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AGGLUTINATING SYSTEM AND ALTERNATION IN MORPHEMES AND ALLOMORPHS IN SELECTED NIGERIAN LANGUAGES

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Abstract

Morphology, subsumed into Syntax until recently, is one the distinctive linguistic field of study that deals with the formation and internal structures of words. It deals with the minimum units of words that are semantically and syntactically significant and meaningful. This simply suggests that the focus and thrust of this piece is 'morpheme'. Morphological studies by various authors have argued that classification of World Languages can be done based on agglutinating and alternation languages. This is not very correct in all cases and situations as revealed in this study. This study thus examines the concepts of 'morphemes', 'allomorphs', 'agglutinating system' and 'alternation' as discussed in Mathews (1991) with the sole aim of eliciting the relevance and application of these concepts in analyzing select Nigerian Language morphological systems. It is hoped that this will form the bases for further works in morphological processes of Nigerian languages.

Keywords: Agglutination, Alternating, Morphemes, Allomorphs, Morphological

Introduction

There is general belief or an assumption that every language has its own specific morphological system. This belief could be, to some extent, correct if languages of the world are diverse in many aspects. The morphological processes of the languages might not be in inconsistency to have some differences in them. This means that different morphological models could be adopted in the study of different languages. In short, it is advisable to study every language using its own morphological rules and norms. Therefore, this write-up intends to examine the concepts of 'Morphemes', 'Allomorphs', 'Agglutinating system' and 'Alternation' as discussed in Mathews (1991) with the aim of eliciting how relevant or applicable these concepts could be in analysing the morphological systems of Nigerian languages. This does not suggest an over-riding competence to delve and dwell in all Nigerian languages. Rather, the study intends to sample three of the languages: Epira, Hausa and Yoruba for analysis. It is believed that this could be the catalyst for other prospective writers in the field of Analytical Morphology of Nigerian Languages.

Morphemes

The term morpheme is usually used by linguists in general and

morphologists in particular to mean the minimum unit of word which is capable of bearing meaning. That is, it is used to describe the meaningful elements that composed a word. Mathews (1991) describes the morpheme as “the primitive unit of syntax, the smallest unit that can bear meaning”. In the same vein, Yule (2001) sees the morpheme as “a minimal unit of meaning or grammatical function.

It is quite pertinent and essential to note here that both definitions portray the morpheme as the smallest unit of language that bears meaning and below which no other meaningful unit exists. That is, the morpheme is perceived as smaller than the 'word' and therefore is an element of word-structure. Again, the morpheme in the light of Mathews and Yule is considered as the basic unit of syntax or grammar because it is both semantically and syntactically very important. For example, the word “re-assessable” and “editors” consist of three minimal units (that is, morphemes) as follow:

- i. Re assessable: (a) re- (meaning – “again”) (b) assess (verb) –able (has the ability)
- ii. Editors: (a) edit (verb) (b) – or (meaning person who edits) © s (meaning plural or grammatical plural marker)

Types of Morphemes

Morphemes can be classified into three basic types. These are the lexical morphemes, inflectional morphemes and derivational morphemes. Some authorities like Mathews (1991) classify it into two basic types, but the three types include these:

- (a) Lexical morphemes: These are the morphemes identified with the lexemes of a language. This means that lexical morphemes are said to consist of both 'content' and 'functional' words of a language. For instance, man, car, sea, jump, eat, run, etc. are content lexical morphemes while besides, on, with, by, upon etc. are said to be functional morphemes.
- (b) Inflectional morphemes: These are the word elements that are usually attached to the lexical morphemes for more meaning or grammatical information. They are sometimes referred to as “affixes” as they could be attached on either side of lexical items. When an inflectional morpheme is attached at the initial position of a lexical morpheme, it is called a 'prefix' and when it occurs at the end of a lexical item it is

referred to as a 'suffix'. The lexical morpheme on which an inflectional morpheme is attached is called a lexical 'root' or 'stem'. For example, Mathews (1991) states this:

	prefix	root	suffix
a.	Un	break	able
b.	Re	assess	ed

(c) Derivational morphemes: According to William O' Grady, John Archibald and Frances Katamba (2011) derivational morpheme is a grammatical unit that is capable of changing the grammatical status (in terms of semantics and word class) of the root to which it is attached. The derivational morpheme is an affixation that forms a word with a meaning and/or category distinct from that of the base. This means that when a morpheme is added to another morpheme or word and it results to meaning different from the base in respect of word category and grammatical information, a derivational process has taken place and completed. For instance, the morpheme -er is one of the most common derivational suffixes that combine with a verb to form a noun with meaning one who does X. For example, explore (v) + -er = explorer (n) and teach (v) + -er = teacher (n), person (singular) + -s = persons (plural), and wash (simple present) + -ed = washed (simple past tense) etc.

Allomorphs

The term allomorph is used to describe the different phonological realisation of a morpheme. Mathews (1991) says that each formal variation in the realisation of a morpheme is called a 'morph' or an 'allomorph'. For instance, the form 'chair' is considered a single morph realising a lexical morpheme, whereas the form 'chairs' consists of two morphs realising a lexical morpheme 'chair' and an inflectional morpheme -s. That is, chair = lexical morpheme (one morpheme realisation or one allomorph), chairs = lexical morpheme + plural morpheme (two morphemes realisation or two allomorphs).

Agglutination System

An agglutinating system describes a situation in a language where the word elements are a sort of glued on or joined on one after another to form what could be described as 'word sentence'. In agglutinating, each element is considered to be a separate word and is capable of being used as such. Not all the elements of a word are joined into the 'word-sentence', but the principal element of the word is usually preserved and remained unchanged. Meaning that in the process of items gluing

together, some of them loose elements so as to really make meaning from the agglutination. The modification element may come either in the beginning or at the end or in both positions. The agglutinating system can be graphically represented as this:

Each box represents a word element glued on one to the other. For example,



In Ebirá: Onimisi is an agglutinated word that can be analysed as: 'oni+mi+si' meaning: the one+I+love(the one I love).

In Hausa too: Mai gyara is agglutinated word analysed as: 'mai+(yin)+gyara' meaning: doer of repair.(a repairer).

Yoruba is not left out in this. For instance, 'Omowunmi' is broken down as 'omo+wun+mi' child+love+me meaning: child (ren) loves or love me.

Alternation

Alternation refers to occurrence or distribution of allomorphs of a morpheme in certain premise. When two or more allomorphs of a morpheme cannot occur in the same environment due to other morphological, phonological or grammatical restrictions, they are seen as 'alternant' of each other. Alternation does not only occur between the allomorphs but also part of the allomorphs which actually differ. The same alternation can occur in two or more different sets of allomorphs (that is, re-current alternation) or alternation can be in only set of allomorphs (that is, non-recurrent alternation) Mathews (1991). For instance,

Presentation

From our discussions so far, we have peripherally explained the concept of 'Morphemes', 'Allomorphs', 'Agglutinating System' and 'Alternation' with special reference to Mathews (1991). We will now demonstrate how relevant or otherwise these concepts could be in the analysis of the morphological system of Nigerian languages.

First, the concept of the morpheme can be seen very helpful in realising

and analysing the plural system in Nigerian languages. For example, in the languages of Ebira, Yoruba and Hausa are the following plurals of some lexical morphemes.

a. The plural system in the languages

I. Ebira Language

Singular	Plural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ?za (a person) • ?n?? (a woman) • ?n?r? (a man) • ozi (a child) • ose (a wife) • ?n?(he) • ?va (husband) • ? (he/she/it) 	<p>aza (people) an?? (woman) ?n?r?/?n?r?nini(men) ezi (children) ese (wives) ?n?(them)</p> <p>?va (husbands) ? (they)</p>

ii. Yoruba Language

Singular	Plural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Okurin (a man) • Ile (a house) • Akekon (a student) 	<p>Awon okurin (men) Awon le (houses) Awonakekon (students)</p>

iii. Hausa Language

Singular	Plural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mutum (person) • Namiji (male) • Buta (a kettle) • Yaro (a boy) • Dabba (an animal) • Mace (female) • Makaranta (school) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mutane (persons) Mazaji/maza (males) Butoci (kettles) Yara (boys) Dabbobi (animals) Mata (females) Makarantu (schools)

From the above table showing the plural systems in the three languages; Ebirá, Yoruba and Hausa, it is observed that all the three languages realise their plural system using different morphemes. In Ebirá language, for instance, there are three more commonly used processes of forming its plurality. These processes are:

- i. **By multiple nominal phrase:** In this process, the plurals are formed by changing the vowel '?' to 'a' or 'e' at the beginning of the phrase. For example, '?za' (person) becomes 'aza' (people), and 'ozi' (child) becomes 'ezi' (children).
- ii. **Pluralisation by numerals:** This is another way of indicating plural in Ebirá language which involves the use of specific numerals to post modify or qualify any noun. For instance, “ezi??va” (children two) and “uye??na” (animal four). This is commonly and more appropriately used in noun phrases or other structures. Note-worthy here is the fact that unlike the English language which mostly pre-modifies, the Ebirá language naturally post modifies.
- iii. **Pluralisation by particle marker:** This is the third and most common way of forming plurals in Ebirá language. The use of particle marker “nini” can pluralise either noun or pronouns. For instance, “ozokunini” (elders), “ewunin” (you(pl)), and “e nini” (they).

In the same vein, the examples cited in the Yoruba language demonstrate that plurality in the language is achieved by addition of the morpheme “awon”. This

morpheme “awon” is always in pre modification position to all the nouns or objects it qualifies.

Similarly, this process has a close operational relationship with one of the principles of Ebira language pluralisation. That is, the third process which involves the use of particle marker ('nini'). Although, the Yoruba plurilisation morpheme “awon” pre modifies its objects contrary to that of Ebira which post modifies. The Hausa language forms its own plurals in a way close to that of the Ebira language. The two languages alternate part of a word (morpheme) or a sound (vowel or consonant) to form their plurals. Although the Ebira language is always very consistent in the formation of plurality, the Hausa language sometimes changes the total form of the word. For instance, in Ebira language, the vowel 'o' in an initial position of a word is alternated by an 'a' or an 'e' to form its plural. This also happens in Hausa but its own is at the final position of the word. For instance, yaro (child) -yara (children). In addition, it also changes the whole form of the word. For example, Namiji (male) - mazaji/maza (males)

The Tense System in the Three Languages

i. Ebira Language: The verbal systems or forms of a particular language form the pillar of the general characteristics of that language. Palma (1965) is of the belief that the verbal patterns of languages “differ in two ways”. First, in the way of linguistic materials are organized and secondly, in the type of information carried.

Verb	Present	Past	Past participle	Future
Na Open	Naa Open it	? naa He opened it	? ranaa He has opened it	? vanaa He will open it
V? Come	V? Come	? v? He came	? zi/rav? He has come	? vav? He will come
Ch?r? Write	Ch?r?? Write it	? ch?r?? He wrote it	? rach?r?? He has written it	? vach?r?? Hewill write it

i. Yoruba Language

Verb	Present	Past	Past participle	Future
Lo Go	On lo He goes	O lo He went	Oti lo He has gone	Omaa lo He will go
Je Eat	On je He eats	O je He ate	Oti je He has eaten	Omaa je He will eat
Wa Come	On wa He comes	O wa He came	Otiwa He has come	Omaanwa He will come

iii. Hausa Language:

Verb	Present	Past	Past participle	Future
Ci Eat	Ci Eat	Ya ci Ta ci Sun ci	Yacin ye ta cin ye sun cin ye	Za ci Za ta ci Zasu ci
Barci Sleep	Barci Sleep	Yaibarci Ta yibarci Sunyibarci	Yarigayacin ye. Ta riga ta cin ye Sun riga sun cin ye	Zayibarci Za ta barci Zasuyibarci
Tafi Go	Tafi Go	Yatafi Ta tafi Sun tafi	Yarigayatafi Ta riga ta tafi Sun riga sun tafi	Zaitafi Za ta tafi Zasutafi

The above illustrations again demonstrate the ways the three languages realise their tenses. For example, the Ebira language uses different morphemes to realize its past, participle and future tenses. It uses the morphemes '?', '?ra' and '?va' to form its past, past participle and future tenses respectively. It is also observed that Ebira language cannot form any tense (past, past participle and future without introducing a person or things as the doer of the verb and what it does, for instance, 'ri' (eat), '?ri' (he ate), '?rari' (he has eaten) and '?vari' (he will eat), rather than simply saying –ate, eaten and will eat.

Similarly, the Yoruba is in morphological and syntactic alignment with the Ebira language. This might not be unrelated to the etymological and ethnological intimacy of the two languages. The Yoruba like the Ebira uses 'on', 'o', 'oti', and 'omaa' to form its present, past, participle and future tenses respectively.

The Hausa language also realises its tenses using different morphemes/markers. It is observed by Fagge (2004) that the past tense morpheme in Hausa language also serves as 'gender' and 'number' marker. For example, in forming past tense, Hausa uses the morphemes 'ka', 'ta', 'ya', 'sun', 'mu', etc before the verb. These morphemes of course are not just tense markers but also 'plural', 'gender' and 'person'. For instance, “yazo” means He (singular, masculine, 3rd person) came. This is not the case with the Ebira and Yoruba. The tense morpheme in Ebira and Yoruba is not an indicator of gender and person. Moreover, the English language lacks agglutinating features in word structure or formation unlike these three Nigerian languages; Ebira, Yoruba and Hausa. The Ebira for instance, has so many glued words which can be described as agglutinated words. Examples of such words are:

Ebira Agglutination	English Interpretations
• Onoruoyiza	Man good – a good man
• Adaviriku	Father is drinking pot
• Oyamine	Let it be in my stomach
• Ohinoyi	Head of public (general/all)

In Yoruba too, there are a number of agglutinating words like;

- ✓ Adebayo – we arrived and met joy.
- ✓ Alajeju – he who eats too much (glutton).
- ✓ Olorire – blessed head (blessed person).
- ✓ Ibinkunle – fill house with children

Hausa also shows some agglutinating features in its word formations, for example

- ✓ Maigida – Owner of house (landlord).
- ✓ Manoma – Doer of farm (farmer).
- ✓ Mai tuki – doer (of) drive (driver)
- ✓ Danjuma – son (of) Friday (Friday)
- ✓ Miakubewa – soup (of) okro (soup made of okro).

With regard to alternation, except Ebira language that demonstrates alternation,

Hausa and Yoruba do not. The Ebira shows alternation especially in its noun pluralisation. For instance, the vowels 'o' and 'e', and 'o' and 'a' are alternants in realizing its plurality. As in:

- ?zi (child) – ezi (children)
- Ose (wife) – ese (wives)
- ?n?r? (a man) – ?n?r? (men)
- ?za (a person) – aza (people)
- ?n?? (a woman) – an?? (women)

We can observe that the allomorph/morph 'o' is used to realise singularity while 'e' and 'a' are used to form the plurality of the nouns. Therefore, we can say that vowels 'o' and 'a' and 'e' are mutually exclusive or complementary to each other in the premise of pluralisation in Ebira language. Morphologically, /o/ and /a/ and /e/ are restricted to singular and plural respectively in Ebira language.

The discussion so far reveals the relevance of the above concepts in the three languages. However, the concepts of 'lexical roots' or 'stems' and 'affixes' are not very relevant in analysing compound words in the languages. For example

- a. Ebira: adarehi ----- father + house (root + root).
Ohin?y?----- head + public/general/all (root + root).
- b. Hausa :Sarkin yaki ----- king + war (root + root).
Maigida ----- owner + house (root + root).
- c. Oluwatobi----- God + great (root + root).
Funmilayo----- give + me + happiness (root + root + root).

Conclusion

The write-up has categorically and unambiguously made it clear that morphemes, allomorphs, agglutinating system and alternation as discussed in Mathews (1991) have relevance in the study of the Nigerian languages particularly the three languages under study. It is also observed that the concepts of morphemes and allomorphs are quite insightful in the study of morphological process of Nigerian languages especially in the realisation of plural and tenses. But unlike in English where the concept of lexical root or stem is very relevant,

it is not the case in Nigerian languages especially when analysing compound words (sentence-like words in Nigerian languages i.e. agglutination).

Consequently, however, we realised that the rigid classification of languages into alternating and agglutinating languages by some authorities, especially Mathews is not very correct in Nigerian situation. The analyses above have crystal shown that Epira, Hausa and Yoruba have alternating and agglutinating features put together as against Mathews' principles. Therefore, they can neither be classified as 'alternating' nor 'agglutinating' languages but both. Since there is no morphological dichotomy that exists in the study of Nigerian Languages in terms of agglutinating system and alternation in morphemes and allomorphs as demonstrated by some authorities. At one time, they demonstrate very good features of one particular type of morphological language and at another time, they show other features; alternating or agglutinating language.

In conclusion, the concepts of morphemes, allomorphs are useful in morphological analysis of English and Nigerian languages. However, we have concluded that these languages use different morphological processes. In addition, the dichotomy in the grouping of languages into alternating and agglutinating by some of our very renowned authorities in the field of linguistic studies cannot really hold water in Nigerian languages as they want us to believe.

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