Investigating the Morpho-Syntactic Antecedents of the Auxiliary Category in Universal Grammar

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Abstract

The theory of universal grammar presupposes that language is a universal property of the individual human mind, and that all humans have the capacity for language known as the 'language faculty'. Hence, universal grammar deals with general properties of natural languages found everywhere in the world, not with the idiosyncrasies of a particular language. Given that the auxiliary verb is an unusually unique linguistic item of English, this study investigates its presence and morpho-syntactic antecedents in other languages of the world as a basis to test for its universal antecedents. The languages studied here are, like English, all head-initial languages. The data is small but the complexities and dynamism of the morpho-syntactic status of the auxiliary verb in these languages, in relation to English, makes for an interesting and an adventurous foray into the investigation of its universality. The result indicates that the auxiliary verb has universal morpho-syntactc antecedents, although with sporadic lexical and functional independence in other languages, and that unlike in English, the form of the modal subclass in these other languages is subject to inflection.

Keywords: language acquisition device, locality conditions, morpho-syntactic, mesoclitics, subcategorise

1.0 Introduction

This study is based on the theory of universal grammar which presupposes that language is a universal property of the individual human mind, and that all humans have the capacity for language known as the 'language faculty' made up of a special linguistic device called the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). (*Aspects*, 3) Hence, universal grammar deals with general properties of language found everywhere, rather than with the idiosyncrasies of a particular language. It is generally concerned with what is common to human beings, not what distinguishes one person from another. Given that the auxiliary category is an unusually unique linguistic item of English, this paper intends to investigate its presence or occurrence, i.e., its morpho-syntactic behaviour in other languages as a basis to test for its universality or otherwise. The data of the languages used is selected based on the similarity of structure and the availability of data, and not on any other criteria; the languages are chosen because like English, they are all head-initial languages. The data might be limited, but the complexities and the dynamism of the status of auxiliaries in these other languages, in relation to English, make for an interesting and an adventurous foray into the investigation of the universality of the auxiliary category.

The morpho-syntactic processes of verbalisation in some languages are to say the least, very complex but interesting and exciting to explore. Unlike English which is unique in its morphology and the procedure for verbalisation seems straightforward, less problematic and less clumsy, the morpho-syntactic processes of verbalisation in other languages is very complex and more complicated. For example, in many Nigerian languages including Hausa, Tiv and Yoruba, the processes go beyond mere base or stem affixes; prefixation, suffixation, morpheme additives, word mutation, and tonation. It also includes certain socio-linguistic and other cultural parameters or conventions. (Jija, 25) That is, it involves certain parameters which Chomsky refers to as *Locality conditions*. (Cook and Newson, 20). Again, Boyd and Richerson (1985), as quoted in Kenny Smith's *How Culture and Biology Interacts* that ''the uniqueness of human language suggests some basis in human biology'', but that ''the precise form of any individual's linguistic system depends on social learning, as such, human language is part of the broader phenomenon of human *culture.*

Indeed, even some European languages that, like English, belong to the great Indo-European family of languages such as French and Italian exhibit different and complex verbalisation processes. For instance, in English in particular, modal auxiliary verbs are more likely to be syntactically inclined as neighbours to lexical verbs or in the vicinity of verbs than nouns. This much is affirmed by Newson et al in the following words "Modal

auxiliary verbs such as *may, can* and *must* … are obviously more related to verbs than nouns." (11) However, in some Nigerian languages such as Hausa and Tiv, the existence of the auxiliary verb can best be described as sporadic, because in some instances it functions as an independent lexical item and at other times it lacks lexical independence. At such times that it lacks lexical independence, the auxiliary element is either fused to the subject NP or to the lexical verb. For example, 'zan' in the Hausa sentence, Ba *zan* zo ba*,* is a mesoclitized word because it literally means 'will I'.

2.0 Morphology and Syntax of Auxiliary Verbs in Other Languages
Morphology according to Ndimele is "a branch of linguistics which focuses on the study of how words are created or formed in human language" (Jija, 2). Highlighting the importance of words in human language further, he quotes Brown and Miller for upholding the relevance of morphology as "a bridge between the syntax of a language and its morphology" (161) The Tiv language has a few auxiliary verbs, and like Hausa, some have morpholo gical independence while others do not. Some of the few such as 'ngu' in Tiv (*ngu* van) and 'na' in Hausa (ta *na* zuwa) that exist as distinct lexical items have dual or even multiple functions. Those that lack lexical independence are mostly realised through a fusion process known as *mesoclitics;* where the auxiliary element is morphologically joined either to the noun phrase that forms the subject of the sentence, or fused with the lexical verb. For example:

1.	**Tiv**	**English**
(a)	M *ngu* van.	I *am* coming.
	Hausa	**English**
(b)	I *na* zuwa	I *am* coming.

In the 1a sentence above, the auxiliary verb is 'ngu'. Here it functions as an independent lexical item that subcategorises for the lexical verb *coming*. The Hausa word 'na' in 1b is also an auxiliary verb and it is an independent lexical item which also functions as the head of the verb phrase *I am coming.* This antecedent of the auxiliary verb in the grammar of Tiv and that of Hausa to function as an independent lexical items is similar to that of English. This shows the sporadic nature of the auxiliary category in other languages of the world. Here the Tiv word 'ngu' in 1b means *am,* i.e. it functions as an auxiliary verb and 'M' is a pronoun that functions as the subject NP, *I,* while in the Hausa example, 'na'

is also an auxiliary verb meaning *am* which subcategorises for *coming.* But, again, there are contrasting examples as illustrated below:

2. English   **Tiv**
(a) *She is* coming.   *Ngu* van.
    English   **Hausa**
(b) He will not come.   Ba *zai* zo ba.

In example 2a, the word 'Ngu', which functions in 1a as an independent lexical auxiliary now performs dual functions through a fusion process (mesoclitic) by acting both as a pronominal pronoun *she* while also retaining its status as an aspectual auxiliary verb, *is.* Again, 'zai' in example 2b above is also a modal auxiliary verb and a pronoun fused together, literally meaning *will I.* This is enough proof that the auxiliary verb, in particular contexts, in some languages, functions only as a mental category with no morphological independence.

3.0 Negation
In English, the negative particle or 'category', as Carnie refers to *not and* any other element that functions to negate a clause, usually precedes the lexical verb or verb phrase, except verbs in auxiliary function, (48), for instance,

Terseer will *never* change.
But,
Terseer has *not* changed.

Hausa language on the other hand, is notorious in its use of double negation where English and many other languages would use only one, for example:

Hausa   **English**
a. *Ban* sani *ba* -   I *don't* know. Literally: *Don't* I know *not.*

We observe that in the Hausa clause, *Ban sani ba,* there are two negative elements; the 'Ban' at the beginning and the 'ba' at the end of the clause both of which function as negative elements. Although the grammar of Tiv does not have double negation, it is similar to Hausa in the sense that the negative particle in all circumstances usually occurs

as the last element of structure. This conforms to the claim by Jija that the verbalisation process in some languages has more to do with cultural conventions, i.e., parameters of locality conditions, shaped by culture and other environmental factors, than with any morpho-syntactic criteria. (Jija, 26; Odling-Smee, Laland and Feldman, 2003)*. The negative particle in Tiv 'ga', is always the last element of structure in negative constructions, usually coming after the complement. For example:

English	**Tiv**
(c) I will *not / won't* accept failure.	Me lumun mgbe *ga*

Literally meaning (I will accept failure not)

Interestingly, 'Me' in example c above is also a mesoclitised word which translates as *I will*.

4.0 Syntax of Modal Auxiliary Verbs in other Languages

Again unlike English, the Hausa modal auxiliary verb also inflects for tense as in the following example:

Ba *zan* zo ba.	I *will* not come.
Ba *zai* zo ba.	He *will* not come.

Here the modal auxiliary verb 'zan' in the first clause, referring to the first person singular, inflects to 'zai' in the second sentence to agree with its subject, the third person singular NP. However, we know that modal auxiliary verbs in English are morphologically invariant; they do not inflect for tense. Even among the European languages, some of which are said to have originated from the same Germanic language as English such as German and Dutch as well as the Romance languages like Italian and French, the modal auxiliary verb does inflect for tense, for example:

French		**English**
Je do*is aller*	-	I *must* go.
Il do*it aller*	-	He *must* go.
Italian		**English**
Dovr*ei* partire	-	I *ought* to go.
Dovr*ebbe* partire	-	He *ought* to go.

In the French example, the modal element *dois* referring to the first person singular inflects to become *doit* in the second example so as to agree with its third person singular subject. A congruous situation also occurs in the Italian example where dov*rei*, the element functioning as the modal auxiliary verb inflects from a first person singular to dov*rebbe* in order to agree with its third person singular subject in the second sentence. Again, modal auxiliary verbs in English occur before their lexical counter parts as in*, I must go*. But in Hausa modals could come before their subjects, e.g.,

Dole, zan tafi   -   literally: *Must,* will I go.

However, the expression of *must* in Yoruba is similar to that of English, e.g.:

Mo *gbodo* lo – I *must* go

5.0 Sentence Tags

Interestingly, because of the sporadic nature of the auxiliary verb in other languages occasioned by parameters of locality conditions, the concept of sentence tag is completely non-existent in such languages. In the grammar of Tiv and that of Hausa, for example, instead of the tag, a full verb phrase is repeated as can be observed in the following examples:

English: Dooshima should not eat cakes, *should she?*
Tiv: Dooshima a de yan kyeek ga, *shin aya?*
English: You will come, *wont you?*
Hausa: Za ka zo, *ko ba za ka zo ba?*

The result of what we have here as a sentence tag in the Tiv example is actually a complete verb phrase in the form of *or should she eat?* Where 'shin aya?' means *or should she eat?* As for the Hausa example, 'ko ba za ka zo ba?' is a complete clause meaning, *or will you not come?* or literally, *not will you come not?* This is why Jija says that the realisation of certain linguistic aspects in some languages "is a process because there are acceptable morphological conventions or rules …which must be observed, maintained and adhered to without violation" (26) These unique cultural based morpho-syntactic conventions or accepted norms associated with the auxiliary verb are, then, the parameters of locality conditions. All these evidence point to the fact that, although the auxiliary verb may have sporadic morphological and lexical independence the grammar of other languages, its existence across many known languages of the world is not in

doubt. Indeed, the use of the auxiliary verb in these other languages is based more on intuition, culture and the knowledge of the language than on any lexico-morphemic or morpho-syntactic behaviour of the word itself.

The question that arises, however, is this: do these differences in the lexico-morphemic and morpho-syntactic behaviour of the auxiliary verb between English and these other languages of the world negate the universal status of this linguistic unit? The reality is that the morphological and syntactic differences not-withstanding, this study has demonstrated that there are traces of auxiliary verb in many languages of the world. Again, Cook and Newson in their work, *Chomsky's Universal Grammar,* also provide the answer to this knotty question by stating that "provided that the universal is found in some human language, it does not have to be present in all languages" because according to them, "UG Theory does not insist all languages are the same; the variation introduced through parameters allows principles to be all but undetectable in particular languages" (21) For example, it is a principle of UG that sentences of all languages must have word classes such as verbs, nouns, adverbs, adjectives, etc, but it is a parameter of locality condition, occasioned either by societal principles or cultural conventions, how linguistic communities order these elements. Just as we observed under sentence tags, English requires movement in the formation of questions derived from declarative sentences through a process called 'inversion' but Hausa and Tiv do not require movement for the formation of such questions. And movement too is a product of linguistic parameters. This again conforms to the position taken by Cook and Newson that "The presence or absence of syntactic movement is then a parameter of variation between languages" (21).

Given all these, therefore, it's evident that the auxiliary verb in English, as compared to other languages, is unique in its morphological and syntactic characteristics. It also shows that the sporadic antecedents of the auxiliary verb in the other languages studied here is not a violation of the principle of the theory of universal grammar, but that the obvious differences in the lexico-morphemic and morpho-syntactic behaviour of the auxiliary verb between English and these other languages is purely a matter of parameterized variations or what is called *Locality conditions*. Because in the words of Cook and Newson, "if knowledge of language were just a matter of fixed principles, all human languages would be identical; the variation between them arises from the different ways that they handle certain parameterized choices" such as fusion and movement of lexical items as well as inflection. (21)

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