The category P in Gbe

Enoch Oladé Aboh, Universiteit van Amsterdam

What follows partially illustrates the exciting and insightful discussions I’ve been having with Hans over the past three years. I really hope we will continue such discussions, as I’m sure that, as a good wine, his knowledge of language will get finer as he gets older.

A salient property of the Gbe languages is that they involve two types of adpositions: $P_1$ involves elements that precede the DP-complement, while $P_2$ involves elements that follow the DP, as shown in (1).

(1) $P_1 > \text{DP} > P_2$

$P_1$ and $P_2$ manifest discrete positions because they freely co-occur. The following table further indicates the differences between these categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Case assignment</th>
<th>Pied-piped P</th>
<th>Stranded P</th>
<th>Verbal origin</th>
<th>Nominal origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$P_1$</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$P_2$</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the table shows, $P_1$ and $P_2$ oppose each other in every respect. It is commonly assumed that certain verbs may grammaticalize into prepositions, or case assigners to form $P_1$. A supporting argument for this is that $P_1$ surfaces in a similar position to that of the second verb in a serial verb construction. This is shown in (2).

(2) $V_1 > \text{(DP)} > V_2 > \text{(DP)}$ versus $V > \text{(DP)} > P_1 > \text{(DP)}$

On the other hand, the status of elements of the type $P_2$ has not yet been clarified. In previous works I have suggested that these elements are functional items that derive from nouns, and are licensed in a spec-head configuration. This requirement is met in Gbe by moving the DP-complement into the specifier of the head encoded by $P_2$. This was meant to account for the surface order of $P_2$ (i.e., DP-$P_2$), and explain the fact that these elements have a similar distribution as determiners, which also occur post-nominally, and fail to assign case.

However, a more promising approach could be that sequences of the type DP-$P_2$ derive from possessive constructions (FP), where the post-nominal noun phrase, that is, a bare NP lacking all projections hosting nominal modifiers, merges as the complement of a functional head $F^0$, whose specifier hosts the DP functioning as subject of the possessive predicate (3). I further propose that what surfaces as $P_2$ is actually the head of the bare NP-complement, which is subsequently incorporated into $F^0$, as represented in (3) for $\text{àtín lọ́ jí}$ “On top of the tree”. In this approach $P_2$ derives from the noun $(ọ)jí$, which means “above or sky”.

(3) $[\text{FP} [\text{DP} \text{àtín lọ́}] [F^0 \text{jí} [\text{NP} t_j]]]$

This analysis is corroborated with the fact that elements of the type $P_2$ lack the noun class initial vowel—here the vowel $ọ$, encode possessive semantics, and fail to assign case. Note that the lack of the initial vowel could constitute a motivation for an incorporation process into an inflectional
head. This analysis has clear consequences for the treatment of certain N-N compounds as involving more complex structures than the N-N adjunction approach would suggest. In addition, the proposed scenario captures the distribution of the Gbe derivational morphemes NP-tɔ/nɔ (e.g., gbé-tɔ /bush-father/“hunter”; kpɔ-nɔ /stick-mother/“policeman”, where the nouns tɔ ‘father’ and nɔ ‘mother’ might have taken the same route as elements of the type P₂. This analysis needs to be refined, but Hans never refused to discuss rough ideas and always came up with insightful comments and examples.