



## On the Emergence of a Splitting Negator in Yoruba

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### Abstract

Relatively recently, a new negator, “Àbí...ni”, emerged in the conversational language of the younger generation of Yoruba speakers. This new linguistic form is termed in this paper as “splitting negator”, owing to the observation that it consists of two particles that are structurally circumfixed with a positive statement. The paper therefore attempts a syntactic cum semantic analysis of this lexical item in order to ascertain whether or not it should be “officially” admitted into the Yoruba lexicon. The data analysed in this study were obtained via researcher’s observation and supplemented by introspective method since the researcher also belongs to the social class of speakers who predominantly use the phenomenon under investigation. Among others, the study fundamentally establishes that this splitting negator is idiomatic as an isolated form and that it often expresses pragmatic ambiguity when it is used in discourse such that it is the context of use that normally determines its interpretation. The paper concludes by proposing that “Àbí...ni” be granted linguistic license as a negator in Yoruba, as this will not only encourage lexicon expansion but will also serve as a new stylistic medium of expressing the opposite of a positive statement in the language.

**Key words:** Splitting negator; Àbí...ni; Particles; Circumfix; Yoruba lexicon.

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### INTRODUCTION

One of the most incontrovertible properties of human language is that it is creative or productive. This is so in the sense that users of language do not always produce only sentences that they have heard or learnt previously; but on the basis of their knowledge of the grammar of their language, they can always produce new expressions (Syal & Jindal, 2007). As McGregor (2009, p.13) succinctly puts it, linguistic signs can be put together to form sequences that may never have been produced before; and even if they are not entirely novel, they may be innovative in that they are not drawn from memory. On this premise, new terms, concepts, terminologies or vocabularies can find their way into the lexicon of a language from time to time as a result of novel ideas in technological development, for example, which have to be expressed both in speech and writing. Even language users are dynamic in such a way that they can develop a new (or an alternative) way of expressing an existing idea in their language. From this brief incursion into the productivity of language, it becomes obvious that language is not a one-way-traffic system of communication but a natural phenomenon that is stylistically designed to accommodate expression of ideas in diverse, new ways.

According to O’Grady, Archibald and Katamba (2011, p.3), because there are always new things to say, new experiences to report, and new challenges to confront, language has to be creative, giving us the freedom to produce and understand new words and sentences as the need arises. It was the so called freedom that was exploited by the younger generation of Yoruba speakers to invent a new negator in the language popularly known as “Àbí...ni”, which is named in this paper as “splitting negator”. Yoruba, a Kwa language of the Niger-Congo sub-phylum spoken in the south-western region of Nigeria, has several negators among which are kò, kó and kíí. However, the need to convey negative information

in a new way must have prompted the Yoruba youths to invent the negator under investigation.

The use of this newly derived form seems to be confined to the context of communication involving like minds; hence, the reason for its slangy nature. Taking this into account as well as considering the fact that it is mutually intelligible nearly only among the younger generation, the ensuing poser is: should this new lexical item be “officially” admitted into the lexicon of Yoruba or be considered as a mere linguistic form which temporally surfaced and which will disappear in the process of time? Thus, proffering an answer to this question becomes paramount in this paper.

## 1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of negation has been extensively discussed in the literature. This is because it is a universal phenomenon in that all human systems of communication have a peculiar way of replacing a proposition with one that states the opposite. By definition, negation is a grammatical operation which concerns itself with the formation of negative expressions. A negative construction, according to Matthews (2007, p.260), is one whose basic role is in asserting that something is not the case. As Bamgbose (1990) observes, negation could be lexical, phrasal or sentential, in which the sense expressed by a word, phrase or sentence respectively is negated.

As a transformational process, negation basically converts an affirmative expression to a negative one. Within the context of truth-condition perspective of semantics, an affirmative form expresses the validity of a basic assertion while a negative form expresses its falsity. Across languages, negative constructions are derived via the insertion of negative markers/particles technically known as negators. A negator is therefore any lexical item that expresses negation. Using English as an example, a negative construction contradicts all or part of the meaning of a sentence with the use of the negative particle “not” or the contracted form “n’t”. Consider the following sentences:

- 1a. Stephen is my friend
- b. Stephen is not my friend
- 2a. My friend kicked the ball
- b. My friend didn’t kick the ball

The introduction of “not” and “n’t” in 1b and 2b respectively reflects the denial or inversion of the corresponding meaning of the constructions in 1a and 2a. Thus, sentence 1b means it is not true that Stephen is my friend; whereas sentence 2b means it is not true that my friend kicked the ball. In the light of this instantiation, negation could be described as an expression that is contrary to the truth (Baker, 1995).

Apart from using the registered negative marker “not” in English, negation could be implied by many other elements such as no, none, nothing, nobody, nowhere, never, etc.. The following examples justify the above claim:

- 3a. Everybody loves rice (positive)
- b. Nobody loves rice (negative)
- 4a. Everything in life worries me (positive)
- b. Nothing in life worries me (negative)

Following Kirsten (1991), cited in Toromade (2011), even verbs such as “deny”, “forget”, “refuse” as well as prepositions such as “without” may be used to alternatively express negation, as shown in the following examples:

- 5a. John said that he killed a hen (positive)
- b. John denied that he killed a hen (negative)
- 6a. Jack did the assignment (positive)
- b. Jack refused to do the assignment (negative)
- 7a. I will go with the pen (positive)
- b. I will go without the pen (negative)

In the three pairs of sentences above, it could be deduced that 5b alternatively means “John did not kill a hen”; 6b alternatively means “Jack did not do the assignment”; and 7b alternatively means “I will not go with the pen”.

Similarly, lexical item negation could be derived in English using affixes. For instance, prefixes such as un-, dis-, in-, non-, il-, ir- can be attached before some words to give them opposite meaning e.g.

agree	→	disagree
common	→	uncommon
relevant	→	irrelevant

Conversion of affirmative statements to their negative counterparts is also evident in Yoruba. In the language, a negative construction is derived by incorporating a negative operator e.g. kò/ò, kó, kí in a positive statement. The pairs of sentences below suffice:

- 8a. Bólá ra bàtà  
Bólá buy shoe  
“Bólá bought shoe”
- b. Bólá ò ra bàtà  
Bólá Neg buy shoe  
“Bólá did not buy shoe”
- 9a. Ilé - iwé ni Adé lọ  
house book FOC Adé go  
“It was school that Adé went to”
- b. Ilé - iwé kó ni Adé lọ  
house book Neg FOC Adé go  
“It was not school that Adé went to”

Looking at the sentences above, it could be observed that the negative particle “ò” in 8b negates the meaning of the declarative proposition in 8a; whereas the negator

“kó” in 9b denies the validity of the emphatic proposition expressed in 9a.

Furthermore, Yoruba attests double or serial negation as revealed in the following examples adapted from Bamgbose (1990):

- 10a. Wón gbòdò bè wá wò  
 they must beg us see  
 “They must visit/check on us”
- b. Wòn ò gbòdò má bè wá wò  
 they Neg must Neg beg us see  
 “They must not fail to visit/check on us”
- 11a. Olú ni ó lọ  
 Olú FOC 3Sg go  
 “It was Olú that went”
- b. Olú kó ni kò lọ  
 Olú Neg FOC Neg go  
 “It was not Olú that did not go”  
 OR
- c. kii se Olú ni kò lọ  
 Neg Olú FOC Neg go  
 “It was not Olú that did not go”

Contrary to the previous examples, the ones above show that once two negators are introduced in a positive sentence, the sentence is converted back to a positive one.

Having addressed the concept of negation both in English and Yoruba above, the subsequent sub-sections examine the splitting negator (Àbí...ni) that recently emerged in the conversational speech of the younger generation of Yoruba language users.

## 2. A BRIEF SOCIOLINGUISTIC OVERVIEW OF THE USE OF ÀBÍ...NI

Roughly three years ago, the lexical item, Àbí...ni, was introduced by the younger generation of Yoruba speakers. Its origin is yet to be unraveled; it seems as if it crept in accidentally. A careful scrutiny reveals that the negator is not “universally” intelligible among the Yoruba speakers but mainly used among the youths. Weird still, the use of this negative marker even among the said users has relatively reduced in contemporary conversations if compared with its pervasiveness about three years ago when it emerged. Its use was so prevalent at the period of its emergence that hardly would an average youth converse in Yoruba without the form surfacing at least once in every ten sentences produced.

The negator appears to have a restricted use; the speakers use it predominantly to express defiance or rejection vis-à-vis a given assignment or order. Consider the following conversation:

- Speaker A: Bá mi gbé erù tó wà níbè yèn  
 (Help me carry that load)
- Speaker B: Àbí mo ti gbé e ni  
 (I won't carry it)  
 OR

Speaker A: Sé wàá bá mi gbé erù yèn?  
 (Will you help me to carry that load?)

Speaker B: Àbí mo ti gbé e ni  
 (I won't carry it)

However, at other times, they employ it to indicate contradiction of a declarative statement or a polar interrogative expression as shown in the following conversation:

Speaker A: Njé Adé wá sí ojà lóníí?  
 (Did Adé come to the market today?)

Speaker B: Àb' ó ti wá ni  
 (He did not come)

Two sociolinguistic contexts above show that the negator is pragmatically ambiguous whenever it is used. Thus, one may erroneously attribute a different meaning to the sentence in which it is used if such sentence is semantically interpreted as an expression in isolation. This implies that its accurate interpretation is usually governed by the context of usage; hence, the reason for its pragmatic ambiguity.

It is also observed that the users of this form frequently introduce the perfective marker “ti” in sentences in which it is used. In fact, from the data gathered for this study, 95% of the negative sentences produced by the speakers using “Àbí...ni” reflects the insertion of the perfective marker. Sometimes, the perfective marker has a semantic correlation with the overall meaning of the negative sentence; at other times, it does not. Let us examine the two instances below:

### Conversation 1:

Speaker A: Sé bàbá tí dé?  
 (Has father come?)

Speaker B: Àbí bàbá tí dé ni  
 (Father has not come)

### Conversation 2:

Speaker A: Lọ pe Súlè wá fún mi  
 (Go and call Súlè for me)

Speaker B: Àbí mo tí lọ ni  
 (I will not go)

In the first conversation, the negative sentence produced by speaker B contains “ti” that has a semantic content parallel to the one in Speaker A’s interrogative expression. But the meaning of “ti” in Speaker B’s utterance in the second conversation does not reflect in the overall meaning of the sentence, as the meaning reads “I will not go” and not “I have not gone”. In this regard, the element “ti” is not semantically coded and that is almost the usual practice when the speakers introduce the marker. That is, they introduce it just for fun when it does not even contribute semantically to the sentence.

## 3. DATA PRESENTATION

- a) Àbí Kúnlé ra mótò ni  
 NegP<sub>1</sub> Kúnlé buy car NegP<sub>2</sub>  
 “Kúnlé did not buy a car”

- b) Àbí mo ti lọ ni  
 NegP<sub>1</sub> I have go NegP<sub>2</sub>  
 “I did not go”
- c) Àbí Wálé ti kàwé ni  
 NegP<sub>1</sub> Wálé has read book NegP<sub>2</sub>  
 “Wálé does/did not read books”
- d) Àbí wón ti gba èbùn kékeré ni  
 NegP<sub>1</sub> they have collect gift small NegP<sub>2</sub>  
 “They did not collect the small gift”
- e) Àbí bàbá ti ta ọkò tí ó tóbi ni  
 NegP<sub>1</sub> father has sell car that 3sg big NegP<sub>2</sub>  
 “Father did not sell the car that is big”
- f) Àbí Bísí fa asọ Bólá ya ni  
 NegP<sub>1</sub> Bísí stretch cloth Bólá tear NegP<sub>2</sub>  
 “Bísí did not tear Bólá’s cloth”
- g) Àbí Chelsea ti win ni  
 NegP<sub>1</sub> Chelsea have win NegP<sub>2</sub>  
 “Chelsea did/will not win”
- h) Àbí wón ti jẹun ni  
 NegP<sub>1</sub> they have eat NegP<sub>2</sub>  
 “They did(have) not eat(en)”
- i) Àbí mummy ti sùn ni  
 NegP<sub>1</sub> mummy has sleep NegP<sub>2</sub>  
 “Mummy did(has) not sleep(slept)”
- j) Àbí Wálé ti wá ni  
 NegP<sub>1</sub> Wálé has come NegP<sub>2</sub>  
 “Wálé will not come”

#### 4. SYNTACTIC AND SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

From the data presented above, it is observed that the negator under investigation comprises two separate but

circumfixal negative particles “Àbí” and “ni” coded as NegP<sub>1</sub> and NegP<sub>2</sub> respectively. In isolation, the first particle means “or” while the second seems to be the Yoruba focus marker, as reflected in the sentences below:

- a) Pe Adé àbí Wálé wá fún mi  
 Call Adé or Wálé come for me  
 “Call Adé or Wálé for me”
- b) Adé ní kí o pè wá fún mi  
 Adé Foc that you call come for me  
 “It is Adé that you should call for me”

It therefore becomes so interesting that the users selected these two unrelated forms and merged them together to generate a negative marker which means “not” or “never” as in:

- c) Àbí Adé àti Wálé ti wá ni  
 NegP<sub>1</sub> Adé and Wálé have come NegP<sub>2</sub>  
 “Adé and Wálé did/have/will not come”

It could be deduced from here that the holistic meaning of this splitting negator (when the two particles are combined) constitutes a radical departure from the individual meaning of the component particles. On this premise, it suffices to infer that “Àbí...ni” is idiomatic in nature since its meaning cannot be construed on the basis of the lexical meaning of “Àbí” and “ni” in isolation.

Furthermore, this splitting negator has a unique, fixed distributional pattern which other existing negators in

the language do not have. Structurally, the first part is positioned before the sentence and the other fragment occurs immediately after the sentence. By implication, the two circumfixal particles making up the negator cannot be verbally rendered or written together when used in a sentence; they must be split, otherwise, the sentence will be ungrammatical and semantically anomalous. Consider the following sentences:

- d) \*Àbí ni mo ti jẹun  
 e) \*Mo ti lọ àbí ni

The two sentences above are ungrammatical and meaningless; they can be made otherwise by repositioning the circumfixal particles “Àbí” and “ni” sentence-initially and finally respectively as follows:

- f) Àbí mo ti jeun ni (I did not eat)
- g) Àbí mo ti lọ ni (I did not go)

It is also observed that when the splitting negator is used in a discourse, ambiguity is inevitable. Empirical conversations reveal that “Àbí...ni” could result in a meaning derived either from pre-positioning auxiliary verbs such as is, are, am, does, do, has, have with the negator “not” or pre-positioning the future auxiliary “will” with “not”. Therefore, it is the context in which the expression is rendered that will determine the choice between the range of meanings above. The examples below suffice:

**Conversation 1:**

- Speaker A: Ó dàbí pé mummy ti sùn  
(It seems that mummy has slept)
- Speaker B: Àbí mummy ti sùn ni  
(Mummy has not slept)

**Conversation 2:**

- Speaker A: Sé/Njé mummy sun?  
(Did mummy sleep?)
- Speaker B: Àbí mummy ti sùn ni  
(Mummy did not sleep)

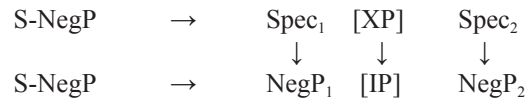
**Conversation 3:**

- Speaker A: Mummy máa sùn  
(Mummy will sleep)
- Speaker B: Àbí mummy ti sùn ni  
(Mummy will not sleep)

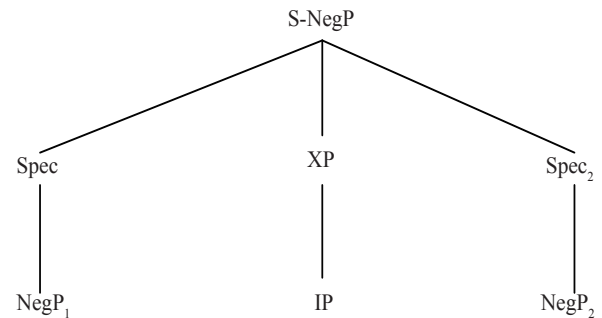
Observe that the same utterance is produced by speaker B in all the three conversations but three different meanings are implied. The ambiguity inherent in the expression is governed by the various contexts in which it is uttered, and its interpretation is determined by same. In this light, this negator is said to have a pragmatic significance as far as its empirical use is concerned.

**5. THE PHRASE STRUCTURE OF “ÀBÍ...NI”**

Within the context of X-bar, a sub-theory of Government and Binding framework which deals with the structure of phrases in language, this paper proposes the following structure for the Splitting-Negative Phrase (S-NegP):

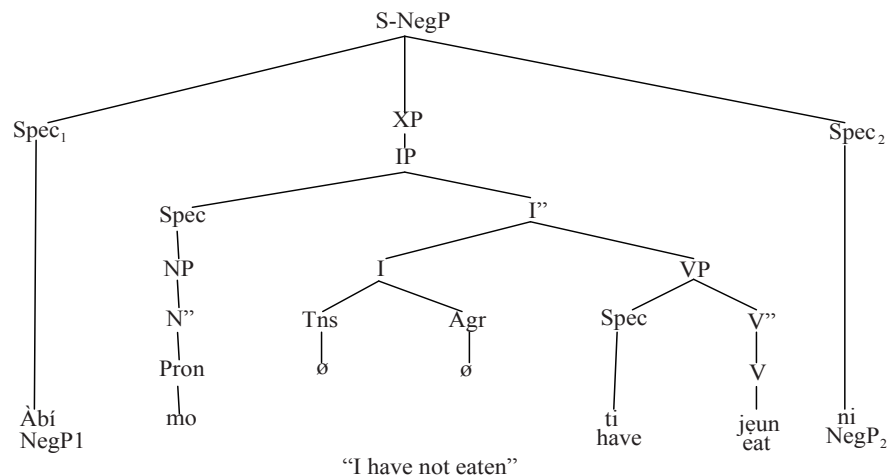


The schema reads as follows: The Splitting-Negative Phrase consists of two Negative Particles which house an Inflectional Phrase (IP). The first particle precedes the IP while the second succeeds it. On the phrase structure tree, the two particles will occupy the two specifier positions. Note, however, that the negator is a single specifier of the IP; it only splits into two when the IP (sentence) is phonetically produced. The above instantiation can be represented on a tree below:



**Figure 1**  
**The Phrase Structure of Àbí...ni**

In the light of the above, the sentence “Àbí mo ti jeun ni” has the following structure which can be used as a template for other examples of the Splitting-Negative Phrase:



**Figure 2**  
**The Structure of the Splitting-Negative Phrase in Yoruba**

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## 6. PROPOSAL

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Since language is an open system, so elastic that new elements could creep in any time, this paper hereby proposes that the splitting negator “Àbí...ní” be granted grammatical acceptance in the Yoruba lexicon. This will encourage linguistic expansion in that its incorporation will add to the number of negators already present in the grammar of Yoruba and its conversational use will serve as a new stylistic medium of expressing the opposite of a statement that is true.

Also, because of its semantic and pragmatic relevance as being idiomatic in isolation and ambiguous in contextual usage respectively, this new linguistic form should be made pedagogically relevant. This can be done by teaching it to Yoruba learners when a lesson on Yoruba negation is taught. Through this, the learners will be exposed to a different dynamic of the concept of negation as far as the language is concerned.

By and large, admitting “Àbí...ní” into the grammatical system of Yoruba constitutes an empirical platform upon which the productivity of human language can be verified and justified. On this premise, it is imperative that the form be given an official status as one of the existing Yoruba negators.

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## CONCLUSION

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This paper has examined the syntactic as well as the semantic dynamics of an emerging splitting negator – Àbí...ní – in Yoruba. Syntactically, the negator comprises

two circumfixal particles; the first normally precedes the sentence while the second succeeds it. In terms of its semantics, the negative marker is idiomatic as an isolated lexical item and, by extension, expresses pragmatic ambiguity when it is used in discourse. Owing to its linguistic uniqueness as shown in this paper, it suffices to conclude that giving this new negator linguistic license to compete with the “officially” recognized negators in the language is indeed tenable, both theoretically and empirically.

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