

## Object pronouns in the Ào dialect of Yorùbá language

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*Object pronouns in the Ào dialect of Yorùbá can either bear a high or a mid tone. The tone selection by these pronouns is not arbitrary. It depends on the tone of the transitive verb. A high or low tone verb selects a mid tone pronoun as its object while a verb with a mid tone selects a high tone pronoun. However, the dialect has only five overt object pronouns. This is because the third person singular object pronoun is not morphologically realized in the dialect. The said pronoun is expressed through the tone of the verb, which can either be a high, or a mid tone.*

**Keywords:** transitive verb, tone, selection, feature checking

### 1. Introduction

Ào is a dialect of Yorùbá spoken in the Northern Eastern part of Oñdó State<sup>1</sup> in Nigeria. The form of the pronoun in object position in a sentence in Ào depends on the tone of the verb. This is understandable in the sense that the verb selects the object it merges with through the Operations Select and Merge in the Computational system<sup>2</sup> (C<sub>HL</sub>).

A high or low tone verb selects a mid tone pronoun as its object, while a verb with a mid tone selects a high tone pronoun as its object. With this behaviour, object pronouns in Ào can be divided into two – the mid tone object pronouns, which a high or low tone transitive verb selects, and the high tone object pronouns, which a mid tone transitive verb selects. However, Ào has only five object pronouns, as the third person singular object pronoun is not expressed in the dialect.

### 2. Object pronouns after high tone verb

The object pronouns after high tone verbs bear mid tones<sup>3</sup>, except the third person singular object pronoun, which is not lexicalized in Ào. The form is given in (1) below.

(1) Object pronoun after a high tone verb

|                        | Singular          | Plural |
|------------------------|-------------------|--------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> Person | mi                | a      |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> Person | ẹ                 | in     |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> Person | high tone of verb | on     |

The pronoun forms in (1) occur in the sentences in (2) below.

(2) a.

|      |                |        |    |
|------|----------------|--------|----|
| Táyé | ó <sup>4</sup> | mú     | mi |
| Táyé | agr            | choose | me |

‘Taye chose me’.

- b. Tírhà wa aí rí a  
Teacher our hab. see us  
‘Our teacher usually sees us’.
- c. Táyò à kín ẹ  
Táyò fut. greet you (sg)  
‘Tayò will greet you’.
- d. Mí ní<sup>5</sup> g<sup>w</sup>ó in  
I fut.neg beat you(sg)  
‘I will not beat you’.
- e. Tópẹ rhíì dó ọn  
Tópẹ cont.neg. marry them  
‘Topẹ is no longer marrying them’.
- f. Tópẹ rhíì dó  
Tópẹ cont.neg. marry  
‘Topẹ is no longer marrying her’.

The verbs in (2) are high tone verbs throughout. We note that each of these verbs in (2) selects and merges with is a mid tone pronoun except (2f) where the high tone verb has no object. Note that this verb is a transitive verb as it selects a mid tone the third person plural pronoun *ọn* in (2e). Though (2f) has no object pronoun, a native speaker knows that the object pronoun of the verb in (2f) is the zero realized third person singular object pronoun. We shall return to (2f) later.

We shall discuss the derivation of the sentences in (2a) – (2e) above. We shall restrict our analysis to the verb and the object pronoun it selects<sup>6</sup>. The sentences in (2a) above shall be our guide. It is repeated below as (3) for convenience:

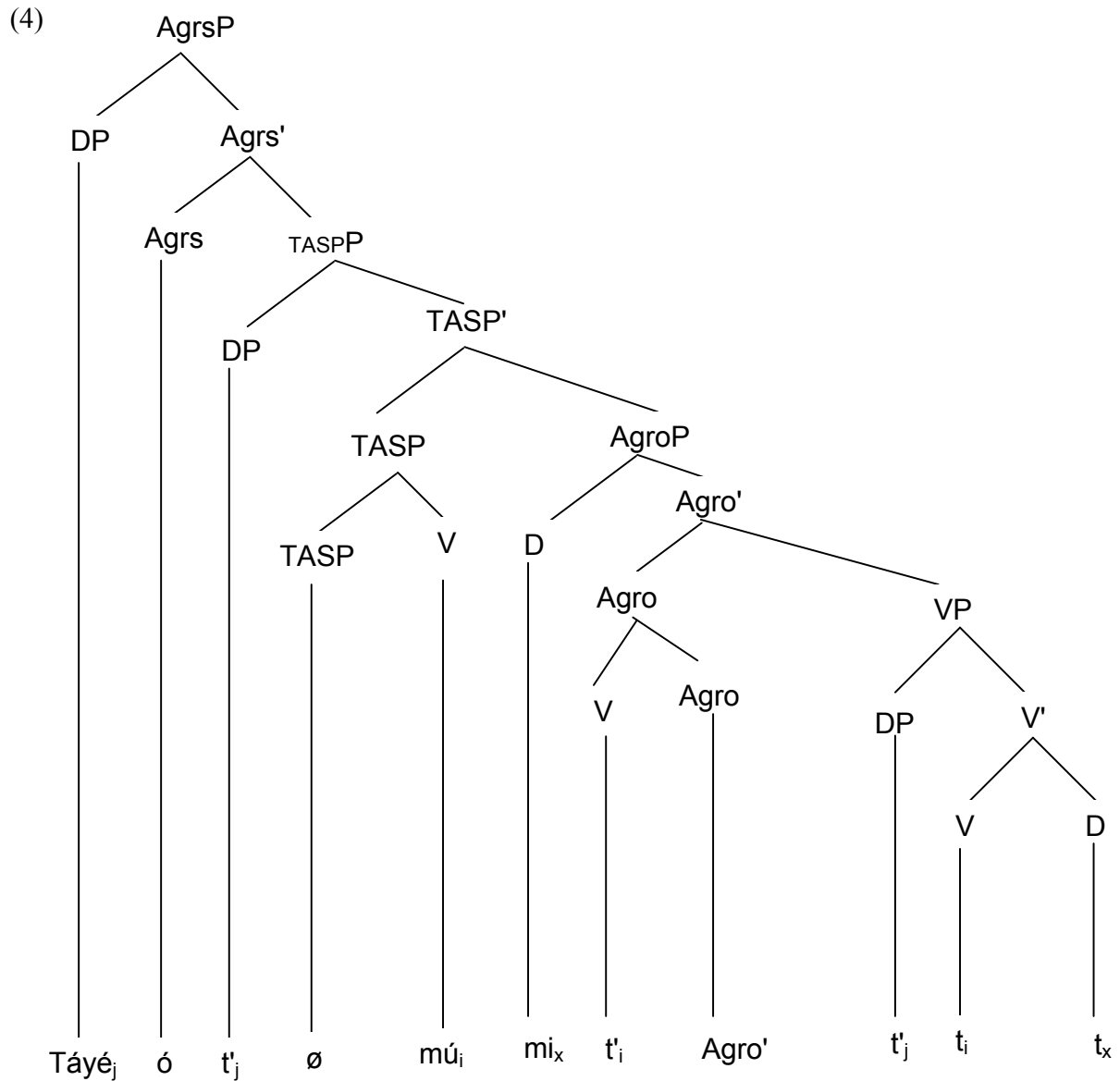
- (3) Táyé ó mú mi  
Táyé agr choose me  
‘Taye chose me’.

The verb and the object pronoun in (3) have the following features:

|     |                       |   |  |
|-----|-----------------------|---|--|
| mú: | Head –features        | – | High tone transitive verb;<br>Tense/aspect |
|     | Specifier – features  | – | None                                       |
|     | Complement – features | – | Mid tone object pronoun                    |

|     |                       |   |   |
|-----|-----------------------|---|---|
| mi: | Head – features       | – | Mid tone object pronoun                 |
|     | Specifier – features  | – | 1 <sup>st</sup> person singular pronoun |
|     | Complement – features | – | None                                    |

The structural representation of (3) is given in (4):



In (4) above, the subject moves from its position as spec of VP, to the spec-TASPP<sup>7</sup> position to check its tense/aspect specifier feature. The verb, which is the head of the VP,

moves and adjoins to the Agro to check its object case feature and thereafter moves and adjoins to the TASP head of the TASPP to check its Tense/Aspect feature. The object pronoun moves to the spec-AgroP position to check its objective/accusative case feature. The complement –feature of the verb which says it must take a mid tone pronoun is satisfied since the pronoun now occupies the spec-AgroP position. The verb, thereafter, moves and adjoins to the TASP head to check its uninterpretable tense/aspect head feature.

### 3. Object pronoun after mid tone verbs

For the mid tone verbs, they select high tone pronouns as their objects, these pronouns are given in (5):

|     |                                      |                   |        |
|-----|--------------------------------------|-------------------|--------|
| (5) | Object pronoun after a mid tone verb |                   |        |
|     |                                      | Singular          | Plural |
|     | 1 <sup>st</sup> Person               | mí                | á      |
|     | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Person               | ẹ                 | ín     |
|     | 3 <sup>rd</sup> Person               | high tone of verb | ọ̀n    |

The pronoun-forms in (5) occur in the sentences in (6) below.

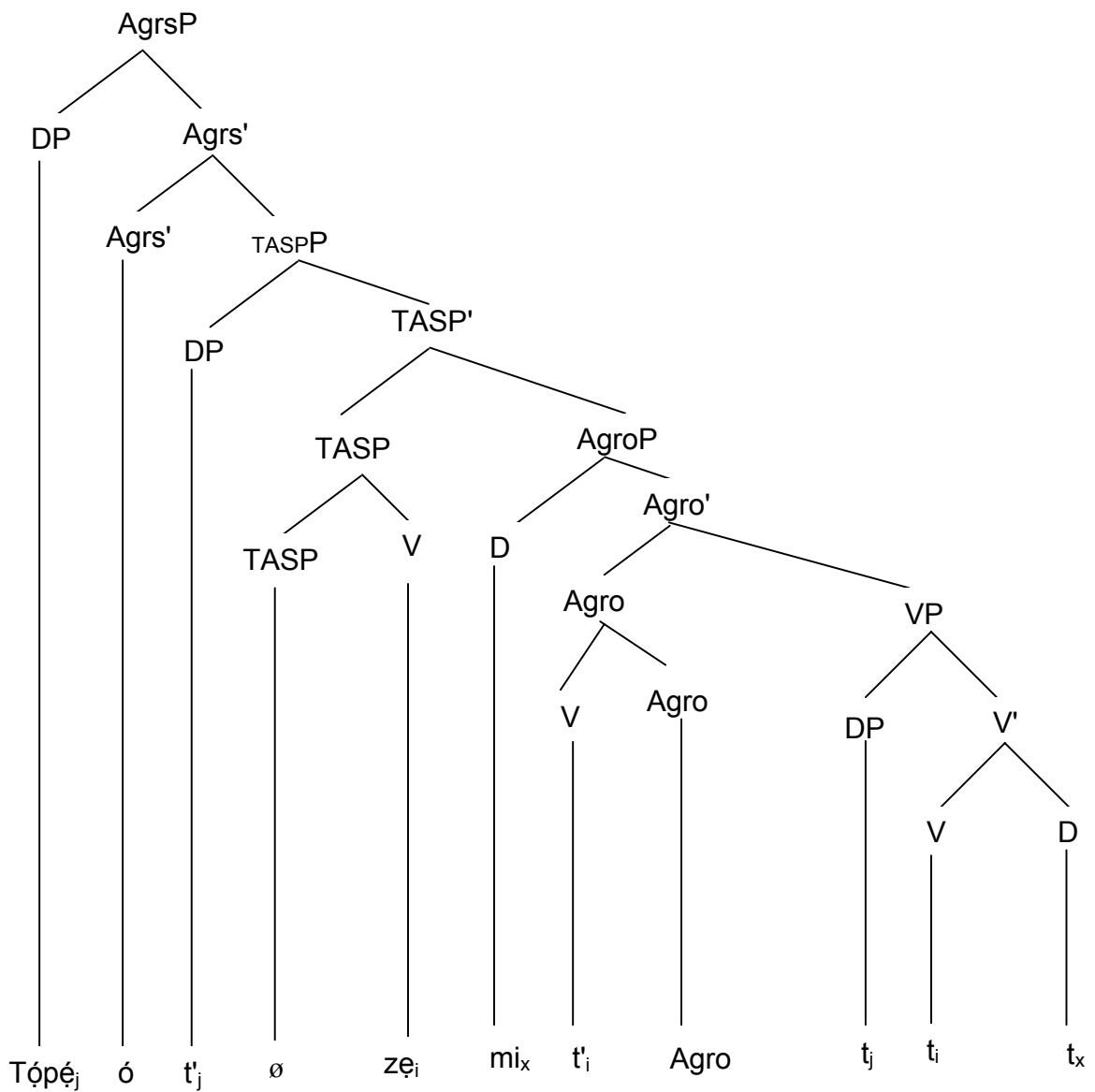
- (6) a.        Tópé            ó            zẹ            mí  
                  Tópé            agr        resemble    me  
                  ‘Tope resembles me’.
- b.            Ayò            a            pa            á  
                  Ayò            fut.        beat        us  
                  ‘Ayo will beat us’.
- c.            Títí            níí            ra            ẹ  
                  Títí            fut.neg     rub        you(sg)  
                  ‘Titi will not rub you’.
- d.            Obínrin        tiẹ        rhíí            rho        ín  
                  woman        the        cont.neg    tie        you(pl)  
                  ‘The woman is no longer tying you’.
- e.            Ùrhìn        ì<sup>8</sup>            ja            ọ̀n  
                  knife        pres.neg    tear        them  
                  ‘The knife is yet to tear them’.

- f.            Ûrhin            ì            já  
               knife            pres.neg        tear  
               ‘The knife is yet to tear him/ her/it’.

The verbs in (6a) – (6e) are mid tone verbs and they subcategorize for high tone object pronouns. However, (6f) has the same verb in (6e) but with a different tone yet with no change in meaning. The difference in tone is traced to the fact that the verb, though a transitive one, has no overt object in (6f). It ought to have the third person singular object pronoun as its object but this pronoun is not morphologically realized, the verb rather than selecting the mid tone when there is an overt object pronoun as in (6e), bears a high tone because of the zero object. We shall return to the third person singular object pronoun later.

For the derivation of the sentences in (6a) – (6e), especially as it concerns the verb and its object pronoun, the verb, among other head-features, must be a mid tone bearing verb and it must select a high tone-bearing pronoun as its object. If these two head-features of the verb and the pronoun are absent, such a derivation will fail to converge and hence crashes and the lexical items return to the working area. These features are checked when the verb moves and adjoins to the TASP head of the TASPP and the object pronoun moves to the spec-AgroP position which is the complement position of the TASP as we have in (7):

(7.)



#### 4. Object pronouns after low tone verbs

For the low tone verbs, they select pronouns that bear mid tone as objects. The form of these object pronouns is given in (8) below.

(8) Object pronouns after a low tone verb

|                        | Singular             | Plural |
|------------------------|----------------------|--------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> Person | mi                   | a      |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> Person | ẹ                    | in     |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> Person | mid tone on the verb | on     |

The pronoun forms in (8) occur in the sentences in (9) below:

- (9) a. Ijè mi a pòn mi  
mother my fut. carry me  
'My mother will back me'.
- b. Títí ó mò a  
Títí agr know us  
'Titi knows us'.
- c. Uwà mi rhíí pè ẹ  
father my cont.neg call you{sg}  
'My father is no longer calling you'.
- d. Obìnrin mi aí kìn in  
woman my hab. praise you(sg)  
'My wife usually praises you'.
- e. Mí níí g<sup>w</sup>ẹ on  
I fut.neg bath them  
'I will not bath them'
- f. Mí níí g<sup>w</sup>ẹ  
I fut.neg bath  
'I will not bath him/her/it'

The verbs in (9a) – (9e) are low tone bearing verbs and these verbs select mid tone object pronouns just as we have in (2a) – (2e) above where the verbs are high tone bearing but select mid tone bearing pronouns as their objects. We can conclude that a high or a low tone bearing verb selects a mid tone object pronoun as its object. However, the difference between the high tone bearing verbs in (2) and the low tone bearing ones in (9) is the behaviour of these verbs when their object is the non-overt third person singular pronoun. While high tone verbs retain their tone with no overt object pronoun as (2f) informs us, the low tone verbs have their tone changed to a mid tone where there is no overt object pronoun as we have in (9f). The low tone transitive verb normally select a mid tone object pronoun, but where there is no overt object pronoun (cf. 9f), the verb bears a mid tone rather than a low one. Note that despite the change in tone, the verb in (9f) does not have a different meaning from the verb in

(9e), which bears a low tone. This is an environment where the lexical function of the tone is neutralized in  $\dot{A}o$ .

The forms of pronouns in object position in  $\dot{A}o$  sentences can be divided into two following our discussions above. The forms are object pronouns after a high or a low tone verb and object pronouns after a mid tone verb. The forms are given in Table 1:

| Person          | Forms                          |    |            |    |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|----|------------|----|
|                 | I                              |    | II         |    |
|                 | SG <sup>9</sup>                | PL | SG         | PL |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> | Mi                             | a  | Mí         | Á  |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> | È                              | in | É          | Ín |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> | HT or MT <sup>10</sup> on verb | on | HT on verb | Ón |

- Forms I: Object pronouns after a high or a low tone verb (1 and 8)  
 II: Object pronouns after a mid tone verb (5)

Table 1 *The forms of pronouns in object positions in  $\dot{A}o$*

From Table 1, we discover that object pronouns after high tone verbs and object pronouns after low tone verbs have the same form except in the non-morphologically realized third person singular pronoun where the verbs behave differently. The high tone-bearing verb will retain its tone while a mid tone-bearing verb will have its tone changed to a high one where there is no overt pronoun object.

### 5. The third person singular object pronoun

Since the third person singular object pronoun is not lexicalized in  $\dot{A}o$ , the tone on the verb makes the difference and enables the speaker to identify the pronoun. A high tone bearing transitive verb still maintains its high tone but without an object when the third person singular pronoun is the supposed object of the transitive verb. However, a low tone bearing transitive verb has its low tone changed to a mid one when the object it selects is the phonetically null third person singular pronoun. A mid tone bearing transitive verb has its mid tone changed to a high one in the same environment. We shall go ahead to discuss the status of the third person singular object pronoun that is zero realized in the sentences in (2f), (6f) and (9f) above. They are repeated below as (10a), (10b) and (10c) respectively.

- (10) a. Tópé rhíì dó  
 Tópé cont.neg. marry  
 ‘Tope is no longer marrying her’.
- b. Ùrhìn ì já



knife pre.neg tear  
 ‘The knife is yet to tear him/her/it’.

- c. Mí ní g<sup>w</sup>ẹ  
 I fut.neg bath  
 ‘I will not bath him/her/it’.

In the sentences in (10), the transitive verbs have no object because their object is the null third person singular pronoun. This particular pronoun is expressed in *Àò* through the tone of the transitive verbs. As we have pointed out earlier, a mid tone bearing transitive verb that sub-categorizes for a high tone object pronoun has its mid tone changed to a high tone when there is no lexical object pronoun following it since the object is the phonetically null third person singular pronoun. A high tone bearing transitive verb maintains the high tone on the verb when the sub-categorized object is the said null pronoun while a low tone bearing transitive verb has its low tone changed to a mid tone when the sub-categorized object is the same null pronoun.

However, it is possible to treat the covert third person singular object pronoun as an instance of pronoun incorporation whereby the object pronoun is incorporated into the transitive verb as we have in standard Yorùbá sentences in (11) and (12) below.

- (11) a. Mo jẹ é nǐ àná  
 I eat it at yesterday  
 ‘I ate it yesterday’.

- b. Mo jẹ ní àná  
 I eat at yesterday  
 ‘I ate it yesterday’.

- (12) a. Ó gbé e sí òkè  
 he carry it at top  
 ‘He carried it up’.

- b. Ó gbe sí òkè  
 he carry at top  
 ‘He carried it up’.

In (11a), the third person singular object pronoun is the vowel of the verb but with a high tone while the verb itself bears a mid tone. In (11b), the third person singular object pronoun is incorporated into the verb and the mid tone bearing verb now bears the high tone of the pronoun. This is also the case in (12a) where the object pronoun is the vowel of the verb but with a mid tone while the verb bears a high tone. When the object pronoun is incorporated into the transitive verb in (12b), the high tone verb in (12a) now bears the mid tone of the pronoun. The syntactic process we have in (11b) and (12b) is known as incorporation, where

a syntactic category is incorporated into another; and in this case, the third person singular object pronoun which, in the first instance, is the vowel of the transitive verb, is incorporated into the verb. We can, however, still trace the pronoun back in a slow or normal speech as we have in (11a) and (12a).

In the *Ào* dialect, we cannot have the situation that we describe for standard Yorùbá as in (11a) and (12a) above. This is so if we consider the sentences in (10). As we have earlier observed, the transitive verbs in (10b) and (10c) have different tones from what they have when their objects are overt while the verb in (10a) maintains its tone. In other words, *dó* ‘marry’ with a high tone in (10a) is the same where it has an overt object, but *jà* ‘tear’ with a high tone in (10b) has a mid tone where there is an overt object and *g<sup>w</sup>ẹ* ‘bath’ with a mid tone in (10c) has a low tone when the object is overt. Unlike the standard Yorùbá examples in (11 and 12) above, especially (11a) and (12a), where the third person singular object pronoun is the vowel of the verb but with a different tone, it is not possible to have the sentences (13b) – (15b) in the *Ào* dialect.

- (13) a. Tópé rhíì dó ọ̀n  
 Tópè cont.neg. marry them  
 ‘Tope is no longer marrying them’
- b. \*Tópé rhíì dó o  
 Tópè cont.neg. marry him/her/it
- (14) a. Ùrhìn ì ja ọ̀n  
 knife pre.neg tear them  
 ‘The knife is yet to tear them’.
- b. \*Ùrhìn ì ja á<sup>11</sup>  
 knife pre.neg tear him/her/it
- (15) a. Mí níí g<sup>w</sup>ẹ̀ ọ̀n  
 I fut.neg bath them  
 ‘I will not bath them’.
- b. \*Mí níí g<sup>w</sup>ẹ̀ é/ẹ  
 I fut.neg bath him/her/it

The sentences in (13b) - (15b) are all ill-formed in *Ào*. They are illformed because of two reasons. One, the phonologically overt items in object positions of the verbs serve as the third person singular pronoun which must be covert; and two, the tones of the transitive verbs especially in (14b) and (15b) which remain the same as their counterparts in (14a) and (15a) cannot select the covert third person singular pronouns as objects.

From the ill-formed sentences in (14b) and (15b), we observe that the third person singular object pronoun is not the vowel of the transitive verb as we have in standard Yorùbá.

Therefore, the non-realization of the third person singular object pronoun in the Ào dialect is not an instance of pronoun incorporation.

We conclude by asserting that the Ào dialect has no overt third person singular object pronoun. When the third person singular object pronoun is the object of reference in a sentence, the verb comes in to play that role. This is made possible because of the fact that the transitive verb selects its object therefore, if the null third person singular pronoun is the object selected, the transitive verb will either select a high tone or a mid tone but not a low which informs that the non-overt item after the transitive verb is the third person singular pronoun. This is what we have in (10) above. This is another unique role played by the tone in the Ào dialect of Yorùbá language<sup>12</sup>.

## 6. Conclusion

The forms of the object pronouns in Ào have been the focus of this work. The work established two different forms of the object pronouns and the significant role played by tone in the selection of these different forms. This is done through the tone on the transitive verb which determines the object pronoun that such verb selects. The third person singular object pronoun is not morphologically realized in the dialect. Though expressed, it is expressed through the tone of the verb which can either be a high or a mid tone.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Oye Taiwo (2003b), where Ào is classified along with the South-Eastern Yorùbá (SEY) following Awobuluyi (1998).

<sup>2</sup> The Minimalist Program (MP) of generative syntax adopted for this study gives details of the operations and principles needed in the formation of sentences. See Chomsky (1995), Radford (1997a) and (1997b), Napoli (1996), and Taiwo (2005) among others.

<sup>3</sup> Yorùbá language has three basic and significant tones. These are the high tone, the low tone and the mid tone. The high and low tones are marked [H] and [L] respectively. The mid tone is not marked.

<sup>4</sup> Ó is the subject agreement marker in Ào. It does not occur in a sentence where the tense/aspect marker occurs. It also does not occur in a sentence which has a short pronoun as its subject. These are the reasons for its non-occurrence in (2b) to (2f).

<sup>5</sup> Tense and aspect are among the functors that inflect for negation in Ào. This is why the future tense marker is the negative form, **nií** in (2b) while its affirmative form is **à** in (2c). The continuous aspect has its negative form in (2e) and (2f). See Oye Taiwo (2003a & 2005) for a detailed analysis of negation and tense and aspect in the Ào dialect of Yorùbá.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion on the derivation of the basic clause in Ào, see Oye Taiwo (2005 & 2007).

<sup>7</sup> In Ào, the subject has tense/aspect specifier-features; hence, it has to move to the spec-TASPP to check these features in accordance with the principle of greed. Oye Taiwo (2005 & 2007) gives a detailed analysis of how these features are identified.

<sup>8</sup> See note 5 above.

<sup>9</sup> SG is singular while PL is plural.

<sup>10</sup> HT means high tone while MT means mid tone.

<sup>11</sup> This sentence will be a well-formed one in Ào if *á*, the object pronoun, is taken to be the first person plural object pronoun, but as a third person singular object pronoun, it is an unacceptable sentence because of the reasons to be given below.

<sup>12</sup> See Oye Taiwo (2006) for an account of the grammatical functions of the tone in the Ào dialect of Yorùbá language.

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