizziness, xvi so  
 don't deceive yourself. xvii

In order to describe the grammatical features of the texts, all the main clauses in the texts are accounted for in terms of the respective options which they realise from different systems. The features indicated by these clauses are specified and later summarized after a frequency count of each feature has been made. General statements are then made in respect of the features and how they relate to the situation in which the texts are produced.

#### 4. ANALYSIS OF GRAMMATICAL FEATURES IN TEXTS

The grammatical features of Text 1 are analysed and presented in Table 1 below. The presentation represents a sample analysis of grammatical features in Yoruba texts.

Table 1 = Features of Text 1

Clause	Sentence	Transitivity				Positive	Tense	Mood	Modality	Theme	
No	Type	Process	Participants		Circumstances		Aspect				
i	S	Mat	Mid	Ac	Manner	Pos	WP.W	Dec	N-mood	Unknd	
ii	S	Mat	Mid	Ac	Manner	Pos	WP.W	Dec	N-mood	Unknd	
iii	Cpr	Mat	W-mid	Ac:G		Pos	WP.W	Dec	N-mood	Unknd	
iv	S	Rel		TK:VI		Neg	WP.D	Dec	N-mood	Unknd	
v	S	Rel		TK:VI		Pos	WP.D	Dec	N-mood	Mkd	
vi	S	Rel		TK:VI		Pos	WP.D	Dec	N-mood	Mkd	
vii	-	Mat	W-mid	Ac:G	Manner	Pos	WP.D	Imp	N-mood	Unknd	
viii	Cpd	Mat	Mid	Ac		Pos	WP.W	Imp	N-mood	Unknd	
ix	S	Rel		TK:VI		Pos	WP.W	Dec	N-mood	Mkd	
x	S	Rel		TK:VI		Pos	P.W	Dec	Nod	Unknd	
xi	Cpr	Mat	W-mid	Ac:G		Neg	P-W	Dec	Nod	Mkd	
xii	S	Mat	W-mid	Ac:G:R		Pos	WP.D	Dec	N-mood	Mkd	

## 5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 THEME AND COHESION

In Text 1 the items under theme belong to the classes of pronouns *ó* "it"; a "someone"; *òkan* "one"; nouns *òyèlè* *òkòkò* "a hen"; *omó tuntun* "a new baby"; and nominalizations *yíyè* "opening"; *áyèbò* "opening and inserting/copulation. Apart from the indefinite pronoun *á* "someone" which indicates the performer of Ifa divination, the other reference items refer to objects (human and non-human, concrete and abstract) which pertain to the childbearing activity described in the text. The items under rheme represent information about the beneficiary of a divination exercise (cli), the activity of childbearing reported in the divination (cls i, ii, vii and viii), the usual state of occurrences of this activity (cls v, vi, ix, and x) and the expected outcome of the activity (cl xii). The presentation of information is realized by an almost even distribution of unmarked (58.3%) and marked clauses (41.7%), which shows that the emphasized items which indicate characteristics and occurrences of positive correlates of events (see cls v, vi, ix and xii) play a very crucial role in the information given.

In Text 2 the items under theme are personal pronouns *è* "You", "He/It", *é* "his", *mó* "I" and *yón* "they"; a demonstrative pronoun *éyèlì* "this one"; a pronominal *ìyó* "you"; and some nouns *Àrà* "Body", *àbéré* "injection", *àgbo* "herbal medicine" etc. These items represent the human participants (herbalist, client and patient) and objects of medicine in a YTM practice. The information provided about these participants via items in the rheme reveal the condition of ill-health of a patient (cls v, vii, viii, x, etc.) and the recommendation of certain drugs for use to cure the illness (cls xv-xxvi).

Unlike Text 1 which has fairly even number of unmarked and marked clauses, Text 2 has a far greater number of unmarked (63%) clauses. The marked clauses seem to be more concentrated in the aspect of prescription than diagnosis in the text and they emphasize certain medicinal objects as well as the circumstances and mode of application of such objects in order to treat an illness (see cls xiv, xv, xvii-xx).

Lastly, the content of both Texts 1 and 2 is characterized by cohesive features which belong especially to the categories of reference and lexical cohesion. While the two texts have cohesive items making co-textual reference, the latter text only is predominated by reference to specific situational features because it presents conversational interaction as opposed to a monological recitation of a mythical event from a repository of Ifa poems. Also, the conversational mode of Text 2 permits one instance of the use of ellipsis (cl. xx).

5.2 TRANSITIVITY

There is a difference in the selection of process options by both texts. While Text 1 selects almost evenly from only two process options (the material and relational), Text 2 makes at least one choice from each of the five process options identified in this study. More importantly, however, is the fact that while the former text has some relational verbs (41.7%) which indicate assertions of states and natural courses of events before and during the process of child delivery, the latter text is predominated by material clauses (76.9%) which indicate physical actions pertaining to the symptoms of a client's disease (cls vii, x and xi) and the efforts at the treatment of the disease (cls xii-xxii and xxiv-xxv). The prominence of material clauses in these two texts, however, shows the perception of a dynamic world by YTM participants. The mark of existence and good health is the ability to perform physical activities.

In Text 2, the material clauses most often select the non-middle participant option (80%) where the actions expressed extended from actors towards particular beneficiaries and/or goals: an illness acts on a patient (cl xi), a mother (the client) has previously taken her daughter (patient) to an hospital for treatment (cl xii), and the daughter has to prepare and drink some herbal medicine (cl xiv ff.). In contrast to

the above, the material clauses in Text 1 select both the non-middle (57.1%) and middle options (42.9%). The middle clauses indicate actions which do not extend beyond the performers of such actions. The description is rather particular about manner of the actions (that is, the ease of the process of child delivery) rather than the goals. Also, all the relational clauses in the text realise states of identification in which certain recognized values are assigned to particular tokens.

The circumstantial elements selected by the two clauses above also differ. Text 1 consists of only manner adjuncts, which indicate the sole concern of the reciter of the text with the manner of occurrences of certain events. But Text 2 is made up of time, place and manner adjuncts which mainly indicate a qualification of the process of application of medicine

### 5.3 POLARITY

It is observed that both Texts 1 and 2 are dominated by positive clauses (83.3% and 88.9%) rather than negative ones (16.7% and 11.1%). The positive clauses in Text 1 indicate the positive conception of the Yoruba universe expressed in the text about the occurrences of events and their positive correlation based on the natural order of the universe. It is argued in the text here that since the mother hen hatches naturally, and since copulation occurs naturally, the process of childbirth in the text should also occur naturally. In Text 2, the positive clauses indicate things that are either happening or being done or supposed to be done than otherwise. In other words, the expressions emphasise what is the case about a state of affairs rather than what is not. It is a notable fact that in the practice of YTM information is exchanged between the herbalist and client. The content of one speaker's contribution most often corroborates that of the other rather than deny it.

### 5.4 TENSE

In Text 1 the non-future tense (83.3%) predominates over the future tense (16.7%) because the events and states described in the text are universal truths which hold for all times. Such events and states are either happening at a point in time or occurring habitually. In Text 2, however, although the non-future tense predominates (66.7%), the future tense also significantly marks the aspect of medication in it. In other words, there is indication that the treatment of the illness diagnosed in the text will take place at the future time.

### 5.5 MOOD AND MODALITY

Texts 1 and 2 differ in their mood and modality features. In Text 1, the dominant option is the declarative (83.3%), and there is no occurrence at all of the interrogative option. The predominance of declaratives mainly show the descriptive and assertive nature of the text. Together with the few imperatives in the text (16.7%), the declaratives represent the description of events and assertions of facts in order to back up a wish (cls vii and viii). Also, the presence of declaratives and absence of interrogatives indicate the nature of this text as a repertoire of conventionally held unquestionable truths believed to come from the divine authoritative source of Ifa. Lastly, the fact that most of the declarative clauses in the text are non-modal (80%) show the factual nature of the text and the absence of any expression of attitude or judgement by the speaker.

However, in Text 2 the three options declarative, interrogative and imperative are significant, although the declarative option occurs more frequently (48.2%) than the other two. Declarative clauses occur in this text more than the imperative (37%) and interrogative (14.8%) options because a lot of statements give information and serve the phatic function in it. After exchanging pleasantries, the herbalist and client exchange information in the diagnosis of the latter's problem. The diagnosis in the text is

projected by both declaratives and interrogatives. Also, the herbalist uses some declarative modalized clauses to accompany the imperatives which are used to give directives in the later (prescriptive) section of the text. Of course, the directives given via declarative modals are more subtle and also less compelling than those given via directives because the former indicates that the carrying out of the herbalist's instruction is supposedly more of the client's responsibility than his. Lastly, the presence of modalized clauses in this text shows the expression of emotions and judgements about certain obligations and futurity by the speakers. From the discussion above, it is evident that Text 2 has a more elaborate expression of interpersonal meanings than Text 1.

## 5.6 SENTENCE TYPES

Both Texts 1 and 2 have some similarities in the sentence types they contain. For example, both of them are predominated by the simple sentence type which enables their quick expression of information by the texts. Conjunctions are sparsely used in the texts, while coherence is achieved mainly in them via the sequential ordering of simple sentences. The difference between the texts is, however, marked by the presence of minor sentences in Text 2 and their absence from Text 1. In this regard, it should be noted that the occurrence of minor sentences is typical of conversational interaction and untypical of poetic texts.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

No claim is made whatsoever that the description of grammatical features in this study is exhaustive. All the work has done is to demonstrate as clearly as possible how some grammatical features can be described efficiently in Yoruba texts via a systemic linguistic framework and also how, with a good analysis of the text, certain inferences can be made from such features to the situational context of the text.

Although, grammar alone does not constitute a text, it no doubt represents the heart of language description whose mechanisms ought to be understood by language scholars. In describing the features of grammar in texts, one not only gains an insight into the linguistic properties of such texts, but also one understands some facts about the socio-situational settings of the texts.

Meanwhile, the findings in this study have shown that the similarities of grammatical features between the texts analysed relate to their similar subject matter, viz, the practice of medicine. The findings have also shown that the differences of grammatical features pertain to the different tenors and modes of the texts. The presentation in Text 2 shows a practice of medicine that is based on empirical knowledge and the use of natural objects while the presentation in Text 1 shows a practice that is based on magical belief and belief in the supernatural. Both the empirical and magical methods of treatment are recognized in YTM practice and they sometimes complement each other in the treatment of some cases in the field (see Adegbite, in progress).

## NOTE

1. Some scholars recognise the fact that some general communicative functions underlie the numerous everyday individual uses of language. Such functions include the informative, directive, expressive, aesthetic and phatic functions (cf. Jakobson 1960, Searle 1976 and Adegbite, in preparation).