Focus System in Yorùbá: The Particle *ni* and its Syntax-Semantics Interface

Kassey Chang
Languages of Africa
May 4, 2023

1 Introduction

The Yoruba language (Yorùbá), belonging to the Benue-Congo subfamily in the Niger-Congo family, is spoken by over 20 million people, primarily in Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. With its rich morpho-syntactic and phonological structures, Yoruba offers a vast array of linguistic phenomena for investigation, including serial verb construction, noun classes, and the tonal system. This paper aims to explore the focus construction in Yoruba, specifically focusing on the role of the focus particle *ni* in its syntax and semantics. To achieve this goal, I will delve into several key questions, including:

- What is the syntactic structure of a focus utterance in Yoruba involving *ni*?

- Is there a semantic correlation between the content of *ni* and the syntactic structure of an utterance, or vice versa?

- Are there other prevalent methods of expressing focus in Yoruba?

To address these questions, I will consolidate the findings of prominent scholars such as Bisang and Sonaiya (1996), Jones (2006), Dik (1997), and Kiss (1998). By synthesizing their research, I aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Yoruba focus particle *ni* and shed light on the focus construction system in Yoruba.

2 Linguistic Focus

Linguistic focus is a crucial aspect of information structure (IS) as it involves marking specific information within an utterance, which can be realized through syntactic, morphological, phonological, or prosodic means. Semantically, focus is a linguistic phenomenon that highlights a set of contextually relevant alternative propositions and isolates a single "focused" proposition. The position of focus in a sentence or the presence of a focus marker often involves a focusing operator that triggers the meaning of focus. According to Halliday (1967), information focus serves as a form of emphasis through which a speaker designates a part (or possibly the entirety) of a message block as the informative element.

In different languages, focus can be marked using various syntactic constructions such as it-cleft, topicalization, and left-dislocation, as seen in English. Alternatively, many languages employ focus particles as markers of information. These particles function as operators that quantify over alternatives, with variations in their focused position. English examples include *only*, *even*, and *also*. In Yoruba, focus can be indicated by particles such as *kan* ("one"/"only"),

nikan ("only"), and the particle *ni*, which can occur in different syntactic constructions.

Yoruba, with its subject-verb-object (SVO) word order, is a head-initial language. In Yoruba, focus can be expressed through the syntactic structure of a focus phrase (FP), which is a functional phrase headed by a focus marker, similar to a complementizer phrase (CP) or an inflectional phrase (IP).

2.1   Syntax: Focus Movement

Focus movement is a syntactic process that involves the movement of the focused element to a specific position in the sentence to express identificational focus. According to Kiss (1998), this movement is restricted to the expression of identificational focus, a type of focus that requires exhaustive information about the entity or entities being referred to. Identificational focus is distinct from information focus, which does not involve movement and lacks obligatory exhaustivity effects. In the subsequent sections, I will further elaborate on these two types of focus.

When the focus operator is triggered, the focus-marked XP is moved to the position of the specifier of the FP, resulting in predicate inversion and the assignment of the focus or emphatic case to the focused phrase (see Figure 1). It is important to note that in the case of VP focus, the verb must undergo nominalization to be placed in the subject position, followed by the particle *ni* (see sentence 2b-c).

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                    FP
                   /  \
                  /    \
                 /      \
              Spec      F'
                       /  \
                      /    \
                     /      \
                    F        IP
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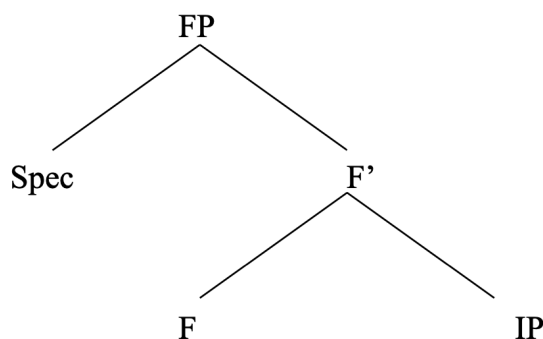
Figure 1: Focus phrase

Examples of focus movement in Yoruba include NP focus (see sentence 1) and VP focus (see sentences 2a-2c). In NP focus, the focused element is the direct object, and it is marked by the focus particle. The focus particle c-commands its associate and triggers focus movement. In VP focus, the verb or verb phrase is the focused element, and it must undergo nominalization to be placed in the subject position, followed by the particle *ni*.

(1)   DO focus:
      Ìwé$_i$ *ni* Olú ra t$_i$
      book FOC Olu buy
      "It is a book the Olu bought."

(2) VP/V focus:
Nom. *ni* DP$_{SUBJ}$ t$_{PRED}$
a. Mo ka ìwé
1sg. read book
"I read a book."

b. Kíka *ni* mo ka ìwé
Read-NOM FOC 1sg read book
"I read$_F$ a book."

c. Kíka ìwé *ni* mo ka ìwé
Read-NOM book FOC 1sg read book
"I [read a book]$_F$."

There are two main theories that have been proposed to explain focus movement in Yoruba: the quantificational particle theory and the operator-particle theory. The quantificational particle theory posits that a focus particle must c-command its associate, while the operator-particle theory suggests that focus movement is triggered by the presence of a focus particle in the sentence. Both theories offer unique perspectives on the mechanisms underlying focus movement in Yoruba. The theories will be further explained in the Discussion section.

2.2   Types of Focus Constructions

The study of focus constructions in Yoruba has identified various types of focus. Two main approaches to categorizing focus in Yoruba are those proposed by Kiss (1998) and Bisang and Sonaiya (2000).

Kiss (1998) distinguishes between two types of focus: identificational and information focus. Identificational focus involves focus movement and expressing a contrastive, identificational function. Information focus, on the other hand, does not involve movement and has no obligatory exhaustivity effect (see Table 1).

Table 1: Comparison between Identificational focus and Information focus (Kiss, 1998)

Identificational/Contrastive Focus	Information/Presentational Focus
Expresses exhaustive identification i.e. [+exhaustiveness]	Marks nonpresupposed nature of information
Has syntactic and semantic properties that information focus does not share	Does not have distinct syntactic or semantic properties
Involves movement to specifier of functional projection (e.g. cleft movement)	Does not involve movement
Always coextensive with an XP available for operator movement	Can be smaller or larger than an XP
Certain types of constituents cannot function as identificational foci	Type of constituents not restricted
Takes scope	Does not take scope

Dik (1997), and Bisang and Sonaiya (2000) identified more subtypes of focus constructions under the binary categorization of identificational/contrastive focus and information/presentational focus. Within contrastive focus, the presence of specific presupposition and the presence of correctiveness within the domain of preconstruction are taken into account (See figure 2).
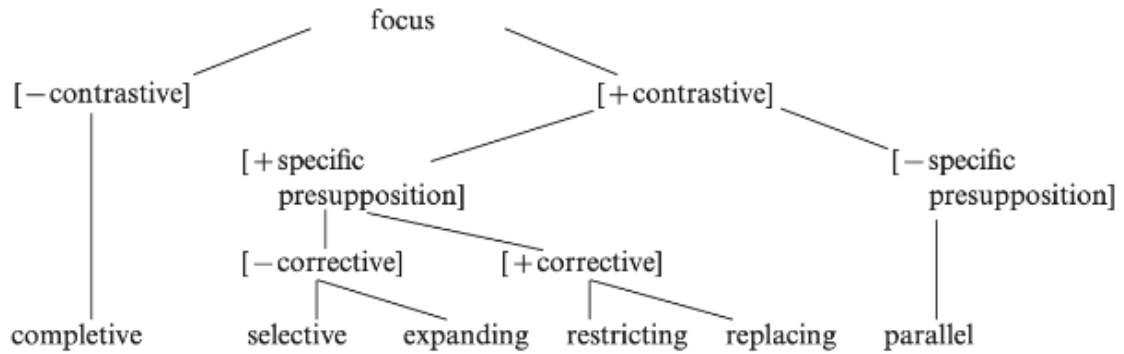

Figure 2: Subtypes of Focus (Dik, 1997; Bisang & Sonaiya, 2000)

In the subsequent section, an attempt will be made to synthesize their theories on the semantics of focus and apply them to the analysis of sentences featuring the particle *ni* in Yoruba. The objective is to uncover the semantic correlation between the content of *ni* and the syntactic structure of utterances.

3   The Focus Particle *ni*

The focus particle *ni* is derived from the copula *ni* and is used to mark focus in Yoruba, not only with noun phrases but also with verbs and clauses. According to Bisang and Sonaiya (1996), the proper use of the focus particle *ni* requires three features: [+preconstruction/specific presupposition], [+identificational/contrastive], and [+exhaustiveness]. Interestingly, some scholars argue that it does not exhibit obligatory exhaustivity effects ([±exhaustiveness]) (Jones, 2006). We can say that previous research all agree that in focus constructions, ni is used to mark identificational focus. However, as Kiss (1998) points out, it goes beyond identificational focus found in other languages and can be used with predicates and states of affairs. The preconstructed domain, marked by the particle *ni*, is crucial for its copula function.

In terms of its use, the particle *ni* has different properties depending on its syntactic, semantic and pragmatic context. When used with identificational, also known as contrastive focus, it can carry the features [±specific presupposition] and [±corrective].

In example 3, the speaker presents two specific presupposed choices to the hearer, beans or rice, and requires the selection of one among this group of predicates. In this context, the particle *ni* carries the semantic features of [+contrastive, +specific presupposition, -corrective], indicating a type of selective focus.

(3) a. èwà ló fé je tàbí ìrésì?
     bean FOC want eat or rice
     "Do you want to eat beans or rice?"
     b. èwà *ni*
     bean FOC
     "Beans, please."

The particle *ni* in Example 4 has the same semantic content as Example 3, but it marks expanding focus because the entity "èwà" (beans) is newly expanded. Although the features of the particle remain the same as [+contrastive, +specific presupposition, -corrective], it is known as expanding focus.

(4) kofí nìkan kó *ni* rà, ó rà èwà náà.
     coffee only NEG:FOC FOC buy 3s buy bean too
     "He not only bought coffee, he also bought beans."

In example 5, the speaker cancels or "corrects" a specific predicate or argument mentioned in a previous conversation or context. The utterance restricts the preconstructed domain, resulting in restricting focus which the two entities "grows" and "sells" are restricted into one ("sells"). The *ni* that modifies "them" carries [+contrastive, +specific presupposition, +corrective].

(5) Context: It seems Ayo grows and sells beans.
     ó kàn ń-tà won *ni*.
     3s only PROG-sell 3p FOC
     "He only sells them."

Similarly, in Example 6, the particle *ni* is [+contrastive, +specific presupposition, +corrective]. However, the speaker proposes another predicate that cancels and "replaces" the previous entity in the context. In the replacing focus sentence below, the entity "corn" is replaced by "beans."

(6) Context: You bought corn.
     àgbà do kó *ni* mo rà, èwà *ni.*
     corn NEG:FOC FOC 1s buy bean FOC
     "It wasn't corn that I bought, it was beans."

In Example 7, *ni* is not used because it is a sentence of parallel focus in which there is no specific presupposition, i.e. Ayo was not supposed to greet the speaker well or be pleasant with them. The focus construction is [+contrastive, -specific presupposition].

(7) Ayò kí mi dáadáa, sùgbón inú Adé ò dùn sí mi
     Ayo greet 1s:OBJ well but inside Ade NEG pleasant PREP OBJ:1s
     "Ayo greeted me well, but Ade was not pleasant with me."

Observably, there is no syntactic structural difference within identificational focus. However, when the focus is not identificational or contrastive ([-constrastive, +preconstruction]), other particles such as *kan* or *nikan* are used instead of the particle *ni*.

The particle *ni* does not carry identificational focus but only information focus ([-identificational, +information]) when the context is to introduce new information to the discourse. In this kind of situation, *ni* is placed only at predicate-final position and it does not undergo focus movements that are demonstrated above. Sentence 8 provides an example of an information focus sentence with predicate-final *ni*. It is no different from a typical statement.

(8) ó ń kàwé *ni*.
3sg PROG read:book FOC
"He is reading."

4 Discussion

4.1 The Syntax-Semantics Interface: Operator-Particle Theory vs Quantificational Particle Theory

In the study of focus constructions in Yoruba, two main theories have been proposed: the quantificational particle theory and the operator-particle theory (Branan Erlewine, 2020). These theories offer different perspectives on the relationship between syntax and semantics, providing insights into the mechanisms underlying focus movement in the language.

The quantificational particle theory suggests that a focus particle must c-command its associate, driving the syntactic movement of the focused constituent in Yoruba to a higher position within the sentence structure. In this framework, the focus particle *ni* plays a crucial role in triggering focus movement.

In contrast, the operator-particle theory proposes that the focus particle i.e. *ni* itself is semantically inert and serves as a reflection of the presence of a nearby semantically contentful operator. The operator carries the semantics of a sentential focus particle, contributing to the interpretation of the focused constituent. Branan and Erlewine (2020) further develop this theory by introducing the Anti-pied-piping approach, which highlights the morphosyntactic response to focus (MSF), specifically particle placement or insertion.

These two theories exhibit an opposing view of focus constructions: one posits that the focus particle has semantic content and is the cause of focus movement, while the other contends that the particle has no semantic content and is an effect of the underlying semantics. Despite the lack of consensus among scholars, investigating these theories and their implications can provide a more profound comprehension of the intricate interplay between syntax and semantics in Yoruba focus constructions, thus unraveling the complexities of focus movement in the language.

4.2 The Tonal System and Focus Marking

Yoruba is known for its complex tonal system, which plays a vital role in conveying meaning and grammatical information, including focus marking. The language has three level tones - high (á), mid (a/ā), and low (à) - that are used to differentiate words and phrases that have different meanings. Tonal focus marking in Yoruba involves the use of specific tones to highlight or emphasize the focused element. For instance, as noted by Jones (2006), predicate focus in Yoruba is marked by a high-tone vowel, *í*, through reduplication. This process results in the nominalization of the VP, creating a gerund with a prefixal reduplication. In sentences 9a and 9b below, the plain, non-focus verb *ka* "read" is reduplicated to the focused verb *kíka* "read." Thus, it is highly possible that the high tone is associated with emphasis and focus.

(9)   a. Mo *ka* ìwé.
   1sg. read book
   "I read a/the book."
   b. *Kíka* ni mo ka ìwé.
   Read-NOM FOC 1sg read book
   "I read$_F$ a/the book."

The use of tonal marking in focus construction in Yoruba is not unique to the language. Other African languages, especially Kwa languages, also utilize tonal marking in focus constructions. From here we can see that Yoruba also employs other strategies i.e. tonal marking for focus in addition to morphosyntactic marking.

4.3 Bipartite focus construction

Another way to express focus in Yoruba is through the use of concord-like bipartite focus constructions. These constructions involve the use of multiple focus markers to convey different aspects of the focus. The most common bipartite focus construction involves the co-occurrence of both the focus particle *ni* and *kan* or *nikan*.

(10)   John$_F$ *nikan ni* o fun Mary ni ìwé
   John only FOC 3SG give Mary SEC book
   "Only John gave a book to Mary."

In example 10, the use of both *nikan* and *ni* serves to emphasize the contrastive nature of the focused element "John." The connotation behind this sentence is that "Only John gave a book to Mary. No one else did." This bipartite focus construction is used to convey the specific and exhaustive nature of the focus, as well as its contrastive relationship to other elements in the sentence. Thus, the *ni* here has the semantic content of [+contrastive, +specific presupposition, +corrective].

(11)   Ko kin she handbag$_F$ *nikan ni* John *kan* fun Mary
   NEG COP do handbag only FOC John only give Mary
   "John not only gave Mary a handbag."

In the above example 11, it is rare as three focus particles are used to contrast the NP "hand-bag." There is a connotation of "John not only gave Mary a handbag. He gave her something else as well." This *ni* is [+contrastive, +specific presupposition, -corrective]. While it is highly possible that there exists a tripartite focus construction in Yoruba habitually, it is worth noting that the tripartite construction is potentially affected by the negation in the utterance. Although it is unclear whether these occurrences are strictly "focus concords," the relationship between bipartite or tripartite focus construction and negation could be a direction for future research.

5 Conclusion

In this report, we have examined the Yoruba focus particle *ni* and its syntactic movement, synthesizing the findings of various scholars. The present analysis has shed light on the complexity of the focus system in Yoruba, as well as various types of focus constructions, the role of focus particles, syntactic movements, and the tonal system in shaping the language's information structure.

Through this investigation, we have gained valuable insights into the intricate workings of the Yoruba focus particle *ni* and its syntax-semantics interface. Future research in this area may continue to explore other aspects of the Yoruba focus system, such as other focus particles and dialectal variations, as well as cross-linguistic comparisons to further enrich our understanding of focus marking and movement in diverse languages.

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