

More on the Indivisibility of {àì-} in Standard Yorùbá

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Abstract

There are two schools of thought among Yoruba linguists regarding the morphological status of *àì*; the unitary school and the split school. Various arguments have been put forth by proponents of the two schools to justify their claims. This paper is an attempt to contribute to the debate on the status of *àì* in Standard Yorùbá (SY). These arguments are examined critical based on data from the language. The two contending positions, *àì-* as a singular morpheme and *à-i-* as two morphemes, are examined. In this paper, we show that evidence from the structure, function and morphological behaviour of *àì* are consistently in favour of a unitary analysis. Our conclusion is that since a split analysis of *àì* proves not amenable to morphological tests while a unitary analysis on the other hand shows conformity to such tests, it is beneficial to treat *àì* as a single indivisible morpheme.

Keywords: *àì, morphological analysis, unitary school, split school, Yorùbá language*

Introduction

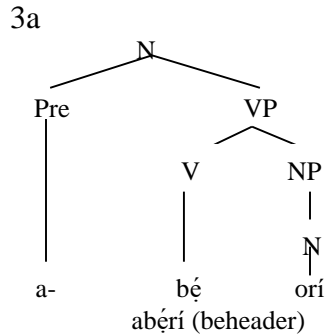
Morphology is the study of the structure of words and the ways in which word structure reflects relation to other words (Spencer 1988:146). It is an aspect of grammar that is concerned with the analysis of the internal structure of words and of the rules by which words are formed (Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams 2007: 77). The discreteness of morphological operations makes it a proper grammatical phenomenon. One common object which recurs in morphological analysis is the morpheme, often defined in traditional terms as a minimal sign composed of the unity of constituent of form with a constituent of meaning (Dimmendaal 2000: 161). The Yorùbá word *abérí* ‘a be-header’, for instance, has the following morphemic constituents.

1. a- bẹ orí → abérí ‘beheader’
agent cut head

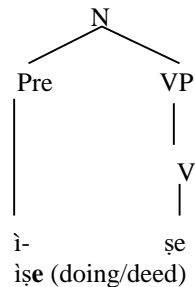
In the complex word in 1 above, *a-*, the first morpheme, is an affix which confers the meaning of agentive on the word *abérí*. The above example also shows that a morpheme can be a sound.

One of the ways to analyse words is to examine their morphological make up; the shape of the morphemes which make up the word, their type, function and semantics (Aronoff and Fudeman 2005, Awobuluyi 2008, Taiwo 2011). One type of morpheme which is very active in Yorùbá morphological analysis is the affix (Awobuluyi 2008:4, Taiwo 2011:42) An example of an affix is *a-* in 1 above which is prefixed to the verb phrase *bẹ orí* and *ì-* prefixed to *şe* in 2 with their diagrams in 3

2. \dot{i} - + ṣe → $\dot{i}\text{ṣe}$ 'doing/deed'



b.



In the example in 2b, \dot{i} is a prefix by virtue of its position and function in the word $\dot{i}\text{ṣe}$.

Other affixes abound. One of them which has become an object of contention is $\{\dot{a}\dot{i}\}$ as seen in the following examples.

4 àìrí 'not seen'

5 àìjẹyó 'not eaten full i.e. eaten but not full'

6 àlẹ́ìbá [àlẹ́àìbá] 'undefeatable'

The contention revolves round its morphemic status, whether it is a single morpheme or two. This gives rise to two schools of thought; the unitary school which regards $\dot{a}\dot{i}$ as a single morpheme and the split school which analyses it as two morphemes.

This paper, which is arranged into four sections, looks at the implications of the various analyses of $\dot{a}\dot{i}$, examines the explanations of the proponents of the two analyses using various methods for identifying and isolating morpheme in Yorubá. Some of such include recurrence, function and meaning. Such meaning may be either grammatical or inherent. Section 1 is the introduction, sections two and three recap the arguments put forth by the unitary school and the split school for and against a unitary analysis as well as justification for splitting $\dot{a}\dot{i}$ into two morphemes, section four contains our reaction to the teeming arguments on the status of $\dot{a}\dot{i}$ as well as our position on its morphemic status. The concluding section is our final remarks

The Unitary School and their arguments

The unitary school analyses *àì-* as a single indivisible morpheme. They are regarded as the ‘old school’ because they represent the earliest conception of the status of *àì*. Scholars like Bamgboṣe 1966, 1990, Owolabi 1995, Ogunkeye 2002, Taiwo 2004, 2006, 2007, 2011 are of the view that {*àì*} is a negative prefix in Yoruba which nominalises a verb or verb phrase at any instance to derive a de-verbal nominal as seen in the following examples.

- | | | | |
|-----|---|---|---------------------------------------|
| 7a. | <i>àì-</i> + <i>lọ</i> ‘to go’ | → | <i>àìlọ</i> ‘not going’ |
| b. | <i>àì-</i> + <i>jẹ</i> ‘to eat’ | → | <i>àìjẹ</i> ‘not eating’ |
| c. | <i>àì-</i> + <i>tètè</i> ‘quick’ <i>dé</i> ‘arrive’ | → | <i>àìtètè dé</i> ‘not arriving early’ |

They gave reasons why *àì* should be regarded as one morpheme instead of two. According to Taiwo, *àì-* derives nominals without restrictions, whereas *à-* is highly restricted in the type of nominals it derives. This explains why the forms in 8 and 9 are possible but those in 10 are not.

- | | | |
|------|----------------|--------------|
| 8a. | <i>àìjẹ</i> | ‘neg eat’ |
| b. | <i>àìlọ</i> | ‘neg go’ |
| c. | <i>àìgbón</i> | ‘neg wise’ |
| d. | <i>àìsàn</i> | ‘neg well’ |
| e. | <i>àìbò</i> | ‘neg arrive’ |
| 9a. | <i>àlọ</i> | ‘going’ |
| b. | <i>àbò</i> | ‘arrival’ |
| 10a. | * <i>àjẹ</i> | |
| b. | * <i>ìjẹ</i> | |
| c. | * <i>àgbón</i> | |
| d. | * <i>ìgbón</i> | |
| e. | * <i>àsàn</i> | |
| f. | * <i>isàn</i> | |

Taiwo (2007:561- 562) explains that the ungrammaticality of the examples in 10 clearly shows that the *à* of *àì-* is not the same as the prefix *à-* in (9). He says further that if *àì-* were to be divisible, those forms in 10 would have been well formed just as those in 9.

On the implication of the unitary analysis of *àì* on forms like those in 11 below where it seems that *àì-* is being separated by intervening morphemes, the explanation of the unitary school is that those examples do not involve the separation of *àì-*.

- | | | |
|------|-----------------|------------------------------|
| 11a. | <i>àlọidé</i> | ‘going without returning’ |
| b. | <i>àsùnùnjí</i> | ‘sleeping without waking up’ |
| c. | <i>àṣeṣetán</i> | ‘doing without completing’ |

They claim that the forms in 11 are derived from an underlying form like those in 12 where *àì-* stands on its own independent of *à-*. They further explain that the vowel *à* of

àì- is thereafter deleted (Bamgboṣe 1966:104¹, Owolabi 1995:111, Ogunkeye 2002:92). In Ogunkeye’s examples in 12 below, the underlying forms of 12b are in 12b. She claims that to derive 12b, deletion and assimilation rules have applied.

- 12a. à - fẹ + àì - rí
 à - ṣe + àì - ṣetán
- b. àfẹ̀cẹ̀rí ‘wanting without seeing’
 aṣeṣetán ‘doing without finishing’

Owolabi (1995:111) sees the forms in 11 as instances of the co-occurrence of prefix *à-* and *àì-*. According to him:

They obligatorily simultaneously nominalise complex roots comprising two verbs/verb phrases. The prefix *à-* attaches to the first verb/verb phrases while *àì-* also attaches to the second verb/verb phrase. The two prefixes jointly produce morphologically complex nouns after the deletion of the vowel *à* of the prefix *àì-*.

Owolabi gives an illustration of the derivation as follows.

13. lọ:dé → àlọ̀àìdẹ → àlọ̀dẹ
 go; return going not returning going without returning

According to him, assimilation further takes place to derive *àlọ̀dẹ*.

The Split School and their arguments

This is the second school of thought. It stresses the divisibility of *àì*. Scholars who belong to this school are Awobuluyi (2005, 2008), Awoyale (1975), Oyebade and Ilori (2005), Adesuyan (2008) and Ajiboye (2013).

The nature of arguments put forth by this school is hinged on reasons why *àì* should not be regarded as a unitary morpheme and secondly, why it should be treated as two separate morphemes, namely *à-* and *ì-*. Going by their conception of *àì*, words like *àìjẹ* and *àìṣetán* will have the following morphological division.

- 14a. À-ì-jẹ → àìjẹ ‘not eaten’
 b. À-ì- ṣe-tán → àìṣetán ‘not completely done’

Even though all the adherents of this school of thought believe in the divisibility of *àì*, yet they also have their points of divergence, especially with regards the status of *ì-* of *àì*. It borders on whether it is a prefix or a pre-verb. Also there is no agreement on its source whether it is an import from dialects or a pre-verb in Standard Yoruba.

The initial sets of arguments put forth by the split school are those given by Awobuluyi (2005). He opines that if one compares items like those in 15a, b and c, one

¹ Bamgboṣe’s (1990: 106) explanation actually is that *àjẹjẹtán* ‘eating and not finishing’ is a combination of *àjẹ* + *àjẹtán*. Owolabi’s (1995) explanation of the phenomenon is an echo of Bamgboṣe (1990). His explanation is however more detailed than that of Bamgboṣe (1966).

must accept the divisibility of (15b) into $\grave{a} + l\grave{o}$ given the fact that $l\grave{o}$ can be segmented from $\grave{a}l\grave{o}$.

- 15a. $l\grave{o}$ ‘to go’
 b. $\grave{a}l\grave{o}$ ‘going’
 c. $\grave{a}il\grave{o}$ ‘not going’

By the same analysis, one should also agree that (15c), $\grave{a}il\grave{o}$ is divisible into $\grave{a} + \grave{i} - l\grave{o}$. Therefore, according to Awobuluyi and all the other proponents of this overview, evidence of pairs such as those in 15 where we have the pairs of \grave{a} , $\grave{a}il$ point to the fact that $\grave{a}il$ is not a single morpheme but rather two morphemes consisting of $\{\grave{a}\}$ and $\{\grave{i}\}$. Awobuluyi further explains that the prefix \grave{a} - in $\grave{a}l\grave{o}$, has the same meaning of ‘doing’ also in $\grave{a}il\grave{o}$. He argues that if \grave{a} - can stand independent of \grave{i} in $\grave{a}l\grave{o}$, then $\grave{a}il$ is not a single morpheme but two.

His second argument, which is also extensively stressed in Oyebade and Ilorì (2005) as well as Ajiboye (2013), is the behaviour of $\grave{a}il$ in certain complex words. First is that $\grave{a}il$ is divisible in some complex words, including the following, where a morpheme is said to be inbetween \grave{a} and \grave{i} of $\grave{a}il$.

- 16a. $\grave{a}se\grave{e}set\grave{a}n \rightarrow \grave{a}se\grave{e}set\grave{a}n$ ‘not completely done’
 b. $\grave{a}k\grave{u}k\grave{u}ib\grave{i} \rightarrow \grave{a}k\grave{u}k\grave{u}ib\grave{i}$ ‘better not born?’

Awobuluyi further noted that $\grave{i}bi$ ‘one’s birth’ in (16b) could not have been a noun since nouns don’t follow adverbs in Yoruba. He concludes therefore that the \grave{i} which is found in $\grave{i}bi$ is a negative adverb which originated from some Èkitì dialects where there are forms like those in 17 and 18.

- 17a. $\grave{a}ris\grave{u}n$ ‘not sleeping’
 b. $\grave{a}b\grave{i}rik\grave{o}$ ‘untrained’

- 18a. $Ay\grave{o} r\grave{i} \acute{a}$. ‘Ayò did not come’.
 b. $K\grave{a} \grave{s}e \acute{e} ki Ib\grave{u}nmi r\grave{i} \acute{a}$? ‘Why did Bunmi not come?’

Ajiboye however disagrees with Awobuluyi’s claim that \grave{i} is a preverbal element. He (Ajiboye) rather sees it (\grave{i}) as a (negative) prefix (Ajiboye 2013: 648 fn5²) which is formed from the negative form $r\grave{i}$. Adesuyan (2008) in his own case believes that \grave{i} is the shortened form of the negative verb $k\grave{i}$, and that it is derived by deleting the consonant k of $k\grave{i}$.

Awobuluyi’s third argument is based on recurrence (similar to his first argument). He observes that two forms of \grave{a} are interchangeable before \grave{i} . One of them has the meaning of ‘doing’ while the second has the meaning of ‘thing’ or ‘person’ as exemplified in 19.

² According to Ajiboye, there are at least three types of \grave{i} in Yoruba

- (a) \grave{i} - nominaliser in $il\grave{u}$ ‘drum’, $it\grave{o}$ ‘urine’
 (b) \grave{i} - negative prefix which combines with \grave{a} - verbal element in \grave{a} - nominalization process as seen in $\grave{a} - \grave{i} - l\grave{u}$.
 (c) \grave{i} - the preverbal element which functions as a question word: $k\grave{o} t\grave{i} \grave{i} l\grave{o}$? ‘Has she not gone?’

We want to quickly comment on (c) that the question word there is not \grave{i} . It is rather the stressing of the vowel $l\grave{o}$ and probably the addition of a question marker (?). The \grave{i} that is found in that sentence is a negative functor. It is used in negative sentences which may be a declarative sentence of the form $k\grave{o} t\grave{i} l\grave{o}$. ‘He has not gone’.

- 19a. Ó jìyà ní àìṣẹ̀ ‘He was punished though without sin’
 b. Má fìyà jẹ (orí) àìṣẹ̀ ‘Don’t punish an innocent person’

He concludes that for the two forms of *à* to occur before *ì*-, with two distinct interpretations, is an indication that *àì* should be analysed as two morphemes.

There are other arguments put forth by Oyebade and Ilori (2005) against the *àì*-unitary analysis and in favour of the *à*- and *ì*- split analysis. A summary of their arguments is as follows:

- i) What appears as *àì* nominalisation is actually an {*à*} nominalisation of the NegP (negative phrase) of the form in 20.

20. *à*- [NegP [Neg *ì* [VP]]]
 (Oyebade and Ilori 2005: 4, 16)

- ii) *à*- prefix attaches to serial V/VP type only and not to simplex
 iii) The reason why the neg. element *ì* does not appear independent of *à* is to minimise ambiguity because Yorùbá has a low toned high vowel prefix *ì* which has a non- negative meaning.
 iv) That low tone verbs do not raise their tone to mid before the derivation of the putative *à-rọ̀-àìdú* ‘raining incessantly’ shows that the word is actually not *àìdú* (Nom) but rather a negative phrase *ìdú* in which case tone raising will not be required because it is not a nominal.
 v) Sub-categorisation facts show that the semantic correlation of the input is always at variance with that of the output. According to them, what *tẹ́* ‘spread’, for instance selects must be something spreadable not the ‘imaginary *àìká* ‘not packed’. This is an indication that the input to *atẹ́kà* is not *atẹ́-àìkà* but *atẹ́kà*, and since *ì-ká* is not a nominal but a negative phrase, there is no need to make reference to nominalization in the derivation.

Comments on the status of {*àì*-}

Firstly, it is pertinent to note that the *ì*- which is found in negative nominals is not a prefix in Yorùbá as claimed by Ajiboye (2013). If it were so, it would have been possible to have it nominalising the verbs and verb phrases of the language in isolation just like the other Yorùbá prefixes. Again it would have been possible for it to derive a new word (in this case noun in Yorùbá) like other prefixes. Awobuluyi’s 2008 and Oyebade and Ilori’s 2005 reference to it as a negative preverbal element which is imported into Yorùbá from Èkìtì dialect is a better option because in that case one does not expect it to function and behave like a prefix.

However, calling it a negative preverbal element is also problematic in that in Èkìtì sentences where the element *rì* is used and from where it is claimed to have been imported into standard Yorùbá, it is not actually a negative preverb in that it does not have the interpretation of negation. *rì* is used as an intensifier in Èkìtì sentences and not as a negator. It is used both in negative and non-negative sentences as seen in the following sentences from Ìkòlẹ̀ form of Èkìtì dialect.

- 21a. Òjọ̀ rì tì lọ. ‘Òjọ̀ has eventually gone’
 b. Òjọ̀ò (rì) tì lọ ‘Òjọ̀ has not yet gone’

in 19 are not derivable from differences in their morphology. It may be a function of semantic interpretation of syntactic structure and this is outside of morphological analysis. Morphologically, there is no difference between *àìsẹ̀* in 19a and 19b.

On Adesuyan's (2008) explanation that *ì* is a shortened form of the negative verb *kì*, we hasten to say that this explanation does not reflect the distribution of the item in question. The negative item *kì* from where *ì* is said to have been derived, is the inflectional form of the negative item which is used only in sentences indicating habitual/continuous action as opposed to past/present which makes use of *kò* (not). If *ì* is derived from *kì*, one will expect the resultant word to which it is added to have the meaning of a continuous action. However, there is nothing about *àìlọ* 'not going' and *àìga* 'not tall' for instance, which suggests that the action of the verb is continuous; rather, they have the interpretation of *kò x* (where x stands for a verb). Therefore, *kì* is not the source of the *ì* which is found in *àì*.

Awobuluyi's allusion to recurrence is important in that it is a veritable yardstick for conferring morpheme status on an item. According to Fromkin (2009:39), one can determine a morpheme boundary if a morpheme alternates with another in a particular position. See for instance, the following:

- 30a. èsin 'religion'
 b. ìsin 'worship'

In the examples in 30, both *ì-* in 30b and *ẹ̀-* in 30a are morphemes because they can alternate with one another to effect a change in the meaning of resultant words. However, no known prefix has been shown to alternate with the so called prefix *à-* before *ì*. One conclusion which can be drawn from this is that *àì* may not, after all, be two morphemes but one indivisible form.

Finally, we would like to make reference to native speakers interpretation of the examples with *àì* and complex predicates as indicated in 11 above, and to state that the logical interpretation which speakers of the Yoruba language give to the forms in 11 (repeated here as 31) is 32 not 33, and this is not contestable.

- 31a àlọidé 'going without returning'
 b àsùnùnjí 'sleeping without waking'
 c àséèsétán 'not completely closed'
- 32a àlọ àidé
 b àsùn àìjì
 c àsé àìsétán
- 33a àlọidé
 b àsùnìjì
 c àséisétán

Conclusion

This paper attempted a reappraisal of the various treatments of {*àì*} by Yorùbá scholars. We examined the two schools of thought on its morphemic status critically and concluded, based on evidence of its morphological structure and behaviour, that *àì* is not divisible into two morphemes, it is mono morphemic.

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