

# Response-Comment Elements in Yorùbá Conversational Discourse

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## 1. Introduction

The application of discourse analysis to Yorùbá discourse is expected to add a new perspective to the understanding of the language and its usage in context, and also give the learner or analyst new tools with which to cater for certain pragmatic as well as discourse needs. Since the central aim of much language use is understanding or communication, then our focus as analysts should be to reinforce users' or members' interpretive skills especially as regards a few 'nuggets' of language that people typically employ to 'say' so much without necessarily 'speaking' that much. These nuggets – referred to in this paper as response-comment elements – constitute a small class of words in Yorùbá, having very limited (if any) content or conceptual meaning but exhibiting remarkable pragmatic force in context. As discourse analysis is a study of language in context, this paper will only consider each of the response-comment elements in a continuous stretch of language larger than a sentence. The reason for this is that the elements cannot be studied in isolation because of their peculiar feature of being dependent on context for their interpretation.

The Yorùbá language has quite a lot of expressions that can substitute for the ones studied in this paper, but the study will be restricted to the ones that have established idiomatic prominence and popularity. For instance, *Àkîkà* (corresponding roughly to English *Hear! Hear!*) has several pragmatic correlates, e.g. *that's a good point; well, you're right about that; there's some truth in that; I never thought of that*, etc. although unlike these forms, *Àkîkà* is culturally imbued with a certain degree of sagacity, and is generally regarded as 'a linguistic property of elders.' However, despite the similarity in their discourse value, this paper examines only the pragmatic functions of markers like *Àkîkà*.

Response-comment elements may be seen as another kind of discourse markers and, given their structural location, they may also be compared to the [Birmingham School] Feedback move, in which function the analyst needs to consider the interactive and functional position occupied by these presumably trivial forms. As 'feedback' they have the function of signalling to the current speaker the need to go on or to stop talking. As interactants at talk are continually looking forward to feedback, these elements allow speakers to know what the other person feels about their contribution.

From the foregoing, the paper hopes to demonstrate that RCEs convey two types of information: first, they display the speaker's attitude to the entire (or segments of) ongoing talk; second, they determine the course of the discourse as it goes on (or if it should) through the connections between the utterances. However, as Trujillo Sáez (2003) remarks about discourse markers, the use of RCEs "is a choice of style" – confirming Blakemore's (1992:177) view that "every speaker must make some decision about what to make explicit and what to leave implicit, and ... every speaker must make a decision about the extent to which he should use the linguistic form of his utterance to guide the interpretation process."

The data used for this work was surreptitiously obtained while listening in to numerous conversations conducted by native speakers of Yorùbá, and to present a satisfactory analysis of the subject, the paper provides translations of all the conversational fragments and ensures that the translations are in alignment with Standard English.

## 2. Discourse markers

The question may be asked, why study discourse markers? Schiffrin (1987) hints that the analysis of discourse markers is part of the more general analysis of discourse coherence – how speakers and hearers jointly integrate forms, meanings, and actions to make overall sense out of what is said. But although markers enhance the overall meaning of discourse, Schiffrin (p.55) cautions that they are hardly the only devices by which discourse meaning is achieved. In other words, other

linguistic devices can accomplish many of the discourse tasks performed by markers. In fact, in many instances of language use, the structure and meaning of [discourse] can be preserved even without markers. For instance, silence, laughter, coughing, gaze, etc can be deployed to carry out some of the functions performed by markers.

The types and classification of discourse markers have been rather problematic and examples abound, depending on what kind of markers the analyst is considering. To the text linguists (e.g. Halliday and Hasan (1976), Bolitho and Tomlinson (1980), Crewe (1990), Thornbury (1997), and Ceri Millward (2005)), for instance, discourse markers can be:

Additive: e.g. *and, also, in addition, that is, similarly, on the other hand*

Adversative: e.g. *but, however, rather*

Causal: e.g. *therefore, as a result, because*

Temporal: e.g. *then, next, finally, first(ly), second(ly)*

Comparison: e.g. *in the same way, likewise*

Purpose: e.g. *for this purpose, with this in mind*

Exemplification: e.g. *for instance, for example, thus*

To the discourse analysts (e.g. Schiffrin (1987)), discourse markers refer to the use of forms like: *well, y'know, I mean, y'see*, and all the items listed above: *now, so, because, then, and*, etc. All these forms are used in speech (and writing) to convey different discourse functions and attitudes: information management (e.g. the use of *Oh*), response (e.g. the use of *Well*), connectivity (e.g. the use of *and, but, and or*), information and participation (e.g. the use of *y'know, y'see* and *I mean*)

From these two 'schools of discourse markers' it is evident, as Parrot (2002:203) points out, that 'there is no universally agreed way of classifying discourse markers; nor is there an exhaustive inventory of them' – a point that confirms Millward's observation that discourse markers are fairly elusive as single word conjunctions and can easily become phrasal, or clausal conjunctions.

As Parrot points out, some of the different functions and uses of discourse markers are:

- 1) To 'signpost' logical relationships and sequences; in other words, discourse markers point out how bits of what we say and write relate to each other.
- 2) To 'manage' conversations; that is, to negotiate who speaks and when, to monitor and express involvement in the topic.
- 3) To influence how the listeners or readers react.
- 4) To express our attitude to what we say and write.

As will be shown in this paper, RCEs perform all these functions in Yorùbá conversational discourse, a fact that clearly underscores their classification as discourse markers. From these functions, it is to be noted that these linguistic forms (that is, discourse markers and RCEs) add to the structure and meaning of discourse although it has been stressed that they are not the only devices available for achieving this objective.

Many linguists present discourse markers out of context, in isolated sentences that bear no relation to each other, thereby not allowing [us] to clearly identify the form and function of these connectors within discourse. To many discourse analysts, this can lead users of the language to believe that discourse markers within the same categories are interchangeable in a text, whereas subtle differences in meaning and the positioning of each marker mark a lot of distinction even within groups.

### 3. Response-comment elements as discourse markers

As suggested above, the question may also be asked, why study response-comment elements in Yorùbá? Speakers of Yorùbá pay great attention to what words do. A proverb, an idiom, a quip or a short expletive may mean the difference between proceeding on a journey and confining oneself to one's residence. In Yorùbá conversational discourse, what people do with words may sometimes be absent from the surface structure of the words spoken, but the listener or addressee would not be in any doubt about the speaker's intention or attitude, even in cases in which the speaker's thought is not fully

expressed. Elements such as *Láláláí, Níbo?, Àgbẹ̀ḍo* and *È̀è̀wọ̀* are enough indication of negative response to the hearer/addressee and – if accompanied with the appropriate facial expression – would also indicate to him or her to drop the issue contained in the segment of talk that evoked the element.

Thus, to function efficiently among a people who say a lot through the use of a few words, the Yorùbá learner (or anyone using it as a second language) needs to become informed and fully tutored in the art of using one element to concurrently respond to and comment on a given segment of discourse. What this means is not that without these response-comment elements the Yorùbá discourse is incomplete; rather, a good knowledge of these features will empower the user for greater performance in the language and offer him more competence to decode speaker attitude and meaning.

As will be seen in the paper, response-comment elements (RCEs) in Yorùbá conversational discourse function quite like discourse markers since they convey and exhibit all the functions and meanings identified with discourse markers. A point of difference between RCEs and discourse markers, however, is that whereas discourse markers are typically used by the current speaker, RCEs are basically the property of the listener, and are uttered in response to a segment of the [previous] speaker's turn.

In fact, there are various discourse markers in Yorùbá that correspond to, and are used as, the established ones in English. For example, *y'know* (Yorùbá: *sé o mọ*), *y'see* (Y: *sé o ri*), *Well* (Y: *ó ri bákán*), and (Y: *àti pé*), *Now* (Y: *t'ó bá jẹ̀ bẹ̀*) etc. It needs to be noted, however, that although all these Yorùbá forms of English markers exist in Yorùbá, the Yorùbá language possesses its own discourse markers, expressions which appear to be mere utterances but whose linguistic significance is entrenched in their conversational deployment and whose pragmatic meaning derives not from their surface structure but from the attitude or disposition the addressee infers.

However, although English discourse markers are classified according to the four observations mentioned earlier, expressions used as discourse markers in Yorùbá have an additional criterion: the illocutionary force of the utterance being used to segment talk, e.g. the use of a proverb or an idiom, as seen below.

#### 4. Response-Comment Elements in Yorùbá

One unique feature of RCEs is their location in discourse. Since they simultaneously respond to and comment on fragments of discourse, they usually come at the beginning of a turn. In most cases, the user of an RCE self-selects, a feature that is close to interrupting the current speaker. However, the injection of an RCE into an ongoing turn is not an indication that the self-selected speaker has much to say; the import of the RCE is either to terminate the current speaker's train of thought or to signal to the 'interrupted' speaker to go on. An element such as *K'á má ri* with an accompanying finality of tone of voice clearly suggests that the proposal being defended or advanced by the interlocutor is unacceptable to the producer of the RCE. On the other hand, *Àkùkà* (spoken by an elderly person – see below) acknowledges and endorses a segment of the previous turn. Thus, in Yorùbá, RCEs are used to signal either the need to develop discourse or the need for the interrupted floor-holder to relinquish the issue contained in the turn. In other words, RCEs are used in Yorùbá discourse to signal speaker stance. In the following sections, we see how Yorùbá speakers use RCEs to signal stance.

##### 4.1 Face-saving elements: *Ọ̀rọ̀ nlá, Àgbẹ̀ḍo* and *Ká má ri*

Discourse or conversational elements regarded as face-saving are used by the producer (usually a third party in a conversation) to display his attitude to a segment of talk as well as indicate his recognition of character in the second ('affected') member. Among the Yorùbá, *Ọ̀rọ̀ nlá, Àgbẹ̀ḍo, Ká má ri* and quite a large number of their pragmatic correlates are used by any of the participants at talk – except the 'affected' member; that is, whom the talk is about:

##### Fragment A

- Ọ̀gá:                   1. Ọ̀gbẹ̀ni, kínni mo ngbọ̀ nípa rẹ̀ yì?  
                          2. Wọ̀n ní o ma nlu iyawo rẹ̀ ní gbogbo ìgbà.  
Ọ̀rẹ̀ Ọ̀gá:           →3. Ọ̀rọ̀ nlá.

- Òsìsẹ̀: 4. Kíí se bẹ ẹ, Ọgá mi.  
 Ọgá: 5. Sé wípe irọ ni wọn npa mọ ẹ?  
 Òsìsẹ̀: 6. Irọ ni.  
 Ọgá: 7. Ó dáa nǎ, báwo ló se jẹ gǎn?

(Translation)

- Boss: 1. (Clerk/Mr. + name, etc.) What's all this I hear about you?  
 2. I hear you beat up your wife very often.  
 Boss's friend: 3. (*Face-saving RCE*)  
 Worker: 4. It's not so, sir.  
 Boss: 5. Do you mean it's false information?  
 Worker: 6. Yes it is.  
 Boss: 7. Right, what's going on?

In the fragment above, Ọrẹ Ọgá (a third party) employs the RCE *Ọrọ nlá* (at utterance 3) as an indirect way of attesting Òsìsẹ̀' s character and breeding – roughly, that somebody like him couldn't have done such a thing – probably the same conviction Ọgá has about him, hence his curiosity. In this usage, not only *Ọrọ nlá* but also the other two RCEs as well as many other correlates can be used to express one's skepticism about the topic of the talk ('beating up one's wife'). Of course, to justify the attestation in these RCEs, the affected member is culturally expected to refute the allegation (utterances 4 and 6) and also be prepared to give an account of the situation; otherwise he would lose face with those who think he is upstanding.

Any of these three RCEs may feature in discourse to express one's feelings about any state of affairs: surprise, embarrassment or disappointment. While the use of the RCE may not really attest the 'affected' participant's character or conduct, it may indicate these feelings in view of what one knows about the parties involved in the situation being discussed. Furthermore, whereas the 'affected' participant must be present in instances like Fragment A, he or she does not have to be involved in the next type of situation:

#### Fragment B

- Baba Àdùkẹ̀: 1. Mo gbọ wípe Àdùkẹ̀ nfún ọkọ rẹ n'iyonu.  
 Baba Ọjọ́: 2. Ọsẹ ti o kọja ni mo tilẹ rii  
 3. t' o nbá gbogbo aládugbò ja.  
 4. Wọn lǎ ti.  
 5. Nse ni ó nta wõnle.  
 Baba Àdùkẹ̀: 6. Àdùkẹ̀ na?  
 Iya Àdùkẹ̀: → 7. Ọrọ nlá.

(Translation)

- Àdùkẹ̀' s father: 1. I hear Àdùkẹ̀ is making her husband miserable.  
 Ojo's father: 2. Last week I saw her  
 3. quarrelling with the neighbours  
 4. She was intractable  
 5. and resisted all entreaties for peace.  
 Àdùkẹ̀' s father: 6. Àdùkẹ̀?  
 Àdùkẹ̀' s mother: 7. (*RCE of disbelief*)

Iya Àdùkẹ̀' s production of *Ọrọ nlá* at utterances 7 is far from being a rebuttal of the 'charge' against her daughter or a justification of her breeding; rather, the RCE expresses skepticism, embarrassment and disappointment, feelings that are in tune with her husband's own disbelief (utterance 6) about their daughter's shameless conduct.

But then, the three RCEs are not always interchangeable. Often, *Ká má ri* and *Àgbẹdọ* pronounce condemnation on an event that the RCE producer finds preposterous:

Fragment C

- Ìyàwó: 1. Ti a bá ti lo ọ̀dun kan pọ̀ bi ọ̀kọ̀ ati aya  
 2. a wùn mi lati lọ̀ gbe pẹ̀lú awọ̀n obí mi fun bi osù méjì kan.  
 Oko: → 3. Ká má ri.  
 Ìyàwó: 4. Onítẹ̀mi [...] ...  
 Oko: → 5. Ká má ri!

(Translation):

- Wife: 1. When we have lived three years together as husband and wife  
 2. I would like to go and stay with my parents for about two months  
 Husband: 3. (RCE condemning a proposal)  
 Wife: 4. Sweetheart  
 Husband: 5. (RCE vehemently condemning the proposal)

A third party at talk like this (e.g. the father-in-law) would not have responded with *Ọ̀rọ̀ nlá* but more probably with *Àgbẹ̀dọ̀* (which is somehow stronger in effect than *Ká má ri* and also indicates an abomination) to underscore the proposal's absurdity.

#### 4.2 Markers of negative stance: *O jẹ̀'bii*, *Àgunlá*, *Ó npe*

Each of these three RCEs expresses the speaker's indifference but the negative stance encoded in them varies. For instance, it can be said that *O jẹ̀'bii* expresses a type of negative stance commonly associated with casual conversation or with the speaker's view that the interlocutor ought to have accomplished a reported situation much sooner. The same marker (that is, *O jẹ̀'bii*) has pronominal variants depending on the person of the speaker. For the 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular, the RCE is as it is: *O jẹ̀'bii*. For the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural, it changes to *E jẹ̀'bii* or *Ẹ̀yin jẹ̀'bii*. For the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular (masculine and feminine) the marker is *Óún jẹ̀'bii*, and for the 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural, *Awọ̀n jẹ̀'bii* or *Wọ̀n jẹ̀'bii*. *O jẹ̀'bii* has no pronominal variant for the 1<sup>st</sup> person singular or plural, since it is not customary for one to condemn one's actions by the use of such a device as this. However, although in Yorùbá the conceptual meaning of the expression (and all its pronominal variants) is *he/she/they/you are guilty*, as a marker of indifference or negative stance, its general conversational connotation is *I am not impressed*.

*Àgunlá* and *Ó npe* also signal negative stance but do not share the conversational connotation of *O jẹ̀'bii*. If put on a scale, the indifference expressed in these two RCEs is much higher than that in *O jẹ̀'bii*, a fact that underscores the distributional relevance of the three markers. Look at the fragments below.

Fragment A

- Máyowá: 1. Òní ni ọ̀jọ̀ ibí mi.  
 2. Mo pé ọ̀mọ̀ ogójì ọ̀dún l'oni.  
 3. À dára ki nwá ikan se pẹ̀lú ọ̀rọ̀ iyawó bayi.  
 4. O yẹ̀ ki emi paapaa ti ni iyawó n'ile  
 5. àbí kínni iwọ̀ rọ̀?  
 Káyode: → 6. O jẹ̀'bii.  
 7. O kò bá dúró ogójì ọ̀dún míran.

(Translation):

- Máyowá: 1. Today is my birthday.  
 2. I'm forty today.  
 3. I'd better start thinking about getting married.  
 4. It's time I had my own wife.  
 5. What d'you think?  
 Káyode: 6. (Negative stance marker ~ I'm not impressed.)

## 7. Why not hold on for another forty years?

Fragment B

- Àdùkẹ: 1. Ọrọ ọkọ mi ti sù mi.  
 2. Gbogbo ọmọ ọdọ ti a ngbà ni ó nfún l'óyún.  
 3. Àfi bí àfise.  
 4. Orí mi ti fẹrẹ dàrú bayĩ.
- Iyá Àdùkẹ: → 5. Àgunlá.  
 6. Ọjọ kinni ànà,  
 7. njẹ o kò sọ pé ẹnu mi nrùn?

*(Translation):*

- Àdùkẹ: 1. I'm fed up with my husband.  
 2. He's always impregnating our housemaids  
 3. He must be under a spell.  
 4. It's driving me crazy.
- Àdùkẹ's mother: 5. (*Negative stance marker* ~ That's not my business.)  
 6. The other day (when I tried to dissuade you from marrying him)  
 7. Did you take my counsel?

Fragment C

- Bodé: 1. Àrùn àtọsí yi lè ya èniyàn ni wèèrè.  
 2. Àti tọ d'ogun  
 3. Èhìn dídùn gān ní kí nfò kí nnisó.  
 4. Kódà, mo ti fẹ gbẹ tó pankẹrẹ.
- Báyọ: → 5. Ó npe.  
 6. Njẹ mi o ní lọ ba ẹ wá ọlọmọge tó mọ'wọ kinní ọhún dádádára  
 7. kí èhìn ọhún lè fi dá páun l'ẹẹkan?

*(Translation):*

- Bode: 1. This gonorrhoea infection is terrible.  
 2. To urinate is difficult  
 3. and there's a dreadful backache as well.  
 4. The worst part is that I'm now as lean as a cane.
- Bayo: 5. (*Negative stance marker* ~ About time.)  
 6. Shall I get you a very adventurous lady  
 7. so your back can snap once for all?

In a lot of Yorùbá conversational discourse, the earlier speaker hardly finds it necessary to continue the existing topic as soon as his or her interlocutor utters certain RCEs, examples of which we have just seen. In the conversational fragments above, the Yorùbá consider it unwise not to heed the hint of indifference encoded in the RCEs. If the interrupted speaker wishes to talk further, it would be either to justify the issue attacked by the RCE or to change the topic at hand completely.

Now, although the three RCEs here signal indifference and general negative stance, they are not interchangeable. *Àgunlá*, for instance, is more common in the speech of the elderly members of society while *Ó npe* and *O jẹ'bii* feature more significantly in the speech pattern of the younger members. Moreover, *Àgunlá* and *Ó npe* are very often used as prefatory elements to the speaker's indifference – hence Iya Àdùkẹ's utterances (at 6-7) – or, in fact, a 'pointer' to teasing. Although *O jẹ'bii* can also be prefatory, its distributional relevance is determined by its conversational content. It is loaded not so much with indifference as with sarcasm (see utterances 6 and 7 in Fragment C). We would then observe that although the three RCEs are markers of negative stance, the indifference they express varies; this variation affects their conversational distribution.

However, on account of the socially contrived conceptual meaning encoded in these RCEs, *O jẹ'bi* is largely prefatory to the producer's reminder of a cultural practice and his evaluation or judgment of the interlocutor's account: how stupid/childish/senseless, etc. since the action being reported is culturally expected. On the other hand, *Ó npe* and *Àgunlá* (while they can also function like *O jẹ'bi*) are more often prefatory both to the producer's general indifference and to his or her perception of the situation as not being part of his own brief. Compare the following fragments:

Fragment D

- Ojó:                   1. Ìgbà tí mo rí baba ìyàwó mi  
                           2. mo dọbáḽe gbalaja  
                           3. mo kí wọṅ k'aaṛọ  
                           4. mo béèrè ...  
 Àlábí:               → 5.                    └ O jẹ'bi.  
                           6. Ni ojo miran, nise ni ki o gbé ìgbájú fun baba iyawo re  
                           7. ki o tún so fun pé k'ó dọbáḽe k'ó t ó kí e.

(Translation):

- Ojó:                   1. When I saw my father-in-law this morning  
                           2. I prostrated myself before him  
                           3. I greeted him  
                           4. I asked him...  
 Àlábí:               5. (*Negative stance marker*)  
                           6. Next time, slap him instead  
                           7. and ask him to prostrate himself to greet you.

Fragment E

- Akin:                   1. Nje o gbà' dúra ki o tó jẹun ti arábirin yẹn gbé fún ọ?  
 Báyo:                   2. Kí lo rí?  
 Akin:                   3. Sé kò lè ti fi ògùn ifẹ s'inú re?  
 Báyo:               → 4. *Ó npe*.  
                           5. Gbogbo e, àjẹpo.

(Translation):

- Akin:                   1. Did you pray before eating the food that lady brought you?  
 Báyo:                   2. Why?  
 Akin:                   3. Couldn't she have put some love potion in it?  
 Báyo:                   4. (*Negative stance marker ~ Who cares?*)  
                           5. It's all food to me.

At D:6-7, Àlábí ingeniously intimates to Ojó that contrary conduct would have been disrespectful to the father-in-law – since culturally a man is expected to prostrate himself before his father- (or mother-) in-law. Notice that although *Àgunlá* could have replaced *Ó npe* in Fragment E, Báyo's indifference (E:4) is less intense than Iya Aduke's invoked remonstrance at B:5 although she too could have employed *Ó npe* to display her attitude.

In sum, on account of their pragmatic deployment, the three RCEs discussed in this section may be seen as indexing speakers' negative disposition and judgment but they have certain distinguishing characteristics – features of usage that confine them to particular contexts or segments of conversational discourse.

### 4.3 Conversational spurs and markers of concurrence: *Àkùkà, Wèèrè, Orọ̀ nì yèn, Mò ngbádùn ẹ̀, Ìyẹn (tún) nkọ?*

When they feature in conversations, these RCEs imbue the current speaker with some impetus to hold the floor a while longer, perhaps because the hearer seems to benefit from the details of the turn. The elements are, however, not without some unique conversational and sociolinguistic features that do not allow for them to be deployed interchangeably. First, let us consider some of them in context:

#### Fragment A

- Baba Èlẹ̀ran: 1. Mo gbọ wipe ijọba fẹ se títì ọlọdà ní gbogbo Nigeria.  
2. Lẹhin na, won fẹ se kọta si gbogbo adugbo ti òjò ti ñyọ won lẹnu.  
3. Ó dàbí ẹni pé ijọba wa ti ntají dídíẹ.
- Iya Aláta: → 4. Orọ̀ nì yèn.
- Baba Èlẹ̀ran: 5. Kódà, ìkan ninu àwọn kómíṣonà sọ wípé ti oun bá le wọle ẹẹkejì  
6. òun a fa'na sí gbogbo agbègbè tí o si wa ninu òkùnkùn.
- Iya Aláta: → 7. Ìyẹn (tún) nkọ?
- Baba Èlẹ̀ran: 8. Èyí t'ó rú mi l'ójú ninu gbogbo ẹ ni gómìnà wa t'ó sọ wípé gbogbo òsìsẹ ni lati san owó orí bi idá mewa owó osù wọ̀n [ ...
- Iya Aláta: → 9. [ Ha, wèèrè.
- Baba Èlẹ̀ran: 10. O rú mi l'ójú díẹ.

(Translation):

- Butcher: 1. I hear the government plans to pave all the roads across Nigeria.  
2. Afterwards, they will construct drainages in all the areas frequently affected by floods.  
3. It seems our government is waking up to its responsibilities.
- Greengrocer: 4. (RCE of concurrence)
- Butcher: 5. Moreover, one of the commissioners has promised that if voted in for a second term  
6. he would ensure there's electricity in areas still in the dark.
- Greengrocer: 7. (RCE of concurrence)
- Butcher: 8. What baffles me in all of this is that the governor requests that workers pay tax that's about a tenth of their salaries monthly
- Greengrocer: 9. [ (RCE of negative concurrence)
- Butcher: 10. [ That quite baffles me.

The situation described in the fragment above is that of government's disregard for public needs, hence Iya Aláta's marker of concurrence (*Orọ̀ nì yèn* – at utterance 4) when informed of government's readiness to execute its ordinary duties. This element is deployed against the backdrop of other things that the government might have been involved in recently (or over time) apparently not in the interests of the public. In other words, *Orọ̀ nì yèn* in this context roughly means that 'the people would rather that promising situation than the earlier hopeless state of affairs.'

At utterance (7), *tún* emphasizes this desire to have the better life, or the 'birth' of the alignment between government's plans and the people's expectations. Now, although the RCE is cast in the form of a question, Baba Èlẹ̀ran need not answer it since it is merely a rhetorical conversational element.

*Wèèrè* (at utterance 9) has a dual function: it justifies Baba Èlẹ̀ran's bafflement and also comments on the governor's irrationality – requesting a monthly 10% tax from every worker in the state. On account of this kind of function, therefore, it is easy for the analyst to see that the occurrence



of *Wèèrè* in conversations signposts absurd character traits, untoward pronouncements or ill-advised decisions. In Yorùbá, the RCE directly suggests to one's interlocutor a total rejection of the discourse segment.

Although they are also frequently deployed as elements of concurrence, *Àkîkà* and *Mò ngbádùn ẹ* reveal sociolinguistic features not found in *Wèèrè*, *Orọ̀ nì yẹn* and *Ìyẹn (tún) nkọ̀?*. Compare the following fragments:

### Fragment B

- Baba Àgbà: 1. Tí gbogbo nkan bá d'ojú rú  
2. t'ó dàbí ẹ̀nìpé kò s'ogbòn mọ  
3. tí sòkòtò gǎn fẹ maa jábọ n'ídi ọ̀mọ̀kùnrin  
4. ọ̀lọgbòn á b'ojú w'ẹ̀hìn  
5. lati mọ bóya ogun ìdílẹ̀ nì  
6. tabí wàhálà ìgbàlódé.  
Àlejò: → 7. Àkîkà.  
Baba Àgbà: 8. Ẹ̀ni t'ó ba f'ojú kékeré wo iyonu  
9. yio maa lọ lati aapọ̀n de aapọ̀n ni.  
Àlejò: → 10. Àkîkà.

(Translation):

- Grandfather: 1. When life is fouled up,  
2. and your wits back up on you,  
3. and the man in you is totally perplexed,  
4. wisdom requires that you make some reflection  
5. to decide if your problem is an ancestral yoke  
6. or a modern phenomenon.  
Guest: 7. (*Conversational spur*)  
Grandfather: 8. One who ignores a predicament  
9. will certainly go from crisis to crisis.  
Guest: 10. (*Conversational spur*)

### Fragment C

- Bùsọlá: 1. Mo ti fẹ̀ sọ ọ̀rọ̀ kan fun ọ̀ lati bi ojo męta.  
Kunlé: → 2. Mò ngbádùn ẹ.  
Bùsọlá: 3. O d'ìgbà t'ósù yi bá parí ki ntó le sọ pátó  
4. amọ̀ o dàbí ẹ̀nipe nkan osù mi fẹ̀ mǎ se ségesẹ̀ge.  
Kunle: → 5. Àkîkà.

(Translation):

- Busola: 1. For a few days now, I have been looking forward to  
telling you something.  
Kunle: 2. (*Conversational spur*)  
Busola: 3. Maybe I'll be more certain by the end of this month  
4. but I reckon that my menses are getting too slow in  
coming.  
Kunle: 5. (*Sarcastic conversational spur* ~ how smart of you!)

From fragments B and C, we see the social situations that engender the deployment of *Àkîkà* and *Mò ngbádùn ẹ*. In the first place, the tenor of the ongoing discourse is the primary catalyst for the use of either element – suggesting that *Àkîkà* is more frequent in formal/serious spoken discourse while *Mò ngbádùn ẹ* features more prominently in casual or non-formal exchanges. Thus, what with the

sagacious context set up by Baba Agba's witticisms, *Àkùkà* – not *Mò ngbádùn ẹ* – is the response-comment element of choice.

However, Kunle's initial deployment of *Mò ngbádùn ẹ* (at C: 2) is an indication of a relaxed, friendly and casual tenor; in this case, a setting between two lovers, with the lady trying to inform the man about the funny state she is in. Thus, at C: 5, *Àkùkà* does not indicate any sagacity (as identified in Fragment B) but instead is a way of intimating it to the lady that she is talking bunkum. Among the Yorùbá, *Àkùkà* used in this sarcastic manner pointedly demonstrates the user's disapproval of the issue at hand and its continued topicality. But, very often, *Mò ngbádùn ẹ* is pre-modified by a short expression, e.g. *Èhẹn* (produced like a long vowel sound and with a long, falling intonation) uttered by the speaker to signal the resumption of an earlier [segment of] discourse. This deployment of *Mò ngbádùn ẹ* re-focuses the topic before now, giving the earlier speaker another opportunity to resume his or her turn. It is not common in Yorùbá to pre-modify *Àkùkà* in this manner.

The observations above point up the distributional distinctions between sarcastic and sagacious *Àkùkà*, with the former identified with the younger folk and the latter a 'prerogative' of the elderly. In view of the normal conversational deployment of *Àkùkà* and *Mò ngbádùn ẹ*, the analyst would observe that whereas *Àkùkà* suggests to the speaker that he is making [a lot of] sense, *Mò ngbádùn ẹ* simply encourages the other person to start (or to continue) speaking 'because I'm enjoying the conversation.'

In sum, as in other RCEs, the application of *Àkùkà* and *Mò ngbádùn ẹ* in Yorùbá conversation directly draws the hearer's attention to the interlocutor's attitude regarding the contents of the current turn, an attitude that may mean for the speaker to go on talking, modify his speech or to abandon it altogether.

#### 4.4 Elements indexing envisioned outcome: *Ó tán, Ilẹ mọ, Mi ò sọ?*

On learning about an incident (especially one with rather untoward consequences), the Yorùbá commonly feel somehow elated and vindicated, expressing this attitude with any of the three RCEs above – or any other pragmatically suitable expression. Usually, the element used serves as a preface to the speaker's observation, remonstrance or warning – even if all these were not expressed in any linguistic form prior to the catastrophe:

##### Fragment A

- Oníròhìn: 1. Ìròhìn t'ó tẹ wa lọwọ l'áipẹ fi yé wa wipé awọn ológun  
ti d'ojú ìjọba bo'le  
2. wọn si ti pa ogunlọgọ awọn èniyàn ni ilu Abuja.
- Gani: —→ 3. Ó tán.  
4. A wí wí wí, a sọ sọ sọ;  
5. irọ ni.  
6. K'áwọn kan kàn ro pé awọn nikan l'Olọrun dá.

(Translation)

- Newscaster: 1. News just coming in reveals that there has been a coup  
2. and that numerous people have been killed in Abuja.
- Gani: 3. (RCE of predicted/expected outcome)  
4. We protested constantly  
5. but to no avail.  
6. Why would any set of people think only of themselves?

The three RCEs in this section are interchangeable in this context as they all carry the meaning of expected or predicted outcome. As said earlier, even where the speaker had not made any prediction, the marker, *Mi ò sọ?*, can still be used – since he or she might have envisioned a tragic upshot.

It should be noted that *Ó tán* as well as other RCEs imbued with the function of indexing (predicted or expected) outcome has an interrogative variant which has the same pragmatic force as the declarative form: *Kò tán?*, *Ilẹ o mọ (bayi)?* and *Mi ò sọ?*. Sometimes, for reinforcement, the two forms are used in the same speaking turn. Such combined usages are: *Ó tán àbí kò tán?*, *Ilẹ mọ àbí ò mọ?* and *Mo sọ àbí mi ò sọ?*, all of which suggest the speaker's foresight and circumspection.

#### 4.5 Markers of Rebuff: *Láí* (or *L'áyé*), *Èèwọ* (or *Èèwọ Orisa*), *Ó d'ayé àtúnwá*

Proposals, suggestions and other ideas ‘confronted’ with RCEs such as *Láí* (or *L'áyé*), *Èèwọ* and *Ó d'ayé àtúnwá* are generally regarded in Yorùbá discourse as having misfired and therefore unacceptable to the producer of any of these items. With a common denominator of absolute refusal, these three elements differ according to the sociolinguistic stimuli they respond to. *Láí* (or *Láíláí*; or *L'áyél'áyé*) and *Ó d'ayé àtúnwá* both have a less serious tenor (compared with *Èèwọ*) and are usually induced by secular matters – perhaps because of their literal morphological meanings: *L'áyé* is a contraction of *ní aiyé* (= in this world), although its social significance is basically negative (that is, *not in this world*), while *Ó d'ayé àtúnwá* literally means ((*maybe*) in the next world). *Èèwọ*, on the other hand, is most often used to invoke spiritual or metaphysical intervention or strength; or to imply that an act, utterance or idea is not socially endorsed because it flouts the spiritual or ethical expectations of the community, or because the gods – e.g. *Òrìsà* – forbid it (*Èèwọ Òrìsà*).

On account of these literal meanings, the three RCEs are not totally interchangeable. For instance, in a situation like Fragment A below, it is unlikely that Baba Kẹmi would use *Èèwọ* to turn down his daughter's desire to go swimming; however, *Ó d'ayé àtúnwá* would equally be an inappropriate response to Àrẹmú's prankish urge (in Fragment B) to carry a sacrifice away from a crossroads:

##### Fragment A

- Kẹmi: 1. Baba mi, mo fẹ lọ s'odo lati lọ wẹ ọ̀lù awon ọ̀rẹ mi.  
 Baba Kẹmi: → 2. Láíláí.  
 3. Sé ninú otútù yí?

(Translation):

- Kẹmi: 1. Dad, I'd like to go swimming with my friends.  
 Father: 2. (RCE of rebuff)  
 3. In spite of this cold weather?

##### Fragment B

- Àrẹmú: 1. Ó dàbí kí ngbé ẹ̀bọ yí kúrò ní oríta  
 2. kí nsì lọ yíi dà s'ínú ìkòkò ọ̀bẹ Iya Ràfíù.  
 Baba Àrẹmú: → 3. Èèwọ Òrìsà.  
 4. Sé o fẹ di adẹ̀tẹ ni?

(Translation):

- Àrẹmú: 1. I feel an urge to carry this sacrifice away from the crossroads  
 2. and throw it into Iya Rafiu's soup.  
 Baba Àrẹmú: 3. (RCE of rebuff)  
 4. (If you touch the sacrifice) you'll become a leper.

These two fragments illustrate the secular/spiritual distinction between the response elements and their situational distribution in Yorùbá. As pointed out earlier, once the context bears on the supernatural, *Èèwọ* (or *Èèwọ Orisa*) is the appropriate element of rebuff, whereas the speaker has *Láí* (or *Láíláí*; or *L'áyél'áyé*) and *Ó d'ayé àtúnwá* to respond to ordinary, day-to-day issues. However, certain situations that require the exertion or application of physical strength – though secular – may spur on the use of the metaphysical marker, *Èèwọ*. Consider the following fragment:

##### Fragment C

- Èrò: 1. Dẹ̀rẹ̀bà, o nsùn ni?  
 Dẹ̀rẹ̀bà: → 2. Èèwọ.

3. Èmi pẹ̀pẹ̀iyẹ.
4. Òrun ti wa jẹ?

(Translation):

- |            |                                    |
|------------|------------------------------------|
| Passenger: | 1. Driver, are you falling asleep? |
| Driver:    | 2. (RCE of rebuff)                 |
|            | 3. I'm the Duck;                   |
|            | 4. no sleep for me.                |

Because the situation is not exceptionally different from most other natural or human conditions, either of the other two RCEs could have been used by Dẹ̀rẹ̀bà at utterance 2; however, he uses È̀ewọ̀ to invoke supernatural support to stay awake, reinforcing it with his alias, *the Duck* (utterance 3) an animal which, in Yorùbá belief, hardly sleeps.

## 5. Conclusion

The sections above have been concerned with the various response-comment elements in Yorùbá and their deployment in conversational discourse. It should be pointed out that these elements feature mainly in spoken interaction as they are used to respond to issues in the immediately occurring speaking turn. On their own, nearly all of these discourse elements have no conceptual meanings but once they are located in particular communicative environments, they acquire pragmatic weight. It is this pragmatic weight that the user depends on for communicative force and as soon as any of these elements is uttered, the hearer understands the speaker's stance concerning that stage of ongoing talk. Moreover, whereas in English similar expressions (called discourse markers) are used by the current-turn assignee, in Yorùbá it is the hearer that has the prerogative of using the ones discussed in this paper. On the whole, like English discourse markers, response-comment elements in Yorùbá have the communicative purpose of deciding the direction, expansion or termination of conversations.

## 6. Implications of the study for Yorùbá and other Nigerian languages

A study such as this has the primary aim of sensitizing linguists to the need to develop our languages. With the current trend of globalization, many languages will become less interesting to linguists, not the least Nigerian languages, with the corresponding neglect of much of their cultural and ecological heritage.

Thus, there should be a revival of interest in Nigeria's major and minor languages and such a revival should include studies of the huge pragmatic significance of seemingly trivial forms such as are examined in this paper. With that kind of reorientation, maybe another 'population' of speakers will emerge who would like to see the world through their own (rather than other people's) cultural eyes.

In sum, this paper has examined the pragmatic implications of some apparently meaningless details of Yorùbá conversational discourse, bringing to light how these elements help to shape the direction of talk as well as display speaker attitude.

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# Selected Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference on African Linguistics: Shifting the Center of Africanism in Language Politics and Economic Globalization

edited by Olaoba F. Arasanyin  
and Michael A. Pemberton

Cascadilla Proceedings Project Somerville, MA 2006

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Selected Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference on African Linguistics:  
Shifting the Center of Africanism in Language Politics and Economic Globalization  
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Fakoya, Adeleke A. 2006. Response-Comment Elements in Yorùbá Conversational Discourse. In *Selected Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, ed. Olaoba F. Arasanyin and Michael A. Pemberton, 80-92. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

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Fakoya, Adeleke A. 2006. Response-Comment Elements in Yorùbá Conversational Discourse. In *Selected Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, ed. Olaoba F. Arasanyin and Michael A. Pemberton, 80-92. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. [www.lingref.com](http://www.lingref.com), document #1410.