

The Semantics of Kó-Negative Constructions in Yoruba

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Abstract

*The presumption in relevant literature is that **kó** is a nominal constituent negation marker in Yoruba. This position is problematic in two ways: first, it runs contrary to the generally known concept of negation as a denial of a proposition; and second, insights from the semantic and syntactic structure of **kó**-negation constructions show that the scope of **kó** in that particular context is not just the focused constituent that linearly precedes it, but the totality of the focus construction that serves as its subcategorized complement. This paper investigates the semantics of **kó**-negation constructions in Yoruba via their entailments and presuppositions to examine what they teach about the overall logical interpretations of such constructions. Findings show that **kó**-constructions in the language embed, entail, and presuppose not just the focused item but the simple proposition from which the focused item is extracted. The paper concludes that what is negated in Yoruba **kó**-negative constructions are not just the focused items but the entire proposition from which the focused items are extracted.*

Keywords: *entailment, negation, presupposition, semantics, Yoruba*

1. Introduction

The item **kó** in the following Yoruba negative constructions (1 below) is generally assumed in the literature to negate the nominal constituent that immediately precedes it. For instance, **kó** would be analysed as negating the bare nouns **Ayò** and **Akin** in 1a and 1b.

- 1a. Ayò **kó** ni ó pè é
Ayò NEG FOC 3SG-HTS call 2SG.ACC
'It was not Ayò that called you.'

- b. Akin **kó** ni ó jí ìwé mi
 Akin NEG FOC 3SG.HTS steal book 1SG.GEN
 ‘It is not Akin that stole my book.’

However, a careful consideration and comparison of the semantic and syntactic structures of corresponding non-negative forms of the constructions, presented in 2 below, calls for a meticulous re-appraisal of this putative claim.

- 2a. Ayọ ni ó pè é
 Ayọ FOC 3SG.HTS call 2SG.ACC
 ‘It was Ayọ that called you.’

- b. Akin ni ó jí ìwé mi
 Akin FOC 3SG.HTS steal book 1SG.GEN
 ‘It is Akin that stole my book.’

In this study, we analyse the entailment and presupposition relations of the negative constructions in 1 and their non-negative counterparts in 2 to show that **kó** is not a nominal constituent negation marker, but a proposition negation marker just like other negation markers in the language. Its only peculiarity is in the fact that it semantically scopes over a focus construction which embeds a proposition to which the focused nominal constituent is referentially linked.

The paper is organized thus: section two is devoted to discussions on entailment relations of the *kó-negation constructions* exemplified in 1; we discussed their presuppositions in section three and highlight our findings and their implications in section four. Section five is the conclusion of the paper.

2. Entailment in Kó-Negation Constructions

Entailment is a semantic sense relation in which the meanings of two constructions, e.g. A and B, are related such that whatever is true of A is also necessarily true of B. In other words, if A entails B, the interpretation of B will be included in the interpretation of A. The question to ask in the context of this paper is: what do *kó-negation constructions* like 1a and 1b entail in

Yoruba? Can that give us a clue on the semantic interpretation of this construction type in the language?

Beginning with 1, it is not difficult to see that 1a is a negation of the proposition in 2a which is an assertion that the fellow who called 2SG was indeed *Ayò*. This points to the fact that there is a third proposition which serves as common ground (GC) upon which the assertion in 2a and its denial in 1a rest. This third proposition is presented here as 3.

3. *Enìkan-án pè é*
 Somebody-HTS call 2SG-ACC
 ‘Somebody called you.’

If 3 is indeed the common ground for 1a and 2a, then, it must be that the two propositions entail it. To establish this, we shall test the claim by using cancellation test which is commonly employed as a foolproof strategy to establish entailment relations. The test involves placing two propositions side by side and negating one against the other to see if there is contradiction in the semantic interpretation of the output. As exemplified in test I below, contradiction (C) in the output amounts to entailment while lack of contradiction means there is no entailment.

Test I:

[<i>Ayò kò ní ó pè é</i>]	and it is not the case that	[<i>Enìkan-án pè é</i>]	= C
‘AYO is not the one who called you.’		‘Somebody called you.’	
(1a)	Not (¬)	(3)	= C

As illustrated in the cancellation test I, 1a without 3 as background truth is contradictory. Therefore, 1a entails 3. In other words, *Ayò kò ní ó pè é* entails *Enìkan-án pè é*. Similarly, 2a also entails 3, as evident in the cancellation test II below.

Test II:

[<i>Ayò ní ó pè é</i>]	and it is not the case that	[<i>Enìkan-án pè é</i>]	= C
‘AYO called you’		‘Somebody called you.’	
(2a)	Not (¬)	(3)	= C

In the same vein, if we consider 1b and 2b, one can easily see that they both share the common ground information in proposition 4. In other words, (1b) and NOT-(4) is contradictory just as (2b) and NOT-(4) equals contradiction.

4. Ẹ̀nìkan-án jí ìwé mi.
 Somebody-HTS steal book 1SG-GEN
 ‘Somebody stole my book.’

What this implies is that both 1b and 2b ordinarily entail 4. Therefore, to answer our earlier question about what *kò-negation* constructions entail, we can easily say at this juncture that they entail simple propositions of the type in 3 and 4, which are structurally embedded in them.

3. Presuppositions in Kò-Negation Constructions

A presupposition is a semantic relation between two or more propositions, e.g. A and B, such that one of the propositions stands as a non-cancellable background for the other. In other words, if A presupposes B, A must not only entail B but the negation of A must also entail B. For instance, 6 and its negation in 7 entail 8a and 8b.

6. Awakò yẹn kò mugbó mó.
 Driver DEM NEG smoke-marijuana again
 ‘That driver no longer smokes marijuana.’

7. Kì í ẹ̀ pé awakò yẹn kò mugbó mó.
 NEG PROG be that driver DEM NEG smoke-marijuana again
 ‘It is not that that driver no longer smokes marijuana.’
Meaning: ‘The driver still smokes marijuana.’

- 8a. Awakò yẹn n mugbó tẹ̀lẹ̀.
 Driver DEM PROG smoke-marijuana before
 ‘That driver used to smoke marijuana before.’

- b. Awakò kan wà.
 Driver one/certain exist
 ‘There is/exists a driver.’

This is evident in the fact that (6) *and NOT*-(8a) is a contradiction just as (6) *and NOT*-(8b) is a contradiction. In addition, the negation of 6 (i.e., 7) entails 8a and 8b. The implication of these is that 6 presupposes 8a and 8b.

The sum of all these is that if we consider Yoruba *kó*-negation constructions in the light of their presuppositions, we should be able to draw some generalizations on their semantics. For instance, what do constructions such as those in 9 below presuppose?

9a. Àwa **kó** ni a gbé owó náà.
1PL-EMPH NEG FOC 1PL carry money DEF
'WE ARE NOT the ones that stole the money.'

b. Àwa ni a gbé owó náà.
1PL-EMPH FOC 1PL carry money DEF
'WE stole the money.'

c. [Àwọn kan] / [Ènìkan]-án gbé owó náà.
1PL.EMPH certain / someone-HTS carry money DEF
'Somebody/Some-fellow stole the money.'

10a. **Kì** í ẹ̀ pé àwa **kó** ni a gbé owó náà.
NEG PROG be that 1PL.EMPH NEG FOC 1PL carry money DEF
Lit: 'It is not that WE ARE NOT the ones that stole the money.'
Logical: 'We (admit we) stole the money.'

b. **Kì** í ẹ̀ àwa ni a gbé owó náà.
NEG PROG be 1PL.EMPH FOC 1PL carry money DEF
Lit: 'It is not WE that stole the money.'
Lit: 'It is not that WE are the ones that stole the money.'
Logical: 'WE ARE NOT the ones that stole the money.'

9a is a *kó*-negation of 9b. 9a simply negates the proposition *WE stole the money* in 9b. However, both 9a and 9b entail 9c which is a common ground for the two of them, i.e. the fact that *some particular agent/actor stole the money*. The evidence for this claim is not far-fetched: (9a) *and NOT*-(9c) leads to contradiction just as (9b) *and NOT*-(9c) equals contradiction.

On entailment relationships of these constructions, it is evident that: 9a and its cleft negation in 10a entail 9c; the fact of the semantic interpretation of 9c that *somebody/some-fellow stole the money* is embedded in the meaning of *WE ARE NOT the ones that stole the money* as expressed in 9a; and the cleft negative proposition in 10a also embeds the meaning of 9c. Given these entailment facts, we conclude here that the *kò-negative* construction in 9a presupposes 9c i.e., the proposition that *somebody/some-fellow stole the money*, as summarized in 11.

11. 9a \rightarrow 9c (i.e. 9a entails 9c)
 \neg 9a (which is 10a) \rightarrow 9c (i.e. NEG-9a entails 9c)
 Therefore, (9a) presupposes (9c).

In similar ways, 9b and its cleft negation type in 10b entail 9c. This implies that 9b also presupposes 9c.

4. More Presupposition Tests

Apart from the negation test employed so far, we shall in this section employ other tests commonly used to ascertain the veracity of presupposition claim in the literature. These are affirmation, interrogation, and conditional tests. The workings of these tests are related. The idea is to examine whether the affirmation, interrogation, and/or conditional embedding of Yoruba *kò-negative* construction entail the same set of propositions which the construction and its negation entail. If they so do, such facts will further reinforce our claim that Yoruba *kò-negative* constructions indeed presuppose simple/basic propositions of the type in 9c.

Affirmative embedding of kò-negation:

12. Pé àwa **kò** ni a gbé owó náà dára gan-an.
 That 1PL.EMPH NEG FOC 1PL carry money DEF good DEG
 ‘That WE ARE NOT the ones that stole the money is very good.’

Interrogation of kò-negation:

13. Sebí àwa **kò** ni a gbé owó náà ?
 INTER 1PL.EMPH NEG FOC 1PL carry money DEF
 ‘WE ARE NOT the ones that stole the money, are we?’

*Conditional embedding of *kò*-negation:*

14. Bí ó bá jẹ àwa **kò** ni a gbé owó náà, Olórún á dájó.
If 3SG then be 1PL.EMPH NEG FOC 1PL carry money DEF God FUT judge
'If WE ARE NOT the ones that stole the money, God will judge.'

12, 13, and 14 all entail 9c, which is the fact that *somebody stole the money*, just as the *kò*-negative construction does. These entailments of 9c therefore confirm that Yoruba *kò*-negative constructions presuppose the simple propositions they embed.

5. Findings and Conclusion

This study has shown with empirical evidence that Yoruba *kò*-negative expressions are negated focus constructions that embed a simple/basic proposition from which the focused item is extracted. It has additionally shown that this construction type in Yoruba consistently presupposes the simple basic proposition embedded in it. The implication of this is that when **kò** is employed for negation in Yoruba, it semantically scopes over a focus construction in such a way that the resultant expression is interpretable as a denial of the focus proposition. Therefore, a construction like 9a, *Àwa **kò** ni a gbé owó náà*, is semantically interpretable as a denial of the proposition, *Àwa ni a gbé owó náà*, as illustrated in 15 below.

- 15a. *Àwa_i ni [X_i gbé owó náà.]*
3PL FOC X carry money DET
'WE stole the money.'
- 15b. \neg *Àwa_i ni [X_i gbé owó náà.]*
NEG 3PL FOC X carry money DET
'NOT WE stole the money.'/
'It is not we that stole the money.'/
'We are not the ones that stole the money.'

In conclusion therefore, contra the popular assumption in the literature, we submit that what is semantically denied in Yoruba *kò*-negative constructions is not just the raised focused item, but the whole of the focus expression

(FocP). This is in addition to the fact that the focused item in the expression is the same referent that fulfilled a gapped and questioned thematic role in the simple proposition embedded in the negated focus construction.

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