

A MINIMALIST ANALYSIS OF ERGATIVE VERBS IN YORÙBÁ

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Abstract

Extant works on Yorùbá have identified some other different sub-classes of verbs in the language, based their classifications on functional, structural, semantic approaches and so on. However, little or no attention is yet to be paid to the sub-class of ergative verbs in the language. Therefore, this paper discusses the in-depth analysis of ergative verbs in Yorùbá, detailing the strategies in the formation of ergative constructions in the language. Twelve (12) native speakers aged 65 and above were purposively selected for structured oral interview based on their proficiency. Data were subjected to syntactic analysis within the confine of the Minimalist Program. Ergative verbs in Yorùbá fall within both simple and complex verbs. In an ergative construction, the subcategorised DP object is copied to the specifier position of the tense phrase (TP) through the specifier position of the light verb phrase (vP) where the nominative case on the T-head (T₀) is checked. Yorùbá operates a null subject DP in an ergative construction, consequent upon this, it is invisible to a potential probe c-commanding it. Ergative features were identified on some transitive and splitting verbs. An object DP in an ergative construction occupies the specifier position of a verb phrase (VP) not for (accusative) case checking purpose. An object DP is only copied through the specifier position of the verb phrase (VP) to the specifier position of the outer light verb phrase (vP), an escape hatch that allows it visible to subsequent operations. The process of case checking is delayed at the VP domain so that the T-head (T₀) will have it [+case] feature checked by raising the same object DP to the specifier position of the tense phrase (TP).

Keywords: *Ergative verbs, Classification of verbs, Yorùbá, Raising constructions, Minimalist Program*

I INTRODUCTION

The concept of ergativity has attracted the interest of language scholars, particularly in English and some other European languages unlike African languages, where it still remains an uncommon phenomenon (Creissels and Good, 2018; Casaretto, Dimmendaal, Hellwig, Reinohil, and Schneider-Blum, 2020). Traditionally, the term is construed to be used in the demonstration of the link between the subject of an intransitive verb and object of a transitive verb (Anderson, 1968; Lyon, 1968; Filmore, 1968; Woolford, 2015 and so on). According to Comrie (1978), Dixon (1979) and Woolford (2015), transitivity is typologically central to ergativity by definition. Ergativity is morphologically reflected, particularly in absolutive languages while some other languages of different typology attest a syntactic device without a morphological manifestation (Dixon, 1979). Apart from claiming that some languages attest covert ergative case, Bittner and Hale (1996) identify two types of ergative case: active and object shift ergative. To them, ergative case-marks only the external argument in a clause when the direct object DP moves out of the VP domain. Verbs that allow this kind of movement or ergative alternation are termed ergative verbs. They are also referred to as ‘labile verbs’ in English (Read Davison, 1982, 1999; McGregor, 2009; Woolford, 2015). As also claimed in some extant works, both the subject of intransitive sentences and the object of transitive sentences are often discussed in relation to passive constructions because they both share the syntactic characteristic of featuring non-agentive subject (McGregor, 2017; Casaretto, Dimmendaal, Hellwig, Reinohil, and Schneider-Blum, 2020). However, not all languages attest passivisation, Yorùbá for instance, operates only ergativity, and not passive voice. Different methods of forming ergative constructions are suggested in the literature; Keyser and Roeper (1984) for example, identify three steps in the formation of an ergative construction in English: the first is to remove the case from the object and dethematise the subject, the second step is to move the object to the subject position while the third step is to delete the agent role normally assigned to the subject (the spec VP) of the lexical entry. Interestingly, the complexities and duplication associated with the methods identified above have been obviated by the Economy Principle under the assumption of the MP (Chomsky, 1995, 2000). The thematic subject DP is not formed in the numeration when deriving an ergative sentence. The object DP is only copied to the specifier of the tense phrase (TP) through the outer specifier of the light verb phrase (vP) where it is valued nominative case. Yusuf (1998) having a closely related position to the raising method identified above claims that in Yorùbá, an ergative verb inherently has a two-argument structure referred to as agent and theme while only one (theme) is lexicalised on the surface and literally translated as agent.

Both unaccusative and ergative structures allow raising of an object DP of a transitive verb to the subject position (the spec, CP) to check the [+case] feature on the T-head (Yusuf, 1998; Alexadou,

Evaraet, and Anagnostopou 2017; Akinbiyi and Ola-orie 2018; Olanrewaju, 2023). In line with Procrastination Principle of the Minimalist Program, assignment of case (to an object DP of the transitive verb) is delayed at the VP domain in an ergative construction (Chomsky, 1995; Hornstein, Nune and Grohmann, 2005; Citko, 2014). Therefore, the raised argument is copied to the spec, IP (the subject position) to check the [+case] feature on the T-head through specifier-head agreement, and be valued nominative case. This paper has four sections: Section One discusses the introduction, Section Two discusses the positions of the relevant extant works on classification of Yorùbá verbs, and ergative predicates. The indept analysis of the syntax of ergativity in Yorùbá is discussed in Section Three while Section Four handles the concluding remarks.

II METHOD

A considerable amount of scholarly works have been done much on the classification of Yorùbá verbs. According to Awóbùlúyì (1978), types of sentences in a language are distinguished from one another primarily by the types of verbs operating in them. He also claims that a verb in Yorùbá can operate in more than one construction type. Therefore, such a verb correspondingly belongs to more than one class of verbs. In line with his assertion above, his sub-classification of Yorùbá verbs is solely based on usage (functions) of verbs with respect to their occurrence in sentences. Thirteen sub-classes of verbs are identified by Awóbùlúyì (1978) as shown below:

- (2-1) Serial verbs (pa jẹ ‘to kill and eat’, sun jẹ ‘to roost and eat’)
- (2-2) Splitting verbs (túnṣe ‘repair’, gbàgbò ‘to believe’)
- (2-3) Echoing verbs (mò ‘know’ fẹ ‘like’, kù ‘remain’ as used in: Ìwọ nikan ni wón mò mí mò ‘You are the only one they know me with’ Èniyàn ò fẹni fẹ ọrò ‘People are never happy to see one prosper’ and Ìwọ ló kù mí kù ‘You are the only person I have got now’)
- (2-4) Complex verbs (rẹrìn-in ‘to smile, rántí ‘to remember, làágùn ‘to sweat’)
- (2-5) Adjectivisable verbs (funfun ‘to be white’, kúrú ‘to be short’ sanra ‘to be fat’)
- (2-6) Nominal assimilating verbs (dùn ‘sweet’, mò ‘know’ as used in Ìlù náà dùn ún jó sí ‘The drum beat is easy to dance to’ and Ó mọ ọṣẹ ẹ ẹ ‘He knows how to work’)
- (2-7) Particle-selecting verbs (jí ‘to steal’, pè ‘to call’ as used in Ó jí mi ní aṣọ ‘He stole my clothes and Wón pè Òjó ní ọlẹ ‘They called Òjó a lazy drone’)
- (2-8) Report verbs (ní ‘to say that’, lẹrí ‘to vow’ as used in Olú ní Òun mò gbogbo wón ‘Olú said he knew them all’ and Wón lẹrí pé àwọn kò ní lẹ ‘They vowed that they would not go’)
- (2-9) Impersonal verbs (yẹ ‘to be fitting’, tó ‘to be morally right’ as used in Ó yẹ láti wà nìbẹ ‘It fits (is good) to be there’ and Ó tó láti wà nìbẹ ‘It right (good) to be there’)
- (2-10) Causative verbs (mú ‘cause’, sọ ‘make’ as used in Olú mú mi bínú ‘Olú made angry’ Wón sọ Olú di ọgá ‘They made Olú a master’)
- (2-11) Symmetrical verbs (bí as used in Àwọn akẹkọọ náà bí inú (bínú) gidigidi ‘The students were terribly annoyed’ and Inú bí àwọn akẹkọọ náà gidigidi ‘The students were terribly annoyed’)
- (2-12) Interrogative verbs (dà and nkó as used in Olùkó náà dà? ‘Where is the teacher?’ and Ọmọ náà nkó? ‘Where is the child?’)
- (2-13) Imperative verbs (jòó (jòwó), pèlẹ as used in Ẹ jòwó ‘Please sir’ and Hello sir’)

It is however discovered that ergative verbs as a sub-class of verbs are left out in the classification discussed above, consequent upon the classification of verbs according to their functions in Yorùbá sentences. Therefore, there is a need to incorporate other criteria like structure, syntactic behaviour and so on (Read Táíwò, 2018) to be able to adequately and truly capture the correct sub-classification(s) of Yorùbá verbs.

Bámgbóṣé (1990) classifies verbs based on their behaviours in Yorùbá sentences. Apart from the thirteen sub-classes identified by Awóbùlúyì (1978) above, he identifies action verbs (lọ ‘go’, rà ‘buy’ and so on) and complement-selecting verbs. He refers to serial verbs as modifying verbs, and classifies complement-selecting verbs into two: reported and non-reported verbs. Unlike its reported verb counterpart, a non-reported verb is not used in a reported speech as shown in the examples below.

- (1) a. Oyè wí pé òun rí ọmọ náà.
Oyè say that he see child the
‘Oyè said he saw the child.’
- b. Ó rò pé mo wá.
He think that I come
‘He thought I came.’ (Bámgbóṣé, 1990:148)

Unlike (1a) above, (1b) is never used as a reported speech in Yorùbá.

2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

Yusuf (1998) identifies ergative constructions in Yorùbá citing (2) below as an example. Although his explanation on ergativity still needs more descriptive adequacy, however, the work serves as an eye opener that Yorubá operates ergative predicates (Olánrewájú, 2023: 85).

- (2) Ọsàn tà dáadáa ní ọdún yíí.
 Ọsàn sell good at year this
 ‘There is market for oranges this season.’

It is discovered that the example in (2) above does not adequately capture the syntactic behaviour of ergative verb in the language. The transitive verb tà ‘sell’ as used in (2) above does not even satisfy the constituent-selection requirement of lexical verb tà ‘sell’ selecting the DP ọsàn ‘oranges’ in the example. The DP ọsàn enters the derivation at the spec VP, before it is internally merged at the spec TP through the spec vP. Another important observation on (2) is that, if the ADVP hosting both the adverb dáadáa ‘good’ and the PP ní ọdun yíí ‘in this year’ is removed from the clause, then, presupposedly raising the object DP of tà ‘sell’ to the subject position in line with Unitary Theta Argument Hypothesis (UTAH) changes what the object DP experiences, and consequently crashes the intended or ergative meaning of the clause as shown in (3b) below:

- (3) a. Gbogbo wón ta ọsàn
 All they sell orange
 ‘They all sold oranges.’
 b. Ó ta ọsàn
 He sell orange
 ‘He sold oranges.’
 c. Ọsàn tà wàràwàrà.
 Ọsàn sell fast
 ‘There is market for oranges’

The implication borne out this is that neither (2) nor (3b) above is an ergative equivalent of (3a).

In (3b) above, the presupposedly raised object DP ọsàn ‘oranges’ does not function as the theme unlike ata. ‘pepper’ in (4b) below:

- (4) a. Oyè bọ ata
 Oyè boil pepper
 ‘Oyè boiled the pepper’
 b. Ata náà bọ
 Pepper the boil
 ‘The pepper was boiled’

In a nutshell, the subject DP of an ergative construction is base-generated at the object position of a transitive verb. (Bittner & Hale, 1996; Yusuf, 1998; Woolorf, 2015; Akinbiyi and Ola-orie 2018),. Therefore (2) above repeated as (5a) below for ease of reference is (semantically) equivalent to (5b and c) below:

- (5) a. Ọsàn yóò yá dáadáa ní ọdún yíí.
 Orange will be-fast good in year this
 ‘Oranges sell very fast this season.’

- b. Qjà q̣sàn yóò yá dáadáa ní ọ́dún yíí.
Market orange will be-fast good in year this
'There will be market for orange this season.'
- c. Q̣sàn títa yóò yá dáadáa ní ọ́dún yíí.
Orange selling will be-fast good in year this
'There will be market for orange this season.'
- (Oláńrewájú, 2023: 86)

The examples in (5a-c) pass the same message that 'orange market will be quite interesting this year'. There is a possibility for an orange seller to sell oranges even when the market (for orange selling) is not fast/interesting. The implication borne out of this is that not all transitive or diadic predicates (Lamidi, 2000) can feature in ergative constructions in Yorùbá. Consequent upon this, there is a need to identify ergative verbs as a sub-class of verbs in the language.

III RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 MINIMALIST ANALYSIS OF ERGATIVE VERBS IN YORÙBÁ

Similarly to some other classes of verbs in Yorùbá, ergative predicates also correspondingly belong to some other sub-classes of verbs according to the classification in the extant literature (Awóbùlúyì, 1978, Bámgbóṣé, 1990). Take for instance, já 'to cut' and padé 'to close' are both examples of ergative verbs in (6a and b) below. Já 'to cut' can still be classified under transitive verbs (as shown in (6c)) while padé 'close/shut' still also belongs to the sub-class of splitting verbs (as shown in (6d)).

- (6) a. Okùn náà ti já.
Rope the have cut
'The rope has cut.'
- b. Fèrèsé náà padé.
Window the close
'The window was closed.'
- c. Oyè ti já okùn náà.
Oyè have cut rope the
'Oyè has cut the rope.'
- d. A ti pa fèrèsé náà dé.
We have close window the shut/close
'We have closed the window.'

Ergative verbs are inherently transitive, they spread beyond just a sub-class of verbs. Therefore, their c-selection requirement must be satisfied by selecting object DPs, that is, themes that internally merge at the spec vP positions (escape hatches) to be visible for subsequent syntactic operations. According to Woolford (2015), ergative subject position is dethematised, that is, an ergative verb is specified with ergative feature that removes the ability of a verb to theta-mark a DP as its subject. Consequently, the object DP moves through the spec vP to the spec TP). To Yusuf (1998), using a previous model of generative grammar (PPT), an ergative sentence does not operate an overt subject (the position for the agent is vacant yet there is INF that discharges its nominative case feature), therefore, the object functioning as the theme is raised to the subject position to normalise the syntactic relation. Examples of ergative verbs in Yorùbá are shown in (7) below:

- | | | |
|-----|-------------------------------------|-----------------|
| (7) | bà (to ferment) | bé (to burst), |
| | bó (to peel) | bọ (to boil) |
| | bù (break) | dá (break) |
| | dẹ (to loose) | gé (to cut) |
| | gò (to be stupid/foolish) là (open) | |
| | pón (ripe) | gbó (to be old) |
| | wó (to bend) | sún (to shift) |

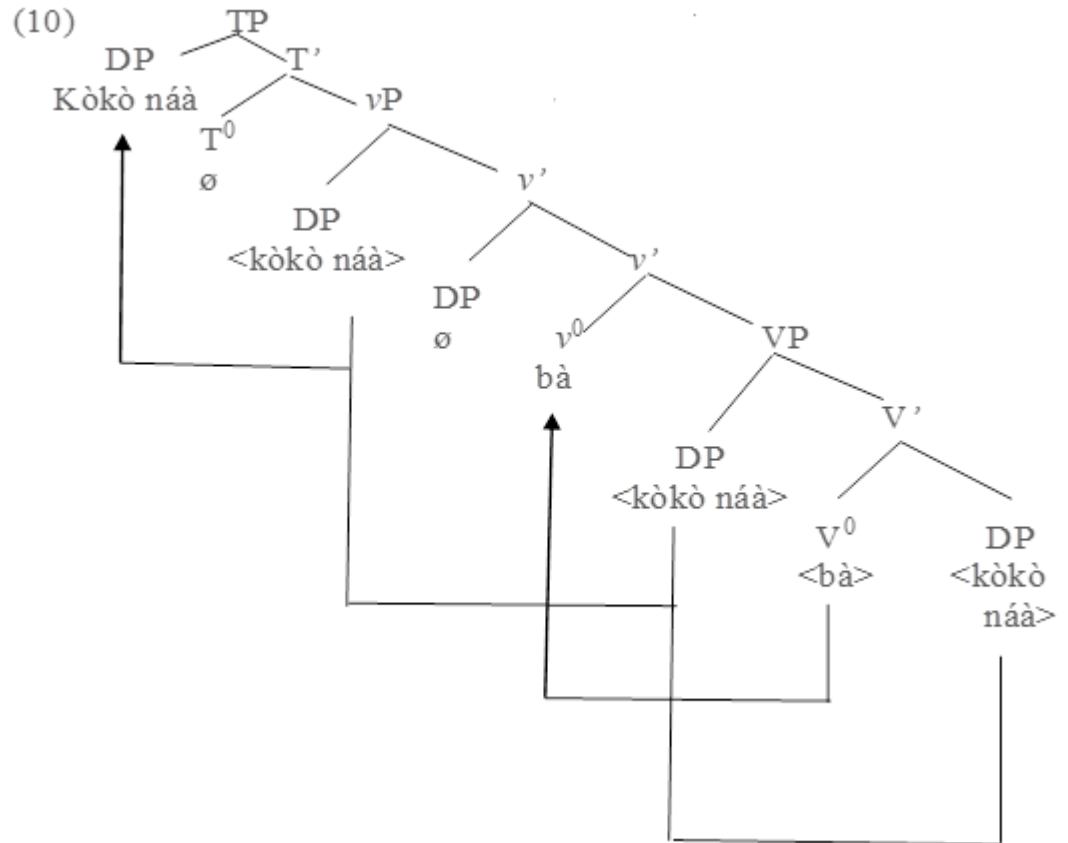
şá (to fade)	şé (to break)
tán (to finish)	tè (to bend)
tó (to be straight)	wó (to collapse)
pá (to be bald)	já (to cut) and so on.

(Olánrewájú, 2023: 85)

Each of the (transitive) verbs in (7) above has c-selection requirement to be satisfied, consequently, each of them subcategorises a (DP) complement which is raised through the spec vP to the spec TP to check the (+nominative) case feature on the T0. It is therefore hypothesised that, in an ergative construction in the language, the subject (DP) is abstract, therefore it is invisible to be sighted by the abstract T0 (Yusuf 1998), consequently, the T0 still needs to search further through its c-command domain to locate the object (DP), a potential goal and attracts it to the spec TP for [+case] feature valuation. To set our discussion on concrete footing, it is necessary to show how some of the identified verbs above are operated in ergative constructions in the language.

- (8) a. Agbè náà ba kòkó rẹ.
Farmer the ferment cocoa his
'The farmer fermented his cocoa seeds.'
- b. Àwọn agbè ba kòkó wọn.
They farmers ferment cocoa their
'The farmers fermented their cocoa seeds.'
- c. Kòkó náà bà.
Kòkó the be-ferment
'The kòkó (seeds) were fermented.'
- (9) a. A ti bu àwọn iṣu náà.
We have cut they yam the
'We cut the yam tubbers.'
- b. È má bu àwọn iṣu náà.
You NEG cut they yam the
'Do not can cut the yam tubbers.'
- c. Àwọn iṣu náà bù.
They yam the break/cut
'The yam tubbers broke/cut'

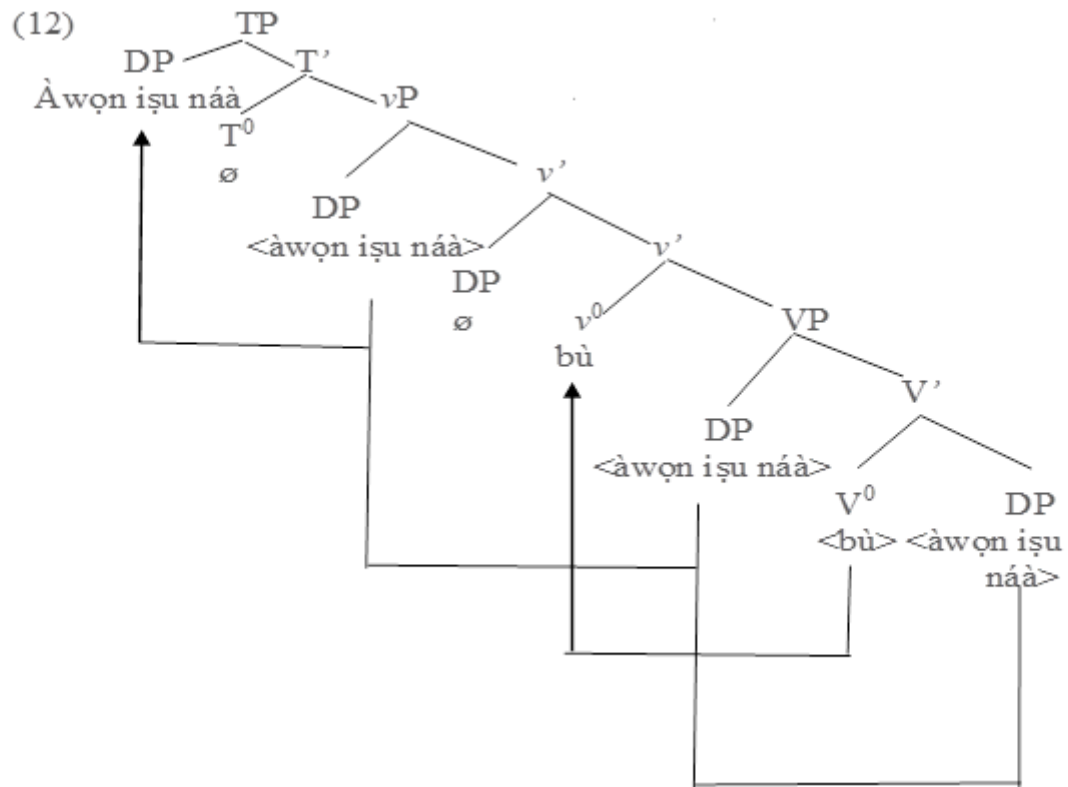
Each of the transitive verbs in (8a and b) and (9a and b) has its c-selection requirement (thematic role) satisfied by the merge of its DP object. Also, their subject DPs are merged at the spec vPs in line with the Predicate-Internal Subject Hypothesis (PISH). In (8c) and (9c), the object DPs are raised to the spec TP through the outer spec vP to check the [+case] feature on the T0. Example (8c) is phrase-marked as (10) below;



The derivation in (10) is as follows: The lexical verb bà ‘ferment’ merges with the direct object DP kòkò náà ‘the cocoa’ to project the VP in line with c-selection requirement of the transitive verb bà ‘ferment’. The direct object DP kòkò náà ‘the cocoa’ is copied to the specifier position of the verb phrase (VP) which serves as the escape hatch for the object DP kòkò náà ‘the cocoa’. After this, the abstract performative light v-head (v0) is merged with the verb phrase (VP) to project the light v-bar while the strong vF on the light light v-head (v0) attracts the transitive verb bà ‘ferment’ to be adjoined to itself. Then, the abstract subject DP (Yusuf, 1998) is externally merged at the inner spec vP in line with the PISH while the direct object DP kòkò náà ‘the cocoa’ is copied to the outer spec vP so as to be licensed from the Phase Impenetrability Condition (PIC). This makes it visible to subsequent syntactic operations. The derivation proceeds by merging the abstract T0 with the vP to project the T-bar. The T0 as a probe attracts the object DP kòkò náà ‘the cocoa’ to the spec TP to check its [+EPP] feature. Consequently, the T0 has its [+case] feature checked simultaneously. The derivation above suggests that the object DP is base-generated in a theta-marked position within the VP domain, and typically moves into the EPP-marked specifier position within the TP by the application of raising. Following the theta criterion in (11) below, it moves to satisfy only [+EPP, case] feature valuation not theta criterion (Chomsky, 1981, Radford, 1997, 2009). The lexical verb bà ‘ferment’ bears a low tone in (10) above because the direct object DP kòkò náà ‘the cocoa’ is no longer visible to the PF interface at the base-generated position associated with its grammatical function.

- (11) Each argument bears one and only one θ -role, and each θ -role is assigned to one and only one argument (Comsky, 1981: 51; Oláńrewájú, 2017: 32)

The example in (9c) is equally phrase-marked as (12) below for a better illustration.

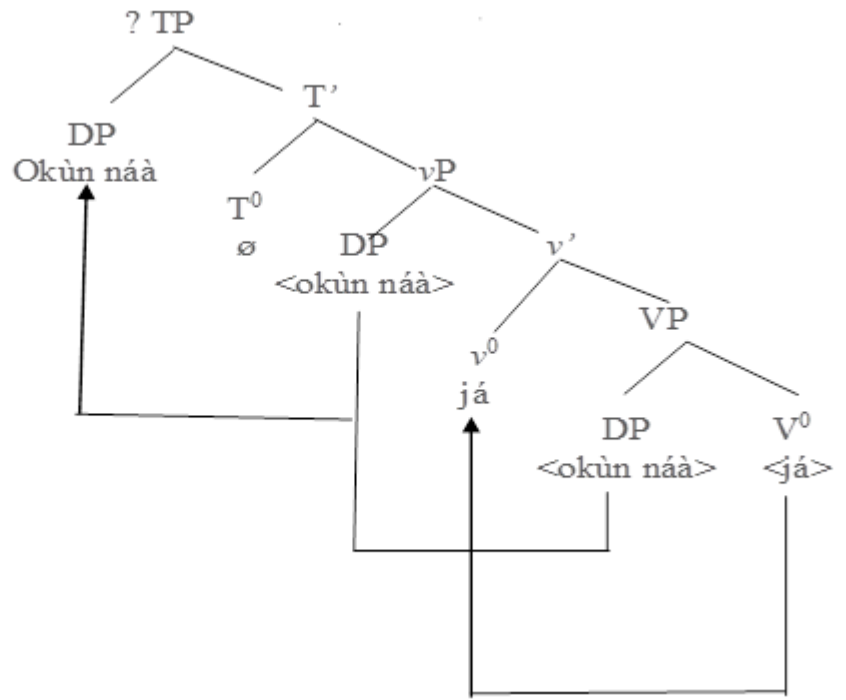


Similarly to what is applicable in (11) above, the object DP *àwọn iṣu náà* ‘the yam tubbers’ is copied to the spec TP through the outer spec vP to check the [+EPP] feature on the T0.

Also, the assumption that the derivation of (13a) below is as shown in phrase-marker in (14) is descriptively inadequate and misleading consequent on the fact that the thematic feature properties of the lexical verb *já* ‘to cut’ is not properly considered.

- (13) a. *Okùn náà já.*
 Rope the cut
 ‘The rope cuts/the rope was cut’
- b. *Wọn já okùn náà.*
 They cut rope the
 ‘They cut the rope.’

(14)



The derivation in (14) above is as follows: The subject DP *okùn náà* ‘the rope’ is externally merged with the lexical verb *já* ‘to cut’ to project the VP *okùn náà já* ‘the rope cuts’ in line with the PISH. The derivation proceeds by merging the abstract performative light *v*⁰ with the VP to project the v-bar while the strong *v*F on the light *v*⁰ attracts the lexical verb *já* ‘to cut’ to adjoin to itself. Then, the subject DP *okùn náà* ‘the rope’ is internally merged at the spec vP. The derivation proceeds by merging the abstract *T*⁰ with the vP to project the T-bar. The *T*⁰ as a probe attracts the subject DP *okùn náà* ‘the rope’ to the spec TP to check its [+EPP, case] feature. The derivation in (14) above is unsubscribed to, consequent upon the singular reason that it captures the verb as a monadic predicate or one place predicate (Lamidi, 2000), and not as an ergative verb. Not all transitive verbs can feature in ergative constructions. Let consider the examples below:

- (15) a. Olú jẹ eja gbígbe ní àná .
 Olú eat fish dried in yesterday
 ‘Olú ate dry fish yesterday.’
- b. Wón jẹ eja gbígbe ní àná .
 They eat fish dried in yesterday
 ‘They ate dried fish yesterday.’
- c. *Eja gbígbe jẹ _____ ní àná .
 Fish dried eat in yesterday
- (16) a. Ọḍe pa ejò.
 Hunter kill snake
 ‘The hunter killed a snake.’
- b. Wón pa ejò.
 They kill snake
 ‘They killed a snake.’
- c. *Ejò pa _____
 Snake kill
- (17) a. Amọkòkò yí ìkòkò amọ náà.
 Potter roll/turn pot clay the
 ‘The potter turned the clay pot.’

- b. Wón yí ìkòkò amò náà.
They roll/turn pot clay the
'They turned the clay pot.'
- c. Ikòkò amò náà yí
Pot clay the turn
'The clay pot was turned.'

Unlike (17c), examples (15c) and (16c) are unacceptable in the language. Two implications are borne out of the ill-formedness of (15c) and (16c) above: one, Yorùbá does not operate passive constructions unlike English or some other Indo-European languages as evident in the English equivalent of the example (17c) above (that is, the gloss). Two, not all Yorùbá transitive verbs can have their accusative case unchecked at the VP domain (Read Yusuf, 1998; Woolorf, 2015).

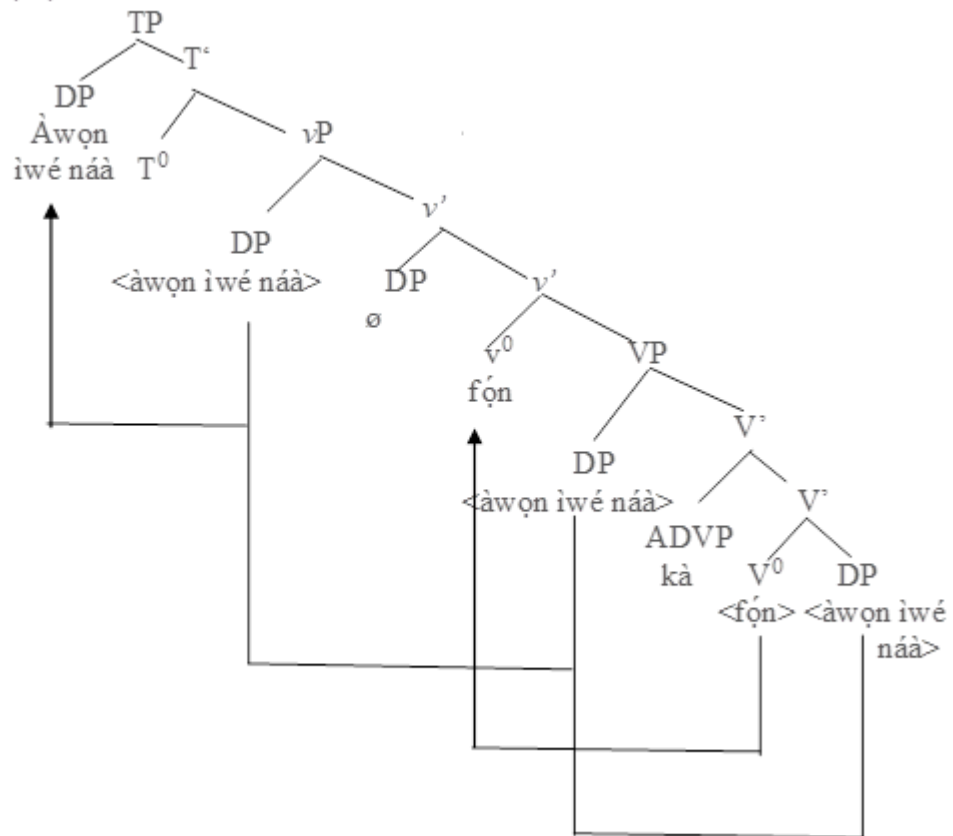
3.2 SPLITTING VERBS AND ERGATIVITY

Splitting verbs according to Awóbùlúyì (1978, 2013) are classified as verbs that can be split into two halves while the object is inserted between them, among the examples cited are: bàjé 'damage or spoil', báwí 'to scold or rebuke', réjẹ́ 'to cheat or swindle', gbàgbó 'to believe', bèwò 'to visit', padé 'to close' and so on. It is equally important to note that not all splitting verbs can be operated in ergative constructions as applicable to simple transitive verbs. Examples of splitting verbs that feature in ergative constructions are: bàjé 'to damage or get spoiled', padé 'to close', papò 'to combine or mix', tóká 'to disperse' and so on. For the purpose of descriptive adequacy, let us consider how ergativity is evident in the examples below:

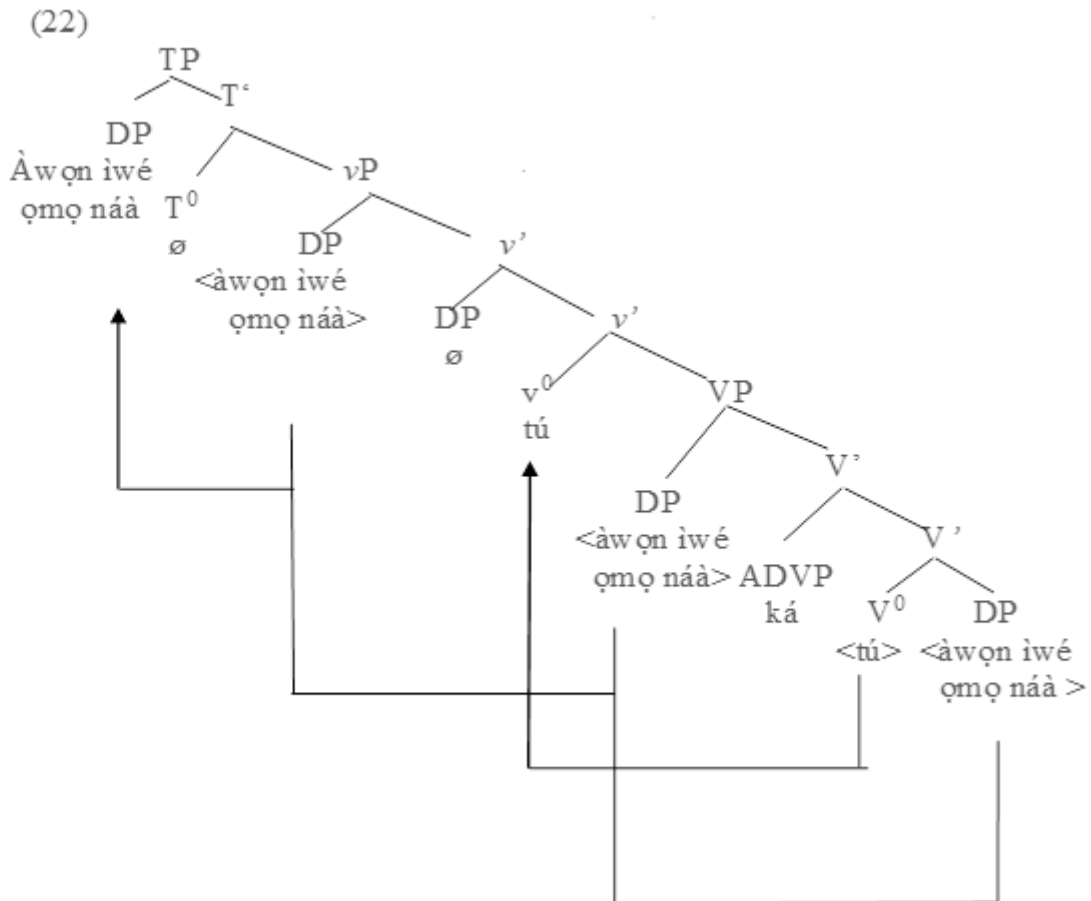
- (18) a. Wón fón àwọn iwé náà ká.
They spread they book the PSM
'They spread/scattered the books.'
- b. Àwọn iwé náà fónká.
They book the scatter/spread
'The books were scattered/spread.'
- (19) a. Ìyá arugbó náà tu ìwe ọmọ rẹ ká.
Mother old the scatter book child her PSM
'The old woman scattered her child's books.'
- b. Wón tu ìwe ọmọ náà ká.
They scatter book child the PSM
'They scattered the child's books.'
- c. Àwọn iwé ọmọ náà túká.
They book child the scatter
'The child's books got scattered.'
- (20) a. Olú tún ìjokó náà ẹ.
They PSM seat the do
'They repaired the seat.'
- b. *Ìjókò náà tunṣe.
Seat the repair

The example in (20b) above is ill-formed because Yorùbá does not operate the splitting verb túnṣe 'to repair' in an ergative construction. Both the DPs iwé náà 'the book in (18b) and àwọn iwé ọmọ náà 'the child's books' in (19c) are raised from their VP domains to the spec TPs. Example (18b) is phrase-marked as (21), while (19c) is phrase-marked as (22) below:

(21)



The derivation in (21) is as follows: The lexical verb *fón* ‘spread/scatter’ merges with the direct object DP *àwọn iwé náà* ‘the books’ to project the V-bar in line with c-selection requirement of the verb. Then, the post-modifier *ká* (Bámgbósé, 2000) is internally merged at the inner spec VP. After this, the object DP *àwọn iwé náà* ‘the books’ is internally merged at the outer spec VP, the escape hatch for PIC. The derivation proceeds by merging the abstract performative light *v⁰* with the VP to project the v-bar while the strong *vF* on the light *v⁰* attracts the lexical verb *fón* ‘spread/scatter’ to adjoin to itself. The abstract subject DP is externally merged at the inner spec vP to satisfy the PISH. The direct object DP *àwọn iwé náà* ‘the books’ is copied to the outer spec vP so as to be licensed from the PIC. This makes it visible to subsequent syntactic operations. The derivation proceeds by merging the abstract *T⁰* with the vP to project the T-bar. The *T⁰* as a probe attracts the raised DP *àwọn iwé náà* ‘the books’ to the spec TP to check its [+EPP] feature. The {+case} feature on the *T⁰* is simultaneously checked alongside the [+EPP] feature.



Similarly to (21) above, the object DP *àwọn ìwé ọmọ náà* ‘the child’s books’ in (22) above is copied to the spec TP through the spec vP, the escape hatch, to have the [+EPP] on the T0 checked. The derivation is as follows: The lexical verb *tú* ‘scatter’ merges with the direct object DP *àwọn ìwé ọmọ náà* ‘the child’s books’ to project the lower V-bar in line with c-selection requirement of the verb. Then, the post-modifier *ká* (Bámgbóşé, 2000) is externally merged at the inner spec VP. The object DP *àwọn ìwé ọmọ náà* ‘the child’s books’ is copied to outer the spec VP to be valued accusative case. The derivation proceeds by merging the abstract performative light *v0* with the VP to project the v-bar, while the strong *vF* on the light *v0* attracts the lexical verb *tú* ‘scatter’ to adjoin to itself. The abstract subject DP externally merges at the inner spec vP to satisfy the PISH. The direct object DP *àwọn ìwé ọmọ náà* ‘the child’s books’ is copied to the outer spec vP so as to be licensed from the PIC. This makes it visible to subsequent syntactic operations. The derivation proceeds by merging the abstract T0 with the vP to project the T-bar. The T0 as a probe attracts the raised DP *àwọn ìwé ọmọ náà* ‘the child’s books’ to the spec TP to check its [+EPP] feature. Suffice to equally note that the [+case] feature on the T0 is simultaneously checked alongside the [+EPP] feature through specifier and head agreement. The abstract subject DP is not visible to the PF interface; therefore, it cannot be internally merged at the spec TP to check the [+case] feature on the T0 consequent on the invisibility (Yusuf, 1998).

IV CONCLUSION

This paper investigated the syntax of ergative verbs in Yorubá detailing the methods of forming ergative constructions. Ergative verbs belong to the class of contentives in the language. Apart from the different sub-classes of verbs like serial verbs, splitting verbs, echoing verbs, complex verbs, adjectivisable verbs, nominal assimilating verbs, repot verbs and so on identified in the existing literature, ergative verbs as a sub-class of verbs are attested in the language. Following Awóbùlúyí’s (1978, 2013) position that verbs that are used in more than one or two different constructions invariably belong to more than one or two sub-classes of verbs, ergative verbs also fall into more than one or two sub-classes of verbs in the language. In an ergative construction, the spec TP, that is, the raised constituent is base-generated within the VP domain before it is copied through the spec vP to its landing site (the spec TP) where it has its [+EPP, +case] feature checked. To gain a deeper understanding of the syntax of ergativity, researchers should indeed explore ergative structures in other African languages.

This will invariably provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, and reveal language-specific and universal aspects, particularly on how ergative constructions are formed.

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