

A re-examination of *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́* as a negative ‘no’ answer to yes-no questions in Yorùbá

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Abstract

*Existing scholarship tends to reproduce the inherited descriptive label **bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni–bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́** as the canonical pair of answers for yes–no questions. However, empirical evidence suggests that contemporary Yorùbá speakers employ a wider range of negative responses. This study offers a critical reassessment of the entrenched descriptive pairing **bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni–bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́** in Yorùbá grammatical discourse. To address this, the study draws on data elicited from competent native speakers and supplements them with naturally occurring instances from Yorùbá films and classical and contemporary written texts. These data are analyzed using the Wider Distribution and Preference Criteria—newly formulated in this research as analytical mechanisms for selecting among competing lexical items with equivalent semantic functions. Findings show that **rárá**, rather than **bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́**, serves as the most contextually versatile, pragmatically neutral, and statistically dominant negative response across discourse contexts. In contrast, **bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́** occurs only in restricted rhetorical or contrastive environments, limiting its suitability as the default negative correlate. Consequently, the study argues that the long-standing label **bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni–bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́** is descriptively and empirically inadequate and should be replaced with **bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni–rárá**, a formulation that more aptly captures the polarity system of contemporary Yorùbá and rectifies a long-standing mischaracterization in the descriptive tradition.*

Keywords: *label, preference criterion, response, wider distribution, yes–no questions*

1. Introduction

Across languages, questions function as information-seeking speech acts, and interlocutors are expected to provide responses that either affirm or deny the proposition under consideration. In Yorùbá, various interrogative

types—wh-questions, yes–no (polar) questions, and rhetorical questions—have been described in the literature. However, although substantial attention has been paid to the *formation* of yes–no questions (Awobuluyi 1978; Bamgbose 1967; Ilori 2017; Ajiboye 2013, 2024), far less attention has been devoted to the *responses* that these questions elicit.

The literature typically echoes the traditional descriptive label *bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní-bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́* as the canonical response pair for yes–no questions. Nonetheless, empirical data indicate that modern Yorùbá speakers employ a more diverse range of negative replies, *ràrá*, *ó tì*, and *hén-hén*, each with distinct distributional and pragmatic properties. Furthermore, *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́*, though traditionally cited as the default negative correlate, appears to occur only in limited rhetorical or contrastive contexts. This discrepancy between traditional grammatical description and actual speaker intuition motivates the present study.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to reassess the descriptive validity of the traditional label *bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní-bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́* and to demonstrate, through empirical and theoretical analysis, that *ràrá* constitutes the most widely distributed and pragmatically unmarked negative response in Yorùbá. The study argues that the revised label *bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní-ràrá* more accurately reflects the polarity response system of contemporary Yorùbá.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews major studies on yes–no questions in Yorùbá, evaluating their theoretical positions, descriptive adequacy, and relevance to the present inquiry. The review identifies areas of convergence and divergence among scholars and highlights the gap this study seeks to fill, specifically the question of how yes–no questions in Yorùbá should be appropriately labeled and what forms constitute their canonical responses.

One of the earliest discussions of yes–no questions in Yorùbá is found in Ogunbowale (1970). The author identifies *ṣé*, *ńjé*, *bí*, *ha*, *ha...bí*, and *tàbí* as particles that introduce yes–no questions. He observes that when *ṣé* is used, the expected response is typically either affirmative ‘yes’ or negative ‘no’, while questions introduced by *ńjé* tend to attract negative replies. Importantly, Ogunbowale proposes *bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní* ‘yes’ and *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́* ‘no’ as the standard responses to yes–no questions. This characterization is particularly relevant to the present study, which re-examines the appropriateness of these forms as the true reflections of Yorùbá response patterns.

Building on this foundation, Awobuluyi (1978) offers a broader classification of Yorùbá interrogatives into two categories: those with overt question markers and those without them. According to him, the former group includes interrogatives marked by *ṣé*, *ńjé*, and *bí*, while the latter rely primarily on prosodic or non-verbal cues such as raised brows or intonation (Awobuluyi 1978:35). Regarding responses, Awobuluyi maintains that yes–no questions in Yorùbá are typically answered with *bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní* ‘yes’ or *ràrá* ‘no’. However, despite recognizing *ràrá* as the negative counterpart, he does not question the traditional label *ìbẹ̀èrè bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní – bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ*, which seems inconsistent with his own description. The present study, therefore, departs from his position by interrogating this labeling and its implications for the semantics of polarity in Yorùbá.

Similarly, Yusuf (1995) supports the view that responses to yes–no questions may be *bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní* ‘yes’, *ràrá* ‘no’, or even full sentential forms. His position aligns with that of Awobuluyi in terms of the expected response types, though he does not address the theoretical basis for the *bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní – bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ* label. Ajiboye (2019) also reaches a comparable conclusion in his study on answers to polar questions, showing that *bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní* ‘yes’ and *ràrá* ‘no’ are the predominant forms, with *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ* appearing only in restricted contexts. Despite his detailed syntactic treatment, Ajiboye, like his predecessors, does not problematize the appropriateness of the conventional label for yes–no questions.

From this review, a pattern emerges: except for Ogunbowale (1970), most scholars, including Awobuluyi (1978), Yusuf (1995), and Ajiboye (2019), recognize *ràrá* as the default negative response to yes–no questions. This observation raises crucial questions about the historical and linguistic basis of the label *ìbẹ̀èrè bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní – bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ*. Was Ogunbowale the originator of this formulation, and if not, what motivated its acceptance in the literature? Could its persistence be attributed to rhythmic or stylistic preference rather than descriptive accuracy?

In light of these issues, the present study contends that *ìbẹ̀èrè bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní – ràrá* provides a more linguistically accurate representation of the response structure to yes–no questions in Yorùbá. The following section substantiates this claim with empirical data drawn from native speaker usage.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts both qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the pattern and distribution of negative responses to yes–no questions in Yorùbá. The data used for the analysis were obtained from multiple complementary sources to ensure both naturalness and representativeness. First, elicited data were collected from ten competent native speakers of Yorùbá, comprising five males and five females aged between 30 and 70 years. Each participant was presented with a set of yes–no questions in varied pragmatic contexts and was asked to provide all possible responses that could naturally fit each question. Their responses formed the core linguistic data analyzed in this study. In addition to the elicited data, naturally occurring language use was examined from Yorùbá home videos in which Yorùbá is either exclusively or predominantly used. These films provide valuable evidence of spontaneous, conversational Yorùbá in everyday contexts, thereby reinforcing the validity of the elicited responses. Furthermore, examples were drawn from well-written classical and contemporary Yorùbá texts, including literary works, grammar books, and manuals written entirely in Yorùbá. The inclusion of these written materials provided a broader perspective on how negative responses to yes–no questions are represented in both spoken and written forms of the language. The data from these different sources were cross-checked and compared to identify patterns of convergence and variation in usage. Particular attention was paid to the occurrence and contextual distribution of the negative responses *rárá*, *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ*, *ó tì*, and *hẹ̀n-hẹ̀n*. The analysis revealed that *rárá* appears more frequently and across a wider range of contexts than *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ*, a finding which serves as the empirical basis for the proposal advanced in this paper. The analytical framework employed is guided by the Wider Distribution and Preference Criteria, formulated in this study as selection mechanisms for choosing among competing lexical items that perform the same grammatical function.

4. Yes-no Questions

This section presents data relevant to the analysis of yes–no questions in Yorùbá. According to Ladipo (2023), a yes–no question functions to elicit confirmation or denial of a given proposition. This question type, often termed a *closed question*, is characterized by its binary response structure, typically requiring one of two possible answers: an affirmative ‘yes’ or a negative ‘no’ response.¹ In essence, a yes–no question permits only one

felicitous response to a proposition, depending on the truth value the speaker seeks to verify. In Yorùbá, yes-no questions are formed through the attachment of specific question markers into otherwise declarative sentences (Ogunbowale, 1970; Awobuluyi, 1978; Ajiboye, 2013). These markers may appear in different syntactic positions, occurring at the sentence-initial (1a), medial (1b), or sentence-final (1c) position (Ajiboye, 2013).

- (1) a. **Şé/ Ñjé/ Àbí/ Şèbí** Adé mu ọ́tí?
 QM Adé drink beer
 ‘Did Ade drink beer?’
- b. Adé **ha** mu ọ́tí?
 Adé **QM** drink beer
 ‘Did Adé drink beer?’
- c. Adé mu ọ́tí **bí/àbí/ni?**
 Adé drink beer **QM**
 ‘Did Adé drink beer?’
- d. **Şé** Adé **ha** mu ọ́tí **bí?**
 QM Adé **QM** drink beer **QM**
 ‘Did Adé drink beer?’

In examples (1a–c), the question markers occur in only one syntactic position. However, example (1d) shows that certain question markers may appear in two or even all three syntactic positions simultaneously. A detailed examination of this phenomenon, however, lies beyond the scope of the present study.

4.1. Answer to Yes-no Questions

In English, responses to yes–no questions typically consist of *yes* or *no*, with additional elements being optional. Similarly, in Yorùbá, the canonical responses to yes–no questions are *bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni* ‘yes’ and *ràrá* ‘no’. However, other response forms are also attested in the language. According to Ajiboye (Ajiboye, 2013), affirmative responses may include *bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni* and *hẹ̀n*, while negative responses may take any of four forms: *ràrá*, *ó tì*, *hẹ̀n-hẹ̀n*, and *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ*. Drawing on examples from existing

literature, the following section presents illustrative responses to yes–no questions in Yorùbá, beginning with the example in (2).

- (2) *Ṣé Olú wá?*
 QM Olú come
 ‘Did Olu come?’

Positive responses: i. *Bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni* ‘Yes’
 ii. *Hẹ̀n*

Negative responses: i. *Rára* ‘No’
 ii. *Ó tì*
 iii. *Hẹ̀n-hẹ̀n*

In addition to verbal responses, yes–no questions in Yorùbá may also elicit non-verbal reactions. These include gestures such as nodding the head to signal affirmation, shaking the head to indicate negation, and spreading the arms or striking the back of one’s palm against the other to express ignorance or lack of knowledge (i.e., ‘I don’t know’). However, the present study is concerned primarily with the verbal responses to Yorùbá yes–no questions, as illustrated in (3). Specifically, the analysis focuses on the negative response forms.

	QUESTION	ANSWER
(3) a.	<i>Ṣé ó tì lọ?</i> <i>QM 3SG ASP go</i> ‘Has he gone?’	<i>Bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni, (ó tì lọ)</i> yes 3SG ASP go ‘Yes, he has gone.’
b.	<i>Ẹ̀jẹ́ ńjẹ́ ńjẹ́ tì lọ?</i> <i>QM 3SG ASP go</i> ‘Has he gone?’	<i>Ó tì, (kò ńjẹ́ ńjẹ́ tì lọ)</i> no, NEG HAB ASP HAB go ‘No, he has not gone.’ (Bamgbose 1990: 183)

In example (3a), the response to the question is *bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni* ‘yes’ while that of (3b) is *ó tì* ‘no’. Another set of examples is presented in (4).

- QUESTION**
(4) a. *Ṣé Ọ̀jọ́ lọ ní ànà?*
QM Ọ̀jọ́ go PREP yesterday

‘Did Òjó go yesterday?’

ANSWER

- a-i. **Bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní**, (Òjó lọ ní àná).
 yes Òjó go PREP yesterday
 ‘Yes, Òjó went yesterday.’
- a-ii. **Bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́**, (Òjó kò lọ ní àná).
 No, Òjó NEG go PREP yesterday
 ‘No, Òjó did not go yesterday.’
- b. Njẹ ọmọ náà lè jẹun?
 QM child Dem Mod eat
 ‘The child couldn’t eat, could he?’
- b-i. Kò lè jẹun.
 NEG MOD eat
 ‘No, he couldn’t (eat).’ (Ogunbowale 1970: 106)

The examples in (4b) reveal that Ogunbowale did not employ any of the established negative response forms. Instead, he utilizes the negative marker *kò* to express negation. In contrast, example (4a) features *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́* as the negative response. This distinction strongly suggests that Ogunbowale was the pioneer of the label *bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní* – *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́*, as he appears to be the earliest traditional grammarian to associate *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́* with negative polarity in Yorùbá yes–no questions. Subsequent scholars evidently adopted and extended this formulation, thereby reinforcing its status in the literature. This continuity is particularly evident in Olaogun (2017), whose analysis, as illustrated in example (5), reflects the same interpretive tradition.

- | QUESTION | ANSWER |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| (5) a. Sẹ/Njẹ olè ní?
QM thief FOC
‘Is he a thief?’ | Bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní/Bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́ ‘Yes/No’ |
| b. Sẹ/Njẹ o ti jẹun?
QM 2.SG PERF eat
‘Have you eaten?’ | Bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní/Bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́ ‘Yes/No’
(Olaogun 2017: 245) |

As a native speaker of Yorùbá, the researcher finds the negative response forms elicited in (4a–ii) and (5) intuitively unconvincing and pragmatically unnatural. Indeed, they are infelicitous answers. The *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́* as a response to those questions is inaccurate. The next example, drawn from Ajiboye (2019) and consistent with Bamgbose’s (1990) explanation, further illustrates this point, as shown in (6).

QUESTION	ANSWER
(6) a. <i>Ṣé ó dára?</i> QM EP nice ‘Is it nice?’	(i) <i>Bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni/Hẹ̀n</i> ‘Yes.’
	(ii) <i>Hẹ̀n-hẹ̀n/Ó tì/Rára</i> ‘No.’
b. <i>Ṣé bí Sunny Adé ẹ̀ ń kọ̀rìn nìyẹn</i> QM like Sunny Adé do PROG sing be-that ‘Is that the way Sunny Adé sings or performs?’	

Answer 1. *Bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni/Hẹ̀n* ‘Yes’

Answer 2. *Bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́* ‘No’ (Ajiboye 2019: 62–63)

The examples in (6) indicate that *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́* can only occur as a response to yes–no questions in highly restricted contexts, as illustrated in (6b)³. In contrast, in (6a), *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́* is clearly infelicitous as a negative response, and the appropriate form has already been supplied. This observation reinforces the argument that *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́* does not function as a general negative response in Yorùbá, contrary to earlier assumptions in the literature. Furthermore, beyond the conventional *bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni* – *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́* paradigm, the language exhibits additional response forms capable of expressing nuance, such as uncertainty or possibility, as exemplified in (7).

Question
(7) <i>Ṣé Olú wá?</i> QM Olú come ‘Did Olu come?’
Answer: <i>Mì ò mò</i> ‘I don’t know!’ <i>Ó jọ bẹ̀ẹ̀</i> ‘It seems so.’

Ladipo (2023) claims that the type of response illustrated in (7) arises because the question is interpreted as *neutral*. Neutral yes–no questions are characterized by their wide interpretive scope, allowing for multiple possible responses, except *bẹ̀ẹ́ kọ́*, as demonstrated in (8). Similarly, Ajiboye (2019) observes that, beyond the canonical *bẹ̀ẹ́ ni* and *bẹ̀ẹ́ kọ́*, other forms such as *bóyá* and *ó ẹ́é ẹ́é* may also serve as responses to yes–no questions, particularly when the speaker wishes to convey uncertainty or non-commitment.

- (8) Ẹ́é Olú wá?
 QM Olú come
 ‘Did Olu come?’

Answer 1 Positive Response: Bẹ̀ẹ́ ni/Hẹ́n ‘Yes’

Answer 2 Negative Response: Rárá/Ó tì/Hẹ́n-hẹ́n ‘No’

Answer 3 Uncertainty: Mí ò mò ‘I don’t know.’

 Bóyá ‘Maybe/Maybe not’

Answer 4 Possibility: Ó jọ bẹ̀ẹ́ ‘It seems so’

 Ó ẹ́é ẹ́é ‘It is possible’

In example (8), a respondent may select any of the options as a possible answer. When the respondent possesses knowledge of the information being sought, Answer 1 or Answer 2 is provided. Conversely, when the respondent is uncertain or lacks a full understanding of the proposition under inquiry, Answer 3 or Answer 4 is elicited.

4.2. Proposal⁴

Following the discussion in the previous section, this study proposes that the label for yes-no questions in Yorùbá should be *ibẹ̀ẹ̀rẹ̀ bẹ̀ẹ́ ni-rárá*, rather than the conventional *ibẹ̀ẹ̀rẹ̀ bẹ̀ẹ́ ni – bẹ̀ẹ́ kọ́* widely adopted in the literature. While *bẹ̀ẹ́ kọ́* has traditionally been accepted as the negative counterpart of *bẹ̀ẹ́ ni*, available descriptive and elicited data indicate that *rárá* occurs more frequently in normal speech as the negative response to yes-no questions. Although the statistical evidence presented here may not yet be sufficient to replace the traditional label decisively, the proposal is motivated by two key considerations.

Wider Distribution and Preference Criteria

To justify the proposed relabeling of yes-no questions in Yorùbá as *ibéèrè bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní – rárá*, this paper adopts two evaluative parameters: the **Wider Distribution Criterion** and the **Preference Criterion**. These criteria serve as complementary tools for assessing linguistic forms that perform equivalent semantic or pragmatic functions but differ in frequency, scope, or speaker acceptability.

Wider Distribution Criterion

The *Wider Distribution Criterion* states that, when two or more lexical items express the same semantic function, the form that occurs in a broader range of syntactic, pragmatic, and discourse contexts should be considered the more canonical form.

Applied to Yorùbá yes–no question responses, this principle suggests that the form which speakers use more flexibly, across both formal and informal registers, spontaneous conversation, and elicited data, should be regarded as having *wider distribution*. Preliminary observations indicate that *rárá* occurs productively in responses to a diverse array of question types, including neutral, confirmatory, and contrastive yes–no questions. In contrast, *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kó* occurs in a narrower set of contexts, often in stylized, rhythmic, or literary usage rather than in everyday speech.

Thus, the wider distribution of *rárá* is not merely a matter of frequency but of functional versatility. It surfaces across speaker age groups, dialect regions, and communicative settings, marking straightforward negation without additional stylistic or rhetorical coloration. The data, therefore, align with the principle that the form with the broader contextual reach should be prioritized in defining the canonical negative response in Yorùbá yes–no questions.

Preference Criterion

The *Preference Criterion* posits that, when multiple lexical items can legitimately fulfill the same communicative function, the form most preferred and readily accepted by native speakers in normal discourse should be considered the more canonical. Preference in this sense does not depend solely on prescriptive norms but emerges from the collective tendencies of proficient speakers in authentic communication. Thus, A is selected over and above B, C..., because A is preferred to B, C....

Field data and observational evidence reveal that speakers overwhelmingly favour *rará* as the default negative answer to yes–no questions. While *bẹẹ kọ* may appear in contrived or rhythmic constructions, most respondents in conversational contexts perceive *rará* as the more immediate, natural, and contextually neutral response. This preference extends even to formal speech, where rhythmical symmetry, though aesthetically valued, does not determine semantic acceptability.

Therefore, according to the *Preference Criterion*, *rará* holds primacy because it aligns with speaker judgement and usage patterns. The predominance of *rará* in both elicited and spontaneous speech provides empirical support for the proposal advanced in Section 4 that *ìbẹ̀èrẹ̀ bẹ̀ẹ̀ nì–rará* more accurately captures the authentic structure of Yorùbá yes–no questions.

5. Analysis

This section critically examines the traditional label assigned to yes–no questions in Yorùbá, namely “*Ìbẹ̀èrẹ̀ bẹ̀ẹ̀ nì – bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ*,” which directly translates as *yes/no questions* in English. As discussed previously, the Yorùbá language provides multiple lexical options for responding to yes–no questions. For affirmative responses, two principal options are attested, *bẹ̀ẹ̀ nì* and *hẹn*. For negative responses, however, four distinct forms occur in the data: (a) *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ*, (b) *rará*, (c) *ó tì*, and (d) *hẹn–hẹn* (see Example (2)). The crucial question that arises here is: if there are multiple forms for expressing negation, what linguistic criterion should determine the most appropriate label for this question type? To address this, I propose the Distribution and Preference Mechanism, a twofold analytical framework designed to guide the selection of the most representative negative form based on linguistic usage and speaker intuition.

From the text corpus and speaker data discussed earlier, it is evident that *rará* exhibits the widest distribution across syntactic and pragmatic contexts, while *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ* appears only in more restricted environments. To illustrate this distinction, consider the following examples:

- (9) Şé Olú tì dé?
 QM Olú ASP arrive
 ‘Has Olú arrived?’

- Answer:** (i) *Bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́
(ii) Rára
(iii) Ó tì
(iv) Hẹ̀n-hẹ̀n

In example (9), all the negative responses are acceptable except *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́*, which is considered infelicitous in this context. However, as shown in example (10), *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́* may occur alongside other negative responses in specific discourse situations.

- (10) Sẹ́ bí ọmọ Yorùbá ẹ́ n kí èyàn niyẹn?
QM like child Yoruba do PROG greet person that
'Is that the way a Yorùbá person greets?'

- Answer:** (i) Bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́
(ii) Rára
(iii) Ó tì
(iv) Hẹ̀n-hẹ̀n

The statistical analysis from the elicited data shows that approximately 80% of native speakers preferred *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́* as their first-choice response in contexts expressed in (10), whereas *rára* was overwhelmingly preferred in questions of the type exemplified in (9). This suggests that *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́* may have contextually restricted acceptability, while *rára* retains general acceptability across various syntactic and pragmatic contexts. Additionally, speakers also provided other plausible responses that reflect uncertainty or possibility, as presented in example (8).

6. Quantitative Summary of Findings

The summary presented in Table 1 reflects the responses of the ten (10) speakers. Participants were asked to provide all possible negative responses they deemed acceptable in a series of yes-no question contexts.

Table 1. Distribution of Negative responses to yes-no Questions

QUESTIONS	PARTICIPANTS									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Şé/Ñjé ó ti lọ?	Rára Ó ti	Rára Ó ti	Ó ti Rára	Bẹẹ kọ Ó ti	Bẹẹ kọ Ó ti	Ó ti Rára	Rára Bẹẹ kọ	Rára Ó ti	Rára Ó ti	Rára
Şé Òjó lọ ní àná?	Rára Ó ti	Rára Ó ti	Rára Ó ti	Bẹẹ kọ Ó ti	Bẹẹ kọ Ó ti	Rára	Rára	Rára	Rára	Rára
Şé/Ñjé olè ní?	Rára Ó ti	Rára Ó ti	Rára Ó ti	Bẹẹ kọ Ó ti	Bẹẹ kọ Rára	Rára	Rára	Rára Ó ti	Ó ti	Rára
Şé/Ñjé ó dára?	Rára Ó ti	Rára Ó ti	Hẹn-hẹn Rára	Rára Bẹẹ kọ	Bẹẹ kọ Rára	Rára	Ó ti	Rára	Rára	Rára
Şé bí Sunny Adé şe n kọrin niyẹn?	Bẹẹ kọ Rára Ó ti	Bẹẹ kọ Rára	Rára Ó ti Hẹn-hẹn	Bẹẹ kọ Rára	Bẹẹ kọ Rára	Rára Ó ti	Bẹẹ kọ	Ó ti Rára Bẹẹ kọ	Hẹn-hẹn Bẹẹ kọ Rára Ó ti	Bẹẹ kọ Rára Hẹn-hẹn
Şé bí ọmọ Yorùbá şe n kını niyẹn?	Bẹẹ kọ Rára Ó ti	Bẹẹ kọ Rára Ó ti	Rára Hẹn-hẹn	Bẹẹ kọ Rára Ó ti	Bẹẹ kọ Rára	Rára Ó ti	Bẹẹ kọ Rára Ó ti	Rára Ó ti Bẹẹ kọ	Bẹẹ kọ Rára Ó ti	Bẹẹ kọ Rára Hẹn-hẹn

Table 2. Percentile Distribution of Negative Responses

	No of Entries	Percentage
Rára	53	46.1
Ó ti	31	27
Bẹẹ kọ	25	21.7
Hẹn-hẹn	6	5.2

As Table 2 shows, **rára** is the most frequently occurring negative response, accounting for **46.1%** of all responses. It is followed by **ó ti** (27%), **bẹẹ kọ** (21.7%), and **hẹn-hẹn** (5.2%). Based on the Wider Distribution Criterion, **rára** clearly exhibits the broadest usage and therefore best represents the prototypical negative response to yes-no questions in Yorùbá.

Under the **Preference Criterion**, the high frequency and natural acceptability of **rára** further support its selection over **ó ti** and **hẹn-hẹn**, which, though semantically similar, display narrower pragmatic scope.

A sociolinguistic factor may also account for the limited use of **hẹn-hẹn**, which is generally used among peers or by superiors when responding to subordinates (Ajiboye, 2024). This sociolinguistic

constraint likely explains why many respondents did not consider *hèn-hèn* as a plausible response in neutral or formal discourse settings. Nonetheless, its existence as a marked form within specific interactional contexts remains valid. The data demonstrate that *rárá* best satisfies both the distributional and preference-based criteria, making it a more accurate and representative negative counterpart to *bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní* in the Yorùbá yes-no question framework.

Taken together, the findings presented above provide compelling evidence that *rárá* serves as the most appropriate negative counterpart to *bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní* in Yorùbá yes-no questions. Its consistent distribution across various contexts and its high frequency of use among speakers satisfy both the *Wider Distribution and Preference Criteria* proposed in this study. Consequently, the label *Ìbẹ̀èrè bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní-rárá* more accurately reflects the natural patterns of usage attested in the language than the traditional *Ìbẹ̀èrè bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní-bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ*. The next section summarizes these findings and highlights their implications for the broader description of interrogative structures in Yorùbá.

6.1. Issues with the current proposal

It is important to acknowledge that one reviewer has raised a question regarding the empirical strength of the present proposal, particularly concerning the adequacy of the statistical data and the general preference for *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ* over *rárá* as the negative response in Yorùbá yes-no questions. This question is valuable, and it underscores the complexity of speakers' variation and stylistic choice in the language. While the rhythmic balance associated with *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ* is recognized as a salient stylistic feature, the present argument maintains that rhythm alone does not override frequency of use or pragmatic appropriateness in determining canonical responses.

Furthermore, it is necessary to clarify that the *Wider Distribution and Preference Criteria* employed in this study are analytical constructs formulated by the present researcher. They are presented as *working hypotheses*, not as a formal linguistic theory. The primary aim of the author is to offer heuristic tools for evaluating lexical selection in Yorùbá yes-no question responses, specifically examining which forms exhibit broader distribution across contexts and stronger speaker preference in natural discourse. These hypotheses having been tested and found to be true can be adopted as principles for the choice among the “no” options in the language.

To recap, the *Wider Distribution Criterion* foregrounds the structural and contextual range of a form, while the *Preference Criterion* emphasizes speaker-based acceptance and naturalness. When applied jointly, they demonstrate that *rará* satisfies both parameters more consistently than *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́*, supporting the argument that the conventional label *ibéèrè bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni–bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́* should be reconsidered in light of contemporary usage. The present analysis, therefore, seeks to open the discussion on the proposal rather than impose a categorical replacement, encouraging further empirical testing through broader speaker data and corpus-based studies.

7. Conclusion

This paper has addressed the issue raised by the use of the label *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́* for the negative part of yes-no answer in Yorùbá yes-no questions, which, based on the findings from the study, is an inappropriate representation. As evidenced from the language data, it has been established that *rará* has a wider distribution and greater acceptability among speakers compared to *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́* as a negative response to yes-no questions. In this vein, it would be more appropriate to label yes-no questions in Yorùbá as “*Ìbéèrè bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni–rará*” rather than hitherto “*Ìbéèrè bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni–bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́*”. It is further opined that the earlier label “*Ìbéèrè bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni–bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́*” may have been adopted by traditional grammarians primarily to achieve a rhythmic balance or phonological harmony, rather than as a reflection of actual usage among native speakers. In light of these findings, future studies could examine how regional variation, generational influence, and discourse context contribute to the selection of forms such as *rará*, *ó tì*, or *bẹ̀ẹ̀ kọ́*. Such research would not only deepen our understanding of the dynamics of Yorùbá interrogative structures but also contribute to the broader typology of responses to yes-no questions in African languages.

Notes

¹ Contrary to one of the reviewers' views that a typical response to yes-no questions could be "*what is your business about the questions asked*", "*mí ò mò*", "*lọ bí Google*", or "*some nasty things*". It is important to note that responses such as those do not typically occur in isolation. Such reactions are context-dependent and pragmatically conditioned, often emerging only in informal or peer-group interactions. They are unlikely to be produced in a social stratum or formal contexts, such as conversations between a child and a parent, or between a junior and a senior interlocutor. Hence, while such responses exist, they are socio-pragmatically restricted and do not invalidate the general distributional claims made in this study.

² The 3SG pronoun should not be mistaken for the HTS that surfaces after the subject NP, because this can easily be replaced with a person name e.g., *Ẹ̀jẹ́ Adé tí lọ* vs *Ẹ̀jẹ́ ó tí lọ*

³ The restricted context depicted in (6b) is that of the manner of action or state of event.

⁴ A reviewer has noted that the statistical data presented may not be sufficient to persuade the wider Yorùbá-speaking community to adopt *rára* in place of *bẹ̀ẹ́ kọ́*, emphasizing that the rhythmic balance of the latter pairing carries communicative value. This observation is valid and duly acknowledged. However, the current proposal rests primarily on observed usage patterns and pragmatic preference, rather than on prescriptive grounds. The rhythmic factor, while significant in stylistic expression, does not necessarily determine the grammatical reality of speaker choice.

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