21
Yoruba
(West Benue-Congo)

John Hewson

21.1 General

Yoruba is spoken mainly in west and southwest Nigeria, and has a long linguistic tradition, dating from an early grammar by Crowther (1852). It has some 20 million native speakers, mostly in Nigeria, but also including a million or so in Togo and Benin. The language has many dialects, and also some two million second language speakers who use it as a lingua franca.

This language is remarkable for its simplicity and its complexity. The early grammars (e.g. Ward 1952, Rowlands 1969) are very comprehensive, and the later accounts to which we have had access for information on the verb phrase (Bamgbọṣẹ 1966, 1967 Awobuluyi 1978, 1982, Àfọṣayi 1982, Odunaga 1982, Oke 1982), open up further possibilities by offering interesting new insights, analyses, and discussions.

Traditional orthography writes open mid vowels with a subscript dot, that is also used with s to represent an /š/ which is pronounced fortis with the lips spread. It should also be noted that since there is no /kp/ vs /p/ contrast (to parallel /gb/ vs /b/), the spelling p represents phonological /kp/. All single vowels are to be regarded as short, and vowel length is represented by doubling the vowel, which simplifies tone marking. The seven-vowel system (phonetic value in brackets) is as follows:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
i & [i] & u & [u] \\
e & [ɛ] & o & [o] \\
ɛ & [ɛ] & ɔ & [ɔ] \\
a & \\
\end{array}
\]

Acute accent represents a high tone, no accent a mid tone, and grave accent a low tone. Final syllables may be marked for one of two different kinds of modified tone that mark elision of earlier tones: lọdè ‘outside’, lágì ‘yesterday’.

Final vowels of verbs and nouns may be lengthened to show syntactic relationships. For verbs this is used, for example, to mark the initial verb of a serial verb construction. On nouns it is used for marking possessive constructions. The noun so marked is the possessee of the noun that follows it: ilé ‘house’, but ilé Bísí ‘Bisi’s house’.

21.2 Word order

Yoruba is strictly SVO, and the 3s object simply copies the vowel of the preceding verb, an iconic representation of the extension or completion of the verbal activity, as in (1).

(1) ó fà á ‘He pulled it.’ ó sì í ‘He opened it.’
The other persons have distinct subject and object pronouns, used only with verbs. There is also a set of emphatic pronouns whose usage is not restricted. The declension of these is illustrated in Table 21.1 (where V = vowel of the verb is copied), and the usage of S and O pronouns in (2).

Table 21.1  Personal pronouns in Yoruba

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Emphatic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1s mo</td>
<td>1s mi</td>
<td>1s èmi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2s o</td>
<td>2s ŋ/ě</td>
<td>2s ćwọ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3s ó</td>
<td>3s V</td>
<td>3s ćun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1p a</td>
<td>1p wa</td>
<td>1p ćawa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2p ë</td>
<td>2p ćyin</td>
<td>2p ćyin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3p nwọn</td>
<td>3p wọn</td>
<td>3p ćawọn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
1. Yoruba syllables are strictly (C)V, and have no consonant clusters. Spellings with -Vn, where n appears in syllable final position, consequently represent nasal vowels, not final consonants. Where syllabic n occurs independently, it functions as V.
2. The vowels /a, o/ are also nasalized after a nasal consonant: the pronunciation of mo is [mɔ].
3. The 2 singular variation ŋ/ě represents dialectal differences.
4. The form nwọn is an arbitrary spelling for wọn to distinguish it from wọn ‘be dear’.
5. There is no distinction of gender in any of the persons, nor of inclusive vs. exclusive in the 1st person plural.

(2)  a  mo rí ćyin ‘I saw you-all.’  ë rí mi ‘You-all saw me.’
     b  mo lù ćyjọ ‘I hit Ojo.’  ćyjọ lù mi ‘Ojo hit me.’
     c  Táiwọ rà á ‘Taiwo bought it.’

The fixed word ordering is not altered for questions or negatives or other expressive, elements, these being marked with a variety of particles, as in (3):

(3)  ó tì ćọ ‘He has gone.’  ó tì ćọ ‘Has he gone yet?’  kò ćtì ćọ ‘He hasn’t gone yet.’

As noted, Yoruba is SVO with both nouns and pronouns: ó lù ćyjọ ‘He hit Ojo.’; ó lù mi ‘He hit me.’ If there is a second object it will be proceeded by nì ‘have, say’ (4a), which becomes l’ before vowels (4b). If both objects are pronominal, the second will be an emphatic pronoun (4c):
(4) a \( ó \ ọ kọ \ wa \ ní \ Yorùbá \)
\( 3s \ \text{teach} \ \text{us} \ \text{have} \ Yoruba \)
‘He taught us Yoruba.’

b \( ó \ \ fún \ mi \ l'ówó \)
\( 3s \ \text{give} \ \text{me} \ \text{have} \ ‘money’ \)
‘He gave me money.’

This construction is of quite high frequency because of its use in idioms: \( ó \ fà \ mi \ l'étí \)
‘He gave me a hint.’ (= ‘he pulled me have ear’) and in two verb constructions \( ó \ jí \ mi \ l'ówó \ gbé \)
‘He stole my money.’ (= ‘he stole me have money take’).

Yoruba has no grammatical plural in the noun, using the 3\( \text{rd} \) person plural emphatic pronoun \( àwọん \) instead to create plural reference, as in (5)

(5) a \( àwọn \ ọyè \ ní \ fò \)
\( 3p \ \text{bird} \ \text{PRG} \ \text{fly} \)
‘Birds fly.’

b \( mo \ \text{rí} \ àwọn \ ijọyè \)
\( 1s \ \text{see} \ 3p \ \text{chief} \)
‘I saw the chiefs.’

Sometimes either form can be used with a slight difference of meaning, as in (6).

(6) a \( ìwé \ mi \ dà \)
book \ my \ where?
‘Where is(are) my book(s)?’

b \( àwọn \ ìwé \ mi \ dà \)
\( 3p \ \text{book} \ \text{my} \ \text{where} \)
‘Where are my various books?’

21. 3 Verbal Structure

Modifiers follow their heads, and adverbial elements are introduced either immediately before the verb, or after the object (after the verb if there is no object). Yoruba has no inflectional subject markers or object markers, and no personal inflections or other grammatical extensions of the verb. Lexical compounding of various kinds is quite frequent however. Typologically Yoruba is strongly analytic in (a) its lack of morphology, (b) its lexical compounding, (c) its use of separate grammatical markers for noun plurality, (d) its lack of grammatical gender, (e) its strictly configurational syntax, and (f) its use of tone to mark grammatical functions.
21.4 Tensed verbs with Performative, Progressive, and Perfect

Verbs that are finite, requiring an explicit subject, lack all tense contrasts, and are consequently representations of the Vast Present. The simple unmarked form of the verb represents a complete event or a state of affairs that can be anywhere in the temporal experience of the speaker, its location as past, present, or future being determined by Aktionsart (inherent lexical aspect), aspect (auxiliaries), and context, especially with such adverbs as lón ‘today’ and láná ‘yesterday’, etc.

Since these forms are simple lexical items with no mark for aspect, they represent the default aspect, which is Performative. There is, as a result, a corresponding marked Progressive. The paradigmatic forms for these two conjugations are presented in (7). The verb is lo ‘go’. The Progressive marker ŋ is probably related to the verb ŋ ‘have’ (see Heine and Kuteva (2002:83) for the common grammaticalization of ‘have’ verbs to markers of Progressive aspect).

(7) PERFORMATIVE PROGRESSIVE

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mo</td>
<td>1s</td>
<td>mo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lo</td>
<td>go,</td>
<td>ŋ lo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1s</td>
<td>went</td>
<td>1s am, was going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>2s</td>
<td>o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lo</td>
<td>go,</td>
<td>ŋ lo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2s</td>
<td>went</td>
<td>2s are, were going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ó</td>
<td>3s</td>
<td>ó</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lo</td>
<td>goes, went</td>
<td>ŋ lo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3s</td>
<td>went</td>
<td>3s is, was going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>1p</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lo</td>
<td>go,</td>
<td>ŋ lo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1p</td>
<td>went</td>
<td>1p are, were going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ĕ</td>
<td>2p</td>
<td>ĕ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lo</td>
<td>go,</td>
<td>ŋ lo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2p</td>
<td>went</td>
<td>2p are, were going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nwōn</td>
<td>3p</td>
<td>nwōn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lo</td>
<td>go,</td>
<td>ŋ lo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3p</td>
<td>went</td>
<td>3p are, were going</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before velar consonants the nasal element is also velarized, as in (8), with wá ‘come’.

(8) mo wá | 1s come, came | mo ŋ wá | 1s am, was coming |
| o wá | 2s come, came | o ŋ wá | 2s are, were coming |
| ó wá | 3s comes, came | ó ŋ wá | 3s is, was coming |
| a wá | 1p come, came | a ŋ wá | 1p are, were coming |
| ĕ wá | 2p come, came | ĕ ŋ wá | 2p are, were coming |
| nwōn wá | 3p come, came | nwōn ŋ wá | 3p are, were coming |

It is normal for the Progressive form of the Vast Present to represent generic statements or universal truths, as in (9):

(9) a oorùn ŋ ràn
    sun PRG shine
    ‘The sun shines.’

b ayé ŋ yí oorùn po
    Earth PRG turn sun round
    ‘The earth rotates around the sun.’

The forms of the Perfect with auxiliary ti are listed in (10):
The *ti* particle has a variety of uses. Rowlands (1969:274) glosses it as three separate items, as follows: (i) property of, matter of; (ii) to come from; (iii) already, now (preceding verbs). These are all variant meanings of a single item with a meaning of ‘source’ (note ‘of’ in (i), ‘from’ in (ii), and in (iii) ‘already’ with the sense of ‘after, result, from’, representation of a resultant state which is the core meaning of an ordinary perfect). Heine and Kuteva, in fact, in their *World Lexicon of Grammaticalization* note that such items may be used for representing the Near Past, and mention explicitly Yoruba *ti* and French *venir de* ‘to come from’ as accomplishing this function (2002:73).

Just as French *de*, English *of* are used to indicate possession, the particle *ti* is used with the unemphatic object pronouns, as in (11), to create possessive forms of the personal pronouns.

(11) 1s tèmi mine 1p tiwa ours
2s tirẹ, tiẹ yours 2p tịnyịn yours
3s tirẹ, tiẹ his/hers/its 3p tiwọn theirs

There is also a Progressive form of the Perfect, as listed in (12):

(12) mo ti ñ lọ 1s have been going mo ti ñ wá 1s have been coming
o ti ñ lọ 2s have been going o ti ñ wá 2s have been coming
ó ti ñ lọ 2s has been going ó ti ñ wá 3s has been coming
a ti ñ lọ 1p have been going a ti ñ wá 1p have been coming
cyi ti ñ lọ 2p have been going cyi ti ñ wá 2p have been coming
nwọn ti ñ lọ 3p have been going nwọn ti ñ wá 3p have been coming

Here both *ti* and ñ markers are combined to give a representation of a continuous activity seen retrospectively; the usage indicates the significant beginning of something some time back. Odunuga (1982:271) gives the examples presented in (13):

(13) a mo ti ñ gba lẹtà re
1s PRF PRG receive letter your
‘I have started to receive your letters.’
b áwa ti ñ ọ si ọ
1p PRF PRG work
‘We have started to work.’
21.4 Auxiliaries

21.5.1 Existential auxiliaries/copula verbs

It is appropriate to introduce at this point the different verbs ‘to be’, since one of these, \( \text{wà} \), is always found in the unmarked aspect. Another \( \text{bè} \), is only used as a Progressive, \( \text{nibè} \), with the nasal prefix. These verbs are exemplars of the frequent contrast found elsewhere between permanent and temporary being, although in Yoruba their usage overlaps to a considerable degree, and varies regionally.

There is also another pair of verbs, \( \text{jè} \) and \( \text{sè} \), that are used for description, \( \text{jè} \) for the more permanent characteristics, and \( \text{sè} \) for the more temporary characteristics, especially when it is preceded by \( \text{ń} \) as in (14). The normal negative is also with \( \text{sè} \) rather than \( \text{jè} \).

\begin{align*}
\text{(14)} & \quad \text{a} \quad \text{òyínbo} \quad \text{l’ò} \quad \text{jè} \\
& \quad \text{European it.is=3s be} \\
& \quad \text{‘S/he is a European.’} \\
\text{b} & \quad \text{mo} \quad \text{sè} \quad \text{káfìntà} \quad \text{rí} \\
& \quad \text{ls be carpenter formerly} \\
& \quad \text{‘I was once/have been a carpenter.’} \\
\text{c} & \quad \text{akòwé} \quad \text{ni} \quad \text{mo} \quad \text{ń-sè} \quad \text{nísisiyī} \\
& \quad \text{clerk it.is ls PRG-be now} \\
& \quad \text{‘I am now a clerk.’} \\
\text{d} & \quad \text{kò} \quad \text{ń-sè} \quad \text{òyínbo} \\
& \quad \text{not.is PRG-be European} \\
& \quad \text{‘S/he is not a European.’}
\end{align*}

21.5.2 Use of copula \( \text{ni} \)

The copula \( \text{ni} \) in some ways parallels the usage of \( \text{kò} \) (see example (14d) and §21.8 on Negatives): (i) it is never preceded by the third person subject pronoun \( \text{ń} \); (ii) likewise, contextual tone raising of noun subjects never occurs before \( \text{kò} \) or \( \text{ni} \); (iii) if a subject pronoun is used, emphatic pronouns are required before these words.

21.6 Expressing past and present

The Aktionsart, the lexical aspect, is a major factor in the temporal interpretation of verbs in the Vast Present, which have no tense distinctions, the finite forms of the verb in Yoruba representing the whole of time as one undivided whole. Lexical items that depict complete actions such as ‘give, take, jump, arrive’, etc, normally represent memorial
time, since whatever is materially complete in the whole of time necessarily belongs to what in English would be considered past, since future events remain imaginary, and have no materiality. States, on the other hand, such as ‘exist, be white, be asleep, know’, etc, since the activity does not change from moment to moment, normally represent the ongoing present in Yoruba, which would be non-past in English, as in (15).

(15) Actions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>mo ọ́ s’ Eko</td>
<td>1s go to Lagos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>ó pa ekun</td>
<td>3s kill leopard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>ó mọ́ mi</td>
<td>3s know me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>ó sùn</td>
<td>3s sleep</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The simple forms of verbs representing temporary states such as ‘sleep, stand, sit’, etc, which begin with an inceptive action (e.g. ‘going to sleep’), may be ambiguous between the inceptive meaning as an English past tense, and the stative meaning of an English present tense. In short, ó sùn may mean either ‘He fell asleep’ or ‘He is asleep’.

21.6.1 Future with particle y(i)ó (Prospective aspect).

This future uses the same unemphatic subject pronouns as are used with the negative marker kó (see §21.8 on Negatives): mo becomes [n] before the velar; 3s is reduced to zero; and nwo becomes neutral tone, the 3rd person subject also being omitted. (These appear to be adjustments to the representation of non-experiential time, shared by both negative and future).

Colloquially, and in some regions, an alternative future marker á is used. The form y(i)ó is quoted in various forms. Rowlands comments (1969:92): “the situation is complicated by the existence of alternative dialectal forms”, and goes on to discuss tonal differences. He then notes that the y is pronounced “energetically” and that the “word could actually be spelt more simply yó”, which is the way that Bamgbosé (1966:69) records it, and the way that we have chosen to record it here. We note, however, that Awobuluyi (1978:71) and Oke (1982:248) both spell it yóò, which may be a dialectal variation.
21.6.2 The particle máa

There is also a particle máa which marks actions as inceptive, progressive, or iterative. It is often found with futures, but is sometimes just an intensifier. The expression máa lo ., for example, may mean ‘Get going, be on your way!’, or ‘Keep going!’, the latter being iterative when used with such adverbial elements as lójoojúmó ‘everyday’.

21.6.3 Combinations of aspect markers

Odunuga, writing on tense and aspect in Yoruba, states (1982:266) that ŋ (Progressive), ti (Perfect), máa (Inceptive) and yó, á (Prospective) form a single class. As we have seen above (example (12)), certain combinations of these aspectual markers are possible. These markers always appear in the order á/yó - ti - máa - ŋ. The permissible combinations listed by Odunuga are presented in (17):

(17) Double combinations

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ti ŋ</td>
<td>ti máa ŋ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>máa ŋ</td>
<td>á ti máa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yó ti</td>
<td>yó ti máa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yó máa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>á máa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples of compound aspectual forms reported by Odunaga (1982:270ff) are presented in (18-20). Although máa by itself, as an Inceptive, may have a future meaning, with the Progressive it may indicate continuity, and with a past adverb even represent the past.

(18) a mo máa lo 
1s INCE go
‘I shall go.’

b mo máa ŋ rí i 
1s INCE PRG see him
‘I always see him.’

(16) PROSPECTIVE

| ng ó lọ | 1s will go | ng ó wá | 1s will come |
| o ó lọ | 2s will go | o ó wá | 2s will come |
| yó lọ | 3s will go | yó wá | 3s will come |
| a ó lọ | 1p will go | a ó wá | 1p will come |
| e ó lọ | 2p will go | e ó wá | 2p will come |
| nwón ó lọ | 3p will go | nwón ó wá | 3p will come |
With the Prospective, màa here indicates continuity, and likewise with the Perfect Progressive indicates a continuous state that existed in the past but no longer exists. It is normal for inceptives to mark continuity: the Aktionsart of the verb ‘to continue’ is just as inceptive as that of the verb ‘to start’. The lexical notion of continuity is inceptive by its very nature, as may be seen by the parallelism of the English imperatives ‘Start doing it!’ and ‘Keep doing it!’

\[(19)\]
\[
\begin{align*}
& a \quad \text{ùwọ́ \ yó \ màa \ rí \ i} \\
& \quad 2p \quad \text{PROS \ INCE \ see \ him} \\
\end{align*}
\]
‘You will be seeing him.’

\[
\begin{align*}
& b \quad \text{mó \ tì \ màa \ ̀jẹ̀ \ un \ níbè} \\
& \quad 1s \quad \text{PFT \ INCE \ PRG \ eat \ there} \\
\end{align*}
\]
‘I used to eat there.’

The other triple forms à ti màa and yó ti màa represent future events that will have already started, as in ‘When we get home you will be sleeping, will have fallen asleep’. Similar results obtain for yó ti màa which appears to indicate a future state of affairs where an action with a long duration has already begun.

\[(20)\]
\[
\begin{align*}
& a \quad \text{ùwọ́ \ á \ ti \ màa \ sùn} \\
& \quad 2p \quad \text{PROS \ PFT \ INCE \ sleep} \\
\end{align*}
\]
‘You will have fallen asleep.’

\[
\begin{align*}
& b \quad \text{èmì \ yó \ ti \ màa \ kẹ́lẹ̀} \\
& \quad 1s.EMPH \quad \text{PROS \ PFT \ INCE \ build.house} \\
\end{align*}
\]
‘I will be building a house.’

The meaning here appears to be ‘I will have started building a house’, in other words the building of the house will be in progress.

### 21.7 Modal forms

### 21.8 Negatives

There is a binary negative contrast in Yoruba: particle kò appears in main clauses, mà in prohibitions and subordinate clauses.
21.8.1 Negative particle kò

With the negative particle kò some subject pronouns have the same forms that are found with the future: mo becomes [ŋ] before the velar; 3s is reduced to zero; and nwo becomes neutral tone, as in (21):

(21) ng kò mò ‘I do not know.’; kò mò ‘He does not know.’; nwo kò mò ‘We do not know.’

The negative particle kò is also subject to vowel copying in allegro speech, where one hears a kò mọ as aà mọ ‘we do not know’ and ç kò mọ as çè mọ. In these examples, the negative marker kò is reduced to V. It also has a variant form kí which is found only before the Future marker yó, ó, the Progressive marker ñ, and the modal marker ibá ‘would, should, could have’.

21.8.2 Prohibitive particle má

Prohibitions are expressed by placing má in front of the verb: má rà á ‘Don’t buy it!’ with modifications to high and mid tones in the following syllable. The particle má is also used in subordinate clauses, as in the contrastive pair in (22 a. and b.):

(22) a mo ní kí o má kà á
1s tell that you not read it
'I told you not to read it.'

b mo kò ní kí o kà á
1s not tell that you read it
'I did not tell you to read it.'

21.9 Conclusion

The unmarked finite forms of the verb represent complete events or continuing states; they are examples of Performative aspect. There is a corresponding Progressive marked by ñ, a Perfect marked by ti, a Prospective marked by yió or á, and an Inceptive marked by máa. Combinations of these five markers are also used.

Suggestions have occasionally made by some of the writers that what we have called the Prospective Aspect could be called a future tense. This appears doubtful for a variety of reasons: (i) there is no other indication of any kind of tense; (ii) the other four markers of this class obviously mark aspect; (iii) it is frequent in the languages of the world for the future to be marked aspectually; (iv) there are two very similar markers of the Prospective (yó, á), which appear to be slightly different in usage, which is normal for aspect or focus markers, but not for tense markers.
21.10 Diagrammatic Representations

(i) Forms in Ascending Time

\[ \text{o wá} \quad (\text{Perfomative}) \]
\[ | \quad \text{X} \rightarrow \quad | \]
\[ \quad \text{\textquotesingle}3\text{'s comes, came\textquoteright} \]

\[ \text{AT} \quad \infty \rightarrow \infty \]

\[ \text{yíó wá} \quad (\text{Prospective}) \]
\[ | \quad \text{X} \rightarrow \quad | \]
\[ \quad \text{\textquotesingle}3\text{' will come\textquoteright} \]

\[ \text{ni ó ọwá} \quad (\text{Progressive}) \]
\[ \text{| ------------X----- |} \]
\[ \quad \text{\textquotesingle}3\text{'s is, was coming\textquoteright} \]

(ii) Forms in Descending Time

\[ \text{DT} \quad \infty \leftarrow \infty \]

\[ \text{ó ti wá} \quad (\text{Retrospective}) \]
\[ \text{| <----------X----- |} \]
\[ \quad \text{\textquotesingle}3\text{' has come\textquoteright} \]

1. This is a very spare system: there is no basic form in Descending Time, and consequently no contrast between Imperfective and Progressive.
References


Bamgboye Ayè. 1967. *A Short Yoruba Grammar*, Ibadan; Heinemann


