

COMPLEX VERBS IN YORUBA

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I. Introduction¹

There are two types of verbs in Yoruba, a Kwa language of Southwestern Nigeria. These are simple monosyllabic verbs such as in (1), and complex verbs such as in (2). Those in (2) are referred to as complex because they are derived from a combination of a verb and another word which could be another verb, or as in the examples below, a derived noun or a non-derived noun.

1. Simple Verbs

- a. rí 'to see'
- b. jẹ 'to eat'
- c. tàn² 'to deceive'

2. Complex Verbs

- a. fẹ̀ràn 'to love' from fẹ́ + ọ̀ràn
'to like' 'case/situation'
- b. kóríra 'to hate' from kó + írira
'to gather' 'disgust'
- c. gbádùn 'to enjoy' from gbá + adùn
'to sweep' 'enjoyment'

The complex verbs in Yoruba have been treated as "compounds" (Abraham 1962 and Rowlands 1969), "Fixed Verb-nominal Combinations" (Bamgbose 1967), and "combinations of verbs and their objects" (Awobuluyi 1977). Recently, Akinlabi (1986), Akinlabi and Oyebade (1986), and Folarin (1987) using the assumptions of Lexical Phonology, argue that such verbs are lexical compounds whose derivations are based on lexical rules. The purpose of this paper is to show that verbs such as fẹ̀ràn, and kóríra are not lexical compounds but instances of noun incorporation and therefore syntactic compounds. This implies that the derivations of fẹ̀ràn and kóríra are based not on lexical rules, but syntactic rules.

In what follows, we will discuss some of the unique characteristics of the verbs in (2) and later present an analysis articulated within the framework of Government and Binding (Chomsky 1981 and 1982).

II. Major Characteristics of *fẹ̀ràn* and *kóríra*

One characteristic that sets verbs such as *fẹ̀ràn* and *kóríra* from other verbs (whether simple or other complex verbs⁴) in Yoruba is that their objects do not have to fulfill an obligatory determiner rule which holds for this language. For example, in Yoruba, object nouns must have something in the determiner node which can be a number, demonstrative, or possessor.

3. a. *mo rí ọmọ kan*
 I see child one
 "I saw a child"
- b. *?mo rí ọmọ*
 I see child
 "I saw a child"

The sentence in (3b) is not okay because of a lack of a determiner node. The logical question from the hearer will be "which child?". On the other hand, the sentence in (3a) is perfectly okay because of the existence of a determiner node.

However, if we replace the verb *rí* with *fẹ̀ràn*, as in (4), we will observe that the determiner rule does not hold for verbs like *fẹ̀ràn*.

4. a. *mo fẹ̀ràn ọmọ kan*
 I love child one
 "I love a child"
- b. *mo fẹ̀ràn àwọn ọmọ*
 I love pl. child
 "I love the children"
- c. *mo fẹ̀ràn ọmọ*
 I love child
 "I love children"

The sentence in (4c) has a habitual connotation. Such a connotation

is possible with *rí* but in that case, the meaning is achieved by context or an aspect marker *máa n̄*. For example,

5. Mo *máa n̄ rí àwọn ọmọ*
 I habitual see pl. child
 "I always see children"

When an unmarked noun is used with *rí*, it cannot be indefinite. It must be specific, referring back to a specific context as in (6) below.

6. a. *Şé o rí obìrín yí àti ọmọ rẹ?* "Did you see this woman and her
 child?"
 b. Mo *rí ọmọ.* "I saw the child (but not the woman)"

The sentence in (6b) is in reply to a question about a particular child and so is the reply. In fact, this use of *rí* is possible only in response to a question referring to a previously mentioned individual or thing. The question now is, why do verbs such as *fẹ̀ràn* and *kóríra* behave in this unique way?

The other peculiarity of verbs such as *fẹ̀ràn* that is crucial to our analysis is their incapability of taking aspect markers. For example,

7. a. mo *ti rí ọmọ kan.*
 I perf. see child one.
 "I have seen a child."
 b. * mo *ti fẹ̀ràn ọmọ*
 I perf. love child
 c. * mo *ti fẹ̀ràn ọmọ kan*
 I perf. love child one

In (7), the aspect marker *ti* 'perfective' is acceptable with *rí* but not with *fẹ̀ràn*. The same situation holds for other aspect markers as shown in (8) below.

8. a. Mo *máa n̄ rí ọmọ.*
 I habt. see child
 "I am accustomed to seeing children."

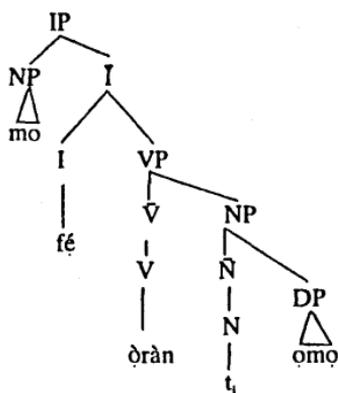
8. b. *Mo máa ní fẹ̀ràn ọmọ.
I habt. love child
- c. *Mo máa ní fẹ̀ràn ọmọ kan.
I habt. love child one

III. Analysis

The complex transitive verbs such as *fẹ̀ràn* and *kóríra* are very limited in Yoruba. Another example in this class of verbs is *gbádùn* 'to enjoy'. All other complex transitive verbs follow the pattern of the verb *rí*.

Assuming that aspect occupies Infl, we can construct the following underlying structure for (4c) in (9) below.

9.



In (9), *fẹ̀* occupies Infl while *òràn* occupies the verb node. This unusual placement of the noun would be explained by saying that Yoruba has constructions similar to "light verb" constructions in Japanese (Grimshaw & Mester, 1988). *Fẹ̀* in Infl, meanwhile, will explain the mutual exclusiveness of *fẹ̀ràn* with the aspect markers. Consider, however, the following data.

10. a. Mo fẹ̀ dódò
"I like fried plantain"

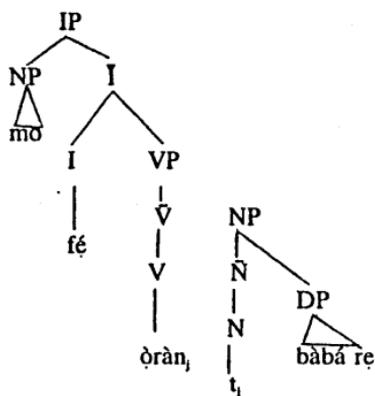
10. b. Mo máa ní fẹ̀ dòdò
 I habitual like fried plantain
 "I usually like fried plantain"

When *fẹ̀* is used by itself, it can take aspect markers and it behaves the same as verbs like *rí*. What's more, *dòdò* in (10) can only be taken for a direct object not a verb (light or heavy). Therefore, *fẹ̀* must occupy the verb node at Deep Structure (DS). If that is so, is it still possible to analyze *fẹ̀ràn* syntactically or must it be understood as a single lexical item?

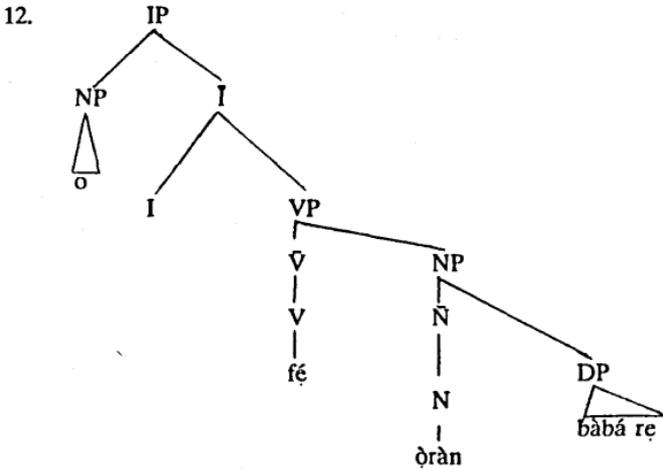
The answer is that *fẹ̀ràn* may still be analyzed as a syntactic compound if we propose a movement rule as part of the compounding process. Since *fẹ̀* functions as a verb when independent of *òràn*, we must assume that *fẹ̀* occupies the verb node in DS. When *òràn* is introduced as a "light verb" then *fẹ̀* moves into Infl.

Of course, this is not the case every time *òràn* appears in a sentence. *Fẹ̀ òràn* can also appear and significantly is not semantically equivalent to *fẹ̀ràn*. For example, *o fẹ̀ràn bàbá rẹ̀* means "you love your father". *O fẹ̀ òràn bàbá rẹ̀* on the other hand, means "you like your father's case". The structures for the two sentences are shown in (11) and (12) below.

11.



"You love your father"



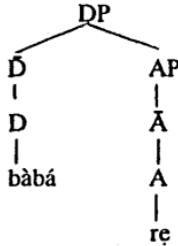
"You like your father's case"

The major difference between the structures in (11) and (12) is that, in (11), *fé* moves from the verb node into Infl, while *òràn* moves from the noun node into the verb node as a light verb. Such movements do not occur in (12).

Similarly, since the possessor remains in the determiner node in (11), how does it become interpreted as a direct object? The answer is that, the possessor must be assigned case by something. In (11), the possessor cannot be assigned possessive case by the object noun (*òràn*), since the object noun is now a light verb. Therefore, the light verb assigns case as any verb, which means that the noun in the determiner node will receive case as a direct object. Note the similarity with noun incorporation in that obliques are raised to the functional status of direct object'.

If the possessor is followed by a demonstrative or a possessive pronoun (which ordinarily would be under the determiner node), the demonstrative is placed in the AP as shown in (13).

13.



This not only explains how the obligatory determiner rule is satisfied, but also reveals the relationship of verbs such as *fẹ̀ràn* to their "object"; namely, that the surface object of *fẹ̀ràn* is the possessor of the noun which becomes the light verb component of these complex verbs. In other words, the derived sentences in (11) and (12) above have the same DS (what we should expect). It is the movement of the verb in (11) that triggers the semantic change.

This is especially clear in two intransitive complex verbs similar to verbs such as *fẹ̀ràn*. These verbs are shown in (14).

14. a. *ṣẹ̀wó* 'to engage in prostitution/ to change money' from
 ṣẹ́ + *owó*
 'to change' 'money'
- b. *làyú* 'to be sophisticated / to open eyes' from
 là + *ojú*
 'to open' 'eyes'

Ṣẹ̀wó, for example, cannot be used with an auxilliary unless it is taken to be a contraction of 'to change money'. But when taken to mean 'to engage in prostitution', it cannot take an auxilliary. The same is true of *làyú*. For example,

15. a. **Ó máa ní làyú* "She usually becomes sophisticated"
 b. *Ó máa ní làyú* "She usually opens (her) eyes"

All of these facts point toward a process which resembles noun incorporation as the explanation for verbs such as *fẹ̀ràn* and *kóríra* in Yoruba. However, there are two crucial differences between noun incorporation and the syntactic process that produces *fẹ̀ràn* and *kóríra*. First, this syntactic process is no longer a productive process. It operates on only a closed set of verbs and with only one object for each verb. Secondly, and even more crucially, the noun is never actually incorporated into the verb, but rather, the verb moves into Infl while the noun moves into the verb node and becomes a light verb.

Actually, there are several verbs which exhibit this same movement, for example, *şẹwó* and *lájú* mentioned above. But in the case of *şẹwó* and *lájú*, the moved noun does not have a possessor in the DS, therefore, there is no possessor raising with resultant surface object as we have in the case of *fẹ̀ràn*. Yet, the class of *lájú* is also closed and with each verb, there is only one noun it can incorporate which makes this class identical to verbs like *fẹ̀ràn* and *kóríra*.

However, the above explanation of moving the object into a verb node does not suffice because just as there is only one object that can be moved for each verb that moves into Infl, there is only one verb that moves into Infl for each object noun that becomes a light verb. At this point, it will be appropriate to address the question of contraction. If the noun indeed is not incorporated into the verb, how is it that the noun must phonologically contract with the verb?

Let us briefly look into another instance of verb-object contraction in Yoruba. In the language, a verb can contract with its object phonologically as shown in (16) below.

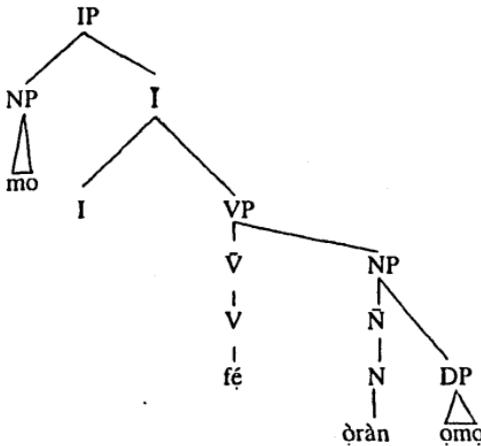
16. a. pa eja --> peja
 to kill fish 'kill fish'
- b. lu Adé --> ladé
 to beat Adé 'to beat Ade'
- c. je ewé --> jewé
 to eat leaves 'to eat leaves'

The type of contraction shown in (16) is optional and it makes no difference in the meaning of the VP. Notice also that the vowel of the verb is deleted, in contrast with the examples with *fẹ̀ràn* where it is the first vowel

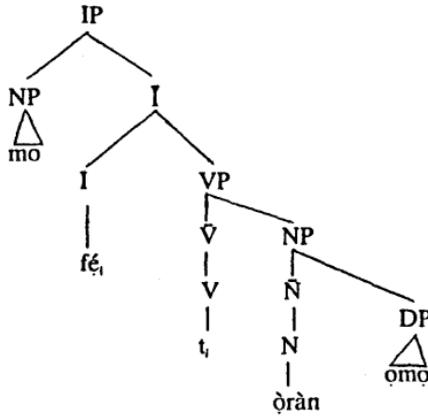
of the noun that is deleted. Folarin (1987), using a Lexical Phonology framework, explained this phenomenon by saying that the type of vowel deletion in *fèràn* is in the first stratum of morphological component while the verb-object contractions in (16) are derived post-lexically. In other words, the contraction of *fèràn* is the same as that of genuine lexical compounds but the fact is that no genuine lexical compounds share some of the unique features of *fèràn*. Neither are these features shared by phrasal verbs.

The *fèràn* complex is treated as a single lexical item at PF (the level of surface structure that assigns phonological form). Therefore, such verbs must be, in some sense, single lexical items by the time they get to PF. The trees in (17) below show the derivational history of *fèràn*.

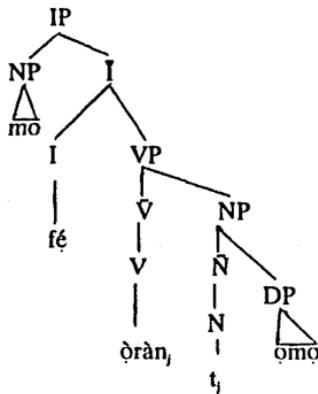
17a.



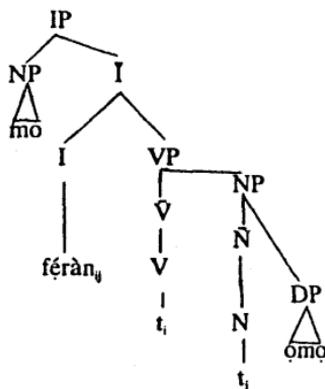
17b.



17c.



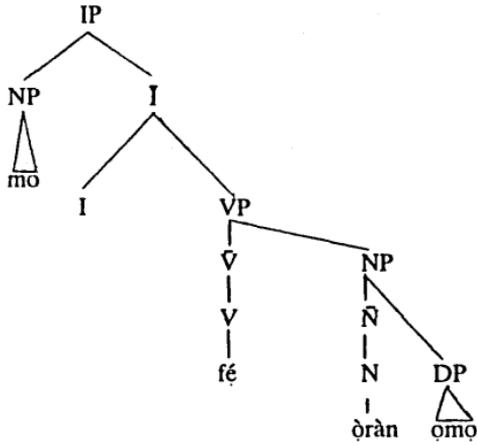
17d.



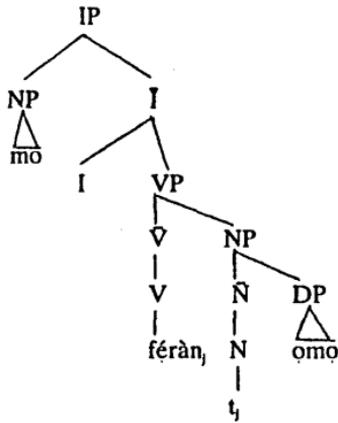
The tree in (17a) represents the DS. In (17b), *fé* raises to Infl; and in (17c) *òràn* is incorporated into the trace of *fé*, as in (9) above. In (17d), however, *òràn* is incorporated directly into *fé*, thus making *fèràn* a single lexical item by the time it reaches PF. This type of incorporation, however, is employed by languages for the purpose of passives and other constructions which do not correspond to the usage of *fèràn* (Baker 1988:305-10; 352-56). If this analysis of *fèràn* is correct, Yoruba will be the first documented case of V-Infl incorporation that is not used for passive constructions and it remains unclear as to why the light verb should incorporate into Infl.

Another solution to this problem (the solution supported in this paper) is to claim that in *fèràn*, the noun *òràn* first of all incorporates into the verb *fé*, then the new verb complex moves from the V-node into Infl. This solution is schematized below in (18) assuming the same DS as in (17a), repeated for convenience in (18a) below.

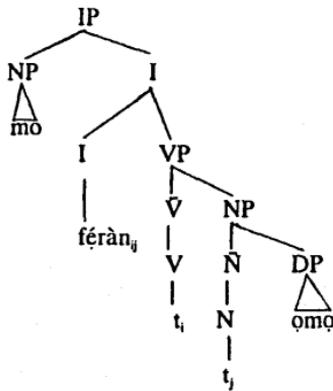
18a.



18b.



18c.



The claim in (18) is that in the case of verbs like *fẹ̀ràn*, the verb first incorporates the noun (18b), then raises to Infl (18c) thereby blocking the existence of aspect markers, and at PF the verb complex is treated as a single word. Either the object incorporation, the verb-to-Infl raising, or both, trigger the semantic change in the compounding. The advantage this solution has over the V-Infl incorporation in (17) is that apart from the fact that such incorporation is associated with passive constructions (which do not exist in Yorùbá), the incorporation of a noun into the trace of a verb is shakier theoretically than a straightforward object incorporation (Baker 1988:23).

The question that this solution raises, however, is "what motivates the verb complex to move into Infl after the process of object incorporation?" This analysis is still a more likely explanation, though, since the semantics of the sentence suggest that the verb in DS, (*fẹ̀* in the case of *fẹ̀ràn*) rather than the light verb (*òràn*), is what assigns case to the possessor.

It is, however, possible to argue that there is no movement from the verb node to Infl (that is, neither *fẹ̀* nor *fẹ̀ràn* is moved to Infl). Instead, one could stipulate a rule requiring affix movement for aspect markers. There would then be another rule prohibiting such movement down from Infl to the verb if the verb was already saddled with an incorporated noun. This would explain why verbs like *fẹ̀ràn* cannot take aspect markers. The problem, however, is that such an explanation would strongly suggest that some kind of binding exists between the aspect markers and verbs. It is improbable though

that aspect markers and verbs are bound in a formal way (as prefixes or proclitics) in Yoruba. For example, *tún*, 'also' can occur before an aspect marker plus a verb as in (19b), or between an aspect marker and a verb as in (19c).

19. a. Olú m^áa jẹ èwà lóla
 fut. eat beans tomorrow
 "Olú will eat beans tomorrow"
- b. Olú *tún* m^áa jẹ èwà lótúnla
 also fut. eat beans day after tomorrow
 "Olu will also eat beans day after tomorrow"
- c. Olú m^áa *tún* jẹ èwà lótúnla
 fut. also eat beans day after tomorrow
 "Olú will also eat beans day after tomorrow"

Both (19b) and (19c) are acceptable. If there is a formal binding between aspect markers and verbs in Yoruba, one will not expect another word such as *tún* to come between *máa* and *jẹ*. Since there is no evidence that there is a formal binding between aspect markers and verbs, the "affix hopping argument" will not be tenable for this analysis.

IV. Conclusion:

In this paper, we have presented an analysis to account for the unique features of verbs such as *féràn* and *kóríra*. These features are; (a) absence of aspect markers and (b) not following obligatory determiner rule. The first feature is more crucial to our analysis since it applies to all the verbs in this class whether transitive or intransitive, whereas the second feature only applies to transitive verbs.

The hypothesis argued for in this paper concerning the derivation of verbs like *féràn* can be stated in a broader way: verbs such as *féràn* involve incorporation of a noun by a verb, which blocks the appearance of aspect markers by motivating the verb complex itself to raise to infl. Further investigation into the structure of Yoruba will be necessary to determine what motivates this class of Yoruba complex verbs to raise to Infl. Possibly, the deciding factor may be found in some seemingly unrelated grammatical phenomenon.

The implication of this analysis is that there are three basic types of verb compounding in Yoruba and these are: (1) Lexical compounds such as *puró* 'to lie', *jókò* 'to sit', and *gbàgbé* 'to forget'; these verbs are derived through lexical rules in the morphological component and they do not share the unique features of verbs such as *fẹ̀rà̀n*; (2) Phrasal Compounds such as *jewé* 'to eat leaves' and *peja* 'to kill fish' which are optional contractions that occur at Surface Structure; and (3) Noun Incorporation as in *fẹ̀rà̀n* 'to love', *kóríra* 'to hate', and *şewó* 'to engage in prostitution'. Of these three types of compounds, only the phrasal compounds are productive.

NOTES

1. We would like to thank Kyle Johnson and Ljiljana Progovac for their valuable comments on this paper. Any errors or oversights are, of course, our responsibility.
2. All simple verbs in Yoruba are of CV structures. There is no Yoruba word that ends in a consonant. The sequence VN is used orthographically to represent nasal vowels.
3. The noun *íríra* itself is a derived noun made up of

ì + rí + ara
'Nominalizer' 'to make dirty' 'body'

4. There are other complex verbs in Yoruba that do not have these characteristics. We are only focusing our attention in this paper on complex verbs such as *fẹ̀rà̀n*, *kóríra*, *gbádùn*, etc., that behave in this unique way.
5. This is plainly seen with pronouns: *Mo rí i*, "I see him", but *Mo fẹ̀rà̀n rẹ̀*, "I love him", where *rẹ̀* is the oblique pronoun (cf. *bàbá rẹ̀*, "his father", or *pẹ̀lú rẹ̀*, "with him").

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