

## **Architecture of Grammatical Particles in Yorùbá: Form, Function, and Distribution**

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### **Abstract**

Substantial works on the Yorùbá lexical categories have been carried out by various scholars right from immemorial till the present day. I also acknowledge the efforts of scholars who have discussed certain grammatical particles in bits from phonological, syntactic, and semantic perspectives. The issues identified with the latter range from their form to status, function, and distribution. In this paper, I examine those particles across the nominal and verbal domains trying to discuss the identified issues and offer suggestions in the areas of disagreement. First, is the high-toned prefix *í-* in certain derived nominals; this is followed by the null determiner that occurs with count bare nouns, the mid-toned syllable both of which are found in the nominal domain and two high-toned syllables in the verbal domain. I affirm the recent claim that the high-toned syllable *í* found in a class of derived word formation hitherto described as partial reduplication is prefix-*í* which derives gerunds via augmentative mechanism. As for the phonological null in the nominal domain of bare count nouns, modifying Ajiboye's (2005) analysis, I propose a null D whose motivation is based on the available interpretations that range from indefiniteness to definiteness and genericity. As for the mid-toned syllable *í*, I analyze it as the genitive case assigner which also heads the GENP that it projects. The high-toned syllable-2 *í* is analyzed as a tense morpheme that has been interpreted as a non-future T which projects a TP. Finally, the high-toned syllable-3 *í* occurring immediately after certain verbs like *fé* 'want' is the infinitive morpheme that heads the INFP. I conclude the paper with a call on Yorùbá language instructors and teachers to begin to teach these grammatical particles in the classroom and encourage reflecting in the writing system as their semantic significance cannot be ignored, especially for L2 of the language.

### **1 Introduction**

Substantial works on the Yorùbá lexical categories have been carried out by various scholars right from the time of Samuel Ajayi Crowther up till the present day. I also acknowledge the efforts of scholars who have discussed certain grammatical particles in bits from phonological, syntactic, and semantic perspectives. The issues identified with the latter range from their form to status, function, and distribution. This squib first presents and discusses the so-called phonological null grammatical particles and later relates them to those without controversial phonological content. The paper is divided into 5 sections. Section 2 describes the grammatical particles in the nominal domain. In section 3, I consider the grammatical particles in the verbal domain. Section 4 presents their architecture while section 5 concludes.

### **§2 Grammatical Particles in Nominal Domain**

The grammatical particles in the nominal domain fall into two categories. On the one hand there is one that has no phonological content. On the other hand, there are those with phonological contents. The latter further divides into two, those that have the front high vowel *i* as the

underlying representation and the two deictic elements: *kan* and *náà*.<sup>1</sup> I take them in turns for discussion.

### §2.1 Null Determiner

The work of Ajiboye (2005, 2024) has established with empirical and language-internal evidence that Yorùbá count nouns (cf. *ajá* ‘dog’ in 1) do not have articles of English type that mark such nouns for (in)definiteness; to that effect, such nouns are bare.

- |     |    |  |                                       |
|-----|----|--|---------------------------------------|
| (1) | a. | Èbùn ún ra <b>ajá</b><br>Èbùn bought a dog/dogs              | <i>indefinite, singular or plural</i> |
|     | b. | <b>Ajá</b> tí Èbùn rà...<br>The dog/dogs that Èbùn bought... | <i>definite, singular or plural</i>   |
|     | c. | Mo kóriira <b>ajá</b><br>I hate dogs                         | <i>generic</i>                        |

In the out-of-the-blue context, a bare count noun can only be interpreted as indefinite singular or plural (1a). When the noun is already familiar with both the speaker and hearer as in (1b) its interpretation can be definite singular or plural. Finally, when the noun occurs as an object of a permanent state verb, the only available interpretation is that of genericity.<sup>2</sup> This has informed the work and subsequent works by the author to propose a null D [Ø] for such nouns with a parallel structure of a DP for languages like English, French and Hebrew with overt D as shown below.

- |     |    |                            |                |
|-----|----|----------------------------|----------------|
| (2) | a. | [DP [D the] [NP [N book]]] | <i>English</i> |
|     | b. | [DP [D la] [NP [N livre]]] | <i>French</i>  |
|     | c. | [DP [D ha] [NP [N sefer]]] | <i>Hebrew</i>  |
|     | d. | [DP [D Ø] [NP [N ìwé]]]    | <i>Yorùbá</i>  |

In the next section, I am going to discuss the mid-toned syllable.

### §2.2 Form, Function, and Distribution of the Mid-Toned Syllable

Another grammatical particle whose form and status are controversial is the mid-toned vowel that appears in genitive constructions between two nominal entities that constitute the genitive phrase in Yorùbá. Holding on to the fact in the literature that genitive constructions are of three types in the language (3):

- |     |    |   |
|-----|----|---|
| (3) | a. | <i>genitive of possession</i> (cf. <i>ilé e Tinubu</i> ‘Tinubu’s house’),                         |
|     | b. | <i>genitive of depiction</i> (cf. <i>àwòrán an Tinubu</i> ‘Tinubi’s portrait’) and                |
|     | c. | <i>genitive of modification</i> (cf. <i>òjẹ̀ òṣèlú</i> ‘an astute politician’) (cf. Ajiboye 2005) |

<sup>1</sup> The discussion of *kan* and *náà* is not within the purview of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Note that generic nouns as kind-referring are essentially plural.

and the claim that the mid-toned element is a relational element that functions as the genitive marker, it is established that this element heads the genitive phrase which projects to the maximal level (cf. Ajiboye 2005: 63ff).

The areas of controversy are (a) its form and (b) its function. I take the two areas of controversy in turns.

As for its form, I assume the MTS is the front vowel *i* with a mid-tone and it obligatorily assimilates the phonetic features of the preceding vowel as illustrated in (4).

(4) ilé        i        Túndé     ‘Tunde’s house/house of Tunde’  
       house    MTS    T.

      ilé        e        Túndé     (cf. Akinbiyi & Liberman 2000)

As for its function, there are two views in the literature. On the one hand, is the view that the mid-tone element functions as a prosthetic vowel for non-canonical nouns. By non-canonical, I mean nouns that begin with a consonant. According to that view, the vowel functions as a restructuring or augmentative element. Consider the following examples.

(5) a. yanrin     iyanrin     ‘sand’  
       lẹ̀kùn     ilẹ̀kùn     ‘door’  
       bùsùn     ibùsùn     ‘bed/mat’

      b. dàda        idàda        ‘personal name’  
       tàlàbí     itàlàbí     ‘personal name’

      c. kúnlé        ikúnlé        ‘personal name’  
       túnde        itúndé        ‘personal name’  
       bọ́lá        ibọ́lá        ‘personal name’

As for the examples in (5a), the alternation between vowel initial and consonant initial variants are recorded in the lexicon and either of them is attested in the spoken variety of the language c.f. *Ó wà lóri bùsùn/ibùsùn* ‘S/he is in bed’. As for the examples in (5b), they are found in the *àmútòrunwá* names. For those examples, the claim is that the *i*-initial variants are attested in most dialects of Central Yorùbá e.g. Mòbà. While this claim is true, it does not justify the occurrence of *idàda* in *ulé idàda* ‘idàda house’. As argued elsewhere (Ajiboye 2018, 2024), that claim can easily be faulted. The argument cannot hold because the restriction of the *i*-initial nouns to only when the noun occurs in a genitive construction and not elsewhere such as in sentence-initial as a subject or sentence-final position as an object is suspicious. Why is *Mo rí ilé idàda* > *Mo rí ilé edàda* ‘I saw Dàda’s house’ be grammatical but *\*Idàda ra ilé* ‘Dada bought a house’/ *\*Mo rí Idàda* ‘I saw Idàda’ are ungrammatical in SY? The answer is this: the claim that vowel *i* occurs in the initial position of those nouns is not true. The *i*- can only be present when in a genitive construction. In that instance, it is not there as a restructuring element but as a genitive marker and it is therefore not attached to the possessor noun.

As for the examples in (5c), the *i*-initial variants are not attested in Standard Yorùbá and there is no reason to impose it on such nouns. This is because those nouns are all vowel-initial before they are truncated. For example, *kúnlé* could have been *omòkúnle*, *olákúnlé*, *adékúnlé*, *odékúnlé*

before the first two syllables are deleted. So, the argument that *i-* in the *ikúnlé* are the likes are to restructure those nouns does not hold. As argued elsewhere, why will for instance, *adékúnle* which begins with a vowel have the first two syllables deleted only to come for a restructuring by inserting another vowel? That argument seems to lack any principled explanation or empirical evidence for the presence of *i-* in *ikúnlé*. The argument canvassed in the cited works is that *i-* is a genitive marker, the segmental features of which are assimilated to the preceding vowel of the possessive noun. This is the reason *ilé i túndé* is pronounced as *ilé e Túndé* ‘Tunde’s house’. It is, therefore, only safe to claim that the mid-toned element is a grammatical entity that relates the possessive and the possessor nouns together where one is the possessum and the other is the possessor. This is illustrated in (4).

(6) [GENP [POSSESSUM NP **ilé**] [GM **e**] [POSSESSOR [NP **Túndé**]] (Ajiboye 2024: 315)

This concludes the discussion of the mid-toned syllable which functions as the head of a genitive phrase.

### §2.3 High-Toned Prefix *í-* in Nominalization

This section discusses one nominal prefix that has not been properly analyzed in the literature. This is a high-toned *í-* that derives a set of nouns. One other thing about this element is the approach that has been given to account for its function in the language.

First is the traditional approach that claims it is involved in deriving gerund nominals via partial reduplication. According to that approach, after reduplication of the initial consonant of the base, the high-toned syllable is epenthesized to break the consonant cluster. For example, *jẹ* > *jjẹ* > *jíjẹ* ‘eat - eating’ (cf. fixed segmentism (Alderete et. al. 1999)).

There is another account similar to the one above; the approach that claims there is a consonant prefix in the language. In that approach, all 18 consonants attested in the language qualify as a prefix to derive one nominal type, namely gerunds! That approach suggests that to derive *jíjẹ*, *j-* serves as a prefix to *jẹ* to have an intermediate form *j-jẹ* to which the high-toned *í* is inserted to break the consonant cluster.

Far away from those two approaches is a more recent understanding of the exact function that the high-toned syllable under consideration performs in gerund derivation. As illuminated in Eleshin (2017), it is now clearer than ever that the high-toned syllable is not functioning as a restructuring device to break consonant clusters either in the traditional approach of deriving gerunds by partial reduplication or the account of deriving gerunds via consonant prefixation. The new approach proposed in Eleshin’s work which I support is the claim that Yorùbá gerunds are derived through high toned prefix *í-*. This radical approach is more revealing and is supported by language-internal evidence and has explanatory adequacy over the other two approaches. The word formation process involving prefixation in the language almost always involves vowels as a prefix. The only difference between the earlier well-established vowel prefixes and the one herein being presented is that the earlier prefixes either bear a mid or low tone. In this new case, this prefix is unique in two respects. First, it is a vowel prefix with a high tone: *í*. Second, it derives only a set of nouns referred to as gerunds. On how this is accounted for, Eleshin shows that the process involves prefixing *í-* to a verb such as *jẹ* ‘eat’ which gives *í-jẹ*, a form that is not

attested in the language since vowel initial nouns do not bear a high tone on that initial vowel.<sup>3</sup> What Eleshin proposed is that to get out of the phonotactic constraint imposed by the grammar of the language, it is imperative to apply an augmentative theory that enforces the provision of a consonant that will restructure the ill-formed *íjẹ*. The only consonant that is available within the word is *j* which is copied to that initial position to derive *jíjẹ*. This goes with all gerunds which form a class of derived nouns.

The advantage of this new approach is enormous. First, it shows that the presence of *í-* goes beyond phonological consideration as argued by Alderete et. al. (1999). Its correct account is in the realm of the morphological domain. In other words, the presence of the high-toned *í-* goes beyond phonological restructuring as canvassed for in the partial reduplication approach. By contrast, it is very central to the derivation of gerunds in the language. In this way, this word-formation by prefixation is unique and distinct from others. In other words, what gives the gerundive meaning is the *í-* prefix rather than the consonant by partial reduplication or the claim that consonant functions as a prefix.

### §3 Grammatical Particles in Verbal Domain

Three types of high-toned syllables have been identified in Standard Yorùbá; one that is found in gerunds which I have treated as a prefix-*í*. The second is found immediately after the subject NP which will be treated as a non-future marker in section 3.1, and the third that is found immediately after certain verbs which I am going to treat as an infinitive marker in section 3.2. I treat the last two in the two sub-sections below.

#### §3.1 High-toned Syllable-2 as a non-future tense marker

The issue of the high-toned syllable (HTS) that occurs immediately after the Subject noun has been a subject of debate for decades (cf. Awoyale 1991: 193-221); Odunuga (982: 264-276). The subject of discussion centers on the form and function of the element.

As to its form, there are two claims. On the one hand, is the claim that HTS has no phonological content. As such, it has an underlying representation of  $\acute{V}$  with its underlying high tone; however, at the level of pronunciation, it takes the segmental features of the final vowel of the subject NP.

- (7) a. [Èbùn]  $\acute{V}$       wà fún mi      There is a gift for me/There are gifts for me.  
       E.    HTS    be for me  
       Èbùn ún...
- b. [Èbùn púpò]  $\acute{V}$       wà fún mi      There are many gifts for me.  
       E       many   HTS    be for me  
       Èbùn púpò ó...

The other claim is that the HTS is the front vowel *í* and it obligatorily assimilates the phonetic features of the preceding vowel as illustrated in (8).

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<sup>3</sup> Compare this with *ì-* prefix which can derive, *ì-lù* ‘drum’ from *lù* ‘to beat’. This form is allowed since non-derived words like *ìgbà* ‘time’, *ìwé* ‘book’ also have this low-toned initial vowels.

- (8) a. [Èbùn] í wà fún mi There is a gift for me/There are gifts for me.  
 E. HTS be for me  
 Èbùn ún...
- b. [Èbùn púpò] í wà fún mi There are many gifts for me.  
 E many HTS be for me  
 Èbùn púpò ọ́...

I adopt the second view because there is a good explanation for that. The first approach that proposes an underlying V with no phonological content has no basis to assimilate the features of a neighboring vowel. By contrast, the second view which adopts *í* as the underlying representation has a place to account for its surface form it meets both descriptive and explanatory adequacy. For instance, for the rule of assimilation to take place, there should be two segments involved in this case, two adjacent vowels: that of the final vowel of the noun and the HTS *í*. This is the descriptive adequacy: V1#V2. When the assimilation rule applies, the output is V1 V1.

As to its distribution, it has been established in the literature that the HTS has the restriction of occurring only after the subject noun (common or personal) and logophoric pronouns (9a-b) but not after clitic pronouns or before negation element (7c-d).

- (9) a. Ojà á tà ní Òyìngbò There is good sales in Oyingbo.  
 Market HTS sell P O.
- b. Èmi ín wá I came.  
 1SG LOG come
- c. \*Mo ọ́ wá
- d. \*Ojà á kò tà ní Òyìngbò

The ungrammaticality in (9c-d) demands some inquiry. What explanation can anyone provide for its non-alliance with the short pronouns and the negation element. I address these two issues in 3.3.

As to the function of this grammatical particle, I align with grammarians who treat it as a non-future tense marker which can be interpreted as either a present or past tense depending on the verb that it marks for tense (Afolayan 1982).

- (10) a. Èbùn ún lọ b. Èbùn ún dé  
 E HTS go E HTS arrive  
 'Èbùn went.' 'Èbùn arrives/arrived.'

### §3.2 High-toned Syllable-3 as Infinitive Marker

The third type of HTS in Yorùbá grammar is found immediately after certain verbs. The verbs that host this element are *fẹ́* 'want', *wá* 'come', *dùn* 'sweet', etc. This grammatical particle whose underlying representation is also the front high vowel *í* marks the verb that precedes them for infinitive (cf. Awoyale 1983:81).

- (11)a. Mo fẹ́ í rí ẹ́ > Mo fẹ́ ẹ́ rí ẹ́ I want **to** see you.  
 1sg see HTS see 2sg
- b. Adé wá í bè ẹ́ > Adé wá á bè ẹ́ Ade came **to** beg you  
 A. come HTS beg 2sg
- c. Owó dùn í ná > Owó dùn ún ná Money is easy to spend  
 money sweet HTS spend

As one can also see, the HTS has *í* as its underlying form just like its counterpart found immediately after the subject NP.

Note that infinitive marking is also reflected with *láti*, and it can be used in place of the HTS.

- (12)a. Mo fẹ́<sup>4</sup> láti rí ẹ́ I want **to** see you.  
 b. Adé wá láti bè ẹ́ Ade came **to** beg you

Note also that certain verbs cannot take the infinitive HTS; instead, *láti* is the only available option.

- (13)a-i. Mo gbà láti rí ẹ́. I agree to see you.  
 1sg accept INF see 2sg
- a-ii. \*Mo gbà á rí ẹ́.
- b-i. Mo ẹ́ tán láti rí ẹ́ I am ready to see you  
 1sg do finish INF see 2sg
- b-ii. \*Mo ẹ́ tán án rí ẹ́

I try to understand what accounts for the ungrammaticality of the examples in (13a-ii and b-ii). One way to look at it from a phonological perspective is to suggest that since the verb *gbà* bears a low tone, it cannot be followed by the infinitive marker whose form is the HTS, thus disobeying the Obligatory Contour Principle (OCP). But this claim has no language-internal evidence because examples like *Mo gbà á* 'I accept it' is allowed. That is not all, how about the example in (13b-ii) where the verb ends in a high tone (cf. *fẹ́*) but which disallows the HTS infinitive marker? This also indicates that there are only a few infinitive verbs in the language.

### §3.3 Absence of HTS with Short Pronouns: An Innovation

Contrary to what is obtainable in Standard Yorùbá above, evidence from some dialects of Yorùbá shows that one of those contexts where the presence of the HTS that marks non-future tense is prohibited in SY is allowed in those dialects. It is essential to show why there is a dichotomy between long and short pronouns in SY and go further to see if there is evidence to the contrary in any of its dialects. In what follows, I present data from two dialects of Yorùbá, namely Mòbà

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<sup>4</sup> Note that there is *fẹ́* 'marry' which cannot take either of these infinitive markers.

(i) Mo ti fẹ́ iyàwó tuntun (ii) \*Mo ti fẹ́ ẹ́/láti iyàwó tuntun.  
 I have married a new wife

and Ìgbómìnà which show the presence of the HTS after short pronouns. First, are the examples from Mòbà in (14).

- |      |    |                  |     |      |  |     |                         |     |      |
|------|----|------------------|-----|------|--|-----|-------------------------|-----|------|
| (14) | a. | Mì               | ín  | á    |  | a'. | Mi                      | kè  | á    |
|      |    | 1SG              | HTS | come |  |     | 1SG                     | NEG | come |
|      |    | I come/came      |     |      |  |     | I did not return/arrive |     |      |
|      | b. | Ò                | ó   | á    |  | b'. | Ọ                       | kè  | á    |
|      |    | 2SG              | HTS | come |  |     | 2SG                     | NEG | come |
|      |    | You come/came    |     |      |  |     | You did not come        |     |      |
|      | c. | É                | (è) | á    |  | c'. | ---                     | Kè  | á    |
|      |    | 3SG              | HTS | come |  |     |                         | Neg |      |
|      |    | S/he comes/came. |     |      |  |     | She did not come        |     |      |
|      | d. | Àn               | án  | á    |  | d'. | An                      | kè  | á    |
|      |    | 3PL              | HTS | come |  |     | 3PL                     | NEG | come |
|      |    | They come/came   |     |      |  |     | They did not come       |     |      |

In (15) below, I show parallel examples from Ìgbómìnà<sup>5</sup>.

- |      |    |               |     |      |  |     |                  |     |      |
|------|----|---------------|-----|------|--|-----|------------------|-----|------|
| (15) | a. | Mò            | o/ó | ghá  |  | a'. | Me               | è   | ghá  |
|      |    | 1SG           | HTS | come |  |     | 1SG              | NEG | come |
|      |    | I come/came   |     |      |  |     | I did not come   |     |      |
|      | b. | Ò             | o/ó | ghá  |  | b'. | Ọ                | ò   | ghá  |
|      |    | 2SG           | HTS | come |  |     | 2SG              | NEG | come |
|      |    | You come/came |     |      |  |     | You did not come |     |      |
|      | c. | Ó             | ó   | ghá  |  | c'. | é                | è   | ghá  |
|      |    | 3SG           | HTS | come |  |     | 3SG              | NEG | come |
|      |    | S/he/it came  |     |      |  |     | She did not come |     |      |

The Ìgbómìnà examples are at par with Mòbà concerning the presence of the HTS after the short pronouns. The difference is that an intra-dialect variation exists in Ìgbómìnà as some render the HTS as MTS. As for the third person, with this fact of Mòbà and Ìgbómìnà, one can assume that the absence of the HTS after subject clitic in SY is an innovation. This calls for studies of other dialects to see if others go along with Mòbà. It is there and then the absence of the HTS in SY may have an adequate and correct explanation.

### §3.5 A recap on the form of grammatical particles

The grammatical particles presented in §2 and 3 are unique in one principal way, namely its underlying representation which is *i*. The significance of the front high vowel in SY cannot be overemphasized. In all the known phonological processes, assimilation, deletion, coalescence,

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Dr Awolayo of Federal University of Education, Oñdó from whom I elicited the data.

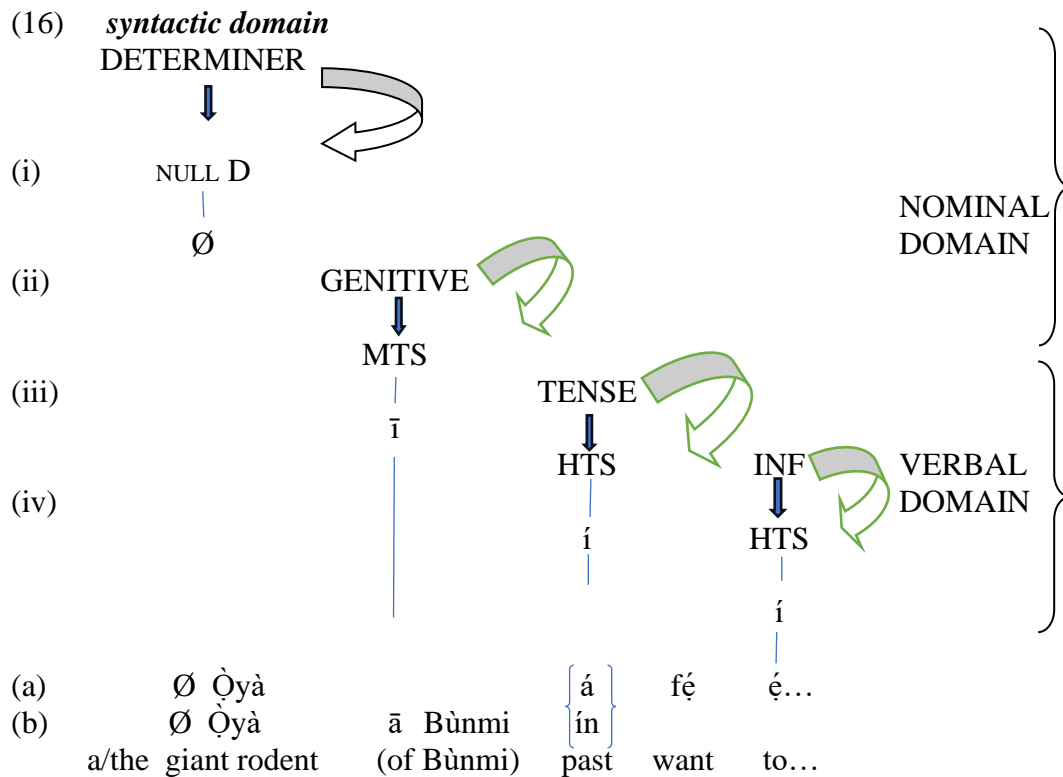


and epenthesis it features prominently either as the undergoer (one that is susceptible to change) or the target (one that survives). For assimilation and coalescence, there is no exception to the rule. For example, whenever vowel *i* is adjacent to another vowel within a word e.g. *àíké* or across word boundary, e.g. *ilé iwé*, it is this vowel that loses its feature to the other vowel; this yields *àáké* and *iléwé* respectively. That is what played out in all the grammatical particles presented in the two sections except the high-toned prefix *í-*.

#### §4 Architecture and Form of Grammatical Particles

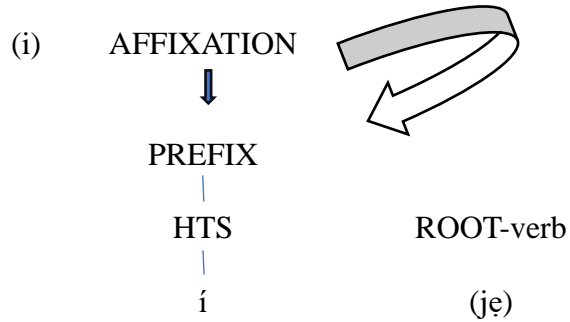
This section presents the architecture of the form of the grammatical particles discussed in the previous sections of the squib. The five particles are divided into two based on the domain where they are located.

The first class falls under the syntactic domain and there are four of them. The D particle which is null. Next is the genitive particle, the phonological form of which is the mid-toned *ī*. This element undergoes an obligatory assimilation of the phonetic features of the preceding vowel. The last two particles, namely the non-future tense and the infinitive also have *i* with a high tone which also undergoes obligatory vowel assimilation rule.

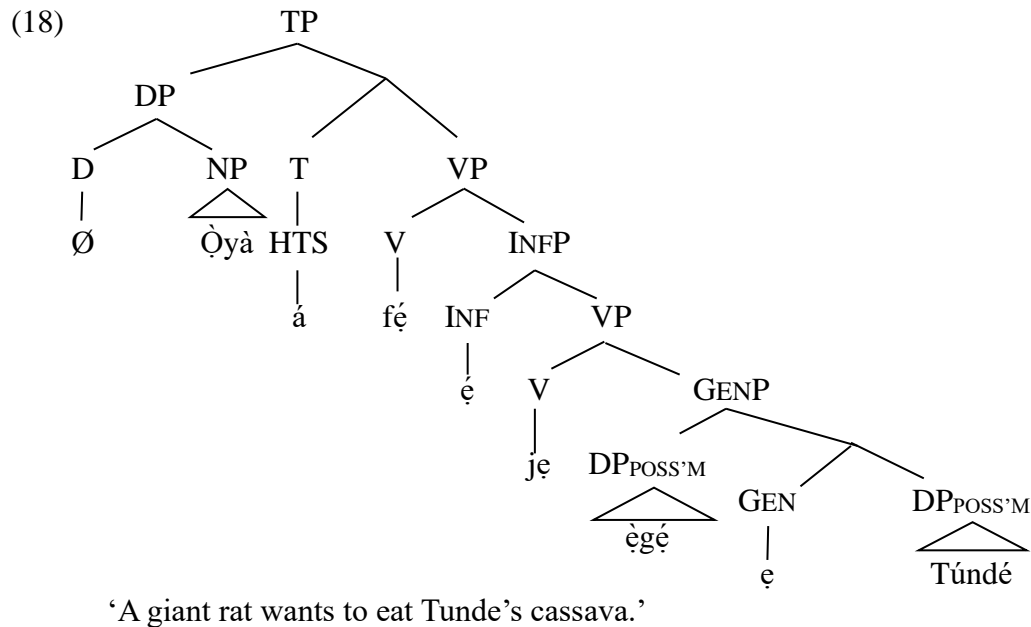


The second class found in the morphological domain consists of one grammatical particle which functions as a nominalizer prefix. First, as already illustrated, it has the same form with the tense and infinitive markers *í* and second, it is the only high-toned prefix morpheme in the language. Third, it is the only entity that does not undergo any phonological change. This is so because it is nominalizer prefix morpheme.

(17) *morphological domain*



A recap of the discussion in this paper concerning the grammatical particles whose phonological content has been in doubt in the language establishes one fact; there is only one grammatical particle that does not have its form, and that is the determiner. As for the remaining four, they are unique in the sense that *i* is their form with one of them in the morphological domain while the other three are found in the syntactic environment. The syntactic structure in (18) summarizes the discussions.



**§5 Conclusion**

This squib has presented two types of grammatical elements in Yorùbá which are (a) the phonological null D that marks a bare count noun as in(definite), generic, or plural in appropriate discourse contexts and the *i* element that falls into two: the mid-toned *i* that heads a genitive phrase and the high-toned *i*. The high-toned *i* discussed also splits into two: the high-toned prefix that derives gerunds and the other that functions as a tense or infinitive marker. This established that the form of all the grammatical elements with phonological content is *i*. I want to conclude the paper with a call on Yorùbá language instructors and teachers to begin to teach these

grammatical particles in the classroom and encourage reflecting them in the writing system as their semantic significance cannot be ignored especially for L2 of the language.

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