

Qualified Bare Nouns in Scopal Contexts in Yorùbá

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Abstract

Already Crowther (1843, p. 4) noted that Yorùbá does not have counterparts of English articles, whether definite or indefinite. Accordingly, a bare count noun argument can have either indefinite or definite readings in appropriate contexts (Ajiboye 2005).

- (1) a. Mo ra ìwé fún Kólá . I bought a book for Kólá
b. Lọjọ keji Kólá ti sọ ìwé nù The second day , Kólá has lost the book.

Besides the above, there is a second important observation which leads us to dismiss the traditional translation of the item "náà" as a definite article in disguise.

- (2) a. Mo rí eku **kan** I saw **a rat**
b. Eku **náà** tóbi **The rat** is big (Adésọla 2008)

Contrary to the impression conveyed by (2b), the expression [count noun + náà] remains ambiguous in most contexts between two readings, which for ease of reference we can label as the *identity reading* (3) and the additive reading (4), and the latter in turn can be either indefinite or definite: *ajá náà* = "the very dog", "a dog also", "the dog under discussion also".

- (3) a. Ọkọ̀ọ́ gbá ajá a Túndé 'A vehicle hit Túndé's dog.'
b. Ajá **náà** ti kú 'The **very** dog has died.'
(4) **Ajá** pa eku, **ológbò náà** pa eku 'A/the dog killed a rat, **a/the dog also** killed a rat.'

For this reason, we regard *náà* as a salience qualifier, distinct from a determiner in a manner to be made more precise. Notice that the ambiguity of "náà" is independent of the ambiguity of the bare noun; hence the combination allows no less than three possible readings. (We suggest provisionally that the fourth logical possibility, "a very dog" is presumably excluded on independent grounds of illformedness, as the notion of "indefinite identity" seems to be semantically incoherent.)

The above points may be controversial in some respects, but they have been widely observed in the Yorùbá literature and we accept them as the basis for any descriptively adequate analysis. Here we add a third observation which is apparently novel although we would be encouraged if it has been made before now: the additive reading disappears in a particular scopal context, namely when the bare noun qualified by "náà" is extracted from the scopal domain of a modal (e.g., *lè* 'possibility', *gbọ̀dọ̀* 'necessity', *kò* 'negation, perhaps among others) in a focus cleft or pseudocleft. Just in this context,

so far as we are able to determine, the sense of "also" (additivity) is obligatorily replaced by the sense of "only" (uniqueness). Note that the basic ambiguity of the bare noun between definite and indefinite interpretations remains in this context, and that the identity interpretation of "náà" is unaffected by the extraction:

ajá náà ni [... MOD...]] = "the very dog", "only a dog, only the dog under discussion"

- (5) *Ajá náà ni ọkọ ọ lè pa*
(a) 'It is the very dog that a car can kill'
(b) 'It is only a dog that a car can kill'
(c) 'It is the dog under discussion that a car can kill'

We propose the following steps toward an explanatory analysis of the patterns observed above.

(a) The radical ambiguity of bare count noun arguments between definite and indefinite interpretations in Yorùbá is robustly conserved across all the contexts discussed. This fact may be relevant to the choice between syntactic truncation à la Bošković (bare noun = NP) and syntactic underspecification à la Longobardi (bare noun = DP with null D), among other formal possibilities in a given framework (e.g. nP, in effect a classifier phrase, à la Lowenstamm 2007)

(b) The intrinsic ambiguity of "náà" is independent of the ambiguity of the bare count noun to which it applies. This is shown by the survival of the **identity reading** of "náà" ("the very dog") even when the **additive reading** ("a dog also"/"the dog under discussion also") is replaced by the **uniqueness reading** ("only a dog"/"only the dog under discussion"). We claim that the identity reading is impervious to modal scope, whereas the **additive reading** is sensitive to modality as illustrated in (5).

(c) The modality scope effect as in (5) holds, to our knowledge, across diverse semantic types of modals including possibility, necessity and negation. This suggests that the effect is computed in the syntax, where scope holds uniformly for the same configuration, rather than in the semantics/pragmatics where configuration is not recoverable.

References

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