

**A descriptive analysis of nouns in Edo**

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**Abstract**

*It is a fact that several interactions abound in the generation of well-formed and acceptable constructions in any human language. These interactions are dependent on the rules governing the positioning and functions of these elements. They have their basis on the nature of words in a language. Grammatical categories also known as parts of speech refer to the classification of elements based on certain linguistic features in a well-formed, acceptable construction. This study specifies the modalities for the classification of word classes like nouns, verbs, adjectives and so on in the Edo language with a view to outlining their roles in the grammar of the language. Data for this study are obtained from conversational contexts and selected Edo songs by Adviser Nowamagbe, this was complemented by data from published works like the Edo-English Dictionary by Agheyisi and Melzian. The study draws the boundary between the two components of grammatical categories – lexical and functional categories as they affect the generation of sentences in Edo language with special emphasis on the lexical class of words, noun.*

**Introduction**

The main function of a language is to communicate meaning from speaker to listener. The concept of grammatical categories, word classes or parts of speech represents a unique way of studying the internal structures of natural languages. The basic concepts in a language are encoded as words which are related together within the grammar by means of categories. Baker (2004) identified three items that can be classified as lexical categories in a language as: nouns, verbs and adjectives. This is much in the same way as Dixon and Aikhenvald's (2004) classification of word classes as lexical and functional, with the former possessing, a prototypical conceptual basis and the latter, a prototypical grammatical function. Baker (2004) is of the opinion that these lexical items or elements are parts of the universal categories of words that are present in all natural languages. Chomsky (1970) provides a basis for the distinction of lexical categories by means of the binary distinctive features [+N, ± V]. This eventually became known as the feature tetrachotomy, Chomsky (1981) in which the following feature values below for grammatical categories are identified:

- (1) a. [+N -V] = the class of nominals  
b. [-N +V] = the class of verbs  
c. [+N +V] = the class of adjectives  
d. [-N -V] = the class of adpositions, prepositions, conjunctions and particles  
(cf. Baker, 2004:17)

This provision by Chomsky, though a good point for the classification of grammatical categories is not comprehensive enough to give us more information about the internal composition and distribution of these grammatical categories in languages generally and Edo language in particular.

### **Methodology**

The study used the primary and secondary means of data collection and the descriptive method of analysis for the data collected. The data collected and used in this study are obtained from the Oredo variety which is the Standard variety of Edo language. A large number of the data came from secondary sources prominent among which are: Melzian (1937) and Agheyisi (1986).

The study is simply descriptive. The analytic procedure is based to a large extent on the one employed by Dixon and Aikhenvald (2004) in the prototypical treatment of the class of adjectives in some languages. They (Dixon and Aikhenvald) are of the view that word classes can be identified between languages (and assigned the same names) based on two criteria: similarity of syntactic function and similarity of meaning. In terms of syntactic function, a noun may always function as head of a noun phrase that can be a predicate argument, and a verb can always be head of a predicate.

In the present study, grammatical categories will be classified into two: lexical categories and functional categories. The former incorporates the classes of nouns and verbs and serves as the focus of this paper. These elements (nouns and verbs) are analyzed based on their morphological and semantic properties, thus accounting for the morpho-semantic nature of the work.

### **The lexical category**

The words that fall under this category are those that originally make up the traditional grammar units of *onoma* (nouns) and *rhema* (verbs). These are the elements that are considered to be the principal constituents of a syntactic derivation (Baker, 2004). Though in Baker's (2004) work, the class of Adjectives was added to the lexical categories in a language for the simple reason that members of this class can be expanded (open class criterion). The class of nouns and verbs in the language will be evaluated using the following defining criteria:

- i. Words that are open to modification and addition of new items,

- ii. Words that exhibit peculiar morphological features in terms of modification and derivation,
- iii. Words that serve as the core or nucleus in a sentence from which other words get their functions and identities and
- iv. Words that possess some unique morpho-semantic features like tense (for verbs) and number (for verbs and nouns)

The above criteria define the lexical categories of nouns and verbs. In the sections that follow, the structures of the nominal category are discussed with a view to appraising their peculiarities in the grammar of a natural language like Edo.

### **The noun in Edo**

The noun is an important lexical category in the grammar of any language which possesses an array of rich morphological, syntactic and semantic features. This class of words can be defined based on the several properties that reflect the nature of the noun as an important aspect of a language's grammar. It is a member of a syntactic class which is definable as follows:

- words which refer to people, places, animals, things, materials and ideas
- concepts whose members may act as any of the following: [subjects](#) of the verb, [objects](#) of the verb, [indirect object](#) of the verb, or object of a preposition (or postposition),
- and most of whose members have inherently determined grammatical [gender](#) (in languages which [inflect](#) for gender) or number.

The noun is the element that is identified as the semantic version of reality since only noun constitutes the lexical category that can be used to identify entities and events that bear a referential index, expressed as an ordered pair of integers (Baker, 2004).

### **Simple nouns in Edo**

Omọ̀rẹ̀gbẹ̀ (2012:56) recognizes the nominal items in 2a-las simple in Edo. She claims that the simple nouns are those that have not undergone any kind of morphological modification. The simple nouns are those nominals whose shapes represent the basic form of a noun that cannot be subdivided into different component forms or morphemes. Examples of such nouns are provided in the data below.

- |     |    |              |    |               |
|-----|----|--------------|----|---------------|
| (2) | a. | òwá 'house'  | g. | ẹ̀kì 'market' |
|     | b. | íghó 'money' | h. | úgbé 'stone'  |
|     | c. | òmó 'child'  | i. | èrhán 'wood'  |
|     | d. | òbó 'hand'   | j. | úgbó 'farm'   |
|     | e. | úkpá 'light' | k. | òmwá 'person' |
|     | f. | íkàn 'cane'  | l. | ùnú 'mouth'   |

These nouns refer to entities that are not derivable from a composition of other entities. Attempt is made in this paper to re-classify these nominals as in-alienable nouns (Roberts, 1992) since they cannot be broken down further into different component units.

### **Complex nouns in Èdo**

Ọmọ̀rẹ̀gbẹ̀ (2012) also identifies the complex nouns as the other structural shape of the nominal class in Èdo. She claims that this class of nominals is derived by three morphological strategies of, (i) prefixation, (ii) circumfixation (using discontinuous morphemes) and (iii) compounding. The complex nouns are those nominals that have undergone one or two morphological modifications in their derivations. The sub-sections that follow will present the nouns that fall under these different morphological categories and the processes of their derivations. The nominals that fall under this type are outlined below with their derivational processes.

#### **a. Complex nouns derived by prefixation**

	VerbStem	Nom. Pref.	Derivation	Gloss
(3)				
a.	kùú ‘play’	i	= ìkù	‘play’
b.	tà ‘say’	ọ	= ọ́tá	‘word’
c.	bàlọ ‘pain	o	= ọ̀bàlọ	‘pain’
d.	wù ‘die’ =	u	= ùwú	‘death’
e.	tẹ̀n ‘relate’	ọ	= ọ́tẹ̀n	‘a relation’
f.	viẹ ‘cry’	e	= èvé	‘tears’
g.	vbiẹ ‘sleep’	o	= ọ̀vbé	‘sleep’
h.	bẹ̀mwẹ̀ ‘stammer’	a	= àbẹ̀mwẹ̀	‘a stammer’
i.	dànmwẹ̀ ‘try’	e	= èdànmwẹ̀	‘a test/ examination’

In these Derived Nominals (DNS), Ọmọ̀rẹ̀gbẹ̀ (2012) reflects the role of the Èdo oral vowels as nominal prefixes. These vowels bear a low tone and when prefixed to the verb stems, the tones on the verbs are automatically altered from a low tone to a high tone. The only exception to this tonemic feature of nominalization in the language can be seen in data (3 a, h & i), where we have disyllabic verbs and the tones on the first and second syllables remain after prefixation. It will be observed also that in 3i, v, vi, and vii that the vowel immediately after the consonant is deleted because in the first instance they are the same as the vowel left behind and are therefore considered redundant if left after prefixation. This further testifies to the fact that nominals in the language begin with a vowel (Ọmọ̀rẹ̀yì, 1990).

#### **b. Complex nouns derived by circumfixation**

(4)	Stem	Circumfix	Derivation	Gloss
a.	bì ‘vomit’	u + bi + mwẹ̀	ùbímwẹ̀	‘vomiting’
b.	gà ‘serve’	u + ga + mwẹ̀	ùgámwẹ̀	‘service’
c.	biẹ̀ ‘deliver’	u + biẹ̀ + mwẹ̀	ùbiẹ̀mwẹ̀	‘delivery’

d. dẹ ‘buy’	u + dẹ + mwẹ	ùdẹmwẹ	‘buying’
e. dẹ ‘fall’	u + de + mwẹ	ùdẹmwẹ	‘falling’
f. gbẹ ‘beat’	u + gbe + mwẹ	ùgbẹmwẹ	‘beating’
g. tiẹ ‘call’	u + tie + mwẹ	ùtiẹmwẹ	‘calling’
h. gbàlọ ‘knot’	u + gbalọ + mwẹ	ùgbàlọmwẹ	‘knotting’
i. gò ‘shout’	u + go + mwẹ	ùgómwẹ	‘shouting’
j. zòzó ‘wander’ ‘wandering’	u + zozo + mwẹ	ìzózómwẹ	

These nominals are also known as gerundive nominals as most of their free translations end with the –ing morpheme in English. This morphological strategy of circumfixation, from investigation, is the most productive nominalization process in the language as the vast majority of verbs, adjectives and adverbs can be nominalized through this process. This process is highly restrictive as it is only the ‘u’ prefix and ‘mwẹ’ suffix that are employed in this derivation.

**c. Complex nouns derived by compounding**

The nominal elements in this category are derived from the merger of different words or group of words. This usually takes place with the compression of a phrase or sentence and the deletion of some elements that are deemed irrelevant to the semantic interpretation of the derived word. Consider the examples below:

(5)	Structure	Compound	Gloss
a.	ò gbẹúgbó nom. prf make farm ‘one who makes farm’	ògbùgbò	‘farmer’
b.	ò mùádá nom. prf carry scepter ‘one who carries a scepter’	òmùàdà	‘scepter bearer’
c.	ò dò èkì nom. prf do market ‘one who does marketing’	òdùèkì	‘trader’
d.	òmọ óghé òbọ child P.M hand ‘a child of hand’	òmóbọ	‘infant’
e.	òwá óghé èbé house P. M. book ‘a house of book’	òwébé	‘school’
f.	ázà óghé íghó safe P. M. money ‘a safe of money’	ázíghó	‘a safe/bank’

The data above show the derivation of compound nouns from the collocation of simple sentences and noun phrases. This is a very productive morphological strategy of lexical derivation in the language. The nominals derived this way will hereafter be referred to as alienable nouns in this work. The reason for this is that these nominals can be split into their component units. The tone on the head noun also undergoes a modification in this case because of assimilation from the tone on the vowel across word boundary.

### **Semantic classification of the nouns in Edo**

Dixon (1991), prototypical identification of nouns made reference to the semantic type of reference associated with these nouns. This prototypical classification is based on the presence or absence of a feature (biotic 'life') which serves as the basis for distinguishing between nouns that are considered living [+animate] and those that are not [-animate]. This gives us two classes of nouns which are identified here with their respective sub-types as the case may be: animate and inanimate nouns.

#### **Animate nouns**

These are nouns associated with concrete entities that have life. The nouns here are used to name or identify living things like humans, animals and plants which consist of the following sub-types of items as shown below:

##### **a. Human nouns**

Human nouns are associated with persons in general and they are also associated with personal names used by humans. These nouns identified entities that possess certain characteristics and abilities that are not associated with other classes of nominals. Examples include the following:

- (6) a. òmwá 'person'
- b. òkpiá 'man'
- c. òkhuò 'woman'
- d. òmọ 'child'
- e. ẹ̀vbò 'people'
- f. ùvbí 'a young unmarried girl (usually used for all female children of the Oba and Chiefs in Benin Kingdom)'
- g. Òsàzẹ́é 'name of a person'
- h. Èbàbá 'father'

The human nouns as animate nominals can be differentiated from other animate nouns by the kind of verbs they select in a clause. This will be shown at the end of this sub-section when identifying the selectional properties of the different nominals in this sub-class.

**b. Fauna nouns**

The items here are used to identify various types of animals which though possess the semantic feature of [+animate], differ from the human nouns identified above. This is due to the presence of certain abilities in the former (human nouns) that are largely absent from the latter (animals). Some of the members of this class are identified in 7 below:

- (7) a. áhiánmwè ‘bird’  
b. ólógbò ‘cat’  
c. èmè ‘monkey’  
d. ékítà ‘dog’  
e. èmilà ‘cattle’  
f. úzò ‘antelope’  
g. éhèn ‘fish’  
h. átété ‘grasshopper’

**c. Flora nouns**

These are associated with plants and are classified as animate due to their biotic (life) features like growth, reproduction and death. Nouns in this sub-type in Edo are listed in 8i-v below:

- (8) a. ìnyá ‘yam’  
b. èbé ‘leave’  
c. íkhínmwì ‘a type of tree’  
d. éré ‘cowpea’  
e. òghèdè ‘plantain’

All the nouns in this category possess the sub-semantic feature of [+life] defining the living characteristics peculiar to these elements. Each is in turn defined by its individual features outlined below:

- (9) a. Human nouns      { +animate }  
                                  { +human }  
b. Fauna nouns        { +animate }  
                                  { -human }  
c. Flora nouns        { +living }  
                                  { -animate }

In spite of the sub-classification of the different nouns identified above, the nouns here are still grouped together as one class due to the presence of the [+living] sub-semantic feature which is defined as ‘having life’ or ‘living’. The difference between the human nouns and the fauna and flora nouns can be illustrated by the verbs they select in a logical construction in the language. Consider the examples below:

- (10) a. Òsàzèébó      òwá

- Osazẹe past-build house  
'Osazẹe built a house'
- b. Èbàbá mú úgbó  
father past-carry farm  
'Father made a farm/is a farmer'
- c. Íyé lèèvbàré  
motherprog-cook food  
'Mother is cooking'
- d. Úyì fì ímòtò  
Uyiprog-drive car  
'Uyi is driving a car'

The data above show the peculiarity of the human animate nouns as a result of the verbs associated with them. These nouns select certain verbs whose activities can only be performed by humans like, bọ 'build', fì 'drive', lè 'cook' and mu 'carry'. These activities cannot be performed by fauna and flora animate nouns as shown by the ungrammaticality of the structures in 11 below:

- (11) a.\* ékítà lé èvbàré  
dog prog-cook food  
b\* ólògbò fímòtò  
catprog-drive car  
c \* ígàribó òwá  
cassava past-build house

The data in 11a-c are asterisked because they are ungrammatical. The subject NPs, ékítà, ólògbò and ígàrì select verbs that do not agree in features with them. This is to emphasize the fact that these animate nouns cannot agree with the verbs identified here. These verbs, lè 'cook', fì 'drive' and bọ 'build' are all [+human, +ability] and pertain to activities possible only with a highly complex mental make-up which are possessed by higher animals like humans. Therefore, only human nouns can adequately perform the activities portrayed by the identified verbs as these verbs denote the presence of a physical and mental ability possessed by this category of nouns. These verbs testify to the semantic features of human nouns that give them the capability of performing certain activities which other animate nouns are incapable of doing.

### **Inanimate nouns**

These are nouns that lack the semantic content of [+life] unlike the animate nouns examined in the preceding sections. This class of nouns has the sub-types presented below:

#### **a. Celestial nouns**



These are inanimate nouns used to name or identify abstract phenomena like, the weather, climate or other natural occurrences that are not concrete. Examples of such nouns are given below in 12a-f:

- (12) a. òvèn ‘sun’  
b. ùkì ‘moon’  
c. òkhuàkhuà ‘harmattan’  
d. órhónmwè ‘stars’  
e. èhóhò ‘wind’  
f. ònì ‘cold’

These nouns are associated with the visible aspects of the human society whose effects are felt tremendously but are more or less abstract. They represent both phenomena and effects of certain phenomena as in example (12c & f).

#### **b. Artefacts**

These are nouns that are used to name concrete objects or phenomena in and around us. The objects so identified are parts of the physical structures of our natural environment. Examples of such nouns include those listed below:

- (13) a. òwá ‘house’  
b. èwá ‘mat’  
c. ógbà ‘fence’  
d. ósísí ‘gun’  
e. ópià ‘cutlass’  
f. ègùàé ‘palace’

These nouns are used to identify the physical structures in our environments also known as edifices created either as a place of habitation or for purely aesthetic purposes. The nominals in (13b, d & e) are also known as instrumental nouns as they represent objects used to perform some tasks by humans.

#### **c. Environmental nouns**

These are nouns associated with the physical features of a human society. These features are the observable elements of the human society such as the geographical landscape and other natural attributes found around us. Nouns in this class are:

- (14) a. èzè ‘water/river’  
b. òdìghì ‘lake’  
c. àtó ‘desert’  
d. òké ‘hill’  
e. òhá ‘bush’  
f. òdè ‘path’

The nouns identified thus far here are ‘inanimate’ and they represent the non-living or physical features of an average human environment or society. These classes of nouns therefore possess the semantic content/feature of [-animate] which is ‘not living’.

### **Criteria for classifying nouns as lexical category**

In the preceding sections, the common properties of what are called lexical categories (Nouns) were examined. In this section, attempt will be made to provide the modalities that informed the decision to place these word classes into this category. Information will be provided on their morphological, syntactic and semantic functions. It is expected that at the end of the analysis and illustrations in this section that more insights will be provided into the peculiarities and place of these two word classes in the grammar of a language like Edo.

### **Morphological criterion for lexical categories**

Morphology has to do with the study of words and their units or morphs as well as how they are organized in a language. It is one level of linguistics that shows the composition of words from sound units or phonemes and the different ways a word can be modified. This modification either results in the extension of the semantic information in the base before modification or leads to an outright change in the semantic content. These are known as inflectional and derivational morphology respectively. In this subsection therefore, we will be evaluating the morphological properties of the nouns and verbs in Edo.

### **The morphological criterion of nominal categories**

The noun in Edo language like in other languages can be inflected for number and this is done morphologically. Contrary to earlier claims, Edo is not solely an agglutinating language as our analysis will reveal shortly. Number in Edo language can be marked inflectionally and isolating as shown by the following examples.

(15)	Singular form	Plural form
a.	òmwá ‘person’	èmwá ‘persons/people’
b.	òkhuò ‘woman’	ìkhuò ‘women’
c.	òtẹ́n ‘relation’	ètẹ́n ‘relations’
d.	ègiè ‘title’	ìgiè ‘titles’
e.	òkhaèm̀wè ‘chief’	èkhaèm̀wè ‘chiefs’
f.	òmó ‘child’	èmó ‘children’

The data above show the inflection of nouns for pluralization by the morphological strategy of suppletion (supplanting or replacement) of a segment (vowel) in the stem with another segment (vowel) in the derived plural. Omoregbé (2012) refers to such nouns as ‘vestigial noun class in Edo’ as their morphological modification pattern reflects the main characteristics of noun class languages.

The predominant pluralization strategy in the language is the employment of quantifiers, numerals and particles. Though this may be viewed as a post-lexical

phenomenon when considered from the point of languages with isolating tendencies, it will be shown that this is a morphological process. This shows that plural marking in the language involves both morphological and syntactic considerations but actually testifies to the fact that Edo has the feature of an isolating language. Consider the data below:

(16) Base form	Plural markers	Derivation
a. òwá ‘house’	nìbún ‘many (countable)’	òwà̀nìbún ‘many houses’
b. ágá ‘chair’	èsó ‘some’	ágbà̀èsó ‘some chairs’
c. ògbá ‘tap’	èsó ‘some’	ògbà̀èsó ‘some taps’
d. èrhán ‘wood’	ávbe ‘several’	ávbèèrhán ‘several woods’
e. ówẹ ‘broom’	isẹn ‘five’	ówẹ̀isẹn ‘five brooms’
f. àmẹ ‘water’	nòbún ‘much (uncountable)’	àmẹ̀ nòbún ‘much water’
g. èkẹn ‘sand’	nòbún ‘much (uncountable)’	èkẹn nòbún ‘much sand’

The plural forms of the nouns above show that Edo is an agglutinating language as the inflectional morphemes are equivalent to a simple lexical item. In this case, the plural markers for the numeral quantifiers occur post-nominally why the plural marker *ávbe* is always at the initial position even in clauses. The *ávbe* plural marker is therefore a pre-nominal element as attested to in the language (see Omoruyi, 1990).

### **The semantic criterion of nominal categories**

The noun is known technically as ‘argument’ and is theta-marked for different roles based on its activities in a clause. The typical roles given to arguments in a clause are determined by the type of verb and the presence of prepositional elements responsible for the argument distribution feature of the clause. The common semantic roles performed by arguments in a clause are described below:

a. Agent role: this is the role played by the major nominal element in a clause which in most cases is the subject of the clause. Examples include the following:

- (17) a. Òsàsú gbé òfẹn  
Osasu past-kill rat  
‘Osasu killed a rat’
- b. Òsàtósá àmẹ̀  
Osato past-fetch water  
‘Osato fetched water’
- c. èbàbádẹ́mótò  
father past-buy car  
‘Father bought a car’

The underlined arguments in (17a-c) above are agents of their respective clauses as they are the initiators of the activities, gbe ‘kill’, sa ‘fetch’ and de ‘buy’ specified in the clauses. Different categories of nouns can function as subject as shown in (17a-c) above.

b. Patient role: this is the role given to the sufferer of the activity of an agent in a clause. It is determined in most cases by the transitivity feature of the verb in the clause in this case and the direct object of a derivation. Consider the data below in (18):

- (18) a.    èwé    rri    ìnyá  
          goat pst-eat yam  
          ‘The goat ate yam’  
      b.    Òsàsú gbé ènyé  
          Osasupst-kill snake  
          ‘Osasu killed a snake’  
      c.    Ètínòsà gbá ìbàtà  
          Ètinospst-wear shoe  
          ‘Ètinosa wore a pair of shoes’

The underlined arguments in the derivations above are the patients of the clause as they are the arguments which are directly affected by the activities of the agents (èwe, Osasu and Ètinosa) through the transitive verbs, (rri, gbe and gba).

In addition to the two roles (agent and patient) identified above, other semantic roles are associated with the nominal elements in a clause like the following highlighted roles.

c.    Theme role: this is the role played by the subject matter of a clause (what is being talked about or looked for) in a derivation. Consider the examples below:

- (19) a.    Òsàyímié néné ìbàtà  
          Osayipst-see the shoe  
          ‘Osayi saw the shoe’  
      b.    Àzàribó òwá nẹ̀  
          Azaripst-build house Asp  
          ‘Azari built house’  
      c.    èbàbámwẹ̀é ímótò  
          fatherprog-own car  
          ‘Father has a car’

d. Location role: this is the semantic role given to the arguments that give the location, position and direction of an entity in discourse. The following arguments portray this role in a clause.

- (20) a.    Úyìrrié íghó yèázà  
          Uyipst-keep money in safe  
          ‘Uyi kept money in the safe’  
      b.    òhuégbé úzòvbè égbó  
          hunterpst-kill antelope in forest  
          ‘The hunter killed an antelope in the forest’  
      c.    Ìyáyibó òwá yèÙsèlú

Iyayipst-build house at Uselu  
'Iyayi built a house at Uselu'

The different roles identified so far represent the semantic distribution of nominal categories in a language. The highlighted items above are nominal elements as used in clausal constructions. These nouns (in bold font) are used to refer to different entities and participants in a discourse and the effect of one of the discourse participant on other participants or objects present in the spatial-temporal orientation of a communicative event. These semantic roles present a functional identification and description of nominal categories in any natural language and also serve as a way of differentiating the properties of one nominal element from other nominal elements.

### **Conclusion**

We have in this paper attempted a classification of grammatical categories or word classes based on morphological and semantic features. The scope of this paper has been the nature of grammatical categories in Edo language. It has succeeded to a large extent in demonstrating the rich and unique structural configuration of the language and the implication of this for the grammatical nature of Edo language. This study has shed some light on the nature of lexical categories in Edo and the manner of its manifestations in certain derivations like the nouns. Such derivations exhibit a rich agreement system which emanates from the morpho-semantic nature of the components of such derivations. This is expected to be a new framework for the study of word classes in natural languages.

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