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## A Syntactic Analysis of ‘fa’ in Ilorin Yorùbá Dialect

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### **Abstract**

*The prevalence of the grammatical constituent ‘fa’ in the conversational speech of Ilorin Yorùbá speakers is so unique that such feature is not observable in any other Yorùbá dialects. Hitherto, no tangible academic work has been done to give account of this phenomenon within the context of syntax. Thus, adopting the Principles and Parameters approach to linguistic theory, this paper examines the syntactic status of ‘fa’ in Ilorin Yorùbá Dialect with a view to proffering answers to two paramount questions: (a) Under which syntactic category can ‘fa’ be classified in the grammar of the dialect, and on what basis? (b) Does ‘fa’ have a syntactic license to head its own syntactic structure? Employing researcher’s observation cum oral interview, the data analyzed in this study were obtained from ten (10) indigenes of Ilorin who possess an appreciable competence in the dialect. From the survey carried out, there was uniformity in the responses of the speakers that the particle ‘fa’ is usually employed as a tool of emphasis in conversational settings. Similarly, it is observed that the speakers use it to exert prominence on the entire message conveyed in the sentence rather than on a specific lexical or phrasal constituent. Therefore, this paper concludes that ‘fa’ expresses pragmatic focus in the dialect; meanwhile it is proposed that the particle be classified as a Quasi-Focus Marker on the basis of its function. Hence, being a*

*functional constituent, it is 'qualified' to head its own syntactic structure, named in this paper as 'Quasi-Focus Phrase'.*

**Keywords:** Syntactic analysis, Ilorin Yorùbá Dialect, fa, Quasi-focus marker/phrase, Principles and Parameters.

## **1. Introduction**

Language and society are Siamese twins, so inseparable that the former is the vehicle through which the latter makes known its intentions, ideas, thoughts, feelings and yearnings, whereas the latter is the entity which controls the former. Put simply, language is the bloodstream of the society, while the society is the custodian of language. It is apposite to emphasize that the society constrains the speech of its members by determining what speech forms are suitable in different conversational settings. More usually, certain linguistic features do reflect in the various utterances articulated by community members such that what is heard from one interlocutor may not, in actual fact, be identical with that of another. This natural linguistic tendency is the locus around which the emergence of sociolects in speech communities usually revolves. As a corollary, the sociolect of one speech community is distinct from another by virtue of the linguistic features that characterize them.

The Ilorin Yorùbá Dialect (hereafter, IYD) spoken in Ilorin, the capital of Kwara State, Nigeria, is a prototypical example of this universal sociolinguistic phenomenon. The 'Ilorin Yorùbá speakers' often use the grammatical constituent 'fa' excessively in their conversations so much more that it has become a defining, unique feature of their dialect, as no other dialect of the Yorùbá

language manifests the particle in its lexicon. In fact, it is constantly evident in their widely used, registered form of informal greeting *È n̄ lẹ fa*. By genetic affinity, Yorùbá belongs to the Kwa subgroup of languages classified under the Niger-Congo phylum; it is spoken predominantly in the southwestern region of Nigeria in sub-Saharan Africa. Including Hausa and Igbo, Yorùbá is one of the three major indigenous languages in Nigeria.

The task of analyzing this sociolectal and grammatical constituent 'fa' within the sphere of linguistics (or more precisely, syntax) constitutes the aim of this paper. Following the researcher's verbal interactions with the Ilorin indigenes who speak Yorùbá as their first language, it is observed that 'fa' is almost always employed to bring to the fore, the intention of the speaker in an emphatic manner. Also, unlike the focus marker 'ni' in the Standard Yorùbá which is used to exert prominence on a specific component of the sentence, such as a noun phrase, the particle 'fa' is used by the speakers of IYD to lay emphasis on the overall sentential construction (message) produced. These observable characteristic features of the functional constituent in the dialect under investigation, therefore, beg two vital questions which the present study seeks to answer: (a) Under which syntactic category can 'fa' be classified in the grammar of the dialect, and on what basis? (b) Does 'fa' have a syntactic license to head its own syntactic structure?

The paper is compartmentalized into seven separate sections. The introductory segment launches the work and it is followed by a brief review of the theoretical framework adopted for the study. The third section presents the data while they are analyzed in the succeeding section. Next is theoretical proposal and justification. In the penultimate segment of the paper, the X-bar template/schema of the structure in which 'fa' occurs is

presented and explained while the final division of the study concludes the entire work.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The analysis of the data used for the present study is premised upon the tenets of the Principles and Parameters approach to the linguistic theory of Chomsky's Universal Grammar (UG). The Principles and Parameters model (hereafter, P&P), which was developed in the 80's, is a theoretical framework which accentuates the principles of Universal Grammar (Cook, 1988 & 1996; Ndimele, 1992; Cook & Newson, 2007; Lamidi, 2008). The P&P approach sees all human languages as naturally sharing some general principles whose scope is, however, circumscribed by the parametric variations inherent in individual languages. Ndimele (1992, p. 4) buttresses this theoretical assumption by claiming that "Principles describe potentially universal attributes of natural languages or properties of grammatical operations, while parameters refer to the dimension of grammatical variations among natural languages". Among these universal principles are structure-dependency principle and projection principle; while the parameters include the head parameter, Wh-parameter and pro-drop parameter.

A cardinal feature of this model of syntactic analysis is that it contains a general transformational component which reduces all kinds of transformational rules (passive, deletion, raising, clefting, etc.) to a more simple, and hence unifying movement rule technically known as 'move alpha (move- $\alpha$ )'. This movement rule requires any unit to be moved anywhere and at any time, but movement is constrained by certain syntactic conditions in order to guard against derivation of ungrammatical constructions. Also, there are four principal levels of structural representation within

the P&P model: Deep Structure (DS), Surface Structure (SS), Logical Form (LF) and Phonological Form (PF). The DS interfaces with the lexicon and is derived via the phrase structure rule; the SS results from certain operations performed on the DS; while the PF and LF account for grammatical well-formedness and semantic interpretation respectively. The P&P framework is a complex (modular) model comprising several interlocking sets of theoretical components. However, only three of them are adopted for the present analysis: the projection principle, the X-bar theory and the head parameter.

Following Cook (1988, p. 9), the projection principle “requires the syntax to accommodate the characteristics of each lexical item”. By implication therefore, all lexical items are to project from the lexicon (the base) in concert with their idiosyncratic properties unto the syntax of the sentence. In other words, appropriate lexical items are selected from the lexicon of a language and merged together to generate a well-formed or grammatical sentential structure. Most crucially, these lexical categories must come along with certain features which they inherently subsume, as it is those features that will eventually determine the choice of other lexical items with which to pattern, as well as the kind of structure to be formed. A typical example which illustrates the operation of the projection principle in the syntax of English is the case of a transitive verb which projects to the syntactic level together with an obligatory object noun, pronoun or noun phrase.

The X-bar module is the cardinal sub-theory among all other operational sub-theories of the P&P framework. This is because its operation is reflected in virtually all derived structures; every phrase is expected to be headed by a particular constituent which in turn names the phrase. Along this line of thought,

Haegeman (1991, p. 95) posits that the X-bar theory is “the part of grammar regulating the structure of phrases”. He explains further that the X-bar module brings out what is common in the structure of the phrases. According to the X-bar theory, all phrases are headed by a lexical head. For instance, a complementizer heads a Complementizer Phrase (CP); a Verb Phrase (VP) is headed by a verb; a Prepositional Phrase (PP) by a preposition; a Negation Phrase (NEGP) by a negator; a Focus Phrase (FP) by a focus marker, and so on. In essence, the aim of the X-bar syntax, as noted by Cook (1996, p. 14), is to express generalizations about the phrase structure of all human languages rather than features that are idiosyncratic to one part of languages or to a single language. On this premise, the X-bar theory is usually referred to as the theory of phrase structure.

Finally, the head parameter is a phenomenon which defines the specification of the lexical head in a phrase in terms of structural position. In other words, “it is concerned with the relative position of the head of a construction vis-à-vis its complement or specifier” (Ndimele, 1992, p .5). This parameter, whose operation varies from one language to another, sets two distinct universal values for headedness cross-linguistically: head-first or head-last. With this, a language subscribes to only one parameter value, that is, the heads in its phrases appear either at the beginning (i.e., head-first/left) or at the end (i.e., head last/right). The constraint placed on the operation of this parameter is that no language can operate the two values within its system, the requirement being “choose one and leave the other”. The insight that this parameter births is that rather than a long list of individual rules specifying the position of the head in each phrase types, a single generalization suffices: heads are last in the phrase or heads are first in the phrase (Chomsky, 1970).

### **3. Data presentation**

- (1) a. È ù lẹ fa ‘an emphatic form of informal greeting’  
b. Bàbá àti Súlú ti lo fa.  
father and Súlú have go Q-FM  
‘Father and Súlú have gone (emphatic)!’
- c. Mo ti jẹun tán fa.  
I have eat finish Q-FM  
‘I have finished eating (emphatic)!’
- d. Inú bí ìyá Wàláyá fa.  
stomach to-bear mother Wàláyá Q-FM  
‘Wàláyá’s mother was angry (emphatic)!’
- e. Mọríá, kàwé rẹ fa.  
Mary read-book your Q-FM  
‘Mary, read your book (emphatic)!’
- f. Qdún iléyá àti Ramadan ti ñ súnmo fa.  
year home-coming and Ramadan have is near Q-FM  
‘Salah and Ramadan festivals are approaching (emphatic)!’
- g. M̀à á lù ọ fa.  
I will beat you (sg) Q-FM  
‘I will beat you (sg) (emphatic)!’
- h. Ìyá Súkúrá ò ra bàtà fún ọ fa.  
mother Súkúrá not buy shoe for you (sg) Q-FM  
‘Súkúrá’s mother did not buy shoe for you (sg)  
(emphatic)!’

- i. Ebi n pa mi fa.  
hunger is kill me Q-FM  
'I am hungry (emphatic)!'
- j. Luuku, kuro nibe yen fa!  
Luuku, get-away place that Q-FM  
'Luuku, get away from that place (emphatic)!'
- k. Roimọ, ọre babá Bọlá ti kú fa.  
Roimọ friend father Bọlá has die Q-FM  
'Roimọ, the friend of Bọlá's father has died (emphatic)!'
- l. Je kí n foşo tán fa.  
let that I wash-cloth finish Q-FM  
'Let me finish washing (the) cloth (emphatic)!'
- m. Mo si n duró fa.  
I still is wait Q-FM  
'I am still waiting (emphatic)!'
- n. Erí e ò pé fa.  
head your not complete Q-FM  
'You are stupid (emphatic)!'
- o. Wàhábi ni orúkọ re n je fa.  
Wàhábi FM name his is bear Q-FM  
'Wàhábi is the name that he bears (emphatic)!'
- p. Erí kọ ni Súlú ti gbá a fa.  
head not FM Súlú has hit him (sg) Q-FM  
'It was not in the head that Súlú hit him (emphatic)!'



- q. Rísí àti Sọlìù ni Sàkà bú lánàá fa.  
Rísí and Sọlìù FM Sàkà abuse yesterday Q-FM  
'It was Rísí and Sọlìù that Sàkà abused yesterday  
(emphatic)!'
- r. Yangan kọ ni ìyá Súkúrá rà wálé fa.  
maize not FM mother Súkúrá buy come-house Q-FM  
'It was not maize that Súkúrá's mother bought home  
(emphatic)!'
- s. Pa ẹnu ẹ mọ fa!  
close mouth your (sg) Q-FM  
'Shut up (emphatic)!'
- t. Tètè jẹun tán fa!  
quickly eat finish Q-FM  
'Finish your food in time (emphatic)!'

#### **4. Data analysis**

The above set of data is the natural speech of the native speakers of IYD in different contexts of conversation. One could observe that each of the items terminates in the emphatic particle 'fa'. It was discovered via researcher's observation that whenever the particle 'fa' is used by the speakers, it is usually borne out of the intention of the speaker to make the addressee aware that (s)he means what (s)he is saying. It is a locution geared towards demanding an undivided attention from the addressee, in addition

to being affirmative with the message passed across. This generalization was also confirmed by all the ten (10) native speakers of IYD interviewed.

For example, considering the two sentences below, it could be observed that while the speaker conveys his intention in a ‘normal’ way in sentence (a), he inserts the particle ‘fa’ in sentence (b) in order for the addressee’s attention to be drawn to the fact that he means the action he is about to carry out:

- (2) a. M̀a á lù ọ            ‘I will beat you’  
    b. M̀a á lù ọ fa        ‘I will beat you (emphatic)!’

With respect to sentence types on the basis of structure, the constituent ‘fa’ can occur in simple sentences, as in items (c), (d), (e), (g), (i), (j), (k) and (m) above; as well as compound sentences: items (b) and (f). However, it is very rare for it to occur in complex and compound-complex sentences in the dialect. On the other hand, the particle can also surface in other sentence types on the basis of function. For example, items (b), (c), (d), (f), (g), (h), (i), (k), (l), (m), and (n) - (r) are instantiations of the occurrence of ‘fa’ in declarative sentences; it can also occur in imperative sentences as exemplified in items (e), (j), (l), (s) and (t). ‘Fa’ can also be used to derive negative sentences, as in items (h) and (n), but there is no evidence in the dialect to illustrate the occurrence of this constituent in interrogative and request sentences. This serves to explain the ill-formedness of the following expressions:

- (3) a. \*Kí ni orúkọ rẹ fa?        ‘What is your name (emphatic)?’  
    b. \*Ta ni ó wólé fa?        ‘Who entered the house (emphatic)?’  
    c. \*Jọwọ bá mi ti ilẹkùn fa ‘Please help me shut the door (emphatic)’

The logical explanation for its non-occurrence in interrogative and request sentences is that the kind of emphasis encoded in it is too strong to be used by a person to seek information and request assistance respectively.

In the data above, one could further observe that the particle can also co-occur with the Standard Yorùbá's syntactic focus marker 'ni' even along three dimensions: simple sentence (item (o)); compound sentence (item (q)); and negative sentence (items (p) and (r)). By and large, it could be inferred that among all the various sentence types, the particle occurs more predominantly in simple and declarative sentences in the dialect.

Following the researcher's observation, supplemented by oral interview of the selected Ilorin Yorùbá speakers, the constituent under analysis is employed by IYD users to lay emphasis on the overall message passed across in the sentence in which it is used. Thus, rather than on a specific lexical or phrasal constituent in the expression, emphasis is placed on the overall intention of the speaker. Thus, this is the reason why its syntactic distribution is structurally restricted to sentence-final position. Its occurrence elsewhere in a sentence would automatically render such form ungrammatical and meaningless, as the following aberrant expressions show:

- (4) a. \*Mà á fa lù ọ 'I will (emphatic) beat you'
- b. \*Mà á lù fa ọ 'I will beat (emphatic) you'
- c. \*Fa mà á lù ọ '(emphatic) I will beat you'

## **5. Theoretical Proposal and its Justification**

This paper proposes that the grammatical particle 'fa' be classified as a 'Quasi-Focus Marker (Q-FM)' in IYD based on the

following reason. There was consistency in the responses of the informants interviewed about the role it plays in a sentence: it is used mainly to draw the attention of the hearer/addressee to the message being communicated by the speaker. In other words, it is a similar way of drawing emphasis when compared with the way the syntactic focus marker ‘ni’ in the Standard Yorùbá is employed to assert prominence on a particular aspect of the sentence, e.g. the subject Noun Phrase (NP):

- (5) a. Adé jẹ ẹja gbígbe.  
Adé eat fish dried  
‘Ade ate dried fish’  
b. Adé ni ó jẹ ẹja gbígbe.  
Adé FM he eat fish dried  
‘It was Ade that ate dried fish’

However, the prefix ‘Quasi-’ is used because unlike in the world’s languages with overt syntactic focus markers, the Standard Yorùbá for example, the constituent ‘fa’ cannot be used in IYD to exert prominence on lexical and phrasal categories in a sentence, only on the sentence as a whole. This is illustrated below:

- (6) a. Bàbá Wálé fọ aṣọ pẹlú oṣẹ ní àná.  
(Deep Structure)  
father Wálé wash cloth with soap yesterday  
‘Wálé’s father washed cloth with soap yesterday’  
b. Bàbá Wálé ni ó fọ aṣọ pẹlú oṣẹ ní àná.  
father Wálé FM he wash cloth with soap yesterday  
‘It was Wálé’s father that washed cloth with soap yesterday’  
c. Fífo ni bàbá Wálé fọ aṣọ pẹlú oṣẹ ní àná.  
washing FM father Wálé wash cloth with soap yesterday  
‘It was washing that Wálé’s father washed cloth with soap yesterday’

- d. Aṣo ni bàbá Wálé fọ pẹlú òṣẹ ní ànà.  
cloth FM father Wálé wash with soap yesterday  
'It was cloth that Wálé's father washed with soap yesterday'
- e. Pelú oṣẹ ni bàbá Wálé fọ aṣo ní ànà.  
with soap FM father Wálé wash cloth yesterday  
'It was with soap that Wálé's father washed cloth yesterday'
- f. Ní ànà ni bàbá Wálé fọ aṣo pẹlú oṣẹ.  
yesterday FM father Wálé wash cloth with soap  
'It was yesterday that Wálé's father washed cloth with soap'

In the above Standard Yorùbá data, different constituents in the deep structure are focused using the focus marker 'ni': the subject-NP *Bàbá Wálé*, the Verb Phrase *fọ* (after being nominalized as *fífo*), the object-NP *aṣo*, the Prepositional Phrase '*pẹlú oṣẹ*', and the Adverbial Phrase '*ní ànà*' in sentences (b), (c), (d), (e) and (f) respectively. This underscores the syntactic relevance of 'ni' as a functional category in the grammar of Yorùbá.

On the other hand, assertion of prominence using 'fa' in IYD is on the entire message conveyed rather than on a particular constituent of the sentence; hence, it is the whole sentence that is focused. Thus, the message in the deep structure above can be focused using 'fa' as follows:

- (7) Bàbá Wálé fọ aṣo pẹlú oṣẹ ní ànà fa.  
father Wálé wash cloth with soap yesterday Q-FM  
'Wálé's father washed cloth with soap yesterday  
(emphatic)!'

From the foregoing comparison, despite the similarity in the role ‘ni’ and ‘fa’ play in their respective linguistic codes, their structural distributions are mutually exclusive; while ‘ni’ is found immediately after the focused constituent in the sentence in the Standard Yorùbá, ‘fa’ always appears after the sentence in IYD.

By and large, this study proposes that the syntactic structure in which Q-FM ‘fa’ is used be named as ‘Quasi-Focus Phrase (Q-FP)’, in accordance with the theoretical proposal of the X-bar theory.

## 6. The Phrase Structure of Quasi-Focus Phrase (Q-FP)

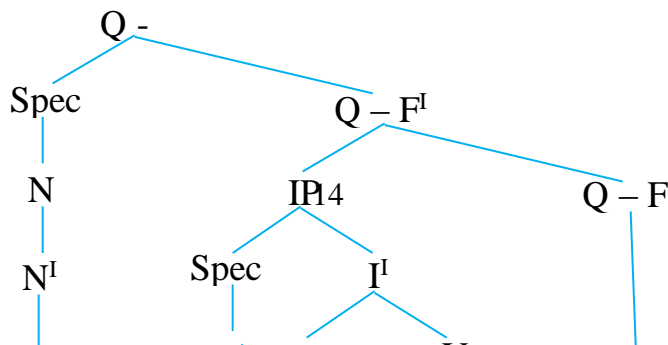
Within the premise of the Principles and Parameters approach, every phrase has its peculiar structure. The structure of each phrase is therefore formalized using appropriate phrase structure rules. Phrase structure rules, otherwise known as re-write rules, are the rules which display the contents of a phrase in terms of its inherent grammatical constituents.

Thus, the structure of IYD has the following rule schema:

- (8) Q-FP → Spec Q-F<sup>I</sup>  
 Spec → NP  
 Q-F<sup>I</sup> → IP Q-F

The sentence below can be represented on a tree diagram to provide a visual representation of the structure of Q-FP:

- (9) M̀à á lù ọ fa.  
 I will beat you (sg) Q-FM  
 ‘I will beat you (sg) (emphatic)!’



## **7. Conclusion**

Within the context of the projection principle, the particle 'fa' in IYD projects from the lexicon to a maximal projection (Quasi-Focus Phrase) along with other necessary constituents. The projection of the particle is not arbitrary, as there must be a specific purpose for doing so, namely, it is merged with some other selected constituents to produce the emphatic structure. Since the

syntactic feature [+ emphatic] is inherent in the element ‘fa’, it is therefore required to project to the level of syntax along with other lexical items in order to complete the emphatic derivation.

Since the particle ‘fa’ is a syntactic constituent which performs a specific function on its own, the tenet of the X-bar theory or module licenses it to head its own phrase such that any structure which it heads would be regarded as a ‘Quasi-Focus Phrase (Q-FP)’. By extension, in consonance with the selectional choice of the value under the head parameter phenomenon in GB syntax, the Q-FP in IYD sets its head parameter value as ‘head-last’. In so far as the focus marker ‘fa’, being the head word, only comes at the end of a declarative sentence as maintained earlier, the parameter value set by the dialect becomes tenable.

It could be deduced that the lexical item ‘fa’ has a restricted syntactic position in which it consistently occurs in a sentence: final position. This means that this particle is syntactically ‘immobile’. Any attempt to move it via transformation would result in ungrammaticality of the structure in which it occurs. In fact, this is the obvious reason why this paper has treated it as a unique focus marker which characterizes the speech of the IYD speakers. Contrary to what is obtainable with the focus marker ‘ni’ in the standard Yorùbá, the constituent ‘fa’ does not lay emphasis on any particular constituent in the sentence in which it appears; rather, it focuses on the entire content (message) of the sentence. The placement of emphasis on the utterance as a whole rather than on a particular phrasal category implies that its usage is usually more pragmatic than syntactic.

Finally, it was established that while the ‘ni’ in the standard Yorùbá can be used in declarative, interrogative and negative sentences, the occurrence of ‘fa’ in IYD is only restricted to



declarative or affirmative sentences except in few examples of imperative sentences; although it can co-occur with the focus marker in the standard Yorùbá in some negative sentences. Its appearance in other sentence types would depict a 'conventional' structure that would be ill-formed. From the foregoing remarks, it suffices to conclude that the Ilorin Yorùbá speakers purposely use the constituent 'fa' to exert pragmatic prominence, a locution that is mutually intelligible among them in any conversational setting. Therefore, one could argue that while the focus maker 'ni' in the standard Yorùbá is syntactically semantic, its version 'fa' in the IYD is syntactically pragmatic.

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