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ABSTRACT

The positional definition of Hausa noun and verb, which uses person and aspect markers "y, s, and t" as criteria, is criticized as an unreliable framework for identification of nouns and verbs. It is proposed that this is so for nouns because a word may appear as a noun without any of the three markers. Verbs are more central than the person markers, indicating that they can not be identified positionally. A more appropriate approach, it is argued, is to consider the semantic role of a word and then define its meaning. For example, a word may be a noun if it plays the semantic role of an agentive, experiencer, benefactive, instrument, or locative, and it may be regarded as a verb if it indicates action, process, or both. (MSE)

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Comments on Skinner's Definition of Noun and Verb of Hausa

By

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ABSTRACT

Skinner (1977) has defined Hausa noun and verb positionally ~~by~~ using person and aspect markers y, s and t of Hausa as his criteria. The positional device in respect to the markers cannot reliably be used as a framework for identifying nouns and verbs in Hausa. This is because a word may appear as a noun without any of the three markers (y, s, t). As for the verbs, they are more central than the person markers and this, therefore, indicates that they cannot reliably be used as framework to identify the verbs. It is, therefore, more appropriate to consider the semantic role of a word and then define its meaning rather than using positional device. For example, a word may be a noun if it plays the semantic role of an agentive, experiencer, benefactive, instrument or locative. It may also be regarded as a verb if it indicates action or process or both.

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Comments on Skinner's Definition of Noun and Verb in Hausa

This paper is intended to make some comments on how Skinner (1977) defined noun and verb of Hausa, and modify the definitions to reflect the universal case grammar theory. In his book, Skinner (1977) has defined Hausa noun as "any morpheme which has the same referent as one of the three third person makers l, s, t." He went on to say that this definition can be tested "by taking a word, if it can be followed by one of these three in a sentence, so that the two words have the same referent, then it is a noun." He gave examples as follows:

1. Mota ta tafi
(Motor has gone)
2. Basukur ya lalace
(Bicycle is spoiled)
3. Lambobi sun kare
(Numbers have finished).

Skinner indicated that mota (motor), basukur (bicycle) and lambobi (numbers) are nouns because the first word of each sentence "has the same referent as the following person markers." On the verb, Skinner said "a verb is any morpheme that normally follows a person marker plus aspect marker (other than -naa/-kee."

It is clear from the above definitions that Skinner has morphologically defined the noun and verb of Hausa; that he has used person and aspect markers as the basic elements with which he tested and defined noun and verb of Hausa, and thirdly, he used positional device as the essential framework for identifying Hausa noun and verb. These observations are convincing enough to believe that Skinner is more inclined to the contextual criterion than anything else in defining the noun and verb.

This criterion is restrictive because, in the first place, morphemes are not universal identical elements, for each language has its own forms of morphemes different from the other. More importantly, the positional device in respect to the markers y, t and s cannot reliably be used as a framework to identifying Hausa nouns and verbs as Skinner did. This is because in some Hausa sentences, for example, a word may appear as a noun on the surface structure of a sentence without any of the three markers y, t and s as can be seen in the following sentences:

4. Audu yaro ne
(Audu is a boy)

5. Binta budurwa ce
(Binta is a girl)
6. Malamai masu ilimi ne
(Teachers are educated)
7. Wace hanya ce mai kyau?
(Which way is good?)
8. Wane doki ne gurgu cikinsu?
(Which horse among them is lame?)
9. Wadanne motoci ne na Malam Garba?
(Which motors are for Malam Garba?)
10. Akwai ruwa cikin buta?
(Is there any water in the kettle?)
11. Babu magani a asibiti
(There is no medicine in hospital)
12. Ga malaman makaranta nan
(Here come the school teachers)

In the above sentences, Audu, yaro (boy), Binta, budurwa (girl), malamai (teachers), ilimi (education or knowledge), hanya (road), doki (horse), motoci (motors), Garba, ruwa (water), buta (kettle), magani (medicine), asibiti (hospital) and makaranta (school), are all nouns. The three third person markers y, s and t are absent in all the sentences, not to talk of the words following them.

It would be more appropriate to consider the semantic role a word can play in a sentence and then determine whether it is a noun or verb. It is through this way that the definition of noun and verb in Hausa can meet universality. In any language you find that the lexical items are either action or nominal. In other words, the lexical items are either verbs or nouns and they have similar referent. It is, therefore, reasonable to define them (noun and verb) in a universal manner not in the contextual restrictive way as Skinner attempted.

For example, in any given language, you find that a noun is either an agentive, experiencer, benefactive, instrumental, objective or locative as in the following sentences:

19. Ladi tana dafa wa yara abinci a madafi

(Ladi is cooking the food for the children in the kitchen)

- (a) Ladi is an agentive, so it is a noun
- (b) yara (children) is a benefactive, so it is a noun
- (c) abinci (food) is an objective, so it is a noun
- (d) madafi (kitchen) is a locative, so it is a noun.

114. Kurma ya fi magana da taimakon na'ura

(A deaf has heard talking with the help of an instrument)

- (a) kurma (deaf) is an experiencer, so it is a noun.

- (b) magana (talking) is an objective, so it is a noun.
- (c) na'ura (instrument) is an instrument, so it is a noun.

In Arabic too, items with the same referent as the above Hausa and English languages, can be found as follows:

13. Ladi tatbakhut-ta'ama fil matbakhi lil ~~matbakhi~~ ^{aulaad}

- (a) Ladi, is an agentive and also a noun.
- (b) ta'ama (food) is an objective and also a noun;
- (c) matbakhi (kitchen) is a locative and also a noun;
- (d) aulaad (children) is a benefactive and also a noun.

In all natural human languages, you find similar patterns as in the above three languages. The only fundamental difference from one language to the other is the syntactic arrangement of the words, but the semantic roles of each word remains the same in all circumstances.

Using this formula as the base, it can be said that, any word which can play the role of an agentive, objective, instrument, experiencer, benefactive or locative in its relationship to the verb is a noun.

Considering the verb, Skinner (1977) as earlier indicated, defined it in a morphological and positional manner, still

using the person and aspect markers as the framework. This definition does not reflect the semantic centrality of the verb as described Chafe (1970) who indicates that, in any grammar, the verbs are more central than the nouns. If it is accepted that the verbs are more central than the nouns, they are, therefore, more central than the person and aspect markers of Skinner's reference, and, therefore, they cannot reliably be used as framework for identifying the verbs. This is because the pronouns are not as important as the verbs and secondly, they are not universally found in all natural languages.

In all languages, verbs are action, state oriented or both, and require in their meaning an obligatory agentive, experiencer, benefactive or objective N.P. to make their meaning clear. It can, therefore, be said that a verb is an action or state oriented item, requiring in its meaning an obligatory N.P. and an optional objective N.P. Example:

16. Audu ya tsaya (-A) state oriented
(Audu has stopped)
17. Bala ya fita (-A) action oriented)
(Bala has gone out)
18. Yara sun yi rawa (-A,O) action oriented (acted upon)
(Children have danced).

19. Ladi ta yanka kaza (-A,0) action oriented (process)
(Ladi slaughtered a hen).

Here, tsaya (stop), fita (go out), yanka (slaughter), and yi (do) are all verbs because they either describe action or process of some sorts not because they follow or precede the person and aspect markers y, t and s.

Summary:

In propositional constituent of the case grammar theory, verbs and their co-occurring N.Ps are the most significant items because they give the actual meaning of the relationship between the verb and the noun which occur in a sentence more than any item. Thus, the pronouns or person and aspect markers y, t and s as far as this theory is concerned, play no role in explaining the meaning relationship of the verb or noun.

Nouns and verbs are universal items because they denote nominal and action respectively, which are common phenomena in all natural human languages. To define them, therefore, we have to reflect their universal features, that is, their semantic roles in a sentence. Semantically, verb describes sort of action and require obligatory N.Ps and sometimes objective N.Ps in a sentence. Noun, on the other hand, either

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plays the role of an agentive, experiencer, benefactive,
objective, instrumental or locative.

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