

## SUBJECTHOOD AND TEMPORAL FRAMING IN YORÙBÁ RIDDLES: AN INTERPERSONAL FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

*Language is not only used for literal communication but also for playful and culturally embedded expressions such as riddles, where information is exchanged between the riddler and the riddlees. Agency coding and temporal realization play valuable roles in shaping participant alignment and guiding content interpretation. The study examined the subjecthood and tense realization in Yoruba riddle-texts, with specific attention to their grammatical forms and pragmatic imports on the overall interpretation of the enigma. Anchored on the mood system of the interpersonal metafunction of Systemic Functional Grammar, 300 purposively selected Yorùbá riddle-texts were analyzed through mixed-method approaches. The analysis showed that grammatical subjects are marked with lexical nouns in 202 (67.33%) samples, pronouns in 43 (14.33%), and HTS of 55 (18.33%), signifying personal names as most frequent subjects in riddles. Tense is indiscriminately employed, with 288 (96%) of non-future tense and 4 (4%) of HTS with or without bá –the time adverbial suggesting timeless actions. No instance of future tense was found in the data, indicating that riddles' referents are epistemic oriented. The study concludes that subject positioning and temporal shifting in internalizing events in riddling are not merely grammatical features but central resources for negotiating responsibility and interpretive suspense in Yoruba riddles.*

**Keywords:** Yoruba Riddle, Subjecthood, Systemic Functional Grammar, Interaction

## Introduction

Language functions as a resource for meaning-making within social interaction. Its functionality does not only limit to literal communication, but also operates in culturally-strengthened genres such as riddles, where meaning and interpretation are negotiated through ambiguity and indirection. A Yorùbá riddle is an oral tradition. It encodes a linguistically structure game expression, in which the riddler deliberately manipulate grammatical structure to challenge the audience's wit in revealing identity of the enigmatic object. Riddles involve analytical exercise during which various level of interaction skills are displayed (Akinyemi, 2015). It also describes phenomena through comparison in a poetic manner and it such, its structural presentation operates within encoding-decoding communication frame (Olatunji, 1984; Owoade, 2019; Oyebamiji & Adejumo., 2019). Meanwhile, a quest towards determining the interpersonal meaning of a speech act rests on the combination of mood elements and residual contents, which personifying a given proposition. The grammatical Mood on the other hand entails interaction between the subject and the finite operators. Thus, the interpersonal linguistic elements that determine mood in respect of interpersonal meaning of a sentence as exchange are subjects; tense; polarity; vocative; and mood adjunct (Dawning & Locke, 2006; Ekins, 1994, Halliday, 2014; and Olakolu, 2017 & 2020). These mood elements are activated at the section or half part of a given clause.

Subject is a principal element of the mood structure. It functions as the element responsible for the validity of what is being predicated in the composition (Thompson, 2000). Talking about an interactiveness of an event, it is believed that there must be an entity that carries the argument forward. Functionally, the subject is responsible for such language purpose. It is the entity in respect of which the assertion is claimed to have validity (Eggins, 2004; Lusi, 2016; and Edem & Solomon, 2021). This means that

the subject as mood elements suggests something by reference to which the proposition of a clause is affirmed or denied.

Tense as a finite element of mood marks the “temporal proximity of an event to the time of speech” (Taiwo & Angisto, 2013, Ogunsiyi & Farinde, 2013). It has to do with point of reference on speaker’s time of speaking. In accordance with the time of speaking, two basic forms of tense are attested in Yorùbá language: non-future which comprised past and present tense and the future tense (Awobuluyi, 2013 and Taiwo, 2024). The present tense postulates exact time in relation to the time of producing the content of a sentence. The past tense relays events that have taken place prior to the time of their reports. In principle, the non-future has no definite marker in Yorùbá. That is to say, most times, they do not have overt item serving as their markers. Hence, the context of occurrence determines their semantic usage as to whether the event is past or present. Applying this to the data of the study, the subject together with the finite elements are closely linked and combined to form the mood elements in riddles. Examples of riddles in table 1 present the structural representation of Mood in Yorùbá riddles (hereafter: YRs)

**Table 1: Samples of Yorùbá Riddles for structural representation of Mood System**

| Riddles |  | Translation  | Answer                                       |
|---------|--|--|--|
| 1       | <p>Àlọ<br/>                 Àlọ<br/>                 Àgbà Ìjẹ, sà<br/>                 feyin kan jàgbàdo.</p>  | <p>An old Ije. sà man<br/>                 eats corn with just<br/>                 a tooth?</p>   | <p>Àdá<br/>                 ‘Cutlass’</p>    |
| 2       | <p>Àlọ,<br/>                 Àlọ<br/>                 Ìyá arúgbó n ti oko bọ; O<br/>                 ní kí wọn máa pọ̀n ètú ori<br/>                 òun lá.</p> | <p>An old woman<br/>                 coming from farm<br/>                 and order people to<br/>                 lick pus on her head</p> | <p>Àgbálùm<br/>                 ‘Cherry’</p> |

|   |   |  |  |
|---|---|--|--|
| 3 | <p>Àlò o,<br/>Àlò<br/>Lágúnrege oba láílo,<br/>Láfàkalè obaláílo,<br/>Lábòlòrundúró obaláílo,<br/>Mètà là á pa á, mètà là á<br/>mò òn; oba láílo.</p> | <p>Lágúnrege, the<br/>king of 'láílo',<br/>Láfàkalè, the king<br/>of 'láílo',<br/>Lábòlòrundúró, the<br/>king of 'láílo',<br/>We break in<br/>threes, we<br/>decode<br/>in threes.</p> | <p>Ebè, erèé,<br/>àgbàdo<br/>[Ridges,<br/>beans and<br/>maize]</p> |
|---|---|--|--|

The riddle sample in (1) and as shown in table (1) is propounded with just a clause. Three clauses are established in example 2 while example 3 as presented has 3 noun phrases with 2 focused clause. The subjects of the clauses are *àgbà ijèsà* (an old *Ijèsà* man), *ìyáarúgbó* (old women), and *Lágúnrege*, *Láfàkalé*, *Lábòlòrundúró* (Metaphorical names for ridges, beans, and maize). These subjects together with non-future tense, specifically past tense in all; continuous aspectual marker 'ń' and the high tone syllable 'á' in example 3 respectively denote interpersonal elements of mood structure. The residue structure presents the predicator, complement, and adjunct in each of the examples. Only example (3) has adjunct: the prepositional phrase 'ní mètà (in threes) and obaláílo (Lailo's king). The object of the prepositional phrase 'ní mètà' which is comment adjunct within the convergent clause 'a pa á ní mètà 'we break it in threes' in (3) has undergone focusing and moves to sentence initial position with the presence focus marker (foc.m). Following the tenet of the SFG, the word 'mètà' functions as physiological subject in its new position. Its application foregrounds emphasis on the number of riddle's referent expected from the respondent. Mood-residue structure of the riddle-samples 1 & 2 above is shown in table (2):

**Table 2. Mood-Residue Structure of Yorùbá riddles**

| Subject              | Finite |                 |     | Predication | Complement           |     |     |                |               | Adjunct | Translation   |
|----------------------|--------|-----------------|-----|-------------|----------------------|-----|-----|----------------|---------------|---------|---|
|                      | Foc    | Ins             | ASP |             | M                    | Sub | Fin | Pre d          | Com           |         |   |
| Agba<br>Ijès.à       |        | non-future:pres |     | Fi---je     | Eyi nkan----agbado   |     |     |                |               |         | An old Ijèsà man eats corn with just a tooth [àdà, cutlass] |
| Ìyáarú               |        |                 | N   | ti --bo.    | Okò                  |     |     |                |               |         |   |
| gbó                  |        |                 |     | ní          | M                    | Sub | Fin | Pre d          | Com           |         |   |
| Ó                    |        |                 |     |             | Ki wo. n             |     | Maa | po. n --lá     | Èét u orí òun |         |   |
| <b>Mood elements</b> |        |                 |     |             | <b>Mood elements</b> |     |     |                |               |         |   |
| <b>Mood</b>          |        |                 |     | <b>ke</b>   | <b>Situe</b>         |     |     | <b>Residue</b> |               |         |   |

Existing Studies on Yoruba riddles have extensively focused on their stylistic, cultural folkloric, semantic dimension and educational significance (Yai, 1977; Oábimtán 1982; Olatunji, 1984; Ajayi, 1999 & 2002; Ajikobi, 2013; Akinyemi, 2015; Saka, 2016; & Adegbodu, 2021). While these studies and methods have provided significant insights into thematic content, performative aesthetic, and educational usefulness, little attention has been given to the grammatical mechanism sustaining riddling as interaction. As such, the syntax and pragmatic roles of elements of mood systems, particularly grammatical subject and tense as indices of interpersonal meaning in Yoruba riddles are underexplored.

### Objectives of the study

The aim of the study is to describe the subjecthood and temporal framing of the grammatical Mood system in Yorùbá

riddles. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. to determine the form of linguistic items encoding subject, tense, polarity, adjunct, and vocative as elements of Mood in Yoruba riddles
2. establish the contribution of mood elements in the pragmatic interaction between the riddler and the riddles.

### Research Questions

The following questions were raised based on the objectives of the study:

1. What are linguistic items encoding subject, tense, polarity, adjunct, and vocative as elements of mood in Yoruba riddles.
2. To what extent do the mood elements influence the pragmatic interaction between the riddler and riddles

The study covers only the structural realization and interpersonal imports of the subject and tense as elements of the mood systems in Yorùbá riddles. The study does not cover the Mood types, meaning and their pragmatic functions.

### Methodology

Three hundred (300) Yorùbá riddle-texts purposively selected from both primary and secondary data together with the researcher's native intuitive knowledge were used for the study. The primary data were sourced from existing documents on Yoruba riddles. Specifically, the data were selected from three texts on Yorùbá riddles-Abiódún Àjàyí's *Ìtúpale Àlò Àpamò*, Bòdé Àgbájé's *Àlò* and Akínyemí Akintúndé's *Orature and Yorùbá Riddles* based on their richness in riddles. These secondary data were obtained from libraries and historical records. Following an interpretive design, the selected data was set to qualitative content analysis, supported with quantitative interpretation of the data. The texts were translated from the Yorùbá (source language) to English (operational language) with the aim of understanding the word

arrangement of the source language. The translation focuses on the content meaning of the text rather than word by word.

Following from here, the next section examines the applicability of subject, tense, polarity, vocative within the mood block of Yorùbá riddles-texts as mood finite elements by which interpersonal meaning of YRs is achieved.

### **Theoretical Framework: Systemic Functional Grammar**

The study is anchored on the interpersonal system of mood of Systemic Functional Grammar. In the interpersonal orientation of a clause, the Mood system is defined in the logico-semantic interaction between mood-residue. Hence, the mood of a given clause is expressed by means of variation in the lexico-grammar arrangement of a clause (Butt, 2000; & Bankole, 2015). However, this variation affects a unit in a clause, leaving remaining part unaffected. The remaining unaffected part of the clause (residue) consists of three linguistic elements: predicator, complement, and adjunct. Meanwhile, the Mood bracket resides in the interaction between subject and finite elements in a clause. The Mood system is therefore, that understood component of the clause that carries the burden of the clause as an interactive event (Bloor & Bloor, 2013; Downin Locke, 2006). Its syntactic strength covers the subject and the finite elements (tense, polarity, voice, adjunct, and vocative) only in a given clause. The organization of system of mood is represented in table below:

**Table 3: Interpersonal Conceptual Framework**

|                       |  |                |            |         |
|-----------------------|--|----------------|------------|---------|
| Subject               | Finite items:<br>tense, aspectual<br>marker, mood<br>adjunct, polarity,<br>voice | Predicators    | Complement | Adjunct |
| <b>The Mood Block</b> |  |                |            |         |
| <b>Mood</b>           |  | <b>Residue</b> |            |         |

### (Adapted from Halliday & Matthiessen 2014)

This theory is chosen for its strength in describing how the speaker and hearer negotiate interaction within an identified communicative space.

#### Data Analysis and Interpretation

Following Halliday's functional model, the subject is typically realized by nominal, adverbial groups or an embedded clause. The subject is conceptualized based on the three functions (Halliday 2004, 2014) it performs as follows:

- 'psychological' Subject –the element that points to the concern of the message;
- 'grammatical' Subject - the item which something is predicated;
- 'logical' Subject -the doer of an action

Consider the structure of riddle-text in (17) below:

Àlò.ó,

Àb

Ìkòkò baba mi kan láéláé,

Ìkòkò baba mi kan láéláé,

Mo pọ̀n omi sí I tít, sùgbọ̀n kò kún

'My father's legendary pot,

My father's legendary pot

I fetch water on it for long however, it did not get full

[Answer: *Apèrè* 'Basket'] Adésuà 1978

*Ìkòkò baba mi kan láéláé* is the **psychological subject** for being the concern of the message of the whole construction. And by so doing, denotes a point of departure for the speaker's utterance. *Ìkòkò baba mi kan láé láé* is also the **grammatical subject** of the *second clause sùgbọ̀n* (*Ìkòkò baba mi kan láéláé*) *kò kún* despite its implicit representation; it is the nominal element that process/verb *kún* 'full' predicates. 'Mo 'I' is the **logical subject** suggesting the doer of the action of *pọ̀n* 'fetch' or the process of *pọ̀n omi* in the

clause *mo ɸon omi sí i* (Ìkòkò baba mi kan láéláé). The subject that forms the concern of interpersonal meaning of language is **grammatical subject-that** element which something is predicated.

The samples of riddle below illustrate the nature and grammatical status of subjects in Yorùbá riddle-texts:

**Table4: Sample of Riddles for Grammatical Realization of Subject in Riddles**

|   | Riddles  | Translation   | Answer  |
|---|--|---|---|
| 4 | <i>Àlò! Àlò!<br/>Àlùfàà isàlè odò, bí o bá ñ<br/>lò sódò, a gararẹ ní<br/>agboòrù.</i>             | Riddle! Riddle!!<br>The cleric at river's<br>bank,<br>Whenever is going to<br>river,<br>He protects its self with<br>'umbrella' | <i>Alákàn</i><br>'Crap'                                   |
| 5 | <i>Àlò! Àlò!!<br/>Ògèdẹ ponpo, a-sùn- má-<br/>délélẹ</i>   | Riddle! Riddle!!<br>A very short banana<br>wood, the one that<br>sleeps without reaching<br>the earth                           | <i>Òrùn</i> 'Neck'  |
| 6 | <i>Àlọ o! Àlọ!!<br/>Àkukọ mi àtayébáyé<br/>A dé eni igba agbọn,<br/>Sibẹsibẹ, o ñ yọ kerekere.</i> | Riddle! Riddle!!<br>My father's legendary<br>cock, we covered it in<br>thirty times but still moves                             | <i>Èéfìn</i><br>'Smoke'                                   |
| 7 | <i>Àlọ o! Àlọ!!<br/>A fẹringbòrẹ wólé,<br/>A ti í síta pèlù túláási</i>                            | Riddle! Riddle!!<br>We warmly accept a<br>friend while we<br>We forcefully push him<br>out.                                     | <i>Óúnje. Àtí</i><br><i>ìgbòsẹ</i><br>'Meal and<br>feaces |
| 8 | <i>Àlọ o! Àlọ!!<br/>Mo dé ojà èbúté,<br/>N kò bá juèniyàn méjì tó ñ<br/>tà tó ñ rà lọ</i>          | Riddle! Riddle!!<br>At Èbúté market,<br>Just only two people<br>involve in transaction  | <i>Tọkọtaya</i><br>'Husband<br>and wife'                  |

|   |   |   |           |
|---|---|---|-----------|
| 9 | <b>Alò o! Alò!!</b><br><b>Ó yé sínú ilé,</b><br><b>Ó sàba sínú igi.</b> | He lays inside and<br>hatches inside tree | Isu ‘Yam’ |
|---|---|---|-----------|

The bold element in each of the riddle-texts in table (4) above indicates subject of their respective clause. As shown in data, the riddles in (4-5) are characterized by lexical noun subjects *Àlùfáà isàlẹ̀ odò* (A cleric at the river bank) and *Ọ̀gèdẹ̀ pópó* (A very short banana). *Àlùfáà isàlẹ̀ odò* signifies topic of discussion that performs the action of ‘lo.’ go/moves in (4). The 1<sup>st</sup> person plural pronoun ‘a’ denotes subjects in examples (6-7). The sample (6) is a derived complex expression. It consists of a topicalised vocative item, a main clause followed by a subordinate clause: *Àkùkò mi àtàyé báyé, a dé e ní igba agbọn Síbẹ̀ síbẹ̀, ó n yó. Kerekere* (My father’s legendary hen, we covered it in thirty times but still moves). The subject in the first main sentence is *a* ‘we’ while ‘ó’ it (the anaphoric pronoun substituting *Àkùkò* (cock) as the metaphorical topic of the riddle) performs the action suggested in the second subordinate sentence. Wherever the subject is grammatically represented by noun phrase, after the first occurrence; it is often substituted by anaphoric pronoun agreeing with it as regard number and person (Abimbola, 2018) as sample (6) reveals. In the sample (7) ‘i’ refers back to the noun phrase (name) *Ọ̀e. Mo ‘I’*, the first person singular pronoun points to the subject of the riddles samples (8) whereas a high tone syllable suggesting third person singular pronoun designate subject of their respective clause in examples (9). The use of *‘Àlùfáà isàlẹ̀ odò* and *Ọ̀gèdẹ̀ pópó* in samples (a&b) and the choice of ‘ó’, the high tone syllable (HTS) (Bamgbos.e, 1981, & Awobuluyi, 2013) in (8) describe the focused hidden objects. As it is evident in (6) and (7), the structural usage of first person impersonal plural pronoun ‘a’ makes reference to the participants in the riddling exercise (the riddler and riddles) as well as the environment. In contrast, the 1<sup>st</sup> person singular pronoun ‘N/mo/mi’ is actually referring only to the proponent as indicated in examples (8). Out of the (300) samples of riddles selected for analysis, 202 have personal noun/names as

their subjects, 43 are found with pronouns while 55 have high tone syllable subjects. The table in (4) below confirms the frequency distribution of subject in the selected YRs. Realization of subject within the Mood system is presented in the table (5) below:

**Table 5: Realization of subjects in the Mood block of Yorùbá riddles**

|                   | Finit                   | Subject | Finite   |               |     | Predicator | Complement        | Adjuvant | Translation  |
|-------------------|-------------------------|---------|----------|---------------|-----|------------|-------------------|----------|--|
|                   | Mod                     |         | moda dj. | Tns           | Asp |            |                   |          |  |
| Vocative          |                         |         |          |               |     |            |                   |          |  |
| Àlùfá àìsàle. òdò | Bí                      | O       | Bá       | non - futu re | N   | lo.        | sòdò              |          | The cleric at the river bank, he protects himself with an umbrella |
|                   |                         | A       |          | non - futu re |     | Ga         | Ararè ní agboòrùn |          |  |
|                   | <b>Elements of Mood</b> |         |          |               |     |            |                   |          |  |
|                   | <b>Mood</b>             |         |          |               |     |            | <b>Residue</b>    |          |  |

The frequency distribution of each form of the items representing subjects in the structural representation of riddles is shown below in table 5

**Table 5: Frequency of subjects in Yorùbá riddle-texts**

| Forms of Subjects        |            |           |            |        |           |            | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------|------------|-----------|------------|--------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
| Noun (Names)             |            |           |            |        |           |            | 202       | 67.33 %    |
| Pronouns                 | Singular   | Frequency | Percentage | Plural | Frequency | Percentage | 43        | 14.33      |
|                          | 1st person | N/mo      | 19         | 44.19  | A         | 21         |           |            |
| 2nd person               | /mi        | —         | —          | —      | —         | —          | 43        | 14.33      |
| 3rd person               | —          | —         | —          | wa'n   | 03        | 6.97       |           |            |
| High tone syllable (HTS) | O          | 55        |            |        |           |            | 55        | 18.33 %    |
| <b>Total</b>             |            |           |            |        |           |            | 300       |            |

Each of the elements denoting subject in the examples above suggests something by reference to which the proposition described by the proponent could be affirmed or denied. This assertion implies that each of the identified subjects in the above samples specifies the entity that validates the riddle's assertion. The subjects in the samples above except in *Àkukọ baba mi, a dé e ni igba agbòṅ, ó tún ñ yòkékeré* are unmarked theme because each of them begins the composition. In summary, the subject is used for personalizing identities in YRs.

The temporal framing of the event predicating the content of any given riddle text is defined by the tense orientation. The bold items in table (6) below activate tense marker in Yoruba riddles.

**Table 6: Riddles samples for Temporal Realization**

|    |   |   |                                |
|----|---|---|--------------------------------|
| 10 | <i>Àlọ o! Àlọ!!<br/>Àgbà kékeré dé<br/>filà funfun.</i> | Riddle! Riddle!!<br>The little old man<br>in whitecap | <i>Sùgà</i> 'acube<br>Of sugar |
|----|---|---|--------------------------------|

|    |  |   |   |
|----|--|---|---|
| 11 | <p>Àlọ o! Àlọ!!<br/>         Wọn <b>ń</b> lùlù nígbó, a<br/>         kò gbó nígbó, òkè<br/>         ìgbó sì <b>ń</b> mì tìtìtì.</p>                                  | <p>Riddle! Riddle!!<br/>         They are drumming<br/>         in the forest, no<br/>         sound is heard at the<br/>         forest yet, the forest<br/>         is trembling.</p> | <p>Ìpénpéjú ‘Eyelid</p>                                     |
| 12 | <p>Àlọ! Àlọ!!<br/>         Mọto bàbá ọrẹrẹ,<br/>         Mọto bàbá ọrẹrẹ<br/> <b>Tí a báti</b> wọnú rẹ,<br/>         A kì <b>í</b> mọb ití gbéni<br/>         lọ</p> | <p>Riddle! Riddle!!<br/>         My father legendary<br/>         car,<br/>         While inside it, we<br/>         do not know where<br/>         is taking us to’</p>                | <p>Oorun’ act Of<br/>         An<br/>         sleeping’</p> |

The riddle-text in 10 is presented in a simple past non-future tense. This tense form has no definite marker in Yorùbá so also its realization in riddles. The text is interpreted through the content meaning soft heverb ‘de’covered. The presence of ‘ń’ the continuous aspectual marker in examples (11) with the verb lù and mì ‘beat & shake’ confirms the non future continuity of the propositions of the sample. In example (12), the finite item; modal adverbial ‘tí....bá and high tone syllable (HTS) ‘I’ mark non- future. The use of time adverbial ‘bá’ and HTS ‘i’ in such context denotes timelessness of the sense of the riddle’s proposition. This finding supports Bámgbóṣe (1983) who viewed timeless sentence as an aspect of habitual action or event. This is also corroborated in Taiwo (2018) who observes that timeless adverbial ‘bá’ semantically suggests ‘anytime’, thereby reveals timelessness import of its clause proposition. With this revelation, one can conclude that the HTS functions as tense marker in YRs.

As the data for this study demonstrate, the High Tone Syllable (HTS) is an in variant high-toned vocalic element typically realized on vowels occurring between the subject NP and the predicate within the Yorùbá clause structure. It functions as a grammatical marker that crucially mediates the interface between phonology, syntax, and pragmatics. Its interpretation is context-

sensitive, allowing it to assume multiple grammatical roles. In certain environments, it encodes temporal reference, while in others it operates as a subject/agreement marker (Awobuluyi, 2006). Evidence of this functional duality is observable in riddle samples (2) and (9).

The non-future temporal value of HTS is further activated in *ǫ̀fò* (incantatory discourse), where it marks tense in propositions construed as timeless or gnomic, particularly in affirmative magical clauses, as illustrated below:

*Bí pẹ̀pẹ̀yẹ̀ bá jòkkúta* 'When a duck eats stone  
*Omi ni í fí í sù* It vomits water  
*A kì í fí oyín sẹ̀nú káròjù* Nobody links honey with a frown face  
*Gbogbo ẹnì tó bá rími lónìí* Whoever sees me today!  
*Ṣe nì kí wọ̀n ó máá yọ̀ mọ̀ mí* They should embrace me  
*Ṣésẹ̀ l'omode yọ̀ méyẹ̀,* A child warmly hold a bird  
*Ṣésẹ̀* Warmly reception today, I declare!

Semantically, the high-tone vowels in lines 2 and 3 denote HTS. Their presence yields a habitual or generic interpretation. Syntactically, as it immediately followed the affirmative marker, it signals that the proposition expressed in the clause holds independently of temporal anchoring.

From a phonetic and morphosyntactic perspective, HTS has also been analyzed as a subject or agreement marker in constructions such as: *Adé ó lọ sí oko* ('Adé went to the farm'). Here, the high-toned mid-back vowel *ó* encodes third person singular agreement. Pragmatically, its function in this context is primarily to index the subject within a third-person construction. Within the specific context of Yorùbá riddles, HTS operates at the intersection of these functions: phonetically, it surfaces as a subject agreement marker, while pragmatically it encodes a non-future (habitual/timeless) temporal interpretation. This double strength enables HTS to simultaneously structure reference to participant identity and temporal interpretation, thereby reinforcing its

central role in the grammatical architecture of Yorùbá clause structure.

The mood block of riddle sample12 in table (6) above is presented in tables (7) respectively below:

**Table7:Structure of tense in Yorùbá riddles**

| Subje            | Finite |      |     |     |     | Predica | Complement |                    |        | Adju |     |
|------------------|--------|------|-----|-----|-----|---------|------------|--------------------|--------|------|-----|
| mòtò             | moda   | Subj | mol | Ins | Asp | wo.     | Inúre.     |                    |        |      |     |
| baba             | ti     | A    | bá  | Pre | Ii  |         |            |                    |        |      |     |
| mj               |        |      |     |     |     |         |            |                    |        |      |     |
| Mood             |        |      |     |     |     | Residue |            |                    |        |      |     |
| A                |        | Neg  |     | HTS |     | mo.     |            | Ibi tíi gbé mi lo. |        |      |     |
|                  |        | ki   |     | I   |     |         |            | Sub                | Finite | Pre  | Com |
|                  |        |      |     |     |     |         |            | gbé..l             |        | eni  |     |
|                  |        |      |     |     |     |         |            | Ibi                | Mo     | HT   |     |
|                  |        |      |     |     |     |         |            | ti                 | I      |      |     |
| Elements of Mood |        |      |     |     |     | Mood    |            | Residue            |        |      |     |
| Mood             |        |      |     |     |     | Residue |            |                    |        |      |     |

The frequency application of each of the tense markers in Yorùbá riddles is summarily presented in table below:

**Table8:Frequency of tense marker in Yorùbá riddles**

| Forms of tense  | Riddles    | Percentage  |
|-----------------|------------|-------------|
| Non-future:     |            |             |
| i. Past/present | 288        | 96%         |
| ii. HTS         | 12         | 4%          |
| Future          | Nil        | 0%          |
| <b>Total</b>    | <b>300</b> | <b>100%</b> |

Through the process of shifting from past to present tense, the proponent is able to preserve the interpersonal meaning of his discourse. From the syntactic reading of the analysis of the cited examples and summarily captured in table 8, it is established that a single type of tense (the non-future) phonetically realized in two forms marked the riddles composition in Yoruba with 288(96%) while 12(4%) marked with timelessness impetus, the HTS. Analysis of tense in YRs shows that the proponent only indiscriminately employs non-future tense in the course of riddling.

Hence, tense is marked in riddles either with the use of simple non-future tense: simple present and past with the use of present continuous aspectual marker ‘n’ or timeless morpheme denoting habitual/ anytime events through any of these linguistic elements:

- i. ‘ń’habitualmarker
- ii. hightonesyllableHTS,and
- iii. Time adverbial-bá

The non-future expresses past, present, and habitual event. The instances of habituality otherwise referred to as timeless event indicates that the events in riddles composition happen regardless of time. They are constant. The activation of HTS in Yoruba riddles as a tense marker, specifically non-future tense is not only grammatically driven but also stands as a functional meaning making resource that informs the cognitive experience of the riddles’ respondents. Its pragmatic import in riddle neutralizes time of the event. This forces the riddlee to direct their searching and interpretation of the encoding enigma from a single specific event towards a generic and habitual reading. This cognitive reading process, in most cases, activates culturally shared knowledge structure, facilitates deep intelligent searching on the part of the respondent by foregrounds invariant properties of the referent, reinforces the inferential load of the respondent, and allows further pragmatic engagement that enriches the identification of similarity or otherwise between or among the available riddle’s referents towards discernment of the real referent. Consequently, the cognitive thinking however does two things; it expands the interpretive search space and by so doing, delays time the respondent use in calculating and able to offer correct answer out of the very many opportunities that open in the reading. Pragmatically, the generic reading sustains interpretive suspense and blocks premature closure of riddling. Hence, the generic reading ensures by the presence of HTS forms part of fundamental interface between the grammatical form and the epistemic dynamic of the riddle performance.

They describe objects that are constant in relation to their time in reality. Both the past and present tense are actually used to describe the present distinctive characteristics of the objects.

The data extremely show that it is impossible in some contexts to delineate tense operator from lexical verb that heads the residue segment (Taiwo, Ogunkeye & Adeniyi, 2017; Sharndama & Magaji, 2014). In such context, the finite element and the lexical verb are fused as shown in the riddle sample below:

13. *Àlò! Àlò!*  
*Ọpà téré kanlẹ,*  
*Ọ kòrun.*

‘A long rod that touches earth and heaven’ [Answer: Ọjò ‘Rain’]

In the example in (13) above, the riddle’s clause complex is predicated by ‘*kanlẹ reaches earth*’ and ‘*kòrun reaches heaven*’ altogether. Looking at the structure of this riddle, it is glaring that the tense cannot be separated from the lexical verb. Within the functional grammar, it is believed that the meaning of the verb and the past suggested tense’s notion have been merged in words *kanlẹ* and *kòrun*. Thus, the merged items designate and mark the predicator in the concerned riddle’s clause. However, in free context where the finite operator and the predicator are not fused, the tense as mood finite item precedes the predicator as shown in table (8) above. Also, it is possible for other element such as negative marker or indirect NP complement to come in-between the finite element and the lexical verb; hence making the verbal group discontinuous (Rica, et al, 2019) as shown in (14) below:

14. *Àlò*  
*Àlò*  
*Ìkòkò dúdú fẹyìn tìgbó.*

‘A very small pot that stocks itself in the forest’  
[Answer: Ì gbín ‘snail’]

The residue block of the above sample of riddle involved a splitting verb 'fiti' 'rest-on', where the indirect object- èyin between the splitting verbs *fì.....tì*. The subject *ìkòkò ndúdú* 'black pot' and the covert non-future tense carry the burden of the riddles as interactive.

## Discussion of findings

The study discovers that subject in Yorùbá Riddles can be marked either with a noun phrase suggesting names, pronouns or a high tone syllable. Names are prominent with total number of 202 out of 300 samples examined. As shown in table (5) above, *N/mo 'I'*, *a* 'we' personal pronouns and *wo. n* 'they' the impersonal pronouns in Yorùbá riddles are established as pronouns in YRs. The 1st person pronoun *mo* is activated in '19' times while frequency of *a* 'we' indicates '21' times of the total numbers of the sampled data. With this result, the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural pronoun *a* is established as prominent personal pronoun in YRs. Personal names and vocatives signal a discreet identity of riddle objects. Pronouns *N/mo(I)*, *a* (we) and *wo.n* (they) reflect the proponent's perception of the relationship between himself and respondents. Variation in the use of *mo* 'I' excludes respondents and society as participants in the riddling session, on the one hand while the use of *a* 'we' is established where the riddle proponent and the respondents form participants in the unfolding of the events that predicate riddles' propositions on the other hand. For instance, *a* 'we' in the following riddles refers to the riddle's proponent together with his/her respondent(s):

15. *Àlọ́,*

*Àlọ́,*

*Agé e lóri*

*Agé e lẹ̀sẹ̀*

*Ó bẹ̀ sí ní ìgbẹ̀ pù*

'We cut his head,

We cut his legs,  
He jump into the bush instantly'  
[Answer: *Kẹ̀lẹ̀bẹ̀* 'phlegm']

16. *Àlò,ò*  
*A gé e lóri*  
*Agée lése,*  
*Àgékúre. 'níòunyòòpeilú jo.*  
'We cut his head,  
We cut it leg,  
Its remain says "he would call for merriment"  
[Answer: *Ìlú* 'drum']

Analysis of tense in riddling shows that the proponent indiscriminately employs tense. Tense is marked with the use of 288 (96%) of non-future tense and 4 (4%) of HTS with or without *bá* –the time adverbial suggesting timelessness actions. No instance of future tense was found in the data because the riddles' objects are already in existence. They are not centered on the phenomenon yet to be created.

Non-activation of future tense marker in riddling construction is functional constraint to preserve the inherent characteristics of the game, which is to identify already and exists various phenomena in and around our environment, purposively to understanding the level at which people take cognizance and familiarize themselves with other creatures in their surroundings. Following this submission, the riddle respondent is charge to identify what does exist not to prediction what is yet to come. Grammatically, the future tense encodes prospective and non-actualized event rather than existence. Following this function, its usage in riddle would shift the interpretive frame from descriptive to speculation or assumption, and thereby undermines the descriptive and referential hidden condition necessary for riddle solution. On the other hand, the constancy of the non-future tense,

especially those riddle-texts with HTS foregrounds invariant properties of the referent. This grammatical function of non-future tense supports the Yoruba worldview that privileged constancy established existence. Thus, implicit use of future tense safeguards the answerability of the riddle by ensuring that the riddle's referent is determinate and retrievable from the participant cultural understanding rather than prediction. Semantically, the future tense relays an uncertainty which contradicts the scrux of the game. Riddle entails epistemic closure for answerability rather than openness.

Majority of YRs are propounded in active voice with a supportive passive emphatic import realizing through focusing in some texts.

## Conclusion

The study has shown that subject and temporal framing are fundamental meaning-making resources rather than neutral grammatical features for encoding agency, structural interaction, and interpretation cues in Yorùbá riddles. Following the Halliday's Mood System of Interpersonal Meta function, the study establishes that the predominance of lexical noun subject is not accidental but for indexes inferential salience, animacy, and cultural familiarity merely to underpin the dialogic and performative nature of the game on one hand. The realization of non-future tense and temporally neutral constructions on the other hands, evidently activate temporal flattening which reveals that coding of riddle-texts transcends specific temporal anchoring. This discovery further supports riddles' portability, didactic and mnemonic functions across contexts. The workability of HTS forms, with or without *bá*; as seen in the analysis, signals a clever pragmatic mechanism for indexing hypothetically and conditional inference, used tactically to enrich the interpretive space available to the riddlees. Theoretically, the study has successfully extended the applicability of Systemic Functional Grammar beyond literal discourse into the domain of oral genre by demonstrating how

interpersonal meaning is preset through subject and tense selection in a culturally embedded discourse. This effort contributes to scholarship at the syntax-pragmatics interface by providing empirical evidence from Yorùbá, a relatively underrepresented language in functional linguistic research. Through this, the study has made attempt to shift the analytical focus from pure lysemantic or folkloric interpretation to a more integrative model that foregrounds grammar as a core meaning making resource in a culturally embedded discourse. This repositioning opens new pathways for computational modeling of riddles, discourse-based pedagogy, and cross-linguistic comparison of verbal arts forms globally. The findings emphasize the need to reconceptualize riddles as complex linguistic artifacts, where grammar, culture and cognition intersect. The study therefore, calls for further research that may build on this framework by exploring multimodal features of riddling performance, diachronic shifts in grammatical pattern, or comparative analyses across world languages, to further illuminate the universality and specificity of the subjecthood and temporal framing in riddling.

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