

# The High Tone Syllable in Central Yorùbá Dialects\*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines The High Tone Syllable (HTS) in Central Yorùbá dialects: Èkìtì, Ifẹ̀, Ìjẹ̀sà and Mọ̀bà dialects.

The High Tone Syllable occurs between the subject and the verb in Central Yoruba dialects. This paper shows that the HTS usually gets deleted in Èkìtì dialects. However, in Ifẹ̀, Ìjẹ̀sà and Mọ̀bà dialects the HTS regularly assimilates the form of the vowel of the last syllable of the preceding subject NP whenever the NP shows up.

The paper also justifies the claim that the position vacated by focused subject NP is always left empty. Hence what is regarded as pronominal substitute in Yoruba is actually an occurrence of the HTS.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Yorùbá declarative sentences, a V-shaped syllable bearing high tone and known in Yorùbá linguistic literature as the high tone syllable (the HTS henceforth) manifests itself between the noun phrase and the verb as we have in the following standard Yorùbá examples.

- (1) a. Òjò ́ rọ̀ lánàá  
rain HTS fall yesterday  
'It rained yesterday'
- b. Ayọ̀ ́ ra mọ̀tò tuntun  
Ayọ̀ HTS buy motor new  
'Ayọ̀ bought a new car'
- c. Mọ̀tò wọ̀n ́n bàjẹ̀  
Motor they HTS destroy  
'Their car broke down'

Awóbùlúyì (1992: 32) and Bámgbóse (1990: 180) suggested that the HTS' underlying form in contemporary Standard Yorùbá, ́, always assimilates to the final vowel of the subject noun phrase. However, opinions are polarized on the

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\* Mid tone is not marked in the language.

precise function of the item among Yorùbá linguists, who have variously called it (a) ‘clitic’ (Adewolé 1998: 95–96) (b) Subject-Predicate Junction Marker (Bámgbósé 1967: 35); (c) Subject Concord Marker (Courtenay 1968: 71–74; Stahlke 1974: 177; Fresco 1970: 79–80); (d) ‘Past/Present Tense Marker’ (Awóbùlúyì 1975, 1978, 1992, 2001); (e) ‘Agreement Marker’ (Dechaine 1993: 84, 483) and (f) ‘operator which actualizes or validates the relationship between a predicate and a subject within a state of affairs’ (Bisang and Sonaiya 1999: 1–2). Awóbùlúyì (1978: 49) foresaw this polarization when he said: “There has long been uncertainty among grammarians as to the precise [...] function of the syllable. It seems very doubtful whether a perfect solution will ever be found to this problem.” However, not wishing to contribute to the problem here, I prefer to simply say that the last word is definitely yet to be said on the precise function of the HTS in Standard Yorùbá.

As the foregoing suggests, much has been said on the HTS in Standard Yorùbá. By contrast, very few scholarly works exist on it in the numerous structurally diverse dialects of the language. Thus, apart from Fábùnmi (2005: 55–56), which examines the HTS in Mofòlí dialect of Yorùbá spoken in Republic of Benin, there is no other known work on it in the Yorùbá dialects spoken in Nigeria. The aim of this paper is to partially fill this gap by examining the forms and occurrences of the HTS in Central Yorùbá (CY) dialects: namely Èkitì, Mòbà, Ìjèsà and Ifẹ̀ (Awóbùlúyì 1998: 2). It is hoped that such an examination will throw further light on the behaviour of the HTS in Standard Yorùbá.

## 2. THE FORMS OF THE HTS IN CY DIALECTS

Just as in Standard Yorùbá, the HTS occupies a post-subject position (i.e. occurring between the subject noun phrase and the verb) in CY dialects as shown in the following examples.

(2)

i. <b>Adó (Èkitì)</b>	ii. <b>Ìjèsà (Ìjèsà)</b>	
a. Ayó lọ	Ayò ọ lọ	‘Ayò went.’
b. Dàdà gbe	Dàdà á gbe	‘Dàdà carried it.’
c. Alẹ gbe	Alẹ ẹ gbe	‘The ground is dry.’
iii. <b>Ilẹ-Ifẹ (Ifẹ)</b>	iv. <b>Ọtùn (Mòbà)</b>	
a. Ayò ọ lọ	Ayò ọ lọ	‘Ayò went’
b. Dàdà á gbe	Dàdà á gbe	‘Dàdà carries it.’
c. Ilẹ ẹ gbe	Ilẹ ẹ gbe	‘The ground is dry.’

A cursory look at examples (2: i–iv) above may give the impression that the HTS has no distinct form in CY dialects. However, utterances or expressions of

the type (3 i–iii) below, in which the subject noun phrase fails to show up, compel us to take its actual form as **ó** in Èkìtì, Ifẹ̀ and Ìjẹ̀sà, and **é** in Mọ̀bà.

(3)

- |                 |                    |                    |                 |
|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| i. Adó (Èkìtì)  | ii. Ilésà (Ìjẹ̀sà) | iii. Ọ̀tùn (Mọ̀bà) |                 |
| a. [NP Ø] ó gbe | [NP Ø] ó gbe       | [NP Ø] é gbe       | ‘he carried it’ |
| b. [NP Ø] ó lọ  | [NP Ø] ó lọ        | [NP Ø] é lọ        | ‘he went it’    |

In (3) above, Ø is used to show that the position of the subject noun phrase is vacant. Because the noun phrase never shows up in its position in this utterance type, earlier writers took the HTS, always the first overt element there, as a 3sg pronoun. Their view is inconsistent with the facts of the language especially when the derivation of the form of the 3sg pronoun is taken into consideration (cf Awóbùlúyì 2001: 2).

The choice between the variants **o/ó** and **é/é** in examples (3) above depends on the tongue height of the vowel of the verb that follows. When the vowel of the verb that follows is half-close, **ó** or **é** is used, however, the alternant **ó/é** is used when the vowel of the verb that follows it is open or half open.

Given the form of the HTS as **ó** in Èkìtì, Ifẹ̀, Ìjẹ̀sà and **é** in Mọ̀bà dialects, examples (2i–iv) above can be re-written as (4i–iii).

(4)

i. **Èkìtì**

- |               |   |            |   |          |
|---------------|---|------------|---|----------|
| a. Ayò ó lọ   | → | Ayò ´ lọ   | → | Ayó lọ   |
| b. Dàda ó gbe | → | Dàda ´ gbe | → | Dàdà gbe |
| c. Alẹ́ ó gbe | → | Alẹ́ ´ gbe | → | Alé gbe  |

ii. **Ifẹ̀/Ìjẹ̀sà**

- |               |   |            |
|---------------|---|------------|
| a. Ayò ó lọ   | → | Ayò ó lọ   |
| b. Dàda ó gbe | → | Dàda á gbe |
| c. Alẹ́ ó gbe | → | Alẹ́ é gbe |

iii. **Mọ̀bà**

- |               |   |            |
|---------------|---|------------|
| a. Ayò é lọ   | → | Ayò ó lọ   |
| b. Dàda é gbe | → | Dàda á gbe |
| c. Alẹ́ é gbe | → | Alẹ́ é gbe |

As shown in 4(i) above, the vowel of the HTS usually gets deleted in Èkìtì dialects. The deletion of the vowel of the HTS causes its stranded high tone to attach to the final vowel of the last syllable of the subject noun phrase. This explains why the HTS regularly manifests on the last syllable of the subject noun phrase in Èkìtì as shown in (2i and 4i). In (4ii–iii), the HTS noticeably and regularly assimilates the form of the vowel of the last syllable of the preceding subject noun phrase whenever the noun phrase shows up in Ifẹ̀, Ìjẹ̀sà and Mọ̀bà dialects.

### 3. THE HTS IN FOCUS CONSTRUCTION

Focusing occurs in CY dialects and it is signal in exactly the same manner in all of them. Thus, in Èkìtì, Ifẹ̀, Ìjẹ̀sà and Mọ̀bà, the focus marker, takes the form of **li** (Olúmúyìwá 2006: 53). As in Standard Yorùbá, the focus marker occurs immediately to the right of the focused constituent in CY dialects, as in.

(5) a. **Èkìtì**

i. Ayọ̀ ó lọ → Ayọ̀ li ó lọ → Ayọ̀ lí lọ  
 Ayọ̀ HTS go Ayọ̀ foc HTS go ‘It was Ayọ̀ that went.’

ii. Seun ó gbe → Seun li ó gbe → Seun lí gbe  
 Seun HTS carry (it) Seun FOC HTS carry (it) ‘It was Seun that carried it.’

b. **Ifẹ̀/Ìjẹ̀sà**

i. Ayọ̀ ó lọ → Ayọ̀ li ó lọ → Ayọ̀ lọ lọ  
 Ayọ̀ HTS go Ayọ̀ FOC HTS go ‘It was Ayọ̀ that went.’

ii. Seun ó gbe → Seun li ó gbe → Seun ló gbe  
 Seun HTS carry (it) Seun FOC HTS carry (it) ‘It was Seun that carried it.’

c. **Mọ̀bà**

i. Ayọ̀ é lọ → Ayọ̀ li é lọ → Ayọ̀ lẹ̀ lọ  
 Ayọ̀ HTS go Ayọ̀ FOC HTS go ‘It was Ayọ̀ that went.’

ii. Seun é gbe → Seun li é gbe → Seun le gbe  
 Seun HTS carry(it) Seun FOC HTS carry (it) ‘It was Seun that carried it.’

Example (5) above shows that when a subject noun phrase is focused, it is usually moved leftwards, however, the HTS remains in situ. In (5a), the vowel of the HTS gets deleted in Èkìtì. However, its tone remains and gets transferred to the vowel of the focus marker. Example (5b) shows that in Ifẹ̀ and Ìjẹ̀sà, it is the vowel of the focus marker that gets deleted. The HTS then replaces the deleted vowel. In example (5c) the vowel of the focus marker and the high tone on the HTS gets deleted. Our analysis of (5) above is completely at variance with the popular view which has it that when a subject noun phrase is focused, its original position is obligatorily taken over by a pronominal substitute **ó**. As we have shown in (5), the position vacated by a focused subject noun phrase is actually always left empty. This argument agrees with Awóbùlúyì (2008: 228) which says that the item **ó** in all subject-focus constructions in Yorùbá is the HTS and not a pronominal substitute.

#### 4. THE HTS AND THE SHORT PRONOUNS

The short singular pronouns in subject position in Yoruba as contained in Awóbùlúyì (2008: 81) are:

- (6)
- |            |    |
|------------|----|
| 1st Person | mi |
| 2nd Person | wọ |
| 3rd Person | ∅  |

Awóbùlúyì (1992: 28, 2008: 82) remarked that the 1st and 2nd person short pronouns in subject position as shown above look different from what have hitherto been thought to be the short singular subject pronouns in the language because, they are yet to undergo a number of morphemic rules. He therefore suggests that the forms of the 1st and 2nd person short singular pronouns, **mo** and **o** are fusion or coalescence of the underlying **mi** and **(w)ọ** and the HTS **ó**, as in

- (7)
- |        |   |       |
|--------|---|-------|
| mi + ó | → | mo    |
| wọ + ó | → | (w) o |

Just as in Standard Yorùbá, the short singular pronouns in subject position at the underlying level in CY dialects are:

- (8)
- |                        |    |
|------------------------|----|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> Person | mi |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> Person | wo |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> Person | ∅  |

The surface forms of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person short singular pronouns in Ife, Ijèsà and Èkìtì dialects are **mo/mọ** and **(w)o/(w)ọ**. The underlying forms **mi**, **(w)ọ** have coalesced with the HTS **ó** as suggested by Awóbùluyì (1992) as in

- (9)
- |        |   |       |
|--------|---|-------|
| mi + ó | → | mo/mọ |
| wọ + ó | → | wo/wọ |

This can be easily noticed in the examples below

- (10)
- |    |        |                   |
|----|--------|-------------------|
| a. | mo gbe | ‘I carried it.’   |
| b. | mọ lọ  | ‘I went.’         |
| c. | o gbe  | ‘You carried it.’ |
| d. | ọ lọ   | ‘You went.’       |

The choice of either **mo/mọ**; **o/ọ** depends on the ATR feature of the vowel of the following verbs. **mo/o** is used when the vowel of the verb that follows is half close. The alternant **mọ/ọ** is used when the vowel of the verb that follows it is open or half open. The 1<sup>st</sup> Person singular short pronoun in subject position

retains its underlying form in Ìpotì, Ayégúnlẹ̀, Ìpólẹ̀ and Ìjerò dialects of Èkìtì. In these dialects, the pronoun does not coalesce with the HTS **ó** as we can easily see in (11) below.

- (11) a. mi gbe           ‘I carried it’  
      b. mi lọ           ‘I went’  
      c. mi á           ‘I came’

In Mọ̀ba, instead of coalescence by merger as suggested by Awóbùlúyí, it is assimilation that takes place as in (12) below.

- (12) mi + é lọ   → mǐ lọ   ‘I went’  
      mi + é gbe → mǐ gbe ‘I carried it.’
- (w)ọ + é lọ   → ọọ lọ   ‘You went.’  
(w)ọ + é gbe → ọọ gbe ‘You carried it.’

As the foregoing has shown, the occurrence of the HTS with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person short subject pronouns in CY dialects corroborates Awobuluyi’s (1992, 2008) claim that the same element, HTS, which occurs with the short pronouns in contemporary Standard Yoruba contributes to the eventual shape of the short pronouns.

## 5. THE HTS IN NEGATIVE EXPRESSIONS

The HTS occurs in some negative expressions in Èkìtì, Ifẹ̀ and Ìjẹ̀sà. Witness its occurrence in

Adó, Ìkeji-Arákeji/Ifẹ̀

- (13)       i.                           ii.                           iii.
- a. Sànyà ó kẹ̀ sùn → Sànyá è sùn → Sànyá à sùn  
      Sànyà HTS NEG sleep   Sànyà NEG sleep   Sànyà did not sleep
- b. A ó kẹ̀ sùn → Á è sùn → Á à sùn  
      We HTS NEG sleep   We NEG sleep   We did not sleep
- c. [NPØ] ó kẹ̀ lọ → [NPØ] ó è lọ → [NPØ] é è lọ  
      HTS NEG go         HTS NEG go         He did not go

The negative marker in (13) above is **kẹ̀** (Sàláwù 1998, 2001). These dialects obligatorily delete the consonant of this negator, thereby causing its stranded

vowel to assimilate to the last vowel of any preceding item as shown in 13 (a–b). Likewise, the vowel of the HTS is deleted and its tone transferred to the last vowel of the preceding Noun Phrase. Sàláwù (1998, 2001) believes that the tonal change in the last syllable of the subject NP in Step II above occurs because the Verb Phrase immediately follows it. In fact, however, the tone in question belongs to the HTS which regularly occurs before the negator **kè** in the dialects. This is shown more clearly in (14) below.

- (14) a. **A ó kè gbe** → **Á è gbe** → **Á à gbe**  
 We HTS NEG carry ‘We did not carry it.’
- b. **Sànyà ó kè sùn** → **Sànyá è sùn** → **Sànyá à sùn**  
**Sànyà** HTS NEG sleep ‘Sànyà did not sleep.’

The derivation involved is shown still more clearly in (15) below.

(15)	<b>A ó kè gbe</b> We HTS NEG carry	Base form	<b>Sànyà ó kè sùn</b> <b>Sànyà</b> HTS NEG sleep
	<b>A ’ è gbe</b> We HTS NEG carry	Deletion	<b>Sànyà ’ è sùn</b> <b>Sànyà</b> HTS NEG sleep
	<b>Á è gbe</b> We NEG carry	HTS and Tone transfer	<b>Sànyá è sùn</b> <b>Sànyà</b> NEG sleep
	<b>Á à gbe</b> We NEG carry ‘We did not carry it.’	Vowel assimilation	<b>Sànyá à sùn</b> Sànyà NEG sleep ‘Sànyà did not sleep.’

The HTS **ó** which regularly occurs between the subject NP and the negation **kè**, is what actually accounts for the tonal change in the last syllable of the subject NP in (13a–b) above. The change has nothing at all to do with the NP being followed by a verb phrase as suggested by Sàláwù (1998, 2001).

Furthermore Sàláwù (1998, 2001) also, regards what we call the HTS in 13(c) above as the 3sg subject pronoun. As shown in example (3) above, the NP position is also vacant in 13(c). And because the NP fails to show up in its position here, the vowel of the HTS is not deleted as seen in Step II of 13 (a–b), it is the consonant of the negator that gets deleted. Therefore, instead of the regressive assimilation that occurs in 13(a–b), there is progressive assimilation in 13(c). This would appear explained by the homonymy avoidance principle that is known to operate extensively in Yorùbá purely in aid of comprehension (Awóbùlúyì 1992: 9) as shown in the outputs of examples (16) and (17) below.

- (16) i. [NPØ] ó kẹ̀ sun → [NPØ] ó è sun → [NPØ] \*ó ò sun  
 ii. [NPØ] ó kẹ̀ lọ → [NPØ] ó è lọ → [NPØ] \*ó ò lọ

We asterisked the outputs of (16) above because they are homonymous with the output of (17) below.

- (17) i. (w) o ó kẹ̀ sùn → (w) ó è sùn → (w) ó ò sun  
 You HTS NEG sleep You NEG sleep You did not sleep.  
 ii. (w) o ó kẹ̀ lọ → (w) ó è lọ → (w) ó ò lọ  
 You HTS NEG go You NEG go You did not go.

As the foregoing discussion has shown, the occurrence of the HTS with negators in the dialects strengthens Dechaine's (1993: 488) claim that the same element (HTS) co-occurs with negators in Ọ̀wọ̀rọ̀ and correspondingly weakens the popular belief that it does not occur in any shape or form with negators in Standard Yorùbá. (Awóbùlúyì (personal communication) postulates a zero form for it before negators in Standard Yorùbá in his forthcoming work on Yorùbá grammar).

## 6. CONCLUSION

We have tried to show in this paper the forms and occurrence of the HTS in CY dialects. Evidence from the dialects strongly validates the claim by Awóbùlúyì (1992, 2008) that the position vacated by moved or focused subject NPs is always empty, hence what most Yorùbá linguists regard as a pronominal substitute in focus construction in Standard Yorùbá is actually an occurrence of the HTS. The paper, we hope, has added to our knowledge of the HTS in CY dialect in particular, and Standard Yorùbá in general.

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