Wh-constructions without Focus Markers in Ṣúpárè

Francis Olayinka Adefabi

Linguistics and African languages Department, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife

Abstract

Wh-Interrogative markers in Yoruba have been widely described as co-occurring with the focus marker. However, this assertion does not hold true for Ṣúpárè, a dialect of Yoruba, which forms grammatically acceptable wh-interrogative constructions without the focus marker. Unlike Standard Yoruba, which employs construction-specific markers, Ṣúpárè uses only two universal markers, "sí" and "kí", across all interrogative constructions. This study examines the structure of Wh-Interrogative constructions in Ṣúpárè, analysing the roles of the interrogative markers as well as all the constituents within these constructions. The motivation stems from the assumption that wh-words are argument-like and associated with focus construction—a claim that Ṣúpárè disproves. The paper highlights the unique features of Ṣúpárè's interrogative system, showcasing its linguistic richness and divergence from standard practices. It concludes that Ṣúpárè dialect provides a distinctive approach to wh-construction, relying solely on "sí" and "kí" to query constituents and generate varied forms of interrogative sentences.

Key words: focus marker, wh-construction, wh-markers, Ṣúpárè, INTP

Introduction

The syntax of interrogative constructions has long held a central place in linguistic theory, particularly in generative grammar, where wh-questions are typically linked with focus constructions (Chomsky, 1957; Abney, 1987). In many languages, including English, wh-phrases like who, what, where and why (including *how*) undergo syntactic movement and occupy specific positions within clause structure (Radford, 1988). In Yoruba, (one of the major languages spoken in southwestern Nigeria) wh-interrogatives are equally structured but follow unique morphosyntactic rules (Chomsky, 1981). In Standard Yoruba, several studies like Bamgbose (1990), Yusuf (1990, 1998, 2007), Awobuluyi, (1992), Lawal (1991) etc have argued that interrogative constructions obligatorily involve the cooccurring of the focus marker {ni} alongside the wh-interrogative markers. The focus marker {ni}, therefore, directly follows the interrogative marker in the Interrogative Phrase at the left periphery of the sentence. This structure has been so dominant in the standard Yoruba that wh-questions in Yoruba are seen as a form of focus constructions. It is assumed that the wh-elements are nominal elements that can be moved from their canonical positions to the sentence initial position for the purpose of being focused (Jackendoff, 1977).

However, just like every human language, Yoruba is not monolithic. It has a great number of dialects spoken across various regions in Nigeria and beyond. Despite the shared grammatical core, there are variations in phonology, morphology, syntax and even pragmatics among the different dialects of the language (Adeniyi, 2021). Yet, much of the literature on Yoruba syntax continues to be based on the Standard Yoruba.

The focus of the Yoruba literature on the standard dialect has left the dialectal syntactic peculiarities underexplored. Among the under-documented dialects is Ṣúpárè, spoken in Akoko South West Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria. The present study focuses on the structure of wh-constructions in Ṣúpárè, which appear to defy the standard requirement for the focus marker in interrogative clauses.

Preliminary fieldwork and syntactic observations suggest that Ṣúpárè permits grammatically well-formed wh-questions without the focus marker ni. Instead, interrogative constructions in this dialect are built around just two lexical items, kí and sí, which cover a wide range of interrogative contexts (objects, subjects, place, time and amount). This finding poses important theoretical questions about the nature of the wh-interrogative constructions, focus constructions as well as the parametric variation within the dialects of a language. If Ṣúpárè forms well-formed wh-questions without a focus marker, then either the assumption that all Yoruba wh-questions require focus is incorrect or Ṣúpárè has undergone a syntactic reparameterization.

The motivation for this study is both empirical and theoretical. Empirically, it aims to document the structure of wh-interrogative constructions in a lesser-known dialect before such structures become lost due to language shift and homogenization. Theoretically, it engages with the Principles and Parameters framework (Chomsky, 1981; Kayne, 1994), particularly the notion that certain grammatical properties (e.g., focus licensing) may be parameterized within related language systems. Thus, the study contributes to the broader understanding of micro-variation within Yoruba and the wider Niger-Congo family.

The goal of this paper is to analyse the syntactic architecture of wh-questions in Ṣúpárè and to compare its structure with the more widely described constructions in Standard Yoruba. Specifically, the study asks:

(i)   What interrogative markers are used in Ṣúpárè and how are they distributed across syntactic environments?
(ii) What role does the focus marker play (or fail to play) in these constructions?
(iii) How can we account for these differences within the theoretical framework of Principles and Parameters?

The study relies on native speaker elicitation, syntactic analysis, and tree diagrams to illustrate its findings.

Literature Review
The analysis of wh-constructions in generative grammar has historically centred around the idea of syntactic movement, where interrogative elements are moved to the specifier of the Complementizer Phrase (Spec-CP) or a related projection at the left periphery of the sentence (Chomsky, 1981; Radford, 1988). In many languages, this movement is overt and is often associated with the expression of focus. Languages like English exhibit wh-movement from their canonical position to a secondary position at the left periphery of the sentence. On the other hand, some other languages use morphologically realised morpheme to achieve wh-interrogative construction.

The movement of a wh word, where the wh-element is fronted to the beginning of the clause, creates a trace at the extraction site. The trace is assumed to be a ghost copy of the extracted wh element. Both the trace (at the extraction site) and the wh element (at the landing site) are assumed to have the same semantic property and as such, they are co-indexed in their respective positions (Chomsky, 1995). While in English, there is an overt wh-movement. Wh elements in Chinese and Japanese are realized at wh-in-situ with interpretation at Logical Form (LF) (Huang, 1982).

Semantically, wh-questions denote a set of possible answers. In contradistinction to the Yes/No questions, the answers to the wh-questions comes in prose form (Hamblin, 1973; Groenendijk & Stokhof, 1984). According to Aboh (2007), Languages like Ìgbò and Yorùbá exhibit both wh-movement and wh-in-situ strategies. This challenges the universal syntactic assumptions that languages can only belong to one of the broad categories (Chomsky, 1995). In the Yoruba language, wh-constructions have attracted considerable scholarly attention. Bamgbose (1990) outlines the structure of wh-interrogatives and emphasizes the obligatory presence of the focus marker {ni} in Standard Yoruba. Yusuf (1990, 1998, 2007) builds on this claim, arguing that Yoruba wh-questions are fundamentally focus constructions.

Standard Yorubá

1. a.　　Kí　　ni　Wálé rà
　　　　　INT. FOC wale buy
　　　　　"What did Wale buy?"
   b.　　　Ẹja　ni　　wálé　rà
　　　　　fish FOC wale buy
　　　　　"Wale bough FISH"
   c.　　Níbo　ni　Kúnlé　lo
　　　　　INT　FOC Kunle go
　　　　　"Where did Kunle go?"
   d.　　Ibadan　ni　Kúnlé　lo
　　　　　Ibadan　FOC Kunle go
　　　　　"Where went to IBADAN"

Looking at data 1, the argument is that 1a & 1b as well as 1c & 1d are structurally similar. While 1a & 1c are regarded as wh-interrogative sentences, 1b & 1d are focus constructions. It can be observed that there is little or no difference in the structures of the pair of sentences above (1a-d respectively). In the submission of Bamgbose (1990) and Yusuf (1990, 1998, 2007), wh-interrogative construction is a form of focus construction in the language.

Awobuluyi (1992) provides additional support, noting that even non-argument phrases like adverbials (níbo, "where"; ìgbà wo, "when") must be followed by *ni* to form grammatically acceptable wh-questions. However, while this structure is well established in Standard Yoruba, it does not necessarily hold across all dialects. Cook (2005), in a comparative study, draws attention to the possibility of interrogative

constructions in Yoruba without focus markers, particularly in spontaneous speech or dialectal variation.

Lawal (1991) also observes that, in Standard Yorùbá, these constructions reflect underlying focus movement or base-generated focus structures. The research rests its argument on the present of **ni** in the sentence initial position against the established SVO structure of the language (Awobuluyi, 1978; Bamgbose, 1990). The conclusion of this scholar is that, since the wh phrase (containing the queried nominal elements) and the focus phrase (containing the focused constituents) are assumed to be in a secondary position rather than their subcategorized position (Rizzi, 1997), the wh-markers must have been moved in the same way focused constituents are moved in Yoruba.

Akanbi (2016) explains that "wo" is not a wh-marker in Yorùbá but rather the combination of "Nígbà wo". The argument is that the interpretive capacity of "wo" alone does not result in the expected wh-construction. However, the challenge with this research is that, it does not examine the possibility of splitting **nígbà wo** in some interrogative constructions in the language. If indeed "nígbà wo" is a single constituent, no one will expect that the same constituent will be separated by other independent morphemes in the data below.

Standard Yorùbá

2.a.   Ní igbà wo   ni Wálé pè mí?
    At time INT FOC Wale call me
    "When did Wale call me?"

b.   Ní igbà mẹ́ta   ni Wálé pè mí
    At time three FOC Wale call me
    "Wale called me THREE TIMES"

c.   Ní igbà mẹ́ta wo   ni Wálé pè mí?
    At time three INT FOC Wale call me
    "What kind of three times did Wale call me?"

d.   Ní igbà mẹ́jọ òtọ̀ọ̀tọ̀   wo ni Kọ́lá sọ fún mi?
    At Time eight separately INT FOC Kola say PREP me
    "What kind of eight separate times did Kola tell me?"

Our first observation in data 2 above is that *nígbà* is a fusion of two morphemes in Yoruba. The morpheme comprises: ní (a locative preposition) and ìgbà (time). Data 2 shows that *nígbà wo* can also be separated by other independent morphemes in the language. The data above therefore shows the possibility of separating *nígba wo* with some independent morphemes in the Yorùbá language. While 2a, c & d show the use of *nígbà wo* {ní ìgbà wo} as an interrogative question marker, 2b shows the declarative equivalent of 2a (and of course, a possible answer to 2a).

The possibility of data 2 above in the standard Yoruba, is a clear indication that Akanbi (2016) has not adequately captured the full characteristic nature of the wh-interrogative markers in Yoruba. Beyond the Standard Yoruba, there are paucity of work on the different dialects of the language especially on the syntax-semantics parts

of the wh-interrogative constructions as well as its variability across the dialects. According to Yuka and Adefabi (2016), Ṣúpárè is a relatively undocumented dialect of Yoruba that shows a wide range of features yet to be explored. While the submission about the standard Yorùbá that, the focus marker (ni) always accompanies the wh-interrogative marker, may look like a perfect reflective of the nature of the wh-construction in Yoruba, the current study examines the manifestation of wh-construction without the influence or support of the focus marker in Ṣúpárè.

According to Petyt (1980) and Claire (2000), the study of dialects gives a better description of controversial features of a standard dialect. The choice of Ṣúpárè as our subject of research in this present study, is therefore motivated by the need to give a better account of the features of the wh-constructions in the Yoruba language. This research also acts as a searchlight for the other dialectal features across the different dialects of the Yorùbá language. The investigation of the various dialects of Yorùbá will therefore give us a better understanding of the Yoruba grammar.

Yuka and Adefabi (2016) also examine the syntactic structure of negation in Ṣúpárè, reporting that negation is marked by LTS alone without overt particles. This minimalist morphosyntax aligns with the current investigation's finding that wh-questions in Ṣúpárè also lack overt focus markers. Together, these works suggest that certain dialects of Yoruba may have undergone a parameter setting in their focus and interrogative systems toward syntactic economy. Olumuyiwa and Oshodi (2012), in a broad survey of the linguistic situation in Akoko (which includes Ṣúpárè), emphasize the diversity of dialects in the area and their syntactic distinctiveness.

Olanrewaju (2022) examine the typology of Interrogative Construction in Central Yoruba Dialects. The study focuses on Ife, Ijesa, Ado-Ekiti and Otun Moba as the leading speech forms in the Central Yoruba dialects. The research concludes that, the focus marker {ni} is a very important constituent of the wh-interrogative constructions in the Central Yoruba Dialects (CY) and that wh-interrogative construction is a form of focus construction in the dialects examined. Akintoye and Ariyo (2015) reports that the focus marker in Ekiti has three allomorphs that are environmentally conditioned in the dialect. The paper accounts for "ni, li and ki" as the focus markers in the dialect. Unlike in the standard Yoruba, where the focus marker has only one morphological shape, the research observes that; these three focus markers occur in separate syntactic constructions in Ekiti. The paper states that "ni" occurs before consonant initial words while "li" is restricted to the environment of the vowels "e" and "u". "ki" is the only focus marker employed by a section of the dialect in all the manifestations of focus construction. The sub-dialects that use "ki" in Ekiti are: Òmùò, Ìpaò, Òkè-Àkò, Ìrèle, Ìtápájì and Iyemèrò. The paper therefore submits that, the focus marker "li" functions as a morpheme in some parts of the Ekiti dialect and at the same time functioning as an allomorph in some other parts of the same dialect.

Thus, there is a growing body of empirical work indicating that Yoruba dialects exhibit significant microvariation, particularly in syntactic domains that have traditionally been considered stable, such as focus and wh-structures. These dialects present counter-evidence to the canonical structures described in Standard Yoruba and call for more comprehensive, data-driven analyses.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework employed in this study is the Principles and Parameters model within the generative tradition (Chomsky, 1981; Kayne, 1994). This theory assumes that the features of human languages are divided into two broad categories. The language universal features are the features common to all human languages. On the other hand, language specific features are the features that distinguish one language from the other. Therefore, the name Principles and Parameters captures the assumptions of the theory. Principles refer to the shared features among the languages of the world, while the cross-linguistic differences arising from parameter settings is known as the Parameters. These parametric features are also noticed in the different dialects of a single language. The Endocentricity Principle (Kayne, 1994), which posits that every phrasal category must be headed by a governor whose features is reflected across the different levels of the projection, is central to this study. The Interrogative Phrase (INTP) is treated as a maximal projection, with **kí** and **sí** serving as the governors of the maximal projection of the Interrogative Phrase in the Ṣúpárè wh-constructions. The adoption of this projection principle allows us to establish the place of the focus marker in the wh-interrogative phrase.

This framework allows us to examine how wh-questions markers in Ṣúpárè differ from those in Standard Yoruba. In particular, it reveals that Ṣúpárè's syntax avoids the focus marker commonly used in Standard Yoruba, instead relying on universal markers to form grammatically coherent interrogative constructions. Additionally, the study explores the interaction between these markers and the phrasal architecture of the sentences, highlighting the unique syntactic behaviours of Ṣúpárè.

The study, therefore, contributes to both dialectal linguistics and syntactic theory by proposing that Ṣúpárè, through its structurally reduced yet semantically rich interrogative system, exemplifies a parameterized variant of interrogative clause formation in Yorùbá. While the wh-interrogative constructions in standard Yoruba needs the presence of the focus marker to derive a syntactically correct wh-construction, Ṣúpárè, on the other hand, constructs its wh-interrogative constructions outside the scope of the focus marker.

Standard Yorùbá

3.a   *Kí*   ni   Wálé rà
       INT. FOC wale buy
       "What did Wale buy?"

b.   *Ta*   ni   ó   ra oko
       INT FOC 3.SG   buy car
       "Who bought a car?"

c.   *Níbo* ni Wálé   ti   ra oko
       INT FOC wale ASP.PERF buy car
       "Where did wale buy a car?"

d.   Ìgbà *wo*   ni   Wálé ra oko

time INT FOC wale buy car
"When did wale buy the car?"
e.   *Báwo* ni Wálé ṣe ra ọkọ̀
      INT FOC wale do buy car
      "How did wale buy the car?"

It can be observed that, each of the interrogative constructions in "3" has a different marker, as indicated by the morphemes in italics (glossed as "INT"). It can also be noted that, each of the wh-interrogative markers is followed with the focus marker "ni" in standard Yorùbá. The implication of the data "3a-e" above is that; the wh-question markers in the Standard Yorùbá occur in pairs.

4.a   *kí*   ni   "What"
       INT FOC
b   *ta*   ni   "Who"
       INT FOC
c   *èwo* ni   "which"
       INT FOC
d   *èló* ni   "how much"
       INT FOC
e   *ibo* ni   "where"
       INT FOC
f   *èkélòó* ni   "how many"
       INT   FOC

The components of the first set of the pair (all written in italics in 2a-f) are the heads of their respective Interrogative Phrases, while the second set ("ni" which is invariant in all the examples) is the morpheme that marks focus in the Standard dialect (Yusuf, 1990; Awobuluyi, 1992; Lawal, 1991; Jones, 2006). Therefore, all the interrogative markers in data 4 above are focused in the same manner that arguments and nominalized verbs are focused in Yorùbá (Adefabi, 2018).

Methodology
The data for this study were collected through direct interaction with native speakers of Ṣúpárè, primarily from the Akoko South West Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria. A total of 50 participants were selected based on their fluency and knowledge of the dialect to ensure the authenticity of the data. We also made use of the native speaker competence of the researcher himself to validate the collected utterances from the respondents. The elicitation process involved structured interviews and targeted questions to generate natural wh-interrogative constructions.
     The analysis focused on syntactic structures, with particular attention given to the markers "sí" and "kí" and their roles in forming wh-questions. Each construction was carefully examined for its morphological and syntactic properties and variations

were noted where applicable. The study adhered to ethical research practices, ensuring participant confidentiality and informed consent throughout the data collection process.

The Wh-Interrogative Markers in Ṣúpárè

The wh-interrogative markers in Ṣúpárè do not occur in pairs just as the markers are completely devoid of the focus marker "ni". The wh-interrogative markers in Ṣúpárè are "*kí*" and "*sí*".

5.a   Olú ra bàtà?
       Olu buy shoe
       "Olu bought a pair of shoes"

b.   *Kí* Olú ù rà á[1]?
       INT. Olu LTS[2] buy 3.SG
       "What did Olu buy?"

c.   È *sí* é è ra bàtà?
       3.SG INT 3.SG LTS buy shoe
       "Who bought a pair of shoes?"

d.   Èlú *sí* Olú ù ra bàtà?
       Amount INT Olu LTS buy shoe
       "How much did Olu buy a pair of shoes?"

e.   Ibo ní *sí* Olú ṣì rà bàtà?
       Place COMP INT Olu ASP.PERF buy shoe
       "Where did Olu buy a pair of shoes?"

f.   Bàtà ní *sí* Olú ù rà á?
       shoe COMP INT Olu LTS buy 3.SG
       "Which pair of shoes did Olu buy?"

The interrogative markers are written in italics in the data above. It can be observed from the data 5a-f above, that "*kí*" is used to query thing/something (data 5b) while

---

[1] This is an object pronoun that stands in for the deleted noun argument. Examine the similar examples below in the standard Yorùbá:

    1   Olú ra bàtà   2.   Olú rà á
         olu buy shoe   olu buy 3.SG
        "Olu bought a pair of shoes"   "Olu bought it"
    3   Mo pe Délé   4.   Mo pè é
        1.SG call Dele   1.SG call 3.SG
        "I called Dele"   "I called him"
    5.   Wón jẹ ẹja   6.   Wón jẹ ẹ́
        3.PL eat fish   3.PL eat 3.SG
        "They ate fish"   "They ate it"

[2] The Low Tone Syllable (LTS) is a functional morpheme of only the suprasegmental element (tone). It is used to mark negation in the Ṣúpárè dialect. According to Yuka and Adefabi (2016), it copies the vocalic shape of the last vowel of the Subject Argument that occurs contiguously to its left and polarizes the tone of the Subject Argument against itself.

"*sí*" is used to query person, amount, place and object (in data 5c, d, e and f respectively). The implication of the above data is that; only two wh-interrogative markers are found in Ṣúpárè. It is also noted above that, "*sí*" is used to query different types of argument. Please consider data 6 below where "*sí*" is constant in 6a-c just as "*kí*" is constant in 6d-f to mark wh-interrogative constructions:

6.a   È   *sí*   Dúpe᷇   e᷆   pè   é³
       3.SG   INT   Dupe   LTS   call   3.SG
       "Who did Dupe call?"

b.   È   *sí*   é   è   é   pe   Dúpe᷇
       3.SG   INT   3.SG   LTS   ASP.CONT   call   Dupe
       "Who is calling dupe?"

c.   O�᷆wọn   ní   *sí*   Dúpe᷇   e᷆   pè   é
       3.PL   COMP   INT   dupe   LTS   call   3.SG
       "Which people did Dupe call?"

d.   *Kí*   Dúpe᷇   e᷆   pè   é
       INT   Dupe   LTS   call   3.SG
       "What did Dupe call?"

e.   *Kí*   kete   uhun   ṣí   rí
       INT   all   thing   ASP.PERF   look
       "How is everything?"

f.   *Kí*   Olú   ṣí   rí
       INT   Olu   ASP.PERF   look
       "How is Olu?"

A look at the data 6 above will show that, the occurrence of "*ki*" and "*sí*" is rule governed. "*sí*" is used to query human (6a-c) while "*kí*" is used to query non-human (6d-f). It can also be observed that, while 6a-b query singulars in their various examples, 6c queries plural. Therefore, the nominal elements before the interrogative marker are either the third person singular pronoun ("è" as in 6a-b) or the third person plural pronoun ("ò̱wọn" as in 6c). Unlike in the case of "*sí*" where there is a demarcation between when a singular nominal element is queried and when a plural nominal element is queried, data 6d-f reveal that; the singular/plural difference of the queried non-human nominal elements does not reflect on any argument because no argument comes before the interrogative marker. Data 7 below will show that, "*sí*" is used to query place, time, amount etc.

7a.   Ibo   ní   *sí*   Dàdá   à   yú
       Place   COMP   INT   Dada   LTS   go
       "Where did Dada go?"

b.   Ìgbà   ní   *sí*   Dàdá   à   yú   Èkó

---

³ This is a third person pronoun that copies the shape of the last vowel of the verb that precedes it. Please see footnote "2" for more on shape of this pronoun in Yorùbá.

Time COMP INT Dada LTS go Lagos
"When did Dada go to Lagos?"

c.   Èlú   *sí*   Dàdá   à   ra   kèke
      amount INT Dada LTS buy bicycle
      "How much did Dada buy the bicycle?"

d.   Ìwé   ní   *sí*   o̩   ò̩   fe̩
      book COMP INT 3.PL LTS want
      "Which book do they want?"

e.   Ibo   ní   *sí*   wé   è   wa
      Place COMP INT 2.SG LTS exist
      "Which place are you?"

f.   Ìgbà   ní   *sí*   ó̩   ò̩   jeun ànó̩
      Time COMP INT 3.PL LTS eat yesterday
      "When did they eat yesterday?"

Rather than having separate interrogative markers for each construction, S̩úpárè uses "*sí*" for where, when, how much and which in 7a-f above respectively. It can be observed that, while the queried arguments in 7a-c above are nouns, the queried arguments in 7d-f are pronouns. Despite the substitution of nouns for pronouns in 7a-c & 7d-f above, the morphological shape as well as the behaviour of the interrogative markers are constant in their respective constructions. An examination of data 5-7 above will show that, "*sí*" has a wider scope of occurrence than "*kí*". It can also be observed that, the complementizer "ní" comes before the interrogative marker in 7a, b, d, e and f above. Therefore, the complementizer "ní" accompanies the Interrogative Marker only when the English equivalents of "where, when and which" are formed in S̩úpárè. In essence, the complementizer "ní" is mutually exclusive of the English equivalent of "how many & how much" (èlú) in S̩úpárè. Please, examine the set of data below on the behaviour of *èlú* in S̩úpárè.

8a.   Èlú   *sí* Wálé è   yá   rà
      amount INT Wale LTS want buy
      "How many does Wale want to buy?"

b.   Èlú   *sí* ewó ò   mi
      amount INT money LTS 1.SG
      "How much is my money?"

c.   Èlú   *sí* wé   è   je̩ mí
      amount INT 2.SG LTS eat 1.SG
      "How much are you owing me?"

d.   Èlú   *sí* mí   ì   yá   kó
      amount INT 1.SG LTS want take
      "How many do I want to take?"

e.   Èlú   *sí* me̩ta àti métá   à   je̩
      amount INT three CONJ. three   LTS equal
      "What is three plus three?"

f. Èlú   *sí*   ewó   tie̱ˋ   àti   tèmí   ì   jé̱
    amount INT money 3.SG-POSS CONJ. 1.SG-POSS LTS equal
    "How much is my money plus his/her money?"

Data 8a-f above shows the peculiar features of *èlú* in Ṣúpárè. Across all the data examples from 8a-f, it can be observed that, the complementizer (ní) is completely absent in the syntactic constructions. *sí* constantly maintain the same position as the interrogative marker in the various sentences. It can also be observed that, *èlú* is interpretable both as how much (amount in terms of money) and how many (total number in terms of quantity). While in data 8a, d & e, *èlú* is interpreted as calculating quantity (as seen in their respective English glosses), in 8b, c & f, the semantic interpretation of *èlú* points to the amount of money rather than to the quantity of something (as seen in their respective English glosses). It therefore means that, it is the context that determines which of the semantic properties of *èlú* (how much or how many) the speaker means in his/her construction. The context (the surrounding words) act as pointers to the intended meaning of èlú in the Ṣúpárè grammar.

The Low Tone Syllable (LTS) can also be observed to be constant across all the sentences. It is noted in data 8e & f that, when the queried argument is more than one noun joined with the help of a conjunction, it is the closest to the LTS that polarizes its tone against the tone of the LTS. A close observation of data 8 above will show that it is divided into three sets. 8a & b shows the nature of *èlú* when the queried arguments are nouns. 8c & d shows the nature of the interrogative marker (*èlú*) when the queried arguments are pronouns. The last set of the data in 8e & f shows the manifestation of the interrogative marker when the queried arguments are more than one. It is observed that *èlú* is used in mathematical sense (to calculate) in 8e & f. The data above has therefore varied the constituents of the sentences to reveal the peculiar features of *èlú* as against the other constituents of the interrogative sentences in Ṣúpárè. We can therefore say here that the complexity of the interrogative sentences in Ṣúpárè does not affect the behevaiour of the interrogative marker (*sí*) as well as the presence of the LTS in the sentences.

The Structure of the Wh-Construction in Ṣúpárè

A Wh-Interrogative Construction in Ṣúpárè houses a nominal element at the specifier position of the interrogative phrase. This nominal element is then queried by the interrogative marker. This queried nominal element at the specifier position of the INTP determines the kind of the wh-interrogative sentence to be formed. For instance, human/person is queried ("who" in English) when the third person singular pronoun "è" occurs at the Specifier Position of the Interrogative Phrase. Time ("when" in English) is queried when "ìgbà" (season/time) occurs at the specifier position of the interrogative phrase. The Venue ("where" in English) is queried when "ibo" (place) occurs at the specifier position of the interrogative phrase. While the IP is headed by the Low Tone Syllable (a morpheme of only the suprasegmental element), the Interrogative Phrase is headed by "*sí/kí*" the interrogative markers. A look at the
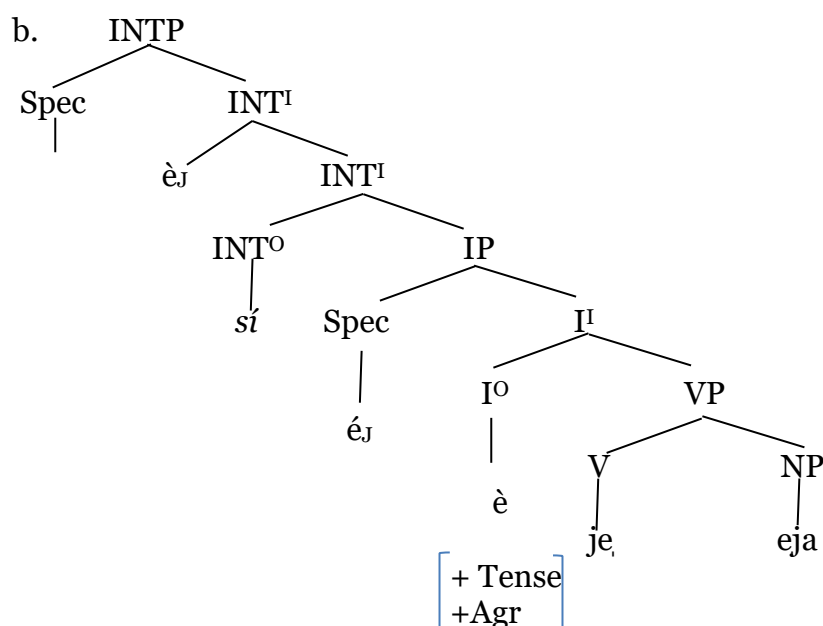
examples in 9-12 below will show that; an interrogative construction does not contain a Focus Phrase and as such does not house any focus marker in the Ṣúpárè dialect.

9.a.   Òjó je̩ eja
       Ojo eat fish
       "Ojo ate fish"

b.   è   *sí*   é   è je̩ eja ?
       3.SG INT 3.SG LTS eat fish
       "Who ate fish?"

c.   *kí* Òjó ò je̩ e̩´ ?
       INT Ojo LTS eat 3.SG
       "What did Olu eat?"

d.   Ìgbà ní   *sí* Òjó ò je̩ eja?
       time COMP INT Ojo LTS eat fish
       "When did Ojo eat fish?"

e.   Ibo ní   *sí* Òjó s̩i   je̩ eja?
       place COMP INT Ojo ASP.PERF eat fish
       "Where did Ojo eat fish?"

Data 9b shows that, "ní" is completely absent when the Subject Argument of the sentence is queried but the queried element is represented with a pronominal argument. The pronoun argument at the specifier position of the IP must agree with the queried argument at the Specifier Position of the INTP in phi-features. The two Specifier positions can therefore be co-indexed in the corresponding tree diagram in 10b. The specifier position of the INTP is empty when the object argument of the sentence is queried because "kí" does not require any nominal element at the Spec INTP position. However, when "time" and "place" are queried (9d and 9e respectively), both the complementizer "ní[4]" and the queried nominal element at the Specifier position of the INTP are present. More so, a comparison of 9b-d and 9e will show that the LTS and the perfective marker "s̩i" are in mutually exclusive relationship. Thus, the LTS is substituted by the perfective marker in 9e above.

10.a è   *sí* é   è je̩ eja ?
       3.SG INT 3.SG LTS eat fish
       "Who ate fish?"

---

[4] It should be noted that, this morpheme "ní" (with a high tone) is completely different from the focus marker "ni" (with a mid-tone) in terms of the structural distribution and shape. According to Adefabi (forthcoming), the Ṣúpárè focus marker is a split of two near identical morphemes "ni…ní". The two particles are obligatory in a single focus construction. The first particle of this focus marker occurs immediately after the focused constituent while the second particle occurs in the sentence final position of the sentence.
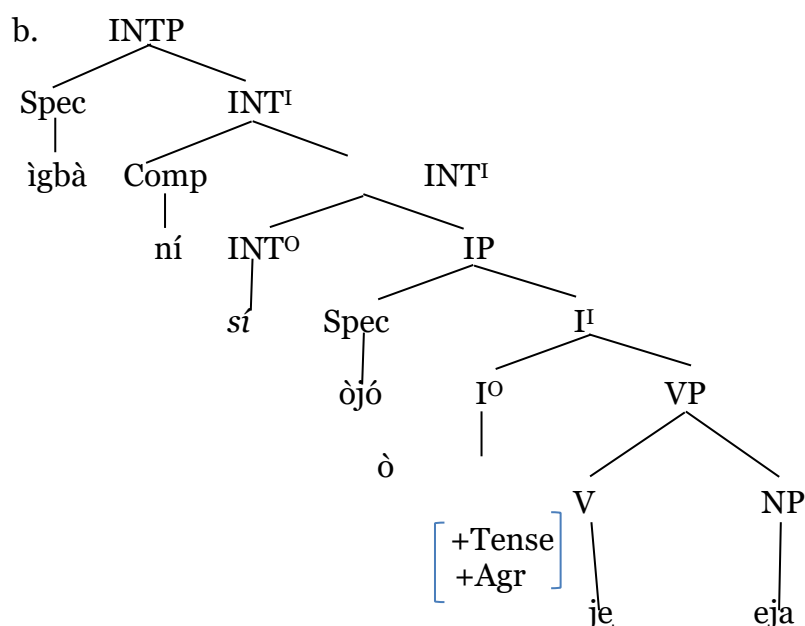
b. INTP

Spec   INT¹

 | èⱼ   INT¹

         INTᴼ   IP

          sí   Spec   I¹

              éⱼ   Iᴼ   VP

                    è   V   NP

                        je̩   eja

$$\begin{bmatrix} +\text{Tense} \\ +\text{Agr} \end{bmatrix}$$

The tree diagram in 10b above shows that, "*sí*" is the interrogative marker as it occupies the head position of the interrogative phrasal category (INTᴼ). The queried argument "è" occupies the specifier position of the INTP. This queried argument is co-indexed with the resumptive pronoun at its extraction site (Spec IP). However, when such subject argument is queried, the complementizer "ní" is absent. Please compare 10b with 11b where the specifier position of the interrogative phrase is empty because "*kí*" does not allow any nominal element before it. A similar comparison with 12b will also show that, unlike in 10b and 11b where there is no complementizer before the interrogative markers, the complementizer "ní" is overtly present in 12b.

11.a   *Kí* Òjó ò je̩ é̩?
       INT Ojo LTS eat 3.SG
       "What did Olu eat?"

b.
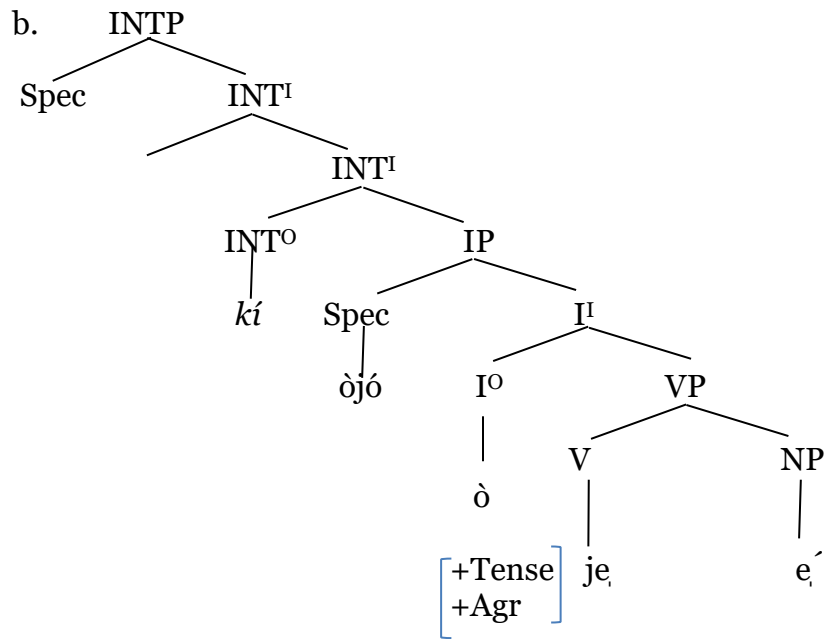
Unlike in example 10 where the queried subject argument occurs at the specifier position of the interrogative phrase, the similar position is empty in 11 because "*kí*" does not require the specifier position of the INTP to be filled. The example 12 below shows that, when the location is queried, both the queried argument and the complementizer must accompany the interrogative marker.

12.a   Ìgbà   ní   *sí* Òjó   ò   je̩ eja?
       time COMP INT Ojo LTS   eat fish
       "When did Ojo eat fish?"

b.

```
              INTP
          ┌────┴────┐
        Spec      INTᴵ
         │      ┌───┴────┐
       ìgbà   Comp      INTᴵ
               │      ┌───┴────┐
               ní  INTᴼ       IP
                    │     ┌────┴────┐
                    sí  Spec       Iᴵ
                         │     ┌────┴────┐
                        òjó   Iᴼ        VP
                              │      ┌───┴───┐
                              ò      V      NP
                                 ┌──────┐   │   │
                                 │+Tense│   │   │
                                 │+Agr  │   │   │
                                 └──────┘  je   eja
```

A comparison of the tree diagrams in 10-12 will show that, when the Subject Argument of the sentence is queried in "10b", the Complementizer "ní" is absent. In the same vein, when the Object Argument of the sentence is queried in "11b", both the slot for the "ní" and that of the Specifier Position of the Interrogative Phrase are empty because "*kí*" does not allow any nominal element to occur before it in the Specifier position of the INTP. But when either the time or the location is queried (as in 12c) both the Complementizer "ní" and the queried nominal elements must be overtly present.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the wh-interrogative constructions in Ṣúpárè deviate significantly from the established norms of Standard Yoruba by completely omitting the focus marker. Unlike Standard Yoruba, which employs multiple wh-markers tied to specific constructions, Ṣúpárè simplifies its interrogative system by relying solely on the universal markers "sí" and "kí". The findings reveal that "kí" is reserved for non-human arguments, while "sí" accommodates a broader range of interrogative functions, including querying humans, time, location and other arguments.

Furthermore, the study highlights unique syntactic features in Ṣúpárè, such as the consistent pairing of the Low Tone Syllable (LTS) with subject arguments in the absence of an aspectual marker and the obligatory use of the complementizer "ní" in certain wh-constructions. The syntactic architecture also demonstrates that a queried subject governs two syntactic positions, whereas a queried object governs only one. These insights contribute to the understanding of the linguistic diversity within Yoruba dialects and challenge the conventional assumptions regarding wh-interrogative constructions. By offering a distinctive framework devoid of the focus

marker, Ṣúpárè enriches the broader discourse on syntax and interrogative structures. This study invites further research into other dialects to expand the comparative analysis and deepen the exploration of linguistic variation within Yoruba and beyond.

References

Abney, S. (1987). The English Noun Phrase in its Sentential Aspect. Doctoral Dissertation. MIT. Cambridge, Mass.

Aboh, E. O. (2007). Focus constructions across Kwa. *The Linguistic Review,* 24(2-3), 149– 195. https://doi.org/10.1515/TLR.2007.007

Adefabi. F. O. (2019). A case for Nominalised Focus in Yorùbá. *Clarep Journal of English and Linguistics. C-JEL* Volume 1, 2019.Edited by Alexandra Esimaje and Josef Schmied. Pp 185-200.

Adeniyi, K. (2021). A Tonal Identification of Yoruba Dialects. *Dialectologia* (2-32)

Akanbi T. (2016). *On The WH Question Particle [Wo] in Yorùbá.* European Scientific Journal June 2016 edition vol.12, No.17.

Akintoye, S. & Ariyo, O. (2015). Focus Constructions and High Tone Syllable Ó on Èkìtì Dialect of Yorùbá: A Critique. *International Journal of Current Research*, Volume 7, Issue, 02, pp.12960-12965.

Awobuluyi, O. (1978). *Essentials of Yorùbá grammar.* Ibadan, Nigeria: Oxford University Press.

Awobuluyi, O. (1992). *Issues in the Syntax of Standard Yorùbá Focus Construction.* Journal of West African Languages. XXIL, 2:69-88.

Awobuluyi, O. (1998). *Àwọn Èka-Èdè Yorùbá.* Pastoral Institute. Bodija Ibadan.

Bamgbose, A. (1990). *Fonólọ́jì àti Gírámà Yorùbá.* Ibadan, Nigeria: University Press PLC.

Chomsky, N. (1957). *Syntactic Structures.* The Hague

Chomsky, N. (1981). *Lectures on Government and Binding.* Dordrecht: Holland. Foris Publications.

Chomsky, N. (1995). *The Minimalist Program.* MIT Press.

Claire, K. (2000). *Language and Culture.* Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Cook, C. (2005). *Extraction Marking Vs. Scope-Marking in Nêhiyawêwin and Yorùbá.* Proceedings of the 2004 annual conference of the Canadian Linguistic Association.

Ginzburg, J. (2012). *The Interactive Stance: Meaning for Conversation.* Oxford University Press.

Groenendijk, J., & Stokhof, M. (1984). Studies on the semantics of questions and the pragmatics of answers. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 15(3), 535–562.

Hamblin, C. L. (1973). Questions in Montague English. *Foundations of Language*, 10(1), 41–53.

Huang, C. (1982). Logical Relations in Chinese and the Theory of Grammar (Doctoral dissertation, MIT).

Jackendoff, R. (1977). *X-bar Syntax: A Theory of Phrase Structure*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Jones, S. (2006). *Focus in Yorùbá: a semantic/pragmatic account*. ZAS Papers in Linguistics 46, 2006: 143 – 160

Kayne, R. (1994). *The antisymmetry of syntax*. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Lawal, A. (1991). *Yorùbá Pi and Ki: Verbs or Complementizers*. Studies in African Linguistics. Volume 22, Number 1, April 1991.

Olanrewaju, E. (2022). Typology of Constituent Interrogatives in Central Yorùbá Dialects: A Minimalist Description. Journal of Universal Language; 23(2): 77-108

Olumuyiwa, T. & Oshodi, B. (2012). *On the Linguistic situation in Akoko*. California Linguistic Notes Volume XXXVII No. 1 Winter 2012

Omachonu, G. (2007). *Question Formation in the Igala Language*. Journal of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria Volume 10 2007 (pp. 191-197)

Petyt, K.M. (1980). *The study of dialect: An introduction to dialectology*. London: Andre Deutsch Ltd.

Radford, A. (1988). *Transformational Grammar*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Rizzi, L. (1997). The Fine Structure of the Left Periphery. In *Elements of Grammar. Handbook in Generative Syntax,* L. Haegeman (ed.), 281-337, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Yuka, C. & Adefabi, F. (2016). *The LTS and Polarity in Ṣùpàrè̀ Negated Clauses*. In New Findings in African Languages and Literature. West African Linguistic Society. Oye Taiwo and Lendzemo Constantine Yuka (Ed.) 38-46.

Yusuf, O. (1990). *Yorùbá Copular ni*. Journal of West African Languages, 20, 83-93

Yusuf, O. (1998). *Fundamentals of syntax and the study of Nigerian languages*. Ijebu-Ode: Shebiotimo Publications.

Yusuf, O. (2007). *Yorùbá syntax*. In Ore Yusuf (ed.). Basic Linguistics for Nigerian languages teachers. Port Harcourt: Grand Orbit Communications. Pp. 257-272.