The Use of Conjunctions in Some African Languages

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Abstract: This paper discusses the use of conjunctions in some languages of Africa. Conjunctions which are words used to link or connect two words, phrases, clauses or sentences together, either in speech or in writing, are not restricted to English alone, but are also found and used in other languages of the world. Conjunctions are regarded as one of the eight parts of speech in English, according to the traditional grammar. In English, the basic function of conjunctions, which is that of linking or connecting, also does same in these languages of Africa, as captured in this paper but there is a slight difference. This paper is rich because the author has worked hard to trace the presence and use of conjunctions in a good number of African languages as outlined here, and it will be of great interest to both students and scholars in the fields of English/Linguistics in particular, and the entire readership in general. The (main) author, having written on conjunctions in English: meaning, types and uses before now, deemed it fit to carry out this study because this crucial area of language study perhaps seems to have received less attention from language scholars and students. The reason for this is attributable to the fact that conjunctions have been adjudged few, and as such, it is believed that there is not enough to say there. Therefore, this article serves as an impetus to those who might like to carry out studies in this area of language study.

1. Introduction

This article is an investigative type, as it investigates to establish both the presence and the use of conjunctions in the languages of Africa under discussion. Consequent upon this, the author, after researching into many more African languages, had been able to trace and identify the presence and use of conjunctions in some of them, as itemised in this paper. This research has shown that conjunctions which are words mainly or mostly used to link or connect two words, phrases, clauses or sentences together, either in writing or in speech, are not limited to English alone, but are also found in other languages of the world. According to traditional grammar, conjunctions are often regarded as one of the eight grammatical classes or parts of speech in English. Furthermore, like preposition, they are often regarded as closed class because they are indeclinable and inflectionless, that is, they are not morphologically expandable through suffixation (using prefixes and suffixes to generate more grammatical classes like nouns, verbs and adjectives). The paper has an immense contribution to knowledge in language study because it has drawn these African languages together in one place and shown clearly how conjunctions are used in them, so that the reader needs not travel far before getting the basic information on how conjunctions are used in these languages. Indeed, this is one of the major purposes of this research.

2. Definition of Conjunctions

According to the traditional grammar, conjunctions are words mainly or mostly used to link or connect two words, phrases, clauses or sentences together, in both writing and speech. Conjunctions are often regarded as one of the eight grammatical classes or parts of speech in English. Unlike nouns, verbs and adjectives, they are referred to as closed class because they are indeclinable and inflectionless just like the prepositions, that is, they are not morphologically expandable through suffixation (using prefixes and suffixes to generate more grammatical classes). Types include the following: coordinating conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions, correlative conjunctions and compound conjunctions [refer to the paper: Conjunctions in English: Meaning, Types and Uses for comprehensive types of conjunctions]. Outlined here below are some of these languages:
3. Conjunctions in Akan

Akan is also known as Tiwi and Fante, and it is spoken in Ivory Coast and Ghana. In this language, conjunctions function as linkers or connectors. However, only noun phrase conjunctions operate in this language. According to Stassen, as cited by Amfo [27], a noun phrase conjunction occurs in a sentence: “(a) if it describes a single occurrence of an event (action, state, process, etc.) and (b) if this event is simultaneously of two participant referents, which are conceived of as separate individuals”. Noun phrase conjunction in Akan is performed by using a marker distinct from the one used in joining clauses. Furthermore, according to Amfo [31], Stassen suggests two strategies for noun phrase conjunction. These are: coordinative and commitative strategies. A classical example of the coordinative strategy is a coordination involving the use of English and, while the English with typically exemplifies the commitative strategy. The coordinative and commitative strategies are exemplified in (i) and (ii) respectively.

(i) [[Peter and Mary] [walk to school]]
(ii) [[Peter] [walks to school] [with Mary]].

It is evident that one noun phrase connector, ne stands for both English and and with in this language. According to Amfo [32], two noun phrases are conjoined with ne, and that ne is underdetermined between a coordinative and a commitative meaning. In other words, ne could be interpreted coordinatively or commitatively depending on the contextual information.

4. Conjunctions in Buwal

Buwal is a language spoken in Cameroon. In the language, conjunctions perform a linking function. According to Matthew, cited by Viljeon [300-310], a conjunction is ‘a word which joins two syntactic units’. There are three types of conjunctions in Buwal: subordinators, sequential markers and coordinators. Subordinators are morphemes which mark subordinate clauses. Included in this section are those morphemes that have a subordinating function. Some of these subordinators include: má ‘when’ which is a morpheme that sets off a relative clause and it occurs at the beginning of a relative clause, már ‘before’ a subordinating conjunction whose only function is to mark adverbial clauses and it can be followed by an infinitive complement, mādā or ndāz ‘if’ which introduces possible conditional clauses and ndār ‘so that’ which is used to mark purpose clauses. Sequential markers are morphemes which mark clauses referring to an event which occurs after and is somehow a consequence of event in the previous clause. Buwal has two sequential markers, āmbā ‘then’ and ājā ‘then/so’. These do not precede negative clauses but may follow a fronted adverb of time. In addition, the sequential marker can function at a discourse level, occurring at the beginning of a sentence. Coordinators are words which link units that are syntactically equivalent. The conjunctive and type coordination can be expressed in Buwal using one of two conjunctions: ēj ‘and’ and leg ‘plus’. Both can be used to coordinate noun phrases, prepositional phrases, adjectives and clauses. The conjunction ēj ‘and’ can also be used at discourse level, beginning a sentence. Furthermore, there is no disjunctive coordinating conjunction ‘or’ in Buwal. Disjunction is expressed using negation markers or juxtaposition in the case of interrogative disjunction. In the case of adversative coordination ‘but’, Buwal makes use of the borrowed conjunction āmā ‘but’ from Hausa. This conjunction is used to coordinate clauses and also often functions at a discourse level, beginning a sentence.

5. Conjunctions in Ewe

Ewe is a language spoken in Ghana. In this language, conjunctions, just as seen from the foregoing, also perform a linking function. However, only the evidence of coordination exists. According to Dzameshie [72-79], coordination in Ewe involves connecting either parts of a sentence or clauses as conjunctions. Thus the words kple ‘and’, eye ‘and’, alo ‘or’, aloo alo, ‘either… or’, hā ‘and also’, gake ‘but’ and kpakple ‘and’ are coordinating conjunctions. But kpakple is normally used to indicate that the items in the list have been exhaustively listed. Coordination may be classified in terms of two criteria: (i) syntactic structures and (ii) linguistic coding. With reference to the first criterion, two types of coordination may be identified: phrasal and clausal. Also, based on the second criterion, two types of coordination may be identified: overt and covert. In phrasal coordination, words or sequences that belong to only one grammatical category (e. g. NPs) are conjoined, and this is an important principle governing coordination in this language. In clausal coordination, two or more clauses are conjoined by coordinating conjunctions. In overt coordination, coordination is overt when the phrases or clauses are explicitly conjoined with an overt connector. In covert coordination, coordination occurs when two or more clauses are juxtaposed without any explicit connecting word, but the sentence is interpreted by native speakers as possessing a conjunction in the underlying structure.
6. Conjunctions in Gwari

Also known as Gbagyi, conjunctions perform a linking or connecting function in this language. However, Hyman and Magaji [86-109] identify three types of conjunctions that are different from coordinating, subordinating and correlative conjunctions. They are: simultaneous, consecutive and subjunctive conjunctions. Simultaneous conjunction is used when two actions taking place during the same period of time are conjoined. The conjunction involved here is translated ‘and’ or ‘as’. Also, a simultaneously conjoined clause is inherently continuous and can be used in habitual constructions with the added nuance of ‘being in the progress of’. In this way, it is regularly used with the auxiliary of the habitual tenses. On the other hand, a consecutive conjunction is required when two actions are combined, the second of which is subsequent in time to the first. Such constructions are translated ‘and then’ or simply ‘and’. Moreover, a subjunctive conjunction is used to conjoin two clauses, the second of which represents an action that has not been completed, but is rather projected to some point in time subsequent to the tense of the verb in the first clause. It is most frequently used to express a desire, an order, a purpose or goal, and it is translated ‘in order to’. A subjunctive conjunction also must be used for future conjunction since the action cannot have been completed, but is instead projected and unachieved.

7. Conjunctions in Hausa

In Hausa, conjunctions perform a linking function as well. Recognised in the language are two types and they are: coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. According to Caron [35], the coordinating conjunction dà ‘and’ is used to coordinate two NPs or APs, but cannot coordinate two clauses. A link between two clauses is rather expressed through simple juxtaposition, sometimes reinforced by adverbial connectors, e.g. kuma ‘too’ when the connection is pragmatic or kánà ‘then’ for temporal succession. The coordinator kuma ‘then’ can also appear either between two conjoined clauses or between the subject pronouns and the verb of the second clause. In the simple juxtaposition of clauses, TAM (Tense, Aspect, Mood) plays an important part in the interpretation of the connection between clauses. Furthermore, the coordinator ‘or’ is called disjunctive coordination and it is used with ko: ‘or’, ko: ... ko: ‘either ... or’ to express an alternative. On the other hand, the subordinating conjunction har means ‘as far as’, ‘up to’, ‘until’, ‘even’, etc. and it denotes continuation of an action until a qualitative degree is reached, entailing a change of state. Almost similar to this is the subordinator sai, which when used with in combination with negation, means ‘except’, ‘only’, ‘unless’, etc. and it denotes a progression towards a goal.

8. Conjunctions in Igala

In Igala, conjunctions connect, join or link words, phrases, clauses or sentences and perform the same function as in English, but without the recognition of the parts of speech taxonomy or grammatical class, as they are regarded in English. The only parts of speech in the language are nouns, verbs and some elements of adjectives. Nonetheless, the presence and use of the following conjunctions have been identified in the language: (i) coordinators like kpái ‘and’, àmáá ‘but’ and àbekí ‘or’; (ii) subordinators like ubí or ubílé ‘after’, tódú ‘for’, tábálẹ or tábále-tábále ‘yet’, tódú or tódúlè and àbekí ‘so’, ìbìbù ‘if’, kákiní or káki ‘that’, ikò or ógbà ‘when’, chái ‘unless’, tákù or ógbà or ògbà ‘before’, tólè ‘than’, tólè ‘than’, àludúúkídè ‘however’, tábále-tábále ‘nevertheless’, ì ‘though/although’, ógbó ‘where’, etc. and (ii) correlatives such as tù...kpái ‘both...and’, tó...tù ‘neither...nor’, dágba...àbekí or dágba...dágba ‘whether...or’ and ì...tábále-tábále ‘though...yet’.

9. Conjunctions in Igbo

In Igbo, Green and Igwe [46-47] note that a small class of conjunctions has been found and that they precede nominals and interrogatives, or introduce clauses or sentences. They are regarded as a part of speech but must be understood as being sui generis (unique in their characteristics). Also, they act as a link rather than as entering into a relationship of mutual dependence such as exists among other parts of speech. The link occurs in three levels: between parts of speech, between clauses, and between sentences. Furthermore, according to Emenajo [86-89], conjunctions in Ibo form a closed class, they are never found in utterance-final position and they have an initial consonant. Moreover, he points out the distinctive features of conjunctions, which include: (i) their tones are almost always invariable, i.e. they almost always retain their lexical tones; (ii) though they function as linking words, they differ in the things they link together. While some of them seem to be used exclusively with nominal or infinitive phrases, e.g. nà 1. ‘and’, some others seem to be used exclusively before verb phrases, e.g. tópu ‘before’; nà 2. ‘that’ while yet some others seem to be used before both nominal and verb phrases, e.g. kà ‘as’; (iii) some of the conjunctions can be combined to...
give compounds which translate into English as if they were independent conjunctions; (iv) while most conjunctions are used singly, about five of them can be used in linked pairs before each of the linked structures, and (v) in terms of how they are used, one can divide the conjunctions into coordinating and subordinating.

10. Conjunctions in Jukun

In this language, few conjunctions have been found. There is no evidence of coordination but there is a trace of subordination, often referred to as independent conjunction. According to Nurse [7], the conditional màà or mòò ‘if’, ‘when’, etc. can occur as an independent conjunction, or can combine with the habitual to form a conjunctive. In most combinations, it occurs in positive and negative clauses, and the conditional clause may precede or follow the main clause. When the màà-clause precedes the main clause, the màà translates as ‘if’, ‘when’ and ‘whenever’, but when it follows, it has different translations, and it is essentially timeless.

11. Conjunctions in Kuteb

Kuteb is a Jukunoid language of East-Central Nigeria. Here, conjunctions perform a linking function but they are not regarded as a part of speech. The only parts of speech are nouns and verbs. In terms of types, there are no coordinating, subordinating or correlative conjunctions. According to Koops [58 & 84], they are words and phrases that join clauses together. They are very few in the language, and as such, they belong to the closed class. Some of them include: ámà ‘then’, asítì ‘if’, títí ‘since’, etc.

12. Conjunctions in Nupe

In Nupe, conjunctions also perform a connecting function and they are regarded as morphemes rather than words. These morphemes only have a coordinating status and there is no evidence of subordination in the language. According to Kandybowicz [53-63], the identity of coordinating element in Nupe is determined by the size or categorical status of the conjoined constituents. As such, conjunction comes in three different forms in the language: (i) the morpheme tò (translated to English ‘and’) is used to conjoin constituents outside the VP level, namely, DPs, PPs, and APs; (ii) verb phrase conjunction proceeds via covert coordination. This is done when a pair of adjacent verb phrases surface without marking of coordination, the verb phrases themselves, and not two clauses containing the verb phrases are being covertly joined; and (iii) the conjunction of clausal constituents is mediated either by ma (another English equivalent ‘and’ but used differently from tò) or ci translated ‘then’. In addition, a variant of ma that is used to conjoin clauses and relate them temporally exists in the language. Also, when two sentences are conjoined by ci, the eventuality denoted by the second conjunct is understood to hold at a time posterior to that of the first conjunct. The ci morpheme is similar to English ‘then’, as mentioned before. Semantically, it is a function from pairs of events to temporal orderings.

13. Conjunctions in Yoruba

In Yoruba, two types of conjunctions have been identified and these, again, are coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. However, according to Ogden [59], conjunctions are used only before the verb (sic). This implies that conjunctions in Yoruba do not perform a linking (or connecting) function as usual. He identifies the following conjunctions:

- And – ati, si
- But - ñ ugbọn
- If – bi, followed by ba (bi o ba)
- Or – tabi, ‘abi
- Still - sibẹ, sibẹsibẹ
- Also/moreover - pẹlupelu
- Because – nitoriti
- Therefore – nitorina.

14. Conjunctions in Zulu

Zulu is a language spoken in South Africa. In this language, conjunctions exist and operate, but in a complex manner. According to Gowlett [22], the use of conjunctions in Zulu can be fairly complex for non-native learners of the language. This is partially because of their varying significance and the way they affect (or do not affect) a following verb or copulative. Differences in the structure of Zulu and the structure of English can be problematic too. The conjunction may be embedded within a larger structure in which it is less easily recognisable. In some cases, there is an additional problem in that the conjunction is identical to another form from which it derives, which is not a conjunction.

15. Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is very obvious that conjunctions are not only present but they are also used in these languages. In addition, it has been brought to our attention that conjunctions do not perform a linking or connecting function in all the languages under study here, as in English. For
instance, in Jukun, conjunctions have no evidence of coordination or linking but there is some evidence of subordination. They either occur independently or they combine with the habitual to form a conjunctive. And in Nupe, conjunctions exist but they are regarded as morphemes rather than words. That conjunctions either perform different functions or are regarded as one thing or the other, as we have seen, is the beauty of this study, and this shows the dynamic nature of conjunctions in language. Indeed, this article is, and will continue to be of great value to students of language as well as language scholars in all generations.

16. References


