More on the Categorial Status of (T)àbí in Yorùbá Grammar

Jelili Adewale Adeoye
Ekiti State University

Yorùbá language is one of the major languages spoken in Nigeria. The term is also used to refer to the language and the native speakers. As shown in Oyetade, Yorùbá language is spoken in six states that constitute the southwest of Nigeria – Lagos, Œ̀yọ́, Œ̀sun, Œ̀gun, Òndó, and Èkìtì. This study investigated the Standard Yorùbá used in the Southwest Nigeria by focusing on the conjunction t(àbí). Findings reveal that there are varieties of Yorùbá language based on the location of the speakers and the state they occupy in Nigeria: Œ̀yọ́ dialect, Ègbá dialect, Èkìtí dialect, Òndó dialect and Œ̀wọ́ dialect to mention a few. Previous scholarly works on Yorùbá grammar show that (t)àbí performs two functions and it is ascribed with two nomenclatures namely conjunction and polar question word. However, this present paper provides another view that is different from the views of the earlier scholars. Findings in this study reveal that (t)àbí is a conjunction in all its positions of occurrence and the researcher argues against its use as a polar question word. It is established in this study among other things that its occurrence at sentence initial position is as a result of ellipsis. The study also maintains that where it appears at sentence medial position, the polar question word has been deleted.

Keywords: Yorùbá, conjunction, polar question word, T(àbí)

Conjunction and question words are integral parts of the universal grammar and every language has the two in its repertoire (lexicon). No language has been reported where the two are absolutely missing. Conjunction is a grammatical category that joins words, phrases, clauses and sentences together while polar question words in Yorùbá are interrogative particles that are adjoined to a declarative sentence to make it interrogative. The grammatical category (conjunction) and the interrogative particle (polar question) are used to show different syntactic structures.

However, over the years, Yorùbá grammarians like Bamgbose (1967, 1990), Awobulu (1978), Ilori (2010) and Ajiboye (2013) have continued to ascribe two functions to (t)àbí from the traditional linguistic approach. None of these scholars, to the best of our knowledge, has queried the assertion that (t)àbí cannot perform the two functions simultaneously.

This paper is divided into four sections. Section one will form the introduction. In section two, the researcher discusses the previous analysis of (t)àbí as a conjunction and a polar question word. In section three, arguments will be presented to support the present proposal. Section four is the conclusion.

Materials and Methods

Previous Analysis of (T)àbí

Previous analysis of (t)àbí falls into two categories: treating it as a conjunction in one context and a polar question word in another context (Bamgbose 1967, 1990; Awobulu, 1978; Ilori, 2010; Ajiboye, 2013). Bamgbose (1967) groups (t)àbí "or", sàgbọ̀n “but” yàlà.....àbí “whether......or” as conjunction as shown...
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in the examples below:

1 a. E ó gberin (t)abí é ó ní Will you join in the song or gberin? won’t you?

b. Sé kí a já.de (t)abí kí a Shall we go out or stay? đúró?

A keen look at the examples given above will show that 1 (a & b) are interrogative sentences. In 1 (b) (t)abí functions as a conjunction because the polar question word “ëdí” (polar question word) is adjoined to the sentence while in 1 (a) (t)abí functions as the polar question word. Since example 1(b) is grammatical in Yorùbá, one may argue that the polar question word in 1 (a) has been deleted. Moreover, Bamgbose (1990, p. 190) asserts that (t)abí functions as both a conjunction and an interrogative particle. He opines further that when two opposite sentences are joined together by (t)abí or when it appears at the sentence initial position, such a sentence will give interrogative connotation. See the examples below:

2 a. E le duro de wa (t)abí ki e maa lo lọ. You can wait for us or go home.

b. Şe ẹ ti se tan (t)abí ẹ sì fẹ fẹ sì sì i? Are you through for the day or you still

c. Yáälá ẹ wá (t)abí ẹ o wá, a a sè ẹ. Whether you come or you don’t, we will do it.

d. Ò tì lo(t)abí kò o tì lọ? Has he gone or he hasn’t?

e. Ô tân (t)abí ọ kú? Has it finished or it remains?

f. Àbí ẹ fẹ́ bá wa lọ? Are you willing to follow us?

(Bamgbose, 1990, p. 190)

In 2 above, Bamgbose (1990) asserts that the function of (t)abí is dependent on the syntactic environment. It is a conjunction in 2 (a, b & c) while the same word is a polar question word in 2 (d, e & f). However, contrary to Bamgbose’s view, consider the examples below:

5 a. Sè ô ti tân (t)abí sè ô kú? Has it finished or it remains?

b. Njó ò tì lo(t)abí njó kò i tì i lọ? Has he gone or he hasn’t?

If (t)abí is a polar question word as asserted by Bamgbose (1990) in 2 (d, e & f) what is the function in 3 (a & b)? In addition, a closer look at 2 (f) will show that a clause has been deleted prior to (t)abí occurrence at the initial position (see Bamgbose, 1990). Moreover, contrary to Bamgbose’s (1967; 1990), Awobulu (1978, p. 106) classifies (t)abí as a disjunction and he notes that the word is used within nouns, adverbs and sentences. See the examples below:

4 a. Ògbá wo ni kí n wa, ni ńààró ni (t)abí ni ale? When should I come in the morning or in the evening?

b. Ò tì dè (t)abí kò o tì i dè? Has he come back or he hasn’t?

c. Àbí kò níi wá ní? Or is it that he doesn’t plan to come?


In the examples in 4 above, it is shown that nigbàwo “when” is the question word in 4 (a) and (t)abí is the conjunction in the sentence; while the same (t)abí is the question word in 4 (b&c). A closer look at example 4 (a) will show that (t)abí is a conjunction in both 4 (b&c) because a question word can be added to 4 (b) while the clause before (t)abí in 4 (c) has been deleted. Furthermore, the question word in 4 (c) has been deleted. See these examples:

4 d. Àbí ì lọ níi wá ní? Or is it that he doesn’t plan to come?

4 e. Àbí ì lọ níi gị̀ ní? Or is it that he doesn’t comprehend?

Awobulu (1978) also named (t)abí a disjunction, that is, a separate entity from conjunctions. However, it must be noted that disjunction or adverse conjunction is an integral part of the coordinating conjunction, thus the appropriate nomenclature for (t)abí is disjunctive conjunction or adverse conjunction.

Ilori (2010) identifies iti/iti and, (t)abí “or” as nominal conjunction in Yorùbá. See the example below:

5 a. Mo ń fè [mọ́tò (t)abí ilé]

1sg prog. Want vehicle or house

I want a car or house.

He also notes that (t)abí “or” is used as a clausal conjunction in interrogative expressions. See the examples below:

5 b. Mo ri i (t)abí mi ọ ri i? 1sg see it or 1sg neg see it

Did I not see it?

c. Wọn ń jẹwọ(t)abí wọ̀n ọ ti i jẹwọ?

3pl perf confess or 3pl neg perf neg confess

Have they confessed or not?

The researcher agrees with Ilori’s claim in 5 (b & c) that (t)abí is a clausal conjunction in interrogative construction but Ilori (2010) has not provided the question words in the sentences. He (Ilori) has not been able to explain the function of (t)abí when it occupies a sentence initial position. This present study shows that examples 5 (b and c) can be rendered in these forms and it will be grammatical. See the examples below:

6 a. Sè mo ri i (t)abí ńe mi ọ ri i?

Qw 1sg see it or Qw 1sg neg see it

Did I not see it or not?

b. Njé wọ́n ti jẹwọ́ (t)abí njé wọn ọ ti i jẹwọ́?

Qw 3pl perf confess or Qw 3pl neg perf neg confess

Have they confessed or not?

If the sentences in 6 (a and b) are grammatical in Òrùbà, the researcher suspected that the question words in 5 (b and c) have been deleted. Moreover, it is worth noting that (t)abí joins sentences of equal status where one is assertive the other is negative. It is also observed that when the first clause is introduced by polar question words such as sé and njé, the question word is always deleted in the second clause in Òrùbà utterances (see example 1 b and 2 b above), this, the researcher assumes must have made some scholars
think that (t)àbí is the question word in the second sentence. However, if examples 6 (a and b) are grammatical; thus, the polar question in the second clause has undergone ellipses.

Ajiboye (2013, p. 10) makes two assertions with respect to (t)àbí. First, he claims that there are three lexical items having the same segmental and tonal features in the form of (t)àbí but function differently; one function as a conjunction, the second as Yes-no interrogative particle and the third as a kind of Wh-word. Secondly, he notes further that the kind of interrogative particle that comes up depends on the syntactic context and the type of structure. Lastly, he assumes that (t)àbí is one and the same lexical item that demonstrates ambiguity between those possible meanings, and one can only appeal to context in order to determine which meaning is intended. See the examples below:

Contrary to the assertions in Ajiboye (2013, p. 10) above, (t)àbí is one lexical item in all its position of occurrence and its syntactic position does not determine its function and it does not demonstrate ambiguity of any kind which can be determined by context. See the examples below:

In reaction to Ajiboye's assertion that (t)àbí is a polar question in one context, a content question in another and a conjunction in some other environment, a closer look at the examples in 8 (a, b & c) above, will show that (t)àbí has a peculiar function which is a clausal conjunction. In addition, a content question in Yorùbá has a strong [Wh-feature] that forbids any other word to replace it. Moreover, when polar question words are adjoined to where (t)àbí is purported to be a polar question word like the examples in 8 above what happens to (t)àbí? As the researcher has noted earlier, (t)àbí combines two sentences with equal structure (S1 conj S2), what happens in most cases is the deletion of the question word (Qw) and NP of S2 to avoid repetition. Observe that 8 c is deviant when the question word (Qw) is attached to S2; we suspend the explanation for this to the next section.

Results and Discussion

The Status of (T)àbí Re-Visited

In the reviewed works above, scholars have claimed that (t)àbí functions as both a polar question and a conjunction. However, based on the earlier assertion that (t)àbí is a conjunction in all ramifications, the researcher presents the following arguments:

i. Why is it that only (t)àbí functions as both a conjunction and a polar question whereas, no other conjunction can perform the same function and no other polar question word can act as a conjunction as well?

ii. That polar question words are adjoined to a declarative sentence to form an interrogative sentence. The question is: how do we account for the instances where (t)àbí appears at the sentence initial position?

iii. When (t)àbí co-occur with other polar question words, what specific function does it perform? If it is a conjunction, can it be a polar question as well?

iv. Finally, why is it that it is only (t)àbí that can occur at the initial, medial and final position as a polar interrogative sentence while other polar question words are either restricted to the sentence initial, medial or final position?

Based on the observations above, we present the following claims to support our arguments.

However, Polar question formation in Yorùbá involves the process of adjoining the polar question words to the existing declarative sentences. See the examples below:

In the examples 9 (a–e), it is discovered that the polar question words are adjoined to the declarative sentence to form polar interrogative sentences. However, in examples (2 f and 7 b) if it is assumed that (t)àbí is adjoined to the declarative sentence as it appears at sentence initial position to produce the outcome like the ones in 9 above, let us consider instances where (t)àbí is sandwiched between two sentences. See the examples below:
A closer look at example 10 (a–b), will reveal that (t)àbí in these sentences is neither inserted nor adjoined. Bamgbose (1990, p. 190) observes among other things with respect to example (2 f and 7 b) and (10) that when two opposite sentences are combined with (t)àbí or where (t)àbí appears at a sentence initial position, it normally has interrogative connotation. He notes further that when (t)àbí occupies a sentence initial position, the clause before it has been deleted. However, this assertion in Bamgbose (1990) is an indication that (t)àbí is not adjoined to a declarative sentence in example (2 f and 7 b). Based on this, (t)àbí has violated the one of the rules of polar question formation in Yorùbá. Secondly, where it occurs between two opposite sentences, a polar question word can be added to such sentences. See the examples below:

11 a. Sè Adé lọ (t)àbí sè Adé kò lo ni? Qw NP go conj. Qw NP neg. go foc. Did Adé go or not?
b. Sèbí Adé lọ (t)àbí sèbí Adé kò lo ni? Qw NP go conj. Qw NP neg. go foc. Ade went or he did not?  
c. Njè Adé lọ (t)àbí njè Adé kò lo ni? Qw NP go conj. Qw NP neg. go foc. Did Adé go or he didn’t?

In examples 11 (a–c), it is discovered that (t)àbí performs conjunction function as opposed to polar question as shown in 10 (a & b). These examples in 11 (a–c) point to the fact that the polar question words in 10 (a & b) have been deleted. Moreover, Sè, sèbí, njè in (11 a–c) of the clause (S1) controls the structure in (S2). However, 11 b seems deviant; Adeoye (2015) argues that sèbí is derived from sè # àbí that is why the contiguous co-occurrence of sèbí and àbí may not yield a grammatical sentence in Yorùbá. This assertion may look plausible but in Yorùbá a low tone cannot displace a high tone as shown in the concatenation. Moreover, this study still maintains that in the distant past in the historical development of Yorùbá sè # àbí must have fused together to produce a polar question word because in some Yorùbá dialects the word is sèbí; this is an indication that the merger of the high and low tone has produced a mid tone which is a plausible tonal process. This process is attested in Mòbà dialect (see Abiodun & Ajiboye, 2008). It must be noted however, that sèbí and sèbí are in free variation in the Yorùbá language, that is, they have same semantic content. Another test to show that (t)àbí is not a polar question word is that no other polar question word such as sè, sèbí and njè have the same distribution as (t)àbí, that is, they must be able to conjoin two independent sentences. See these examples:

12 a.* Adé lọ sé kò lo  
NP go Qw neg. go  
Ade went did not go  
b.* Adé lọ sèbí kò lo  
NP go Qw neg. go  
Ade went didn’t not go  
c.* Adé lọ nje’ kò lo  
NP go Qw neg. go  
Ade went did not go.  
d. Adé lọ (t)àbí kò lo  
NP go conj. neg. go  
Ade went or he didn’t

While examples in 12 (a–c) are ungrammatical, example 12 (d) is grammatical. This is a clear indication that (t)àbí is a conjunction. And, no real polar question word can combine two opposite sentences. Moreover, no other conjunction has been reported in Yorùbá to perform polar question word functions. If this is the case, why is (t)àbí an exception? However, with respect to the arguments above, three hypotheses are proposed by the researcher to account for (t)àbí in Yorùbá.

Hypothesis (1) (t)àbí is a polar question word and a conjunction.

Hypothesis (2) (t)àbí is a polar question word.  
Hypothesis (3) (t)àbí is a conjunction (disjunctive).

To start with the first hypothesis, the researcher proposes a Complementizer Phrase (CP) Structure for a polar question interrogative sentence where the polar question word occupies the C, CP position and it takes IP as its complement. Moreover, the study also proposes a ConjP that is dominated by IP x and it combines two sentences (IP n and IP m) together. The proposed structures are represented below:
These structures in 13 (a-b) will be used for the analysis of hypothesis (1) in example 13 below:

    b. (T)ábi Olú ọ . /? Did Olu go? Or Olu went.  
    c. Olú ọ t(ábi) kò Did Olu go or Olu went or he  
       ọ . /? not? didn’t.  
    d. Sè/Njè/Sébi Olú  
       ọ (t)ábi kò ọ? he didn’t

The examples above are presented on tree diagrams for clarification

15 a.  

15 b. i  

15 b. ii  

15 c. i  

15 c. ii
Based on our assertion in hypothesis (1), examples 14 (b, c and d) will have two reading as shown in 15 (b, c and d) diagrammatically above. However, example 15 d (i) shows that there are two sentences, Sé questions the first sentence, while (t)àbi questions the second sentence whereas example 15 d (ii), depicts that there are two sentences; the first sentence is questioned by Sé while (t)àbi combines the second sentence to polar interrogative sentence (first sentence).

The conclusion that will be drawn from the tree diagrams above is that the assertion in hypothesis (1) is ambiguous, because where (t)àbi is sandwiched between two sentences, it would either function as a polar question word or a conjunction. Moreover, when a polar question word is adjoined to the same sentence the function of (t)àbi will also remain the same. It must be noted that Yorùbá permits the co-occurrences of two polar question words in a sentence and these do not result in change of their functions. See these examples:

16 a. Sé Adé lo bí?
   Qw NP go Qw
   Did Ade go?

b. Njé Adé lo bí?
   Qw NP go Qw
   Did Ade go?

c. Sé Adé ha lo bí?
   Qw NP Qw go Qw
   Did Ade go?

The examples in (16) above show that the occurrence of two or more polar question words in a sentence do not change the function of one of the two as opposed to example 15 d (ii) above. Moreover, it is pertinent to note that where (t)àbi co-occur with other conjunctions like yálà/bóyá its function remains as a conjunction. See the examples below:

17 a. Yálà ójó rò (t)àbi kò rò mài gbin ṣẹ̀gbẹ̀
   Conj. NP rain Conj. Neg rain fut. plant maize
   Whether it rains or not I will plant maize

b. Bóyá Ò lo (t)àbi kò lo mì ò mò.
   Conj. Pro go conj. Neg go Pro Neg know
   Whether he went or not I don’t know

In addition, if (t)àbi is placed as a question word and a conjunction on the same node on a tree diagram, the structure will be cumbersome for analysis and it will generate a grammar that is hard to comprehend. Since, Hypothesis (1) cannot provide a unified approach for the analysis of (t)àbi, it is pertinent to make recourse to hypothesis (2). In hypothesis (2), it is stated that (t)àbi is a polar question word in all its position of occurrence thus a CP structure is proposed where C projects into CP and it takes IP as its complement. The structures in 15 b (i) 15 c (i) and 15 d (i) will be applicable, but example 17 (a and b) will pose a problem to this assertion in hypothesis (2). See the tree diagram in 18 below:
The structure in 18 above and other examples where \(\text{t(àbí)}\) functions as a conjunction will show clearly that hypothesis (2) is not plausible. Thus, it is imperative to look for a unified analysis to capture \(\text{t(àbí)}\) in all its position of occurrence in Yorùbá sentences. However, hypothesis (3) may offer a plausible explanation for the occurrences of \(\text{t(àbí)}\).

Hypothesis (3) asserts that all occurrences of \(\text{t(àbí)}\) is a conjunction. In line with this assertion, a ConjP-Structure is proposed, where \(\text{t(àbí)}\) occupies Conj that projects into ConjP and it takes IP or CP as its complement. Moreover, the ConjP can occur between IP \(n\) and IP \(m\) (declarative sentences). See the tree diagrams below:

19 a. \(\text{T(àbí) Olú lo.}\) Or Olú went.

19 b. \(\text{Olú lo (t)àbí kò lo.}\) Olú went or he didn’t.

19 d. \(\text{Sé / Njé / Sébí Olú lo(t)àbí xé, njé kò lo?}\) Did Olú go or he didn’t?
The assertion put forward in hypothesis (3) looks more plausible and it provides a uniform approach to the status of (t)àbí in all its places of occurrence. Based on this fact, it is argued that whenever (t)àbí occupies a sentence initial position, the clause or sentence before it has been deleted (see Bamgbose, 1990). It is also submitted that when it appears between two sentences, the polar question word has been deleted at the base. Thus, its (polar question word) presence becomes optional. The researcher also upholds the popular belief of Yorùbá grammarians like Ilori (1978) and Bamgbose (1990) on the use of voice raising to produce a polar question because of its cross linguistic evidence. This study asserts that voice raising to produce a polar question must have been responsible for the claim that (t)àbí is a polar question word by some Yorùbá scholars. It is also posited that there is no specific way to differentiate sentences with raised voice and the sentences without a raised voice when they are reduced to writing. However, the researcher opines that Yes / No questions in Yorùbá can be interpreted just like the $\phi$-features of N items based on its syntactic position (see Ilori, 2010). Thus, it has a weak [WH] feature that is why it can be deleted in some syntactic environment; and its presence may be optional in other environment. Finally, this paper submits that (t)àbí is a conjunction in all its place occurrence in sentences.

**Conclusion**

This paper provides another argument that is quite different from the views of the earlier scholars. This paper challenges the traditional approach of the use of (t)àbí which ascribes two nomenclatures (lexical category - conjunction and functional category - polar question word) and use for it. The study establishes that the occurrences of (t)àbí in all syntactic environments is a case of a conjunction. The paper also asserts that where it appears at a sentence initial position, the question word in the sentence has been deleted. It is also established that when it is sandwiched between two sentences the question word has been deleted or its presence becomes optional. Moreover, this study submits that when it combines two sentences where the first clause is introduced by a polar question word, the same polar question word controls the second sentence but in utterances it is always deleted. However, this paper supports the claim that raising of the voice can be used to produce a polar question in Yorùbá and in such an utterance the polar question is always deleted. This research is limited to lexical categorization of (t)àbí. Moreover, the deviance in the co-occurrence of șèbí and àbí in an interrogative sentence needs further research, maybe an incursion into Yorùbá dialects may provide a clear answer. Furthermore, Yorùbá lexical categories need a total reappraisal. In English language for instance, a definite number of lexical categories are taught in any grammar course. However, Yorùbá grammar which has been undergoing research for decades has not evolved any definite number of word classes. This is a challenge that scholars cannot afford to run away from.

**References**


