

## THE NUPE á-CONSTRUCTION REVISITED

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This paper reexamines the á-construction in the light of the thesis that the notion focus is a prominent organizational principle in African languages. It is claimed that the construction is a device which puts in focus the fact of the completedness of some event/process/action that has taken place. It is in contrast with the o-construction, which places the noun phrase subject or object in focus. It is also demonstrated that both the á and o-constructions are in contrast with the neutral construction in which the whole of the verb phrase is in focus. The implication of the structures of some of the constructions is indicated.

Cet article réexamine la construction á en Nupe. Notre thèse est que la focalisation constitue un trait dominant du système grammatical des langues Africaines. Nous prétendons que la construction en question fournit un moyen d'attirer l'attention sur le caractère accompli d'un événement, d'un procès ou d'une action. Elle s'oppose ainsi à la construction o dont la fonction est de mettre en relief le groupe nominal sujet ou complément d'objet.

Par la suite, nous démontrons que les constructions á et o s'opposent, toutes deux, à celle dite 'neutre'. Dans la construction neutre, c'est la phrase verbale toute entière qui est mise en exergue. L'implication grammaticale de la structure de quelques-unes de ces constructions est dégagée.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Corresponding to the neutral sentence of (1a), Nupe has constructions of the type (1b), which contains the particle á:

- |                     |                       |
|---------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. (a) Musa gí yàbà | 'Musa ate the banana' |
| ate banana          |                       |
| (b) Musa á yàbà gí  | 'Musa ate the banana' |

The two sentences are closely related, in fact they are cognitively synonymous in the sense that they more or less carry the same information and therefore have identical truth value; but they differ in their pragmatic functions such that they are not contextually interchangeable.

In George (1971) an unsuccessful attempt was made to account for the version (b) of (1) as a construction reflecting either a Perfective, Passive, Stative, Causative or Instrumental meaning. Some of his examples include the following:



## 2.1 THE NEUTRAL FOCUS

The structure of the basic sentence, which corresponds to the nF, is S-Aux-V-O as illustrated by (7):

7. Musa là tása<sup>4</sup>(nF0) 'Musa broke the plate'  
broke plate

where the whole of the verb phrase is in focus and Past is marked by Ø morpheme. It can be preceded by a question something like 'What did Musa do?' which is based on the presupposition that Musa did something. The nF has no special marking.

## 2.2 THE o-CONSTRUCTION

When either the subject or object of a sentence is in focus, the particle o is added at sentence final position as in:

8. Musa là tása o<sup>5</sup> (oF1) 'It was Musa that broke the  
broke plate om  
plate'

Apart from the addition of the om, the structure of the oF1 is identical with that of the nF. Functionally, however, this construction is used to answer the question 'Who broke the plate?' where the knowledge of the event expressed by the verb phrase is presupposed, and the subject, in this case the agent, constitutes the focus.

If on the other hand, the object is in focus we get sentence (9):

9. Tása Musa là o (oF2) 'It was a plate that Musa  
om  
broke'

The structure of (9) is O-S-V+o, in which case the object has been fronted and now precedes even the subject. It is a felicitous response to the question 'What did Musa break?' based on the presupposition that Musa broke something.

## 2.3 THE á-CONSTRUCTION

Turning now to the áF, we find that it has the structure S-Aux-á-O-V:

10. Musa á tása là 'Musa broke the plate'  
áFm

Obviously the syntax of (10) involves a permutation V-O --> O-V, which in fact is identical with a productive process of verb phrase nominalization in the language, for example,

11. gbè èya --> èyagbè  
hunt buffalo --> buffalo hunting

The fact that the áF triggers V-O --> O-V permutation is further reflected in the structural behaviour of certain complex verbs comprising a verbal constituent (VC) followed by its complementing nominal constituent (CNC), for example, leyé 'to see'. Examine, then, the following:

12. **Mi le Musa yé** (nF) 'I saw Musa'  
I saw Musa CNC
13. **Mi á Musa leyé** (áF) 'I saw Musa'  
áFm (Lit.I got to see Musa)

In (12) the components of the verb are separated from each other and the object occurs between them, but in (13) they are recombined, due to the process of permutation.

In certain contexts, however, the permutation is irregular. One example is the verb *bici* 'to run' as shown in (14):

14. (a) **Musa bici** (nF) 'Musa ran'  
run
- (b) **Musa á bici** (áF) 'Musa ran (away)'  
áFm
- (c) **Musa á eci bi<sup>6</sup>** (áF) 'Musa (really) ran (well)'  
áFm

Both sentences (14b,c) are áF, but the permutation takes place only in (14c). What is the basis of the difference?

The difference in the meanings of the two sentences is quite obvious, and this may be a partial answer. In any case, the sentences answer different questions in (15) and (16) respectively.

15. **Ké Musa jin bè etí wuntsó yin o?**<sup>7</sup>  
What did with head his-own CNC Q  
'What did Musa do with himself?'
16. **Ke Musa jin jin bè eci yin na o?**<sup>8</sup>  
How did did with race CNC how Q  
'How did Musa run the race?' (Lit.How did M.perform in the race?)

In (15), to which (14b) is an appropriate response, the object is the same as the subject, but in (16), which induces (14c), the CNC is the object, though prepositional. Thus, what functions as the object is an important factor in such constructions.

The irregularities in permutation is even more complicated in causative constructions, particularly the type which permits either the experiencer noun or the CNC to appear in the subject position. Consider then, the following sentences:

17. (a) **Musa funíñ** (nF) 'Musa is full'  
full-CNC
- (b) **Níñ fu Musa** (nF) 'Musa is full'  
CNC full
18. (a) **Musa á funíñ** (áF) 'Musa is full'  
áFm
- (b) **Níñ á fu musa** (áF) 'Musa is full'  
áFm
19. (a) **Eci gá fu Musa níñ** (nF) 'That yam filled Musa'  
yam that filled

(b) Eci gá á fu Musa nin (áF) 'That yam filled Musa'

áFm

(c) Eci gá á Musa funíñ(áF)

áFm

'That yam filled Musa'

20. (a) \*Eci gá níñ fu Musa

(b)??Eci gá á níñ fu Musa

In (17a,b) the positions of the experiencer noun and the CNC are interchangeable without affecting the meaning of the sentences, and in (18a,b) they are converted into áF's, maintaining the same word order. Now in (19a) a causative noun occurs, and the verb is split, just as expected. Then in (19b), contrary to what is expected, no permutation takes place, rather it is in (19c) that the process is effected. Finally, (20a) is ungrammatical, and although (20b) shows a slight improvement, presumably because of the inclusion of the áFm, its grammatical status is still in doubt.

Very likely, these complications are in some measure due to the nature of causativity coupled with the effect of the áF. Undoubtedly, this is an interesting area of Nupe grammar deserving a thorough discussion, but since what is intended here is simply to show the structural peculiarities of the áF, there will be no further explication of causative constructions.

Concerning the type of question the áF answers, we find that this varies according to the subcategory of verb involved. Such questions are of the type 'What did X do in connection with Y?' or 'How did X fare in Y?' as we have seen in examples (15) and (16) above. Others, as we shall see later, include 'What happened to X?', 'What event/process took place?' and 'How does X look?' etc.

The syntax of different focus constructions and the appropriate contexts in which they occur can be summarized in (21):

21.	<u>Type and Structure</u>	<u>Preceding Question</u>
(a)	nF S-Aux-V-0	What did Su-do?
(b)	oF1 S-Aux-V-0+o	Who V-0?
(c)	oF2 O-S-Aux-V+o	What did Su-V
(d)	áF S-Aux-á-0-V	What did Su-do in connection with O, etc.

(See section 4 for historical implications of the structures of (c) and (d).

### 3. FOCUS CONSTRUCTIONS AND TYPES OF VERB

In this section the behaviour of the áF is examined in connection with various types of verb, which are far from exhaustive, bringing in the other focus sentences as they provide fundamental contrasts.

## 3.1 LOCATIVE VERBS

In their Nupe grammar, Banfield and Macintyre (1915) correctly describe certain verbs as 'prepositional verbs'. Actually, they are BE+Prepositional semantically and are concerned merely with locating objects or persons, hence locative verbs. The whole list is as follows:

	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>	<u>Gloss</u>
21. (a)	dan	fi	'to be in/inside'
(b)	ci	zi	'to be lying down'
(c)	si	zi	'to be sitting down'
(d)	gi	zi	'to be standing upright'
(e)	ta	kpe	'to be upon'
(f)	há	-	'to be stuck into'
(g)	bàn	-	'to be hanging on'
(h)	fó	-	'to be impaled on'
(i)	ba	-	'to be placed against'

Some of these verbs make a distinction between singular and plural. Apart from these, one other verb that makes such a distinction is lá (Sg.) 'take', ku (Pl.). In general, however, the majority of the verbs do not make this distinction.

As far as I know there are no instances in which these verbs occur in the áF, thus, for example, there is no áF counterpart of (23a), as both (23b,c) are ungrammatical.

22. Egi sukun? 'How about the child?'  
child how about
23. (a) Egi dan kata o<sup>9</sup>(nF) 'The child is in the house'  
child be-in house Loc.
- (b) \*Egi á dan kata o (áF)  
áFm
- (c) \*Egi á kata dan o (áF)

We should observe that sentence (22) induces (23a), and that only two other questions are possible in connection with a locative construction. These are illustrated in (24) and (25):

24. (a) Zèé dan kata bo o? 'Who is in the house?'  
who be-in house Loc.Q
- (b) Egi dan kata bo o (oF1) 'Its the child that is  
child be-in house Loc.om in the house'
25. (a) Babo egi dan o? 'Where is the child?'  
place-Loc child be-in Q
- (b) Kata bo egi dan o (oF2)  
house Loc.child be-in om  
'The child is in the house' (Lit.Its in the house that  
the child is in)

Since a locative verb involves no action, process, or event, it cannot be questioned.

## 3.2 VERBS OF STATE

These are the verbs which express the quality of entities they predicate. A few examples are: **gbóká** 'to be strong/hard/tough', **dzú** 'to be red', **sà** 'to be beautiful', **ge** 'to be good', **wóna** 'to be hot' and **fùyèkò** 'to be cold'<sup>10</sup>.

Unlike the locatives noted above, verbs of state occur in the áF. Let us consider the following sentences:

26. (a) **Ke lã̀kpà gá yì na o?**  
How brick that BE BE How Q  
'How is the brick?'
- (b) **Lã̀kpa gá gbóká (nF)** 'That brick is hard'  
hard
27. (a) **Ké gbóká o** 'What is hard?'  
What Q
- (b) **Lã̀kpa gá gbóká o (oF1)**  
om  
'It's the brick that is hard'
28. (a) **Ke lã̀kpà gá yì yì gbáni na o**  
How brick that BE BE now How Q
- (b) **Lã̀kpa á gbóká(áF)**  
áFm  
'The brick is (now) hard'

The (b) sentence of each pair in (26) through (28) above appropriately answers the (a) question before it. Thus the nF of (26b) expresses the quality of the brick as being hard, in response to a question that does not presuppose this knowledge. The oF1 of (27b) focusses on the brick as an entity (not assumed) that has the quality hardness (assumed), while the áF of (28b) is a response to a question concerning the state of the brick now as opposed to what it was at a prior period. The inclusion of the word 'now' is therefore important, as it demands a response which must indicate that some process has taken place in conjunction with the brick. Thus without it (28b) would be inappropriate. In this instance the áF is concerned with focussing the fact that a completed process has taken place in an object, thereby causing a change of state.

## 3.3 VERBS OF EXPERIENCE

These include such verbs as **kpeye** 'to know', **yébo** 'to like/love', **ba/máfi** 'to please', **kayé** 'to be surprised' etc. and they occur in the áF as shown in (32b) below:

29. (a) -----  
(b) **Musa kpe Bãbá ye (nF)** 'Musa knows Baba'
30. (a) **Zèé kpe Bãbá ye o?** 'Who knows Baba?'  
Who knows CNC Q
- (b) **Musa kpe Bãbá ye o (oF1)** 'It's Musa that Baba  
om knows'
- 31 (a) **Zèé Musa kpeye o** 'Who does Musa know?'

(b) Bâbá Musa kpeye o (oF2) 'It's Baba that Musa knows'

32. (a) -----

(b) Musa á Bâbá kpeye (áF) 'Musa got to know Baba'  
áFm

The sentences of (30) and (31) are straightforward: they illustrate questions and answers in connection with the oF1 and oF2 respectively. But by their nature, as Bamgboṣe(1980) points out, verbs of experience cannot be questioned in Yoruba, which is probably true universally. This explains the fact that inducing questions are not available in (29) and (32). Questions such as 'What did Musa do?' will not be appropriate for inducing the nF (29b), nor will a question like 'What did Musa do with/to Baba?' elicit the áF of (32b). The underlying presupposition of (32b) is the notion of event. At a particular time an event took place, which is that X got to know Y. In our example, Musa got to know Baba, stipulating that prior to that event, Musa did not know Baba. This example then further shows that the áF is intricately connected with the notion event.

### 3.4 VERBS OF ACTION

Verbs of action such as gún 'to sew', gandan 'to enter', dìn 'to carve', lu 'to weave', dagwa 'to push', go 'to grind' etc. generally occur in the áF, as shown in (36b) below:<sup>11</sup>

33. (a) Ké Fátùma jin o? 'What did Fatuma do?'  
What do Q

(b) Fátùma go kaba (nF) 'Fatuma ground the corn'  
ground corn

34. (a) Zèé go kaba o? 'Who ground the corn?'  
Who ground corn Q

(b) Fátùma go kaba o (oF1) 'It was F.that ground the  
om corn'

35. (a) Ké Fátùma go o? 'What did Fatuma grind?'  
What Q

(b) Kaba Fátùma go o (oF2) 'It was the corn that  
om Fatuma ground'

36. (a) Ké Fátùma jin bè kaba yin o?  
do with corn CNC Q  
'What did Fatuma do with the corn?'

(b) Fátùma á kaba go (áF) Fatuma ground the corn'  
áFm

Since the verb go is an action verb, it is easily questioned in (33a), using the pro-form jin 'do' to hold the position for the verb phrase, which is filled by the VP in the nF (33b). We find a similar question form in (36a) but with an additional prepositional phrase bè kaba yin 'with the corn', which is presupposed, and to which the áF(36b) is a correct response. In contrast to the focussing of the verb or the verb phrase, we find the now familiar oF1 and oF2 in (34) and (35) respectively.

## 3.5 VERBS OF OCCURRENCE

A verb of occurrence denotes an event which took place specifically affecting a person or object. A few examples include *bo* 'to be tired', *zo* 'to be finished', *dinna* 'burnt', *nikin* 'fall'. One interesting fact about these verbs, as noted by George (1971) is that they must obligatorily occur in focus constructions. Examine the following:

37. (a) *Ké jin Bàbá o?* 'What happened to Baba?'  
 What happened Q
- (b) \**Bàbá bo*<sup>12</sup> (nF) 'Baba is tired'
- 38 (a) *Zèé bo o* 'Who is tired?'  
 Who tired Q
- (b) *Bàbá bo o oF1* 'It's Baba that is tired'  
 om
39. (a) *Ké jin Bàbá o?* (=37a)
- (b) *Bàbá á bo* (áF) 'Baba is tired'  
 áFm

The question in (37a) is appropriate for verbs of occurrence, for which there is no nF as a felicitous response. Perhaps this is a reflection of the fact that entities which such verbs predicate are not normally in the state expressed by them, and that they acquire that state after some event or process has taken place. Then since that áF indicate just that, we find that (39b) is appropriate. The sentences of (38) are the normal oF1 pattern.

In summary, the nF deals with basic information, and we find that the o-constructions are purely concerned with nouns insofar as they answer such questions as 'who' and 'what'. On the other hand, the áF is a device used in answering questions like 'How is X now?', 'What did X do to Y?' or 'What happened to X?' etc. It is clear then that the nF and áF are not functionally interchangeable as they focus on different aspects of information.

## 4. FOCUS CONSTRUCTIONS AND HISTORICAL PROCESSES

The syntactic structures of two of the focus constructions outlined above, namely those of the oF2 and áF, are of historical interest. In the case of the oF, we recall, the structure is OSV, which is a rare word order, but according to Greenberg's (1966) implicational universals, in a language with dominant SOV order only OSV may be the alternative. Perhaps as a reflection of this tendency an SO --> OS word order permutation is reported to occur in Rendille with respect to some kind of focus construction (Oomen, 1978:38). In the case of Nupe, however, being an SV0 language, two interpretations are possible. One is to view the OSV structure as a reflection of some feature of an earlier SOV inherited from proto Niger-Congo, believed to be an SOV language (Givón, 1975; Hyman, 1975). One may

adduce evidence to support this interpretation from some other SOV features attested in Nupe. To take one example, (footnote 4), the majority of the Aux elements occur preverbally, but a few of them appear postverbally. Certainly, this is typically an SOV feature, and it is shared by a number of languages of Central Niger (Madugu, 1979).

Another interpretation is to regard the OSV structure as an innovation brought about by the processes of placing the object in focus. At present I have no concrete evidence for choosing between the two possibilities.

One other interesting fact concerning the OSV syntax is that the focussed object is preposed and occupies the position of the subject, which is universally recognized as definite, given topic presupposed and therefore out of focus. The puzzle is why should focussed category occupy the position of a non-focussed one? Conceivably, however, the mere fact that the focussed object is not immediately followed by the verb is used by the speakers of the language to give the sentence the appropriate interpretation.

Turning now to the áF, we recall that its structure is S Aux á O V, which is close to a pure SOV syntax. This raises the same historical questions as those raised by the oF2, as to whether the structure is a retention of its past SOV, or a new trend heading towards an SOV syntax. Again the two possible interpretations are applicable. Hyman (1979) in fact suggests that the two are possible, basing his argument on data from a good number of languages of West Africa. As for Nupe, again I leave the question open, pending further investigation.

Finally, another interesting historical question is the source of the áFm. Very likely, it is a grammaticalized form of lá 'take'. Some internal evidence supports this. First, as noted by George (1971) and subsequently confirmed by Hyman (1979), only one focus element is permitted in one sentence; therefore, the áF does not occur in negative sentences, since focus is inherently coded in negative sentences. Thus the Nupe sentence of (40) is ungrammatical:

40. \*Fátùma á kaba go à (áF)  
       áFm corn ground Neg  
       'Fatuma has not ground the corn'

The grammatical negative version of (40) is (41):

41. Fátùma lá go kaba à  
       'Fatuma has not ground the corn'

In (41) lá is used, but the VO --> OV permutation fails to take place. Perhaps this may not be a convincing evidence to show that the áFm originates from lá. Now examine (42):

## 42. Fátùma èlá kaba go

Cont.

'Fatuma is grinding the corn'

(Lit. Fatuma is getting the corn ground)

where è- is the continuous aspect marker, and lá is the counterpart of á in the context of non-completive aspect of action/event. It should be observed that the normal permutation is effected in (42). Perhaps lá and á complement each other, lá functioning in non-completive aspect, and á in completive aspect.

It is clear from the above observations that an indepth study of focus constructions in Nupe will provide some clue to some aspects of its historical development.

## 5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

No doubt the above sketch of four types of focus constructions in Nupe has shown that the notion focus is a prominent organizational principle in the language, and therefore supports the thesis that focus is a prominent feature in, though not exclusively peculiar to, African languages. It is not claimed that the focus devices included in this study are the only ones available in the language.

The contrast between the verb phrase, subject, object and verb in focus are highlighted, both syntactically and functionally. The áF is of particular interest: as it is exclusively concerned with the focussing of the completive aspect of events, the possibility of its occurrence in various types of expressions vary from zero to obligatory. Thus the áF is incompatible with locative sentences, but functions in constructions with verbs of state when a process is implied. Similarly, in constructions denoting experience, the áF can be used to indicate implied events. And since actions are events, the áF generally occurs with verbs of action. Then, expressions indicating occurrence are obligatorily given in the áF or oF. The historical implications of the study of focus constructions is briefly mentioned.

The question now is, what is responsible for the prominence of the notion focus in African languages? Is it attributable to the fact that such devices as stress are not generally employed in these languages for focussing purposes because some of them like Nupe are rigidly tonal? I believe that these and similar questions constitute directions for further research.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The summary of his arguments against these interpretations are:

(a) Since the particle á freely occurs in Past and Future sentences, it is unlikely to be a marker of Perfectivity.

(b) If the á-construction is interpreted as Passive, we would expect sentences like (ii) below to be grammatical, which they are not.

- |      |              |                        |
|------|--------------|------------------------|
| (i)  | Musa cé bólù | 'Musa kicked the ball' |
| (ii) | *Bólù á cé   | 'The ball was kicked'  |

(c) Verbs such as bo are inherently stative, and require no additional mechanism for indicating this feature.

(d) Nupe uses jin 'make' and lá 'take' to indicate causativity.

(e) The aprticle á occurs with la', which marks the Instrumental case.

<sup>2</sup> An earlier version of this paper was read at the 14th West African Languages Congress, Cotonou, April, 1980.

<sup>3</sup> The term focus prominent is used advisedly in Hyman. It is not in opposition to either Subject- or Topic-prominent languages, rather it is assumed that 'languages will differ in the degree to which each or all of these enter into the rules and syntactic constraints characterizing as language'.

<sup>4</sup> The Auxiliary comprises Tense, Modal, Be, Aspect, all of which occur preverbally. A few modals, however, occur postverbally, e.g.

(i) U dazàn wòó 'He/she can walk'  
he/she walk can

(ii) U dazàn à 'He/she did not walk'

(See Madugu (1979) for discussion on the peculiar structural position of these modals.)

<sup>5</sup> Actually has a more complicated version:

(i) Musa (gá) ù yì o na là tása na  
Emph. it Be om ECM broke plate ECM

'It was Musa that broke the plate'

(ECM = Embedded clause marker. Two of them are used, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the embedded clause.)

There is also an elliptical version:

(ii) Musa o 'It's Musa'

6 The full form of CNC -ci of the complex verb bici 'to run' is eci, which literally means 'race'.

7 The preposition bèvin 'with' behaves just like many complex verbs whose components split, as the object is lodged between them.

8 Ke the WH- word for 'how' must be complemented by the ECM na. The pro-form jin 'do' is repeated to get the meaning 'How did X do Y?'

9 The actual locative marker is bo, but it has a variant o which is frequently used as in (23a). It should not be confused with the om.

10 Actually they are verbs with adjectival meanings.

11 A few exceptions include bé 'to come', zín 'to return'. These two verbs use dâ to mark the completive aspect of action, e.g.

(i) U dâ bé and not \*U á bé 'He/she has come'

(ii) U dâ zín and not \*U á zín 'He/she has  
returned'

12 As far as I know, the only context in which sentences like (31a) can be used is when a refutation of a negatively asserted sentence is called for, e.g. Bâbá bo à, Bâbá bo, 'Baba is not tired', 'Baba is tired'.

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