

THE VERBID – A CAVEAT TO ‘SERIAL VERBS’

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The occurrence of a string of verbs or verbal constructions in a single sentence is a well-known phenomenon in many West African languages. It is discussed in Ewe, Ga-Adangme, Twi, Nupe, Yoruba and known to exist in the Gur languages as well.¹

Most of the discussions on this topic are geared to establishing that the major constituents in these strings are genuine verbs. Thus in her chapter on Yoruba verbal combinations,² Ward is at pains to demonstrate that although these constructions resemble verb + prepositional or verb + adverbial constructions, they are, in fact, combinations of verbs, and that even the term ‘split verb’ is not appropriate. John Stewart terms the phenomenon ‘serial verbal constructions’, and although he is interested in his article to demonstrate restrictions in the occurrence of objects in a specific type of serial verbal sentence in Twi, he points out that they ‘can in fact be accounted for entirely if (they are) considered to be derived from two underlying simple sentences’ – i.e. each containing a verbal group.

For Ewe, Westermann, among other things, says that all the verbs in such a construction ‘have the same tense or mood’. He then goes on to demonstrate this. Some of the examples he gives are discussed in subsequent paragraphs.

A detailed examination of Ewe and some preliminary investigation of several other languages which have the serial verbal construction reveals that there are some forms which have been assumed to be serial verbal sentences, but in fact are not. The main purpose of this paper is to isolate one of these peculiar types and to attempt an analysis of the sentences in which it occurs, with a view to allocating to it its appropriate structural status.³

From the examples cited by Westermann,⁴ two very significant facts emerge. First, not all the structures he designates as ‘verbal combinations’ are subject to agreement in tense and mood as his rule requires. This is not due to inaccuracy in recording. In fact, it is credit to him that he recorded these sentences as they are said. Rather, it seems obvious that in dealing with his verbal combinations, he had included other structures which look deceptively like verbal groups, but which are not.

c.g. Progressive:

é nò kútsétsé wó gbeń nò màmám ná ame wó⁵

he was fruits plucking was sharing to people

‘He used to pluck fruits and share them among people’

¹(a) Westermann treats them in Ewe, Christaller and Stewart in Twi, Neil Smith in Nupe, and Ward and Bamgbose in Yoruba. André Wilson has found them in the Gur languages.

(b) Miss Kay Williamson’s *A GRAMMAR OF THE KOLOKUMA DIALECT OF IJO, WEST AFRICAN LANGUAGE MONOGRAPH 2*, Cambridge, 1965, appeared the day after this paper was written. She also treats the phenomenon in Chapter 3.

²J. Ward: *AN INTRODUCTION TO THE YORUBA LANGUAGE*, London, 1952.

³The general framework of description used here and some of the terminology are based on the Scale and Category model of grammar as expounded by M. A. K. Halliday and others. See especially, ‘Categories of the Theory of Grammar’, *WORD*, Vol. 17, No. 3, and *THE LINGUISTIC SCIENCES AND LANGUAGE TEACHING* by Halliday, McIntosh and Stevens, Longmans, 1964.

⁴Westermann: *A STUDY OF THE EWE LANGUAGE*, London 1930, pp. 126 f.

⁵The transcription adopted here is not altogether the standard Ewe orthography. What is used here is phonemic with certain morphophonemic adjustments in the marking of the tones. Word division is determined by a grammatical analysis, the details of which are to be discussed elsewhere.

Future:

gbɪ̀ ɛ̀ ná ámlaɔ̀ bɛ́ná wò àkpó é-me ádrɔ́ ágbɪ̀ ná mí

say it to governor that he will look its inside will judge will say to us

'Tell the governor to look into the matter, judge it and report to us'

In the first example, the verbs gbɛ̀ 'to pick a fruit' and má 'to share' are both in their past progressive form: nɔ́ . . . gbɛ́m, nɔ́ màmám. The word ná, however, is not conjugated at all. There is a lexical item: ná, which is a verb meaning 'to give'. If ná were to be part of the serial verbal construction it would have exhibited agreement with the other verbs and the form would have been: nɔ́ ame wó ná́m. Similarly, in the second example, the verbal groups ákpó 'will look', ádrɔ́ 'will judge' and ágbɪ̀ 'will say' are in the future tense, but ná is not. That ná is not a peculiar deviant will be seen below.

The second significant point is that Westermann discusses what he calls 'the change of verbs into prepositions, adverbs and conjunctions', and gives a list of words which he claims are in the process of historical change. In this fluid state, it is further asserted, these words function as verbs in some circumstances and as 'form words' in others. Thus 'the same word may be considered in the same combination and with the same meaning, sometimes as verbs, when they are conjugated, sometimes as invariable prepositions, etc., according to the wishes of the speaker'.

It is the problem of such alleged arbitrariness that this paper seeks to resolve.

The difficulty seems to stem from two main sources. One is theoretical and the other descriptive. The first is due to failure to distinguish the class of a unit and the place in the structure of the unit next above in the rank scale at which it operates. The descriptive problem derives from the assumption that identity in phonological shape presupposes grammatical identity as well as common lexis.

In theory, if there are items, a, b, c, and places P and Q such that the complex item ab operates at P, and ac operates at Q, the fact that places P and Q are not identical is justification for distinguishing sub-items a₁ and a₂. In description, if items a₁ and a₂ have the same phonological shape, but are subject to neither the same morphological nor syntactic rules, then a₁ and a₂ should be distinguished. The following examples in Ewe are pertinent:

- | | | |
|---------------------------|--------|------------------------------|
| 1. kofi le míá gbɔ́ | SPC | Kofi is with us |
| 2. kofi le nú ɔ́wɛ́ | SP <C> | Kofi is eating |
| 3. kofi ɔ́ ama le ɔ́dí mè | SPCA | Kofi beat Ama in the morning |

In sentence 1, the P (Predicator) element of structure is expounded by a simple verbal group, the formal item of which is lè 'to be located'. lè is a verb and can be conjugated for tense, aspect and mood. In sentence 2, le . . . m forms the discontinuous present tense, progressive aspect marker of the discontinuous verbal group: le . . . ɔ́wɛ́. This verbal group operates at place P in clause structure. In sentence 3, le is a morpheme which combines with the multiple nominal group ɔ́dí mè 'in morning' to form an adverbial group. The adverbial group thus formed operates at place A (Adjunct) in clause structure.

The analysis suggested above requires that three instances of le be recognized in the grammar and lexicon of Ewe:

le₁ – the transitive verb 'to be located'

le₂ . . . m – the discontinuous present tense/progressive aspect marker 'to be in the process of'

le₃ - the verbid.⁶

There are a number of morphemes in Ewe which function just like le₃, i.e. combining with a nominal group to form an adverbial group. Their investigation has not been completed, but they seem to form a closed set of about six members. They are given the name 'verbid' here to distinguish them from verbs. This distinction is of crucial importance, since most of them, like le, have homophonous verbal partners, and others like tó have several nominal and verbal homophones.

The following is a list of Ewe verbids with exemplifications from text, both written and spoken:

- | | | |
|-------|---|----------------|
| ɖé: | é le né. bé wò àká ɖé éɖókui dzí | a(SPA) b(LSPA) |
| | 'It is necessary for him to be sure of himself' | |
| c.p. | é le né. bé wò áɖu éɖókui dzí | a(SPA) b(LSPC) |
| | 'It is necessary for him to control himself' | |
| tsó: | égbeégbe ví-wó fě sùsù tó vòvò sáá tsó blémàtò-wó tɔ gbó | SPCAA |
| | 'The opinions of modern children are vastly different from those of the people of olden days' | |
| ná: | mí àzù viɖe gá ná alá denyigbá | SPCA |
| | 'We shall become of great benefit to our motherland' | |
| kplé: | wó afo nu ná ɖèvi-á-wó kplé gbè bɔ̀bɔ̀é | SPCAA |
| | 'They will speak to the children with gentle voice' | |
| tó: | tó éslá me lá ɖèvi-á-wó á.lɔ́ wó de. kɔnú-wó | ASPC |
| | 'Through this children will love their native customs' | |
| lè: | lè sukú xɔ me há. wó até gú áwɔ́ kɔnú áɖé-wó tó fefé mè | ASPCPCA |
| | 'In the classroom they can practise some of the customs through play acting' | |

All these verbids, except kplé have homophones which are verbs, to which they may be historically related. But as is well known in descriptive linguistics, we should not appeal to history to link the two - verbid and the verb. Nor can we prove any case based on such a claim. Too often, over-emphasis on phonological similarity has led to a blurring of grammatical detail.

Verbid constructions seem to exist in other West African languages as well. It seems that in Twi, the word class: verbid has only one member: wɔ, as in the sentence:

odi ne dwuma wɔ ofie? 'He does his business at home'.

In his treatment of adjuncts, Christaller regards them as 'accessory parts of the predicate'.⁸ He divides this section into four parts: adjuncts of place, of time, of manner and

⁶The term 'verbid' is used by Jespersen (ANALYTIC SYNTAX, 1937) and Mittin (THE GRAMMAR OF SPOKEN ENGLISH, 1962). In both cases it is used to cover certain occurrences of the infinitive and the Verb+ing forms, for which the more recent and general term 'nominalized verb' seems more appropriate. Here it is used for the unconjugated morpheme which combines with the nominal group to form a class of the adverbial group. 'Prepositions' could be used, but then a distinction between it and the other items, e.g. postpositions, would have to be made. 'Verbid' reminds us of the close resemblance between itself and the verb while it still maintains the distinction between the two.

⁷Quoted from Christaller A GRAMMAR OF THE ASANTE AND FANTE LANGUAGE, 1875, p. 131.

⁸OP. CIT., p. 130.

of cause, and in a most revealing footnote, which shows that he knew exactly what he was doing, he says:

'... we treat the circumstances of place, time, manner, cause etc. MORE IN THEIR LOGICAL, THAN IN THEIR GRAMMATICAL RELATION to the principal verb of the sentence, i.e. we confine ourselves not only to such expressions as are obviously adjuncts of a predicate, but mention also those cases in which an adjunct in the English language is expressed in T'shi by an additional predicate, co-ordinate . . . to the principal one.'

Of all the verb-like 'auxiliaries' (to use Christaller's term), which introduce T'wi adjuncts, *wɔ* is the only one known to the writer, which does not have agreement in polarity, aspect and tense with the verbs of the clause in which it occurs – a phenomenon for which T'wi verbs are well-known. Thus, we have sentences like:

<i>ɔ-frɛ me wɔ kokoam</i> ⁹	'He called me in secret'	SPCA
<i>wɔ-koe wɔ so</i>	'They fought about it'	SPA
<i>o-turu ne ba wɔ n'akyi</i>	'She carries her baby on her back'	SPCA

Affirmative:

<i>akurɔma no kyeree akokɔ no wee wɔ dan no akyi</i>	SPCPA
'The hawk caught the chicken (and) ate it behind the house'	

c.p. Negative:

<i>akurɔma no ankyere akokɔ no anwe wɔ dan no akyi</i>	SPCPA
'The hawk didn't catch the chicken (and) didn't eat it behind the house'	

In these sentences, the item *wɔ* in *wɔ kokoam*, *wɔ so*, *wɔ n'akyi* and *wɔ dan no akyi* is not subject to conjugation. Moreover, whereas the verbs *kyere* and *wee* in the last sentence have the negative forms: *ankyere* and *anwe*, *wɔ* the verbid is unaffected by change in polarity from positive to negative. Formal criteria demand that *wɔ* be distinguished from the other items which are genuine verbs in a serial construction.

Similarly, in Ga and Adangme, the morpheme *ye* and *ɲe* respectively seem on preliminary investigation to be verbids; that is to say, they are not subject to inflection, and furthermore, they combine with nominals to form adverbial groups operating at place A (Adjunct) in clause structure, e.g.:

Ga: <i>ma-ye ni ye bie</i>	'I shall eat here'	SPCA
Ada: <i>ma-ye ni ɲe hɔ</i>	'I shall eat here'	SPCA

Again, it should be pointed out that in each case of T'wi, Ga and Adangme, these verbids have verb-stem counterparts which have the same phonological shape, but which are subject to the laws of inflection and are therefore grammatically different.

To sum up, the 'combinations' in the verbal group in Eve and several other West African languages require more detailed study. It is suggested that the term serial verbal constructions be reserved for cases in which real verbs are involved in the structure. The verbid construction, although it looks very much like that of the serial verb in certain respects, cannot be included in the system of the verbal group. The obvious approach is to regard it as part of the adverbial group.

⁹The tone marks in the T'wi, Ga and Adangme examples have been intentionally left out partially for the sake of simplicity and partially because tonal analyses, especially for Ga and Adangme are not available.