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Prepositions in Igálà*

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Abstract

Previous studies on Igala grammar are unanimous on the claim that the language employs body parts, place nouns, and certain verbs as prepositions. This study questions the claim from both syntactic and semantic points of view and argues to the contrary that the items analysed as body parts and/or place prepositions are N1 spatial nouns in an [N1 N2] genitive phrase complement of preposition in a structural context where the preposition head is phonetically spelt-out null in the syntax. Given its exclusive locative-goal denotation, the paper argues that *tú* in contexts like *tú unyí un* 'to his/her house' is a lexicalization of preposition in Igálà.

Keywords: preposition; spatial nouns; null-head; syntax; semantics.

*Igálà is a Benue-Congo language classified under Yoruboid subgroup of Defoid languages. It is natively spoken mainly in Kogi State in Nigeria.

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1. Introduction

Preposition (P henceforth) is a word category which expresses the concept of location, direction, time, space, instrument, etc. in relation to the state or event denoted by predicate in clause construction. Semantically, it denotes relations such as locality, temporality, causality, and modality between elements (Bussman 1998: 934). It codes the relation between the predicate and its preposition phrase (PP) or adverbial phrase complement by locating the event or state denoted by the predicate in time and space in relation to the P complement. By so doing, preposition mediates between the verb's denotation and that of the argument complement of P (Saint-Dizier 2006:12). One crucial syntactic/semantic property of P is that it obligatorily selects or subcategorizes for nominal complement to project (PP). The denotation of the nominal complement of P then serves as the locus or realization point of the P-function/feature. (1a) to (1e) are English clause examples illustrating the realization of the P-feature/function in the nominal complement.

- 1a. Jane put her bag *in* the car. (Space/Location)
- b. Jane put her things *on* the table. (Space/Location)
- c. Jane would be going *to* Lagos *on* Monday.
(Goal/Direction; Time)
- d. Jane would return *before* evening. (Time)
- e. The legislators were attacked *with* guns. (Instrument)

In clause architecture, PP may show up as a verb phrase (VP) internal adverbial adjunct, as in (1), or a modifying adjunct to noun (N) within noun phrase (NP). For instance, the English phrase *of you* in (2) is a PP modifier to the nominal *four*.

- 2. Four *of you* should see me.

Generally, the internal structure of PP varies within limits in natural languages. It may show up either as a pre/post-positional phrase depending relatively on whether a language is head-first or head-last. For instance, Igálà is a head-first language and is by implication expected to attest pre-position phrase structure. On the other hand, a language like Japanese is head-last and thus attests to post-positional phrase projections, as in example (3).

3. Nihon *ni* (Space/Location)
 Japan in
 ‘in Japan’

There are also other languages such as Dutch and German which have both postposition and preposition phrases, as illustrated in (4) and (5).

Dutch:

4a. *op* de tafel *Preposition*
 ‘on the table’

b. de berg *op* *Postposition*
 the mountain on
 ‘onto/up the mountain’

c. *op* iemand *af* komen *Preposition*
 on someone from come *and Postposition*
 ‘come towards someone’

(Koopman 1993:4)

German:

5a. *mit* einer Frau *Preposition*
 ‘with one woman’

- b. Hans geht den Fluss *etlang* *Postposition*
Hans goes the river along
'Hans goes along the river.'
(Radford 1997:27)

2. Igala Prepositions

Two groups of prepositions are recorded for Igala in the literature. The first is the group of body and place prepositions of which Omachonu (2011:27) remarked:

... it is difficult to find words which function primarily as prepositions in Igala. Hence, the language resorts to using nouns, especially parts of the body as prepositions

Therefore, the idea canvassed in earlier works (see also Atadoga 2011: 95-96; Ikani 2011:168) is that the language lacks prepositions of the English types but remedied that lack by using body parts or place nouns to relate predicates to location, goal/direction, time, space, etc.. Word items in this category are those highlighted in (5a-i).

- 5a. Ì dẹ éjú ọ̀nà
 3sg be eye road
 'He/She/It is on the road.'
- b. Ọ̀tá kádà un dẹ ọ́jì íchéà
 Book 3sg be head chair
 'His/her book is on the chair.'
- c. Ù gwẹ ùkpò éfù ómi
 1sg wash cloth stomach water
 'I washed clothes inside the water.'

- d. Óbúkà mi dẹ ùbì únyí lẹ
 Kitchen my be back house the
 ‘My kitchen is at the back of the house.’
- e. Ma á che íya ódódá únyí ma
 3pl Prog do play outside house 3pl
 ‘They are playing outside their house.’
- f. Éwẹ á wu àtẹ ọmọ
 Bird prog fly above there
 ‘The bird is flying over there.’
- g. Éwó dẹ ófẹ àtẹ
 Goat be under bed
 ‘The goat is under the bed.’
- h. Ì á dágo ọwọ áwótọ
 3sg prog stand hand right
 ‘S/he is standing on the right side.’
- i. Ì lẹ ùlẹ étí òhìmìnì
 3sg walk walk side sea
 ‘She/he walked by the sea side.’

The second group consists of words usually referred to as *verbal prepositions* in Igala grammar. These are so-called because they are regarded as verbs which also function as preposition, thereby forming part of what has been termed the repair strategies employed by the language to make up for her lack of concise prepositions. Word items in this category are those highlighted in (6) and (7).

6.a. Íye mi kwô¹ ájá (cf. *íye mi ájá)
 Mother my leave market
 ‘My mother came from the market.’

b. Ù kw’ájá (kwô ájá) (cf. *Ù ájá)
 1sg leave-market
 ‘I came from the market.’

7.a. Óma mi chukóló nwú ónú
 Child my do-work give king
 ‘My child worked for the king.’

b. Mu du nwú un
 take-3sg carry give 3sg
 ‘Take it to him/her.’ / ‘take it and give it to him/her.’

c. Àtá wẹ du ókó nwú ma
 Father your take money give them
 ‘Your father gave them money.’

1. This item is a shortened form of *kwúlò* as evident in Ìbàjí dialect which uses *kwúlò* in contexts where *kwô* is used in Central/Standard Igala. An anonymous reviewer demanded information on what informs the use of the shortened form in contrast to the full form thereby suggesting a possible morphological decomposition of *kwúlò* as *kwú/kwó* (V) + *lò* (P). Our humble opinion however is that *kwúlò* is an indivisible free morpheme in Igala and *kwô* is a fast speech product of that morpheme in which the contiguous vowel /u/ and consonant /l/ in *kwúlò* are deleted paving way for the high tone on /u/ to align with the low tone of the vowel /ò/ to derive the /ô/ in *kwô*. This to us is a plausible account because the meaning of each of the proposed morphemes in *kwúlò* (i.e. *kwú* ‘to die’ and *lo* ‘to go’) does not have any semantic import in the logical interpretation of *kwúlò* ‘to leave’.

d. Ì fu che nwú ma
 3sg take-it do give/for them
 ‘S/he did it for them.’

The crux of the matter addressed in this paper therefore is whether these two groups of word items highlighted in (5), (6), and (7) truly function as preposition especially when considered in the light of the syntactic and semantic structures of the clause contexts where they show up.

2.1. Body Parts and Place Prepositions

Classifying some items as body part and place prepositions in Igala is not unconnected with the fact that each of the words in question has two English translation equivalents which belong to two separate syntactic categories, i.e. noun and preposition. For instance, *éfi* could literally mean ‘head (i.e. the part of the body above the neck)’ classified as noun or ‘inside (i.e. on/to the inner part of something)’ classified as locative preposition in English. Interestingly, the fact that a particular type of word in a language syntactically/semantically qualifies as preposition does not make the same type of item a preposition in another. We therefore investigate the syntax and semantic denotations of Igala body and place prepositions to ascertain the veracity of the claim about them.

2.1.1. The Syntax

A careful look at the syntactic behavior of words analysed as body/place prepositions in Igala shows that their syntax is contrary to the claim made about them in the literature. The items syntactically behave as spatial and location nouns consistently, even in contexts where they are regarded as P. They occur as independent noun heads in both nominative and accusative argument positions as evident in (8).

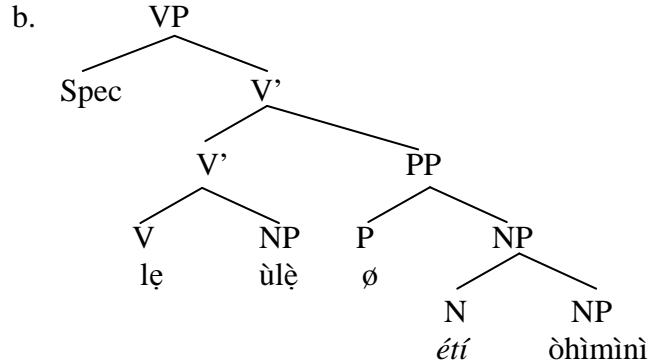
8a. *Étí lójúlùbì* mi á wọ mi
 Ear/eye/back my prog pain me
 ‘My ear/eye/back hurts.’

b. Aládi kp’umi *étí lójúlùbì*
 Aladi beat-me ear/eye/back
 ‘Aladi slapped me.’/
 ‘Aladi hit me on the eye/back.’

c. ì kpu *étí lójúlùbì* mi
 3sg beat ear/eye/back 1sg-gen
 ‘S/he hit my ear/eye/back.’/
 ‘S/he hit me on the eye/back.’

A careful study of the constituent structure of clauses where they are said to function as preposition, e.g. (5a-i), shows that the smallest structural unit where they show up is a noun phrase complement of a phonetically null but syntactically and semantically present P head inside the VP. This observation suggests a PP syntax of the type in (9a&b) which are a partial structural representation of (5c) and (5i).

9a. Û gwẹ ùkpò [PP [P ∅] [NP [N *éfù* ómi]]]



In (9a) the null locative P, \emptyset , relates the event denoted by V *gwẹ* ‘to wash’ to the location *éfù ómi* ‘inside water’ where the event took place. The earlier analysis which claims that *éfù* in this context is a locative P does not seem to take cognizance of the fact that *éfù ómi* is a genitive [N₁ N₂] noun phrase where N₁ is associated with N₂. The same explanation is applicable to *étí òhìmìni* ‘beside/side-of the river’ and others in examples (5a-i)².

One possible counter argument that could be put forward here is to claim that a word can perform two or more different syntactic functions. As such, it could be argued that each of the word items in question functions exclusively as preposition in contexts like (5a-i) but as noun in other contexts such as (7a). As a matter of fact, Ikani (2011) claims that each of the items in question is polysemous because the two meanings ascribed to each of them are related in some sense. While this appears like a valid argument, such consideration is not supported by the semantics of the items in question which requires each of them to have two separate senses or be recorded as separate lexemes in the lexicon.

2.1.2. The Semantics

The lexical semantic fields of these Igala body parts and place prepositions are two: space and location. Spatial items as the term implies denote space. They are mostly common nouns with the semantic denotation of *the set of x such that x is a space in relation to a location y*. For instance, *òfé* denotes ‘space under/beneath/below/bottom of y’, *éfù* denotes ‘space inside of y’, while *àtẹ* is that ‘space above of y’.

Location/locative items on the other hand denote particular entities in the real/imaginary world referring to some kind of

2. See Owolabi (1976) for discussions on the various types of genitive constructions.

location, e.g. *ójí* ‘head’, *ùbì* ‘back’, *ọwọ* ‘side’, *étí* ‘side/beside of x’, *’ódódá* ‘outside’. The semantic denotation of this group is *the set of x such that x is a location in relation to another location y* (e.g. *x* is a location within *y*). For instance *ójí* ‘head’ *ítébùlù* ‘table’ would be semantically interpreted as a location *x* (*ójí*) in relation to another location *y* (*ítébùlù*). What this signals is an associative genitive semantic relation between *x* and *y*. If this observation is anything to go by, then, expressions like *ójí* *ítébùlù* ‘literal: head of (the) table / table head’/ ‘logically: on the table’ cannot be a PP but a noun-noun construction as genitive constructions are a type of nominal phrase not PP.

One piece of English language based semantic evidence that supports our claim here is in the fact that the English spatial item *inside* has more than one semantic senses and interestingly, one of the usage senses is that of a noun meaning ‘the inner part, side or surface of something’³. This precisely is the semantic sense of Igala *éfù* in contexts like (5c) where earlier studies glossed it as P *inside*, as the semantic interpretation *éfù* there signals ‘the (space) inside of *ómi*’ (cf. *éfù ámọ* ‘inside of *ámọ* (the earthen pot)’. Ikani’s (2011:168) observation seems to align with this position of ours when he said:

The word *étí* here connotes ear, or edge of something while *éfù* connotes stomach or inside of something.

The problem that leads to the mix-up in the interpretation of these items as preposition in previous works is that Igala like other Yoruboid languages, but unlike English and probably other Germanic languages, does not lexicalize the semantic concept of *space* as preposition but rather as noun in the syntax.

3. See *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* (7th Edition).

For instance, *éfù* ‘inside, stomach’ is consistently lexicalized as noun in (10a) and (10b).

10a. *Éfù* mi á wọ mi
Stomach my prog pain me
‘My stomach is paining me.’

b. Ma lè tú *éfù* (→ *téfù*) unyí lè
3pl go loc inside house def
‘They went inside the house.’

It is evidently clear that the P in (10b) is not the noun *éfù* ‘inside’ but the locative item *tú*. English on her part lexicalizes the same concept of space as both preposition and noun, depending on the context of use. For example, the concept is lexicalized as preposition in (11a) and as noun in (11b).

11a. They went *inside* the house. *Preposition*
b. The *inside* of the bag was black *Noun*

2.1.3. Implications

The syntax of Igala spatial and location items is quite revealing, not only because it follows from their semantics but also because the items actually function in the same structural form as space and location complement or locus point for the realization of the function denoted by P as evident in (12).

12a. Íye mi kwô *éfù* ájá
Mother my leave *inside-of* market
‘My mother left from inside-of the market.’/
‘My mother came from inside-of the market.’

- b. Ì lè tú ódódá unyí àtá un
 3sg go loc outside house father his/her
 ‘She/He went to the outside-of his/her father’s house.’
- c. Ù lè tú àtẹ ọmọ
 1sg go loc above/up there
 ‘I went up there.’

(12b) and (12c) are particularly interesting and informative. It is clear that the locative P in the two contexts is *tú* not *ódódá/àtẹ* which functions as N1 inside the [N1 N2] genitive construction complement of the P in line with our analysis exemplified in (9). What these examples suggest is that items like *àtẹ*, *ódódá*, etc. in contexts like (5a-i) are not prepositions but nominal phrase complement of P in a PP where the P head is phonetically null but syntactically and semantically present.

The claim that P in such contexts shows up null in Igala is supported by constructions like those in (13a-d).

- 13a. Ì kọ etí mi àwó
 3sg slap ear my slap
 ‘She/He slapped me (on the ear).’
- b. Ì kọ mi àwó etí⁴
 3sg slap me slap loc-ear
 ‘She/He slapped me (on the ear).’/
 ‘She/He gave me a slap-on-the-ear slapping’ (literal)
- c. Aládi gwó ẹrẹ mi

⁴ This construction is ambiguous: the other interpretation is one in which *àwó etí* ‘ear-slap or slap-on-the-ear’ (in the sense of ‘a type of slap’) is an N1 N2 construction functioning as indirect object of V *kọ* ‘to slap’.

Al. hit leg my
 ‘Aladi hit my leg.’

d. Aládi gwo mi ẹ̀rẹ̀
 Al. hit my leg
 ‘Aladi hit me on the leg.’

In (13a), one expects some kind of prepositional linker to linearly mediate between the argument *etí mi* ‘my ear’ and *àwó* ‘slap’ where *àwó* is a theme complement of the event denoted by the V *kọ* ‘to slap’ and *etí mi* is the particular location on the body of the patient *mi* directly affected by the slapping, but there is no such thing there. (13b) is a bit more interesting in that *etí*, a location on the body of the patient is the item directly affected by the slap; and ordinarily, one would expect a locative P to show up between *àwó* and the affected location *etí* but there is none, at least phonetically, yet the semantic reading shows a relation of the event denoted by *kọ* ‘to slap’ to the said location *etí mi* ‘my ear’. Similar explanation holds for (13d) where there is no phonetically realized P that visibly connects the event denoted by *gwo* to the exact location *ẹ̀rẹ̀* affected by the event on the body of the patient. The implication of these is that the P which connects the event to the affected location is semantically present in the syntax and interpretation of the constructions but the P head does not have any phonetic realization. This among other structural facts informs our null P analysis for such constructions in Igala.

It is noteworthy to mention that similar constructions in other related languages, e.g. Àfá-Òkè-àgbè⁵ language spoken in the

5. Òkè-àgbè (Amgbé, spoken in Akoko, Ondo State) is a language classified under Defoid, the umbrella group that subsumes Yoruboid (comprising Yoruba, Igala, Ishẹkiri). See Bendor-Samuel (1989) and Heine & Nurse (2000) for more information.

northern Akoko region of Ondo state, and Yoruba appear to share similar syntactic and semantic structures as evident in (14) and (15).

Àfá-Òkè-àgbè:

14a. U gbà mù ø íjù
3sg slap me loc eye
'He/She slapped me (on the eye).'

b. Mòmó vè ø ájá
mother go loc market
'Mother went to the market.'

Yorùbá:

15a. Mòmó lọ ø ojà
Mother go loc market
'Mother went to the market.'

b. Mòmó lọ sí ojà
mother go loc market
'Mother went to the market.'

The syntax and semantics of the clauses in (14) and (15) show that event denoted by V is semantically related to some specific locations denoted by *íjù* 'eyes' and *ájá/ojà* 'market'. However, the P that coordinate that relationship is phonetically missing in Àfá-Òkè-àgbè (14) but optionally realized in Yoruba (15). Therefore, one can speculate that the null P behaviour in this kind of construction goes beyond Igala. This however needs to be further investigated for the specific languages mentioned.

2.2. Verbal Prepositions

The two reported verbal prepositions in Igálà are *kwô* glossed as ‘from’ and *nwú* assumed to translate English benefactive ‘for’. However, the ill-formedness noted in (6a&b) repeated here as (16a&b) for ease of reference which resulted from the syntactic behaviour of *kwô* as the only verb in a simple declarative clause calls the preposition claim to question.

- 16a. Íye mi *kwô* ájá (cf. *Íye mi ájá)
 Mother my leave market
 ‘My mother came from the market.’
- b. Û *kw’ájá* (*kwô* ájá) (cf. *Û ájá)
 1sg leave-from-market
 ‘I came from the market.’

While the logical gloss suggests that there is a semantic sense of the subject leaving/coming from a source-location (*ájá* ‘market’ in this context), we are of the opinion that it is not *kwô/kwúlò* that gives the source role to market. This position is motivated by contexts such as (17) where *kwô* simply means ‘(to) leave’, which is the same meaning it has in (16).

17. *kwô* ánè/òmq
 Leave ground/there
 ‘Get up!’/‘leave that place.’

(17) appears to suggest that some other word item is providing the locative-source semantics in clauses like (16a &b). This suspicion becomes riper when one considers clause types like those in (18) where an item comes in-between *kwô* and the immediately following locative nominal object.

- 18a. Ù kwô l'ájá
 3sg leave loc-market.'
 'I came from the market.'
- b. Ù kwô ájá
 3sg leave market.'
 'I came from the market.'

A closer look however shows that this is not the case. The issue is that *kwô* is a contracted form of its variant *kwúlò* and it is this full variant that is employed in forms like *kwúlájá*. So, the claim in Ilori (2010) that *l'* is a realization of P in this context is not true as it missed this crucial data information. This however does not imply that *kwô/kwúlò* is a P in that context. Clause contexts where *kwô/kwúlò* is the only verb in addition to having a locative nominal adjunct phrase show clearly that it is a V. Therefore *kwúlájá* in (18) is a contracted VP which derived from word juncture phonological processes of deletion, contraction and assimilation of the V *kwô/kwúlò* and its PP adjunct complement headed by the phonetically null P. This structure is as represented in (19).

19. [_{VP} [_V *kwúlò*] [_{PP} [_P \emptyset] [_{DP} ájá]]] → kwúlájá
 leave source-loc market 'leave/come
 from the market'

Note that the fact that P does not have phonetic realisation in the construction does not stop it from giving way to phonological word junction processes to apply on the string of words within the VP. This, we suppose, is what happens in Igala as regards this construction.

2.2.1. nwú

This item in Igala translates English V ‘to give’ and ‘for’ and that appears to have informed its classification as verbal preposition. It can be used alone as the sole predicate of a simple clause bearing the V meaning as in (20).

20. Ítíchà neke *nwú* mi (cf. *Ítíchà neke mi)
 Teacher can give me
 ‘The teacher can give me.’

This evidently affirms that the language has a V lexeme *nwú* with the logical interpretation of ‘give’. The preposition claim for *nwú* however is doubtful when one considers examples like (21), adapted from Ejeba (2011:130), and (22).

- 21a. Ọché là àfẹ kó *nwú* ọmayè-un
 Ọché buy clothe carry(pl) give sibling-3sg
 ‘Ọché bought clothes for his sister/brother.’

- b. Á kọ éli jényú *nwú* ọjọ
 1pl sing song praise give God
 ‘Let us sing praises to God.’

- 22a. Ọma chukóló *nwú* ọnú
 Child do-work give king
 ‘The child worked for the king.’

- b. Mu du *nwú* un
 take-3sg carry give 3sg
 ‘Take it to him.’

- c. Àtá wẹ du ọkọ *nwú* ma
 Father your take money give them

‘Your father gave them money.’

d. Ì fu che *nwú* ma
 3sg take-it do give/for them
 ‘He/She did it for them.’

In all of these examples, the syntactic and semantic behaviour of *nwú* is not really different from that of a V in serial verbal construction, as it can be translated literally and logically as ‘to give’ and not ‘for’ notwithstanding the benefactive reading it engenders, as the object complement of *nwú* is consistently a benefactee who enjoys, so to say, the largesse/benefit denoted by the first V in the construction. For these reasons therefore, *nwú* would appear better analysed as a verb that assigns the benefactive role to noun phrase complements in Igala. Although its literal meaning in the constructions appears like ‘for’, a careful scrutiny of the inter-linear one-to-one glossing indicates that such interpretation is superficial. The only constant interpretation both at the literal and logical levels of the glossing is ‘to give’.

2.2.2. *dàbú* and *né/nó*

Two other verbs which have been analyzed as prepositions in Igálà are *dàbú* ‘be-like/as’ and *né/nó* ‘place on’ illustrated in (23).

23a. Ì *dàbú* ómayè un
 3sg be-like sibling 3sg-gen
 ‘He/She is like his brother/sister
 (of the same mother).’

b. Mu du *né/nó* érè wẹ
 Take-3sg carry place-on leg your

3sg go loc outside
'He/She went outside.'

d. Ù lè tú àtẹ
I go loc above/up
'I went up.'

Tú in (24) marks its nominal phrase complement as the location or goal of the event denoted by V *lò/lè*. In addition, it never occurs in any structure either as a lone V or V in serial verbal construction. Finally, it doesn't linearly follow any Infl item directly. For these reasons, we submit in this paper in line with earlier works that *tú* is indeed an instantiation of preposition in Igálà.

4. Conclusion

This paper has investigated the claim that Igala employs body parts, place nouns, and some verbs as preposition. It provided language internal and cross-linguistic syntactic and semantic evidence to show to the contrary that the assumed body-part and place prepositions are spatial and location nouns which functions as N1 in a [N1 N2] genitive nominal complement of a null P head in the language. The null P was motivated on the premise that: cross-linguistic features of P evident in Igala shows that P takes nominal complement; mediates between the predicate (i.e. the V and its complement where applicable); and relates V denotation to the denotation of P complement in terms of location, goal/source, space, time, etc. This claim is reinforced by the syntactic-semantic behaviour of instantiation of preposition such as the locative-goal *tú*. The study also argued that although *nwú* assigns benefactive role, it consistently does so as a V and not as a P in Ígálà clause structure.

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