

Grammatical Variation and Feature Checking in Yoruba: A Minimalist Account

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Abstract

Variation refers to the systemic differences in language use that occur across speakers, contexts and time, reflecting the dynamic and adaptive nature of human language. In Yoruba, this phenomenon has become significant due to contact with English, Arabic and socio-cultural influences. While the previous studies have largely examined phonological and sociolinguistic variation, grammatical variation-particularly from syntactic standpoint-remains underexplored. This study, therefore, focuses on identifying and analysing grammatical variation in Yoruba using the framework of the Minimalist program (MP) with the view to identifying forms of grammatical variation and determining their linguistic motivation. Data were drawn from the Yoruba TV show 'Masoyinbo' and natural conversation involving two speakers for the two groups aged (20-35 and 45-70). The study examines three core areas common among the speakers of Yoruba: prepositional variation (fún/lówó alternation), lexical-positional alternation (Lola/lagbara alternation) and lexical-semantic alternation (gbó/mò alternation). These were analysed based on feature valuation, lexical insertion and interpretive effects at the conceptual-intentional interface. The findings reveal that grammatical variation in Yoruba is conditioned by feature compatibility, optional lexical insertion and interpretive flexibility rather than random alternation. The study concludes that such variation reflects interaction between syntactic structure and sociocultural factors such as age, religion and language competence, underscoring the Yoruba evolving grammatical system.

Linguistics Variation

Linguistic variation is a universal feature of human language, reflecting differences in how speakers use forms across age groups, social classes, levels of competence, and sociolinguistic environments. Scholars have long investigated this phenomenon to understand why speakers choose one structure over another and how such choices contribute to language change. Chomsky (1965), as cited in Honeybone (2011), notes that much variation is shaped by non-linguistic factors,

while Labov and Herzog (cited in Chambers, 2002) emphasise that although not all variability leads to change, all change begins with variability.

Variation occurs at all levels of language—phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics—and may manifest as differences in pronunciation, lexical preference, or structural selection. These patterns reveal that speakers do not use grammar uniformly but negotiate meaning and structure based on context, intention, and social factors. Understanding variation, therefore, provides insight into how languages evolve and how speakers conceptualise and express meaning within their linguistic system.

Variation can be categorised into two main types: linguistic variation and sociolinguistic variation (Gomez, 2021). Linguistic variation refers to differences in grammar, pronunciation, word choice, and morphology that occur without a change in meaning, whereas sociolinguistic variation is influenced by factors such as social class, age, and religion. While both areas are significant, this study focuses on grammatical variation, which represents the intersection of syntax and sociolinguistics.

Over time, scholars have used terms such as socio-syntax, syntactic variation, morphosyntactic variation, and grammatical variation. Despite differences in terminology, all describe the relationship between society, grammar, and language. Numerous studies have explored variation across languages, but no universal pattern has been established. Grammatical variation primarily concerns the integration of syntactic theory with linguistic variability to explain constructions within conversations and speech communities.

Grammatical variation, as explained by Moore (2023), involves understanding why speakers use language the way they do by examining their learning experiences and how they adapt that knowledge in communication. Moore argues that grammatical choices communicate more than structural differences; they also convey information about when a person is speaking, their preferences, stance, and attitudes toward interlocutors. This perspective highlights that grammatical variation is not merely linguistic alternation but also a social and cognitive process through which speakers express identity, alignment, and intent.

Examples of Grammatical Variation in English

Consider the following variations in English word order:

- 1 Betty took off her coat and gave him it.

- 2 Betty took her coat off and gave him it.
- 3 Betty took her coat off and gave it him.
- 4 Betty took off her coat and gave it to him.
- 5 Betty off her coat and gave it to him. (Honeybone,2011:1-2)

Variations 1–3 are common in north-west England and the English East Midlands, while 4 and 5 are more typical in Nigerian English. These examples demonstrate how sociolinguistic environments influence grammatical forms. Pronunciation may vary across these structures, and even when meaning is constant, differences in word order reflect distinct grammatical preferences. For instance, “gave him it” follows a typical subject-object sequence, “gave it him” is dialectal and nonstandard in formal English, and “gave it to him” is widely accepted due to the preposition clarifying the indirect object.

Adger and Smith (2005) provide further evidence of morphosyntactic variation in English, focusing on the alternation of *was/were* and the absence of *do* in negative declaratives from Buckie, Scotland:

- 6 Buckie boats were a’ bonny graint.
“Buckie boats were all nicely grained”
- 7 The mothers was roaring at ye comin’ in.
“The mothers were shouting at you to come”
- 8 They were still like partying hard.
“They were still partying hard” (Adger and Smith,2005:156)

The alternation between *was* and *were* depends on the subject: second person singular (*you*), first person plural (*we*), existential *there*, and plural noun phrases. However, with the third-person plural *they*, only *were* is grammatical. Within the Minimalist Program, this variation arises from differences in morphological features, which must align with the subject.

Burnett et al. (2018) analyse negative concord in English, a phenomenon absent in Standard English, highlighting historical shifts in negative polarity items (e.g., replacing *any* with *no* in constructions involving the verb *be*). Obeka (2016) identifies systematic variations in Nigerian

English, such as article omissions, noun misclassifications, and preposition misuse. While often considered errors relative to Standard English, these forms represent structured variation shaped by mother tongue influence, demonstrating the importance of recognising linguistic norms within sociocultural contexts.

Despite extensive research on English, studies of variation in African languages remain limited. Speakers and researchers often interpret variation as errors or markers of low competence. Yet, languages are dynamic, shaped by geography, education, social background, and religion. As a result, every language naturally exhibits variation within its speech community over time.

Yoruba Grammar

Yoruba, spoken by millions in Nigeria and the Diaspora, exhibits a rich morphological, phonological, and syntactic system characteristic of African languages. Its grammar has been extensively studied, from Crowther (1852) to contemporary analyses by Ajiboye (2005) and Oye Taiwo (2013). Crowther's pioneering work documented word formation processes, showing how verbs, nouns, and compounds are derived through prefixation, reduplication, and vowel alternation. For example, the verb *ṣe* ('to do') generates forms such as *ilẹṣe* ('a state of sin') and *alailẹṣe* ('one who has no sin'), illustrating derivational processes in Yoruba.

Bamgbose (1966) expanded this foundation using native speaker data, analysing phonology, morphology, syntax, and verb aspects. He highlighted Yoruba's tonal system, verb tenses, aspectual distinctions (*Mo ti jeun* vs. *Mo n jeun*), and sentence structures, distinguishing simple, complex, and compound constructions. Bamgbose applied structural and transformational approaches, demonstrating how element positions, sequences, and relational connections shape grammatical patterns.

Awobuluyi (1978) further refined the analysis by classifying words based on meaning, syntactic behaviour, and function, proposing six parts of speech for Yoruba. He examined nouns, pronouns, qualifiers, verbs, modifiers, and sentence introducers, emphasising the central role of verbs in sentence construction. Serial verbs, echoing verbs, and complex verbs illustrate the dynamic interplay of lexical and syntactic structure. He also detailed the function of conjunctions and disjunctions (*ati, pèlú, òun, àbí, sùgbón*) in linking sentence elements. While Awobuluyi's work reflects standard Yoruba, earlier analyses often relied on English-based classification systems.

Together, these studies demonstrate that Yoruba grammar is both highly structured and flexible, accommodating derivation, compounding, and syntactic variation. They highlight the interaction

between lexical semantics, syntactic behaviour, and speaker intuition, providing a foundation for understanding both historical and contemporary grammatical patterns, including variation, within Yoruba speech communities.

Variation Within Yoruba

Variation in Yoruba has been an area of concern for linguists who aim to document how the language evolves. Scholars such as Crowther (1852), Bamgbose (1966), and Awobuluyi (1978) have laid a strong foundation for Yoruba grammar, providing a clear framework for understanding its structures, rules, and patterns. As language is naturally subject to change, scholars have observed notable shifts in Yoruba vocabulary and grammar due to contact with English, Arabic, and other languages.

Adebayo (2020, 2023) identified several changes in Yoruba words, including new derivations and morphosyntactic developments, particularly in second- and third-person plural forms.

9	English	Output in Yoruba	Gloss
	a. bread	búṛẹ̀dì	bread'
	b. blade	bílẹ̀èdì	blade
10	Arabic	Output in Yoruba	Gloss
	a. fitna	fitínà	temptation
	b naas	neṛésì	mankind (Adebayo, 2023, p. 252)

These examples show how new lexical items have entered Yoruba grammar through borrowing and adaptation. Many of these derivations are the result of English and Arabic influence, especially through Islam, which facilitated the integration of foreign words into Yoruba. In his 2020 study, Adebayo also identified orthographic changes in the writing of second- and third-person plural pronouns, comparing Pre-Yoruba and Crowther's Yoruba with contemporary usage, highlighting the phonological changes over time.

Stage 1 (Pre-Yoruba):	Nominative Accusative/	Genitive (AG)
	*Èṅyin	*ṅyin
	*Àṅwọ̀n	*ṅwọ̀n

Stage 2 (Pre-Yoruba):	*Èṅyin	*ṅyin
	*Àṅwọṅ/ṅwọṅ	*ṅwọṅ
Stage 3 (Crowther Yoruba):	Èṅyin	ṅyin
	Àwọṅ/nwọṅ	wọṅ
Stage 4 (Contemporary Yoruba):	Ẹyin	yin
	Àwọṅ/wọṅ	wọṅ (Adebayo, 2023, p. 252)

His analysis shows that the alveolar nasal has been gradually deleted from these forms over time, reflecting a diachronic shift from Pre-Yoruba to modern Yoruba.

Atologbe (2020) examined variation between Standard Yoruba and the Igbomina dialect in Kwara State. His study compared Standard Yoruba with three Igbomina dialects (Irepodun, Ifelodun, and Isin) using the *Ibadan 400 Word List* and personal interviews. Employing the comparative method, he identified similarities and differences across the dialects, noting that while most verbs remained consistent, some lexical items varied. His findings revealed high levels of mutual intelligibility among the dialects, with scores ranging between **77.4%** and **98.9%**. This shows that although there are lexical and phonological differences between Standard Yoruba and Igbomina, a strong degree of variation still exists within the broader Yoruba language continuum.

Although research on Yoruba variation exists, the number of studies remains relatively small. Previous works have applied frameworks such as the Minimalist Program and Transformational Grammar. For instance, Adger accounted for English variation in Buckie using the Minimalist approach, while Adebayo employed Transformational Grammar in his analysis. However, it is observed that there is little research on Variation in Yoruba sentence structures using the minimalist framework. The question then arises: how can grammatical variation within Yoruba sentences be explained in terms of syntactic operations and feature interaction? The gap highlights the need to examine Yoruba variation not just as surface-level, lexical or phonological differences, but as a reflection of deeper syntactic and interpretative mechanisms while addressing the grammaticality of this variation and possible factors. Addressing this question is central to understanding the reason for the interaction of sociolinguistic factors and speaker choices of construction to produce variation within Yoruba grammar.

The study adopts the Minimalist Program (MP) as its theoretical framework to explain grammatical variation in Yoruba. Developed by Chomsky (1995), the MP views grammar as an economical system in which syntactic structures are generated with the simplest and most efficient operations, following the Economy Principle. Within this framework, lexical items carry specific features—such as person, number, tense, or prepositional selection—that must be checked and matched during sentence derivation. Key operations include Merge, which combines elements into hierarchical structures; Agree, which ensures feature compatibility between heads and phrases; Feature Checking, which confirms that uninterpretable features on a lexical item are valued against interpretable ones; and Transfer, which maps the derivation onto the Phonetic Form (PF) for pronunciation and the Logical Form (LF) for semantic interpretation.

The MP is beneficial for understanding variation in language because it allows linguists to model how different forms emerge from the interaction of lexical features, structural positions, and interpretive requirements. It emphasises that variation is not arbitrary but systematically constrained by feature compatibility and syntactic licensing, offering a formal account of why some constructions are grammatical while others are not. This framework provides a clear lens through which to examine the structural possibilities of Yoruba grammar and the underlying principles governing variation.

This study investigates grammatical variation in Yoruba through a combination of naturally occurring data and constructed elicitation materials. Data were sourced from the Masoyinbo Interview archive, from which 10-minute excerpts were randomly extracted for six Yoruba speakers. These speakers were divided into two age-defined groups: younger speakers (20–35 years) and older speakers (45–70 years). The selection reflects an interest in generational differences, particularly how exposure to English, Arabic, and media-driven Yoruba influences younger speakers' grammatical competence, compared to older speakers who generally demonstrate higher stability in usage due to reduced external linguistic influence.

Although detailed sociolinguistic profiles of the interviewees were unavailable, all speakers were native Yoruba speakers living in predominantly Yoruba-speaking communities, using the language in daily communication. This provides reasonable linguistic homogeneity and allows the study to focus on syntactic and semantic variation rather than broad sociolinguistic divergence.

The data consist of two types: (i) verbatim transcriptions from the interviews and informal conversations, which provide naturally occurring constructions, and (ii) impressionistically

constructed minimal pairs based on native-speaker intuition. The constructed data were necessary where interview recordings did not produce paired constructions needed to test subtle grammatical contrasts. This dual approach strengthens the empirical grounding by ensuring that naturally occurring usage is complemented by diagnostic examples capable of revealing underlying grammatical distinctions.

The 10-minute sample per speaker is judged adequate for this study because the analysis focuses on specific grammatical phenomena—particularly prepositional alternation (*fún/lówó*), verb meaning shifts (*mò/gbó*), and lexicalised expressions (*lólá/lágbára*)—which occur frequently in Yoruba discourse. The goal is not to document an entire idiolect but to capture enough tokens to identify patterns of variation and test grammatical hypotheses.

Overall, the methodology combines generational comparison, corpus-based observation, and theoretical elicitation, providing a solid empirical foundation for analysing how syntactic features, lexical choice, and sociolinguistic factors interact to shape contemporary Yoruba grammar. The study assumes that variation occurs across generations and seeks to determine whether the type and degree of variation differ between these age groups, as well as the possible causes. The younger were selected because, although they are native-speaker their grammatical proficiency may be reduced due to the exposure to Arabic, English, or sociolinguistic influences such as the media and urban peer group codes. The older speakers, by contrast, are presumed to exhibit higher proficiency and more stable grammatical patterns, partly due to their reduced exposure to these external influences and the generational distance between them and the younger speakers.

Variation In Prepositional Selection: *fún/lówó* Alternation

Prepositions in Yoruba indicate the relationship between the subject and other elements in a sentence, especially those expressing place, direction, time, purpose, or possession. They are often realised as particles or derived locative nouns.

12 Adúpe fólórun (extracted from Eniola Ajao interview on Masoyinbo)

A dupe folorun

3sg Thank you **fun**+olorun

we Thank you PREP +God

Thanks to God.

13 A dúpẹ lówó Ọlórún (adupe lowo olorun eledumare (extracted from one of the Masoyinbo interview)

A dupe **lowo** olorun (eledumare)

3sg Thank you PREP+ hand God(creator)

Thanks to God. (our creator)

Syntactically, the derivation of *Adúpẹ fún Ọlórún* can be represented as:

[vP [v Adúpẹ] [PP fún Ọlórún]]

In this structure, the verb *A dúpẹ* selects a PP complement headed by *fún*. The preposition *fún* assigns a Goal/Benefactive theta role to its complement (*Ọlórún*). The semantic interpretation, “thank for the sake of/for God,” reflects this benefactive role.

Adúpẹ lówó Ọlórún:

[vP [v Adúpẹ] [PP lówó Ọlórún]]

Here, the verb *Adúpẹ* selects a PP headed by *lówó*. The preposition *lówó* introduces a **Source/Agentive** role, meaning “from the hand of.” Semantically, the structure conveys “thank (from/to) God.” Both constructions are grammatically acceptable and express the same general meaning, “thank God.” However, *fún* and *lówó* differ both semantically and structurally. Their interchangeability is limited to specific verbs like *A dúpẹ* (“to thank”); where both goal and source roles can coexist in the same conceptual frame. In most other contexts, they cannot replace each other without changing meaning or causing ungrammaticality.

14a. Mo ra a fún Bólá

‘I bought it for bola’

b. Mo ra a lówó Bólá

‘I bought it from Bola’ (constructed examples)

In (14a), the action is benefactive—the item is bought for Bola. In (14b), *Bola* becomes the source or seller. The substitution alters the meaning and violates the selectional restrictions of the verb *ra* (“to buy”). This shows that not all verbs permit alternation between these two prepositions. In this

case, *dúpé* is a verb that allows such alternation. This flexibility can be explained through the internal structure of *A dúpé*, which itself is a compound and clause-like form consisting of a subject and predicate: *A* (subject pronoun) + *dúpé* (predicate ‘thank’). Morphologically, *dúpé* originates from *dá + opé* (“create + thanks”), a verb–complement compound that has become lexicalised in Yoruba. Similarly, *lówó* derives from *ní + owó* (“at/with hand”), functioning as a prepositional compound meaning “by the hand of” or “from.” Because *A dúpé* contains its own subject agreement and already expresses a full propositional meaning, it behaves as a fixed verbal idiom rather than a simple verb. This structural independence allows it to combine with either *fún* or *lówó* while retaining grammaticality and a coherent meaning.

Within the Minimalist Program, this variation arises from feature checking between the predicate head and the prepositional head, rather than from separate syntactic rules. In the derivation, the verb *Adúpé* functions as a higher head (v) and acts as a probe carrying an uninterpretable prepositional feature [uP]. The preposition (*fún* or *lówó*) serves as a goal with an interpretable feature [iP]. Through a head-to-head agreement, *Adúpé* checks and values its [uP] feature against the preposition’s [iP] feature. When the features match, the derivation is grammatical. In the case of (14b), however, the derivation crashes at the Logical Form (LF) level because it violates the verb’s selectional requirements (i.e it does not have the and *Adúpé* can be classified as a controlled flexibility grounded in feature compatibility rather than free substitution.

It was further observed that this construction appears more common among certain groups, particularly speakers influenced by Islamic expressions. This study assumes that the alternation between *fún* and *lówó* may be due to Arabic influence on Yoruba through Islam. In Arabic, appreciation or gratitude is commonly expressed as “*Alhamdulillah.*”

15	Al	+	hamdu(u)	+	li	+	Allah
	The	+	praise	+	prep	+	God
	The	+	praise	+	to	+	God

All praise to God/all praise is due to God.

16	الله	الحمد
	Lillah	alhamdu

To allah the praise (extracted from Google online)

The influence of Arabic expressions on Yoruba speakers has likely contributed to the alternation between *fún* and *lówó* in similar constructions, preserving the same semantic meaning. This phenomenon may therefore be seen as a direct translation or structural adaptation from Arabic into Yoruba grammar.

From both semantic and grammatical perspectives, *A dúpe fún Olórun* and *A dúpe lówó Olórun* do not convey the same intention, even though both express gratitude and are often used in similar cultural or religious contexts. Each construction reflects a different conceptualization of the act of thanksgiving depending on how the speaker perceives the relationship between the subject and the object of gratitude. While speakers often treat the two as interchangeable in casual use, a closer grammatical analysis suggests that *A dúpe lówó Olórun* is more consistent with the syntactic and semantic patterns of Yoruba

17 A dúpe lówó Feranmi

‘We are grateful to Feranmi’

b A dúpe fun Feranmi

‘We are grateful for Feranmi’ (constructed sentences)

In these examples, only (17a) is considered natural and contextually appropriate in Yoruba, since gratitude is directed toward an agent or benefactor—someone to whom thanks is owed—not for their existence but for their action. This implies that the preposition *lówó* is used to mark the source or initiator of a benefactive act, whereas *fún* is generally used to mark purpose or benefit. This distinction shows that Yoruba restricts the alternation between *fún* and *lówó* based on argument selection and semantic compatibility. However, in fixed or religious expressions such as *A dúpe fún Olórun* and *A dúpe lówó Olórun*, both forms are accepted because speakers perceive them as functionally equivalent ways of expressing thanksgiving to God. The variation here thus results from pragmatic reanalysis and sociolinguistic factors rather than strict syntactic equivalence, showing how meaning, context, and grammatical structure interact to shape expression in Yoruba.

Variation In Lexical Choice and Position: Lola/lagbara alternation

17 owó ti n gbé kúrò níbí, **lólá** elédúà (extracted from Saheed Osupa interview)

Owó tí ñ gbé kúrò níbí **lólá** elédúà
 Money tense 1sg verb verb prep+ here prep+wealth Creator
 By God’s grace, I will leave here with the money.

b owó ti ñ gbé kúrò níbí, **lágbara** elédúà (extracted from Masoyinbo interview)

Owó tí ñ gbé kúrò níbí **lágbara** elédúà
 Money 1sg tense verb verb prep+ here prep+power creator
 By the benevolence of God, I will leave here with the money.

18 **lagbara** Olórún, mi o ni tu iro mi nibi

Lagbara olorun mi o ni tu iro mi nibi
 PREP+power God 1SG 2SG FOC lose wrapper 2SG here
 By God’s grace, I won’t untie my wrapper here today.

b. **lola** olorun,mi o ni tu iro mi nibi

lola olorun mi o ni tu iro mi nibi
 PREP+wealth God 1SG 2SG FOC lose wrapper 2SG here
 By the benevolence of God, I won’t untie my wrapper here today

Both expressions in (17a–b) and (18a–b) are grammatically acceptable and convey the same meaning. The elements *lólá* (‘by grace/wealth’) and *lágbara* (‘by power/strength’) can occur in different positions within the clause and may also be interchanged without affecting the meaning. This illustrates positional freedom and lexical interchangeability, which are key forms of grammatical variation in Yoruba. Both forms are acceptable and widely used.

From a Minimalist perspective, these expressions function as adjuncts within the sentence because they do not affect the core argument structure but rather modify the entire clause. Structurally, they attach at the CP level, regardless of position. Unlike prepositions, which are directly selected by the verb and participate in feature checking, adjuncts do not engage in such strict syntactic operations. Their contribution lies mainly at the semantic level.

Adjuncts are considered optional merge elements added after the core arguments of a sentence have been built. Therefore, they do not bear uninterpretable features that require checking. Their positional flexibility stems from this independence—no movement or feature conflict occurs, allowing the derivation to converge at both PF (Phonetic Form) and LF (Logical Form) while satisfying the economy principle through minimal structural complexity.

Semantically, *lólá* and *lágbara* express similar meanings and assign an instrumental theta role ('by means of / through God's grace or power'). Since their interpretable features align, both are compatible within the same syntactic environment. This supports the claim that Yoruba grammar permits adjunct mobility and lexical alternation when no uninterpretable feature checking is involved.

The observed variation also reflects religious influence over time. Among Christians, *lágbara* ('by the power of God') is commonly used to acknowledge divine strength or presence. Among Muslims, *lólá* ('by the grace or benevolence of God') aligns with expressions of divine mercy. Thus, the alternation reflects not only grammatical flexibility but also sociolinguistic variation shaped by religious background. In purely traditional Yoruba usage, similar meanings might be expressed through alternative constructions rather than through these specific lexical items.

Lexical Variation: *gbó/mò* Alternation

The alternation between *mò* and *gbó* in Yoruba reveals a subtle but significant case of lexical and semantic variation that also manifests syntactically within the framework of the Minimalist Program (MP). Traditionally, *mò* selects a complement expressing knowledge or awareness, while *gbó* selects one denoting auditory perception. Thus, in derivation, the verb *gbó* assigns a [+perceptual] feature, whereas *mò* assigns a [+cognitive] feature.

19 Kì í ɕe bèè náà la **gbó** Yoruba

Kíí ɕe bèè náà la gbó Yoruba

NHAM To do like FOC to hear Yoruba

It is not like I understand Yoruba that much

20 kíí ɕe bèè ni mo **mò** Yorùbá tó

Kíí ɕe bèè ni mo mò Yoruba tó

NHAM to do like FOC 1SG to know Yoruba EMP

It is not like I understand Yoruba that much

We observe that some speakers interchange these two verbs to express the same meaning— ‘to know Yoruba.’ Although *mò* and *gbó* have distinct lexical features, some speakers, particularly younger ones, use them interchangeably. This overlap suggests that both verbs can occupy the vP position in derivation, triggering feature valuation and checking.

Within the Minimalist framework, this type of variation can be analysed as feature competition and optional lexical insertion, dependent on the speaker’s competence in the language. At the Logical Form (LF) interface, the choice between *mò* and *gbó* does not alter the structural representation but instead affects interpretation at the Conceptual–Intentional (C-I) interface. In other words, the derivation remains structurally identical, but the semantic output differs slightly, shifting between ‘to hear’ and ‘to know.’

Therefore, this alternation is syntactically conditioned by the availability of two lexical heads capable of checking equivalent semantic features. The phenomenon reflects grammatical variation driven by ongoing lexical reanalysis, whereby *gbó* has extended beyond its original perceptual domain to assume cognitive functions, while *mò* occasionally overlaps into perceptual contexts.

Conclusion

The analysis of grammatical variation in Yoruba reveals that the phenomenon extends beyond surface lexical choices into deeper syntactic and interpretive domains. The study demonstrates that Yoruba permits limited prepositional interchangeability only when the interpretive features of the prepositions are contextually compatible. This restriction shows that variation is not arbitrary but conditioned by feature selection and syntactic licensing within the grammar. For instance, in the *Adúpé fún Ọlórún* and *Adúpé lówó Ọlórún* alternation, the difference goes beyond mere substitution; it reflects how speakers conceptualise the act of thanksgiving. While both expressions communicate gratitude, their grammaticality and semantic appropriateness depend on how the speaker encodes agency and benefaction. The verb *Adúpé*, a compound of *da* ‘make’ and *ọpé* ‘thanks,’ naturally aligns with *lówó* (‘from the hand of’) to express the notion of gratitude derived from an agent. However, under Arabic influence, *fún* (‘for/to’) has emerged as an alternative preposition due to translation equivalence with *Alhamdulillah* (‘praise be to God’).

This interaction between expression and intention reveals that grammatical variation in Yoruba often mirrors speakers' conceptual, religious, and social orientations rather than syntactic error. Similarly, alternations such as *lólá/lágbára* and *mò/gbò* demonstrate both free and restricted variation, highlighting the language's dynamic capacity for reinterpretation. Within the Minimalist framework, these variations are best explained through feature valuation and checking processes, where lexical items such as *mò*, *gbò*, *fún*, and *lówó* enter derivation with interpretable semantic features that shape meaning at the Conceptual–Intentional interface.

Ultimately, the study argues that grammatical variation in Yoruba is not merely evidence of linguistic change or dialectal divergence but a reflection of how syntactic economy interacts with sociolinguistic factors such as religion, age, and speaker competence. The findings reveal an ongoing process of lexical and structural reanalysis in Yoruba, where speakers—consciously or unconsciously—adapt grammatical forms to align with contemporary expression and interpretation. This reinforces the view that variation is a natural and systematic component of Yoruba grammar, shaped by both internal linguistic mechanisms and external influences.

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