

## THE PARTICLE *lí* IN YORUBA

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o.1. Existing descriptions of the particle *lí*<sup>1</sup> in Yoruba leave one in confusion regarding its categorial status, its meaning and function, and the structure of the construction in which it occurs. Some of the earliest grammarians of the language analysed it as part of a splitting verb,<sup>2</sup> while more recent writers have analysed it variously as a 'word' with no specific meaning,<sup>3</sup> or as a preposition meaning 'in, on', etc.,<sup>4</sup> or, finally, as a verb meaning 'in'.<sup>5</sup> The construction in which it typically occurs has similarly been described as containing verbs with double objects,<sup>3</sup> or combinations of verb phrases and prepositional phrases,<sup>4</sup> or, in effect, as containing serial verbs.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the following sentence

- (1) *dàda jí òjò lí owó*<sup>6</sup>  
'Dada stole Ojo's money.'

has the structure

- (2) Subj. V Obj. *lí* Obj.

for Ward, the structure

- (3) Subj. V Obj. Prep. Obj.

for Abraham, and the structure

- (4) Subj. V Compl. V Compl.<sup>7</sup>

for Bamgboṣe.

o.2. Such a lack of agreement among experts suggests to us one of two things: either the particle is genuinely recalcitrant or its true identity is yet to be discovered. We believe the latter to be the case, and shall attempt in this paper to shed new light on the points raised

<sup>1</sup> Besides this particle, there are four other homophonous elements *lí* in Yoruba. These are: the preposition *lí* 'in, on', the verbs *lí* 'to say (that)', *lí* 'to have', *lí* 'to load (of a ship)'.  
<sup>2</sup> See, for example, T. J. Bowen, *GRAMMAR AND DICTIONARY OF THE YORUBA LANGUAGE* (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1858), p. 11, §37-2a. On splitting verbs in Yoruba, see O. Awobuluyi (1969), 'Splitting verbs in Yoruba', a paper presented to the 8th West African Languages Congress held at the University of Abidjan in March 1969 (to appear in the proceedings of the Congress).  
<sup>3</sup> I. C. Ward, *AN INTRODUCTION TO THE YORUBA LANGUAGE* (reprinted, W. Heffer and Sons Ltd., Cambridge, 1956), §319.  
<sup>4</sup> R. C. Abraham, *DICTIONARY OF MODERN YORUBA* (University of London Press Ltd., London, 1958), pp. 439-41.  
<sup>5</sup> A. Bamgboṣe, (1966), *A GRAMMAR OF YORUBA*, West African Language Monograph Series, no. 5 (Cambridge University Press), p. 78.  
<sup>6</sup> Our transcription is morphophonemic; it does not indicate tone change and vowel elision.  
<sup>7</sup> Bamgboṣe would not have his term 'complement' equated to 'object', since, he says (oral communication), not all his 'complements' are 'objects'. Nevertheless, to the extent that there is no indication whatsoever of exactly what the term signifies in specific contexts, it will in no way escape the criticism to be levelled below (§1.14) at the way the term 'object' has been used indiscriminately by other writers.

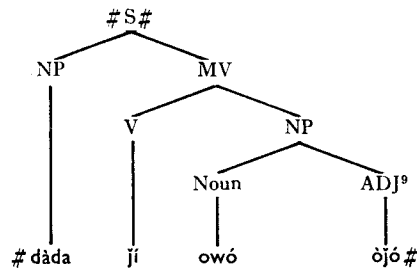
above by showing, among other things, that the particle lacks both lexical meaning and categorial status and is, therefore, most appropriately introduced by transformation.<sup>8</sup>

1.1. We begin by noting that the sentences in which the particle *lɛ* occurs are structurally more varied than existing descriptions suggest. It would seem from (2-4) that most of the earlier writers started out with the assumption that in sentences like (1), the second noun phrase is always the object of the immediately preceding verb, and then went on to analyse the last noun phrase either as yet another object of that same verb or as the object of *lɛ*. This assumption very probably was inspired or at least given the semblance of correctness by the fact that the normal word order in a Yoruba sentence is Subj. V Obj.

1.11. We very much doubt, however, that this is always a safe assumption to make. Thus, for example, the object of the verb *jí* 'to steal' in (1) is not *òjò* but *owó* 'money', since this is what Dada actually stole. Far from being an object, the noun *òjò* has the force of a genitive construction attributive noun. This fact appears clearly in the following stylistic variant of (1), namely (5).

- (5) *dàda jí owó òjò*  
 lit. 'Dada stole money-of Ojo.'  
 i.e. 'Dada stole Ojo's money.'

The structure of this sentence may be diagrammed as follows, leaving out irrelevant structural details:



1.12. Consider next the sentence

- (6) *dàda jà òjò lɛ iyǎ*  
 'Dada argued with Ojo.'

The object of the verb *jà* 'to wage' is not *òjò*, but *iyǎ* 'argument'. In the first place, what *dàda* waged is not *òjò* but *iyǎ*; in the second place (and this is particularly worth noting), no nouns denoting or referring to human beings can function as the object of the verb *jà*. Thus, the sentence

- (7) *\*dàda jà òjò*

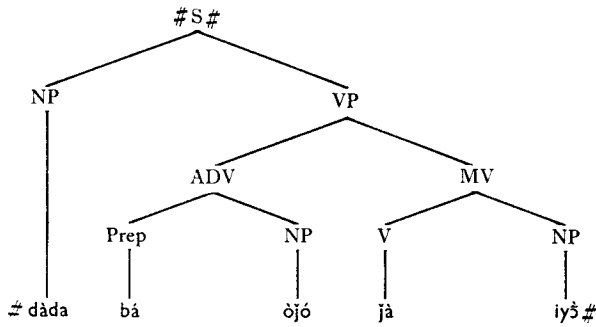
is ungrammatical (indicated by an asterisk). *òjò* in (6) does not have the force of a genitive construction attributive noun, as it does in (1), but of the head of an adverbial phrase. This fact appears more clearly in (8), the stylistic variant of (6),

<sup>8</sup> For the theoretical background of this discussion, see N. Chomsky, ASPECTS OF THE THEORY OF SYNTAX (M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1965).

<sup>9</sup> Relative Clauses come from this node, while genitive construction attributive nouns and adjectives in turn come from relative clauses. On this, see A. O. Awobuluyi, STUDIES IN THE SYNTAX OF THE STANDARD YORUBA VERB (Columbia University Dissertation, 1967), chapter 5.

- (8) *dàda bá òjò já iyě*  
 lit. 'Dada with Ojo waged argument.'  
 i.e. 'Dada argued with Ojo.'

whose structure is shown in the accompanying diagram.

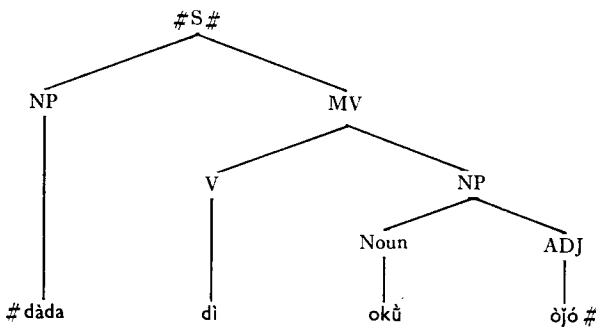
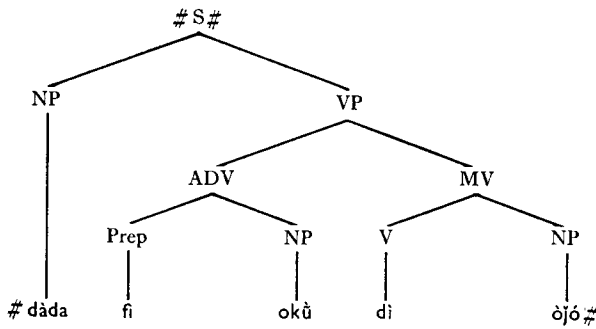


1.13. Consider, as a final example, the ambiguous sentence

- (9) *dàda dì òjò lí okù*  
 (i) 'Dada bound Ojo with ropes.'  
 (ii) 'Dada tied Ojo's ropes together.'

Here *òjò* is either an object of the verb *dì* 'to tie, bind' or a genitive construction attributive noun. This fact appears clearly in (10-11), the stylistic variants of (9).

The structures of the two sentences 10 and 11 are shown in the following diagrams:



- (10) *dàda fi okù dì òjò*  
 lit. 'Dada with ropes tied Ojo.'  
 i.e. 'Dada bound Ojo with ropes.'
- (11) *dàda dì okù òjò*  
 lit. 'Dada tied ropes-of Ojo.'  
 i.e. 'Dada tied Ojo's ropes together.'

1.14. Examples (1), (6), and (9) show clearly that in the construction under consideration, any noun immediately preceding the particle *lí* has at least one of the following three structures: (i) object; (ii) genitive construction attributive noun; and (iii) adverbial phrase noun. (The same thing is true for any noun that follows the particle, except that the third possibility is subject—in causative verb sentences (see §§2.1, 2.2 below) instead of genitive construction attributive noun.) In view of this, it is completely misleading to lump all these possibilities together under the term object or complement, as earlier writers did.

1.21. As for the meaning of the particle, we are unable to follow Bamgboṣe and Abraham in glossing it as 'in, on', etc. Ward in our opinion came much closer to the truth when she observed in effect that the particle does not appear to have any of the meanings, including those just given, associated with the other homophonous elements *lí* in the language.<sup>10</sup> Her observation is fully borne out by the fact that none of the native speakers we asked ever said the particle means 'in, on', etc. Far from doing that, these speakers invariably either gave it various other glosses as required very clearly by considerations of idiomatic English usage, or remained silent, looking quite puzzled, or actually confessed that they were not sure about its meaning.<sup>11</sup>

1.22. The only explanation for such uncertainty on the part of native speakers, we feel, is that the meaning of the particle is syntactic rather than lexical. In any case, there is one very striking fact about the sentences of the type under consideration which cannot be explained except by reference to the particle, whether or not one eventually succeeds in discovering its lexical meaning. This is the fact that all such sentences contain constituents which appear in positions they do not normally occupy. Thus, as pointed out above, some nouns which appear where objects normally occur in other sentence types are not objects, but adverbial phrase nouns or genitive construction attributive nouns. In the light of this, and considering the general uncertainty among speakers regarding the lexical meaning of the particle, we find it convenient as well as sufficient to describe it simply as serving to indicate that constituent permutation has occurred.

1.31. Of the various homophonous elements *lí* in the language, the only one with which the particle *lí* could be, and indeed has at times been, confused<sup>12</sup> is the preposition *lí* 'in,

<sup>10</sup> Ward, *op. cit.* §319.

<sup>11</sup> The informants consulted are Mr Adekunle Adejumo, when he was a student at Michigan State University in 1966, and members of the final year (1968/9) Yoruba Grammar class, University of Ibadan.

<sup>12</sup> Of the three writers, Ward, Bamgboṣe and Abraham, only Ward actually distinguished between the two elements (§§319–320), as it would seem, on semantic grounds. Bamgboṣe analyses both elements as 'verbs' and, what is more, glosses them alike as 'in' (pp. 78, 129), thus claiming in effect that they are formally, categorially, and semantically indistinguishable. Nevertheless, he insists (oral communication) that he in fact distinguishes between 'ní + noun used as a "predicator" and ní + noun used as an adjunct (adverb)'. He does not show, however, why it cannot possibly be the same element 'ní' that operates in both structures, a crucial point on which his claim either stands or falls. As for Abraham, he just did not distinguish between the two elements.

on'. The two elements are actually distinct, however, as they behave quite differently under identical transformations. Thus, consider the following ambiguous sentence:

- (12) *dàda tè òjò lí esè*  
 (i) 'Dada stepped on Ojo's foot.'  
 (ii) 'Dada trampled Ojo on the foot.'

When *lí* in this sentence is a preposition, *esè* 'foot, leg' is analysable only as a locative noun, such that when it is either emphasized or questioned, we get

- (13) (*lí*) *esè lí<sup>13</sup> dàda ti tè òjò*  
 'It was on the foot that Dada trampled Ojo.'  
 (14) (*lí*) *ibo lí dàda ti tè òjò*  
 'Where did Dada trample Ojo?'

where the preposition is optionally retained sentence-initially and obligatorily represented morphophonemically elsewhere by *ti*. On the other hand, when *lí* in this same sentence is the particle under discussion, the noun *esè* is analysable only as a possessed item, such that when it is either emphasized or questioned we get

- (15) *esè òjò lí dàda tè*  
 'Ojo's foot was what Dada stepped upon.'  
 (16) *kí lí dàda tè*  
 'What did Dada step upon?'

from which the particle has been dropped completely.

1.32. There is, in our opinion, no justification for analysing the particle as a verb, as it does not behave like one<sup>14</sup> whether functionally or syntactically. Seen as it ought to be, in the light of its function as defined above, the particle is completely unique in the language. But this does not mean that one must therefore set up a special category for it. Quite the contrary, since it actually duplicates an already existing convention in transformational grammar, namely that of having permutation, among other syntactic processes, automatically recorded in the transformational history of appropriate derived strings, all one need do is to have the particle introduced by transformation instead of recognizing it in the base component.

2.1. Sentences with the particle *lí* appear to come from three types of sources only. These are here labelled either genitive, or causative, or adverbial, depending on whether they contain a genitive construction, as in

- (17) *dàda wó ɔkò òjò*  
 lit. 'Dada wrecked lorry-of Ojo.'  
 i.e. 'Dada wrecked Ojo's lorry.'

or a causative verb, as in

- (18) *oúǽ lǎ́ mú ilú kú òjò*  
 lit. 'Food the caused stomach filled Ojo.'  
 i.e. 'The food gave Ojo indigestion.'

<sup>13</sup> This element *lí* (with the mid tone) indicates that any immediately preceding constituent is emphasized. On this, see Awobuluyi (1967), *op. cit.* pp. 204-7.

<sup>14</sup> On this, see *IBID*, p. 15. The whole question of what is or is not a verb in Yoruba is discussed in greater detail in this writer's 'The Verb in Yoruba' (forthcoming).

or, finally, an adverbial phrase, as in

- (19) *dàda fi iwé kó òjò*  
 lit. 'Dada with book taught Ojo.'  
 i.e. 'Dada taught Ojo to read and write.'

2.2. Not every sentence containing a genitive construction, or a causative verb, or an adverbial phrase is a potential source of a construction with the particle *lí* however.<sup>15</sup> For any such sentence to be a potential source of this construction, it must contain a particular type of verb, as shown by the fact that we can have (read the arrow → as 'can be turned into'):

- (17) *dàda wó ɔkò òjò* →  
 'Dada wrecked Ojo's lorry.'  
 (20) *dàda wó òjò lí ɔkò*  
 'Dada wrecked Ojo's lorry.'  
 (18) *oúje lísù mú ilú kú òjò* →  
 'The food gave Ojo indigestion.'  
 (21) *oúje lísù kú òjò lí ilú*<sup>16</sup>  
 'The food gave Ojo indigestion.'  
 (19) *dàda fi iwé kó òjò* →  
 'Dada taught Ojo how to read and write.'  
 (22) *dàda kó òjò lí iwé*  
 'Dada taught Ojo how to read and write.'

But, by contrast, we cannot have

- (23) *dàda rí ɔkò òjò* →  
 'Dada saw Ojo's lorry.'  
 (24) \**dàda rí òjò lí ɔkò*  
 (25) *oúje lísù mú ilú dù òjò* →  
 'The food gave Ojo pain in the stomach.'  
 (26) \**oúje lísù dù òjò lí ilú*  
 (27) *dàda fi iwé ṭṣ òjò* →  
 'Dada deceived Ojo with a book.'  
 (28) \**dàda ṭṣ òjò lí iwé*

Notice that (17) differs from (23) only in having the verb *wó* 'to wreck, smash up' where the latter has *rí* 'to see'; similarly, (18) has *kú* 'to fill up, be full' where (25) has *dù* 'to hurt, to pain', and (19) *kó* 'to teach' where (27) has *ṭṣ* 'to deceive'. It is clear from this that *wó*, *kú*, *kó*, and other verbs like them form a distinct subclass from which verbs like *rí*, *dù*, and *ṭṣ* are excluded. We indicate this by assigning the former group of verbs the syntactic feature [+lí], and the latter group the opposite feature, namely [-lí].

<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, not every sentence with the particle *lí* has an extant variant without the particle. There are twenty or so such sentences in the language. They will not be discussed here, for lack of space.

<sup>16</sup> This sentence is ambiguous, as it could also have come from *oúje lísù kú ilú òjò* 'The food filled Ojo's stomach'.

## THE PARTICLE *Í* IN YORUBA

The following is a partial list of verbs having the feature [+Í]: *jí* 'to steal', *kó*, 'to rob', *dá* 'to break', *kpa* 'to kill', *jó* 'to burn', *wó* 'to wreck', *là* 'to open', *bò* 'to cover', *dí* 'to obstruct', *dì* 'to bind', *dè* 'to tighten', *lù* 'to hit', *kpè* 'to call', *gbá* 'to kick', *rś* 'to send', *kó* 'to teach', *kú* 'to fill up', *fú* 'to give', *ta* 'to kick', *ta* 'to shoot', *śá* 'to slash', *dá* 'to judge', *je* 'to owe', *yá* 'to lend', *so* 'to throw', *kpa* 'to tell, utter'.

It is possible to subclassify the verbs listed here; for we find that some verbs which will tolerate the permutation of the constituents of any accompanying genitive construction do not tolerate any permutation at all when they occur in sentences with adverbials, and vice versa. For example, the following two sentences

(29) *dàda lù igi òjò*  
'Dada hit Ojo's wood/stick.'

(30) *dàda fi igi lù òjò*  
'Dada hit Ojo with a stick.'

can be transformed into

(31) *dàda lù òjò Í igi*

with the meanings of (29) and (30). By contrast,

(32) *dàda kó ilé òjò*  
'Dada burgled Ojo's house.'

can be transformed into

(33) *dàda kó òjò Í ilé*  
'Dada burgled Ojo's house.'

while the following corresponding sentence with an adverbial phrase

(34) *dàda fi ɔkò kó ilé òjò*  
'Dada used a lorry in burgling Ojo's house.'

cannot be transformed into

(35) \**dàda kó ilé òjò Í ɔkò*

For the reverse of the preceding case, consider the following sentence with an adverbial phrase

(36) *dàda fi ɔfà ta òjò*  
'Dada shot Ojo with an arrow.'

which can be transformed into

(37) *dàda ta òjò Í ɔfà*  
'Dada shot Ojo with an arrow.'

while its genitive counterpart

(38) *dàda ta ɔfà òjò*  
'Dada shot Ojo's arrow.'

apparently cannot be transformed into

(39) *dàda ta òjò Í ɔfà*

since the latter is understood in the sense of (37) only.

As might be expected, some of these verbs behave just as idiosyncratically in more complex sentences with combinations of genitive constructions, adverbial phrases, and causative verbs. However, no examples will be given, as they will only illustrate the same point as the simpler examples considered above, namely, that the construction with the particle *lí* is of limited productivity.

The descriptive problem arising from this is not best handled by subclassifying the verbs under discussion, as there would be no natural stopping point once one has embarked upon a programme of subclassifying them. And, what is worse, the syntactic rules for deriving sentences with the particle *lí* would have to be correspondingly complex if they are in any way to reflect all the subclasses of verbs having the feature [+*lí*] arrived at. Therefore, instead of subclassifying these verbs, we shall assume that the lexical entry for each of them contains, among other features, special features indicating its idiosyncratic transformational potential in the three types of sources from which constructions with *lí* are derived.

2.3. As far as we have been able to determine, there are no sentences with more than one occurrence each of the particle *lí*. Thus, the following sentence

- (40) *dàda fi igi lù ɔm̩ òj̩ó*  
 'Dada hit Ojo's child with a stick.'

can be transformed only into

- (41) *dàda lù ɔm̩ òj̩ó lí igi*  
 (42) *dàda fi igi lù òj̩ó lí ɔm̩*

with the meaning of (40) (this writer would avoid saying (42) however), but never into

- (43) *\*dàda lù òj̩ó lí ɔm̩ lí igi*

This simply means that the rules for deriving sentences with the particle *lí* must not be allowed to operate cyclically.

3.1. The rule which accepts strings with genitive constructions as input now follows. Notice, incidentally, that it is all the more necessary to restrain it from operating cyclically because sentences like

- (44) *dàda jí owó ɔm̩ ɔba šókótó*  
 'Dada stole some money belonging to the child of the king of Sokoto.'

have variants only of the type

- (45) *dàda jí ɔm̩ ɔba šókótó lí owó*

the following being unacceptable:

- (46) *\*dàda jí ɔba šókótó lí owó lí ɔm̩*  
 (47) *\*dàda jí šókótó lí owó lí ɔm̩ lí ɔba*  
 (48) TOP ATTRIBUTIVE INVERSION

SD: X—V—NP—NP<sup>(n)</sup>—Y  
           1      2      3

SC: X—1—3—lí—2—Y

Condition: 1 = Verb [+*lí*]

X, Y = null/nonnull, and neither contains *lí*.

3.2. The causative verbs which operate in the sources of sentences with the particle *lí* are *dá*, *mú*, and *fi*. With the exception of the last, the subjects of these verbs are always inanimate, when functioning in sentences with the particle *lí*. Thus, we have

- (49) *òrò lís dá èrù bà òjò* →  
lit. 'Matter the caused fear struck Ojo.'  
i.e. 'The matter frightened Ojo.'
- (50) *òrò lís bà òjò lí èrù*  
'The matter frightened Ojo.'
- (18) *oúje lís mú ilú kú òjò* →  
'The food gave Ojo indigestion.'
- (21) *oúje lís kú òjò lí ilú*  
'The food gave Ojo indigestion.'

but not

- (51) *dàda dá èrù bà òjò* →  
'Dada scared Ojo.'
- (52) \**dàda bà òjò lí èrù*
- (53) *dàda mú ilú kú òjò* →  
'Dada caused Ojo to have indigestion.'
- (54) \**dàda kú òjò lí ilú*

On the other hand, we have

- (55) *dàda fi iyà je òjò* →  
lit. 'Dada caused suffering afflicted Ojo.'  
i.e. 'Dada tortured Ojo.'
- (56) *dàda je òjò lí iyà*  
'Dada tortured Ojo.'

as well as

- (57) *àlíf owó lí owó fi iyà je òjò*<sup>17</sup> →  
lit. 'Not-having money in hand caused suffering afflicted Ojo.'  
i.e. 'Ojo suffered hardships for lack of money.'
- (58) *àlíf owó lí owó je òjò lí iyà*  
'Ojo suffered hardships for lack of money.'

The following two ordered rules derive sentences with the particle *lí* from their causative underlying strings:

(59) TOP SUBJECT INVERSION

SD: X—NP—V—NP—MV — Y

1 2 3 4

SC: X—1 — 2—4 — lí—3—Y

Condition: 4 contains Verb [+lí]

2 = *dá*, *fi*, *mú*

when 2 = *dá*, *mú*, 1 = Noun [–anim.]

X, Y = null/nonnull, and neither contains *lí*.

<sup>17</sup> Some informants felt uneasy (for stylistic reasons) about this sentence, others did not.

- (60) T<sup>ob</sup> CAUSATIVE DELETION  
 SD: X—V—MV lí NP—Y  
           1                  2  
 SC: X—2—Y  
 Condition: 1 = dá, fi, mú  
             X, Y = null/nonnull.

3.3. The adverbials functioning in the sources of sentences with the particle lí are restricted to those formed by means of fi ‘with, by means of’, fú ‘for’, sí ‘at, to’, and bá ‘with, for’. For example,

- (19) dàda fi ìwé kó òjò →  
 ‘Dada taught Ojo to read and write.’  
 (22) dàda kó òjò lí ìwé  
 ‘Dada taught Ojo to read and write.’  
 (8) dàda bá òjò jà iyě →  
 ‘Dada argued with Ojo.’  
 (6) dàda jà òjò lí iyě  
 ‘Dada argued with Ojo.’  
 (61) dàda dá àrè fú òjò →  
 lit. ‘Dada judged innocence for Ojo.’  
 i.e. ‘Dada declared Ojo innocent.’  
 (62) dàda dá òjò lí àrè  
 ‘Dada declared Ojo innocent.’  
 (63) dàda ta ɔfà sí wě →  
 lit. ‘Dada shot arrow at/to them.’  
 i.e. ‘Dada shot an arrow at them.’  
 (64) dàda ta wě lí ɔfà  
 ‘Dada shot an arrow at them.’

Considerations of rule economy require that the second member of each of the preceding pairs of sentences be derived from the string underlying both sentences; namely

- (65) # dàda kó òjò fi ìwé #  
 (66) # dàda jà iyě bá òjò #  
 (67) # dàda dá àrè fú òjò #  
 (68) # dàda ta ɔfà sí wě #

The rules which carry out this derivation are:

- (69a) T<sup>op</sup> OBJECT AND ADVERBIAL NOUNS INVERSION  
 SD: X—V—NP—Prep—NP—Y  
           1  2  3  4  
 SC: X—1—3 — 2—lí—4— Y  
 Condition: 1 = Verb [+lí]  
             3 = fi  
             X, Y = null/nonnull, and neither contains lí.

(69b) T<sup>op</sup> OBJECT AND ADVERBIAL NOUNS INVERSION

SD: X—V—NP—Prep—NP—Y

          1      2      3      4  
 SC: X—1—3 — 4—Íf—2 — Y

Condition: 1 = Verb [+Íf]

          3 = bá, sí, fú

X, Y = null/nonnull, and neither contains *Íf*.

(70) T<sup>ob</sup> PREPOSITION DELETION

SD: X—V—Prep—NP Íf NP—Y

          1      2                  3  
 SC: X—1—3—Y

Condition: 2 = bá, fi, sí, fú

X, Y = null/nonnull.

These two rules are ordered.

4.1. Our aim in this discussion has been to show that there is need for a reappraisal of existing descriptions of sentences with the particle *Íf*, for they are problematic in many more ways than these descriptions suggest. The solution we have proposed of course does not purport to be the only solution possible, nor does it even claim to treat every phenomenon connected with the sentences satisfactorily. But it does, in our opinion, have the merit over all other existing solutions of at least recognizing all the major distinctions that are made in such sentences.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> We wish to thank Professor Bamgboṣe for suggesting ways to improve an earlier draft of this paper and for patiently answering some of the questions we have raised about his own analysis.