

‘HIGH-TONE-JUNCTION-CONTRACTING VERBS’ IN YORUBA

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The term ‘high-tone-junction-contracting verbs’, which serves as the title of this paper, is borrowed from Bamgboṣe¹ who used it to label the class of Yoruba verbs listed more or less in full below:

ṣíwú	to stop (doing something)
mǎ	to know
yé	to stop, to desist from (doing something)
kó	to learn, teach
kú	a verb used only in greetings
lǐ	to have
bèrè	to start
sú	to bore, be tired of, be fed up with
ṣe	to do
wù	to appeal to, to please
kpé	to be late
fé	to want
yá	to be fast or quick
ṣòro	to be difficult
gó	to tire out
dù	to be sweet, pleasant
tó	to be up to, be sufficient, be enough
wá	to come
lò	to go ²
dára	to be good

This same class of verbs has recently also been described as ‘verbs with lengthened vowels’.³ The question arises, however, as to whether these two terms, based as they are on surface structure considerations only, constitute an accurate characterization of these verbs. It is the contention of the present paper that not only is this not the case, the two terms have also in turn inspired further misleading empirical claims about the structure of the language.

Thus, on the basis of his observation that these verbs contract a ‘high-tone junction’, as in

- (1) a mǎ oko ó kó⁴
 lit. ‘We know farm hoeing’
 i.e. ‘We know how to hoe’

¹ Ayo Bamgboṣe. *A GRAMMAR OF YORUBA*, West African Language Monographs, no. 5 (Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 77.

² On the inclusion of this verb here, see E. C. Rowlands. *TEACH YOURSELF YORUBA* (London: English Universities Press, 1969), p. 66.

³ See loc. cit.

⁴ This transcription does not indicate tone change and (vowel) elision.

(2) a mǎ́ iwéé kò

lit. 'We know book/paper writing'

i.e. 'We know how to write'

where the phonically varying junction takes the form of an 'extra' ó or é with a high tone, Bamgboṣe posited two new subclasses of verbs, the strong verbs and the weak verbs, for Yoruba, defining them as follows:⁵ 'A strong verb is a free verb before which an immediately preceding "high-tone-junction-contracting verb" always has a high-tone junction. . . A weak verb is a free verb before which an immediately preceding "high-tone-junction-contracting verb" may have a high-tone junction or a zero junction.' The validity of the two claims made here, namely that the 'high-tone-junction-contracting verbs' are followed by verbs and that there are strong verbs and weak verbs in the Yoruba language is, however, very much open to question.

Let us, for convenience, examine the second claim first. The distinction it makes between the strong verbs and the weak verbs seems rather suspect, among other things, (i) because the two subclasses of verbs resulting from it do not seem to define any known types of constructions in the language, as major subclasses of Yoruba verbs usually do, and (ii) because it seems somewhat paradoxical that there should be authentic 'high-tone-junction-contracting verbs' which, while still functioning in this same capacity, also contract a zero junction—verbs, in other words, which are at one and the same time [+high-tone junction] and [−high-tone junction].

The analysis on which the claim is based raises some important questions to which it supplies either no direct answer or no answer at all, namely: Do these verbs contract the high-tone junction and the zero junction optionally or obligatorily? If the latter, what factors govern the incidence of the two types of junction?

It is possible to infer from the following sentences, suggested by Bamgboṣe's illustration of a related point,

(3) a mǎ́ ʃ wí kpé ó ló

lit. 'We know saying that he/she/it went'

i.e. 'We know how to say that he/she/it went'

(4) a mǎ́ wí kpé ó ló

lit. 'We know say that he/she/it went'

i.e. 'We know that he/she/it went'

that the incidence of the two types of junction is not optional, since these two sentences differ in meaning. As for the factors governing the incidence of the junctions, however, it does not seem possible within the framework of this analysis to account for them, say, by subclassifying the so-called weak verbs into those which are always preceded by a high-tone junction and those which are always preceded by a zero junction; for were such a subclassification at all possible, it would only succeed in raising the most serious question of all, namely, what justification is there for calling a verb a 'high-tone-junction-contracting verb' in situations where it regularly does not contract the high-tone junction, a feature which is absolutely crucial for establishing a verb's membership of that class? Similarly, any attempt to achieve the same result by subclassifying the 'high-tone-junction-contracting verbs' into those that always contract the high-tone junction and those which always contract the zero junction, were this possible (which it is not), would raise this very question once again. But worse than that, such a subclassification would amount to an

⁵ Bamgboṣe, loc. cit.

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admission of error, since the analysis under examination is firmly based on the assumption that no such distinction exists among these verbs.

In effect, then, Bamgboṣe's analysis contains no answer at all to the second question posed above. This fact alone, not to mention the lack of justification for and the paradox involved in calling a verb which does not contract the high-tone junction a 'high-tone-junction-contracting verb' is sufficient reason for rejecting the claim that there are strong verbs and weak verbs in Yoruba. However, this will not be the actual reason for rejecting it here; that reason, a more compelling one, emerges when one considers the causes of the problems that beset Bamgboṣe's analysis. Those problems arise primarily because the analysis did not concern itself sufficiently with the 'high-tone-junction-contracting verbs' as such, nor did it attempt to see them as they relate to other natural subclasses of verbs in the language.

In particular, to clarify the latter point, the analysis seems to have overlooked the fact that many Yoruba verbs have the syntactic privilege of functioning as members of two to three different subclasses of verbs established on the basis of the constructions in which they operate. Thus, the verb *gbó* 'to hear' functions as a transitive verb whose object can be deleted, and as a member of a small subclass of verbs used in clauses that introduce indirect statements. Similarly, the verb *wá* 'to look for' functions as a leading verb in serial verbal sentences, as a verb in clauses that introduce indirect statements,⁶ and as a member of the subclass of verbs that in particular contexts are optionally accompanied by the particle *lí*.⁷

The verbs listed at the beginning of this paper are no exception to this general rule. For while they all function as 'high-tone-junction-contracting verbs', some of them function additionally as members of other subclasses of verbs. In particular, *mǎ*, *kó*, and *fé* are also members, along with verbs like *gbó* 'to hear', *só* 'to say', *lí* 'to say', *rò* 'to think', etc., of the subclass of verbs that operate in the main clauses of indirect statement sentences. For example,

- (5) a *mǎ* (*wí*) *kpé adé wá*
'We know that Ade came'
- (6) a *só* (*wí*) *kpé adé wá*
'We said that Ade came'
- (7) a *fé* *kí adé wá*
'We want Ade to come'
- (8) a *lí* *kí adé wá*
'We said that Ade should come'

Similarly, *yá*, *jòro*, *dù*, and *kpé* belong with other verbs such as *ga* 'to be tall, high', *dúdú* 'to be black', *kéré* 'to be small', *wá* 'to come', *mú* 'to take', etc., in the subclass of verbs which lead in serial verbal sentences. For example,

- (9) *ó yá jù iyě*
lit. 'It is-quick surpasses that'
i.e. 'It is quicker than that'

⁶ As in *ó mǎ wá kí a bá òũ ló*, lit. 'He is looking-for that we with him go', i.e. 'He is scheming so that we may accompany him'.

⁷ For a more detailed discussion of such verbs, see the writer's 'The particle *lí* in Yoruba' J.W.A.L. vol VI, no. 2 (1969).

- (10) ó dũ jù lǎ
'It is sweeter than that'
(11) ó dúdú jù lǎ
'It is darker/blacker than that'
(12) ó ga jù lǎ
'It is taller than that'

Notice that the high-tone junction is consistently absent from all these sentences. This is so because such a junction is not a feature of the two constructions they exemplify; its appearance there would produce ungrammaticality or, at best, some meaning other than the one intended. This shows clearly that, when a verb which one would otherwise have called a 'high-tone-junction-contracting verb' does not contract this junction, the only explanation is that the verb is functioning in some other capacity, as a member of another subclass of verbs. Under these circumstances, there is no justification for continuing to refer to such a verb as a 'high-tone-junction-contracting verb' any more than there is for applying the label to a verb like gbó 'to hear' which never contracts the junction at all to begin with.

In the light of the above finding, Bamgboṣe's claim regarding the weak verbs amounts to saying that in a particular construction, X, such verbs are always preceded by a high-tone junction, while in other constructions, Y, they are never preceded by such a junction—as in (13) and (14), respectively,

- (13) ó mǎ ibè é ló
lit. 'He knows there going'
i.e. 'He, too, can go there'
(14) ó jí mǎkǎ ló
'He stole something away'

where ló 'to go' is a weak verb,⁸ mǎ 'to know' a 'high-tone-junction-contracting verb', and jí 'to steal' a 'non-high-tone-junction-contracting verb'.

Interestingly enough, exactly the same thing is true of the so-called strong verbs also: in construction X they are always preceded by a high-tone junction, while in constructions Y they are never so preceded. For example,

- (15) ó mǎ mǎkǎ ǎ kó
'He knows how to write'
(16) ó jí mǎkǎ kó
lit. 'He stole something wrote'
i.e. 'He spied something and copied it'

where kó 'to write' is a strong verb.⁸

Given sentences of this type, which abound in the language, it is clear that, if ló is a weak verb, so, too, is kó; or if kó is a strong verb, so, too, is ló. In other words, ló and kó are either both strong or both weak; no distinction of the type claimed by Bamgboṣe exists between them.

The other claim, namely that the 'high-tone-junction-contracting verbs' are followed by verbs is even less defensible than the one just rejected. It goes all the way back to Ida Ward who, in this connection, observed as follows:⁹

⁸ Bamgboṣe, loc. cit.

⁹ Ida C. Ward, AN INTRODUCTION TO THE YORUBA LANGUAGE, p. 116 (reprinted, Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd., 1956).

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Attention should be drawn to verbal combinations where a long vowel occurs when certain verbs are immediately followed by another verb... we hear it as a lengthening of the vowel of the first verb... It is probable that this lengthening of the vowel takes the place of a prefix of the second verb... In every case the lengthening is on a high tone, and would therefore correspond to the reduplicated form which is the verbal noun. I am told that both forms, i.e. with the full verbal noun and with the vowel prefix *i* (on a high tone), may be heard in certain Yoruba dialects.

Since Ward persisted (as do authors who accept her views as correct) in calling what follows the first verb a verb, instead of reflecting the information volunteered to her about the origin of the long vowel she heard and faithfully recorded, it would seem that she feared that to do otherwise would amount to mixing synchronic and diachronic aspects of the language. In fact, however, such fears are in the present instance completely unjustified, as there is synchronic basis for the view that what follows the first verb is not a verb but, as Ward was told, a nominalization.¹⁰ Thus, consider the following sentences:

- (17) *ó mǎ̀ iwé*
lit. 'He knows book'
i.e. 'He is brilliant'
- (18) *ó mǎ̀ ɔ̀kò ɔ̀ wà*
'He knows how to drive'
- (19) *ó kó ɔ̀kò ɔ̀ wà*
'He learned to drive'

The object of (17) is *iwé* 'book', while that of (18-19) is *ɔ̀kò ɔ̀ wà*, lit. 'lorry/truck/car driving'. When these objects are emphasized, one gets

- (20) *iwé lí ó mǎ̀*
lit. 'Book he knows'
i.e. 'The fact is that he is brilliant'
- (21) *ɔ̀kò wíwà lí ó mǎ̀*
'Driving is what he knows'
- (22) *ɔ̀kò wíwà lí ó kó*
'Driving is what he learned'

where the object of (17) remains unchanged, while that of (18-19) has suddenly become an unmistakable inverted nominalized verb phrase.¹¹ Clearly, unless the object of (18-19) is analysed as a nominalized verb phrase to start with, there will be no way at all of explaining its form under emphasis. This being the case, there is no justification whatsoever for regarding the verb-like elements occurring after the 'high-tone-junction-contracting verbs' as verbs: they are not verbs, but nominalizations. This is all the more reason why the claim that there are strong verbs and weak verbs in Yoruba should be avoided.

Earlier discussions of the 'high-tone-junction-contracting verbs' have generally been much too brief to be able to reveal the distinctions that exist among them. Essentially,

¹⁰ As in the following line of poetry:

ó sunwòṇ, ó dùn bíbí l'òṃọ̀

lit. 'She was good, she was nice to bear as a child', i.e. 'She was very pretty and was the pride and joy of her parents'. (G. I. Ojo, *OLORUN ESAN*, Ibadan, Ministry of Education (General Publications Section), 1952, line 351.)

¹¹ A verb phrase does not become automatically nominalized (by reduplication) just because it is emphasized—witness *wà ɔ̀kò lí ó wí*, lit. 'Drive lorry/car he said', i.e. "Drive", that's what he said'.

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such verbs fall into two structural classes—verbs which select prepositional objects, and verbs which select nominalizations.

The first class comprises *ḡwó*, *kó*, *má*, *kú*, *yé*, and *lí*, and

- (23) *adé má ɔkò ɔ wà*
'Ade knows how to drive'
- (24) *adé kó ɔkò ɔ wà*
'Ade learned to drive'
- (25) *adé kò lí í wà ɔkò*
lit. 'Ade not have driving lorry/car'
i.e. 'Ade will not drive'

The nominalizations which function as the objects of the verbs in (23–24) are truncated versions of embedded sentences. In (23–24) the verbs have contained the subject pro-NP, *wó* 'they, one', and the infinitive suggested by the following paraphrases of (23–24):

- (26) *adé má bí wó tí m wà ɔkò*
lit. 'Ade knows manner one from habitually'
i.e. 'Ade knows how to drive'
- (27) *adé kó bí wó tí m wà ɔkò*
'Ade learned to drive'

which come from

- (28) *adé má/kó bí/bá tí wó m wà ɔkò lí bí/bá íkò*
'Ade knows/learned manner which one habitually one'

In other words, the embedded sentence in (23–24) is

- (29) *wó m wà ɔkò*

(25) has no paraphrase of the type of (26–27), but its structure, too, contains (29) in its deep structure.

Yoruba nominalizations are always introduced by what are called nominalizing conjunctions, except in the case of nominalizations involving the conjunction *á*. However, since a subject must be provided for all Yoruba nominalizations, so as to give them their phonetic shape, they are but manifestations of the structure suggested by (29). It has been suggested that nominalizations involving reduplication are introduced by an abstract nominalizing conjunction written for convenience as *NML*.

Putting all the foregoing together, one arrives at the following

- (30) *adé má NML wó m wà ɔkò*
- (31) *adé kó NML wó m wà ɔkò*
- (32) *adé kò lí NML wó m wà ɔkò*

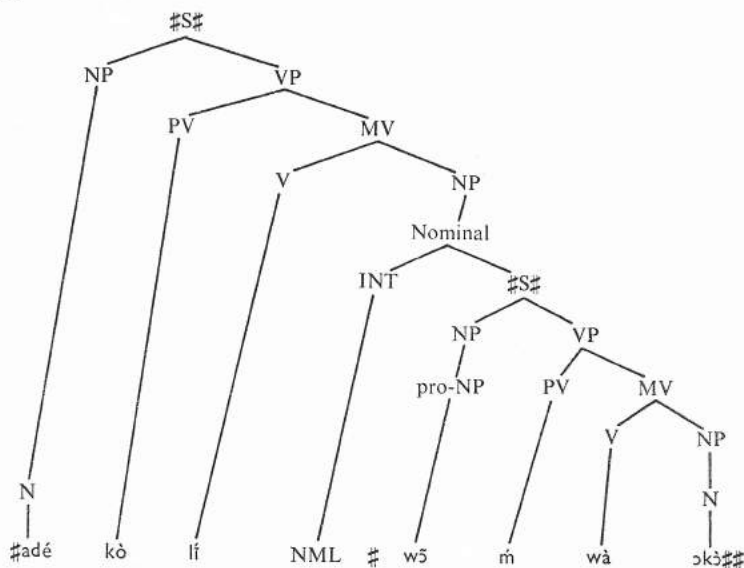
The phrase structure rules which generate these base forms are given in the Appendix. However, some idea of what such rules are like can be obtained from the marker of (32).

¹² On this, see A. Oladele Awobuluyi, *STUDIES IN THE SYNTAX OF THE YORUBA VERB*, unpublished Columbia University doctoral dissertation, 1971.

¹³ For these, see *ibid.* pp. 287–8.

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(33)



The first two transformations¹⁴ to be applied to (30-32) will delete the pro-NP, w5, and the aspectual adverb, m̃, both in the environment of NML, leaving those strings as

- (34) adé m̃ NML wà ɔkò
- (35) adé k5 NML wà ɔkò
- (36) adé kò lí NML wà ɔkò

Then (34-35) will obligatorily be turned into

- (37) adé m̃ ɔkò NML wà
- (38) adé k5 ɔkò NML wà

In the phonological component, NML will be dropped after any verb immediately following it has been reduplicated. Then the initial consonant of such a reduplicated verb will be deleted either optionally or obligatorily, depending upon the 'high-tone-junction-contracting verb' as well as on the dialect involved. The other phonological rules that must apply to (36-38) before the latter become phonetically well-formed Yoruba utterances are of no particular interest here and are, therefore, omitted from discussion.

The second class of 'high-tone-junction-contracting verbs', namely those which select adverbial phrases containing nominalizations, are: bèrè, sú, je, wù, kpé, fé, yá, jòro, dára, dù, g5, tó, lí,¹⁵ wá, and ɔ. With the exception of bèrè 'to begin, start', the constructional meaning of the sentences in which these verbs operate is, roughly speaking, that of purpose.¹⁶ When bèrè occurs, the constructional meaning expressed is much the same as the one found with the first group of verbs. It is being treated separately from those verbs, however, for a reason that will soon become apparent.

¹⁴ For the actual form of these rules, see *ibid.* p. 124.

¹⁵ As in adé lí láàti ɔ, 'Ade has to/must go'.

¹⁶ Other types of verbs occur in the main clauses of purpose sentences, but, unlike the ones being examined here, they do not select adverbials containing reduplicated nominalizations.

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Earlier analyses do not permit one to associate *bèrè* in

- (39) *adé bèrè ifé íf àlǎ*
'Ade started work yesterday'

with *bèrè sí* in

- (40) *adé bèrè sí í fè ifé*
'Ade started working.'

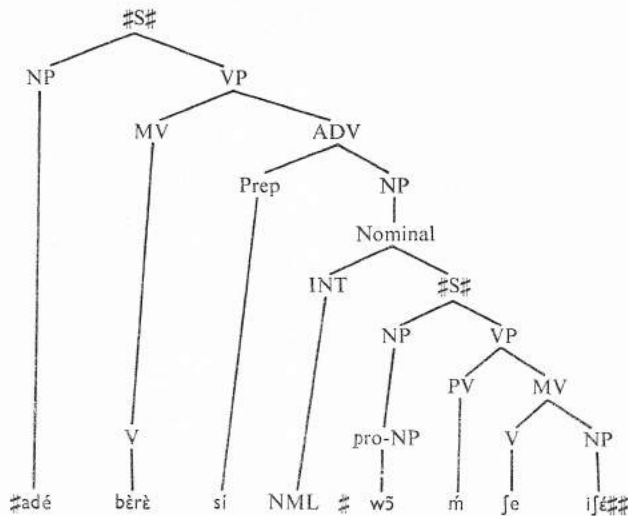
By listing these words separately as *bèrè* and *bèrèsí*,¹⁷ these analyses give the impression that they are completely unrelated items. This seems counterintuitive, to say the least. For the meanings of the two items clearly suggest that *bèrè* is present in *bèrèsí*. Besides, a comparison of the two items shows that it is possible to break *bèrèsí* down morphologically into *bèrè* 'to start, begin' and *sí* 'to, into, towards'. This is the analysis that will be adopted here because it not only permits a simpler account of the morphological facts involved, but it also affords more insight into the meaning of sentences like (40).

Since, as indicated earlier, (40) is like (23-25) except that its nominalization is a constituent of an adverbial phrase, it will be derived by means of the transformational rules mentioned earlier from

- (41) *adé bèrè sí NML wǎ m fè ifé*

whose structure is shown in (42).

- (42)



Purpose is expressed in a variety of ways in Yoruba, as can be seen from the following sentences:

- (43) *adé ló rà ifu*
'Ade went to buy yams'

- (44) *adé ló láàtì rà ifu*
'Ade went to buy yams'

¹⁷ Cf. Bamgboṣe, *op. cit.* pp. 76, 85; Rowlands, *op. cit.* p. 67; and I. O. Delano, *A MODERN YORUBA GRAMMAR* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1965), p. 71.

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- (45) ifu dũ láàti ʒe
'Yam tastes delicious'
(46) ifu dũ lí ʒiʒe
'Yam tastes delicious'
(47) ifu dũ ń ʒe
'Yam tastes delicious'

So varied are the forms of these sentences that one can easily mistake some of them for instances of other constructions. As a matter of fact, an earlier account of such sentences assigned (43-44), but not (45-47) also, the structure of serial verbal sentences,¹⁸ simply because (43) in particular has the structure normally associated with such sentences—witness the fact that it seems to contain a sequence of two verbs, *lo* 'to go' and *rà* 'to buy', much as the following true serial verbal sentence

- (48) ifu b5 lù adé
'A piece of yam dropped and hit Ade'

contains a sequence of two verbs, *b5* 'to drop' and *lù* 'to hit, beat'. Unfortunately, however, such an analysis amounts to a denial of the semantic basis for grouping (43-47) together—the exact opposite of what was actually intended.

This error arose because *láàti* 'in order to' was, in conformity with existing practice, thought best considered as an unanalysable lexical item. On further thought, however, it now seems much preferable to analyse it as a combination of the preposition *lí* 'in, on, at' and the nominalizing conjunction *àti*, for two main reasons.

First, *láàti* seems to be bimorphemic in structure because its tonal contour is the type that would normally result when two morphemes *lí*, with a final high tone, and *àti*, with an initial low tone, collocate in that order. That is,

- (49) lí àti → láàti 'in order to'
just as
(50) lí ɔ̀la → lɔ̀lɔ̀la 'in tomorrow', i.e. 'tomorrow'
(51) kó iwé → kóòwé 'gather books'
(52) lá àlá → láàlá 'dream a dream', i.e. 'to dream'.

Second, as stylistic or dialectal variants, (45) and (46) must be derived from the same deep structure. Now, since the nominalization in (46) involves reduplication, part of its deep structure will look like the following:

- (53) ...lí NML # S #

If the corresponding portion of the deep structure of (45) were to be written as follows,

- (54) ...láàti # S #

the parallelism between (53) and (54), or the similarity between the deep structures of (45) and (46) would be completely obscured. The only way to avoid this is to break *láàti* down morphologically into *lí* and *àti*, such that (54) now appears as

- (55) ...lí àti # S #

with exactly the same structure as (53). (NML and *àti* have the same function and are both dominated by INT; cf. (42).)

Given the analysis suggested here for *láàti*, the underlying forms of (43-47) turn out to be

- (56) adé lo lí àti adé mǎǎ rà ifu

¹⁸ See Awobuluyi, op. cit. (1967), p. 90.

(57) ifu dũ lí àti w̃ r̃ ʒe ifu

(58) ifu dũ lí NML w̃ r̃ ʒe ifu

with exactly the same structure as (41).

(56) underlies (43-44). The embedded sentence in (56) contains the future tense adverb, *mǎǎ*, thereby signifying the fact that there is always a time-lag between the moment one starts working towards a goal and the time one finally attains it. The meaning of (45-47) involves specification (of the aspect of sweetness that is being talked about), a variant of purpose.¹⁹ At the same time, these sentences have a habitual meaning that is very reminiscent of the sentences with nominalized objects considered earlier. These facts are reflected in (57) which underlies (45), and in (58) which underlies (46-47).

The only new rules that are needed, in addition to the ones already mentioned, for deriving (43-47) from (56-58) are those that will delete *lí àti* optionally and *adé mǎǎ* obligatorily from (56), *lí* optionally from (58), and the second occurrence of *ifu* obligatorily from (57-58).

The analysis presented in this paper achieves, it is felt, substantial simplification, first of Yoruba grammar as a whole, by eliminating from it what is here considered to be an unfortunate subcategorical distinction, then of the structure of purpose clauses, and finally of the serial verbal construction. It has been shown elsewhere²⁰ that the splitting verb construction is distinct from the serial verbal construction. The analysis presented above prunes this latter construction further by excluding strings with *lí àti* from its deep structure and leaving only strings with *si* 'and' and *tífi* 'until' there.

¹⁹ In this construction, specification implies the presence of a stative verb in the preceding main clause, while purpose implies the presence of a non-stative verb.

²⁰ See O. Awobuluyi, 'Splitting verbs in Yoruba', to appear in the Proceedings of the Eighth West African Languages Congress, held in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, 1969.