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Yorùbá as a pro-drop language: a preliminary investigation

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ABSTRACT

The issue of the third person singular pronoun subject in Yorùbá is a controversial one. The controversy borders on whether Yorùbá has a phonetically realised third person singular pronoun subject or not. Some scholars believe that the occurrence of a morpheme presumed to be this pronoun is at best a high tone syllable (HTS); the implication of this is that the position of this pronoun in any structure in which it is presumed to have occurred is empty and without any phonetic content. There are three schools of thought to this controversy; while some scholars believe that Yorùbá has third person singular pronoun subject, some others believe that it is non-existent. Some also believe that there are two ways by which the morpheme assumed to be the third person singular pronoun subject could be interpreted. According to such school, the morphemes can be designated as a High Tone Syllable while, in the second instance, it can be interpreted as the third person singular pronoun subject; depending on the context in which it occurs. This paper is a contribution to the controversy but in another dimension. I argue in the paper that Yoruba language should be regarded as a pro-drop. This may be at variance to what obtains in some other established pro-drop languages in the world; however, language internal evidence appears to favour this assertion of pro-drop. Evidence is given to buttress my arguments. My argument is not limited to whether this morpheme exists or not in the subject position; I also explored other positions within the structure of Yorùbá language to show the erratic nature of this pronoun. The paper concludes that if my arguments are proved to be valid, then, the issue of whether Yorùbá has the third person pronoun subject would have been significantly addressed.

Keywords: Yorùbá, Pro-drop, Pronoun, Phonetic Content

1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of the third person singular pronoun in Yorùbá has generated a lot of controversy in recent time. The controversy borders on whether the Yorùbá language has a phonetically realised third person singular pronoun in the subject position or not. Some Yorùbá scholars believe that the occurrence of a morpheme presumed to be this pronoun as shown in (1 (c)) below, is at best a high tone syllable (HTS); the implication of this is that the position of this pronoun in any structure in which it is presumed to occur is empty and without any phonetic content.

- 1 (a) Mo lọ
1sg go
I went
- (b) O lọ
2sg go
You went
- (c) ___ Ó lọ
(e) HTS go
He went

There are three schools of thought to this controversy. The first school believes that Yorùbá has the third person singular pronoun in the subject position represented by morpheme *Ó*. The second school also believes that this pronoun is non-existent.

While the third school argues that the morpheme regarded as the HTS can be viewed as having two functions; one, it can function as a High Tone Syllable and two, it can function as a third person singular pronoun. And that the function of this morpheme within a structure is self-identifiable because the structure within which this morpheme occurs will dictate how it will be interpreted.

This paper is a contribution to this controversy but in a different perspective. I argue in the paper that Yorùbá language should be regarded as one of the pro-drop languages. This may be at variance to what obtains in some other established pro-drop languages in the world¹; however, language internal evidence appears to favour the fact that the Yorùbá language should be categorised as a pro-drop one. Evidence, in form of data presentation, is given to buttress my arguments.

My assertions are not limited to whether this morpheme exists or not in the subject position; I also explored other positions within the structure of Yorùbá language to show the erratic nature of this third person pronoun.

¹ The consensus of scholars is that pro-drop languages like Latin, German, Italian, etc. are morphologically rich and therefore could afford to drop their pronouns. But Yorùbá, like English, is morphologically impoverished; therefore, it cannot be regarded as a pro-drop language.

2. CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING THE ISSUE OF THE THIRD PERSON PRONOUN

The controversy on the issue of whether Yorùbá has a third person pronoun was first brought to the fore by Awobuluyi (2001). This scholar argues that what hitherto has been regarded as the third person singular pronoun subject by the Yorùbá scholars is actually not a pronoun. The morpheme, according to him (Awobuluyi 2001) can best be regarded and described as a HTS because its behaviour is in tandem with the HTS that mostly occurs between the noun subject and the verb that follows it. This is seen in (2) below.

- 2 (a) Òjọ́ ó sùn
Òjọ́ HTS sleep
Ojo slept
- (b) Ayò ó² lọ
Ayò HTS go
Ayò went

The implication of the data in (2) above is that in the sentences in (3), the *ó* that surfaces in the subject position can only be regarded as a HTS and not a third person pronoun.

- 3 (a) ___ Ó lọ sí oko
HTS go PP farm
He went to the farm
- (b) ___ Ó pa eku
HTS kill rat
He killed the rat

By this assertion, it means that the pronoun which is supposed to be at the underline spot has been dropped. We know this because the sentence is still grammatical although it seems as if there is no subject.

3. THE PHENOMENON OF PRO-DROP

The issue of pro-drop phenomenon first emerged from the Principles and Parameters model of language within the Generative framework (Chomsky 1981). Chomsky, in his works (1981, 1982) distinguishes two types of null elements; PRO and *Pro*. PRO is taken to be a pronominal anaphor, while *Pro* is said to be a pure pronominal. PRO is assumed to be a universal phenomenon; it occurs across languages. Therefore, it is language universal. The occurrence of PRO is limited to the subject position of an infinitival clause, in an ungoverned position; since PRO is not governed. However, the occurrence of *Pro* is language specific and not language universal. Chomsky (1981, 1982), opines that the distribution of pro-drop is

² The ‘ó’ here and any of the forms of ‘o’ is as a result of vowel co-occurrence in Yorùbá.

assumed to be determined by the principle of recoverability. This is known as Identification Hypothesis (see Taraldsen (1978), and Jaeggli (1982)). The concept of pro-drop in languages hinges on the null phonetic realisation of the subject of a declarative sentence. It has been observed, through the linguistics theory that certain languages of the world drop their pronouns at the subject position and yet, such sentences are still found to be well-formed. Discussion on pro-drop languages in line with the Generative typology parameter (see Biberauer, et.al. 2010) suggests four identifiable types of null-subject languages that facilitate the omission of subjects; such types are Expletive null-subject languages (e.g. German), partial null-subject languages (e.g. Finnish), discourse (radical) pro-drop languages (e.g. Chinese), and consistent null-subject languages (e.g. Spanish).

Languages like Chinese (Huang 1989), Italian (Riemsdijk and Williams 1986, Heageman 1991), Japanese (Radford 1997) and Spanish (Sells 1985) have been found to manifest pro-drop. Since it is not all languages that manifest pro-drop, it is therefore imperative to say that some languages are described as pro-drop while some are described as non-pro drop. Besides, pro-drop manifestations in languages have been found to be different in their form and formation (Huang 1989). Jaeggli and Safari (1989) who postulate the pro-drop parameter theory define it as the situation in which a description of language is made on the rules of suppression of subject pronoun in a finite sentence or clause; examples in (4) taken from Riemsdijk and William (1986) and Heageman (1991), show the pro-drop phenomenon.

4	(a)		(b)
	i.	io parlo 'I talk'	i. (<i>pro</i>) parlo (1sg)
	ii.	tu parli 'you talk'	ii. (<i>pro</i>) parli (2sg)
	iii.	lei parla 'he talks'	iii. (<i>pro</i>) parla (3sg)
	iv.	noi parliamo 'we talk'	iv. (<i>pro</i>) parliamo (1pl)
	v.	voi parlate 'you talk'	v. (<i>pro</i>) parlate (2pl)
	vi.	essi parlano 'they talk'	vi. (<i>pro</i>) parlano (3pl)

Observation from the data above shows that the verbal morphology in the language (Italian) is rich enough to make the subject pronouns in some sense redundant and recoverable. Therefore, the pronoun can be optionally dropped.

Some scholars who have worked on African languages have found that some languages in Africa can also be regarded as pro-drop. Funnami and Mua'zu (2011: 1) note that Igbo, Ibibio, Dagema and Izon have been described as pro-drop languages by various scholars (cf. Eze 1995, Ndimele 1991, 1997, 2000; Ndimele and Kari 2000; Oladiti, 2017). These languages, according to findings exhibit the absence of pronoun subjects in finite sentences and clauses.

This paper looks at the pronouns in Yorùbá and relates the absence of the third singular pronoun in certain environments within the structures of Yorùbá language as a phenomenon of pro-drop. Scholars have noted that the third person singular pronoun in Yorùbá behaves in an unpredictable manner (cf. Akanbi 2004, 2010; Adesola 2005). In some instances, the pronoun can be dropped at the subject and object positions of finite clauses. The issue of unpredictability of this pronoun is not limited to the subject or object positions alone, it also drops in the subject position of lower clauses. In case of long pronouns, Lawal (1994) notes that the occurrence of the pronominal (Long Pronoun) counterpart of this third person

pronoun always occurs in violation of the Binding Theory (this is not our concern in this paper). However, this can be attributable to the fact of Yorùbá being a pro-drop language.

The belief of scholars is that only languages with rich agreements exhibit pro-drop (as seen in data 4 above). On this, Neeleman and Szendrői (2005:1), (echoing the words of Taraldsen 1978, Rizzi 1986 among others) opine that:

The generalization that pro-drop is conditioned by rich agreement allows for a very attractive theory that reduces variation in the syntax to variation in the lexicon. The central idea is that languages allow pro-drop to the extent that their verbal agreement paradigm expresses the ϕ -features necessary for local recovery of the content of dropped arguments.

They went further to say that

An agreement-based theory of pro-drop faces difficulties with languages like Japanese and Chinese, which lack agreement and nevertheless allow pro-drop. In fact, pro-drop in these languages seems to be more wide-spread than in Italian-type languages: any pronominal argument can be omitted. The literature refers to this phenomenon as ‘radical pro-drop’, ‘rampant pro-drop’, or, perhaps most frequently, ‘discourse pro-drop’.

Yorùbá language falls within one of these types of pro-drop.

4. THE PRONOUNS IN YORÙBÁ

Like in all other languages, Yorùbá manifests complete sets of pronouns in conformity to the Universal Grammar principles. The table below shows the paradigm of the short pronouns in Yorùbá.

Table 1. Short Pronouns

	Singular		Plural	
	Subject	Object	Subject	Object
1p	mo	mi	a	Wa
2p	o	ọ/ẹ	ẹ	Yín
3p	ó ³	V Copy	wọn	wọn

³ Some scholars do not accept this morpheme as a third person singular. They (such scholars) believe that this morpheme in all its occurrences should be regarded only as a High Tone Syllable (HTS). We are going to discuss this phenomenon in the sub-sections below.

The pronouns in Table 1 above are used in the various sentences in (5) and (6) below.

5	(a)	<u>Mo</u> pe Òjọ 1sg call Òjọ I gave Ojo	Òjọ pè <u>mí</u> Òjọ call 1sg Òjọ gave me
	(b)	<u>O</u> pe Òjọ 2sg call Òjọ You (sg) Òjọ	Òjọ pè <u>o/e</u> Òjọ call 2sg Òjọ gave you
	(c)	<u>—</u> <u>Ó</u> pe Òjọ 3sg give Òjọ He gave Òjọ	Òjọ pè <u>é</u> ⁴ Òjọ give Òjọ gave him
6	(a)	<u>A</u> pe Òjọ 1pl. call Òjọ We called Òjọ	Òjọ pè <u>wa</u> Òjọ call 1pl Òjọ called us
	(b)	<u>E</u> pe Òjọ 2pl call Òjọ You called Òjọ	Òjọ pè <u>yín</u> Òjọ pè 2pl Òjọ called you
	(c)	<u>Wón</u> pe Òjọ 3pl. call Òjọ They called Òjọ	Òjọ pè <u>wón</u> Òjọ call 3pl Òjọ called them

To say that the syntactic behaviour of the third singular pronoun in Yorùbá is unpredictable is to state the obvious. The unpredictable behaviour of this pronoun is not limited to syntax alone, it extends to phonology. Consider the data in (7) below taken from Abiodun (2007).

7	(1)	(2)	
	(a)	Şè a wá QM 1pl come Did we come?	Şá a wá
	(b)	Şé o wá QM 2sg come Did you come?	Şó o wá
(c)	Şé ẹ wá QM 2pl come Did you come?	Şé ẹ wá	

⁴ Awóbùlúyì (2017) argues that the third person singular pronoun object is *ún*; and that whatever morpheme surfaces in the position of this pronoun is as a result of assimilation. We agree with him on this.

- | | | |
|-----|---|-----------|
| (d) | Şe wón wá
QM 3pl. come
Did they come? | Şón ọn wá |
| (e) | Şé ó wá
QM 3sg
Did he come? | Şó wá |

It can easily be observed from the data in (7) that while (a – d) is a case of assimilation that in (e) is a case of deletion. Abiodun (2007) then concludes that the reason why the supposed third person pronoun behaves like that is because, Yorùbá has no third person pronoun or better still, that *ó* is not a pronoun in Yorùbá. We agree with his assertion based on the fact that this third person pronoun always drops.

5. THE CASE OF PRO DROP IN YORÙBÁ

Various scholars have argued for and against the existence of the third person singular pronoun in Yorùbá since the earlier part of the year 2000. Those who have had one thing or the other to say on this subject include Awobuluyi (2001, 2006, 2017), Oladeji (2003), Akanbi (2004, 2010), Olumuyiwa (2005), Adesola (2005), Abiodun (2007), among many other scholars. Their arguments hinge on the presence or absence of the third singular pronoun within a structure. Before Awobuluyi (2001) expands the issue of the third singular pronoun, Stahlke (1974) has said something on it. To Stahlke (ibid.) this pronoun is not realizable; therefore, it is non-existent in Yorùbá. Awobuluyi (2001, 2006) agree that if this pronoun is there at all, it is phonetically zero and therefore, the *ó* that normally surfaces in its assumed position is certainly not the third person pronoun but a preverbal element which he designated as High Tone Syllable (HTS). Our take in this paper is not to argue for the existence or non-existence of this pronoun but to show that Yorùbá manifests some of the traits of pro-drop language. Therefore, we shall argue along this line.

Though, Yorùbá is not reach morphologically, therefore, it may be argued that only languages that are morphologically rich have the monopoly of the phenomenon of pro-drop. The Chinese language which has the same typology like Yorùbá is said to be a pro-drop language. We premise this assertion on the argument of Huang (1984). Huang (1984) opines that Chinese, a morphologically impoverished language allows null-subjects indicating that it is a *pro*-drop language although it lacks agreement entirely. Huang argues further that *pro* is possible either in languages with rich agreement or no agreement at all. It is believed that Yorùbá falls within the argument of Huang (ibid).

6. NULL PRONOUNS IN YORÙBÁ SENTENCE STRUCTURES

It has been argued by the Yorùbá scholars that the third singular pronoun subject in Yorùbá is phonetically zero; this is because the *ó* that is realised in the subject position of the finite clause is just a HTS. In this section I will extend the non-realisation of this pronoun beyond the subject position of finite clauses and argue that the phenomenon also manifests in

the object and other structural positions as well. We shall present data that back up this argument.

Consider the example below.

8	<p>A</p> <p>(a) ___ Ó lọ sí oko Pro HTS go PP farm He went to the farm</p> <p>(b) ___ Ó lọ sí ibè Pro HTS go pp there He went to the place</p>	<p>B</p> <p>⊖= Kò lọ sí oko Pro Neg go PP farm He did not go to the farm</p> <p>⊖=Yóò lọ sí ibè Pro Fut go PP there He will go to the place</p>
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In the above data, the third person pronoun is obligatorily dropped in the subject position of the (A (a) and (b)) sentences. The morpheme that surfaced is the HTS that normally occurs between the subject and the immediately following verb (as shown in 2 above). This HTS, as shown in the B part of the data does not show up at all. It is a common occurrence in Yorùbá that within a negative structure and structures that show the future marker, the HTS does not surface. It is obligatorily deleted. Yet, the addressee is identifiable because the pronoun is recoverable.

Still on the subject position; other pronouns apart from the third person singular pronoun can also drop in the subject position of a lower clause within a complex sentence. This confirms the fact that Yorùbá is one of the pro-drop languages. The examples below, taken from Awobuluyi (2006) attest to this fact.

9	<p>(a) Mo lọ sí bè 1sg go pp place I went there</p> <p>(b) O lọ sí bè 2sg go pp place You went there</p> <p>(c) Ó lọ sí bè 3sg go pp place He went there</p> <p>(d) A lọ sí bè 1plu go pp place We went there</p> <p>(e) È lọ sí bè 2plu go pp place You went there</p> <p>(f) Wọn lọ lọ sí bè</p>	<p>Èmi ni ___ ó lọ sí bè 1sg Foc Pro HTS pp place I am the one that went there (to the place)</p> <p>Ìwọ ni ___ ó lọ sí bè 2sg Foc Pro HTS pp place You are the one that went there</p> <p>Òun ni ___ ó lọ sí bè 3sg Foc Pro HTS pp place He is the one that went there</p> <p>Àwa ni ___ ó lọ sí bè 1plu Foc Pro HTS pp place We are the one that went there</p> <p>Èyin ni ___ ó lọ sí bè 2plu Foc Pro HTS pp place You are the one that went there</p> <p>Àwọn ni ___ ó lọ sí bè</p>
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3plu go pp place 3plu Foc Pro HTS pp place
They went there They are the one that went there

It is evident that the morpheme *ó* in the lower clauses does not agree in person and number with its pronominal antecedent in the subject position of the higher clause. Whereas the pronoun and its antecedent must agree in terms of person, number and (gender) the pronoun in the above example is in violation of this. The supposed pronoun *ó* that surfaces does not agree, either in person or number, with its various antecedents which are: *mo* (I), *o* (you), *ó* (he), *a* (we), *e* (you), and *wón* (they), yet, the sentences are grammatical. The implication of this is that the *ó* designated as HTS is not really a pronoun at all. Therefore, the pronouns which should have occupied the empty slot have been optionally dropped.

The same phenomenon is observed in the genitive position of a finite clause where the residue pronouns at the genitive position in the B data do not agree in person and in number with their various antecedents. The examples in (10) taken from Adewole (1992) lay credence.

10	A	B
(i)	Èmi ni Olú gba iwe mi 1sg Foc Olu collect book mine I am the one whose book Olu collected	Èmi ni Olú gba ìwé rẹ̀ 1sg Foc Olu collect book ____ I am the one whose book Olu collected
(ii)	Ìwọ̀ ni Olú gba iwe rẹ̀ 2sg Foc Olu collect book mine You are the one whose book Olu collected	Ìwọ̀ ni Olú gba ìwé rẹ̀ 2sg Foc Olu collect book ____ You are the one whose book Olu collected
(iii)	Òun ni Olú gba iwe rẹ̀ 3sg Foc Olu collect book mine He is the one whose book Olu collected	Oun ni Olú gba ìwé rẹ̀ 3sg Foc Olu collect book ____ He is the one whose book Olu collected
(iv)	Àwa ni Olú gba iwe wa 1plu Foc Olu collect book mine We are the one whose book Olu collected	Àwa ni Olú gba ìwé rẹ̀ 1plu Foc Olu collect book ____ We are the one whose book Olu collected
(v)	Èyin ni Olú gba iwe yin 2plu Foc Olu collect book mine You are the one whose book Olu collected	Èyin ni Olú gba ìwé rẹ̀ 2plu Foc Olu collect book ____ You are the one whose book Olu collected
(vi)	Àwọ̀n ni Olú gba iwe wọ̀n 3plu Foc Olu collect book mine They are the one whose book Olu collected	Àwọ̀n ni Olú gba ìwé rẹ̀ 3plu Foc Olu collect book ____ They are the one whose book Olu collected

The B part of the data in (10) shows a case of pro-drop. However, the dropping of the pronoun here, like in (9) above, is optional. In the (A) part, the pronoun in the genitive position agrees with the antecedent in person and number. But the opposite is the case in the

(B) part of the data; yet the sentence is grammatical. What causes the grammaticality is simply that Yorùbá is a pro-drop language.

In some instances, Yorùbá pronouns can be dropped in the object position of a finite clause. This is peculiar to the third person singular pronoun. We give the following examples.

- 11**
- (a) Olú nǎ ____
Olú beat
Olú beat him
 - (b) Olú ri ____
Olú see
Olu saw him
 - (c) Olú fǒ ____
Olú jump
Olu jumped it
 - (d) Olu pě ____
Olú call
Olú called him

The data in (10) show a kind of pro-drop at the object position. The pronoun that is dropped is the third singular pronoun object. One may argue about the low rising tone that appears on the vowel of the verb. The answer is when the phoneme segment is deleted in such positions, the high tone on the deleted segment realigns with the vowel of the verb to make it a low rising. This is possible since both the segment and the tone occupy different tares (see Goldsmith (1976)). The dropping of the pronoun here is not obligatory but optional. I need to point out here that the issue of pro drop is not synonymous with identity deletion as pointed out by Bamgbose (2000). As shown in the examples below, it is not in all cases that identity deletion is allowed. Consider the examples in (12) and (13) taken from Bamgbose (2000).

- 12**
- (a)

Şé wọn fẹ owó?	Wọn fẹ ____
Qm 3pl want money	3pl want
Do they want money	They do (want)
 - (b)

Bísí fẹ owó	Èmi náà fẹ ____
Bísí want money	1sg det want
Bísí wants money	I also want
- 13**
- (a)

Şé wọn kí ọba?	*Wọn kí ____
Qm 3pl greet king	3pl greet
Did they greet the king?	They greet
 - (b)

Bísí kí ọba	*Èmi náà kí ____
Bísí greet king	1 st sg det greet
Ísí greeted the king	I also greeted

Though, Bamgbose (2000: 60) says that the issue of ellipsis as shown in the examples above is also referred to as syntactically null object, I want to say that this is different from pro-drop phenomenon we have discussed so far in this paper. In Bamgbose's case, the issue has to do with the type of verb one is dealing with. Some Yorùbá verbs allow identity deletion while some do not.

7. CONCLUSION

Though, this paper is a preliminary investigation, I have shown there that the issue of the third person pronoun in Yorùbá should be treated as a case of pro-drop. I have also extended the phenomenon beyond the third person pronoun to other pronouns in the language. I have shown that just as the short pronoun can be dropped, so also the long pronouns can be dropped. To buttress the fact of Yorùbá language as a pro-drop language, I have argued that the reason of the erratic behaviour of the pronoun both syntactically and phonologically can be attributed to the fact that Yorùbá is a pro-drop language. If the assertions in this paper, supported by the various data as presented are taken as valid, then, the controversy surrounding the third occurrence or non-occurrence of this pronoun in Yorùbá will become redundant and irrelevant.

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