

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

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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, Òyó, Òsun, Ògùn, 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: Òyó dialect, Ègbá dialect, Èkìtì dialect, Òndó dialect and Òwò 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), Awobuluyi (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 is a conjunction and a polar question word. It shall be argued in this paper that all occurrences of (t)àbí perform the function of a conjunction. It will also be shown that there is no single word that can combine the functions of a polar question and a conjunction. For instance, a polar question word serves as the introducer

of interrogative sentence while a conjunction occurs between nouns, clauses and sentences. This significant difference is an indication 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; Awobuluyi, 1978; Ilori, 2010; Ajiboye, 2013).

Bamgbose (1967) groups (t)àbí “or”, *sùgbón* “but” *yálà.....tàbí* “whether.....or” as conjunction as shown

in the examples below:

- 1 a. È ó gberin (t)àbí è ó ní Will you join in the song or  
gberin? won't you?  
b. Sé kí a já.de (t)àbí kí a Shall we go out or stay?  
dúró?

A keen look at the examples given above will show that 1 (a & b) are interrogative sentences. In 1 (b) (t)àbí functions as a conjunction because the polar question word *Sé* “did” (polar question word) is adjoined to the sentence while in 1 (a) (t)àbí 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)àbí functions as both a conjunction and an interrogative particle. He opines further that when two opposite sentences are joined together by (t) àbí or when it appears at the sentence initial position, such a sentence will give interrogative connotation. See the examples below:

- 2 a. È le duro de wa (t)àbí kí You can wait for us or go home.  
e maa lo sile.  
b. Sé è ti še tan (t)àbí è si Are you through for the day or  
fẹ́ẹ́ síṣẹ́ sí i? you still  
c. Yálà è wá (t)àbí è o wá, Whether you come or you  
a a še é. don't, we will do it.  
d. Ó ti lo(t)àbí kò ì tí ì lo? Has he gone or he hasn't?  
e. Ó tán (t)àbí ó kù? Has it finished or it remains?  
f. Àbí è fẹ́ẹ́ bá wa lo? Are you willing to follow us?  
(Bamgbose, 1990, p. 190)

In 2 above, Bamgbose (1990) asserts that the function of (t)àbí 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:

- 3 a. Sé ó ti tán (t)àbí sé ó kù? Has it finished or it remains?  
b. Njé ó ti lo(t)àbí njé kò ì Has he gone or he hasn't?  
tí ì lo?

If (t)àbí 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)àbí occurrence at the initial position (see Bamgbose, 1990). Moreover, contrary to Bamgbose's (1967; 1990), Awobuluyi (1978, p. 106) classifies (t)àbí as a disjunction and he notes that the word is used within nouns, adverbs and sentences. See the examples below:

- 4 a. Ìgbà wo ni kí n wa, ni When should I come in the  
àárò ni (t)àbí ni aḗ? morning or in the evening?  
b. Ó ti dé (t)àbí kò ì tí ì dé? Has he come back or he hasn't?  
c. Àbí kò níí wá ni? Or is it that he doesn't plan to  
come?  
(Awobuluyi, 1978, p. 106).

In the examples in 4 above, it is shown that *nígbàwo* “when” is the question word in 4 (a) and (t)àbí is the

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

- 4 d. Àbí sé kò níí wá ni? Or is it that he doesn't plan to  
come?  
4 e. Àbí sé kò gbó ni? Or is it that he doesn't  
comprehend?

Awobuluyi (1978) also named (t)àbí 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)àbí is disjunctive conjunction or adverse conjunction.

Ilori (2010) identifies *àti/ti* and, (t)àbí “or” as nominal conjunction in Yorùbá. See the example below:

- 5 a. Mo ù fẹ́ [mótò (t)àbí ilé]  
1sg prog. Want vehicle or house  
I want a car or house.

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

- 5 b. Mo rí i (t)àbí mi ò rí i?  
1sg see it or 1sg neg see it  
Did I not see it?  
c. Wón ti jéwó(t)àbí wón ò ti ì jéwó?  
3pl pert confess or 3pl neg pert neg confess  
Have they confessed or not?

The researcher agrees with Ilori's claim in 5 (b & c) that (t)àbí 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)àbí 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. Sé mo rí i (t)àbí sé mi ò rí i?  
Qw 1sg see it or Qw 1sg neg see it  
Did I not see it or not?  
b. Njé wón ti jéwó (t)àbí njé wón ò ti ì jéwó?  
Qw 3pl pert confess or Qw 3pl neg pert neg confess  
Have they confessed or not?

If the sentences in 6 (a and b) are grammatical in Yorùbá, the researcher suspected that the question words in 5 (b and c) have been deleted. Moreover, it is worth noting that (t)àbí 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 Yorùbá 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:

- |      |  |   |
|------|--|---|
| 7 a. | Yaradua de,(t)àbí?                     | Did Yaradua arrive?                                   |
| b.   | (T)àbí musulumi?                       | Is it a muslim?                                       |
| c.   | Nínú kí Adé lọ oko (t)àbí kí o lọ oja. | Is either Ade goes to the farm or the market.         |
| d.   | Adé lọ oko (t)àbí o sun?               | Is it the case that Ade went to farm or he is asleep? |

(Ajiboye, 2013, p. 10)

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:

- |      |   |   |
|------|---|---|
| 8 a. | Sé Yaradua dé (t)àbí Sé Yaradua kò dé?  | Has Yaradua arrived or not?                         |
| b.   | Njé musulumi ni (t)àbí njé musulumi kọ? | Is he a Muslim or not?                              |
| c.   | Sèbí Adé lọ sí oko (t)àbí ó sùn?        | Is it a fact that Ade went to the farm or he slept? |

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:

- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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:

- |      |  |             |
|------|--|-------------|
| 9 a. | Adé lọ sí oko NP go to farm<br>Ade went to the farm.                     | Declarative |
| b.   | Sé Adé lọ sí oko? Qw NP go to farm<br>Did Ade go to farm?                |             |
| c.   | Sèbí Adé lọ sí oko? Qw NP go to farm<br>Ade went to the farm, didn't he? |             |
| d.   | Njé Adé lọ sí oko? Qw NP go to farm<br>Did Ade go to the farm?           |             |
| e.   | Adé ha lọ sí oko bí? NP Qw go to farm Qw<br>Did Ade go to the farm?      |             |

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:

MORE ON THE CATEGORIAL STATUS OF (T)ÀBÍ IN YORÙBÁ GRAMMAR

- 10 a. Adé ɔ (t)àbí kò ɔ?  
 NP go Qw neg. go  
 Did Ade go or he didn't?
- b. Olú dúró (t)àbí ó jòkòó?  
 NP stand Qw he sit  
 Olu stood or he sat down?

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. Sé Adé ɔ (t)àbí sé Adé kò ɔ ni?  
 Qw NP go conj. Qw NP neg. go foc.  
 Did Ade go or not?
- b.\* Sèbí Adé ɔ (t)àbí sèbí Adé kò ɔ ni?  
 Qw NP go conj. Qw NP neg. go foc.  
 Ade went or he did not?
- c. Njé Adé ɔ (t)àbí njé Adé kò ɔ ni?  
 Qw NP go conj. Qw NP neg. go foc.  
 Did Ade 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, Sé, sèbí, njé 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 sé # 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 sé # 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 sé, sèbí and njé have the same distribution as (t)àbí, that is, they must be able to conjoin two

independent sentences. See these examples:

- 12 a.\* Adé ɔ sé kò ɔ  
 NP go Qw neg. go  
 Ade went did not go
- b.\* Adé ɔ sèbí kò ɔ  
 NP go Qw neg. go  
 Ade went didn't not go
- c.\* Adé ɔ njé kò ɔ  
 NP go Qw neg. go  
 Ade went did not go.
- d. Adé ɔ (t)àbí kò ɔ  
 NP go conj. neg. go  
 Ade went or he didn't

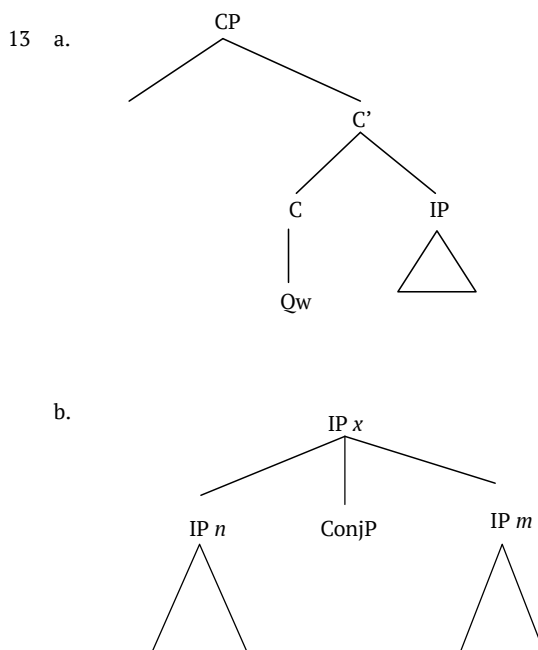
While examples in 12 (a–c) are ungrammatical, example 12 (d) is grammatical. This is a clear indication that (t)àbí is a conjunction. And, no real polar question word can combine two opposite sentences. Moreover, no other conjunction has been reported in Yorùbá to perform polar question word functions. 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).

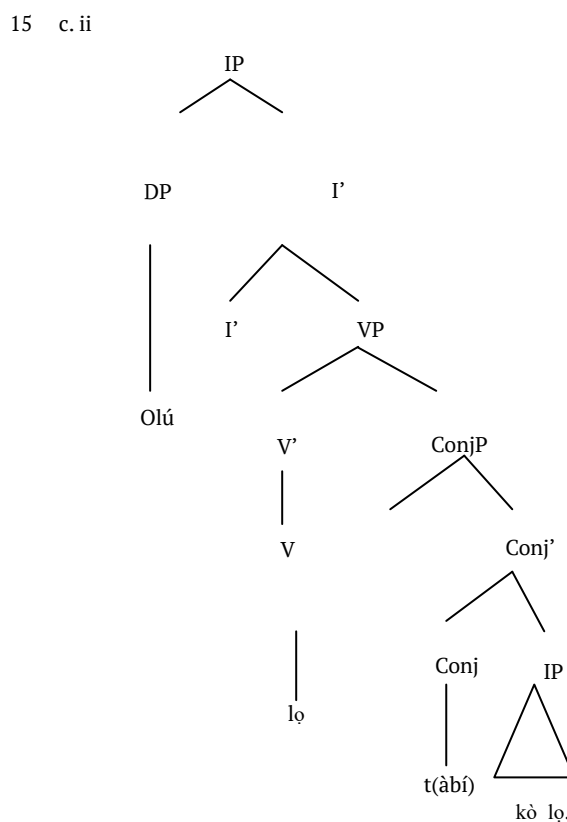
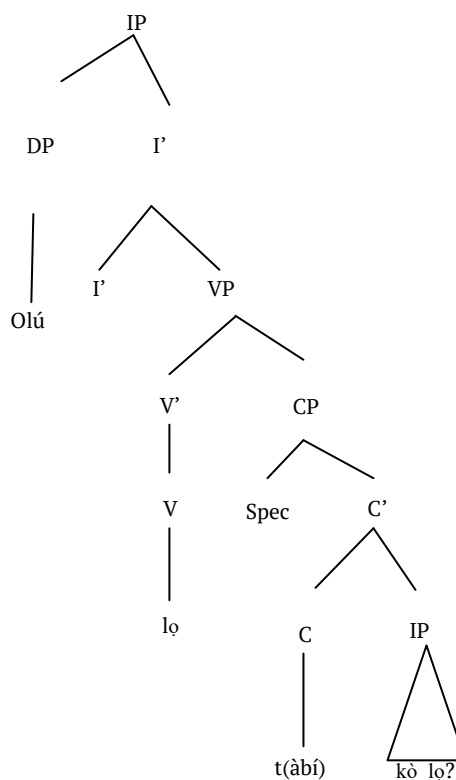
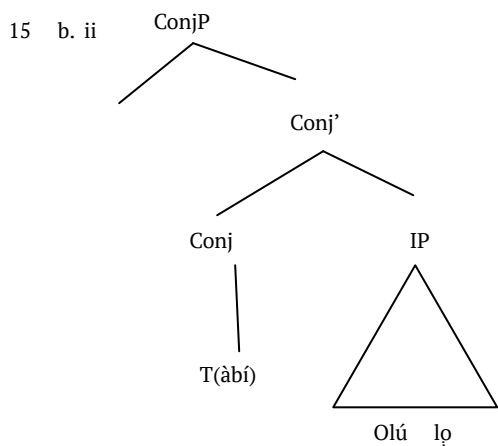
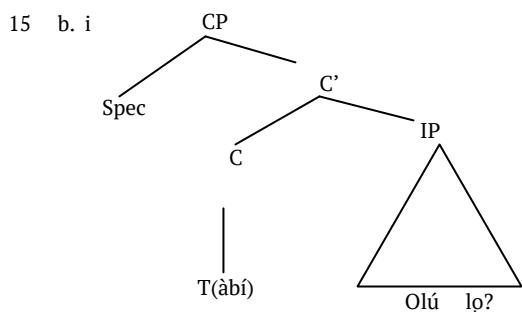
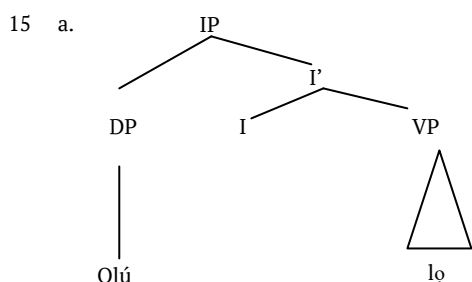
To start with the first hypothesis, the researcher proposes a Complementizer Phrase (CP) Structure for a polar question interrogative sentence where the polar question word occupies the C, CP position and it takes IP as its complement. Moreover, the study also proposes a ConjP that is dominated by IP 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: 15 c.i

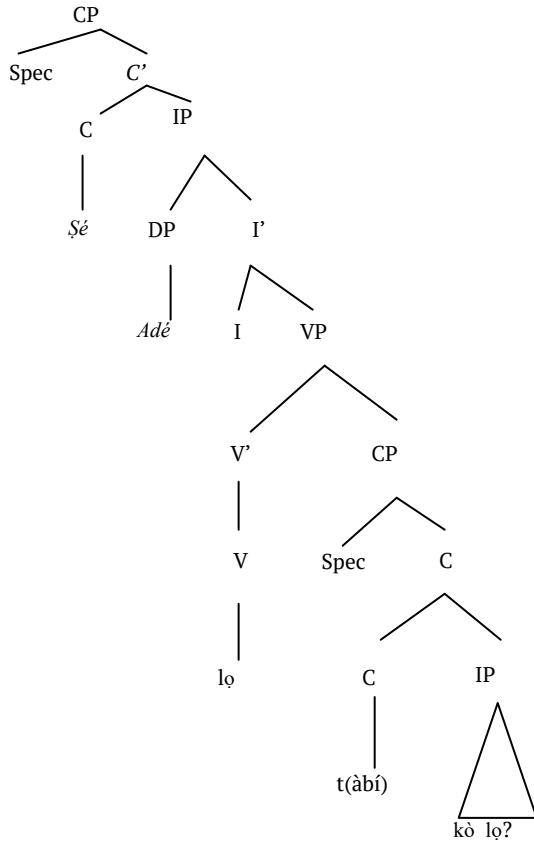
- 14 a. Olú lọ. Olu went. Declarative
- b. (T)àbí Olú lọ ./? Did Olu go? Or Olu went.
- c. Olú lọ t(àbí) kò Did Olu go or Olu went or he lọ./? not? didn't.
- d. Şé/Ñjé/Şèbí Olú Did Olu go or lọ (t)àbí kò lọ? he didn't

The examples above are presented on tree diagrams for clarification

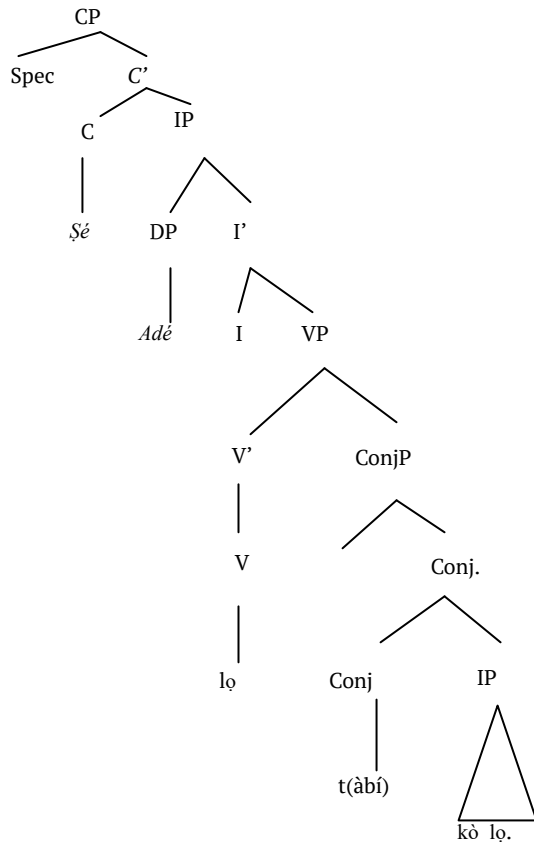


MORE ON THE CATEGORIAL STATUS OF (T)ÀBÍ IN YORÙBÁ GRAMMAR

15 d. i



15 d. ii



Based on our assertion in hypothesis (1), examples 14 (b, c and d) will have two readings 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)àbí* questions the second sentence whereas example 15 d (ii), depicts that there are two sentences; the first sentence is questioned by *Sé* while *(t)àbí* 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)àbí* 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)àbí* 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?

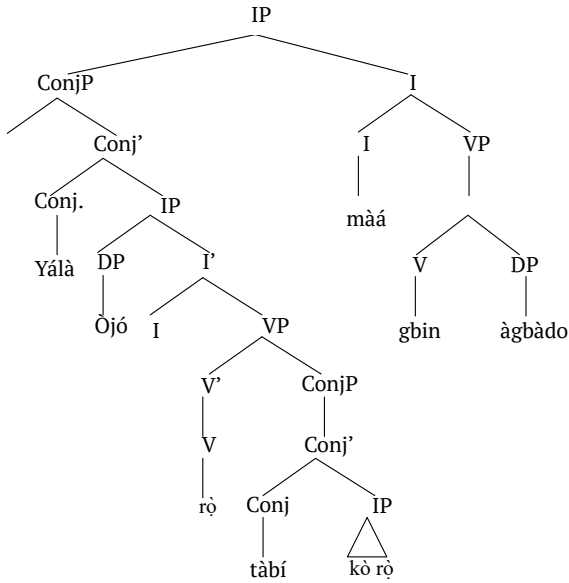
The examples in (16) above show that the occurrence of two or more polar question words in a sentence do not change the function of one of the two as opposed to example 15 d (ii) above. Moreover, it is pertinent to note that where *(t)àbí* co-occur with other conjunctions like *yálà/bóyá* its function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

- 17 a. *Yálà òjò rò (t)àbí kò rò maá gbín igbádo.*  
Conj. NP rain Conj. Neg rain fut. plant maize  
Whether it rains or not I will plant maize
- b. *Bóyá Ó lo (t)àbí kò lo mi ò mò.*  
Conj. Pro go conj. Neg go Pro Neg know  
Whether he went or not I don't know

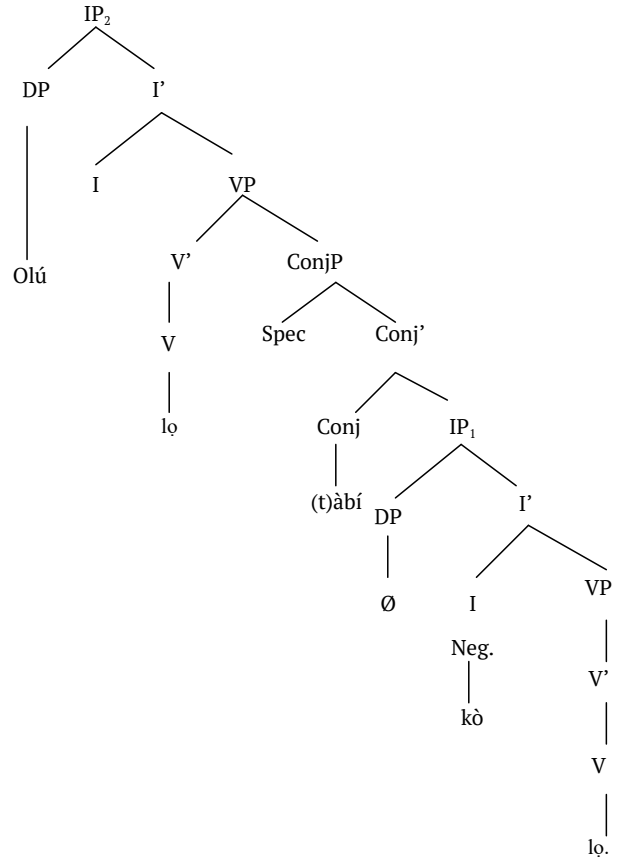
In addition, if *t(àbí)* is placed as a question word and a conjunction on the same node on a tree diagram, the structure will be cumbersome for analysis and it will generate a grammar that is hard to comprehend.

Since, Hypothesis (1) cannot provide a unified approach for the analysis of *(t)àbí*, it is pertinent to make recourse to hypothesis (2). In hypothesis (2), it is stated that *(t)àbí* 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:

18



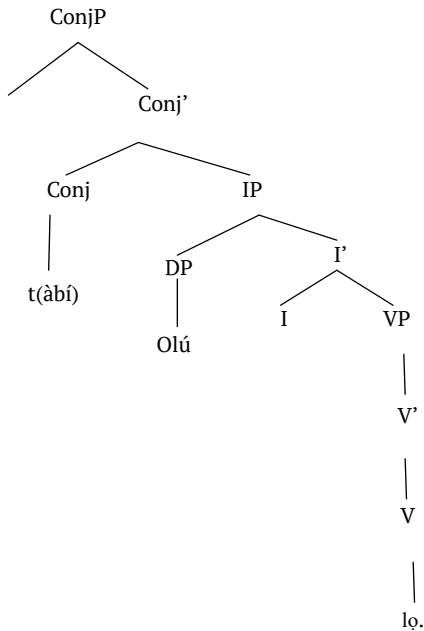
b Olú lo (t)àbí kò lo. Olú went or he didn't.



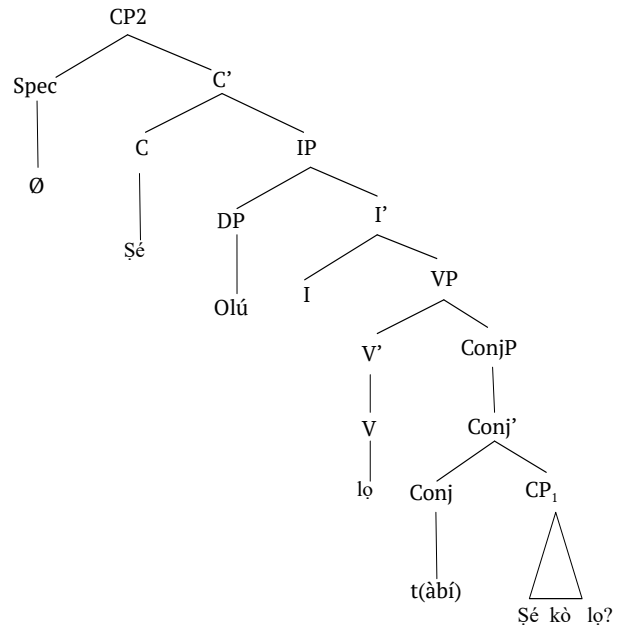
The structure in 18 above and other examples where *t(àbí)* functions as a conjunction will show clearly that hypothesis (2) is not plausible. Thus, it is imperative to look for a unified analysis to capture *t(àbí)* in all its position of occurrence in Yorùbá sentences. However, hypothesis (3) may offer a plausible explanation for the occurrences of *t(àbí)*.

Hypothesis (3) asserts that all occurrences of *(t)àbí* is a conjunction. In line with this assertion, a ConjP-Structure is proposed, where *(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. T(àbí) Olú lo. Or Olú went.



d. Sé / Njé / Šèbí Olú lo(t)àbí sé,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 Awobuluyi (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 a 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 *ṣèbí* 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.

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