

THE LICENSING OF FON VERBS*

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Fon verb stems must be licensed by an item on its left, which may be Infl, a negation particle or an object. If there is no suitable item, the verb reduplicates to create morphological material on its left which licenses it. This requirement holds in both the syntax and the lexicon, and accounts for the fact that nominalization of a verb is achieved by reduplication. The Fon licensing requirement resembles an English verb licensing requirement.

Un radical verbal en fon doit être licencié par un item à sa gauche. Cet item peut être Infl, une particule de négation ou un objet. S'il n'y a pas d'item approprié, le verbe est rédupliqué, ce qui crée le matériel morphologique habileté à le licensier. Cette exigence doit être remplie dans la syntaxe aussi bien que dans le lexique, et rend compte du fait que la nominalisation d'un verbe est rendue par la reduplication. L'exigence de licenciement du verbe en fon est similaire à l'exigence de licenciement du verbe en anglais.

0. INTRODUCTION

This paper asks why the Fon verb reduplicates in certain contexts and fails to reduplicate in others. My account applies the suggestion made in Fabb (1984, 1988), regarding the licensing of verb stems. The notion of 'licensing' has been developed in Government Binding Theory – in, for example, the 'Principle of Full Interpretation' (Chomsky 1986: 98) – as a proposal that for a syntactic item to be visible to the interpretive components it must either have some inherent property (eg. have the features which constitute the null pronominal PRO) or lie in a structural relation to some other item (the basis of the the notion of abstract structural Case). The main focus has been on whether noun phrases are licensed. My suggestion in Fabb (1984, 1988) was (in two parts): (a) A morpheme may syntactically license a syntactically visible constituent – for example, genitive -s in English is syntactically separate from the NP which it governs and licenses (by assigning it abstract structural Case); these situations where affixes syntactically license the phrases or words they attach to are the cases of 'syntactic affixation' from which Fabb (1984) draws its title. (b) Every verb stem must be licensed – either in the syntax by government by an independent item (like Infl or another verb) or by an affix, or in the lexicon by government by a derivational affix. I show that verb stems in English always appear either affixed or in a position where they are governed by a small class of verbs or Infl (with the possible exception of imperatives, where it isn't immediately clear whether there is an Infl). In the present paper I argue that Fon shares with English the constraint that verb stems must be licensed, that one way in which a verb stem is licensed is by reduplication, and that this approach can explain why verbs reduplicate in some constructions and not in others. I give a unified account of the reduplication of verb stems in both the syntax and the lexicon.

1. WHERE VERB STEMS APPEAR

In English, verb stems appear in the following contexts:

(a) governed by specific items: present tense Infl, **to**, and specific verbs like **see**, **make** in examples like **I saw / made him run**.

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- (b) the imperative construction (perhaps here also the verb is governed by an Infl node).
- (c) affixed with inflectional affixes, such as past tense **-ed**; probably we should include as inflectional affixes the progressive **-ing**, tenseless **-ing**, and passive/perfect **-en**.
- (d) affixed with derivational affixes. I assume that zero-derivation where there is a category change but no overt affix involves a phonologically null but morphologically present affix.

In Fon, verb stems appear in the following contexts:

- (a) governed by a specific item: Infl (there are no overt tense distinctions). I assume that in serial constructions, the lower verb is governed by the upper Infl.
- (b) the imperative construction (perhaps here also the verb is governed by an Infl node).
- (c) (there are probably no inflectional affixes).
- (d) reduplicated (and sometimes also compounded and suffixed with a derivational affix as well).
- (e) compounded with a preceding noun (and also reduplicated and/or suffixed with a derivational affix).

If we compare English and Fon, we see that there is a basic similarity in that the verb stem is either in the domain of some specific item(s) in the syntax (with the possible exception of imperative) or attached morphologically to something else in an affixed or compounded word. Thus we can say that the verb stem in both languages must be licensed in the syntax or the lexicon. In English we can characterise licensing as: a verb must be governed by one of a specified class of items. This class includes present tense Infl, **see**, **to**, **-ed**, and derivational affixes like **-able** and the phonologically null affix which nominalizes verbs. Government is defined as c-command by a head, subject to barrier constraints; derivational affixes are taken (conventionally) to be heads which govern the stems they attach to. As we will see, the licensing procedure for Fon verbs will turn out to be different, involving linear adjacency rather than government.

2. REDUPLICATION OF THE VERB

A significant difference between Fon and English is that Fon verbs can be reduplicated. Reduplication is to the left (i.e. as a prefix), as can be seen by the fact that the reduplicated form is not always a perfect copy of the stem; for example the verb 'worship', **sɛn** is reduplicated to form the noun 'worship' as **sinsɛn** (not ***sensɛn**). This suggests that reduplication is by attachment of underspecified morphological material on the left of the verb, onto which the phonological information spreads from the stem. (For an outline of the phonology of reduplication in Fon and related languages see Capo 1991: 172-181).

One of the most interesting characteristics of reduplication in Fon is that it fails to occur in some cases where an item syntactically precedes the verb, as though reduplication and the syntactically preceding neighbour both performed the same function. For example, an intransitive verb normally reduplicates in the progressive construction (which has the structure

subject + **ɖò** [=locational ‘be’] + verb phrase + **wè** [a particle with no clear independent meaning]).

1. **É tón.**
‘He leaves/left.’
2. **É ɖò tinton wè.**
he leaving
‘He is leaving.’

But reduplication will fail if the verb is immediately preceded by the future particle **na** (which, in combination with the progressive, gives a meaning of ‘about to’).

3. **É ɖò na tón wè.**
he FUT leave
‘He is about to leave.’

I have been told that another possibility (“this is not correct, but you can hear it being said” – Maxi dialect speaker) is that the negation particle **ma** can also block reduplication (with a meaning expressing uncertainty):

4. **É ɖò ma tón wè ǎ.**
he NEG leave NEG
‘He is not sure whether he is going out.’

My proposal will be that reduplication is one way of licensing a verb stem, and that in most cases this is *the sole purpose of reduplication*; when reduplication does not happen, as in these cases, it is because the verb is being licensed by something else (its preceding neighbour). In order to show this, we need to consider where reduplication of the verb takes place.

Verbs are reduplicated in these situations:

(a) In company with sentence-middle and sentence-final particles, reduplication is used to express various meanings, including the progressive, ingressive, etc. Reduplication typically takes place only with intransitives (as for example in (2) above), but as we will see it can also take place with transitives given the right syntactic context.

(b) Verbs can be nominalised by reduplication. A stative verb is reduplicated to give a noun meaning a quality; for example, **klo** means ‘to be big’ and **kloklo** means ‘size’. An active verb is reduplicated to give a noun which describes the action; for example **sí** means ‘to respect’, and **sísí** means ‘respect’; **sís** means ‘to tremble’ and **sísísís** means ‘trembling’. We might want to distinguish between two different types of nominalisation which are formally identical but have different meanings. **Nùdúdí** involves a combination of the noun **nù**, meaning ‘thing’ and the reduplication of the verb **dí**, meaning ‘eat’; the combination can be interpreted as meaning ‘eating’ or as meaning ‘food’; the former we should probably interpret as a gerund with internal syntactic structure, and the latter as a lexically derived compound noun. It is not clear that there is any significant difference on the whole between nouns and adjectives; verbs may become nouns with adjective-type meanings by reduplication. Thus **zè** ‘break’ by being reduplicated becomes a modifier **zízè** ‘broken’.

(c) Several word-formational processes involve simultaneous compounding with a preceding noun and suffixation of a nominal suffix like **-tɔ** (agent) or **-nɔ** (possessor), to give a structure with the pattern Noun-(Redup.-)-Verb-Suffix. In some words the verb does not reduplicate, in others it does. If reduplication takes place it will give a more transparent derived meaning: Brousseau (1988: 44) points to the distinction between for example **nukún-tó-nɔ**, (eye – put out – possessor) meaning ‘blind person’ and **nukún-tító-nɔ**, which means ‘someone who has had their eye put out’. The former unreduplicated form shows some lexical drift, while the latter reduplicated form has a literal interpretation.

3. THE REDUPLICATION OF THE VERB IN PROGRESSIVE ETC.

The key to understanding the function of reduplication of Fon verbs is the progressive and similar constructions. Reduplication in these constructions depends on the syntactic context. As (2) and (3) show, an intransitive verb normally reduplicates, but if a future particle immediately precedes the verb, the verb fails to reduplicate. This suggests that reduplication in this case is a post-lexical rule since it is sensitive to syntactic context. We see similar behaviour when the verb is transitive. If the object is a post-verbal pronoun (5) or is put at the front of the sentence (8), the verb reduplicates:

5. **É sɔn wè.**
‘he adores you.’
6. **É ɖò sisen we wè.**
he adore you
‘He is adoring you.’
7. **É sà wěmà.**
‘He sells books.’
8. **Été é ɖò sisà wè.**
what he sell
‘What is he selling?’

If however the object immediately precedes the verb, which is the unmarked situation in the progressive of a transitive verb, the verb does not reduplicate:

9. **É ɖò wěmà sà wè.**
he book sell
‘He is selling books.’

Thus in the progressive, the verb reduplicates unless it is immediately preceded either by its object or by the particle **na**. This pattern holds not just for the progressive construction but also for various other constructions:

(a) Prospective, with **jà... gbé**,

10. **É jà wìwá gbé.**
he come
‘He is about to come.’
11. **É jà nũ ɖù gbé.**
he thing eat
‘I am going to eat.’

(b) 'begin', with **jè...jí** or **bě**,

12. **É jè wíwá jí.**
 he come
 'He begins to come.'
13. **É jè xó ɖò jí.**
 he word say
 'He begins to speak.'
14. **Étɛ é bɛ sisà.**
 what he start sell
 'What is he starting to sell?'
15. **É bɛ xó ɖò.**
 he word say
 'He starts to speak.'

(c) 'stop' with **gbò**:

16. **Gbò wíwá.**
 'Stops coming!'
17. **Gbò xó ɖò.**
 stop word say
 'He stops speaking.'

(d) 'know/can/be easy' with **nyó**

18. **Kokloo nyó sisà.**
 chicken can sell
 'Chicken is easy to sell.'
19. **É nyó xó ɖò.**
 he can word say
 'He can speak.'

In summary, we can state the following descriptive rule:

20. In certain syntactic contexts the verb reduplicates unless it is preceded by a noun phrase or by the future particle.

The syntactic contexts are defined by the presence of the auxiliary verbs or particles **ɖò**, **jà**, **jè**, **bɛ**, **gbò**, and **nyó**.

4. LEXICAL REDUPLICATIONS

The above examples are presumably not cases of lexical reduplication (since they are sensitive to syntactic context). However, the same pattern can be seen in lexical reduplication, where reduplication gives a derived word and is not sensitive to syntactic context. The two major word formational processes involving verbs are (1) reduplication and (2) simultaneous suffixation and compounding with a preceding noun (with reduplication possible as well); examples are given on pp. 3-4.

We can state the rule as:

21. In a derived word, the verb reduplicates unless it is preceded by a noun.

On this account, the Fon equivalent to English zero-derivations, which are the cases of verbs becoming nouns by reduplication (e.g., *klo* 'be big'; *kloklo* 'size'), can be seen to involve the same basic derivational process as their English equivalents. That is, the basic derivation is simply a change in category (or perhaps, the addition of a phonologically null suffix). The reduplication in the Fon words is a side-effect, caused by the fact that a derivational process has taken place and the verb is not preceded by a noun.

5. COMBINING THE LEXICAL AND POSTLEXICAL REDUPLICATION RULES

The conditions on the two types of reduplication are rather similar; in both cases, reduplication fails if certain things precede the verb. However, while the lexical case is fairly simple (the thing which precedes the verb is always a noun), the syntactic case is more complicated: a preceding noun phrase or the future particle prevents reduplication, but *dò* and similar items do not prevent reduplication. Moreover, in the lexicon, reduplication is the norm – either a verb remains untouched by lexical activity, and enters the syntax as a stem, or it is reduplicated as a side-product of some lexical change (e.g., a change of category, in nominalisation). But in the syntax, reduplication does not appear to be the norm because it does not take place in a simple tensed sentence.

These problems have a common solution, which is to suggest that reduplication is in fact the norm, but that it can be prevented by almost any left-adjacent item at the relevant level (i.e., in the syntax or the lexicon). Thus for example Infl – and particles such as negative and habitual – are able to block reduplication; only *dò* and similar items are unable to block reduplication. We can restate this rather more simply in terms of licensing: either a verb is licensed by a preceding item or it reduplicates.

Thus all preceding items can license a verb except *dò*, *jà*, *jè*, *bě*, *gbɔ̀*, and *nyɔ̀*. What makes these unable to license a verb? One possibility is that their category rules them out: perhaps, if they are verbs as seems plausible, a verb may not license another verb. This is a simple and fairly attractive solution, though there are some problems with it. The first problem comes from serial verb sequences, where a verb may often precede another verb without the second verb being reduplicated; in these cases we would have to ask what is licensing the second verb. An example is (22), where *gbɔ̀n* 'pass by' is apparently licensed by *yì* (though it is possible that there is an Infl in the lower constituent, which would solve the problem).

22. *É nà yì gbɔ̀n fi.*
 he FUT go pass-by here
 'He will go by here.'

The same problem arises with 'serial' words like the following, where we must assume that the verb *mɔ̀* 'find' is licensed by the verb *jló* 'wish' since there is no other licenser and the verb *mɔ̀* is not reduplicated.

23. *nú-jló-mɔ̀-nɔ̀*
 thing-wish-find-possessor
 'ambitious person'

The second problem relates to cross-linguistic comparison, and is that English verbs **can** licence verbs; this is what happens in sentences like **John made the rabbit eat all the lettuce**, where **make** licenses **eat** (by government, which is the contextual requirement in English).

A second possible explanation of the failure of **ḍò**, **jà**, **jè**, **bě**, **gbò**, and **nyó** to license a verb involves the possibility that there is a barrier between these verbs and the following verb, which prevents these verbs licensing the following verb, and so forcing reduplication. In the progressive construction, the constituent containing the lower verb and its objects is often considered to be a noun phrase (in Fabb (1992) I suggest that it is a sentence; for the purpose of the analysis here it makes little difference); thus there is a noun phrase maximal projection between the lower verb and the upper verb **ḍò** etc. Perhaps this projection acts as a barrier to the licensing of the verb – just as it acts as a barrier elsewhere in the grammar to extraction, binding and Case assignment (another type of licensing).

6. LICENSING

I have suggested that either a verb is reduplicated or it is licensed by an immediately preceding item. This requirement must be satisfied in the lexicon if the verb stem is subject to any lexical rules; otherwise it must be satisfied in the syntax. We can explain this complementary patterning of reduplication or licensing if we take reduplication to be an example of licensing by an immediately preceding item. Note first that reduplication is leftwards, as indicated earlier. Reduplication can be interpreted (cf. e.g., Pulleyblank 1988) as the provision of phonologically underspecified morphological material preceding the verb, onto which phonological information spreads. That is, reduplication can be interpreted as the addition of a morphological host immediately before the verb. This implies that reduplication in these Fon cases takes place specifically in order to provide a host (i. e. reduplication takes place because of the licensing requirement). If no other host is available, a dummy ‘pleonastic’ morpheme is inserted before the verb and the verb reduplicates onto it, thus satisfying the licensing requirement.

It is possible to determine when in the syntax and lexicon reduplication takes place. In the lexicon it takes place after compounding, because it is blocked by compounding; but there is evidence (from the already discussed example **nukún-tító-nò**, meaning ‘someone who has had their eye put out’) that it takes place also before a later, more transparent compounding process. Moreover, in order to differentiate the **nùḍúḍú** which means ‘food’ from the **nùḍúḍú** which means ‘eating’, we should presumably put the former into the lexicon. Thus reduplication sometimes takes place even when there is also a noun compounded with the word, suggesting either that the licensing requirement in the lexicon applies before all lexical processes have finished or that there is some free reduplication independent of the licensing requirement.

7. WHEN REDUPLICATION FAILS

A verb which is lexically reduplicated will not reduplicate again in the syntax:

24. **É sísín.**
‘It melts.’
25. **É jà sísín gbé.**
‘It is about to melt.’

26. *É jà sísín-sísín gbé
‘It is about to melt.’

One possible interpretation of this is that there is a surface filter ruling out multiple reduplication of this kind. However, when reduplication is used for a different function – to intensify a modifier, double reduplication is found, so that for example *káká*, ‘good’, becomes *káká-káká* ‘very good’. So it is possible that verbs which are found only in reduplicated forms, like *sísín* are counted as inherently licensed in some sense; one way of doing this would be to say that these verbs are in fact licensed by a derivational reduplication, e.g., in this case from an underlying verb *sín* which does not surface as an independent verb.

I know of one word formation process in which reduplication fails, in words with the structure V-NEG-V:

27. *ji-ma-kplón*
engender-NOT-teach
‘badly raised’

Here the problem is the first verb, *ji*, which as it has no host within the lexicon should reduplicate to form a derived word **jiji-ma-kplón*. This process offers an idiosyncratic exception to the licensing rule.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Fon verb stems are subject to a licensing requirement, such that it must either be provided in the syntax or lexicon with a potential adjacent host preceding it, or must reduplicate to form its own host. Fabb (1984, 1988) argues that English verb stems are also subject to a licensing requirement, which involves government rather than adjacency. English (and presumably also Fon) noun phrases are subject to a licensing requirement which involves both government and adjacency (the two conditions for Case assignment). Thus different languages choose from government and/or adjacency as conditions under which licensing is permitted to take place for different categories.

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