

Is “ai” a Unitary or Separate Morpheme?

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Abstract:

Yorubá is one of the major languages spoken in Nigeria alongside Hausa and Igbo. It has enjoyed extensive research works from both native and non-native authors in virtually all the sub-fields of linguistics. However, there are areas of disagreement among scholars, one of which is the status of the negative maker "ai" as a morpheme or two morphemes. This argument, among other reasons, prompted this paper. Albeit, Oye (2007) argues that negative marker /ai/ is a morpheme while Awobuluyi (2005), Adewole (1992) Solomon (1983) and Olumuyiwa (2006) have a contrary opinion, they claim that the negative prefix marker /ai/ is two morphemes. In this paper, we shall examine the arguments of Yoruba scholars on the negative prefix marker /ai/ as to whether it a unitary morpheme or two separate morphemes. We shall argue in this paper, that the morpheme /i/ has two variants; one is a nominal prefix while the other is a negative marker and the variants are in complementary distribution. We shall also show in this paper that /a/ is a nominal prefix while /i/ is the negative marker in support of the earlier scholars that claim that /ai/ is two morphemes.

Keywords:

morpheme, nominal prefix, negative prefix, complimentary distribution

I. Introduction

Yorubá is one of the major languages spoken in Nigeria alongside Hausa and Igbo. It has enjoyed extensive research works from both native and non-native authors in virtually all the sub-fields of linguistics. However, there are areas of disagreement among scholars, one of which is the status of the negative maker "ai" as a morpheme or two morphemes.

This argument, among other reasons, prompted this paper presentation. Albeit, Oye(2007) argues that negative marker /ai/ is a morpheme while Awobuluyi (2005), Adewole (1992) Solomon (1983) and Olumuyiwa (2006) have a contrary opinion, they claim that the negative prefix marker /ai/ is two morphemes.

In this paper, we shall examine the arguments of Yoruba scholars on the negative prefix marker /ai/ as to whether it a unitary morpheme or two separate morphemes. We shall argue in this paper, that the morpheme /i/ has two variants; one is a nominal prefix while the other is a negative marker and the variants are in complementary distribution.

We shall also show in this paper that /a/ is a nominal prefix while i/ is the negative marker in support of the earlier scholars that claim that /ai/ is two morphemes.

There are controversies among Yoruba scholars on the status of the prefix negative marker /ai/.Some scholars argue that the negative prefix marker /ai/ is a unitary morpheme and should be treated as one indivisible morpheme rather than two separate morphemes (see Bambose 1990, Salawu 1998, 2001, Oye 2007) among others. While other scholars are of the

opinion that the prefix negative marker /a/ is two separate morphemes (see Adewole 1992, Solomon 1983, Olumuyiwa 2006 & Awobuluyi 2005) among others.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 The status of /ai/ in Nominal Expressions

The discussion here splits into two: In 2.1, the attention is on the arguments of Awobuluyi (2005) with evidences to support his claims that /ai/ are two separate morphemes. In 2.2, the focus is on the arguments of Oye (2007) with evidences to support his claims that /ai/ is a unitary morpheme.

a. Ai as Two Separate Morphemes

Awobuluyi (2005) argues that the morpheme /ai/ consists of two morphemes

a - nominalising morpheme

i -negative marker

As in:

/alo/" the act of going" la-i-lo/ "the act of not going"

He claims that, if we compare /lo/ with /alo/, it becomes clear that /alo/ can be divided as shown below:

1. (a) lo

(b) a-lo

/lo/ cannot be divided and it has the meaning "going from one place to another". As a result, it is a morpheme. In the same vein, /a/ cannot be further divided and it has the semantic "happening". Therefore /a/ is a morpheme in its own right. He explain that if we compare /alo/ with /ailo/, it becomes clear that the morphemes can be broken down as shown below:

2. (a) a-lo

(b) a-i-lo

There is no difference between /lo/ in 1(a, b) and the /lo/ in 2(a, b) because they all have the same semantic; also /a/ in 1(b) and 2(a, b) have the same semantic, however, /alo/ and /ailo/ do not have the same semantic, while /alo/ means "going", /ailo/ means "the act of not going", now the question is, what marks negation in /ailo/? We already know that, /lo/ means "to go" and /alo/ means "the act of going". The only morpheme left is /i/ which invariably marks negation in

3. (a) a-lo

(b) a-i-lo

He also claims that if truly /ai/ is a unitary morpheme as other group of scholars would want us to believe, then it will not be possible for the prefix negative marker /ai/ to be divided by another morpheme, for instance, all Yoruba scholars considered /lo/ as a morpheme and there are no instances where /lo/ is separated by another morpheme. But it is not true with /ai/; there are many instances where it is separated by another morpheme as shown below:

4. (a) a-je-i-je-tan-----> ajejetan

(b) a-bu-i-bu-tan -----> abuubutan

(c) a-kuku-i-bi -----> akukuubi

Assimilation in the examples changes /i/ to /e & u/. It is evident in the examples that /je/, /bu/ and /kuku/ separated /ai/ into two. The division of /ai/ into two morphemes by other morphemes as shown in the examples is enough evidence to show that /ai/ is not a unitary

morpheme but two separate morphemes.

He further claims that /i/ behaves like /ba/ that is also dependent on /ti/ and /bi/ as in

(a) Bi/Ti Tope o ba de mi o nii lo.

* (b) Tope o ba de mi o nii lo.

We should not consider (ai) as a unitary morpheme in as much we cannot consider (bi/ti) with (ba) as a morpheme; therefore we cannot consider or we should not consider /ai/ as a morpheme.

b. Ai as One-Morpheme

Oye (2007) argues against the claim of Awobuluyi (2005) he asserts that lai/ should be treated as one indivisible morpheme rather than two separate morphemes. He argues that /a/ cannot be prefixed to a number of verbs as it is to lo/ in /alo? the act of going". He presents the following to support his positions.

- | | | | |
|----|------|---------------|---------------------|
| 5. | San | "become well" | a+san -----> *asan |
| | Gbon | "be wise" | a+gbon ----->*agbon |
| | Ku | "to die" | a+ku ----->*aku |

Based on these examples, he considered /ail as a single morpheme because it gives grammatical and meaningful utterances as in:

- | | | |
|----|---------------------|------------------|
| 6. | ai+san -----aisan | "sickness" |
| | ai+gbon -----aigbon | "lack of wisdom" |
| | ai+ku -----aiku | "immortal" |

Another point raised in Oye's work is the status of /i/ in structures such as:

- | | | | |
|----|----|--------------|--------------------|
| 7. | a. | Ojo ti i lo? | "Has ojo gone?" |
| | b. | Ojo ko i lo | "Ojo has not gone" |

Oye claims that /i/ in /ojo ti i lo/ is a question marker but fails to comment on the status of the morpheme in /ojo ko i lo/ Other points raised in Oye's work are:

that /i/ should not be seen as a morpheme whose occurrence depends on the presence of /a/, as in:

- | | |
|--------|------------|
| ai-san | "sickness" |
| ai-ku | "immortal" |

Oye (2007) also claims that no segment can be inserted between the morpheme /ai/ as shown in the examples below:

- | | |
|----|-----------------|
| 8. | a-je -i - jetan |
| | a-bu-i- butan |
| | a-kuku-i-bi |

He argues that /i/ in these examples is the relic of /ai/ arising from the deletion of /a/ as in:

- | |
|-------------------------------|
| a-je-ai--jetan----->ajeijetan |
| a-bu-ai-butan----->abuibutan |
| a-kuku-ai-bi-----> akukuibi |

III. Results and Discussion

3.1 My Position and Findings

The discussion here splits into two: In **3.1**, the attention is on my position of the status of /ai/ in response to the claims of Awobuluyi (2005) and Oye (2007). In **3.2**, the attention is on the status of /i/ as a nominal marker and a negative marker; showing the environment in which they occur.

a. My Position

My stance on Oye's work is that his arguments and positions are not adequate enough. For instance, his rejection of Awobuluyi's claim that /a/ cannot be prefixed to some verbs does not constitute a serious argument in our view. It is not always true that a prefix will collocate with all the lexical items in a given lexical class. For instance the prefix /oni/ "ownership" collocates with nouns but not with all kinds of nouns as shown below:

Oni+werewere-----oniwerewere
Oni+wuruwuru-----oniwuruwuru

But not,

Oni+kiakia
Oni+werewere
Oni+jeje

On his second point, it is difficult to see how /i/ in /Ojo ti i de/ becomes a question marker but not a question marker in /Ojo ko i de/. Oye overlooked the /i/ in **7b** because his position, that it is a question marker in **9a** is questionable.

On this position i agreed with Awobuluyi claims that /ai/ is a two separate morpheme; not only did i agree with Awobuluyi's claims but i also provided examples to support my claims that /ai/ is two morphemes.

9. (a) a-la-1-la-tan ----->alaalatan
(b) a-mu-i-mu-tan -----> amuumutan
(c) a-ka-i-ka-tan-----> akaakatan

Assimilation changes /i/ to /a/ and /u/ in the examples above; we can also see from the examples above that morpheme /ai/ cannot be a morpheme because it has violated one of the criteria in determining a morpheme in a word that states that "a morpheme cannot be divided into smaller grammatical unit without altering its meaning". In as much we can divide /ai/ into /a/ and /i/, and both have semantic that suggests to us that, they are two separate morphemes with different independent meaning; Oye's position that the prefix negative marker /ai/ is a unitary morpheme fails to put Yoruba dialects into consideration; for instance some dialects of the Yoruba use /i/ in their negative construction as shown in Oluji, a dialect of Ondo.

10. a. Se ojo ti i lo "Ojo hasn't gone"
b. Tope ti i seun "Tope hasn't eaten"
c. Bola ti i sun "Bola hasn't sleep"

In sentence 10(a-c) the morpheme /i/ marks negation without the presence of /a/. These rules out Oye's claims that the nominalising morpheme /a/ cannot do without the presence of the negative marker /i/

b. /i/ as a Nominal Prefix and a Negative Marker

The morpheme /i/ has two variants; one is a nominal prefix while the other is a negative marker and the variants are in complementary distribution as shown below:

11. a. i-fe----> ife “love”
b. i-gbagbo---> igbagbo "faith"
c. i-mon-----> imon “knowledge”
d. i- la-----> ila “line”
e. i- gbadun ----->igbadun “ejoyment”

The morpheme /i/ if prefixed to the root words changes the root words from verbs to nouns. It functions as a derivational morpheme through a process known as prefixation whereas its variant /i/ negates as shown below

12. (a) a-la-i-la-tan -----> alaalatan
(b) a-mu-i-mu-tan -----> amuumutan
(c) a-ka-i-ka-tan -----> akaakatan

What I observed from **11** and **12** is that the morpheme /i/ is in complementary distribution, that is, where one occurs the other does not. In **11** it is prefixed to the root words and it performs a nominal function whereas in **12** it is inserted between the root words through a morphological process known as interfixation. This explains further that the morpheme /ai/ is a separate morpheme and not a unitary morpheme as the first school of thought would want us to believe.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, the possibility of the morpheme /ai/ being separable, taken along with the other pieces of evidence, suggests to us that the morpheme should be analyzed as two separate morphemes until further evidence based on in-depth studies or research proves otherwise; therefore the morpheme is a separate morpheme. I also provide evidence to support the thought that the morpheme /ai/ is a separate morpheme by arguing that /i/ functions as a negative marker and as a nominal prefix. And the variants are in complementary distribution. In other words, they are mutually exclusive of one another. This validates my support for the school of thought that the morpheme /ai/ is a separable morpheme.

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