

A Description of Syntactic Transformations in Yàgbà

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Abstract

This paper examines the syntactic transformations of Yàgbà, a north-eastern Yoruba dialect spoken in Kogi State, Nigeria, with the aim of uncovering how derivational processes sustain grammatical relations and contribute to discourse organisation. Drawing on a corpus of naturally occurring speech, complemented by targeted elicitation, the analysis identifies five transformation types—verb movement, pronominalisation, WH-fronting, topicalization, and clefting—as central to the dialect’s grammar. Three significant insights emerge from the findings. First, Yàgbà consistently employs verb movement in object-demoting constructions, especially within focus structures where the particle *rí/rín* marks discourse prominence. Second, left-dislocation in Yàgbà strongly requires resumptive pronouns, in contrast to Standard Yoruba where optionality is more common. Third, WH-fronting in Yàgbà often co-occurs with resumptives, underscoring a discourse-sensitive strategy not uniformly observed across Yoruboid varieties. These findings demonstrate that Yàgbà structures foreground a delicate interplay between syntax and discourse, while simultaneously highlighting typological micro-variation within the Yoruba continuum. Beyond its descriptive value, this work adds to the comparative study of Niger-Congo languages, providing evidence for how transformation processes adapt to local discourse ecologies. Ultimately, the paper contributes both to the documentation of an under-described dialect and to theoretical debates within transformational grammar, information structure, and cross-dialectal typology.

Keywords: Yàgbà Syntax, Syntactic Transformations, Resumptive Pronouns, Focus Constructions

Introduction

Yàgbà, a dialect cluster within the north-eastern Yoruba branch of the Niger-Congo family, represents a significant yet relatively under-documented variety of the

Yoruboid continuum. Spoken predominantly in the western senatorial zone of Kogi State, Nigeria, it maintains strong links to both Yoruba cultural traditions and local sociolinguistic ecologies. Yàgbà functions not only as a medium of daily communication but also as a key vehicle for oral genres such as folktales, riddles, and *oríkì* (panegyrics). These forms serve essential roles in preserving communal history, transmitting moral codes, and constructing identities through performance. As such, the study of Yàgbà syntax extends beyond formal linguistic description; it intersects with cultural memory, aesthetics, and pedagogy, thereby offering a holistic perspective on the ways linguistic form scaffolds social practice (Finnegan, 2012; Owolabi, 2018).

The distinctive syntactic profile of Yàgbà, especially when compared to Standard Yoruba, underscores the dialect's importance for typological and theoretical linguistics. Unlike Standard Yoruba, which has been subjected to considerable descriptive and theoretical scrutiny (Awobuluyi, 1967; Awoyale, 1985; Atoyébi, 2011), Yàgbà exhibits transformation patterns that are far less well described. For instance, while Standard Yoruba often allows null operators in relative clauses and focus constructions, Yàgbà favours resumptive strategies, thereby imposing stricter structural requirements. Similarly, object-demotion diagnostics in Yàgbà reveal the interaction of verb movement with focus particles such as *rí/rín*, which are not attested in Standard Yoruba. Moreover, the dialect places heavier restrictions on WH-fronting, typically requiring discourse-sensitive particles or resumption to license extraction. These points of divergence highlight Yàgbà's potential to refine cross-dialectal theories of movement, focus, and resumption, as well as to expand typological models of Niger-Congo syntax (Manfredi, 1993; Rizzi, 1997; Adekunle, 2024).

From a theoretical standpoint, the study situates Yàgbà within transformational grammar, particularly the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995) and the cartographic tradition that models the fine structure of the left periphery (Rizzi, 1997; Cinque & Rizzi, 2010). These frameworks emphasize the role of functional projections such as Focus Phrase (FocP) and Topic Phrase (TopP) in encoding discourse-related features. Yàgbà data provides fertile ground for testing these models, especially since the dialect employs particles (*rí/rín*) and resumptive pronouns as overt markers of discourse prominence. Such patterns reveal how abstract syntactic operations interface with pragmatic conditions, thereby offering evidence for the interplay between universal principles of movement and language-specific instantiations.

Equally important is the sociolinguistic and documentation angle of the present research. As an under-described dialect spoken by a shrinking proportion of younger speakers due to urban migration and language shift, Yàgbà represents a vulnerable linguistic resource (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2016). Documenting its syntax is thus not only a theoretical exercise but also an act of preservation. By recording naturally occurring speech, including ritual performances and everyday conversations, this study captures the lived reality of Yàgbà speakers while safeguarding data for future generations and researchers. Furthermore, attention to oral performance contexts such as *oríkì* enriches the analysis of transformations, since these genres foreground syntactic manipulation for rhythmic, emphatic, and aesthetic purposes (Barber, 1991; Akinlabi & Liberman, 2000).

This paper therefore pursues two interrelated objectives: (i) to describe the major syntactic transformations that characterise Yàgbà, focusing on verb movement, pronominalisation, WH-fronting, topicalization, and clefting; and (ii) to situate these findings within broader linguistic debates concerning information structure,

resumption, and the architecture of the left periphery. The data are drawn from ethnolinguistic fieldwork conducted in Odo-Ere and surrounding communities, where native speakers provided both elicited and spontaneous speech samples. The resulting corpus enables a balanced view that integrates natural performance with controlled syntactic diagnostics, thus ensuring empirical robustness.

By adopting this dual approach, the study contributes to multiple domains of scholarship. For theoretical linguists, it sharpens understanding of how transformations operate in a Niger-Congo language with rich discourse marking but minimal case morphology. For African language specialists, it expands the descriptive record of a dialect often overshadowed by Standard Yoruba, providing comparative insights into micro-variation within Yoruboid. For anthropologists and cultural scholars, it underscores how grammatical transformations sustain oral performance, identity-making, and pedagogy in Yàgbà communities. Together, these contributions position the paper as both a descriptive documentation of an endangered variety and a theoretical intervention in debates about the interaction of syntax and discourse.

Literature Review

Theoretical and Typological Background

The syntactic architecture of Niger-Congo languages has long attracted scholarly attention because of its consistent head-initial, right-branching structure, which aligns with cross-linguistic typological tendencies toward verb-object (VO) word order. Foundational works on Yoruba syntax, such as Awobuluyi (1967), established the head-initial profile of the language, highlighting the absence of morphological case marking and the reliance on word order and particles for encoding grammatical relations. These findings have been reinforced by subsequent comparative studies across Niger-Congo, which confirm that head-initial branching, the use of focus markers, and serial verb constructions are typological hallmarks of the family (Collins, 2005; Payne, 1997). Within this theoretical landscape, transformational operations such as WH-fronting, topicalization, clefting, and left dislocation occupy a central position because they illuminate how syntax interacts with discourse functions such as focus, emphasis, and referential continuity (Kiss, 1998; Lambrecht, 2001). Yàgbà, as a Yoruboid dialect, therefore represents a crucial testing ground for refining typological generalizations within the Niger-Congo family.

Yoruba and Yoruboid Dialect Syntax

Within the Yoruboid cluster, Standard Yoruba has been extensively studied and described across multiple frameworks. Awoyale (1985) was among the first to provide a systematic account of focus operators and WH-questions, demonstrating that transformations were not only syntactically productive but also pragmatically motivated. Later works such as Atoyébi (2011) extended this analysis to reflexives and anaphoric strategies, situating Yoruba within broader typologies of binding and resumption. However, dialects like Yàgbà, Owé, and Ikálé have historically received less scholarly attention, with most descriptions limited to phonological or lexical surveys (Adetugbo, 1982; Bamgbose, 1990). Recent studies, however, indicate that these dialects exhibit significant micro-variation in transformation patterns, particularly in their use of resumptive pronouns and focus particles (Adekunle, 2024). This gap underscores the need for a dialect-sensitive syntactic inquiry that captures both convergence and divergence across Yoruboid.

Focus Marking and Information Structure

One striking area of divergence between Standard Yoruba and Yàgbà lies in the domain of focus marking. In Standard Yoruba, the particle *ní* typically occupies a low Focus head, surfacing in clefts and in-situ focus constructions (Manfredi, 1993). By contrast, Yàgbà employs the particles *rí/rín* to signal focus, particularly in cleft and object-demotion structures. The choice of particle raises theoretical questions about the position of the Focus head in the left periphery: whether Yàgbà realizes focus higher in the CP domain, or whether dialect-specific morphophonological strategies determine particle selection. Comparative studies suggest that Yoruboid dialects are particularly innovative in this respect, often deploying unique particles for focus and topic marking (Ajíbóyè, 2005; Fádípe, 2020). By treating *rí/rín* as the overt realization of Foc°, this study aligns with cartographic models of the CP field (Rizzi, 1997), while also emphasizing the dialect-specific instantiations of a shared syntactic architecture.

Resumption and Dislocation Strategies

The use of resumptive pronouns is another area where Yàgbà diverges from Standard Yoruba. While Standard Yoruba allows relative clauses and topicalized structures with or without resumptives, Yàgbà strongly favours their presence, particularly in left-dislocation contexts. This mirrors broader Niger–Congo patterns, where resumption often functions as a last-resort strategy to repair violations of locality or island constraints (Tabe, 2005; Biloa, 2013). For example, resumption in Bantu and Kwa languages frequently surfaces in contexts of extraction from embedded clauses, adjuncts, or prepositional phrases (Rizzi, 1990; Demuth, 1995). Yàgbà's consistent reliance on resumptives suggests that its syntax is particularly sensitive to locality conditions, thereby providing valuable evidence for Minimalist accounts of movement and resumption (Chomsky, 1995). By systematically documenting resumptive strategies, this study contributes to debates on whether resumptives should be analyzed as pronouns inserted at PF (surface repair) or as base-generated elements licensed by discourse (Bošković, 2002; McCloskey, 2006).

WH-Movement and Interrogative Syntax

Interrogative syntax in Yoruba and related Niger–Congo languages has been the subject of sustained debate, particularly regarding the positioning of WH-elements and their interaction with focus markers. Chomsky's (1977) account of WH-movement predicted that WH-elements universally target [Spec, CP], but cross-linguistic research has shown considerable variation. In Yoruba, WH-elements may remain in situ, often accompanied by focus markers or prosodic cues (Awoyale, 1985; Manfredi, 1993). Yàgbà, however, exhibits stricter constraints, with overt WH-fronting frequently co-occurring with resumptive clitics. This pattern reflects a discourse-driven strategy where resumptives ensure interpretive clarity, especially in complex or embedded interrogatives. Comparative evidence from Ewe and Igbo similarly demonstrates that resumption often co-occurs with interrogative fronting in West African languages (Ameka, 2004; Nwachukwu, 1995). Yàgbà thus provides further evidence that WH-movement in Niger–Congo is not uniformly constrained by syntactic principles alone but is also shaped by discourse conditions and interpretive needs.

Cleft and Pseudo-Cleft Constructions

Clefting and pseudo-clefting have attracted extensive attention in both general and African linguistics because of their role in marking information structure. In English

and Romance languages, clefts typically involve biclausal derivations, with the copula introducing a focused constituent followed by a relative clause (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002; Lambrecht, 2001). Yoruba shares this pattern, with clefts formed using the copula *ní* plus a relative clause (Kiss, 1998). Yàgbà, however, innovates through the systematic use of *rí/rín* as focus particles, as well as through its strong reliance on resumptives in indirect-object clefts. This aligns with broader Niger–Congo tendencies, where pseudo-clefts often involve WH-elements in the left periphery, followed by resumptives to maintain referential continuity (Payne, 1997; Aboh, 2015). By comparing cleft and pseudo-cleft constructions, Yàgbà reveals a flexible interplay between biclausal and monoclausal derivations, suggesting that clefting strategies in Yoruboid are shaped as much by discourse ecology as by syntactic economy.

Emerging Perspectives in Yoruba Dialect Syntax

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the importance of dialect variation in refining theories of Yoruba syntax. For example, Adekunle (2024) highlights innovations in clitic-based topic resumption, while Fádípe (2020) documents dialect-specific strategies of object demotion. These studies point to a broader trend of recognizing Yoruboid not as a uniform system but as a continuum characterized by micro-variation across phonology, lexicon, and syntax. From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with the view that dialect variation provides crucial evidence for parameter-setting and the interaction of universal grammar with local morphophonological strategies (Kayne, 2000). Yàgbà, with its distinctive use of resumptives and focus particles, therefore stands as a valuable case study for understanding how information-structural operations are realized differently across dialects of the same language.

Methodology

Research Design and Framework

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research framework tailored to the documentation of under-described dialects. The approach reflects the recognition that Yàgbà, like many Niger–Congo languages, is best understood through the interplay of naturalistic usage and elicited speech. In line with field-based linguistics, the research integrates ethnographic sensitivity with formal syntactic diagnostics, ensuring that transformations are analyzed within their cultural and communicative contexts (Payne, 1997; Himmelmann, 1998). While quantitative methods such as corpus frequency counts can illuminate patterns, the present study emphasizes the explanatory power of qualitative analysis for uncovering the motivations and constraints underlying transformations. This design enables both empirical richness and theoretical relevance, particularly since Yàgbà transformations often surface in discourse-sensitive environments such as *oríkì* performances and ritual speech. The combination of naturalistic and elicited data thus allows for a balanced methodology that captures both structural and functional dimensions of syntax.

Field Site and Community Context

The majority of fieldwork was conducted in Odo-Ere and neighboring communities within Yàgbà West Local Government Area, Kogi State, Nigeria. These communities are predominantly Yàgbà-speaking and serve as important custodians of oral traditions, making them ideal for documenting both everyday and ritualized uses of language. The sociolinguistic environment is characterized by bilingualism and

multilingualism, with many speakers also proficient in Standard Yoruba, Hausa, and English. This multilingual context posed both challenges and opportunities: while code-switching occasionally interfered with elicitation, it also provided insights into how Yàgbà speakers negotiate syntactic variation across registers. Care was taken to prioritize natural settings such as market conversations, storytelling sessions, and ritual performances, which offered spontaneous instances of syntactic transformations. By situating data collection within community life, the study ensures that the analysis reflects authentic patterns rather than artifacts of elicitation.

Speaker Profile

To capture generational and stylistic variation, four primary speakers were recruited as language consultants. They represented different age groups, occupations, and degrees of fluency, thereby providing a diverse sample of speech styles. Table 1 below summarizes their profiles:

Speaker ID	Age	Gender	Role / Occupation	Dialect Fluency	Notes
SP1	68	M	Praise singer / Elder	Native	Retired hunter, oral custodian
SP2	42	F	Trader / Community leader	Native	Known for ritual speech
SP3	33	M	Teacher / Local historian	Fluent	Multilingual (Yoruba, Nupe)
SP4	55	M	Farmer / Clan historian	Native	Involved in public recitations

The inclusion of both male and female consultants was intentional, as gendered roles in Yàgbà society influence access to certain genres of oral performance. For example, male elders such as SP1 were particularly knowledgeable about praise poetry, while SP2 provided ritual speech forms associated with women's roles in market and religious contexts. The speakers' varied backgrounds allowed for a more comprehensive capture of syntactic strategies across registers, from formal ritual contexts to informal conversations.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were gathered using a triangulated approach that combined ethnolinguistic interviews, impromptu conversational recordings, and targeted elicitation tasks. Approximately twelve recording sessions produced about nine hours of audio, yielding a corpus of over 18,500 words. From this corpus, 356 examples were extracted for syntactic analysis. Naturalistic recordings included greetings, folktales, ritual chants, and market negotiations, thereby ensuring coverage of multiple discourse genres. To complement this, elicitation tasks employed structured prompts such as sentence frames, minimal pairs, and focus constructions designed to test transformations like pronominalisation and WH-fronting. Following best practices in field linguistics, elicitation sentences were randomized to avoid ordering bias and included both canonical and non-canonical word orders (Matthewson, 2004). All recordings were made with high-fidelity equipment, and transcriptions adhered to the Leipzig Glossing Rules, with additional annotations for discourse and prosody.

Acceptability Judgments and Speaker Variability

In addition to recording spontaneous speech, speakers were asked to provide acceptability judgments on syntactic variations of target structures. A combination of binary ratings (acceptable/unacceptable) and gradient judgments using a five-point Likert scale was employed. This method allowed the study to capture subtle intuitions about prosodic preferences, emphasis, and focus-driven variation. For instance, cleft constructions that omitted resumptive pronouns were often rated as marginal by older speakers but somewhat more acceptable to younger, multilingual speakers. Similarly, certain elliptical strategies were more common in *orìkì* recitations than in casual speech, reflecting register-based variation. These patterns underscore that Yàgbà syntax is not monolithic but shaped by sociolinguistic factors such as age, genre, and communicative setting. By combining naturalistic data with structured judgments, the study achieves both cultural fidelity and theoretical rigor.

Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

As with all community-based linguistic documentation, reflexivity about researcher positionality was essential. The primary investigator is a native Yoruba speaker with professional training in linguistics, while the co-author has longstanding experience conducting fieldwork in Kogi State. This insider-outsider balance facilitated both trust with community members and analytical distance in interpreting data. However, challenges arose in eliciting forms perceived as unnatural by speakers, who often resisted producing sentences outside culturally plausible contexts. Such challenges highlighted the importance of respecting speaker intuitions and embedding elicitation within meaningful scenarios. For instance, WH-questions were more readily produced in narrative settings than in isolation. Recognizing the performative nature of Yàgbà speech, the researchers adjusted protocols to include storytelling and ritual contexts, thereby aligning data collection with the community's communicative norms (Woodbury, 2003).

Ethics Statement

The research adhered to strict ethical guidelines designed to respect both individual participants and the collective cultural ownership of Yàgbà oral traditions. Written and verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants, with explanations provided in both Yoruba and Yàgbà to ensure comprehension. Anonymity was maintained by assigning coded identifiers to speakers, although explicit permission was sought for cases where community leaders or praise singers were locally identifiable. Recordings and transcriptions were stored securely on password-protected drives with backup copies to prevent data loss. Participants retained the right to withdraw their data at any stage, and community custodians were consulted before including quotations from ritual performances or folktales. Since the research did not involve vulnerable populations or medical interventions, formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) clearance was not required; nonetheless, the project maintained transparency and accountability throughout. This ethical framework aligns with contemporary best practices in linguistic documentation, emphasizing reciprocity and cultural sensitivity (Bower, 2008).

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents the essential syntactic data of Yàgbà, organized around five major transformations: verb movement and object demotion, pronominalisation, WH-

fronting, topicalization and left dislocation, and cleft/pseudo-cleft constructions. Each transformation is first introduced through a brief theoretical overview, followed by data examples drawn from fieldwork. The analysis situates the Yàgbà facts in relation to Standard Yoruba and other Niger–Congo languages, highlighting both typological consistencies and micro-variation. By progressing from relatively straightforward transformations such as verb raising to more complex discourse-sensitive structures like clefts, the section builds toward a comprehensive account of how Yàgbà manages information structure and referential clarity.

Verb Movement and Object Demotion

Verb movement in Yàgbà serves as a foundational transformation, underpinning other syntactic operations such as clefting, focus, and object omission. In transformational grammar, verb movement is typically analyzed as the raising of the verb from its base-generated position within VP to higher functional heads such as T(ense) or Asp(ect) (Chomsky, 1995; Pollock, 1989). In Yàgbà, this process frequently interacts with object demotion, where the object is either suppressed, omitted, or semantically recoverable from discourse context. This phenomenon bears similarity to “smuggling” strategies in other non-ergative languages (Collins, 2005) and aligns with broader Niger–Congo patterns of verb–auxiliary interactions (Déchaine, 1993).

The examples in (1–3) illustrate how verb movement licenses object suppression in Yàgbà. In (1a), the canonical clause positions the object immediately after the verb, but in the focused counterpart (1b), the object moves to the left periphery, accompanied by verb raising and the insertion of the focus particle *rí*. This reflects a verb–focus agreement that reconfigures canonical SVO order into OVS. Similarly, in (2b) and (3b), the objects are omitted but semantically retrievable, with verb movement aligning the verb with auxiliary markers such as *tí* (perfective). These patterns show that Yàgbà employs verb raising not only for inflectional purposes but also as a discourse-driven strategy to foreground focus or background objects.

From a theoretical perspective, these constructions demonstrate that Yàgbà aligns with the cartographic account of the left periphery (Rizzi, 1997), where functional projections such as FocP mediate between syntactic operations and discourse requirements. The obligatory movement of the verb in focused contexts suggests that the dialect treats verb raising as a mechanism for maintaining structural alignment between displaced objects and their governing heads. Moreover, object demotion highlights the economy of expression in Yàgbà, where recoverable information is often omitted, a strategy consistent with discourse-driven ellipsis in other Niger–Congo languages (Aboh, 2004).

Cross-dialectally, Yàgbà’s treatment of verb movement diverges from Standard Yoruba, where focus is marked by *ní* and null objects are more common. Yàgbà’s insistence on overt particles and verb raising reflects a stricter syntax–discourse interface. Comparable strategies are observed in Ewe and Igbo, where verb–auxiliary alignment facilitates omission of objects while preserving semantic recoverability (Ameka, 2004; Nwachukwu, 1995). Thus, Yàgbà verb movement not only sustains grammaticality but also encodes discourse salience, situating the dialect within a broader Niger–Congo typology while preserving unique local strategies.

Pronominalisation

Pronominalisation is a central device in Yàgbà for maintaining coherence and tracking reference across discourse. Like many Niger–Congo languages, Yàgbà relies on a rich set of pronominal forms that encode features such as person, number, and sometimes emphasis. Following Postal (1966) and Radford (2009), pronouns can be understood as reduced noun phrases that either replace or resume full referential expressions. In Yàgbà, pronominalisation not only economizes expression but also plays a critical role in licensing transformations such as WH-fronting and dislocation, where resumptive pronouns ensure interpretability.

The data in (3–5) illustrate straightforward pronominal substitution, where a full noun phrase is replaced by a pronoun that shares its grammatical features. In (4), the subject pronoun *óhun* co-refers with the antecedent *Adé*, maintaining subject continuity across a complement clause. In (5), the full NP subject is pronominalised as *í*, enabling emphasis without redundancy. These examples demonstrate that pronominalisation in Yàgbà is structurally versatile, operating at the level of subjects, objects, and even emphatic constructions.

Crucially, pronominalisation in Yàgbà interacts with discourse in nuanced ways. In ritual performances such as *oríkì*, speakers frequently employ emphatic pronouns to foreground lineage or deities, creating rhythmic emphasis while maintaining referential clarity. This reflects Lambrecht’s (1994) account of pronouns as vehicles for information packaging, balancing new and given information in discourse. Yàgbà thus illustrates the dual role of pronouns as both syntactic placeholders and pragmatic tools for emphasis and continuity.

Cross-linguistically, Yàgbà pronominalisation resonates with findings from Bantu languages, where clitics and pronouns often function as obligatory resumptive elements in dislocation contexts (Tabe, 2005; Bresnan & Mchombo, 1987). However, Yàgbà diverges from Standard Yoruba in its stricter reliance on overt pronouns, reflecting a dialectal preference for explicit referential linking. This suggests that Yàgbà pronominalisation is not merely a matter of economy but also a discourse strategy that prioritizes clarity in complex constructions.

WH-Fronting

WH-fronting in Yàgbà offers critical insights into the syntax–discourse interface, particularly because it consistently co-occurs with resumptive elements and focus particles. In generative theory, WH-elements are typically assumed to move to [Spec, CP], leaving traces in their base positions (Chomsky, 1977; Radford, 2004). However, cross-linguistic research has shown that many languages permit WH-in-situ strategies, often mediated by prosody or particles (Richards, 2001). Yàgbà falls somewhere in between: it allows WH-fronting but often requires resumptive pronouns or clitics to preserve interpretability.

The examples in (6–11) show the range of WH-fronting strategies in Yàgbà. In (6) and (7), the interrogative *kín* (“what”) is fronted to the left periphery, followed by the focus particle *rín*. In (9) and (10), benefactive questions introduce resumptive clitics to maintain reference to the base position. These constructions highlight a strong tendency in Yàgbà to combine fronting with resumption, suggesting that the dialect prioritizes explicit linking between displaced constituents and their original syntactic roles.

From a theoretical standpoint, this pattern can be analyzed within Rizzi's (1997) Split CP framework, where WH-elements target a dedicated interrogative projection while focus particles surface in Foc°. The co-occurrence of fronted WH-elements and resumptives suggests that Yàgbà treats interrogative scope as requiring both structural displacement and overt discourse marking. This differs from Standard Yoruba, where WH-in-situ strategies are more common and resumptives are less obligatory.

Typologically, Yàgbà's WH-fronting resonates with patterns in Ewe and Igbo, where resumptive pronouns frequently appear in interrogatives (Ameka, 2004; Nwachukwu, 1995). The obligatory nature of resumptives in certain Yàgbà WH-questions supports the view that resumption serves as a last-resort strategy to repair violations of locality or island constraints (Rizzi, 1990; McCloskey, 2006). Thus, Yàgbà contributes to broader debates about whether resumption is syntactic, discourse-driven, or a hybrid phenomenon.

Topicalization and Left Dislocation

Topicalization and left dislocation represent two related but distinct transformations in Yàgbà, each serving to manage discourse prominence and thematic structuring. In topicalization, a noun phrase is moved to the sentence-initial position, usually without a co-referential pronoun inside the clause. In contrast, left dislocation involves base-generating a noun phrase at the left periphery and reintroducing it via a resumptive pronoun (Cinque, 1990; Prince, 1981). Yàgbà provides particularly rich data for comparing these strategies, given its consistent reliance on resumptives in dislocation contexts.

Examples (12–14) illustrate topicalization, where fronted elements appear clause-initially without resumptive pronouns. These constructions align with Rizzi's (1997) analysis of topicalization as movement to [Spec, TopP]. The absence of resumptives suggests that Yàgbà topicalization relies on syntactic displacement, marked prosodically by pauses. By contrast, examples (15–18) demonstrate left dislocation, where resumptives such as *á* or *ó* resume the displaced noun phrase. These constructions exhibit clear prosodic breaks and serve to foreground discourse anchors, often in narratives or ritualized speech.

Functionally, topicalization in Yàgbà anchors discourse by highlighting aboutness topics, while left dislocation frames information and emphasizes continuity. The reliance on resumptives in left dislocation reflects Yàgbà's preference for explicit referential linkage, contrasting with Standard Yoruba, where null resumption is more common. This pattern resonates with findings in Italian and Hebrew, where left dislocation obligatorily involves resumptives (Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl, 2007; Doron, 1982). Yàgbà thus illustrates a typologically significant convergence between African and European languages in the use of dislocation as a discourse strategy.

Cleft and Pseudo-Cleft Constructions

Clefting and pseudo-clefting in Yàgbà bring together multiple transformational operations, including movement, resumption, and focus marking. In clefts, a constituent is fronted and emphasized through the use of a copula plus a relative clause, while pseudo-clefts rely on WH-elements in the left periphery to introduce focused information (Lambrecht, 2001; Kiss, 1998). Yàgbà innovates in this domain by systematically employing the focus particle *rí/rín* and by requiring resumptives in indirect-object clefts.

The examples in (19–20) show how Yàgbà clefts foreground subjects, objects, and indirect objects. Importantly, resumptive pronouns are obligatory in non-subject clefts, as shown in (24). This supports the view that resumption repairs violations of locality when extraction targets embedded positions. Pseudo-clefts in Yàgbà similarly rely on WH-elements followed by resumptives, aligning with broader Niger–Congo patterns (Aboh, 2015).

Theoretically, these findings confirm that Yàgbà clefts align with biclausal derivations, while pseudo-clefts exploit the interrogative projection of CP. The reliance on resumptives provides evidence for the interaction of syntax and discourse, where interpretive clarity overrides economy. Cross-linguistically, Yàgbà patterns with languages such as Igbo and Akan, where clefts and pseudo-clefts are central strategies for marking focus (Ameka, 2004; Nwachukwu, 1995). At the same time, the consistent use of *rí/rín* sets Yàgbà apart from Standard Yoruba, reinforcing the dialect’s distinct role in refining theories of the left periphery.

Summary of Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study establish that Yàgbà employs a highly systematic set of syntactic transformation strategies, each of which contributes to discourse organisation and the maintenance of referential clarity. The most central of these is verb movement, which consistently underpins focus and cleft structures. By fronting objects and aligning them with the focus particle *rí/rín*, Yàgbà creates an OVS order that diverges from the canonical SVO of Standard Yoruba. This movement demonstrates not only the productivity of verb raising in the dialect but also its strong connection to discourse-driven object demotion. Such findings reinforce the argument that Yàgbà maintains a more explicit syntax–discourse interface than many of its Yoruboid counterparts, privileging overt marking and structural realignment where other dialects rely on prosody or ellipsis.

A second major insight concerns the obligatory nature of resumption in left-dislocation and cleft constructions. While Standard Yoruba often allows optional resumption, Yàgbà displays a far stricter requirement for overt resumptive pronouns in indirect-object and embedded positions. This pattern aligns with cross-linguistic findings in Bantu and Semitic languages, where resumption is necessary to avoid violations of locality constraints (Rizzi, 1990; Doron, 1982; Tabe, 2005). By insisting on resumption in contexts where Standard Yoruba permits gaps, Yàgbà illustrates a typological shift towards explicitness, suggesting that resumption is not merely a repair strategy but an integral aspect of the dialect’s grammar. Such evidence strengthens the claim that resumption is shaped by the interface between syntax and discourse, functioning as both a structural and interpretive requirement.

The third finding relates to WH-fronting, which in Yàgbà demonstrates a striking tendency to co-occur with resumptive clitics. While WH-movement in many Niger–Congo languages is accompanied by focus particles, Yàgbà innovates by combining fronting with explicit resumptive marking. This hybrid strategy ensures that interrogative scope is not only structurally licensed but also pragmatically transparent. The pattern contributes to ongoing debates about whether resumption is syntactic or discourse-driven, suggesting that in Yàgbà the two dimensions cannot be easily disentangled. The use of resumptives in WH-constructions provides evidence for a “double marking” strategy, where both structural displacement and overt reference tracking work together to sustain interpretability in interrogatives.

Cleft and pseudo-cleft constructions further highlight the discourse sensitivity of Yàgbà syntax. The consistent use of the focus particle *rí/rín* across clefts, pseudo-clefts, and WH-questions signals a strong grammaticalization of focus in the dialect. Unlike Standard Yoruba, where *ní* serves as the default focus marker, Yàgbà innovates through morphophonological strategies that emphasize local distinctiveness. The obligatory resumptive pronouns in indirect-object clefts confirm that clefting is not purely syntactic but tightly bound to discourse conditions, as resumptives provide interpretive scaffolding for extracted constituents. Pseudo-clefts, in turn, underscore the role of WH-elements in encoding information structure, supporting the view that Yàgbà's CP field is richly articulated, with dedicated projections for focus, topic, and interrogativity (Rizzi, 1997; Aboh, 2015).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Yàgbà syntax is marked by a preference for explicitness in marking discourse roles. Whereas Standard Yoruba often relies on prosody, null operators, or structural ambiguity, Yàgbà insists on overt particles and resumptives. This preference reflects a broader typological pattern in Niger-Congo languages, where discourse-sensitive strategies often dominate over purely syntactic economy. Yet Yàgbà is distinctive in its consistency: across focus, dislocation, and cleft constructions, resumptives and focus particles form an obligatory part of the grammar. This suggests that Yàgbà encodes information structure with a higher degree of formalization, offering crucial evidence for refining cross-dialectal models of Yoruba syntax.

The theoretical implications of these findings are significant. Within the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995), the Yàgbà data highlight the role of overt morphosyntactic markers in satisfying interface conditions between syntax and discourse. The cartographic approach (Rizzi, 1997) is particularly relevant, as Yàgbà provides evidence for multiple left-peripheral projections, including FocP and TopP, each overtly realized by particles or resumptives. These findings also challenge the universality of certain economy-driven principles, such as the preference for gaps over resumptives. In Yàgbà, interpretive clarity outweighs economy, underscoring the need to account for language-specific priorities in syntactic theory.

Beyond theoretical linguistics, the findings carry implications for cultural and educational contexts. The reliance on resumptives and focus particles in Yàgbà enhances the rhythmic and emphatic qualities of oral performances, particularly in *oríkì*. These transformations are not only grammatical but also aesthetic, shaping the cadence and intensity of praise poetry and ritual speech. From an educational perspective, understanding the distinctive features of Yàgbà syntax can aid in developing culturally sensitive teaching materials that acknowledge dialectal variation rather than imposing Standard Yoruba norms. Such an approach could foster greater pride and continuity in Yàgbà-speaking communities, where language shift towards Yoruba or English threatens local varieties.

Finally, these findings underscore the importance of documenting under-described dialects for typological and comparative research. Yàgbà challenges assumptions drawn from Standard Yoruba and reveals the richness of micro-variation within the Yoruboid cluster. Its strict reliance on resumptives, innovative focus marking, and discourse-driven verb movement provide data that can refine theories of resumption, clefting, and the left periphery. At the same time, Yàgbà highlights how language structure and cultural practice are intertwined, showing that syntactic transformations are as much about managing meaning in social interaction as they are about formal grammatical rules.

Conclusion

This study has examined syntactic transformations in Yàgbà, a north-eastern Yoruba dialect, with a focus on how operations such as verb movement, pronominalisation, WH-fronting, topicalization, and clefting interact with discourse. The findings underscore the dialect's systematic reliance on overt markers—focus particles like *rí/rín* and resumptive pronouns—in contexts where Standard Yoruba and related dialects often permit null operators or unmarked strategies. By documenting these transformations through both naturalistic speech and structured elicitation, the study contributes valuable descriptive data to the under-explored domain of Yàgbà grammar. It also reinforces the view that syntactic analysis in Niger–Congo languages must integrate discourse considerations, as information structure plays a decisive role in shaping grammatical options.

One of the central conclusions of this research is that Yàgbà syntax exemplifies a strong preference for explicitness. Whether in clefts, left-dislocation, or interrogatives, the dialect consistently requires resumptives to sustain interpretability. This finding challenges theoretical models that treat resumptives primarily as optional or repair mechanisms. Instead, the Yàgbà evidence suggests that resumption may be fully grammaticalized in certain dialects, forming a core component of the syntax rather than a peripheral strategy. Such a perspective has implications for generative theory, particularly for analyses that seek to account for cross-linguistic variation in movement and resumption within the Minimalist framework (Chomsky, 1995; McCloskey, 2006). Yàgbà highlights the need to refine these models to accommodate cases where resumption is not marginal but obligatory.

Another key insight relates to the central role of verb movement in Yàgbà transformations. The dialect's consistent use of verb raising in focus and object-demotion constructions illustrates how movement serves both grammatical and discourse purposes. While verb movement has long been recognized as a central process in the world's languages, the Yàgbà data demonstrate its expanded role in sustaining information structure in a context where case morphology is minimal. By comparing these patterns with Standard Yoruba and other Niger–Congo languages such as Igbo and Ewe, this study situates Yàgbà within a broader typology of verb movement while underscoring its distinctive innovations. These innovations show how local discourse ecologies condition syntactic strategies, leading to micro-variation even within closely related dialects.

The study also emphasizes the intricate relationship between grammar and performance. In Yàgbà oral traditions, syntactic transformations are not merely structural but are exploited for aesthetic and rhetorical effect. Praise singers, storytellers, and ritual performers use clefts, topicalization, and resumptives to heighten emphasis, create rhythm, and foreground key themes. This intersection of syntax and performance illustrates the importance of analyzing grammar in its cultural setting, where linguistic form is inextricable from artistic and social practice. Scholars of African oral literature have long noted the role of formulaic structures in performance (Finnegan, 2012; Barber, 1991), and the present study extends this insight to show how transformational grammar contributes to the artistry of Yàgbà speech.

In terms of applied contributions, this research provides a framework for developing culturally responsive educational materials. As Yàgbà speakers increasingly encounter Standard Yoruba and English in formal schooling, there is a risk that local syntactic patterns may be marginalized or stigmatized. By documenting Yàgbà transformations

in detail, this study lays the groundwork for teaching resources that respect dialectal diversity while fostering metalinguistic awareness. Such materials could help younger generations appreciate the distinctiveness of their heritage language, thereby strengthening linguistic identity and resisting the pressures of language shift. At a broader level, this aligns with efforts in African linguistics to promote dialect-inclusive pedagogies that value micro-variation rather than subordinating it to standardized norms (Adegbija, 1994; Bamgbose, 1991).

From a typological perspective, the Yàgbà data enrich comparative research on the left periphery, particularly in languages where information structure plays a more pronounced role than case morphology. The consistent co-occurrence of focus particles and resumptives supports cartographic models that posit finely articulated projections such as FocP and TopP (Rizzi, 1997). At the same time, the data challenge the universality of certain assumptions in Minimalism, particularly regarding economy. In Yàgbà, overt redundancy—through particles and resumptives—is not a violation of economy but a strategy for maintaining discourse clarity. This insight highlights the value of under-documented dialects for testing and refining universalist claims in syntax.

Finally, this study demonstrates the importance of linguistic documentation for preserving endangered varieties. While Yàgbà remains vital among older generations, younger speakers increasingly shift toward Standard Yoruba and English in urban and educational contexts. Without systematic documentation, many of the dialect's unique features risk being lost within a generation. By recording and analyzing syntactic transformations, this study contributes to the long-term preservation of Yàgbà as both a linguistic and cultural resource. Future research could extend this documentation to additional domains, such as clausal embedding, reflexivization, and serial verb constructions, thereby building a more comprehensive grammar. Comparative studies with other Yoruba dialects would also shed light on the mechanisms of micro-variation and the sociolinguistic factors driving syntactic innovation.

In conclusion, Yàgbà exhibits a typologically significant and culturally rich system of syntactic transformations that foregrounds the dialect's contribution to both African linguistics and general syntactic theory. By privileging overt marking, resumption, and verb movement, Yàgbà underscores the importance of discourse in shaping grammar. This study thus contributes to three interrelated domains: (i) descriptive linguistics, by documenting an under-studied dialect; (ii) theoretical syntax, by refining models of resumption, focus, and the left periphery; and (iii) applied linguistics, by offering a foundation for educational and preservation efforts. Ultimately, the Yàgbà data remind us that grammar is not only a cognitive system but also a cultural practice, one that sustains memory, identity, and artistry in the lives of its speakers.

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