



ON THE CATEGORICAL STATUS OF PRONOUNS IN YORÙBÁ

BY

SIMEON OLAOGUN

Department of Linguistics and Languages

Adekunle Ajasin University

Akungba Akoko.

Simeon.olaogun@aaua.edu.ng

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18334719>

Abstract

Words in human language are traditionally classified into lexical and grammatical categories. However, pronouns in Yoruba have long been a subject of controversy, with scholars presenting divergent views on their syntax and morphology. While some argue that pronouns should be classified as a lexical category, others maintain that they belong to the grammatical category. Additionally, there is disagreement regarding whether pronouns are derivable or not. Despite extensive debate, there remains limited consensus in the literature on these issues. In light of this, this study aims to provide new evidence to support the view that pronouns in Yoruba are best classified as a grammatical category, with no forms derived from one another. The research utilizes structured interviews and descriptive methods for data collection and analysis. The results offer both cross-linguistic and language-internal evidence that reinforces the classification of Yoruba pronouns as grammatical categories, thus contributing to the ongoing discourse in this area.

Keywords: Lexical category, grammatical category, cross –dialectal and language-internal evidence, structured interviews and descriptive methods.

1. Introduction

Pronouns constitute one of the most contentious grammatical categories in Yoruba, owing to the divergent and often conflicting perspectives held by scholars regarding their morphological and syntactic properties. Main areas of disagreement include whether Yoruba pronouns should be classified as lexical or functional categories; the focusability of both long and short pronoun forms; and the directionality of derivation between short and long pronouns. Existing studies in the literature tend to anchor their analyses within a single theoretical framework, relying primarily on language-internal criteria to substantiate their claims. For example, Awobuluyi (1978, 2008, 2013), employing syntactic criteria, classifies Yoruba pronouns as nouns, thereby placing them within the lexical category. In a related argument, Awobuluyi (2008) uses morphological evidence to contend that long pronouns are derived from short forms through prefixation. While these contributions are valuable, they exemplify a broader trend in the literature: the tendency to adopt a single theoretical orientation or methodological approach, leaving a critical gap in the comprehensive understanding of Yoruba pronouns. In light of this lacuna, the present study adopts a multifaceted analytical approach. It integrates syntactic, morphological, semantic, and cross-dialectal evidence, alongside a lexicalist perspective, to offer a more holistic account of the status of pronouns in Yoruba. The study aims to contribute to the classification of Yoruba pronouns as grammatical categories, thereby addressing unresolved questions in the extant literature.

2. The Categorical Status of Pronouns in Yorùbá

The categorial status of pronouns in Yoruba has been the subject of considerable debate, with two dominant perspectives emerging in the literature. On one hand, some scholars maintain that pronouns should be classified as functional categories (functors); on the other hand, others argue that they are nouns, thereby placing them within the lexical category.

Oyelaran (1987) advances the former position, claiming that Yoruba pronouns belong to the functional category on the following grounds:

- (i) they lack descriptive or semantic content,
- (ii) they belong to closed lexical classes,
- (iii) short pronouns cannot be modified (e.g., *mo yèn* is ungrammatical), and



(iv) short pronouns do not serve as bases for word formation (e.g., forms like *timo*, *tia*, etc., are not derived from them).

A key feature Oyelaran emphasizes is the non-derivability of short pronouns, which supports their classification as functors. However, this view has been challenged by scholars such as Olumuyiwa (2006), who, following Awobuluyi (2001b), argues that long pronouns in Yoruba are formed from short ones through prefixation, as illustrated in (1):

- | | | |
|----|--------------|----------------|
| 1. | è + mi = èmi | à + wa = àwa |
| | ì + wọ = ìwọ | ẹ + yin = ẹyin |
| | ò = un = òun | à + wọn = àwọn |

These derivations directly challenge Oyelaran’s claim that short pronouns are non-derivable, thereby supporting the classification of pronouns as nouns. However, Olumuyiwa’s argument relies primarily on morphological evidence. As Radford (2004) cautions, relying exclusively on a single criterion can lead to incomplete or idiosyncratic conclusions.

Moreover, evidence from the Ọwọ dialect complicates the derivational analysis. In Ọwọ, each short subject pronoun often has multiple phonological forms (three to five variants), while the corresponding long pronoun typically has only one stable form. As Ajónḡòlò (2005) observes, a grammar that seeks to derive long pronouns from short ones in Ọwọ would require a complex array of morphological and phonological rules, thereby undermining the simplicity and regularity expected of such derivations.

This raises further theoretical concerns: if the Ọwọ dialect does not support the derivational link between short and long pronouns, and if the pronouns lack descriptive or semantic content, can they truly be classified as lexical nouns? Scholars who maintain the nominal status of pronouns must contend with questions such as:

- (i) Do pronouns possess descriptive content?
- (ii) Do they convey lexical meaning?
- (iii) Or do they primarily encode grammatical features?

Olumuyiwa (2006: 85) notably concedes that both long and short pronouns signal grammatical information such as person and number. If pronouns are defined by their grammatical function rather than their semantic content, then they align more closely with functional categories. Radford (2004: 39) supports this view, asserting that personal pronouns are function words precisely because they lack descriptive content. Unlike lexical nouns such as *dog*, which refer to specific entities and depend on context for reference, pronouns encode grammatical distinctions of person (first, second, third), number (singular or plural), gender (in languages that mark it), and case (e.g., accusative, genitive).

Despite this, many Yoruba scholars appear to implicitly treat long pronouns as nouns, primarily due to their syntactic behaviour. Bamgbose (1967: 11), for instance, defines a pronominal (i.e., a long pronoun) as a noun that possesses a system of person and number, while Bamgbose (1990: 116) states that the functions of long pronouns are not distinct from those of regular nouns. Importantly, the scholarly debate predominantly centers on the status of short pronouns, suggesting a tacit consensus on the nominal nature of long pronouns.

Proponents of this view often cite the following characteristics of long pronouns to justify their classification as nouns:

- i. Long pronouns can be qualified (e.g., *àwọn méjì* ‘the two of them’).
- ii. They can function as sentence subjects (e.g., *àwọn wá* ‘they came’).
- iii. They can be conjoined with other noun phrases using *àti* ‘and’ (e.g., *àwọn àti èmi lọ* ‘they and I went’; *ìwọ àti èmi ti sùn* ‘you and I have slept’).

However, these syntactic behaviour alone do not suffice to categorize long pronouns as lexical nouns. When evaluated against criteria for functional categories, both long and short pronouns display key features of functors:

- i. Lack of descriptive/semantic content
- ii. Membership in a closed class
- iii. Inability to serve as bases for derivation
- iv. Grammatical rather than referential function

Additionally, Radford (1997a, 1997b, 2004: 34) proposes that one reliable test for lexicality is whether a word has antonyms. Lexical categories often participate in oppositeness (e.g., *hot* vs



cold, big vs small). Pronouns, however, lack antonyms—there is no opposite of *àwọ̀n* ('they'), *ẹ̀yín* ('you'), *àwá* ('we'), or *mọ* ('I'). This further supports their classification as function words.

Consequently, the most plausible conclusion is that Yoruba pronouns, both long and short, are best analyzed as functional categories that may secondarily perform nominal functions in specific syntactic contexts. Importantly, this distinction between categorial status and syntactic function aligns with analyses in other languages. In English, for instance:

- 2a. The tall boy wore a red shirt.
- b. The boy ate quickly.
- c. It is quite silly.
- d. The man in the garden is my father.

The underlined elements (*tall, red, quickly, quite, in the garden*) are all labeled as modifiers based on their function, but this does not alter their categorial status as adjectives, adverbs, or prepositional phrases, respectively.

By analogy, it would be erroneous to conclude that Yoruba pronouns are nouns simply because they can function as noun phrases in certain syntactic environments. Their core properties, particularly their lack of descriptive content and their encoding of grammatical information, firmly position them within the class of functional categories. Therefore, the more tenable position is that Yoruba pronouns are functors that may, in particular syntactic environments, perform functions typically associated with nouns.

3. The Focus Status of Pronouns in Yorùbá

Another contentious issue in the syntactic analysis of Yorùbá pronouns concerns their ability to undergo focus, particularly whether they can be focused in the same way as lexical nouns. Scholars diverge on whether both short and long pronouns can occur in focus constructions, or whether this ability is restricted to one form.

Adewole (1998: 95) argues that only long pronouns can appear in focus positions in Yorùbá. According to his analysis, short pronouns are ungrammatical when focused, as illustrated in (3):

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>*3a. Mo ni ó lo
I foc pro go
“It was me that went”</p> | <p>*c. Won ni ó jẹ ẹyin
they foc pro eats eggs
“It was them that ate eggs”</p> |
| <p>*b. Wọ̀n ni ó lo
they foc pro go
“It was them that went”</p> | <p>*d. O ni ó wá
you foc pro come
“It was him that came”</p> |

Awobuluyi (2006: 1) agrees with the claim that short pronouns cannot be directly focused, but attributes this to their inherent grammatical design. He argues that focusing short pronouns is syntactically licensed only through substitution with their corresponding long pronoun forms. For instance, *èmi* is used in place of *mi* or *mo*, *àwa* for *a*, *ìwọ́* for *ó*, *àwọ̀n* for *wọ̀n*, *òun* for *un*, and *ẹ̀yín* for *yín*. This is demonstrated in the data below:

- 4a. Mo lọ > èmi ni ó lọ.
I go I foc HTS go
“I went > I was the one that went”
- b. Adé rí mi > èmi ni Adé rí.
Ade see me > I foc Ade see
“Ade saw me > I was the one that Ade saw”
- c. Adé rí wa > Àwa ni Adé rí.
Olú pè wọ̀n > àwọ̀n ni olú pè.

From the above, Awobuluyi infers that short pronouns achieve focus only through the mediation of their long counterparts. This presupposes that long pronouns function as focus proxies for short pronouns.

However, this position is sharply contested by Olumuyiwa (2006), who challenges the claim that long pronouns are used for focusing. According to him, long pronouns inherently carry emphatic readings due to their morphological composition (often through affixation). Consequently, re-focusing them using the focus marker *ni* results in semantic redundancy or tautology. From this perspective, long pronouns are inherently emphatic and therefore do not require further syntactic focusing.



Despite the contrasting perspectives, neither of these claims appears to be fully descriptively or explanatorily adequate. Awobuluyi's proposal is particularly problematic. The notion that short pronouns are "focused by proxy" through long pronouns is typologically unusual; cross-linguistically, there is little evidence to support the idea of nouns or pronouns undergoing focus by substitution rather than direct focus marking.

On the other hand, Olumuyiwa's assertion that long pronouns cannot be focused because they are inherently emphatic is also unconvincing. Native speaker intuitions and usage patterns indicate that long pronouns frequently occur in focus constructions with *ni*, contrary to his claim. This empirical observation undermines the theoretical claim that focusing them is semantically redundant.

In sum, while both short and long pronouns exhibit restrictions in their syntactic distribution under focus, the available evidence supports the view that long pronouns can undergo focus marking in Yorùbá, both structurally and pragmatically. The rejection of their focusability on the grounds of inherent emphasis is not supported by actual usage. Thus, the claim that long pronouns are "unfocusable" is both descriptively inaccurate and intuitively implausible.

4. Cross-Dialectal Evidence for Non-derivability of Short and Long pronouns in Ọ̀wọ̀ .

The debate over the morphological relationship between short and long pronouns in Yorùbá continues to attract scholarly attention. Two competing hypotheses dominate the literature. The first maintains that short pronouns are derived from long pronouns through deletion while the second view states that long pronouns are derived from their short counterparts through prefixation. This latter claim, originally suggested to Awobuluyi by a Canadian scholar, has also been adopted by Olumuyiwa (2006: 19).

However, cross-dialectal evidence, particularly from the Ọ̀wọ̀ variety of Yorùbá, casts doubt on the validity of both claims. Pronouns paradigm data from Ọ̀wọ̀ reveal that neither derivational direction is supported by empirical evidence. Consider the paradigms of short and long subject pronouns in Ọ̀wọ̀ below:

5. **Short Subject Pronouns**

	Sg	Pl
1 st person	mo/mò/mà/mí/mì	à
2 nd person	wo/wò/wà/wé/wè	òn
3 rd person	ó/é/á	èn

6.

Long Subject Pronouns

	Singular	Plural
1 st person	Èmi	Àwa
2 nd person	ùwọ	Ènghẹn
3 rd person	òun	Ònghọn

The data above raise significant questions about both derivational hypotheses. If long pronouns were truly derived from short pronouns via prefixation, we would expect multiple long forms corresponding to each variant of the short forms. For instance, given the five short forms of the 1st person singular (*mo, mò, mà, mí, mì*), five distinct long forms would be expected. Instead, only one long form (*èmi*) is attested. Similarly, in Ikafe, as reported by Japhet (2021), each of the long subject personal pronoun has at least two forms, one for affirmative sentences and one for negative sentences as exemplified in the paradigm below.

7. **Long Pronouns**

Singular	plural
Èmi (1sg)	àwa (1pl)
ùwọ (2sg)	àghan (2pl)
òghun (3sg)	àghan (3pl)

Short Pronouns

Affirmative	Negative
mo (1sg)	mèé (1sg)
wo (2sg)	wèé (2sg)
Ó (3sg)	èé (3sg)



a (1pl)	áà (1pl)
an (2pl)	àn-àn (2pl)
an (3pl)	án-àn (3pl)

Conversely, if short pronouns are derived by deletion from long pronouns, then the emergence of five phonologically distinct short forms from a single long form would necessitate a proliferation of deletion rules with no apparent systematic basis. This would undermine any claim to regular morphological derivation and verge on what could be described as linguistically “magical.” The data, therefore, point toward a non-derivational account in which both long and short pronouns are independently listed in the lexicon, with their features fully specified.

Further evidence against a derivational analysis comes from the claim that long pronouns are inherently emphatic forms of their short counterparts, due to the presence of vowel prefixes (Awobuluyi 2001, 2008). This position is illustrated with the following standard Yorùbá examples:

- 8a. Mo lọ
I go
“I go/went”
- b. Èmi lọ (emphasis)
I go/went
“I go / went”
- 9a. A jẹ iṣu
We eat yam
“We ate yam”
- b. Àwá jẹ isu
We eat yam
“We ate yam”

In these examples, the vowel prefixes *è-* and *à-* are said to confer emphasis. However, data from Òwò dialect directly challenges this analysis. In contexts where Standard Yorùbá employs long pronouns for emphasis, Òwò employs short pronouns without any apparent loss of grammaticality or emphatic force:

SY

10a Èmi rí òbẹ

I see knife
“I see/ saw a knife”b. Èmì yóò gé ìgì náà
I fut cut tree the
“I will cut down the tree”c. Ìwọ̀ ò tì ra ìwé
You neg pst Neg buy book
“You have not bought a book”11a À wa
We come/ came
“We come”b. Wọ̀n ọ̀n lọ
They neg go
“They did not go”c. Ẹ̀ pọ̀n mi
You fetch water
“You fetched water”**ÒWÒ DIALECT**

Mo rí òbẹ

I see knife
“I see/saw a knife”Mà á gé ìgin nẹ̀
I fut cut tree the
“I will cut down the tree”Wé è tì ra ìwé
You neg pst Neg buy book
“You have not bought a book”Àwa wá
we come/ came
“We come”Ọ̀nghọ̀n ọ̀n yú
They neg go
“They did not go”Ẹ̀ghẹ̀n pọ̀n omi
You fetch water
“You fetched water”

These examples suggest that in Òwò, short pronouns can appear in both emphatic and non-emphatic contexts, thereby undermining the claim that emphasis is a defining feature of long pronouns. The data provide further support for a non-derivational analysis in which both short and long pronouns are stored lexically and selected based on grammatical context rather than derived via morphological operations.

An additional implication of the Òwò pronoun system relates to earlier claims in the literature concerning the absence of distinction between second and third person plural pronouns in southeastern Yorùbá dialects. Adétugbò (1967: 105) claims that dialects such as Ondo, Òkitipupa, Ìdànrẹ̀, and Òwò lack distinct lexical forms for 2nd and 3rd person plural pronouns, resulting in potential ambiguity, e.g., *Àwa wá* might mean either "they came" or "you (pl.) came." However, data from Òwò contradicts this claim. The dialect clearly distinguishes between 2nd person plural (*ẹ̀nghẹ̀n*) and 3rd person plural (*ọ̀nghọ̀n*) forms, as evidenced in their independent paradigms.

- e Wè é sùn
 You cont Sleep
 “You are sleeping”
- 14a Ó rí wa
 He see us
 “He saw us”
- b É è gbó
 He neg hear
 “He did not hear”
- c Á á rí ghon
 He fut see them
 “He will see them”

The distributional patterns show that each pronominal form is conditioned by grammatical factors:

- i. Forms such as *mo*, *wo*, and *ó* are used in non-future affirmative contexts.
- ii. Forms like *ma*, *wa*, and *á* mark future tense.
- iii. Forms like *mí*, *wé*, and *é* are associated with negation or progressive aspect.
- iv. Some forms alternate based on tone: e.g., *mò* (mid tone) vs. *mò* (low tone) depending on the presence or absence of high-tone subject markers (HTS).

This range of forms, each linked to specific morphosyntactic environments, further discredits the derivational analysis. A single long pronoun cannot reasonably serve as the base for the multiplicity of short forms without postulating a highly abstract and unmotivated rule system. The most parsimonious analysis is therefore one that treats each form as lexically specified and morphosyntactically selected.

Dialectal evidence from Ọ̀wò provides strong counterarguments against both the prefixation and deletion-based derivational hypotheses concerning Yorùbá pronouns. The multiplicity of short pronoun forms, each conditioned by tense, aspect, and polarity alongside the singularity of corresponding long forms, supports a non-derivational analysis. Instead of assuming that one set is morphologically derived from the other, the data suggest that short and long pronouns are distinct lexical items, each independently stored in the mental lexicon with its own grammatical specifications. The Ọ̀wò dialect thus offers a compelling empirical case for re-evaluating assumptions about pronoun derivation in Yorùbá.



4. Conclusion

This paper has critically examined a range of contentious issues surrounding the status and behaviour of pronouns in Yorùbá, drawing on empirical data from the Òwò and Ìkàlè dialects. Leaning on language-internal and cross-dialectal evidence, the study has demonstrated, among other findings, that: (i) long pronouns in Yorùbá are focusable, contrary to some earlier claims; (ii) both long and short pronouns are best classified as functional categories, based on their grammatical behaviour and lack of descriptive content; and (iii) the Òwò dialect clearly distinguishes between second- and third-person plural pronouns, challenging previous generalizations about southeastern Yorùbá varieties. These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of pronoun categorization and variation within Yorùbá dialectology and grammar.

References

- Adétùgbò, A. (1967). *The Yoruba language in Western Nigeria: Its major dialect areas*. Doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, USA.
- Ajónḡòlò, T. O. (2005). *Negation in the Ào dialect of Yorùbá*. Doctoral thesis, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.
- Awóbùlúyì, O. (1978). *Essentials of Yoruba grammar*. Ibadan: University Press Limited.
- Awóbùlúyì, O. (2001a). Àròpò orúkò kúkúrí enì-kètà. *Èyò Àsòlùwà Yorùbá*, 2(1), 1–8.
- Awóbùlúyì, O. (2001b). Òtẹ̀-Ìlò àwọn àròpò orúkò kúkúrí. Paper presented at the YSAN Conference, Lagos, Nigeria.
- Awóbùlúyì, O. (2008). *Èkọ̀ isèdà-òrò Yorùbá*. Àkúré: Montem Paperbacks.
- Awobuluyi, O. (2013). *Èkò girámà èdè Yorùbá*. Osogbo, Nigeria: Atman Limited.
- Bámgbósé, A. (1967). *A short grammar of Yoruba*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press.
- Bámgbósé, A. (1990). *Fónólójì àti girámà Yorùbá*. Ibadan: University Press Limited.
- Japhet, A.S. (2021). *Forms and Features of Personal Pronouns in the Ilaje Dialect of Yoruba*. Doctoral thesis, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.
- Olúmúyìwà, T. O. (2006). *Àwọn wúnrèn onítúmò girámà nínú àwọn èka-èdè àárín gbùngbùn Yorùbá*. Doctoral Thesis, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Nigeria.
- Radford, A. (1997). *Syntactic theory and the structure of English: A minimalist approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Radford, A. (2004). *English syntax: An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.