

**ACQUISITION OF YORUBA ARGUMENT STRUCTURE
BY PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN NIGERIA**

**AROKOYO, Bolanle Elizabeth
M.A. Linguistics
95/039419**

**A THESIS IN THE DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS AND
NIGERIAN LANGUAGES,**

**SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ARTS IN PARTIAL
FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF**

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

OF THE

UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN, ILORIN, NIGERIA

SEPTEMBER 2010

Certification

This thesis has been read and approved as meeting part of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D) Degree in Linguistics in the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.

Supervisors : (1).....
Date

(2).....
Date

.....
External Examiner Date

.....
Head of Department Date

Dedication

This is for Christopher and JohnPaul, who always remind me of the most significant things in life.

Acknowledgments

I appreciate God for all that He has been to me. He alone knows the end from the beginning. Father, I thank you.

I have been privileged to spend the past few years doing what I love doing and just like everything that has a beginning must have an end, the end of this has come. I could not have come this far without the love, support and encouragement of some very important people, to all of whom I am eternally grateful.

My deepest and sincere gratitude goes to my supervisor, Dr. Issa O. Sanusi. I really appreciate you for always being there. God bless you and reward you abundantly. Thank you so much *ògá mi sà*.

I also sincerely appreciate my HOD, Prof. A. S. Abdussalam for his support and encouragement. Thank you sir for being there and for pushing us to get the Golden Fleece. I appreciate every member of the Postgraduate Committee for seeing this work as theirs. Prof. Tunde Ajiboye, Prof. Bayo Lawal, Prof. Gbenga Fakuade, Dr. Mrs. Victoria Alabi, Dr. Lere Adeyemi and Dr. S. T. Babatunde, God bless you all and reward your labour of love.

My appreciation goes to all members of staff of the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages. God bless you all. I also appreciate my 'ogas' and colleagues from sister departments. Dr. Mrs. Oyin Medubi, Dr. Abdulrasheed Adeoye, I sincerely appreciate you. To my colleagues in the race, we will all get there. I owe a whole lot of gratitude to my students, both past and present. Without you there might not be a need for

this. I have learnt so much from your intelligence and stupidity, wisdom and foolishness. May God lead you all to higher heights.

To every member of my family, you have been of so much support and encouragement to me. God bless you all for being there for me.

The last but not the least on the list are the two men in my life, Christopher Bamidele Arokoyo and JohnPaul Oyindamola Temiloluwa Arokoyo. What would I have done without you? You have given so much meaning to my life. Thanks for believing in me. I love you!

Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Certification	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	vi
List of Abbreviations	xiv
List of Figures	xvi
List of Tables	xviii
Abstract	xix
 Chapter one	
Introduction	
1.0 Background to the Study	1
1.1 Statement of the Research Problem	3
1.2 Objectives of the Study	4
1.3 Research Questions	4
1.4 Justification of the Study	5
1.5 Scope of the Study	7
1.6 The Yoruba Language	8
1.7 Definition of Terms	9

Chapter Two**Literature Review**

2.0	Introduction	11
2.1	First Language Acquisition	11
2.1.1	Language Acquisition and Language Learning	12
2.1.2	Studies in Child Language Acquisition	13
2.2	Language Acquisition Theories	17
2.2.1	The Behaviourist Approach	17
2.2.2	The Cognitive Approach	19
2.2.3	The Nativist Theory	21
2.2.4	Appraisal of Language Acquisition Theories	27
2.3	Studies on Language Acquisition in Nigeria	27
2.4	Developmental Models	31
2.4.1	The Initial State	31
2.4.2	Continuity Hypothesis	33
2.4.3	Discontinuity Hypothesis	34
2.4.4	Maturational Hypothesis	36
2.5	Developmental Sequences	37
2.5.1	Babbling Stage	38
2.5.2	The One-Word Stage	39
2.5.3	The Two-Word Stage	41

2.5.4	Multi-Word Stage	46
2.6	Argument Structure	51
2.6.1	Arguments	53
2.6.2	Types of Arguments	54
2.6.3	Thematic Roles	57
2.6.4	The Verb	64
2.6.4.1	Transitive Verbs	65
2.6.4.2	Intransitive Verbs	66
2.6.4.2.1	Unergative verbs	68
2.6.4.2.2	Unaccusative Verbs	70
2.6.4.3	Ditransitive Verbs	72
2.6.5	Classes of Verbs in Yoruba	73
2.7	Argument Structure Theories	88
2.7.1	Uniformity of Theta Assignment Hypothesis (UTAH)	88
2.7.2	Prominence Theory	90
2.8	Studies on Acquisition of Argument Structure	94
2.8.1	Acquisition of Transitive and Intransitive Verbs	98
2.8.2	Acquisition of Null Arguments	101
2.8.3	Acquisition of Complex Predicates	108
2.8.4	Role of Input	110
2.9	Theoretical Framework	113

2.9.1	An Overview of the Minimalist Programme	116
2.9.2	Syntactic Component	119
2.9.2.1	The Lexicon	119
2.9.2.2	The Computational System	120
2.9.2.2.1	Operation Merge	121
2.9.2.2.2	The Operation Move	125
2.9.2.3	Checking Theory	128
2.9.3	Clause Structure	132
2.9.4	Appraisal of Theoretical Framework	134
2.10	Yoruba Clause Structure	135
2.11	Conclusion	146
 Chapter Three		
Research Methodology		
3.0	Introduction	147
3.1	Research Methodology	147
3.2	Research Design	150
3.3	Participant/Population	151
3.3.1	Longitudinal Participants	152
3.3.2	Cross-sectional Participants	152
3.4	Research Instruments	153
3.5	Procedure for Data Collection	154

3.6	Transcription of Data	155
3.7	Data Analysis Procedure	156
3.7.1	Lexical Coding	157
3.7.2	Coding of Argument Structure	157
3.7.3	Coding of Null Arguments	159
3.7.4	Coding of Thematic Relations	161
3.8	Ethical Issues	162

Chapter Four

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

4.0	Introduction	164
4.1	Early Lexicon of the Yoruba Child	165
4.2	Null arguments in the Yoruba child's early speech	173
4.2.1	Null Arguments	174
4.2.2	Null Subjects and Null Objects	179
4.2.3	Null Subjects versus Overt Subjects	181
4.2.4	Finiteness and Null Arguments	186
4.3	Transitive and Intransitive Verbs of the Yoruba Child	192
4.4	Order of Acquisition of Verb Argument Structure	196
4.4.1	Acquisition of Argument Structure of Verbs that opaquely Theta-mark the Object	197
4.4.2	Acquisition of Argument Structure of Verbs that Anti-causativize without New Object	201

4.4.3	Acquisition Argument Structure of Adjectivisable Verbs	204
4.4.4	Acquisition of Argument Structure of Report Verbs	211
4.5	Acquisition of Argument Structure of Complex Predicates	213
4.5.1	Acquisition of Argument Structure of Serial Verb Constructions by Yoruba Children	214
4.5.2	Acquisition of Argument Structure of Splitting Verbs	221
4.5.3	Acquisition of the Argument Structure of Ditransitive Verbs	226
4.6	Acquisition of Overt Argument-NPs	228
4.6.1	Acquisition of Yoruba Lexical Noun Phrases	228
4.6.1.1	Acquisition of Bare Nouns	229
4.6.1.2	Acquisition of Definite Nouns	241
4.6.1.3	Acquisition of Plural Nouns	243
4.6.2	Acquisition of Yoruba Pronouns	248
4.6.2.1	Acquisition of Overt Subject Pronouns	249
4.6.2.2	Acquisition of Overt Object Pronouns	252
4.6.3	Acquisition of Genitive Constructions	255
4.7	Further Issues	259
 Chapter Five		
Summary, Findings and Conclusion		
5.0	Introduction	265
5.1	Summary	265

5.2	Findings	268
5.3	Areas in Need of Further studies/ Recommendations	273
5.3.1	Role of Input in the Acquisition of Yoruba Argument Structure	273
5.3.2	Longitudinal Studies of Acquisition of Yoruba Argument Structure	274
5.3.3	Comparative Study of First and Second Language Acquisition of Yoruba Verb Argument Structure	275
5.3.4	Computerized Database for Studying the Acquisition of Yoruba language	275
5.4	Conclusion	276
	End Notes	278
	References	279
	Appendix A: Longitudinal Data	310
	Appendix B: Longitudinal Data, Tables and Figures	339
	Appendix C: Experimental Data (Cross-section of participants)	347
	Appendix D: The Elicitation Task Experiment: Picture Tasks	358
	Appendix D: The Elicitation Task Experiment: Video	370

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Entry
1 st	First person
2 nd	Second person
3 rd	Third person
AGR	Agreement
AGROP	Object-Agreement Phrase
AGRSP	Subject-Agreement Phrase
BNC	British National Corpus
CHILDES	Child Language Data Exchange System
C _{HL}	Computational System
CIC	Children's Initial Clauses
CLAP	Cross-linguistic Language Acquisition Project
CO	Cognate Objects
COMP/C	Complementizer
CP	Complementizer Phrase
DAT	Dative
DO	Direct Object
DP	Determiner Phrase
FCH	Full Competence Hypothesis
INF	Infinitive
INFL	Inflection
INTR	Intransitive
IO	Indirect Object
IP	Inflectional Phrase
LAD	Language Acquisition Device
LOC	Locative
MLP	Minimal Lexical Projections
MP	Minimalist Programme
N	Noun
NEG	Negation
NP	Noun Phrase
OBLQ	Oblique Object
OI	Optional Infinitive
OS	Object Subject
OV	Overt
P	Preposition
PL	Plural
PP	Prepositional Phrase
PR/PRES	Present
PRO	Pronoun

PROG	Progressive Marker
PT	Past
RI	Root Infinitive
SBJ	Subject
SC	Small Clauses
SG	Singular
SPEC	Specifier
SLI	Speech Language Impairment
SO	Subject Object
SV	Subject Verb
SVL	Subject Verb Location
SVO	Subject Verb (direct) Object
TNS/T	Tense
TP	Tense Phrase
TR	Transitive
UG	Universal Grammar
UTAH	Uniformity of Theta Assignment Hypothesis
UTTS	Utterances
V	Verb
VL	Verb Location
VO	Verb (direct) Object
VocO	Vocative Object
VocSO	Vocative Subject Object
VocV	Vocative Verb
VocVO	Vocative Verb Object
VocSVO	Vocative Subject Verb Object
VP	Verb Phrase

List of Figures

Figure 1: Thematic Grid

Figure 2: Theta Grid

Figure 3: Syntactic Component

Figure 4: Spell-out

Figure 5: Merger Operation and θ -role Assignment

Figure 6: Structure of TP.

Figure 7: The Structure of CP

Figure 8: The Structure of VP

Figure 9: Larsonian Shell

Figure 10: Distribution of Nouns and Verbs in the Early Utterances of Damilare

Figure 11: Null NPs in the Utterances of Damilare

Figure 12: Null NPs in the Utterances of Damilare

Figure 13: Distribution of Null and Overt Subject in the Early Utterances of Tola

Figure 14: Transitive and Intransitive Verbs in the Early Sentences of Temiloluwa

Figure 15: Null Subjects of Transitive and Intransitive Verbs of Damilare and Temiloluwa

Figure 16: Distribution of Verbal Items in the early utterances of Damilare

Figure 17: Distribution of Verbal Items in the early utterances of Tola

Figure 18: Distribution of Verbal Items in the early utterances of Temiloluwa

Figure 19: Distribution of Null and Overt Subject NPs in the early sentences of Damilare

Figure 20: Distribution of Null and Overt subject in the early sentences of Tola

Figure 21: Distribution of Null and Overt Subject NPs in the early sentences of Damilare

Figure 22: Distribution of Null and Overt Subjects NPs in speech of Temiloluwa

Figure 23: Distribution of Verbal Items in the early utterances of Tola

Figure 24: Distribution of Verbal Items in the early utterances of Damilare

Figure 25: Distribution of Verbal Items in the early utterances of Temiloluwa

Figure 26: Distribution of Null and Overt Subject NPs in the early sentences of Damilare

Figure 27: Distribution of Null and Overt Subjects NPs in speech of Temiloluwa

Figure 28: Distribution of Verbal Items in the early utterances of Tola

Figure 29: Distribution of Verbal Items in the early utterances of Temiloluwa

List of Tables

Table 1: Strong Pronouns in Yoruba

Table 2: Weak Pronouns in Yoruba

Table 3: Attested Argument Structure-Configurations in the utterances of the Children

Table 4: Attested Noun Configuration in the utterances of the Children

Table 5: Distribution of Verbal Items in the Early Utterances of Temiloluwa

Table 6: Distribution of Verbal Items in the Early Utterances of Tola

Table 7: Distribution of Nominal Items in the Early Utterances of Damilare

Table 8: Distribution of Nominal Items in the Early Utterances of Temiloluwa

Table 9: Distribution of Nominal Items in the Early Utterances of Tola

Table 10: Distribution of Nouns and Verbs in the Early Utterances of Damilare,
Temiloluwa and Tola

Table 11: Null NPs in the Yoruba Child: Longitudinal Data from Three Children

Table 12: Null Subjects and Null Objects

Table 13: Distribution of Null and Overt Subject NPs

Table 14: Overt Subjects and Finiteness

Table 15: First Set of Verbs in the Early Speech of Damilare, Temiloluwa and Tola

Table 16: Transitive and Intransitive Verbs in the Early Sentences of Child Yoruba

Table 17: Nature and Order of Occurrence of Overt Subject Pronouns

Table 18: Nature and Order of Occurrence of Overt Object Pronouns

Abstract

The acquisition of argument structure marks an important milestone in the process of language acquisition, as it marks the transition from child language to adult grammatical utterances. This thesis studied the acquisition of argument structure of Yoruba as a first language. Chomsky's Minimalist Programme was adopted as the theoretical framework. The relevance of the theory is its provision for minimality in the processes of language acquisition.

The objectives of the study were to examine how children acquire argument structure, null and overt argument-NPs and complex predicates in Yoruba. The thesis reported two empirical studies involving two methodologies designed to address the acquisition of argument structure. The studies were carried out in Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria. The first database was made up of longitudinal naturalistic speech output of three Yoruba-speaking children, a boy, Damilare, and two girls- Temiloluwa and Tola, who were within the range of fifteen and thirty-six (15-36) months of age. The utterances were collected daily. As a naturalistic study, it examined language development among the subjects over an extended period of time. The second database which complemented the first one consisted of cross-sectional experimental speech samples which involved investigating and comparing the linguistic knowledge of different children or groups of children at a particular point in development. A total of twenty (20) three to four-year old and twenty (20) four to five-year old children were involved in the experiments. Pictures and videos were used to elicit information on the acquisition of different argument structures by the children.

The major findings of the study were the following:

- i. the predominant lexical items in the speech of the Yoruba-speaking children, at the initial state of language acquisition, were nouns and verbs;
- ii. there was the preponderance of null argument-NPs at the initial stage; subjects-NPs were easily omitted while object-NPs were hardly omitted;

- iii. the three Yoruba-speaking children began to make use of overt argument-NPs from fifteen (15) months and gradually, null argument-NPs gave way. The children used only bare nouns at the initial stage because they have not developed the required grammatical knowledge of plural formation system in the language. Thus, they assumed that all nouns are in singular form. However, at the age of three years, the children have acquired specificity;
- iv. the transition from nominal reference to pronominal reference marked an important milestone in the language acquisition ability of Yoruba-speaking children; and
- v. at the early stage of acquisition, the children used plain rather than idiomatic verbs and such verbs are normally related to actions and events that the children or those around them were involved in.

The study concluded that the order of acquisition of argument structure by the Yoruba child progresses in a cumulative fashion. The acquisition of the argument structure of complex predicates by the Yoruba child between the ages of three and five years indicated that so much progress had been made in the course of language acquisition. By age five, the Yoruba child has acquired the argument structure of the language.