

## Verb Relativization in Yoruba Revisited

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### Abstract

The claim in Yoruba Grammar that expressions featuring verb relativisation are sentential nominalisations because they convey only the meanings of such nominalisations is both both false and fallacious. Copies of relativised and focused verbs are always nominalised because they are required to head NPs, and the originals of such verbs always remain in situ as, otherwise, primary aspect marker co-constituents would be unlicensed.

**Keywords:** Yoruba Grammar; verb relativisation; relativised verbs; focused verbs; primary aspect markers

### 1. Introduction

This writer has always felt that focusing and relativization are similar syntactic processes in the Yoruba language (witness Awobuluyi 1975; 1978a; 1978b: 94-7; 2013: 68-87; 273-76). In what looks very much like a welcome sign of the gradual meeting of the minds on the two processes, Bamgboṣe (1990: 209-210) is observed also saying that the two constructions are derived in the same way. Not only that, he calls

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the marker *ni* a “particle” rather than a “verb” (as some others would do), but says the marker *tí* signifies relativization as well as declarative “sentential nominalization”. He gives the following as examples of these last two constructions.

1. *Mo ra ilé.* → *Ilé tí mo rà,* (Relativization)  
‘I bought a house.’ → ‘The house that I bought,’
2. *Mo ra ilé.* → *Rírà tí mo ra ilé,* (Declarative Sentential  
Nominalization)  
‘I bought a house.’ → ‘(The fact) that I bought a house,’

## **2. Structural Considerations**

There are at least three structural problems, however, with calling (2) a declarative sentential nominalization; and those problems must be specifically addressed. The first such problem is that the account of (1) and (2) given directly above is an unexpected conflation of two opposite syntactic possibilities. The first such possibility is that (1) and (2) will necessarily be tokens of one and the same construction, if the marker *tí* is truly the same element for them. But if, as a second possibility, (1) and (2) are indeed different constructions, as readers are told, then two different markers *tí* must necessarily be involved for them, and not just one single marker *tí*, as readers are also told. The preponderance of clear evidence in the language (as will be seen below) indicates, however, that only one marker *tí* is actually involved in (1) and (2). What that means, therefore, is that those two examples are indeed tokens of the same construction, namely, the relative clause construction, contrary to what readers are told.

The second problem with calling (2) a declarative sentential nominalization has to do with the “nominalization marker *tí*” that occurs as the second element of structure within that example. None of the hitherto universally and independently known sentential nominalizations in the language have their complementizers occurring other than at their very beginning, as in

3. *Pé mo ra ilé,*  
'That I bought a house,' (declarative nominalization)
4. *Kí n ra ilé,*  
'That I should buy a house,' (hortative/imperative nominalization)
5. *Bí mo ra ilé,*  
'If I buy a house,' (conditional nominalization)

That being the case, examples like (3-5) very clearly render (2) immediately suspect as a declarative sentential nominalization in the language.

In defence of (2) as a declarative sentential nominalization, it is most likely to be said that utterances like (6) and (7) show that there are declarative sentential nominalizations in the language that actually begin with *tí*:

6. *Mo gbó tí wón n kọrin.* 'I heard them singing.'
7. *Mo gbó pé wón n kọrin.*  
'I heard/learned that they were singing.'

However, the structure beginning with *tí* in (6) is actually not a declarative sentential nominalization. This is shown by the ill formed nature of (8) as contrasted with (9).

8. *\*Mo rò tí wón n kọrin.* 'I think/thought they were singing.'
9. *Mo rò pé wón n kọrin.* 'I thought they were singing.'

The verb *rò* is what rules *tí wón n kọrin* out in (8), among other possible reasons, because it is not a declarative nominalization that functions in that example as an adverb or adverbial, as *pé wón n kọrin* does in (9).

The same thing is also shown more clearly by the ill formed nature of (10) when contrasted with (11).

10. *\*Tí wón n kọrin dára.* 'It's good that they are singing.'
11. *Pé wón n kọrin dára.* 'It's good that they are singing.'

Example (10) here is ill-formed simply because *tí wọn ñ kọrin* is not a nominalization and, accordingly, cannot function as a subject NP, as *pé wọn ñ kọrin* in (11) can.<sup>1</sup>

What (8) and (10) thus unequivocally show is that no declarative “sentential nominalization” derived with the marker *tí* exists anywhere in the language. In other words, *tí* nowhere functions as a marker of declarative sentential nominalization in the language. Accordingly, (2) necessarily still remains very suspect as a Yoruba declarative sentential nominalization.

The third problem with (2) as a declarative sentential nominalization is the exact syntactic relationship holding between the declarative “nominalization marker *tí*” and the nouns/noun phrases that always directly precede it in all such examples. Is it in any way different from the relationship holding between the same marker *tí* and the nouns/noun phrases directly preceding it in examples like (1)? (Notice, in this connection, that those nouns/noun phrases must precede and be

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<sup>1</sup>Awobuluyi (2013: 86-7; forthcoming) calls expressions like *tí wọn ñ kọrin* covert headed relative clause constructions. It appears that, in general and subject to possible correction, relativized verb phrases in Yoruba must be overtly headed in pre-verbal or subject position (as some of the examples given in (Awobuluyi 2013: 87) suggest), but usually are covert headed when occurring after verbs. Even then, the verb *gbọ* (and maybe a few others like it) can sometimes have overt headed relativized verb phrases directly following it. Thus, example (6) above can also occur as *Mo gbọ kíkọ tí wọn ñ kọrin*. ‘I heard them singing.’ With the verb *rò* in (8), one would probably have to say *Mo rò ọrọ kíkọ tí wọn ñ kọrin*. = *Mo rò tí kíkọ tí wọn ñ kọrin*. = *Mo rò tí orin tí wọn ñ kọ*. ‘I took the fact that they were singing into consideration.’

Another *tí*, (which, unlike the one concerned in the preceding paragraph, does not require nouns/noun phrases directly preceding it and being in construction with it, and also does not necessitate the extracting or copying of any element within its host expression) occurs at the actual beginning of sentences in the language. It is called a “sequel marker” in the writer’s forthcoming work. It occurs as in *Ẹjẹ ó wọlé rí, tí kò kí ẹnìkànkàn?* ‘Did he/she ever go in without greeting anyone?’ *Wọn mọ, tí wọn ò sọ nìkànkàn!* ‘They knew it, but didn’t say a word about it!’

in construction with that marker in both (1) and (2)!) As the marker clearly could not be in its position in (2) by pure chance, why must it appear there rather than elsewhere within (2)? Correct answers to these questions would render making any successful case for *tí* as a declarative nominalization marker in (2) a truly uphill task.

Finally, notice that example (1) is actually “ambiguous,” in the sense that it is both a “relative clause construction” and a declarative “sentential nominalization.” As a declarative sentential nominalization, it would mean ‘because I bought a house,’ in

12. *Ilé tí mo rà kò jẹ kówó kù sí mi lówó.*

‘Because I bought a house, I have no money left with me.’

Now, what exactly is the natural (as opposed to man-made) structural difference between *ilé tí mo rà* representing “relative clause constructions” in (1) above and this same string representing declarative “sentential nominalizations” in (12) here? This writer, for one, cannot see, and cannot think of, any genuine structural difference between that particular string in the two examples.

In these circumstances, without clearly and convincingly indicating the precise element of structure that makes *ilé tí mo rà* ambiguous in the sense indicated above, and also without offering any satisfactory and convincing explanation of the relationship between *tí* and the nouns immediately preceding it in examples like (2), the case for all such utterances as examples of declarative nominalization in the language necessarily remains unmade.

In actual fact, such a case cannot be successfully made and must, therefore, be abandoned. That is because, as (8) and (10) have already shown above, *tí* actually nowhere functions as a marker of declarative sentential nominalization in the entire language.

### 3. Semantic Considerations

It would appear that the real reason for calling utterances like (2) sentential nominalizations is actually not structural, but semantic. Such examples seem to be called sentential nominalizations just because they are merely thought to convey ‘fact’ meanings only. But examples like

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(1) can also convey ‘fact’ meanings, as seen in (12) above, and consistency would, therefore, require that they be simply called sentential nominalizations, too. To do so, however, would involve deliberately ignoring the fact that, as in (13) directly below, the meaning that such examples normally convey is that of specific things – in this particular case, a specific house.

13. *Ilé tí mo rà kò wọn rárá.*  
‘The house that I bought was not at all expensive.’

Such examples can sometimes convey conditional meanings, too, as in

14. *Ọmọ tí ó ní iyá òun ò ní sùn, òun náà kò ní fojú kan oorun.*  
‘If a child would not let its mother sleep, it, too, would not sleep a wink.’

No one would call the structure of interest in (14) a regular conditional clause, just because it actually conveys that meaning in this particular instance.

Even examples like (2), that are said to convey ‘fact’ meanings only, can actually convey the meaning of specific things or specific manners also, which are the default meanings of relative clause constructions in the language. Such meanings can be clearly seen in

15. *Lílù tí ẹ lu olè yẹn mà ti tóò! Àbí ẹ fẹ́ẹ pa á ni?*  
‘The beating you’ve already given the thief is sufficient!  
Or are you intent on committing murder?’

16. *Irú lílọ tí ọbá lọ sóde yẹn kò pón ọn lé rárá.*  
‘The kind of outing that the king made into town was  
totally unbecoming of him.’

Notice that sentential or fact readings are completely ruled out for these last two examples, which are clearly of the same kind as (2). The verb *tó* and the noun *irú*, respectively, are what rule out such readings for them. More specifically, the verb *tó* gives (15) the meaning of ‘a

specific amount of beating,’ as opposed to the ‘fact of beating.’ Similarly, the noun *irú* gives (16) the meaning of ‘a specific type/kind/manner of going or outing,’ as opposed to the ‘fact of going.’

Because, as (13-16) thus clearly show, relative clause constructions in the language actually convey more than just ‘fact’ meanings, it is hard to see why the latter meanings should have been singled out and then portrayed as the only meanings especially of expressions like (2) and (15-16). The more normal and, therefore, the more expected view of (2) and (13-16) would have been that they are relative clause constructions that convey different kinds of meanings, depending on the situational or linguistic context of their use. In other words, they are polysemous expressions, rather than ambiguous expressions. Such a view of them would have the additional merit of completely avoiding the intractable structural problems raised against considering some of them as declarative sentential nominalizations at the end of Section 2 above.

Still on semantic considerations, it has also been claimed by implication that (2) is a declarative sentential nominalization just because it can easily be paraphrased with a declarative sentential nominalization, as in

17. *Rírà tí mo ra ilé, = Pé mo ra ilé,*  
‘The fact that I bought a house,’

The claim implicitly made in (17) is that an utterance and its paraphrase must necessarily be identical in structure. In fact, however, what paraphrases by definition must have is the same meaning and not necessarily the same structure, exactly as in (17). That being the case, the only pertinent observation that could rightly be made about the relative clause construction there is that it has the meaning of a declarative sentential nominalization, and not that it is a declarative sentential nominalization.

In short and in summary, therefore, neither structural nor semantic considerations support the view that (2) is any different from (1). They are both tokens of the relative clause construction in Yoruba.

#### **4. Why Verbs Remain In-Situ in the Derivation of Focused and Relativized Verbs**

The foregoing are actually no more than preliminaries to the issue of real interest in this paper. That issue is the fact that a focused or relativized verb is never promoted, raised, or somehow moved out of the declarative expression hosting it. It always remains in its position there, while a copy of it is regularly nominalized<sup>2</sup> and attached to the beginning of the host expression. Every informed Yoruba grammarian knows this, but no one that this writer knows of has ever explained it.

As Awobuluyi (2021: 145) finds and reports, primary aspect markers and verbs in the language license each other's presence within declarative sentences. That is, they require each other's presence there, and, therefore, can't ever occur without each other there. That finding was used to explain the clear difference in the acceptability status of the following two expressions:

18. *Aṣégun ni wá.* 'We are spiritual conquerors.'
19. \**Aṣégun ún ni wa.* 'We are spiritual conquerors.'

A comparison between (18) and (19) shows that what clearly makes (19) unacceptable is the non-future aspect marker *ún*. Specifically, its occurrence there is not licensed by any verb – meaning therefore that, as said much earlier in Subsection 6.26 of (Awobuluyi 1978b: 97), the focus marker *ni* is actually not a verb in the language, contrary to what many people think, thanks to its traditional grammars.

The relationship of mutual licensing between primary aspect markers and verbs, which worked negatively to cause the ungrammaticality of (19) above, would seem to be the very thing that works positively to ensure the grammaticality of all constructions

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<sup>2</sup>Awobuluyi (1978a: 95) explained such nominalization as due to the fact that copied verbs are required to head noun phrases, which they could only do as nouns/nominalizations. Awobuluyi (forthcoming) now says virtually the same thing by indicating that the markers *ni* and *tí*, like all other specifiers (not in the UG sense!) in the language, must everywhere be in construction with nouns/nominalizations occurring to their immediate left.



featuring focused or relativized verbs. For, by in effect preventing focused or relativized verbs from being moved out of their host expressions, that relationship prevents primary aspect markers in such expressions from being left unlicensed, a circumstance that would otherwise predictably cause the affected host expressions to be ill formed.

As it turns out, that same relationship now also shows or confirms two other things already known in the language. First, it shows that (18) is actually not a sentence. It is not a sentence because it does not contain, and cannot contain, any primary aspect markers, as every declarative sentence must do in the language. This finding tallies perfectly with the conclusion reached much earlier in (Awobuluyi 1978a: 94) solely from considering the difference in the acceptability status of the following two expressions:

20. *Kì í ʃe ìwé ni mo rà.* ‘A book wasn’t what I bought.’

21. \**Kì í ʃe mo ra ìwé.* ‘A book wasn’t what I bought.’

Notice, incidentally, that the fact that focus constructions are actually not sentences automatically rules out the Subject node as the cause of the obligatory nominalization of copies of verbs in such constructions. In consequence, it leaves the head node of the NP as the only other possible explanation for that nominalization, as indicated in footnote 2 above.

Second, if as (19) shows focus constructions are not sentences, what else could they be? In that connection, notice that primary aspect markers cannot occur preceding the relative clause marker *tí* just as they cannot occur preceding the focus marker *ni*. That being the case, and since relative clause constructions are known on independent grounds to be noun phrases, it can be assumed that focus constructions are noun phrases, too, but without necessarily saying that the two constructions will always behave in the same way as noun phrases. It is actually known that the noun phrases in the language do not all behave in the same way. The assumption that focus constructions are noun phrases is proved to be right by (20) and (21) above.

However, notwithstanding that focus constructions are basically noun phrases, as indicated in Awobuluyi (forthcoming), they regularly get used as sentences. That is because, like two other types of noun phrases in the language, they are subject to conversion, a linguistic process which changes the syntactic categories of words, phrases, and even sentences, without in any way altering their normal shapes or forms, as when the sentence *Ọlá dé ilé.* becomes the name or proper noun *Ọládélé.*

### **5. Conclusion**

Thus, if an explanation proves to be correct somewhere, it is very likely to be useful for explaining still other phenomena elsewhere within the language concerned. That is what the different phenomena considered directly above all seem to show very clearly.

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