

Inflectional processes in Hausa verbs: Grade and reduplication

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Almustapha Sambo Wali

Department of African Languages, Al-Qalam University, Katsina

mustaphaoldman@gmail.com

Hafsata Abubakar Kofar Kaura

Department of English, Al-Qalam University, Katsina

hafsatabubakar955@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper investigates inflectional morphology in Hausa with particular attention to the processes of grade and reduplication as they apply to verbs. It adopts Parsons (1960) for the description of grade and Yakasai (2014) for reduplication as inflectional mechanisms. Building on previous analyses of Hausa morphology, the study begins by outlining the distinction between inflection and derivation on phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic grounds. Using data from Hausa, the paper demonstrates how grade operates through predictable suffixal patterns defined by tone and final vowels, producing systematic verb classes with distinct morphosyntactic and semantic properties. Reduplication, by contrast, functions as both a full and partial process, encoding semantic values such as repetition, intensity, and distributive action. Examples are presented with standard interlinear glossing, illustrating how these processes preserve the word class of the base while enriching the verbal paradigm. The findings highlight the productivity and regularity of inflection in Hausa and its significance for understanding the interaction of tone, morphology, and syntax. More broadly, the study contributes to comparative morphological theory by providing insights into how an African language organizes verbal inflection through both highly structured and flexible processes.

Keywords: Hausa morphology, inflectional processes, verbal grade system, reduplication, morphosyntax

Introduction

This paper examines the morphological process of inflection in Hausa verbs. To provide context, it first distinguishes inflection from derivation, then analyzes two Hausa inflectional processes, grade and reduplication, showing how they function to produce verb forms.

Morphology is the branch of linguistics that studies the internal structure of words and their relationships (Akmajian et al., 2003). It addresses questions such as: What elements make up a word? What do they mean? How do they combine? And how can they be used to form new words?

The main morphological processes are inflection, derivation, and compounding. Other processes have also been identified (Adams, 1973; Malkiel, 1978; Bauer, 1983; Cannon, 1986). While there is general agreement on these categories, details vary. For instance, Marchand (1969) distinguishes between formations involving full linguistic signs (e.g., compounding, prefixation, suffixation) and those that do not. Bauer (1983) proposes alternative classifications.

Inflection

Inflection involves attaching affixes to a base form to produce new forms within the same grammatical category. Matthews (1972) identifies inflection as a central part of morphology, while Bloomfield (1933) views it as the “outer layer” of word structure, following derivation and compounding. For example, the plural of *motor-bike* (compound) is *motorbikes*, not *motorsbike*, and the plural of *painter* (derived form) is *painters*, not *paintser*.

In English, inflectional processes such as tense, number, and voice have important syntactic effects, and are therefore called *morphosyntactic processes* (Matthews, 1991). Hausa likewise employs inflectional processes—including number, gender, grade, reduplication, and nominal agreement—that are crucial to morphosyntax.

Hausa Inflectional Morphemes

(1) Ethnonyms

a. *kanòo* → *bàkanòo*

‘Kano’ → ‘male native of Kano’

b. *bàkan-* → *bàkaniyaa*

‘Kano native (male)’ → ‘Kano native (female)’

c. *kanòo* → *kanaawaa*

‘Kano’ → ‘inhabitants of Kano (plural)’

(2) Nominal Agreement

a. *bak-* → *bakii*

‘black’ → ‘black (masculine)’

b. *bak-* → *bakaa*

‘black’ → ‘black (feminine)’

c. *bak-* → *bakàakee*

‘black’ → ‘blacks (plural)’

(3) Plural Formation

a. *àbookii* → *àbòokai*

‘friend’ → ‘friends’

b. *makarantaa* → *màkàràntuu*

‘school’ → ‘schools’

(4) Verbal/Grade Suffixes

a. *jeef-* → *jeefàa*

‘throw (*base*)’ → ‘to throw’

b. *say-* → *sàyi*

‘buy (*base*)’ → ‘to buy’

c. *zub-* → *zubèe*

‘pour (*base*)’ → ‘to flow away’

d. *daaw-* → *daawoo*

‘return (*base*)’ → ‘to return’

(5) Reduplication

a. *kaamàa* → *kakkàamaa*

‘catch’ → ‘catch repeatedly’

b. *riḃànyaa* → *rirriḃànyaa*

‘double’ → ‘double repeatedly’

Distinguishing Inflection and Derivation

Inflection and derivation are distinct though related processes. This paper highlights four criteria - phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic - that differentiate them in Hausa:

1. Tone pattern: Inflectional affixes may override the tone of the base (tone-integrating), while derivational affixes generally do not (Newman, 1986).
2. Productivity: Inflectional morphemes are more widely applicable across verbs; derivational morphemes vary in productivity.

3. *Word class: Inflection preserves word class (verbs remain verbs), whereas derivation may shift it (e.g., verb → noun).*
4. *Meaning: Inflectional morphemes are semantically regular, while derivational ones vary more widely.*

Inflectional processes in Hausa verbs

Grade

Hausa verbs belong to morphological classes known as *grades*, defined by final vowel/termination and tone pattern (Newman, 2000). Parsons (1960) first presented this system, later refined by Newman (1973, 2000). Most Hausa verbs (about 98%) fall into one of these grades; only a small group of irregular verbs, including mono-consonantal ones, fall outside.

The grade system can be summarized as:

Verb = Verbal Base + Grade

(6) Examples of Grade Inflection

- a. *jeef-* + *-aa* (H-L) → *jeefàa*
 ‘*throw (base)*’ → ‘*to throw something*’
- b. *zub-* + *-oo* (H-H) → *zuboo*
 ‘*pour (base)*’ → ‘*pour toward*’
- c. *karant-* + *-ar* (H-H) → *karantar*
 ‘*read (base)*’ → ‘*to teach*’

Table 1: Hausa Verb Grades (Adapted from Newman, 2000)

Grade	Grade System	
	<i>Final Vowel/Termination</i>	<i>Tone Pattern</i>
0	-a/-i/-e/-o	H
1	-aa/-a	H-L-(H)
2	-aa/-ee/-i	(L)-L-H
3	-a	L-H-(L)
3a	-a	H-H
3b	-i/-u/-a	H-L
4	-ee/-e	H-L-(H)
5	-ar (dà)	H
6	-oo	H
7	-u	(L) L-H

Reduplication

Hausa also uses reduplication extensively in nouns, adjectives, and verbs (Yakasai, 2014). Reduplication may be full (*gàrrii* → *gàrrii-gàrrii* ‘town to town’) or partial (*kaamàa* → *kakkàamaa* ‘catch repeatedly’).

Partial reduplication typically involves prefixing a reduplicated syllable from the base, sometimes with assimilation:

(7) Reduplication of Verbs

a. *jeefàa* → *jejjèefaa*

‘throw’ → ‘throw repeatedly’

b. *kashèe* → *kakkàshee*

‘kill’ → ‘kill repeatedly’

c. *karàntaa* → *kakkaràntaa*

‘read’ → ‘read repeatedly’

These forms remain verbs, showing that reduplication in Hausa serves an inflectional rather than derivational role, often marking intensity, repetition, or plurality of action.

Conclusion

This paper has examined two key inflectional processes in Hausa verbs: grade and reduplication. The analysis shows that both processes operate systematically on verbal bases to generate multiple verb forms while maintaining the same word class. The grade system, characterized by the interaction of tone patterns and final vowels, provides a highly structured and productive means of verb inflection. Reduplication, on the other hand, demonstrates the flexibility of Hausa morphology, signaling repetition, intensity, and other semantic nuances through partial or full reduplication.

Beyond their descriptive interest, these processes highlight the close relationship between phonology, morphology, and syntax in Hausa. The grade system in particular illustrates how a language can encode fine semantic and syntactic distinctions through predictable morphological patterns. Reduplication further underscores the creativity of the language in extending meaning without altering lexical category.

By contrasting inflection with derivation, the paper also clarified the criteria—phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic—that distinguish the two processes. These distinctions are not only relevant for the analysis of Hausa but also enrich general morphological theory, showing how languages balance regularity and productivity with idiosyncratic patterns.

In sum, Hausa provides a valuable case study of how inflectional morphology shapes the verbal system of a natural language. A deeper understanding of these processes not only advances Hausa linguistics but also contributes to comparative morphological research, especially in the study of African languages. Future research could extend this analysis to other less-studied processes of Hausa inflection or explore how these patterns interact with dialectal variation and language change.

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