21
Yoruba
(West Benue-Congo)

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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 (Bamgboṣe 1966, 1967 Awobuluyi 1978, 1982, Afọlayan 1982, Odunaga 1982, Ọkẹ 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:

i [i]   **u** [u]
   e [e]   **o** [o]
      ẹ [ɛ]   **ọ** [ɔ]
            a

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: **lódè** 'outside', **lánǎ** '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 **ilée 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.'   **ọ́ ṣí 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**

Subject		Object		Emphatic	
1s	**mo**	1s	**mi**	1s	**èmi**
2s	**o**	2s	**ọ /ẹ**	2s	**ìwọ**
3s	**ó**	3s	**V**	3s	**òun**
1p	**a**	1p	**wa**	1p	**àwa**
2p	**ẹ**	2p	**nyin**	2p	**ènyin**
3p	**nwọ́n**	3p	**wọn**	3p	**àwọn**

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 [mɔ̃].
3. The 2 singular variation **ọ /ẹ** represents dialectal differences.
4. The form **nwọ́n** is an arbitrary spelling for **wọ́n** to distinguish it from **wọ́n** '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 nyín** 'I saw you-all.'   **ẹ rí mi** 'You-all saw me.'

       b   **mo lù Òjó** 'I hit Ojo.'   **Òjó lù mi** 'Ojo hit me.'

       c   **Táíwò 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 ti lọ** 'He has gone.' **ó ti ìlọ** 'Has he gone yet?'   **kò iti ìlọ**   'He hasn't gone yet.'

As noted, Yoruba is SVO with both nouns and pronouns: **ó lù Òjó** 'He hit Ojo.'; **ó lù mi** 'He hit me.' If there is a second object it will be proceded by **ní** '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** **kọ** **wa** **ní** **Yorùbá**
           3s teach us have Yoruba
         'He taught us Yoruba.'

    b **ó** **fún** **mi** **l'ówó**
           3s give me have'money
         'He gave me money.'

This construction is of quite high frequency because of its use in idioms: **ó fà mí 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 3rd person plural emphatic pronoun **àwọn** instead to create plural reference, as in (5)

(5) a **àwọn** **ẹyẹ** **ń** **fò**
           3p bird PRG fly
         'Birds fly.'

    b **mo** **rí** **àwọn** **ìjòyè**
           1s see 3p 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 book my 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 **lónǐ** 'today' and **lánǎ** '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 **lọ** 'go'. The Progressive marker **ń** is probably related to the verb **ń** 'have' (see Heine and Kuteva (2002:83) for the common grammaticalization of 'have' verbs to markers of Progressive aspect).

(7)   PERFORMATIVE   PROGRESSIVE

mo lo	1s go, went	**mo ń lọ**	1s am, was going
o lọ	2s go, went	**o ń lọ**	2s are, were going
ó lọ	3s goes, went	**ó ń lọ**	3s is, was going
a lọ	1p go, went	**a ń lọ**	1p are, were going
ẹ lọ	2p go, went	**ẹ ń lọ**	2p are, were going
nwọ́n lo	3p go, went	**nwọ́n ń lọ**	3p are, were going

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

(8)

mo wá	1s come, came	**mo ńg wá**	1s am, was coming
o wá	2s come, came	**o ńg wá**	2s are, were coming
ó wá	3s comes, came	**ó ńg wá**	3s is, was coming
a wá	1p come, came	**a ńg wá**	1p are, were coming
ẹ wá	2p come, came	**ẹ ńg wá**	2p are, were coming
nwọ́n wá	3p come, came	**nwọ́n ńg 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   **oòrùn ń   ràn**
           sun   PRG   shine
           'The sun shines.'

       b   **ayé   ń   yí   oòrùn po**
           Earth PRG   turn   sun   round
           'The earth rotates around the sun.'

The forms of the Perfect with auxiliary **ti** are listed in (10):

(10)   **mo ti lọ**   1s have gone   **mo ti wá**   1s have come
       o ti lọ   2s have gone   **o ti wá**   2s have come
       ó ti lọ   3s have gone   **ó ti wá**   3s has come
       a ti lọ   1p have gone   **a ti wá**   1p have come
       ẹ ti lọ   2p have gone   **ẹ ti wá**   2p have come
       nwọ́n ti lọ   3p have gone   **nwọ́n ti wá**   3p have come

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   **tìrẹ**, **tiẹ**   yours   2p   **tinyín**   yours
       3s   **tirẹ̀**, **tiẹ́**   his/hers/its 3p   **tiwọn**   theirs

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

(12)   **mo ti ń lọ**   1s have been going   **mo ti ń wá**   1s have been coming
       o ti ń lọ   2s have been going   **o ti ń wá**   2s have been coming
       ó ti ń lọ   2s has been going   **ó ti ń wá**   3s has been coming
       a ti ń lọ   1p have been going   **a ti ń wá**   1p have been coming
       ẹ ti ń lọ   2p have been going   **ẹ ti ń wá**   2p have been coming
       nwọ́n ti ń lọ   3p have been going   **nwọ́n ti ń wá**   3p have been coming

Here both **ti** and **ń** 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**   **ń**   **gba**   **lẹ́tà**   **rẹ**
            1s   PRF   PRG   receive   letter   your
            'I have started to receive your letters.'
       b   **àwa**   **ti**   **ń**   **ṣ iṣẹ́**
            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, **wà**, is always found in the unmarked aspect. Another **bẹ,** is only used as a Progressive, **ḿbẹ ,** 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, **jẹ́** and **ṣe**, that are used for description, **jẹ́** for the more permanent characteristics, and **ṣ e** for the more temporary characteristics, especially when it is preceded by **ń** as in (14). The normal negative is also with **ṣ e** rather than **jẹ́** .

(14) a **òyìnbó   l'ó   jẹ́**
European it.is=3s   be
'S/he is a European.'

  b **mo   ṣe   káfíntà   rí**
1s   be   carpenter   formerly
'I was once/have been a carpenter.'

  c. **akọ̀wé   ni   mo   ń-ṣe   nísìsiyǐ**
clerk   it.is   1s   PRG-be   now
'I am now a clerk.'

  d **kò   ń-ṣe   òyìnbó**
not.is   PRG-be   European
'S/he is not a European.'

21.5.2 *Use of copula **ni***

The copula **ni** in some ways parallels the usage of **kò** (see example (14d) and §21.8 on Negatives): (i) it is never preceded by the third person subject pronoun **ó**; (ii) likewise, contextual tone raising of noun subjects never occurs before **kò** or **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	a	**mo**	**lọ**	**s' Eko**
			1s	go	to Lagos

'I went to Lagos.'

		b	**ó**	**pa**	**ekun**
			3s	kill	leopard

'He killed a leopard.'

	States	a	**ó**	**mò**	**mi**
			3s	know	me

'S/he knows me.'

		b	**ó**	**sùn**	
			3s	sleep	

'S/he is asleep.'

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 [ŋ] before the velar; 3s is reduced to zero; and **nwọn** 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 Bamgboṣ e (1966:69) records it, and the way that we have chosen to record it here. We note, however, that Awobuluyi (1978:71) and Ọ kẹ (1982:248) both spell it yóò, which may be a dialectal variation.

(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
ẹ ó lọ	2p will go	**ẹ ó wá**	2p will come
nwọ́n ó lọ	3p will go	**nwọ́n ó wá**	3p will come

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 lọ**, 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 **ń** (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 - ń.** The permissible combinations listed by Odunuga are presented in (17):

(17)   Double combinations   Triple combinations

      ti ń   **ti máa ń**
      máa ń   **á ti máa**
      yó ti   **yó ti máa**
      yó máa
      á máa

      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   lọ**
               1s   INCE   go
               'I   shall   go.

      b   **mo   máa   ń   rí i**
               1s   INCE   PRG   see him
               'I always see him.'

c   **àwa**   **máa**   **ń**   **kí**   **i**   **rí**
         1p   INCE   PRG   greet   him   formerly
         'We used to greet him.'

With the Prospective, **máa** 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)   a   **ìwọ**   **yó**   **máa**   **rí**   **i**
           2p   PROS   INCE   see   him
           'You will be seeing him.'

       b   **mo**   **ti**   **máa**   **ń**   **jẹ un**   **níbẹ̀**
           1s   PFT   INCE   PRG   eat   there
           'I used to eat there.'

The other triple forms **á ti máa** and **yó ti máa** 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 máa** which appears to indicate a future state of affairs where an action with a long duration has already begun.

(20)   a   **ìwọ**   **á**   **ti**   **máa**   **sùn**
           2p   PROS   PFT   INCE   sleep
           'You will have fallen asleep.'

       b   **èmi**   **yó**   **ti**   **máa**   **kọlé**
           1s.EMPH   PROS   PFT   INCE   build.house
           '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, **má** 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 **nwọn** becomes neutral tone, as in (21):

(21)   **ng kò mò** 'I do not know.'; **kò mò** 'He does not know.'; **nwọn kò mò** 'We do not know.'

The negative particle **kò** is also subject to vowel copying in allegro speech, where one hears **a kò mọ̀** as **aà mọ̀** 'we do not know' and **ẹ kò mọ̀** as **ẹẹ̀ mò**. 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 **ń**, and the modal marker **ìbá** '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
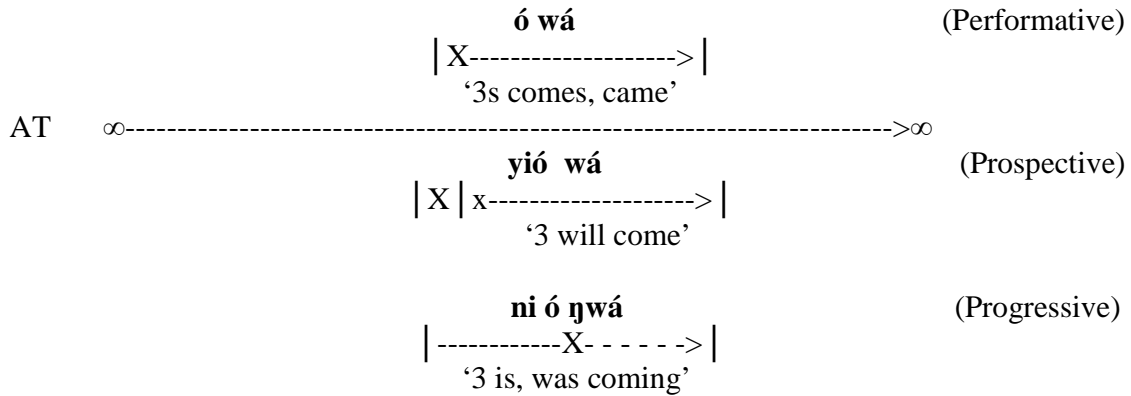   'I did not tell you to read it.'

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 **ń**, 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.
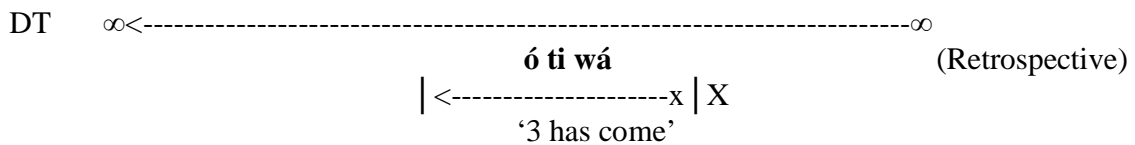
   Suggestions have occasionally made by some of the writers that what we have called the Prospective Aspect could be called a future tense. This appears doubtful for a variety of reasons: (i) there is no other indication of any kind of tense; (ii) the other four markers of this class obviously mark aspect; (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

```
                          ó wá                        (Performative)
                   │X-------------------->│
                       '3s comes, came'

AT      ∞------------------------------------------------------------------->∞
                          yió  wá                     (Prospective)
                   │X│x-------------------->│
                        '3 will come'


                          ni ó ŋwá                    (Progressive)
                   │------------X- - - - - ->│
                       '3 is, was coming'
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(ii) Forms in Descending Time

```
DT      ∞<-------------------------------------------------------------------∞
                          ó ti wá                     (Retrospective)
                   │<--------------------x│X
                        '3 has come'
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1. This is a very spare system: there is no basic form in Descending Time, and consequently no contrast between Imperfective and Progressive.

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