

# The Structure of Noun Phrase in M̀ada

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## Abstract

M̀ada, a Platoid language of West Benue-Congo sub-family, is spoken mainly in Akwanga Local Government Area of Nasarawa State. This paper is an attempt to examine the grammatical structures of noun phrase in M̀ada within the background of generative syntax, more specifically, the Principles and Parameters approach. It examines the order of noun dependents, word categories and other functional constituents of the NP such as demonstratives, modifiers and associative constituents. The technique employed in collecting data for this study is direct elicitation from competent speakers of the language. The major findings show that a typical NP in M̀ada may consist of a head noun only or a head noun with optionally occurring modifiers. All modifiers are post head items with a strictly ordered pattern. The study concludes by noting that the structural configuration of a typical NP in M̀ada is N + [(Poss)(Dem)(Adj)(Quant)(Num)] + [(Rel Clause)].

## 1.0 Introduction

The noun phrase (henceforth, NP) is a universal phrasal category, and the most frequently occurring phrase type in all languages (Radford 1988, 2004; Ndimele 1992; Mbah 2006; Abney 1987; Alexiadous, Haegeman, Starvou 2007; Yusuf 1998, 2007; Lamidi 2008; Tallerman 2005). It is essentially a quintessential part of every sentence which has a noun as its head, or plays the role of a noun. As a language universal category, it varies cross-linguistically. For instance, the English NP is made up of a noun, being the head, and other optionally occurring pre-modified elements such as determiners and modifiers. In English, pre-modified elements precede the head in a given string. In some languages, nominal satellites follow the noun as in the case of Akan (Tallerman, 2005), Ayèré, Uneme, Igala (Owokade, 2016). The noun phrase is seen variously as headed by, or having roles in syntax like those of nouns (Matthews, 2007). According to Langacker (1972), the term NP can either be represented by a clause, or just a single words, as well as phrases.

Within the Principles and Parameters theory, the NP is the largest maximal projection of the noun. That is, the noun, being the head of its phrase, serves as an indispensable core element in a nominal string it dominates. Following Yusuf (1998), the head of a phrase must satisfy two operational criteria, viz: distributive and obligatory

criterion. The noun is identified and named by its distribution and participatory role in a sentence. Consider, for example, the distribution of noun in (1) below:

1. i. John bought a house.
- ii. Baba is a tall handsome student.

In (1), above, the nouns *John*, *a house*, *Baba*, *student* are heads of their respective phrases hence, they are evenly distributed. As observed by Radford (1988), if the head is a noun, then the whole construct must also be a noun phrase. Also, from the foregoing, the nominal string *a tall handsome student* is headed by the noun *student* whereas, *a*, *tall* and *handsome* are optionally occurring satellites. They are so described as optional elements because they are noun dependents.

Against this background, the goal of this paper is to account for the linear ordering of the functional elements that co-occur with the head noun in the Mada noun phrase. Attempt is made to examine the functional relationship between the head noun and all other optionally occurring satellites in terms of the order of noun dependents, word categories and their semantic function. The data for this paper is collected through direct elicitation from competent speakers of the language.

Mada is a Platoid language of West Benue-Congo sub-family of the Niger-Congo phylum. Greenberg (1963), Williamson (1971), Hansford et al (1976), Gerhardt (1989, 2011), Crozier and Blench (1992), and Blench (2005) have classified Mada as belonging to the Benue-Congo sub-family. Mada is spoken mainly in Akwanga Local Government Area of Nasarawa State, and it is one of the most widely spoken languages in Sanga and Jama'a Local Government Areas of Kaduna State (Samuel, 2012; 2016). Varieties of Mada are also spoken in the adjoining Local Governments Areas of Nasarawa state, including Kokona in the East, Nasarawa Eggon in the South and Wamba in the West of Nasarawa State.

## 2.0 The Structure of Mada Noun Phrase

Structurally, the Mada noun phrase is composed of two parts: the noun, being an obligatory element and other optionally occurring elements (modifiers). In other words, the NP in Mada is made up of the head noun only, or head noun with optionally occurring post-modified items, usually with a strict pattern. The diagram below shows the distributional pattern of the noun and other elements within the NP.

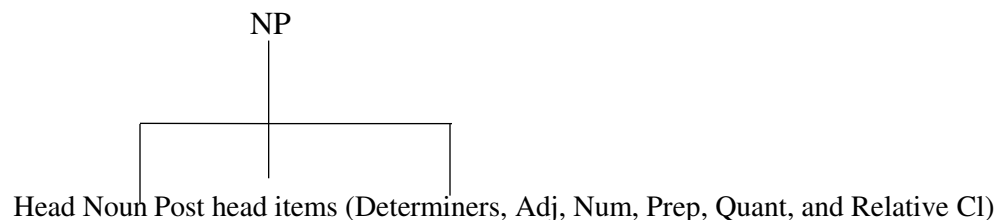


Fig. 1

The illustration above is shown in (2) below:

- i. **Bàbā**  
3SG  
'Bàbā'
- ii. **və̀ɓn cɪ̀njì**  
man black  
'(The) black man'
- iii. **mb̄ə mē**  
woman this  
'This woman'
- iv. **kar kūkwār**  
prostitute all  
'All prostitutes'
- v. **nyw̄en makaranta bān tàr**  
children school those three  
'Those three students'
- vi. **nyw̄en makaranta kūkwār**  
children school every  
'Every student'

Examples i & iii can be illustrated below:

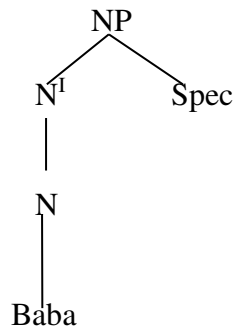


Fig. 2

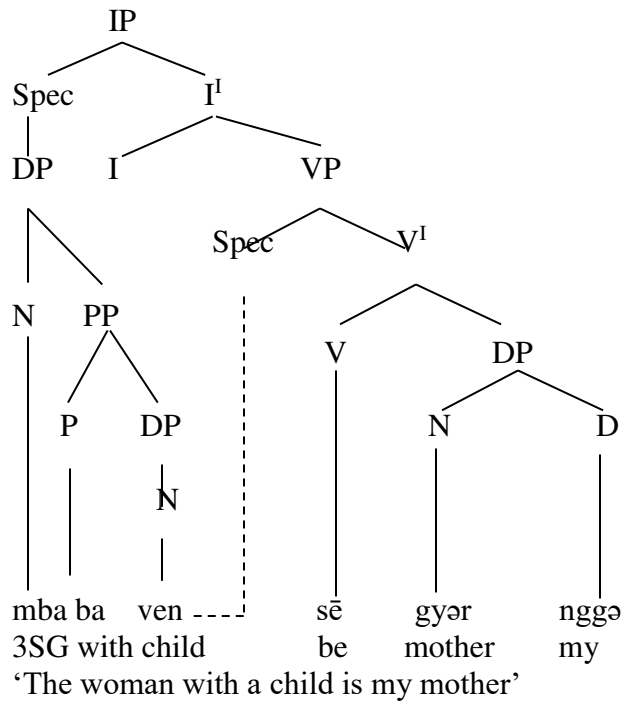


Fig. 3.

## 2.1 The Order of Noun Dependents in Māda

A simple Māda NP is usually accompanied by other constituents (functional elements) of various categories. With regards to NP in Māda, all optionally occurring satellites follow the noun rightward. The order of noun dependents in Māda is shown in the table below:

Possible Sequence	Examples	Gloss
i.    N <b>Dem</b>	mbā mē woman this	'This woman'
	nywēn bān children those	'Those children'
	kì yāmē thing that	'That thing'
ii.   N <b>Poss</b>	mgbāmṽ nggə book my	'My book'

		matò <b>məgu</b>	‘His car’
		car his	
		kō <b>məbā</b>	‘Their house’
		house their	
iii.	<b>N Adj</b>	mbū <b>kūkwō</b>	‘A small mat’
		mat small	
		matò <b>suswē</b>	‘A new car’
		car new	
		kpè <b>cīnji</b>	‘A black shoe’
		shoe black	
iv.	<b>N Quant</b>	tā <b>kūkwār</b>	‘All of us’
		we all	
		nywēn <b>kānàn</b>	‘Many children’
		children many	
v.	<b>N Prep</b>	vəlon ə <b>kō</b>	‘The man at home’
		Man at house	
		kələbā ə <b>təbūlə</b>	‘The bottle on the table’
		bottle at table	
		vēn bā <b>nji</b>	‘The child with a knife’
		child with knife	
vi.	<b>N Noun</b>	Bābā, <b>wanryān</b>	‘Bābā, the hunter’
		3SG hunter	
		fāgywē <b>Nuhu</b>	‘Comrade Nuhu’
		elder Nuhu	
vii.	<b>N Num</b>	kō <b>tār</b>	‘Three houses’
		House three	

	<b>vēn tūn</b>	‘The fifth child’
	child fifth	
	<b>kō târ</b>	‘The third house’
	house third	
viii. N Rel	<b>mbə wān kyū</b>	‘The woman who died’
	woman Rel.Cl die	
	<b>matò dè gi</b>	‘Car that is stolen’
	car that steal	

## 2.2 Identification of Elements in Māda Noun Phrase

The Māda NP can be made up of a head noun and other optionally occurring functional elements, or word categories; each having a specific grammatical function. Givón (2001) posits that numerals, adjectives, demonstratives, genitives, articles and relative clauses are noun modifiers, hence can co-occur with a head noun in a given nominal string. Along this view, Cinque (2000) says that such elements or dependents can occur either before the head noun, or after it, but in the case of Māda, word categories are strictly post head items, or show post head relationship thereby revealing the hierarchical ordering of occurrence, and/or linear sequence of occurrence. Against this premises, attempt is hereby made to identify and reveal the hierarchical linear order of these elements fewer than two sub-headings: determiners and modifiers.

### 2.2.1 Determiners

Determiners are entities that specify reference of nouns (Stockwell, 1977). The term is used as an umbrella term for possessives, demonstratives, articles, numerals, quantifiers, etc.

#### 2.2.2. Possessives

With regards to Māda, possessives occur immediately after the noun. This can be illustrated in (3).

1 <sup>st</sup> SG i.	mgbāmvū <b>nggə̀</b>	‘My book’
	book my	
2 <sup>nd</sup> SG ii.	mgbāmvū <b>məgu</b>	‘His/her book’
	book his/her	
3 <sup>rd</sup> SG iii.	mgbāmvū <b>wə</b>	‘Your book’
	book your	
1 <sup>st</sup> PL iv.	mgbāmvū <b>tə</b>	‘Our books’
	book ou	

2 <sup>nd</sup> PL v.	mgbāmvū <b>gyā</b>	‘Your books’
	book your	
3 <sup>rd</sup> PL vi.	mgbāmvū <b>bā</b>	‘Their books’

The use of possessive in NP is illustrated in sentences as in (4) below:

- i. **kpā nggə** sē ə mbū  
shoe my be at mat  
‘My shoe is on (the) mat’.
- ii. **mgbāmvū fā** sē gī  
book our be steal  
‘Our book is stolen’.
- iii. və̀lən ə tar sē **tiyār nggə**  
man at room be father my  
‘The man in the room is my father’.

### 2.2.3. Demonstratives

Demonstratives are characterized with features that are used to indicate proximity and non-proximity of location of the noun referent in relation to the speaker and hearer’s position (Dryer, 2007b). Along this view, Matthews (2005) defines a demonstrative as a word whose basic role is to locate a noun referent in relation to a speaker, addressee, or some other person referred to. With regards to Māda, demonstratives such as **mē**, **yāmē**, **yāmā**, **bān** and **yəmū** are used to identify a person or thing. This can be seen in (5).

- i. mbā **mē** sē kru  
woman this be barren  
‘This woman is barren’.
- ii. kī **yāmā** sē mənggə  
thing that be mine  
‘That thing is mine’.
- iii. nywēn **bān** sē nān ndu  
children those be do work  
‘Those children are working’.
- iv. mgbāmvū **yəmē** sē mətə  
book this be our  
‘This book is ours’.

As observed from the examples above, the demonstratives *mē* and *bān* occur only with animate nouns as against the use of *yāmā* and *yəmē* in (ii & iv) respectively. It is germane to state here that the latter is used only with inanimate objects. From the data presented in (5), all demonstratives follow the head noun (see i-iv), thus function as post head items.

### 2.3. Post-Modifiers

In this section, we shall examine numerals, adjectives, prepositions, quantifiers and relative clauses as modifiers of a simple NP in M̀àda.

#### 2.3.1 Numerals

In general, numerals are sub-divided into cardinal and ordinal class. Distinction is made between the two. Cardinals are used to indicate quantity while ordinals are used to specify position. Numerals are post head items in M̀àda. The distribution of numerals in M̀àda is shown below.

S/N	M̀àda	Cardinal	M̀àda	Ordinal
1.	gyən	1	gyən	1 <sup>st</sup>
2.	ywa	2	ywā	2 <sup>nd</sup>
3.	t̀ar	3	t̀ar	3 <sup>rd</sup>
4.	nlyē	4	nlyè	4 <sup>th</sup>
5.	Tun	5	tūn	5 <sup>th</sup>
6.	t̀anǹen	6	t̀anǹen	6 <sup>th</sup>
7.	t̀amgbā	7	t̀amgba	7 <sup>th</sup>
8.	t̀andā	8	t̀anda	8 <sup>th</sup>
9.	t̀iyār	9	t̀iyar	9 <sup>th</sup>
10.	g̀ur	10	gur	10 <sup>th</sup>

In expressing ordinal class, from the foregoing, there is always a change in tone. For example, **t̀ar** represents the cardinal 3 and **t̀ar** denotes 3<sup>rd</sup> as in the position of something. In sum, both cardinal and ordinal class function to indicate the quantity or position of something as the case may be. The use of numerals (cardinal and ordinal) in NP is illustrated in (6).

- i. **k̀ō t̀ar sē m̀əngg̀è**  
house three be mine  
'(Those) three houses are mine'.
- ii. Nuhu sē **vən t̀ar**  
3SG be child third  
'Nuhu is the third child'.
- iii. **wānw̄ō tūn sən ə Keffi**



blind man five stay at Keffi  
'The five blind men reside in Keffi'

### 2.3.2 Adjective

In general, an adjective describes a noun by revealing the quality of a noun. In M̀ada, adjectives always follow the noun they describe. In other words, adjectives occur as post head item; the structure N + [(Adj) (Adj)] is produced as shown in (7).

- i. Nuhu r̀ mb̀ **k̀kw̄**  
3SG buy-PST mat small  
'Nuhu bought a small mat'.
- ii. mat̀ **susw̄** s̄ g̀  
car new be steal  
'The new car is stolen'.
- iii. kp̄ **susw̄** ə tar s̄ m̄ngg̀  
shoe new at room be mine  
'The new shoes in the room are mine'.
- iv. gȳr ngg̀ rȳn kr̀ ỳm̄ **b̀b̀**  
mother my cook-PST yam that rot  
'My mother cooked the rotten yam'.

As can be observed, all adjectives follow their respective nominal heads in the NP. In (ii-iii) the head noun together with the modifying adjective *susw̄* function as the subject of the string.

### 2.3.3 Prepositional Phrase

Prepositional phrase also can co-occur in a nominal string. The PP, being a modifier of the NP, functions as an adjunct and adds to the meaning of the NP. Examples can be seen in (8).

- i. v̀l̀n **ru** keffi  
man from keffi  
'The man from Keffi'
- ii. mgb̄mv̄ ə tar  
book at room  
'The book in the room'
- iii. v̄n **b̀** là  
child with food  
'The child with the food'

### 2.3.4 Quantifier

According to Stockwell (1977), quantifier can be used together with a noun to count event. In English, for instance, quantifiers precede the head noun, but M̀ada, being a head

first language, shows a different pattern such that all quantifiers follow the head noun instead. The distribution of quantifiers can be seen in (9).

- i. mbā **kənàn** mē kō  
woman many build-PST house  
'Many women own a house'.
- ii. kar **kūkwār** nàn ndu ə bū  
prostitute all do work at night  
'All prostitutes work in the night'.
- iii. nywēn **kənàn** blā mgbāmū Rì  
children many read book God  
'Many children study the Bible'.

### 2.3.5 Relative Clause

Relative clause in M̀àda involves the use of the relative markers **wān** (who), **dè** (that use with object nouns), and **ỳə** (that) to introduce the relative clause. The relative clause, like adjective, is a functional category of the NP and can occur as post head noun item. Consider the examples in (10).

- i. mbā **ỳə** nən̄ə ə mbù sē gyər ngg̀ə  
woman Rel sleep-PST at mat be mother my  
'The woman that slept on the mat is my mother'
- ii. v̄en **wān** blā mgbāmvū sē v̄en makaranta  
child Rel read book be child school  
'The child who read the book is a student'.
- iii. matò **dè** ngg̀ə r̀è sē g̀ì  
car Rel I buy-PST be stal  
'The car that I bought is stolen'.

## 3.0 Semantic and Syntactic Functions of Noun Phrase in M̀àda

NP arguments are classified either in terms of their semantic, or in terms of their syntactic functions. This sections deals with the semantic and syntactic functions of the noun phrase in M̀àda.

### 3.1 Semantic Functions of Noun Phrase

The NP mostly functions as the arguments of the predicate (Tallerman, 2005). In other words, the verb, or preposition assigns theta roles to its governed argument, either as internal or external arguments. The semantic roles include Agent, Patient, Source, Locative, Goal, Instrument, etc. Examples of semantic functions of NP are shown in (11).

- i. Bábā r̀e s̀əkā  
**Agent** eat-PST **theme**  
'Bábā ate rice'.
- ii. ngg̀ə ngūn gūgū b̄ə ǹjì  
**Agent** kill-PST **Patient** with **Instrument**

- iii. 'I killed the goat with a knife'.  
 t̄ə ngr̄ən Nuhu ə kpanga  
**Agent** see-PST **theme** at **Locative**  
 'I saw Nuhu at Akwanga'.

As can be observed in (11), above, each noun occupies a specific grammatical position to be assigned one and only one semantic role. From the foregoing, the nouns *Bàbā*, *gūgū*, *njì* and *kpanga* receive the following theta roles- agent, theme, patient, locative and instrument role. The relationship between the assigner and assignee is shown in figure 4 & 5 below:

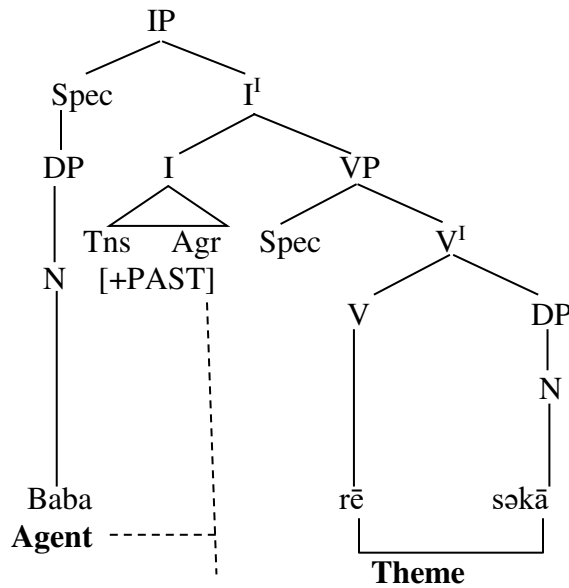


Fig. 4.

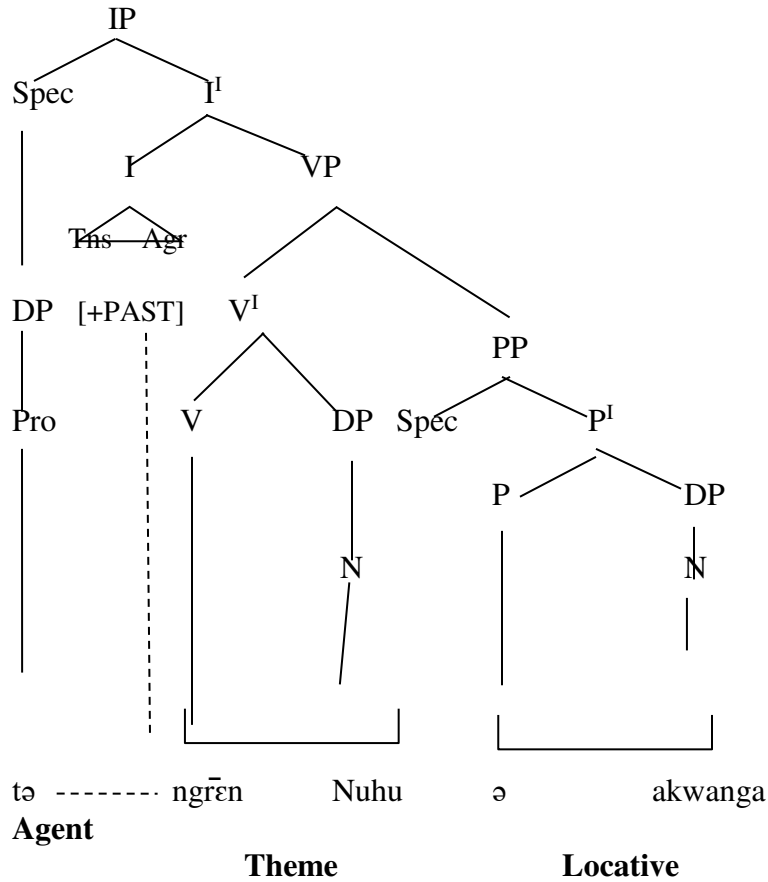


Fig 5

### 3.2 Syntactic Functions of Noun Phrase

Syntactically, the noun phrase can function as the subject, direct object, indirect object, or complement of the preposition (Tallerman, 2005; Lamidi, 2008; Anyanwu, 2010; Arokoyo, 2013). However, the syntactic function of the NP depends largely on its distributional and participatory role in a given string (Yusuf, 1998). The followings are the functions of NP in Màda:

(12) NP as Subject of the Predicate

- i.     **tiyār nggè** rè matò suswè  
father my buy-PST car new  
‘My father bought a new car’.
- ii    **gu** rē lègū  
3SG eat-PST cassava  
‘S/he ate cassava’.
- iii   **Nuhu** ngūn gūgū bē njì  
3SG kill-PST goat with knife

- ‘Nuhu killed the goat with (a) knife’.
- (13) NP as Apposition of the Subject
- i Bābā, wanryān ngūn bārga  
3SG hunter kill-PST lion  
‘Bābā, the hunter killed a lion’.
- ii fāgywā Nekrè mē makaranta  
comrade 3SG build-PST school  
‘Comrade Nekrè built a school’.
- iii tiyār nggə, wānpānnēn sē wānkwār  
father my policeman be diviner  
‘My father, a policeman is a diviner’.
- (14) NP as Direct Object of the Verb
- i. Bābā rē kpə  
3SG buy-PST shoe  
‘Bābā bought a shoe’.
- ii. Talatu zε gyār nggə  
3SG.F greet-PST mother my  
‘Talatu greeted my mother’.
- (15) NP as an Indirect Object
- i nggə rē gu matò suswè  
1<sup>ST</sup> buy-PST him car new  
‘I bought him a new car’.
- ii Mbəcūn nə Talatu kəjì  
3SG.F give-PST Talatu money  
‘Mbəcūn gave Talatu some money’.
- iii gu nə Mary gbārki  
3SG give-PST Mary flower  
‘S/he gave Mary a flower’.
- (16) NP as Object of the Preposition
- i fā tsē bā ə kō  
1<sup>ST</sup> PL beat-PST them at house  
‘We punished them at home’.
- ii Bābā nənə ə mbu kūkwō  
3SG sleep-PST ar mat small  
‘Bābā slept on the small mat’.
- iii gu sār lāndār bā njì  
3SG slaughter-PST cow with knife  
‘S/he slaughtered the cow with a knife’.

From the data presented above, the underlined NPs perform specific grammatical functions based on their distribution in a sentence. Whereas some function as subjects, others occupy object slot. As can be observed in (15i-iii), the indirect object function is

introduced by the presence of an indirect NP necessitated by double object verbs which are either inherent as exemplified in (15ii-iii), or derived.

The data from M̈ada, as exemplified in (16iii), can be illustrated below:

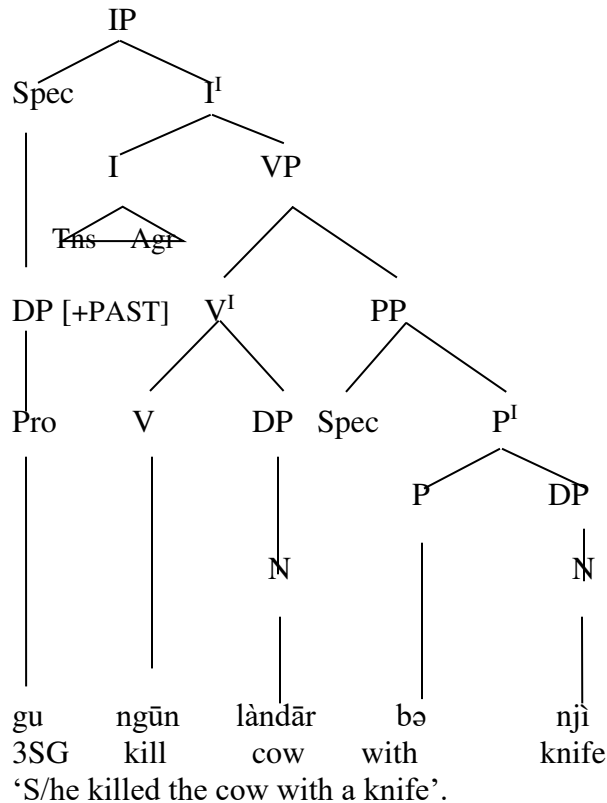


Fig. 6.

#### 4.0 Summary and Discussion of Findings

In this paper, we have discussed the structure of the NP in M̈ada. The paper has revealed that functional elements such as possessives, demonstratives, adjectives, numerals, quantifiers and relative clauses can occur in a simple M̈ada NP. This paper, also, showed that all functional elements of the NP in M̈ada are post head items against English nominal structure which is [(Poss)(Dem)(Num)(Adj)(Quant)] + N. The structural configuration of the typical NP in M̈ada is N + [(Poss) (Dem) (Adj) (Quant) (Num)] + [(Rel Clause)]. Thus, the NP can accommodate either a complement or an adjunct, or even both simultaneously with the same syntactic structure.

The NP in M̈ada can perform several semantic and syntactic functions as exemplified in this paper. The semantic (theta role) functions include agentive, theme, patient, instrument, locative, source, etc. while syntactically the NP can function as the subject, object of the verb, indirect object, and complement of the preposition depending on its structural position in a given string.

The data also show that both determiners and modifiers of the M̀ada NP are post head items, that is, in all the structures of the NP, the head noun always appears as the first word preceding other possible satellites. This shows that M̀ada is a head first language given the head parameter and word order phenomenon.

## 5.0 Conclusion

The goal of this paper, however, has been to describe the syntactic structure of the NP in M̀ada. It takes as its central objective the linear order of noun dependents in the NP, thus showing by means of examples, the co-occurrence of each element in the NP. Throughout this paper, we have shown that the head noun can occur as non-associative, or with optionally defined elements. Due to the paucity of linguistic description of minority languages in Northern Nigeria, this attempt intends to contribute to the existing literatures in Linguistics and document an aspect of the syntax of M̀ada. Attention of linguists is drawn to the fact that several minority languages are struggling in the face of endangerment, thus we suggest that similar studies be embarked upon by researchers to enhance the interesting facts about minority languages.

Finally, it is hoped that this attempt will add to the existing knowledge in linguistics, and create awareness for further research in M̀ada.

## End Notes

1. Data for this study is taken from Rijà variety of M̀ada. Thus, wherever the term M̀ada is used, it depicts Rijà.
2. The interlinear translation, gloss and orthography are mine.

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