

## The Third-Person Singular Short Subject Pronoun in Standard Yoruba

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### Abstract

The Standard Yoruba word *ó* occurs mutually exclusively with tense/aspect markers immediately following subject NPs in declarative sentences. It is, therefore, a tense/aspect marker, and not the third-person singular short subject pronoun ‘he, she, it’ that it has long been held to be. The actual third-person singular short subject pronoun in the language occurs covertly in form everywhere in surface structure, as seen in two hitherto virtually unnoticed types of utterances in the language.

Almost all Standard Yoruba grammarians and lexicographers take the word *ó* to be the third-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun meaning ‘he, she, it’ in the language (Anonymous 1913: Part 2: 166; Abraham 1958: 446; Beecroft and de Gaye 1922: 6; Rowlands 1969: 43; Bamgboṣe 1990: 114). In fact, however, it is actually a pre-verbal modifier signifying ‘present/past tense’ and is in the same word class as *a* ‘would,’ *á* ‘will, would,’ *yóḍ/óḍ* ‘will, would,’ as suggested by the following examples.

1. *Ayò a lọ* lit. *Ayò would* go, i.e. ‘*Ayò* would go (somewhere).’  
*Ayò á lọ* lit. *Ayò will/would* go, i.e. ‘*Ayò* will/would go (somewhere).’  
*Ayò yóḍ/óḍ lọ* lit. *Ayò will/would* go, i.e. ‘*Ayò* will/would go (somewhere).’  
*Ayò ó lọ* → *Ayò ọ lọ* lit. *Ayò past tense* go, i.e. ‘*Ayò* went (somewhere).’

The pre-verbal modifier *ó* occurs mutually exclusively with the other three pre-verbal modifiers immediately after the subject NP in declarative sentences in the language, as seen directly above. Unlike the other modifiers, however, it obligatorily assimilates regressively to the vowel in the final syllable of the subject NP. That same final vowel of the subject NP optionally assimilates progressively to the initial or only vowel of the other modifiers, as in

2. *Ayò a lọ* → *Ayà a lọ*. ‘*Ayò* would go (somewhere).’  
*Ayò á lọ* → *Ayà á lọ*. ‘*Ayò* will/would go (somewhere).’  
*Ayò óḍ lọ* → *Ayò óó lọ*. ‘*Ayò* will/would go (somewhere).’

Because the four pre-verbal modifiers are mutually exclusive, as indicated, none of them ever cooccurs with itself or with any other member of its class in declarative sentences in the language. For that same reason, words or phrases signifying past time or future time are sometimes needed to provide appropriate temporal contexts for habitual action, as in:

3. *Ní àtíjọ, a lọ, a sì padà níjọ kejì*. lit. **in past**, he-would go, he-would and return **on-day second**  
‘In the past, he would go there and come back the following day.’

Future tense by nature or meaning cannot cooccur with present/past tense. Accordingly, Bamgboṣe (1990: 170) reflects that relationship by portraying our past, present, and future here simply as a binary contrast between future and nonfuture.

As said earlier, the pre-verbal modifier *ó* signifies ‘present tense’ or ‘past tense.’ It does so, depending on whether the verb with which it cooccurs is stative or non-stative in meaning. The verb *lọ* ‘to go’ in all the above examples is non-stative in meaning and *ó*, accordingly, signifies only ‘past tense’ there. But with a verb phrase like *sanra* ‘be obese,’ which is stative in meaning, i.e. it describes a given state of affairs, the modifier would signify either ‘present tense’ or ‘past tense,’ as the context concerned dictates.

Finally, notice in particular that the position of occurrence of the pre-verbal modifier *ó* as indicated above completely precludes it from ever occurring in subject position or under the subject node. Furthermore, its one and only true meaning as seen in (1) above is distinct from that of any known personal pronoun in the language. These two considerations jointly indicate that it is definitely not a personal pronoun. More specifically, it is not the third-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun that it has been held to be from the beginning in the language.

If this last conclusion is correct, it suggests that the third-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun in the language must be something other than the pre-verbal modifier *ó*. Indeed, Standard Yoruba morphology very clearly suggests that it must be the word *un*, at least in deep structure (Awobuluyi 1988: 28-32; 2013: 27; 2024b: 31). However, it would appear that, like the other two singular short subject pronouns, that deep structure form of the pronoun *un* undergoes significant change as follows, when it cooccurs with the present/past tense marker *ó* (Awobuluyi 2024b: 31-32, 95-96):

4.  $mi + ó \rightarrow mo$  ‘I (present/past tense)’  
 $o + ó \rightarrow o$  ‘you (sg.) (present/past tense)’  
 $un + ó \rightarrow *o$  ‘he, she, it (present/past tense)’  $\rightarrow \emptyset + ó$  ‘he, she, it (present/past tense)’

What the third line of (4) says here is that, in order to avert becoming totally indistinguishable from the second-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun *o*, the third-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun *un* becomes covert in form ( $\emptyset$ ), directly before the present/past tense marker *ó*.

This immediately suggests that there must be expressions in the language that each predicate things about unnamed and unseen singular subjects. Indeed, such expressions, consciously cited and briefly discussed in (Awobuluyi 1988: 30-31), have from the very beginning remained hidden in plain sight in the language, as in:

5. *A lọ*. lit. would go, i.e. ‘He/She/It would go (somewhere).’  
*Á lọ*. lit. will/would go, i.e. ‘He/She/It will/would go (somewhere).’  
*Yóò lọ*. lit. will/would go, i.e. ‘He/She/It will/would go (somewhere).’  
*Ó lọ*. lit. past-tense go, i.e. ‘He/She/It went (somewhere).’  
*Ì bá lọ*. lit. concessive realis go, i.e. ‘He/She/It would have gone (somewhere).’

*Ì báà lọ...* lit. concessive irrealis go, i.e. ‘Even if he/she/it goes (somewhere)...’

Judged by their glosses indicated here, these utterances each have a third-person singular as their subject referent as indicated earlier. Notice that the pre-verbal modifier *ó*, that most grammarians of the language take to be its third-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun, could not at all be what actually stands for the subject referent in (5), for two fairly obvious reasons. First, the pre-verbal modifier *ó* is very clearly overt in form, whereas the subject of the utterances in (5) is required to be covert in form. In effect, therefore, that modifier is completely barred from being the subject of (5) on phonetic grounds. Second, as indicated above concerning (1), the pre-verbal modifier *ó* is mutually exclusive both with itself and with the other elements in its word class. That circumstance predicts that the starred expressions in (6) directly below would not occur or be acceptable in the language with *ó* functioning as third-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun for each of them. The prediction is accurate. The utterances in (6) are, indeed, all ill-formed and unacceptable. Thus, in effect, the modifier *ó* is not only barred phonetically from being the subject of (5), it is also barred syntactically from that same role. Indeed, for grammars that, unlike (Awobuluyi 2024b), recognise (1-3, 5-7) as the only kinds of positive declarative sentences in the language, the modifier *ó* would actually also be syntactically barred by extension from being the subject of any sentences in the language.

6. \**Ó a lọ*. ‘He/She/It would go (somewhere).’  
\**Ó á lọ*. ‘He/She/It will/would go (somewhere).’  
\**Ó yòò/óò lọ*.<sup>1</sup> ‘He/She/It will/would go (somewhere).’  
\**Ó ó lọ*. ‘He/She/It went (somewhere).’  
\**Ó ì bá lọ*. ‘He/She/It would have gone (somewhere).’  
\**Ó ì báà lọ*. ‘Even if he/she/it goes (somewhere) ...’

On the other hand, if ‘third-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun’ is for expository purposes coded as <un>, it will be what actually occurs as subject NP for each of the expressions in (5), as follows:

7. <un> *a lọ*. ‘He/She/It would go (somewhere).’  
<un> *á lọ*. ‘He/She/It will/would go (somewhere).’  
<un> *yòò lọ*. ‘He/She/It will/would go (somewhere).’  
<un> *ó lọ*. ‘He/She/It went (somewhere).’  
<un> *ì bá lọ*. ‘He/She/It would have gone (somewhere).’  
<un> *ì báà lọ...* ‘Even if he/she/it goes (somewhere)...’

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<sup>1</sup>In core Ekiti dialects, where *yòò* signifies modality rather than tense/aspect, it is possible to have *Ó yòò yún* lit. present/past able/may go (somewhere), i.e. ‘He/She/It can/may/might go (somewhere).’ In Standard Yoruba, however, where *yòò* signifies tense/aspect, \**Ó yòò lọ* lit. present/past will go (somewhere) is semantically and syntactically ruled out. The element *ó* beginning it is a dog-in-the-manger, as it were, for its subject NP.

Thus, the foregoing examples do not only show that the covert element <un> ‘he/ she, it’ is the actual subject of each of the sentences in (5 and 7) above. They also show that the pre-verbal modifier *ó* that has long been held to be a third-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun by most of the grammarians of the language is actually no pronoun at all. More specifically in that connection, the examples collectively numbered (1) above show both semantically and syntactically that that pre-verbal modifier could not be a third-person singular short/emphatic subject pronoun, while the examples collectively numbered (6), also above, now show empirically that, indeed, it is not the pronoun that it has long been erroneously thought to be in the language. Thus, in effect, the pre-verbal modifier *ó* fails to meet every conceivable linguistic criterion, including gender/number concord (in (Awobuluyi 2024a)), for personal pronouns in the language.

Nevertheless, as if to make assurance doubly sure on this matter, the language itself provides yet another piece of evidence showing that the covert element <un> rather than the pre-verbal modifier *ó* is its actual third-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun. The evidence comes from yet another syntactic phenomenon in the language that is actually yet to be satisfactorily explained. The phenomenon involves utterances in which subjects become transformed into objects. Specifically, in direct speech in the utterances concerned (as opposed to in reported speech; for which, see particularly Awobuluyi 2024b: 169-170)), subject personal pronouns miraculously become corresponding output object personal pronouns, as in

8. *Ògá ni mi ó jé.* lit. boss focus-marker I present/past-tense be, i.e. ‘I am/was the boss.’

which becomes

→ 9. *Ògá ni mí.* lit. boss focus-marker me ‘I am/was the boss.’

In the input expression here, *mi*, with unmarked mid tone, is a subject personal pronoun. In the corresponding output expression, on the other hand, it is now an output object personal pronoun with a polarised high tone, and it can be seen directly following the focus marker *ni* there.

One would have thought that, just as in the case of (8 and 9) directly above, the following expression where the word *ó* is taken to be the third-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun by almost all the lexicographers and grammarians of the language (Abraham 1958: 435; Rowlands 1969: 158; Bamgboṣe 1990: 208),

10. *Ògá ni ó jé* lit. boss focus-marker he/she be, i.e. ‘He/She is/was the boss.’

would yield (11) as a perfectly well-formed output expression having an overt corresponding output object pronoun *ó* or *ín*, with a polarised high tone, occurring right after the focus marker *ni* in it (for more on the form of *ín*, see footnote 4 on page 8 below):

→ 11. \**Ògá ni ó/ín.* lit. boss focus-marker him/her ‘He/She is/was the boss.’

Surprisingly, however, it does not yield (11)! According to all the known lexicographers and grammarians of the language, what it yields instead is (12), which has no visible or audible third-person singular corresponding output personal object pronoun in it:

→ 12. *Ògá ni*. lit. boss focus-marker (him/her) ‘He/She is/was the boss.’

What is really intriguing, indeed initially mystifying, about focus expressions like (12), and appears to set them completely apart in the language, is that they appear to be structurally incomplete, for not having any visible or audible third-person singular output object pronoun. And yet, semantically, they are quite complete, as they always have a third-person singular output pronoun as their object referent, shown in parenthesis in the literal translation provided for the example! Thus, there appears to be something complete and incomplete about all such examples that is caused by the third-person singular short object pronoun there. It needs to be investigated.

Of all the grammarians of the language, only (Rowlands<sup>2</sup> 1969: 158) would appear, to his eternal credit, to have ever noticed anything strange and worth mentioning in the type of examples in question. And concerning them, he simply said,

“**ni** is followed by the object forms of the unemphatic personal pronouns, except that in the third per. sing. no pronoun is used.

akòwé ni mí I am a clerk	akòwé ni wá
akòwé ni ó/é etc <sup>3</sup>	akòwé ni nyín
akòwé ni	akòwé ni wón”

Although his observation here appears to merely state what is plainly obvious in the above paradigm, if memory serves one right, it nevertheless has the distinct merit and effect of being the first observation to ever call attention, albeit indirectly, to the usual absence of output personal object pronouns in cases like (12) as a phenomenon or circumstance that definitely requires to be addressed and explained in Standard Yoruba grammar.

The rule or stipulation prohibiting the use of the “third per. sing. [corresponding object] pronoun” that he proposed for explaining and solving the problem he noticed, however, assumes that all cases like (12) actually come from (10) above, with the word *ó* as its third-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun. For, that so-called short/unemphatic subject pronoun *ó* that occurs in (10) but does not show up, contrary to expectation, in (12) and in the above paradigm is what clearly led to his rule or stipulation prohibiting the use of “the third per. sing. [corresponding object] pronoun.”

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<sup>2</sup>He was a Scotsman who served as a colonial officer in western Nigeria, where Yoruba is spoken, and ended up teaching in the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. While in Nigeria, he acquired an impressive command of spoken Standard Yoruba and its proverbs. In this regard, he was very much like Douglas Pulleyblank; only he came a lot earlier.

<sup>3</sup>‘Etc’ in this passage means that the English glosses for the other five members of the paradigm are like the very first gloss, except for the specific meaning contributed by the personal pronoun involved. Thus, the second member of the paradigm on the left, for example, would mean ‘You (sg.) are a clerk.’ while the third member there would mean ‘He/She is a clerk’ even though no object pronoun actually appears to be used after **ni** there, unlike in the other cases.

Unfortunately, however, his simple and straightforward solution would seem to compound the very problem that it was designed to solve. For, first, the solution simply decided on the third-person singular short object pronoun as the pronoun to be stipulated out of existence in all cases like (9 and 12), without indicating or being able to indicate precisely what makes that pronoun, and none of the other five short object pronouns in the language, eligible for such a treatment. Second, the solution got rid of the physical form of the third-person singular short object pronoun in (12) by stipulation, only to end up creating the semantic problem of a third-person singular object referent that has no corresponding personal object pronoun standing for it. And finally, as can easily be inferred from the description of (8 and 9) above, the input condition for deriving all expressions like (9 and 12) in the language is that there must be an input subject, while the output condition says that there must also be a corresponding output object. The rule or stipulation prohibiting the use of precisely the third-person singular output object pronoun flagrantly violates this latter output condition, and consequently renders the applicable derivational rule inoperable!

Interestingly enough, however, these three seemingly insoluble problems all have one single simple solution. To see the solution and taking the problems for convenience in reverse order, notice that since (12) is universally said to be well formed despite the fact that the output condition for its derivation is violated, that violation must be only apparent but not real. And the conclusion to be drawn from that is that the third-person singular object pronoun that is thought to have been stipulated out of existence is actually still there, but in some form other than that of the word *ó*. Similarly, in the case of the second problem, notice that a referent cannot exist without having a real word or lexical element standing for it. Therefore, the fact that a third-person singular short object referent remains in (12) after the physical third-person singular short object pronoun standing for that very object referent is thought to have been stipulated out of existence means that that physical third-person singular short object pronoun is actually still in (12), but in a form other than that of the word *ó*. This solution applies by implication to the very first problem above, where stipulating the third-person singular short object pronoun out of (12) as well as out of (Rowland 1969: 158) first began. The fact that the third-person singular short object pronoun remains in existence in some form other than that of the word *ó* in all these three cases shows that stipulating the pronoun out of existence is an exercise in futility. It also means that underlying forms like (10) featuring the word *ó* as a third-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun are actually not the real source of expressions like (12).

If underlying forms like (10) are not the real source of expressions like (12), then the only other option available now is to derive them from underlying forms like (13) below, where the third-person singular short subject pronoun has the covert form of *<un>*, just as it does elsewhere in the language, as seen earlier in (7) above.

13. *Ògá ni <un> ó jé* lit. boss focus-marker he/she present/past be, i.e. ‘He/She is/was the boss.’

This alternative approach works like magic! For, it produces the expected and normal results without any complications, unlike in the case of (12) above. Thus, (13) would later become

→ 14. *Ògá ni <un>* lit. boss focus-marker him/her ‘He/She is/was the boss.’



which displays <un> as a corresponding third-person singular output short object pronoun directly following the focus marker *ni*, exactly as similar output short personal object pronouns do in all other similar cases in the language. The implication of this is that the input and output conditions for the relevant derivational rule are fully and easily met in (13 and 14), unlike in the case of (10 and 12) above. It also implies that cases like (14) are actually not in any separate class by themselves among Yoruba focus clause constructions, as cases like (12) above appear to be.

Furthermore, nothing special is needed to account for everything else about output expressions like (14), unlike for output expressions like (12), as seen earlier above. Thus, to begin with, because expressions like (14) each contain an output short personal object pronoun <un>, they each automatically contain the third-person singular output short object referent that characterises their meanings. Next, because expressions like (14) indeed each contain an output short personal object pronoun, no native speakers of the language could or should rightly feel that any output short personal object pronoun is missing in them, as Rowlands (1969: 158) understandably did above. And finally, because the output short personal object pronoun <un> contained in expressions like (14) is always invisible and inaudible, a syntactic stipulation or ploy specifically designed to render it invisible and inaudible becomes totally unnecessary. All this goes to show that the third-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun in the language indeed takes a covert form that, for expository purposes, could be represented by <un>, as done much earlier above.

It should be noted here, however, that things are actually much worse than unnecessary for stipulation as a syntactic ploy for accounting for the constructions in question. To see why it is so, consider the fact that the covert form or character of the output short personal object pronoun <un> above is actually fully subject to the dictum: *ex nihilo nihil fit*. With its meaning adapted for the case in hand, the dictum says ‘a linguistic element that has no shape or form of its own cannot be turned or transformed into any other linguistic element that has a shape or form of its own.’ In other words, a covert form can neither be directly or indirectly changed, nor can it be directly or indirectly reshaped into any other form. The implication of that for stipulation as a syntactic ploy as used by Rowlands (1969: 158) is that it is not only unnecessary; it is also actually inoperable, because an element that has no form cannot be forced or made whether directly or indirectly to take any particular shape or form. Thus, this new conclusion perfectly tallies with the earlier one on page 6 above, which terms stipulating the third-person singular object pronoun out of existence in focus clause constructions like (12) an exercise in futility!

For the particular type of focus clause construction concerned here, the dictum’s overall implication is that, as long as the Standard Yoruba third-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun remains covert in form in direct speech (for the pronoun in reported speech, see Awobuluyi 2024b: 169-170), no corresponding overt output short personal object pronoun would ever occur in it or be acceptable in it, as shown by (11) above (Awobuluyi 2024b: 33-36, 141-144). Incidentally, the covert third-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun <un> actually has an overt object counterpart *un* in the language (Awobuluyi 2024b: 31, 144). That overt object counterpart of the pronoun, too, would never be able to occur and function as an output short object

pronoun in the type of focus clause constructions concerned (as also shown by (11) above<sup>4</sup>), as it would otherwise be in direct violation of the prohibition by the dictum *ex nihilo nihil fit* – replacing a covert short subject pronoun with an overt short object pronoun is indirectly turning that covert subject into an overt object, which violates the prohibition by the dictum.<sup>5</sup>

To conclude this short piece, the hope here is that all the related findings reported above have now sufficiently dispelled the unfortunate misconception that the word *ó* is the third-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun in Standard Yoruba, a misconception passed down from the otherwise mostly eye-opening pioneering works of its earliest grammarians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As can be seen in (5) above, in particular, the pre-verbal modifier *ó* is actually no more of a personal pronoun than *a* ‘would,’ *á* ‘will/would,’ and *yóò/óò* ‘will/would,’ which contemporary grammarians of the language all consider to be tense/aspect markers. Thus, consistency, too, requires that the misconception be now allowed to go peacefully and permanently to rest, as urged earlier in the concluding section of (Awobuluyi 2024a).

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<sup>4</sup>The object pronoun *un* regularly assimilates to any vowel standing immediately to its left (Awobuluyi 2024b: 31). The only vowel of the focus marker *ni* is nasalized; hence, the object pronoun takes the form of *in* in (11).

<sup>5</sup>For yet another previously unnoticed effect of the covert nature of the third-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun in reported speech in the language, see (Awobuluyi 2024b: 169-170).

Some other elements, like the present/past tense marker *ó*, the relative clause marker *tí*, and the focus clause marker *ni*, sometimes go covert in the language, as in *A/E <ó> lọ* lit. we/you (pl.) past-tense go (somewhere), i.e. ‘We/You (pl.) went (somewhere).’ *Ohun <tí> mo rí* lit. thing that I-past-tense see, i.e. ‘What I saw.’ *Ohun <tí> ẹ <ó> rí <ni> ẹ <ó> wí* lit. thing that you (pl.) see focus-marker you (pl.) say, i.e. ‘Say what you (pl.) like!’ Only the third-person singular short/unemphatic subject pronoun *<un>* does so all the time, in surface structure.

Stahlke (1974: 175) said that the pronoun is “morphologically zero everywhere.” That view is based on considerations other than those on which the view in the current paper is based.