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A Minimalist Syntax of Yoruba Splitting Verbs

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Abstract

While the literature on Yoruba splitting verbs affirms that every verb in the group splits to sandwich its object, very little is known about how the process really comes by. This paper investigates this group of verbs in Yoruba looking especially at their syntactic frame and features in both causative and inchoative constructions. Employing theoretical insights from minimalist grammar with data evidence from Standard and Central Yoruba dialects, it argues that such verbs are base generated in the core VP before their first halves are raised to lexicalize the functional light *v* within the outer VP shell. The paper concludes that Yoruba splitting verbs are complex lexemes entered in the lexicon as single units of word items before they get selected and merged to their nominal *c*-selected complement in the syntax.

1. Introduction

Splitting verbs are so-called in Yoruba in that each of such verbs optionally splits in clause construction to sandwich its nominal object. Such verbs appear as fusions or combinations of two simple verbs, i.e. $V + V \rightarrow V$, which morphologically yields a new but more complex verb. One property of this subgroup of Yoruba verbs is that when they split, each half of the phonological sequence is often rendered meaningless, and where such a half has any meaning at all, it is often literal and incoherent with the overall logical interpretation of the whole verb sequence. According to Awobuluyi (1978:53), many of the Yorubá splitting verbs, e.g. **bá...wí** ‘to scold’, **bà...jé** ‘to spoil’, **dì...mú** ‘to hold’, **rẹ...jẹ** ‘to cheat’, **bẹ/yẹ...wò** ‘to inspect or pay a visit’, **pa...dà** ‘turn around’, **şẹ...kù** ‘to leave something over’, **gbá...mú** ‘to lay hold of or catch’, **gbà...gbọ** ‘to believe’, etc., as illustrated in (1), have idiomatic interpretations.

- 1a. Àwọ̀n olóşẹ̀lú ń **rẹ** ará ilú **jẹ**.
3pl¹ politician prog cut folk town eat
‘Politicians are cheating the populace.’

¹. The following is a list of abbreviations used in this article: HTS--High Tone Syllable; Infl--Inflection; 1sg--1st Person Singular; 2sg--2nd Person Singular; 3sg--3rd Person Singular; 1pl--1st Person Plural; 2pl--2nd Person Plural; 3pl--3rd Person plural; Acc--Accusative; Neg--Negation; Fut--Future; Spec--Specifier; Perf--Perfective; def--definite; Prog--Progressive; T--Tense; Subj--Subject; Loc--Locative. C-selection--complement selection; s-selection--subject selection; Spec--Specifier; MP--Minimalist Program

- b. Olùkọ **bá** Ṣọlá **wí**.
 Teacher meet Sola say
 ‘The teacher scolded Sola.’
- c. Tọlá **ba** fòdùnù mi **jé**.
 ? phone my ?
 ‘Tola spoilt my telephone set.’
- d. Mo **gba** Ọlọrun **gbọ**.
 1sg accept God hear
 ‘I believe in God.’
- e. Wọn **di** dẹrẹbà náà **mú**
 3pl-HTS tie driver the catch
 ‘They hold the driver.’
- f. Mo **gbá** ọ **mú** ní oní
 I ? you catch at today
 ‘I caught you today.’

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical approach employed in this study is minimalist syntax, a model of generative grammar which emphasizes economically minimal number of operations for syntactic derivation. The organization of the grammar revolves around a feature ladden/rich lexicon and a computation system that combines lexical items into syntactic objects (SOs). The core of the operations is *merge* which combines word items in pairwise fashion directly from the lexicon via numeration (i.e. external merge) or remerge items within already constructed syntactic objects (i.e. internal merge). The study also employs relevant hypotheses that have over the years been incorporated into the minimalist grammar tradition, especially VP-Subject-Internal and Split-VP hypotheses.

2.1. VP-Internal Subject Hypothesis

The standard assumption and practice in generative grammar right from Government-Binding (Chomsky 1981) up to principles and parameters (Chomsky 1986, 1991) is that subjects of clauses occupy the specifier position of IP and remain there because they are assumed to be base-generated in that position. This implies that Spec-IP is a θ -marked argument position in clausal architecture.

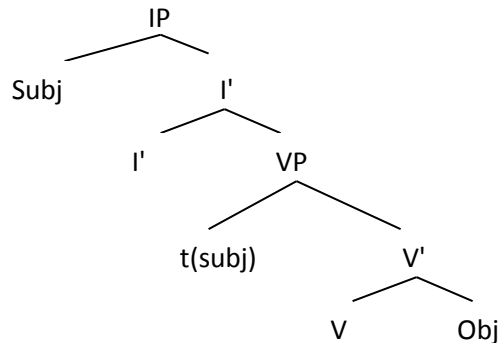
However, various scholars beginning with Koopman & Sportiche (1985, 1990), Kitagawa (1986), and Kuroda (1988) among others, have since

argued against this claim. Instead of the traditional position, they favour a VP-internal generation of subjects. The thrust of their claim is that subjects of clauses which normally occupy Spec-IP are not primarily generated there. Rather, they are base-generated in a VP internally theta-marked position before being raised to Spec-IP. That VP-internal position is assumed to be Spec-VP, and it is from there that the feature checking configuration raises the subjects to Spec-IP. Since then, much conceptual and empirical evidence have been presented by various scholars in support of the VP-internal subject hypothesis. Such arguments include the case of floating quantifiers in French and English (Koopman and Sportiche 1990), facts from VP coordination (Burton & Grimshaw 1992), and the syntax of cliticisation in English (Radford 1997: 154). Oduntan (2000) similarly presents a piece of Yoruba language internal evidence where it was showed that the subject in expressions like (2) below is actually generated in a position lower than Neg before being subsequently raised to Spec-NegP. He identified the original source position of that subject as Spec-VP.

2. Olùkọ̀ Yorùbá *(kò) bú ẹ̀nikankan
 teacher Yoruba Neg insult no-one
 ‘The Yoruba teacher insulted no one.’

Given the fact of movement from Spec-VP to Spec-IP in the VP-internal subject hypothesis, internally merged or raised subjects are assumed to leave behind a trace in their theta-marked base position. A consequence of the VP-internal theory is that Spec-IP is uniformly assumed to be a non-theta position since the theta role requirement of the raised subject has already been satisfied VP-internally. The VP-internal subject structure is presented below in figure 1, as adapted from Chomsky (1995: 186).

Figure 1:



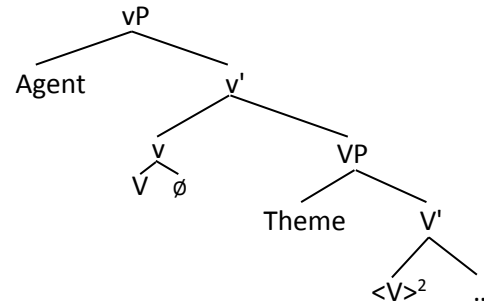
2.2. Split-VP Hypothesis

This hypothesis, also called VP-shell or Light-verb analysis, is advanced in Chomsky (1995). It holds that VPs canonically have a complex structure comprising an inner core VP headed by a lexical verb and an outer vP shell headed by a strong null (\emptyset) light verb to which the lexical V head of the inner/core VP adjoins when raised into vp to lexicalize v. According to Chomsky (1995: 321),

... the operation cannot have targeted VP either as adjunction or as substitution. It must be, then, that X^{\max} is not a projection of the raised V but rather a verb phrase distinct from VP ... Thus, V raises to an already filled position occupied by the light verb v that has been selected from the Lexicon and heads its own projection, v^{\max} . V adjoins to v forming [_v V v];

Following the idea advanced in the uniformity of theta-assignment hypothesis (UTAH) developed by Baker (1988), which claim that each theta role by a particular predicate is canonically tied to a syntactic position, the light v analysis assumes that some arguments, e.g. agent, originate within the outer vP shell while others like theme originate within the inner/core VP shell as illustrated below in figure 2.

Figure 2:



². This sign is used to indicate that the item inside it is no longer phonetically realised in the position where it is used. Another way of indicating that in the literature is to draw a straight line across the item, e.g. <ba> = ba .

The light v itself is assumed to be used either in the causative or performative sense. When used in the causative sense, it has an interpretation similar to a verb like *make/cause* in ‘make or cause an activity/event to be carried out or done.’ On the other hand, v is performative when it has the interpretation paraphrasable as ‘an agent performs the event/action denoted by the inner core VP’ (Radford 1997: 201, 209). Chomsky (1995) motivates this analysis on the premise that it provides a more principled solution to the problem of three place predicates and other complex VPs within a framework like the MP which assumes that the merger operations employed in syntactic derivation is inherently binary.

3. Syntactic Projection of Yorùbá Splitting Verbs

This section addresses the question of how Yoruba splitting verbs project their syntax. Generally, the syntax of a verb consists in the complement it c-selects and by extension, given its argument structure, the subject that the V projection s-selects (see Radford 2004: 357). So, given this syntactic and semantic background, how exactly do Yoruba splitting verbs project their syntax before and even after their vP is merged to Infl to derived full clause constructions. Two observations suffice in this respect: First, most Yoruba splitting verbs permit transitive-inchoative alternation as evident in the behaviour of **bàjé**, **şékù**, **túkà**, and **gbàgbó** in (3).

- 3ai. Akín **ba** àga Tádé **jé**.
 Akin-HTS V chair Tade V
 ‘Akin spoilt Tade’s chair.’
- aii. Àga Tádé **bàjé**.
 Chair Tade-HTS spoil
 ‘Tade’s chair got spoilt.’
- bi. Ọlórùn-ún **tú** àwọ̀n aṣẹbi **ká**.
 God-HTS disperse 3pl evil-doer around.
 ‘God dispersed / scattered the evil-doers.’
- bii. Àwọ̀n aṣẹbí **túkà**.
 3pl evil-doer-HTS disperse
 ‘The evil-doers dispersed.’
- ci. Mo **gba** Ọlórùn Olódùmarè **gbọ**.
 1sg accept God Almighty hear
 ‘I believe in God Almighty.’
- cii. Mo **gbàgbó** nínú Ọlórùn Olódùmarè.
 1sg believe Loc-inside God Almighty
 ‘I believe in God Almighty.’
- ciii. *Mo Ọlórùn Olódùmarè **gbàgbó** /*Mo **gbàgbó** Ọlórùn Olódùmarè
 1sg God Almighty believe
- di. Wọ̀n **şé** óunjẹ nàà **kù**.
 3pl-HTS break food Def remain
 ‘They left over the food remains.’

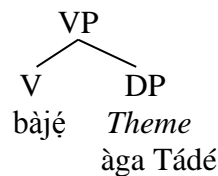
- dii. Oúnjẹ nàà **şékù**.
 food Def remain
 ‘The food remains.’/‘the food has left-over.’
- ei. Wọ̀n **rẹ́** mi **jẹ́**.
 3pl-HTS cut 1sg-acc eat
 ‘They cheated me.’
- eii. *Wọ̀n **rẹ́jẹ́** mi
 1sg-HTS cut-eat 1sg-acc
- eiii. *Mí **rẹ́jẹ́**
 1sg cut-eat

This suggests that the splitting verbs in those constructions may have been base generated as single unit heads of their inner core VPs, exactly in the manner they show up in the inchoative constructions in (3aii, bii, cii, & dii). The motivation for this resides in the conviction that the unsplit forms appear more primary than the split forms.

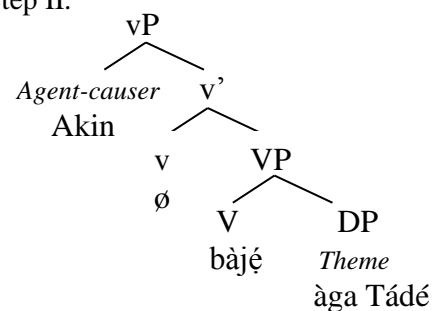
Second, the argument structure of the verbs in this group is quite revealing as almost all of them are two-place predicates having *agent-causer* or *experiencer* subject and *theme/patient* object respectively. For instance, **bàjẹ́** ‘to spoil’ and **túká** ‘to scatter’ have *agent-causer* subjects and *theme/patient* objects while **gbàgbọ́** ‘to believe’ has *experiencer* subject and *theme* object. What these argument structure information suggest is that each of the verbs in question, though lexically complex, are entered as single unit word items in the lexicon, and not as split halves. The position pursued in this paper, therefore, is that the split forms are derived via internal merge, i.e. raising movement, of the first half of the unsplit forms of the verbs. The following syntactic configurations in Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the derivational steps involved in the construction.

Figure 3: Base VP

a. Step 1:



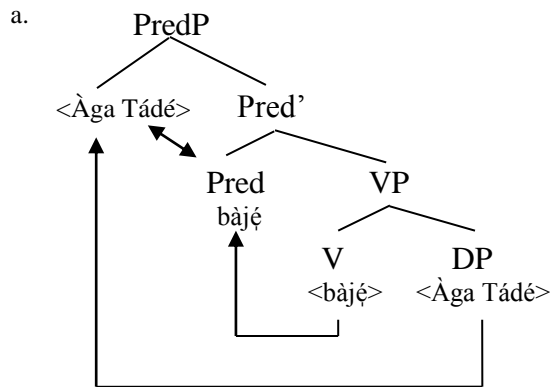
b. Step II:



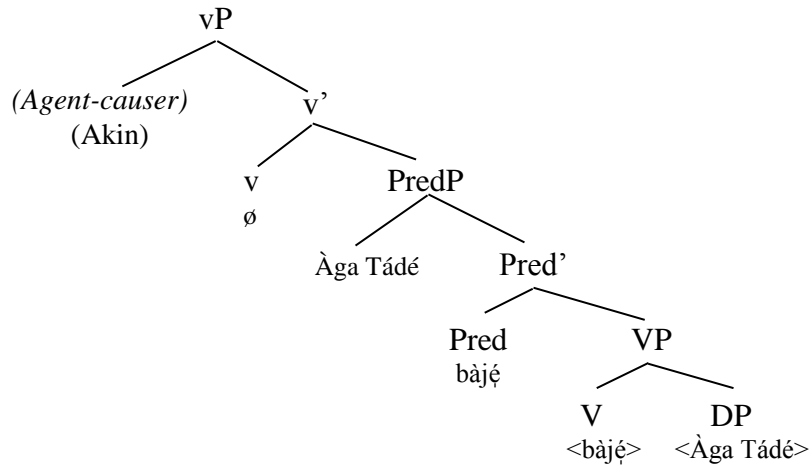
To form the base VP of the splitting verbs, the process begins with an external merge which gets the lexical verb merged as a unit to its DP object complement, as illustrated in figure 3a. This is the step I that derives the inner core VP shell of the verb phrase. Step II involves the projection of the causative functional light verb \emptyset which is also externally merged to VP to project the outer vP shell which houses the agent-causer subject argument **Akin** as specifier, as shown in figure 3b.

To check the accusative features of the lexical V and its object complement, a predicate phrase (PredP) is projected in-between vP and VP by merging Pred^0 to the core VP. The reason for this is to create a Spec-Head structural relationship between V and its object complement being a necessary requirement for accusative feature checking between the two. The assumption therefore is that the lexical V (**bàjé**) is raised to Pred^0 while its object (**Àga Tádé**) is raised to spec-PredP, as illustrated in figure 4a. The double arrow indicates mutual feature-checking relationship between the V and its object complement. It is this PredP as constructed in figure 4a that is directly merged to the light functional v to project the outer vP shell as illustrated in figure 4b.

Figure 4: Base VP



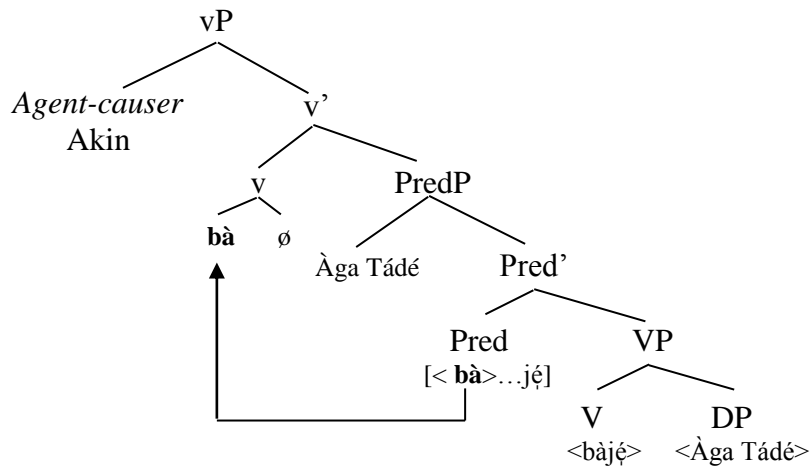
b.



The assumption of this study is that figure 4b is the base verb phrase from which clause constructions containing splitting verbs are derived in Yoruba. If this is true as claimed, the next question to answer is how the lexical V in the verb phrase splits to sandwich its object complement.

This paper assumes that the splitting verb in Pred⁰ (in Figure 4b) splits into two halves and its first half is raised to adjoin to the functional light v to lexicalize it. This internal merge and adjunction is done in such a way that the raised half of the lexical verb immediately precedes the object complement in Spec-PredP, as illustrated in figure 5.

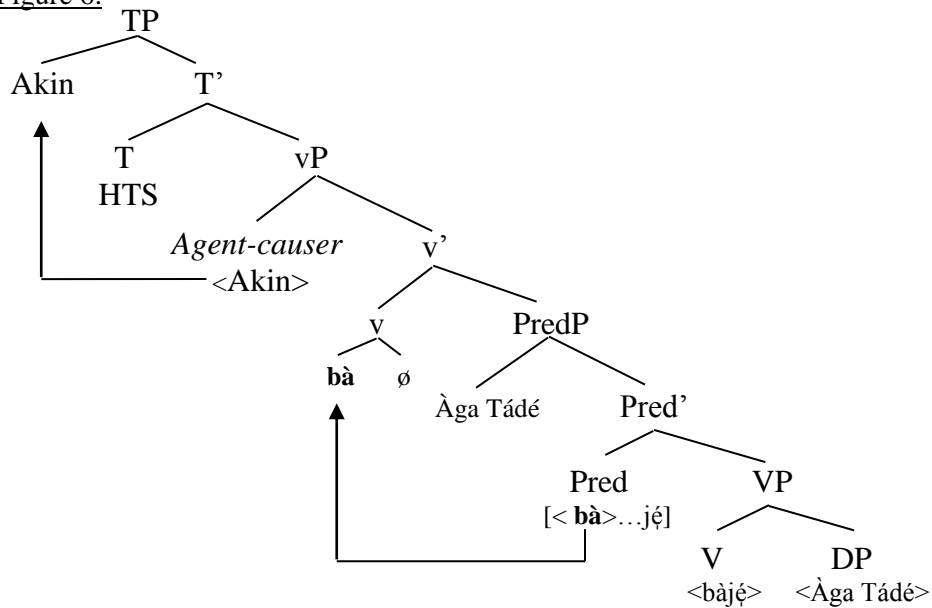
Figure 5:



This syntactic process derives the phonetic spell-out form of the convergent verb phrase **Akin ba àga Tádé jé** in which the two halves of the split lexical verb **bàjé** have already sandwich the object complement. It should however be noted that the output at this point of the derivation is a verb phrase and not a clause. Evidence for this is clearly seen in the lack of tense which following Awobuluyi (2013) is assumed to be marked by the High tone syllable (HTS) in Yoruba. The HTS as a matter of obligation occurs immediately after the syntactic subject argument in Yoruba clause constructions. By implication, therefore, the phonetic output at this point should be **Akín ba àga Tádé jé** if it is a convergent clause construction.

To derive the convergent Tense phrase or finite clause **Akín ba àga Tádé jé** from the verb phrase base in figure 5, the assumption of this paper is that the vP in figure 5 serves as complement which is merged to the Tense head to derive TP. Given the extended projection Principle (EPP) feature requirement of Tense, T probes its syntactic domain (i.e. vP) and attracts its goal, which is the agent-causer subject argument **Akin**, to Spec-TP to check off the nominative EPP feature of T. This process is illustrated with the syntactic configuration in figure 6.

Figure 6:



4. Projection of Inchoative Form of Yoruba Splitting Verb Constructions

The inchoative form of a verb is that which appears intransitive contextually and expresses the action, event or state denoted by such verb as if it occurs of its own accord. In other words, its clause construction does not have any syntactically visible agent-causer argument. This however is syntactically superficial as such agent-causer argument still exists in the argument structure semantics of such verbs. (3aii, bii, and dii) rewritten here as (4aii, bii, and cii) are examples of inchoative forms of some Yoruba splitting verbs.

- 4ai. Akín **ba** àga Tádé **jé**.
 Akin-HTS V chair Tade V
 ‘Akin spoilt Tade’s chair.’
- aii. Àga Tádé **bàjé**.
 Chair Tade-HTS spoil
 ‘Tade’s chair got spoilt.’
- bi. Olórun **tú** àwọ̀n aṣẹbi **ká**.
 God disperse 3pl evil-doer around.
 ‘God dispersed / scattered the evil-doers.’
- bii. Àwọ̀n aṣẹbi **túká**
 3pl evil-doer disperse
 ‘The evil-doers dispersed.’
- ci. Wọ̀n **ṣé** oúnjẹ nàà **kù**
 3pl-HTS break food Def remain
 ‘They left over the food remains.’
- cii. Oúnjẹ nàà **ṣékù**.
 food Def remain
 ‘The food remains.’ / ‘The food has left-overs.’

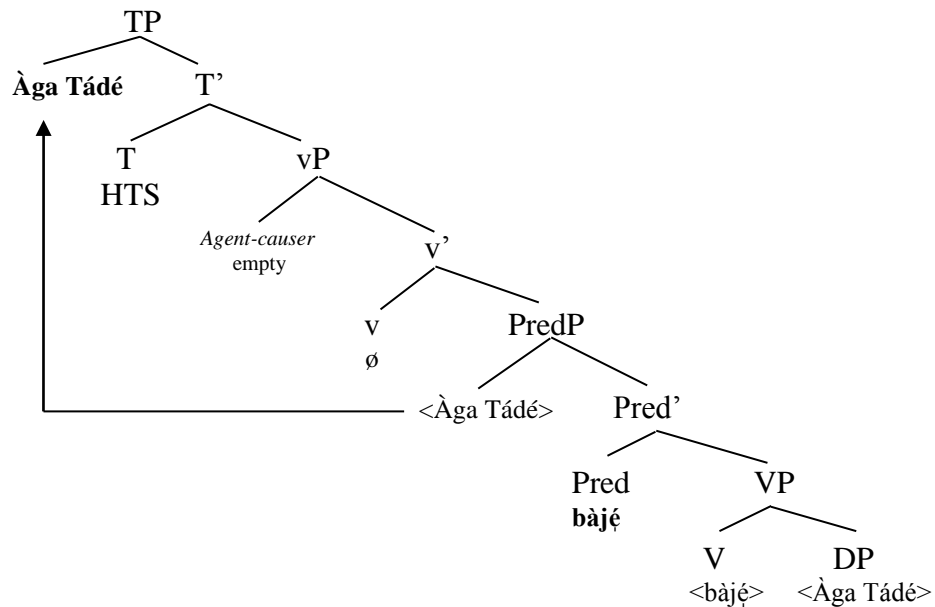
The issue about the inchoative forms is how their clause constructions are derived in contrast to their split causative counterparts already taken care of in figure 6.

The position of this paper is that the syntactic configuration in figure 4b is the departure point between the derivation of the causative and inchoative forms of Yoruba splitting verb clauses. The only difference between the two constructions is that while the *agent-causative* vP-internal subject position is empty in the inchoative form, it is filled by a phonetically

realised argument in the causative form. Therefore, to derive the inchoative clause construction (e.g. 4a_{iii}) from figure 4b, the agent-causer subject of the outer vP shell is, as a matter of obligation, empty because the construction type does not need it. The denotation of the verb is to be expressed somehow as occurring of its own accord. In addition, the structural step in figure 5 where the complex verb splits does not apply. The following structural steps fully illustrated with the configuration in figure 7 are assumed for the inchoative clause derivation in this study:

- (i) The causer-empty vP is merged to T as complement;
- (ii) T probes vP, its syntactic domain, for a matching goal to attract to spec-TP to check off its EPP feature. It finds its goal match in the theme object (**Àga Tádé**) and attracts it right from spec-PredP to Spec-TP as subject. It should be noted that the empty agent-causer subject argument in spec-vP is not a matching goal for the probe of T because T does not require an agent-causer but a theme argument as subject; and
- (iii) Nominative feature of the theme argument is checked against the EPP feature of T, and because there is no mismatch, the derivation is passed as convergent.

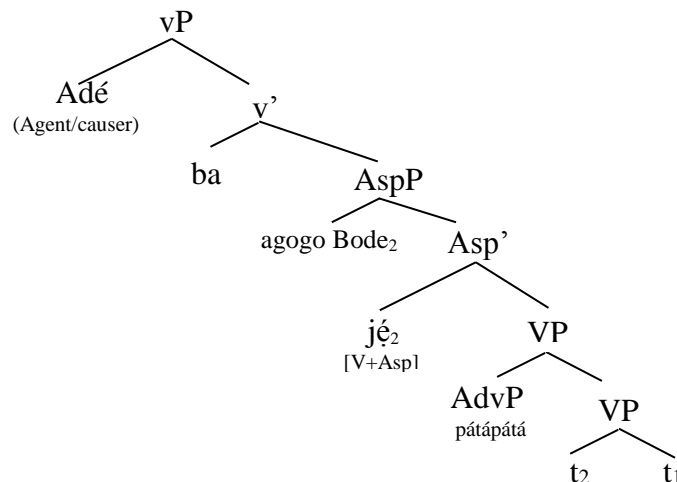
Figure 7:



The implication of this derivation as presented in figure 7 is that it is the same theme object complement of the splitting verb that get raised to become the subject of the inchoative construction involving the unsplit form of the verb. This is not a totally strange syntactic occurrence as similar process occurs in passive constructions, e.g. in English (see Radford 1997: 183-185; 2004:1999-201) and Yoruba symmetrical verb constructions (see Ilori & Oloagun 2015: 359-361).

At this juncture, it is pertinent to mention that there is another view in the literature on how the causative form of Yoruba splitting verb clause construction is derived. Oduntan (2000) claims that the first half of Yoruba splitting verb is base generated in vP where it lexicalizes v, while the second half is generated as head of the inner core VP. The view is as represented in figure 8 below, reproduced directly from Oduntan (2000:277).

Figure 8:



The problem with the syntactic configuration in figure 8 lies in fact that it proposes two different base positions for splitting verb projections: The two halves originate as a unit in one position in the inchoative derivation but they are base generated separately (- first half in vP and the other half in VP-) in the causative non-inchoative forms. The analysis fails to reflect the semantics of splitting verbs. The fact that each of the splitting verbs cannot occur meaningfully in isolation with the same contextual interpretation without the other is evidence that they are more likely to be base generated as complex units in a single position. Similarly, the claim tends to deny the fact that the inchoative and the non-inchoative projections of the splitting verbs are related

both in structure and logical interpretation. For this present study, that undeniable relatedness consists in the fact that the two derivations share a somewhat similar inner core VP and, in that VP, both halves of the splitting verb are generated as a complex unit of lexical verb to which a theme argument is directly merged as object complement. Therefore, irrespective of the target derivation (i.e. inchoative or causative), the theme object and the head *v* have to check off their features against one another in a Spec-Head structural relationship. The verb splits in the causative form to lexicalize the causative light *v* but remains unsplit in the inchoative form where the agent-causer interpretation is not required.

5. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the syntactic projection of Yoruba splitting verbs and how their clause constructions are syntactically derived. It submitted that the whole complex unit of the splitting verb is base-generated in the inner core VP before its first half get raised to lexicalize *v* in the causative non-inchoative derivation. It argued that such splitting does not occur in the inchoative derivation because the agent-causer subject argument is not needed in the syntax. The study provided a unified account of the syntax of splitting verb clause constructions by providing both syntactic and semantic evidence to show that the causative and inchoative forms have the same base verb phrase such that causative-inchoative alternation is a product of raising which targets different arguments as subject of the convergent clause: agent-causer in the causative form and theme object argument in the inchoative.

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