

Preposition as a non-lexical class in standard Yorùbá

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Abstract

Until recently, the preposition seems to have been firmly established as one of the lexical classes in Yorùbá (Crowther 1852, Ògúnbôwálé 1970 Awóbùlúyì 1971, among others). This paper examines this claim by employing the Minimalist Programme as suggested by Radford (1999:38) that morpho-syntactic features must be the basis of establishing a lexical class. This we do by looking at the morphological structure and process of the items classified as preposition and their syntactic distribution in the language. It was found out that preposition does not take part in the derivational morphology system in the Yorùbá language neither does it have a position of occurrence as noun and verb do in the language. The paper therefore concludes that preposition is not a lexical class in the standard Yorùbá but it is part of the functional support for the noun in the language.

Key words: Preposition, Lexical, Class, Standard, Yoruba

1. Preposition in the literature

With the advent of modern linguistics, three opposing schools have emerged on scholarship on the preposition in the standard Yorùbá language. The first school is of the view that there are prepositions in Yorùbá language (though few in number). Scholars in this school include Crowther (1852), Johnson (1969), Ògúnbôwálé (1970), Awóbùlúyì (1978), Awóyalé (1991) and Olúyêyç (1993). Items listed as prepositions by this school include: sí 'to', ti 'of', pèlú 'with', ní 'in/at', fún 'for', dé 'for', kù 'before' and fi 'with' so categorized. Others are bá 'help', mǒ 'anymore/longer', sin 'before' and kà 'on'

The second school is of the view that there is no preposition in Yorùbá language. Yusuf (1992, 1994) and Adékèyè (2012) belong to this school of thought. The third school is of the view that there are not more than two or three prepositions in Yorùbá. This view is shared by grammarians like Bowen (1858), Bámgbóyè (1990), Déchainé (1993) and Ajíbóyè (2011). The prepositions established by this school are: ní 'in/at', sí 'to', ti 'of' and pèlú 'with'.

Bámgbóyè (1990:131) identifies many of the so-called prepositions as bound verbs in Yorùbá language. Among his examples are: bá, 'with' fèrê 'almost' fi 'use' sí 'to' as in the examples below:

1. (a) Adé bá wǒn lö.

Adé with them go.

'Adé went with them'

(b) Wǒn fèrê dé

They soon arrive.

'They will soon arrive'

(c) Wǒn fi öyç sí ojú.

They apply soap to eye.

'They applied soap into the eyes'

Bámgbóyè (1990: 131) explains that they are analyzed as preposition in the literature because they are bound verbs and are translated as prepositions in English language.

The first school which enumerates a number of items as prepositions, do so with some degree of doubt, even uncertainty that many of the items categorized as prepositions belong to some other classes. For instance, Awóbùlúyì (1978:99) says of pèlú ‘with’:

This preposition’s status is somewhat doubtful. In other words, it may be possible or desirable to call it something else. When used ,correctly’, it has the same meaning as fi ,with, by’.

This observation about pèlú ‘with’ is right as other observations are about many other items called prepositions. They may well be verbs in serial verb construction.

2.1 Conditions for establishing a lexical class

Radford (1999:38) suggests that:

...the bulk of evidence in support of postulating that words belong to categories is morphosyntactic (i.e. morphological and/or syntactic) in nature. The relevant morphological evidence relates to the inflectional and derivational properties of words: inflectional properties relate to different forms of the same word (E.g. plural form of a noun like cat is formed by adding the plural inflection +s to form cats), while derivational properties relate to the processes by which a word can be used to form a different kind of word by the addition of another morpheme (e.g. by adding the suffix +ness to the adjective sad, we can form the noun sadness).

Radford (1999) is saying that words of the same lexical class must have the same derivational process or that words derived by the same derivational process must belong to the same lexical class. Radford (1999) says further that items of a lexical class must be able to serve as derivational morphemes to derive new items of another lexical class, as in the English example of adding the suffix +ness to an adjective to form a noun. Though, Yorùbá is not an inflectional language, but it has morphological processes and morphemes for deriving new lexical items. On the syntactic evidence, Radford (1999:40) says

The syntactic evidence for assigning words to categories essentially relates to the fact that categories of words have different distributions (i.e. occupy a different range of positions within phrases and sentences).

Radford is saying here that lexical items of the same class can be found in the same position and can substitute one another as long as the semantics of the language permits. Words of a different class cannot appear in the position of another class. This is to say that a noun in a language has its position in a phrase or sentence which cannot be occupied by another class, a verb, for instance.

From the morpho-syntactic evidence postulated by Radford (1999), the following conditions can be deduced for a lexical class to be established:

Condition 1:

A lexical class must have its own morphological feature. i.e. it must be derivable by some morphological processes, having derivational morphemes and must be able to serve as derivational morpheme to derive items of another class.

A lexical class must have its position of occurrence in a phrase or sentence.

Condition 2:

3. Application of condition 1

The grammar of Yorùbá so far has derivational morphemes and processes for the classes of noun and verb. Many scholars have worked on this. Among them are Awóbùlúyì (2008), Tinúoyè (2000), Owólabí (1984, 1985, 1995), Bámgbóyé (1990), etc. The derivational processes established for the class of noun are prefixation, reduplication (partial and full), combination of two noun items etc. These processes are peculiar to noun derivation. This is why the class of noun is productive.

The verb also has derivational processes which include combining a verb and a noun as well as combining two verbs to derive new verbs in the language. The class of verb is also productive with an uncountable number of members.

Now looking at the so-called class of preposition, we find out that it neither has morphological processes to derive more of its members nor morphemes for its derivation. This is why it is non-productive and has very small number of members with as few as three items. Many of the items so classified by some scholars (Crowther 1852, Ògunbôwálé 1970, Olúyêç 1993, Awóbùlúyì 1978 among others) are called verbs by some other scholars (Bowen 1858, Bámgbóyé 1990, Dechaine 1993 Adékèyè 2012 among others). The items are so analyzed because they are translated into preposition in English words, (Bámgbóyé 1990:131) Awóbùlúyì (1978:97) lists (fí 'with/ by means of', bá 'for, in company', fún 'for, on behalf of', and pèlú 'by') ní 'in', sí 'to' and ti 'of' as prepositions. Some of these (bá, fí, and fún) are analyzed as verbs employed as preposition in Yorùbá by Bowen (1858:52), while Bámgbóyé (1990:157) analyzes bá; fí and ní as ,ôrô-ìyè afarahç' i.e. bound verbs in the language but later lists ní as one of his two prepositions in Yorùbá language (Bámgbóyé 1990:175).

In fact, Baker (2003) observes that preposition must be part of another system as he calls it a functional head that derives adjunct modifiers. He also discusses it as small and finite in number, often under five, sometimes one. Among his examples are:

Sranan: 1

Mohawk: 4

Chichewa: 2 or 5

Edo: approximately 3 (+ some defective verbs). English: about 50.

Baker is also of the opinion that preposition does not take part in the derivational morphology system, as either input or output. Therefore, morphologically, preposition is not qualified to be established as a lexical class.

4. Application of condition 2

Condition 2 is that a lexical class should have its syntactic position in the phrase or sentence. The only syntactic position we can talk of for preposition is that of noun phrase.

Noun and verb have syntactic positions peculiar to them in the phrase or sentence. Noun is always found in subject and object positions. The verb cannot be found in any of these two positions but in the predicate position. There is no position like this for the preposition.

This is the reason why Grimshaw 1990 says it is part of the functional support for the noun when it becomes prepositional phrases which are always adjuncts. The items analyzed as prepositions in Yorùbá are always found occurring with temporal and or spatial nouns in the language. This is why Welmers 1973 analyses both ní 'in' and sí 'to /exist' as verbs expressing possession and location respectively as in the sentences below:

2. (a) Omi wà ní inú ìkòkò

Water exist in inside pot

'There is water in the pot'

(b) Omi kò sí ní inú ìkòkò

Water NEG exists in inside pot.

'There is no water in the pot.'

Yusuf (1992) argues that these items serve as predicates in sentences as in :

3. (a) Mo ní owó.

'I have money'

(b) Mo ní owó ní àpò.

‘I have money in my pocket’

ní in sentence 3(a) is clearly a verb of possession as well as the first ní ‘have’ of 3(b). The second instance of ní ‘in’ is treated as a verb of location.

5. Conclusion

We have been able to establish two conditions for establishing a lexical class by employing the morpho-syntactic features established by Radford (1999). Applying these conditions to the class of ‘preposition’ in Yorùbá, we find out that preposition does not exist as a lexical class in standard Yorùbá language. Scholars who have it as a lexical class employ meaning equivalence to do so. This fact has been noticed by Bámbóyé (1999) and the position of Grimshaw (1990) also supports our claim for standard Yorùbá.

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