

# YORUBA COPULA NI

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This paper<sup>1</sup> attempts to establish the categorial status of *ni* which has been referred to as an empty FOCUS marker in the literature. It is suggested here that by recognizing the item as a copula verb there would be a principled basis for judging the clausal status of the construction in which it occurs.

Cette communication cherche à établir le statut catégoriel de *ni* que la littérature nomme 'empty focus marker' 'marque vide de mise au point.' Nous proposons ici qu'en reconnaissant l'élément comme une copule verbale il y aurait un moyen plus raisonné de rendre compte du statut propositionnel de la séquence dans laquelle il paraît.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Ni*, which many speakers will intuitively analyze as a verb and which many Yoruba linguists will accept as such, is used in a number of sentence types including Copula, Focus, and Question constructions. The item is underlined in the discourse piece below:

1. *Ọgbón mēta pàtàkì ni àwọn tó sẹ wá*  
wisdom three important be they REL-3sg create us  
*silẹ dá ni igbà tiwon, láti*  
be:on-ground devise at time of-theirs in-order:that  
*máa fi tùn ayé sẹ. Oun ló mù kí*  
HABIT INST again world do it be-3sg cause that  
*ètò, ètọ àti àjẹpẹ ayé wà fún wọn.*  
organization right and long life exist BENE them  
*Ọgbón kìnì ni àṣẹ, ọgbón keji ni àṣà, ọgbón*  
wisdom first be law wisdom second be custom wisdom  
*kẹta ni èwọ. Ofin ni àṣẹ ijọba tí*  
third be taboo law be imperative government REL  
*enikéni kò gbọdọ rú. Bì èyàn bá rú òfin,*  
nobody NEG must disobey if person COND disobey law  
*ijọba yóó jẹ é niyà yó*  
government 3sg:FUT eat 3sg NI2-punishment 3sg:FUT  
*sì jẹ ewé iyá pèlú. Ijọba lè pa á.*  
and eat leaf iya also government can kill 3sg  
*ṣùgbón èwọ ni í gbèjà ara rẹ.*  
But taboo be 3sg:CONT support-fight self it

<sup>1</sup> The detailed and insightful comments of the anonymous JWAL reviewer are gratefully acknowledged.

Orthographic convention: The sounds represented as [ɛ], [o] and [s] are equivalent to the IPA [ɛ], [ɔ] and [ʃ] respectively. Tones are marked [̀] for Low, [́] for High and the Mid tone is unmarked.

<sup>2</sup> Some *ni* (a preposition) cannot be ascribed any meaning. I have therefore 'glossed' them as 'NT'. In some other work (Yusuf 1985), I have called it an Oblique Case marker although a more pragmatic appraisal is possible and is indeed in progress right now.

There are three strategies which our ancestors devised to make life better (for themselves). It is these strategies that made longevity possible for them. The first strategy is unquestioned imperatives, the second strategy is custom and the third strategy is taboo. The law is the decree of the government which nobody must go against. If anybody goes against it, Government will punish the person severely. Government could kill him... But the taboo fights its own cause. (Eèwò by Sóbándé, in Olájubù 1978:23)

The seven sentences in the passage above contain seven occurrences of the *ni* under investigation; three illustrate Focus construction, and four Copula.

Further occurrences of *ni* are shown in 2 below:

2. *Ilànà ẹ̀kọ́ tuntun tí ìjọba ilẹ̀ Nigeria*  
 guideline knowledge new REL govt land
- ṣètò pé kí ò bẹ̀rẹ̀ ní oṣu kẹ̀sàn-àn ọ̀dún 1982*  
 arrange COMP that 3sg begin at month ninth year
- ni ó ẹ̀ okùnfá àtiwáyé idáni lẹ̀kọ́ yíí.*  
 be 3sg do trigger existence giving NI-knowledge this
- Kí ni àsepò tí litirésò ní pẹ̀lù ẹ̀kọ́*  
 what be togetherness REL have be:with knowledge
- yíí? Ọ̀rọ́ ẹ̀kọ́ kí i ẹ̀ ohún tí a lè sọ*  
 this matter knowledge 3sg-NEG-PROG be thing REL we can say
- láhán kan. Abini-tún-bi ni, àbèèrè-tún-bèèrè ni*  
 in-tongue one perpetual-question be ceaseless-question be.

The new guideline for education which the Nigerian government has scheduled to commence in September 1982 is the motivation for this lecture. What does literature have in common with this schedule? Educational matters are not things that one can scurry through. It is an endless search with unending questioning. (Ogúnṣinà, 1987:1)

Again, there are four occurrences of *ni* in the four sentences above; once as focus construction, once as content word question construction (otherwise known as WH-question), twice as copula construction.

As preliminary to our work on *ni*, I want to point out its three uses in the two passages above.

## 2. THE USES OF NI

2.1 In sentences like 3, extracted from 1 and 2, the *ni* can be tentatively seen as a focus marker, a way of emphasizing or 'stressing' an NP:

- 3a. *Ogbón mэта pàtàkí ni àwọn tó*  
 wisdom three important be they REL-3sg
- sẹ̀ wà silẹ̀ dá*  
 create us be:on ground devise  
 'It's three strategies that our progenitors devised'
- b. *Oun ló mú kí ètò.... wà*  
 it be-3sg cause that organization exist  
 'It was that that brought about organization'

- c. Ilàna èkó tuntun....1982 ni ó ẹ  
 guideline education new be 3sg do  
 okùnfà àtiwáyé idáni lẹkòḡ yíí  
 motivation coming:to-world giving NI-lecture this  
 'The new guideline for education of 1982 is the motivation  
 for this lecture'
- d. Eèwò ni i gbèjà ara rẹ  
 taboo be 3sg wrest body self  
 'Taboo fights its own cause'

Here, sentence-initial NPs are focused, i.e. isolated from the post-ni sentence and coded sentence-initially to give them prominence (this being the only strategy, in lieu of contrastive stress, to emphasize any constituent in the language).

2.2 In 4, also extracted from 1 and 2, the ni functions like the Copula:

- 4a.i. Ogbón kini ni àse  
 wisdom first be decree  
 'The first strategy is imperative'
- ii. Ogbón keji ni àsà  
 wisdom second be custom  
 'The second strategy is custom'
- iii. Ogbón keta ni èèwò  
 wisdom third be taboo  
 'The third strategy is taboo'
- b. Ofin ni àse  
 law be decree  
 'The law is an imperative'
- c. Abinitúnbi ni, àbèèrè tún-bèèrè ni  
 NOM-ask-one-again-ask be NOM-ask again-ask be  
 'It is a perpetual questioning'

In 4a-b two NPs are related in something of an equational way while in 4c we have something similar to the English predicate nominal with a pleonastic non-referential 'it' as in 5:

5. It be NP

2.3 Ni is found in other environments too. In WH constructions, the ni follows the WH-NP in the sentence initial position as shown in #2 of example 2, repeated here as 6a and supplemented with additional examples:

- 6a. Kí ni àsepò tí lítírésò ní pẹlú...  
 what be togetherness REL have with  
 'What is the connection that literature has with...'
- b. Kí ni orúkọ gómínà wa?  
 what be name governor our  
 'What is the name of our governor?'

- c. Ta ni ó ñ delé de alábà linguistics  
 who be 3sg ASP hold-house wait head-hut  
 'Who is deputising for the head of Linguistics Dept.?'

2.4 The use of ni also abounds in sentence-final position where it gives an emphatic reading to the whole event or situation coded by the sentence:

- 7a. Mo ñ jẹun ni  
 I ASP eat be  
 'I am eating (i.e. It is the case that I am eating)'
- b. Sé o fẹ ya mi ni ẹwú ni  
 QUES you want tear me NI cloth be  
 'Do you want to tear my cloth'  
 (i.e. Is it your intention to tear my cloth)

From 1-7 we have seen ni in different environments: Focusing, Copula and WH-question constructions. In some cases (e.g. 4), it is the sole predicator of the sentence. Thus it behaves like a verb, and has been analyzed as such. However, sentences containing ni now require fresh attention in view of the unresolved controversy generated by Awobuluyi (1978a). See Awobuluyi (1987), and Owolabi (1987, 1989) for the ongoing dialogue on the sentence type.

### 3. AWOBULUYI'S POSITION

Awobuluyi (1978a,b), taking a radical departure from the intuition of the native speaker and many Yoruba scholars, made two novel and controversial contributions to the scholarship of the ni constructions: firstly, that ni is not a verb –

This ni, contrary to popular English-inspired belief, is an introducer, and not a verb. It is an introducer because its function is the same as that of the introducer discussed earlier. It occurs in exactly the same position as the introducer tí [i.e. a Relative Marker --- Ore Yusuf], for example...

...since tí is not a verb, ni cannot be a verb either. (Awobuluyi 1978b:97)

and secondly, that the ni focus construction is not a sentence but an NP. Thus, while most Yorùbá linguists would call 8 a sentence (Bamgboṣe 1966, Owolabi 1983 and Awoyale 1985) which paraphrases something like the English cleft construction like 9a, Awobuluyi would analyze it as an NP with a structure similar to 9b<sup>3</sup>:

8. Iwé ni mo rà  
 book be I buy  
 'It's a book that I bought'
- 9a. It be S'
- b. [NP iwé [Q ni [mo rà]]]  
 (Q, used after Awobuluyi (1978a), is a category label QUALIFIER).

This paper contends that Awobuluyi's analysis on the categorical status of both ni and the entire focus construction is counter-intuitive and inadequate. I will adduce

<sup>3</sup> Awobuluyi consistently claims that the focus construction could read like a sentence in some environments and like an NP in others. Other than in syntactic argumentation, the native speaker intuitively reads the construction as a predication. And it is this intuition that my essay supports.

evidence to support the verbal status of *ni* and the sentential status of the focus construction, using the status of the former to determine the latter.

Awobuluyi's research is limited to the construction type shown in 3, i.e. focusing, but for a more plausible grammar of the construction, all environments where *ni* is found must be surveyed.

Awobuluyi's principal argument in support for 9b has been that it can occur in the negative cleft sentence as in 10:

10. **Ki i se** [NP **iwé ni mo rà**]  
 NEG 3sg be book be I buy  
 'It's not a book that I bought'

when only NPs and PPs have the privilege of occurring as complement of the verb *se* 'to be'. See Awobuluyi (1978b:94-97). 10 is claimed to be the structure underlying 8. This claim is treated in the next section.

Awobuluyi also contends that *ni* with its complement functions like a modifier (= Awobuluyi's 'qualifier') similar to the relative construction which is a sentence introduced by the morpheme *ti*, as in:

11. **Iwe ti mo ra**  
 book REL I buy  
 'The book which I bought'

and such similarity in structure and the putative similarity in function between the focus construction and the relative construction are used to reinforce his claim that the focus construction like 8 is an NP:

8. **Iwé ni mo rà**  
 book be I buy  
 'It's a book that I bought'

This analysis can only be sustained if *ni* occurs in focusing and nowhere else. But as we have seen, *ni*, which is claimed to be parallel in category to *tí*, occurs in some places where *tí* is never used, indeed excluded. See Owolabi (1983) for arguments on this. In view of this, it is desirable that Awobuluyi's analysis be re-examined and revised.

#### 4. DERIVATION OF FOCUSING

Recent analyses of the Focus construction posit movement rules in the derivation. That is, the focused NP is moved to the sentence initial COMP (Awoyale 1985), with 12a as something similar to the D-structure, while 12b is the S-structure from which 8 is derived:

- 12a. **Mo ra iwé**  
 I buy book  
 'I bought a book'
- b. [<sub>S</sub>' iwé<sub>i</sub> ni [<sub>S</sub> mo rà [<sub>t<sub>i</sub></sub>]]]
- ↑

(The trace of a moved element is characterized with [t] with a coindexing subscript to the antecedent eg. [<sub>t<sub>i</sub></sub>])

12 is identical to the WH-movement in 13. See Carstens (1986) and Sonaiya (1986) for the Government and Binding-based account (Chomsky 1981):

13. [<sub>S</sub>' kí<sub>i</sub> **ni** [S mo rà [t<sub>i</sub>]]]

In the G-B analysis, **ni** is regarded as an expletive for which nobody offers any explanation for its appearance. By Awobuluyi's accounts (1978b:103-106) the construction (e.g. 8) is derived by Copy and Deletion rule from an underlying structure like 14:

14. ó kò **ń** **şe** iwé mo ra iwé ==>  
 3sg NEG ASP be book I buy book  
 'It is not a book that I bought'
8. Iwé **ni** mo rà  
 'It was a book that I bought'

After a series of operations which will delete the non-referential ó '3sg', the NEG kò, the aspectual marker **ń** and the second occurrence of the co-referential iwé 'book', the surface structure like 8 is obtained. The process is informally illustrated in 15:

15. ~~o~~-kò-~~n~~-~~şe~~ iwe mo ra iwe  
 3sg NEG ASP be book I buy book  
 'It is not a book that I bought'

**Ni** would be inserted at some stage of the derivation.

This analysis attracts two objections. Firstly, the focus construction is made the 'object' of the verb **şe** 'be', thereby giving the impression that the construction would not have come from any other source. But as we have seen, the movement analysis also accounts for focusing without recourse to **şe** and the items preceding it. Even if the Copy and deletion rule were adopted, we need not posit the deleted items other than the co-referential item. Secondly, if the deletion of the non-referential **o** is allowed, the rules which would delete content words like **şe** 'to be' and iwé 'book' is of questionable status. Neither is the deletion of the negative particle kò justifiable. These objections cast doubts on the validity of the NP analysis.

Owolabi (1983, 1987) has severely criticised Awobuluyi's analysis, imputing its inadequacy to, among other things, a survey of limited data. Owolabi has also found a copious body of counter examples to the NP analysis. Valid as his observations are, they are rather taxonomic and do not seem to follow from any general principle. In the next section, I will try to show that there is indeed a general principle by which the categorical status of the focus construction can be established. I will make crucial use of the verbal status of **ni**.

##### 5. THE CATEGORICAL STATUS OF **ni** REVISED

With examples like 1, 2, 3 and 4, most convincingly 4, we have established that **ni** functions in these contexts like a verb, although it also functions like a focus marker. This dual function is not incompatible with what obtains in other languages of the world. For instance, in only remotely related Hausa (a Chadic language), the morpheme **ne** (or **ce** for FEM singular) serves as focus marker and is also found in the copula sentence. Examples:

- 16a. Audù mánòmi nè (COPULA)  
 farmer be  
 'Audu is a farmer'
- b. Fàtimà dàlìbá cè (COPULA)  
 student be  
 'Fatima is a student'
- c. Aúdù ne ná gàní (FOCUS)  
 be INFL see  
 'It's Audu that I saw'
- d. Fàtì cè tá zó (FOCUS)  
 be INFL come  
 'It's Fati who came'

(INFL, 'inflection', in Hausa incorporates tense-aspect and pronominal agreement)

These examples show that the use of the same morpheme for both focus marking and copula construction is not peculiar to Yoruba. In English the copula and clefting sentences use the same verb *be*. Thus with languages from three distinct families, we see that the element used for the copula sentence construction is also used for focusing, a possible pointer to a universal phenomenon.

We find, therefore, that a focus marker might well be a verb. Awobuluyi's analysis which denies the verbal status of *ni* may have missed this fact due to the limitation of his work to just focus construction. What prevents calling the focus construction a sentence is the status of *ni*, a morpheme which we can call a copula verb, a defective verb that does not have all the usual trappings of a full verb. This qualification is not out of place as Harries-Delisle (1978) has remarked:

Outside the Indo-European family we rarely find copulas that behave like true verbs. That is, very often the copula is an invariant morpheme which does not undergo the inflectional processes that true verbs undergo. And very frequently the copula will have a unique negative form (p. 438).

Here is another view on the copula:

The copulative verbs are verbs which once had concrete meaning but which have acquired a more abstract meaning and function. (Davidson 1968).

Now that we have categorized *ni* as a copula verb we examine their behaviour in Yoruba to justify our position.

## 6. THE MORPHOLOGY OF THE COPULA

As noted above, the copula may be bleached of certain syntactic behaviours and semantic functions. One such syntactic erosion is that despite its prototypical CV verb form, *ni* does not undergo the nominalization by reduplication which feeds verb focusing as in 17b-18b:

- 17a. Mo ra iwé  
 I buy book  
 'I bought a book'
- b. Rírà ní mo ra iwé  
 buying be I buy book  
 'It's buying that I bought the book'

- 18a. **Mo wè**  
I swim  
'I swam'
- b. **Wiwè ni mo wè**  
swimming be I swim  
'It's swimming that I did'
- 4a. **ogbón kinni ni àṣẹ**  
wisdom first be imperative  
'The first wisdom is the imperative'
- a'. **\*nini ni ogbón kinni ni àṣẹ**

In short, regular verbs undergo partial reduplication to form a nominal when focusing it, but **ni** cannot undergo this process, (4a'). Further, **ni** does not take the nominalizing prefix as do other verbs eg. 19:

19. <b>wè</b>	'to wash'	<b>i-wè</b>	'washing'
<b>pọ</b>	'be plenty'	<b>ọ-pọ</b>	'abundance'
<b>mọ</b>	'to know'	<b>i-mọ</b>	'knowledge'
<b>jọ</b>	'be together'	<b>i-jọ</b>	'congregation'
<b>rin</b>	'walk'	<b>i-rin</b>	'walking'
<b>ni</b>	'be'	<b>*i-ni</b>	(uninterpretable)

**Ni** also lacks the property of assigning an independent semantic role to its subject. This role is assigned in the source of extraction. For instance, the subject of **ni** would be understood as performing the semantic role as it would in situ. That is why **adẹ**, **ọbẹ** 'knife' and **isù** 'yam' will be understood as AGENT, INSTRUMENT and THEME respectively in the following examples which include focused sentence:

- 20a. **Adẹ fi ọbẹ gé isù**  
use knife cut yam  
'Ade cut yam with a knife'
- b. **ọbẹ ni Adẹ fi gé isù**  
knife be Ade use cut yam  
'It was a knife that Ade used to cut yams'
- c. **Isù ni Adẹ fi ọbẹ gé**  
yam be Ade use knife cut  
'It was yams that Ade cut with the knife'
- d. **Adẹ ní ọ fi ọbẹ gé isù**  
be 3sg use knife cut yam  
'It was Ade who cut the yams with a knife'

Yoruba **ni**, like copulas in many languages, is a defective verb. However, this is not to say that **ni** cannot be a verb, as there is still a strong indication that it is. For instance, non-high-toned regular verbs trigger a high tone on their weak pronominal objects, and so does **ni** (See also Owolabi 1989):

- 21a. **Mo sun ún**  
I roast it  
'I roasted it'



b.	Mo sin in I worship it	'I worship it'
c.	Mo mọ ọn I know it	'I know it'
d.	Ikà ni é wicked:person be you	'You are wicked'
e.	Akòwé ni wọn writer be they	'They are clerks'
f.	Ta ni é who be you	'Who are you?'
g.	Ki ni yin what be you	'What are you?'

The behavior of *ni* is similar to verbs and therefore shows that it can also be a verb.

Having identified *ni* as a copula, a verb, it follows that it may take NP, or clausal complements (since it has this inherent property). This lexical property can be captured by the formal notation (Rule-1):

R-1:  

$$ni: \quad V: \quad + [ \text{----} ( \begin{matrix} \{NP\} \\ \{ \quad \} \\ \{S'\} \end{matrix} ) ]$$

This subcategorization structure which has been substantiated by our numerous examples further reinforces the verbness of *ni*. I therefore reject the Awobuluyi assumption that *ni* is not a verb. Also, the expletive status (usually posited in G-B syntax) is to be rejected, since it has the meaning 'be' in all its environments and a lexically specified property.

## 7. RESIDUAL ISSUES

I need to attend to a few issues raised by Awobuluyi in connection with the alleged similarity between the relative construction and focus construction and the need to explain 22. I attend to the second issue first. Awobuluyi (1987) claims that 22 is a positive counterpart of 14 and that any satisfying grammar must account for its occurrence:

22.	Bi ó ẹ́ iwé ni mo rà...
	if it be book be I buy
	'If it is a book that I bought...'

In the first place, I do not see 22 as a positive counterpart of 14. 22 is in fact a subordinate conditional clause. To my mind, the appearance of *ẹ́* here can only bring to our knowledge the fact that we have some other copula verb other than *ni*. Perhaps the relationship of this item and *ni* and some other copulas may shed some light into the controversy at hand, but I do not see that an explanation of 23 is crucial to the sentential status of the focus construction.

On the issue of the parallelism in the derivation of the relative and focus constructions, a simple explanation will suffice.

In the current formulations of the generative grammar (Chomsky 1980, 1981 and after), all the formerly separately listed rules have been conflated into a single rule of Move Alpha (Move-A), a construct that says any category can be moved anywhere

(subject to universal constraints). Thus, what is happening is that focusing, relativization and WH-movement apply this rule with similar formal effects. The movement of one or more elements and their adjunction sentence-initially do not say anything about the final configuration, except that most core movements land their Alpha in either COMP or a base-generated but empty NP positions in the domain of a sentence (or S'). The derivational process of relativization and focusing are merely instances of the universal principle of Move-A. My point here is that though the focus construction and the relative construction may be formally similar they do not function alike. In other words the *ni* NP/S' is not a 'topical qualifier' [sic]. Neither is it a modifier (= Awobuluyi's 'qualifier') of any type. Refer to Owolabi (1983, 1987, 1989) for arguments against the 'topical qualifier'.

Note too that Focusing and relativization, despite the similarity, merely use the same rules (be it 'Copy and Deletion' as per Awobuluyi (1978) or Move-A as in the G-B syntax)<sup>4</sup>, but their markers *ni* and *ti* show up in different environments; while *ni* can occur in mono-clausal or multi-clausal sentences the appearance of *ti* 'RELATIVIZER' requires that there be more than one clause.

### 8. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The categorical status of *ni* was established by looking at the use of the item in various contexts. It is found to be a copula verb. It follows that its environment is a sentence. The use of *ni* includes the construction of Predicate Nominal sentences, focus and related WD-sentences. In the focusing function, *ni* is used to mark out an NP for emphasis. In stressed languages, an emphatic stress (or possibly a cleft construction) would have been used in this situation. For Yoruba to use a verb to indicate an emphasis is nothing unusual. In fact it is a general rule of the language for separate verbs (as in serial verbal constructions) to characterize semantic structures for which other languages may use composite verbs, prosodic features, affixes or adverbs. This point has been discussed at length in Yusuf (1987). These lead to the conclusion that *ni* is a verb with various uses, including functioning as a copula, question sentence marker and focus marker. Also, its environment is a sentence which does not in any way function like an NP, neither is its complement a modifier for which this item is an introducer. Clearly, the communicative import of the focus construction like:

8. *iwé ni mo rà*  
 book be I buy  
 'It's a book that I bought'

is a predication as opposed to a nominalization. The difference in the meaning of *ni* and *ti* (a relative clause marker) points to the fact that their complements are not performing the same function. Neither are the items in the same syntactic category. *Ni* is a verb, albeit a defective one, while *ti* is a grammatical marker of subordination for which no origin has been discerned.

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<sup>4</sup> It would appear that the G-B approach, despite its currency, is only one of the possible grammars. I have mentioned this to Awobuluyi (in personal communication) and the anonymous JWAL reviewer has confirmed this. In fact, I am beginning to think that the Copy and Deletion rule or something close to it would explain the derivation of these constructions better, in view of the 'trace' problem which I have discovered (Yusuf, in preparation) in the movement account.

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