

Towards the Semantics of Content Questions in Yorùbá

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60787/jolan.vol29no1.457>

Ọlaide Akinwande

University of Lagos, Akoka

oaakinwande@unilag.edu.ng

Abstract

Although syntactic studies on Yorùbá content questions abound, their semantic aspects remain understudied. To address this gap, this paper examines the semantics of Yorùbá content questions, focusing specifically on in-situ content question constructions. Drawing data from spontaneous speech, it constructs pragmatic contexts to account for their specific interpretations. Framed within Information Structure (Chafe, 1976; Prince, 1981; Halliday, 1994; Lambrecht, 1994; Erteschik-Shir, 2007; van der Wal et al., 2025) and Alternative Semantics (Hamblin, 1973; Karttunen, 1977; Rooth, 1992, 2015), the analysis captures both the structural composition and semantic interpretations of in-situ content questions. The paper identifies three distinct semantic construals: clarity, assurance, and amazement/displeasure. Additionally, it re-evaluates Jones's (2006) claim that verb or VP focus cannot answer *wh*-questions in Yorùbá. It demonstrates that while Jones's conclusions hold for restricted content questions, verb or VP focus cleanly answers unrestricted content questions. It concludes with the suggestion that future research should extend this semantic analysis to ex-situ content questions.

Keywords: *Alternative Semantics, Content Questions, Information Structure, Semantics, Yorùbá*

1 Introduction

Two main question types exist in natural language syntax: polar questions, which require a positive or negative response, and content questions, which demand a full, explicit response. Beyond their surface form, every natural language expression carries background meanings (Potts, 2005). Although numerous syntactic accounts of content questions exist, semantic studies pinpointing the interpretations associated with Yorùbá content questions - particularly when question phrases (*wh*-elements) appear *in-situ* - remain scarce. Accordingly, this study examines the semantic readings of *in-situ* content questions in Yorùbá, excluding *ex-situ* constructions from its scope.

2 Literature review

This section reviews previous literature on content questions to highlight the empirical and theoretical gaps addressed by the present study. Bamgboṣe (1990) presents a syntactic analysis of Yorùbá questions, identifying modifying words such as *kí* ‘what’, *ta* ‘who’, *èwo* ‘which’, *èlò* ‘how much’, and *ibo* ‘where’, while noting their occurrence in focus constructions. However, Bamgboṣe omits the semantic readings associated with in-situ content questions. In contrast, this study analyzes these items as nominal expressions that directly contribute to the semantic denotations of Yorùbá content questions.

Hagstrom (1998) examines the semantics of in-situ wh-questions, arguing against invisible movement at Logical Form (LF). Hagstrom proposes that the wh-word remains in-situ while an interrogative operator/particle moves leftward (e.g., Japanese *ka*), and that wh-words resemble indefinites that generate set-of-alternatives answers. Because Yorùbá lacks a Japanese-style question particle co-occurring with wh-expressions, this mechanism does not apply directly. More importantly, Hagstrom does not account for the specific pragmatic interpretations attached to in-situ wh-questions, a gap this study addresses for Yorùbá.

Déchaine (2001) investigates the syntax-phonology interface in Yorùbá, noting that low-tone verbs raise to mid-tone before accusative objects in basic clauses but retain their inherent tone in content questions. Déchaine analyzes object extraction as leaving a trace/gap, whereas subject and possessor extractions require nominative and genitive clitics, respectively. While Déchaine concludes that low-drop verbs with wh-traces involve movement rather than deletion, the analysis remains strictly syntactic and neglects the semantic interpretations of in-situ content questions.

Jones (2006) offers a semantic/pragmatic account of Yorùbá focus, arguing that argument and predicate focus involve A-movement to the left periphery. Jones notes that Yorùbá focus is non-exhaustive and does not trigger existence presuppositions (contrasting with English clefts and Hungarian focus). Critically, Jones claims that verb or VP focus cannot serve as an answer to content questions in Yorùbá. This study directly re-evaluates and refutes that claim.

Iløri (2010) provides a syntactic comparison of content questions in Igálà and Yorùbá, asserting that content question words (e.g., Yorùbá *ta*, *kí*, *èwo*, *báwo*; Igálà *énwú*, *éné*, *ábú*) move clause-initially followed by the focus marker, *ni*. Iløri also examines interrogative predicators (*dà*, *ńkó*, *hà*). However, Iløri does not address the semantic denotations of content questions, which this study examines through the lens of in-situ construals.

Cable (2010) formulates a Q-based theory of wh-questions, proposing that wh-words do not inherently encode interrogative force; rather, a Q-particle drives the syntax

and semantics. Cable categorizes languages into those that license Q-particle/wh-word agreement (e.g., Japanese, Chinese) and those that block it (e.g., Turkish, Malayalam). Yorùbá falls outside the Q-particle agreement type. While Cable links in-situ wh-phrases to focus semantics and alternative semantics, the framework is not applied to the specific pragmatically driven readings of Yorùbá in-situ questions.

Oshodi (2016) outlines content question structures in the Ọ̀wò dialect of Yorùbá, highlighting four markers (sí, kí, kẹ̀ẹ̀, and final-syllable lengthening). Because Oshodi's focus is restricted to clause-initial syntax and morphology, the semantics of Ọ̀wò content questions remain unanalyzed.

Ilọ̀rì (2017) reinforces a movement account for Yoruboid languages, arguing that content question operators reside outside the focus domain and that non-operator elements like *dà* and *ńkọ́* lack verbal properties. Like Ilọ̀rì (2010), this work overlooks the semantic interpretations of in-situ constructions.

Olaogun (2017) applies a clause-typing and information-structure framework to Yorùbá content questions, arguing that content question words are focused constituents rather than clause-typing particles. Olaogun notes that question words cannot co-occur with other focused nouns due to a single-focus constraint per clause. Although Olaogun links content questions to focus via structural parallelism, the study focuses on isolated interrogative nouns rather than whole-clause semantic interpretations. This present study expands the scope by employing Information Structure and Alternative Semantics to analyze full in-situ question expressions in Yorùbá.

Adeoye (2018) provides a syntactic derivation of content questions in Úwù, arguing that question elements move from clause-final to clause-initial position. Adeoye does not address how content questions are semantically construed.

Olaogun (2018) proposes a unified projection where both yes/no and content questions in Ñjò-kóo are headed by an Inter head. While establishing the presence of Q-particles and wh-movement in Ñjò-kóo, it leaves the semantic interpretation of in-situ questions unaddressed.

Akerele (2021) presents a typology of Yorùbá content questions, classifying them into nominal Q-words (*ta*, *kí*), locative Q-particles (*dà*, *ńkọ́*), and reason phrases (*è é ẹ̀*). Akerele analyzes *dà* and *ńkọ́* as clause-final Q-particles carrying choice-specifying or emphatic readings, but treats nominal Q-words purely syntactically. The present study sets aside Q-particles to focus specifically on the semantic readings of nominal Q-words when they occur in-situ (clause-finally).

In conclusion, the existing literature on Yorùbá content questions is overwhelmingly syntactic. While some selective studies (e.g., Hagstrom, 1998; Cable, 2010; Olaogun, 2017; Akerele, 2021) touched formal semantic mechanisms, none

systematically account for the pragmatic interpretations associated with clause-final *in-situ* content questions in Yorùbá. Our concern in this article is to bridge that gap by integrating Information Structure and Alternative Semantics to model these readings directly.

3 Theoretical approach

This paper adopts Information Structure and Alternative Semantics as its core theoretical frameworks. Together, these frameworks account for the semantic readings of *in-situ* content questions in Yorùbá. The following subsections outline their key principles and application to the data.

3.1 Information Structure

Information Structure (IS) is a discourse-semantics framework that models how information is coded, packaged, and arranged in speech acts to facilitate effective communication between speaker and listener (Halliday, 1994; Erteschik-Shir, 2007; van der Wal, 2025). Information packaging in IS is primarily achieved through two mechanisms. The first called Cognitive Alignment (Given vs. New) assumes that the speaker structures an utterance based on the assumed mental state of the addressee and distinguishes between shared, pre-existing knowledge (Given or Topic), and newly introduced information (New or Comment). The second christened Structural and Prosodic Packaging assumes that natural languages employs syntactic modifications such as word-order reordering, e.g. placing Given before New information, and prosodic features like stress and pitch to signal topic or focus.

In addition to these, IS also relies on what it calls activation status and functional roles of referents within discourse (van der Wal, 2025). Referents, whether real or mental representations, may be active (i.e. accessible) if previously mentioned in the discourse, or inactive (inaccessible) if newly introduced (Ariel, 2001; Gundel, 2003). While cross-linguistic variations exist in how IS is realized, its fundamental principles remain consistent. For this study, we employ IS to analyze the semantic structure of Yorùbá content questions, focusing on how referential activation and discourse functions account for their interpretation.

3.2 Alternative semantics

Alternative Semantics (Rooth, 1992, 2015) is a formal semantic framework that analyses expressions such as focus, questions, topics, disjunctions, and negative polarity by modeling their meanings as sets of alternative propositions rather than single denotations. In question semantics, Hamblin (1973) proposes that a question denotes the set of all possible answers (both true and false), whereas Karttunen (1977) restricts this set strictly

to true answers. Under Rooth's framework, expressions are assigned two distinct semantic values: first is *Ordinary Semantic Value*, $([|x|]^o)$, which is the conventional or literal meaning of the expression; and second, the *Focus/Question Semantic Value*, $([|x|]^f)$ or $([|x|]^Q)$, which is the set of alternative propositions generated by replacing the focus/question element with contextual alternatives.

In content questions, alternative-sensitive operators evaluate these generated alternatives against the context. For instance, in a Standard Yorùbá content question expression like (1) below, the variable x in the ordinary semantic value $[|x|]^o$ generates a question value $[|x|]^Q$ consisting of contextually relevant alternatives, such as {ìrẹ̀sì 'rice' èwà 'beans', iṣu 'yam'}.

- 1a. Kí ni Akin jẹ?
Yam FOC Akin eat
'What did Akin ate?'
- b. IṢU ni Akín jẹ
Yam FOC Akin eat
'Akin ate YAM.'

The question semantic value is expressed as $[|1|]^Q$, indicating that the question operator evaluates the alternative set to pick a specific answer (e.g., iṣu 'yam') for what Akin ate. To account for question readings, Alternative Semantics posits distinct alternative sets for questions and their answers, namely: question denotation which posits a set of alternative propositions (as in 1a); and answer denotation which posits a set of possible individual answers (1b) over which the question variable ranges - analogous to how a disjunction operator ranges over the set of conjunct denotations. For example, in an alternative proposition targeting an unknown entity (e.g., who invented calculus in 2a below), the question variable generates two or more alternatives from which the responder selects the correct entity (2b).

- 2a. [Who invented calculus_i, Leibniz, John or James?]
b. [Leibniz invented it_i]. (Rooth, 2015:9)

4 Construals of content questions in Yorùbá

Following Cheng's (1991) Clause Typing Hypothesis, natural languages are broadly categorized into two groups (Bobaljik & Wurmbrand, 2015; Chang, 2016; Faure & Palasis, 2021) namely in-situ and ex-situ languages. In in-situ languages, wh-elements remain in their base-generated positions or optionally raise to the clause-initial domain while ex-situ languages, in contrast, obligatorily require wh-elements to move to the clause-initial position. Given that content question words such as *kí* 'what', *ta* 'who', and *èwo* 'which' are base-generated in-situ, though they may optionally raise to the clause-initial periphery (Ilori, 2010, 2017; Akerele, 2021), we assume that Yorùbá belongs to the former group. Because Yorùbá lacks genuine morphological wh-words, these items are referred to as content question phrases in this paper. It is pertinent to mention that interrogative particles, *dà* and *ńkọ* are excluded from this study, as they do not express the semantic readings under investigation. To illustrate these properties, let us consider examples (3) and (4) below.

- 3a. Olú àti Ọláewé rí [ta ni?]
 Olu CONJ Ọlaewe see who FOC
 'Olu and Ọlaewe saw who?'
- b. Bùnmi lọ [ibo/ *ibo ni?]
 Bunmi go where/*where FOC
 'Bunmi went where?'
- c. Adé jẹ [kí ni?]
 Ade eat what FOC
 'Ade ate what?'
- 4a. Ẹlára [èwo/ *èwo ni?]
 Ẹlára buy which/*which FOC
 'Ẹlára bought which one?'
- b. Ẹgbẹ́dà sọrò [báwo/ *báwo ni?]
 Ẹgbẹ́dà talk how/ *how FOC
 'Ẹgbẹ́dà talked how?'
- c. O jẹ [mélòó/ *mélòó ni?]
 2SG eat how-much/ *how-much FOC
 'You ate how many?'
- d. Ẹ gbé ipò [(i)kelòó/ *(i)kelòó ni?]
 2PL carry position how-many/*how-manyFOC
 'How many position did you take?'

Beyond the basic semantic content, the contextual data in (3) and (4) demonstrate that in-situ content questions carry distinct pragmatic readings. The speakers in these contexts do not pose questions idly; rather, they deliberately deploy in-situ constructions to resolve confusion or signal specific speaker attitudes regarding a situation. From contexts like (3) and (4), three primary semantic interpretations emerge. These readings are not unique to these specific examples, but extend broadly to contexts where content question phrases occur clause-finally. Each interpretation is detailed in the subsections below.

4.1 Clarity

Clarity involves presenting ideas in a manner that enables accurate interpretation by listeners (Clark, 1996:58). Similarly, Grice (1975:45) describes clarity as language use that makes meaning readily understandable, avoiding ambiguity so listeners can interpret speech correctly. In the context of examples (3) and (4), a clarity reading implies that the interrogator seeks to confirm whether activated referents (van der Wal, 2025:7) performed the action in question. This reading extends to scenarios where the interrogator failed to hear the previous utterance clearly (Roberts, 2012), prompting a question to clarify the situation. For instance, the speaker in (3a) seeks to identify whom Olú and Ọláewé saw, likely because the interrogator misheard the name when it was initially mentioned. Within Alternative Semantics, (3a) carries a presupposition originating from prior discourse that the interrogator did not fully hear; thus, the question is raised to clarify the person's identity and confirm whether Olú and Ọláewé indeed saw someone. A clarity interpretation is likewise present in (4b), where the interrogator seeks to confirm and validate whether Egbédá was speaking improperly. Context 1 below illustrates this clarity interpretation.

Context 1:

Olú and Ọláewé were returning from school when they saw their younger brother, Dàda, playing football. Upon arriving home, they reported the incident to their mother. Their father, who was sitting a short distance away, overheard the conversation and wanted to clarify the details. Seeking full confirmation of the situation, the father - acting as the speaker in examples (3a) and (4b) - asked the questions.

The clarity reading is equally available in (3b), indicating the speaker's intention to confirm where Búnmi went and validate what was heard. Similarly, the interrogator in (3c) seeks to confirm whether Adé ate something and clarify what was consumed. From examples (3a-c) and (4b), one can infer a scenario where either X performed an action known to Z but unknown to Y, or X said something that Z heard clearly but Y misheard. To decipher

what X did or said, Y poses the questions in (3a-c) and (4b). Non-verbal cues such as head turns and facial expressions may also accompany these utterances. As illustrated, three activated referents (Ariel, 2001; Gundel, 2003) participate in these contexts. In Alternative Semantics (Hamblin, 1973; Karttunen, 1977), questions generate alternative propositions to resolve the ambiguity. For instance, the alternative set for whom Olú and Oláewé saw in Context 1 may be {Délé, Túnjì, Dàda, Bádé, Báyo}, with the core semantic value picking the true answer, *Dàda*. In (3b), the alternative set for where the referent went may include {market, beach, park, football pitch}, where the true answer carries the core semantic value (e.g., beach). For (3c), the alternative set for what the referent ate may include {fish, egg, meat, snail}, with the question semantic value selecting the true item (e.g., egg). The table below summarizes the clarity interpretations and semantic values for (3a-c) and (4b).

Table 1: Activity of referents involved in the clarity interpretation

Referents	situations/events
X	did or said something (theme).
Y	wanted to confirm what X said/not heard what X said.
Z	had the knowledge of what X did or said.

4.2 Assurance

Assurance is an interactional move that provides confirmation, reassurance, and emotional or epistemic support, thereby reducing uncertainty, maintaining alignment, and sustaining social relations within conversation (Heritage, 1984:299). An assurance reading in this sense asks whether the addressee can confirm that the agentive arguments in questions like (5) below actually performed the action claimed. Under this interpretation, it is presupposed that a speaker previously asserted that X performed an action. To verify this claim, the interrogators in (5) pose the question to the addressee to ascertain whether they are certain of their statement. The examples in (4) above are reproduced below as (5) for ease of reference.

- 5a. *Şola* ra [èwo/ *èwo ni?]
Şola buy which/ *which FOC
 ‘Şola bought which one?’
- b. *Egbèda* sòrò [báwo/*báwo ni?]
Egbèda talk how/ *how FOC
 ‘Egbèda talked as how?’

¹The asterisked part in the examples show that in-situ content question phrases cannot take focus marker *ni* in that position, lest ill-formed constructions emerge.

- c. O jẹ [mélòó/ *mélòó ni?]
2SG eat how-much/ *how-much FOC
‘You ate how-many?’
- d. È gbé ipò [(i)kelòó/ *(i)kelòó ni?]
2PL carry position how-many/*how-many FOC
‘You took how many positions?’

In (5a), the interrogator seeks to ascertain whether X actually purchased a specific entity among various alternatives. In (5b), the interrogator aims to confirm the truth or falsity of the manner in which the referent spoke. Similarly, the interrogator in (5c) questions the addressee to establish the exact quantity of entities (presumably food items) consumed. In (5d), the referent is questioned to verify the position they took. The context below illustrates this assurance interpretation.

Context 2:

Ègbédá’s mother had warned him not to join in irrelevant discussions when he was supposed to be studying, and she asked neighboring women to help monitor his behavior. One day, while his mother was out, Ègbédá surreptitiously slipped away to play and talk improperly with his friends, unaware that Wálé’s mother saw him leaving. When Ègbédá’s mother returned to an empty house, she asked Wálé’s mother if she knew where Ègbédá was, and Wálé’s mother confirmed that he had slipped out to play and converse with his friends. Shortly after, one of Ègbédá’s friends arrived to report that Ègbédá had abused and bullied him. Seeking assurance and confirmation of the report, Ègbédá’s mother asked the question in (5b).

Following Roberts (2012), shared information exists between the speaker and hearer regarding the questions in (5) and Context 2, as the hearer is aware of violating a prior instruction to avoid irrelevant discussions. Consequently, Context 2 conditions the questions in (5) to generate an assurance reading focused on establishing certainty. Three referents participate in (5a-b): Referent X (active) is the agentive argument or theme performing the action, Referent Y (inactive/unknown) is the hearer, and Referent Z (inactive/unknown) is the interrogator. Similarly, three referents feature in (5c-d): Referent Z (inactive) is the interrogator, Referent Y (active/accessible) is the hearer, and Referent

X is the underlying entity under discussion (the quantity consumed or the position attained).

Within Alternative Semantics, (5a) presupposes the existence of various candidate entities, such as {black, brown, white, red}, from which Referent Y made a purchase. The existence of these entities triggers the question in (5a). Under Potts's (2005) framework of conventional implicature, if no such entities existed, the existential presupposition would be canceled. Likewise, (5c) presupposes an existential set of countable edible items {snacks, fruits, tubers of yam, slices of bread}, prompting the speaker to interrogate Referent Y to confirm the exact quantity consumed. In (5d), the question presupposes a set of ordinal ranks {first, second, third, fourth}, from which Referent Y achieved a specific position. Table 2 below summarizes the *assurance* interpretations and semantic properties for (5a-d).

Table 2: *Referents involved and situational role of assurance interpretation in (5a-b)*

Referents	situational roles
X	agentive/theme
Y	interrogatee/knowledge based
Z	interrogator/speaker

Table 3: *Referents involved and situational role of assurance interpretation in 5c-d.*

Referents	situations/events
X	topic/theme
Y	interrogatee/addressee
Z	interrogator/speaker

4.3 Amazement and displeasure

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines amazement as a feeling of great surprise in response to something unexpected or impressive, while displeasure is defined as a feeling of dissatisfaction or mild annoyance in reaction to something unfavorable or unwanted. In essence, the third interpretation of in-situ content questions established in (3) and (4) above is the expression of amazement and displeasure. In these interpretive utterances, the interrogator expresses amazement and displeasure regarding the action of the alleged agentive argument, posing questions to highlight their stance toward the individual. This is illustrated in (6a) and (6b) below.

- 6a. Olú àti Ọláewé rí [ta ni?]
Olu CONJ Ọlaewe see who FOC
'Olu and Ọlaewe saw who?'
- b. Adé jẹ [kí ni?]
Ade eat what FOC
'Ade ate what?'

In this type of reading, the interrogator frowns and may turn their mouth and head to the side, exhibiting a negative posture when asking the question. The interrogator may also raise the question with a loud, angry tone. In (6a), the following context illustrates the reading of amazement and displeasure:

Context 3:

Túndé's father sent Túndé on an errand to buy corn. Túndé collected the money but went to play football instead. Ọláewé and Olú saw their friend Túndé playing football, unaware that he had been sent on an errand. On their way home, Ọláewé and Olú passed by Túndé's house. Túndé's mother saw them and asked if they had seen Túndé, as he was supposed to have returned from buying corn. Ọláewé and Olú informed Túndé's mother that they saw Túndé playing football. Túndé's mother then reported the matter to Túndé's father. To express his displeasure and amazement, Túndé's father asked the question in (6a).

In (6b), the following context reflects the interpretation of *amazement and displeasure*:

Context 4:

Şolá told Adé and Tayò, his younger brothers, not to eat the fish in the pot because it was reserved for dinner. After instructing them, Şolá went out. In the afternoon, Adé defied his brother's instruction, divided the fish into two, and ate half of it with bread. When Şolá returned, Tayò reported that Adé had eaten the fish. To express his amazement and displeasure, Şolá posed the question in (6b).

The conventional implicature (Potts, 2005) of Contexts 3 and 4 is that the violators of these instructions will likely face punishment. Context often reveals speaker attitude in questions involving expectation, desire, assumption, and surprise (Gunlogson, 2003; Sudo, 2013). In

Contexts 3 and 4, the speaker in (6a) desired that Tundé would have returned promptly from the errand, while the speaker in (6b) expected to find the fish untouched in the pot. Because both Tundé and Adé violated these expectations, the speakers experienced surprise and amazement, expressing their displeasure through the questions in (6a) and (6b).

Following Information Structure, three referents (X, Y, Z) participate in these interrogative exchanges: Referent X is the active, accessible agentive argument; Referent Y is the instruction violator; and Referent Z is the interrogator. Within Alternative Semantics, the set of alternative propositions for whom Oláewé and Olú saw in (6a) may include {Wálé, Délé, Tundé, Báýò, Gbénga}, with the core semantic value selecting Tundé. Similarly, the alternative set of items consumed by Adé in (6b) may include {meat, snail, fish, crayfish}, with the true question semantic value picking fish.

5 Felicity conditions of content question and answer congruence

The felicity condition in a question-answer context determines whether an answer is suitable, appropriate, or well-formed for a given question. An answer that fits a question is felicitous, whereas an inappropriate answer is infelicitous (Jones, 2006:156). However, Jones (2006:154-157) argues that verb or VP focus in Yorùbá cannot serve as a felicitous answer to wh-questions in the language, as illustrated in (7) and (8).

- Question: 7a. Kí ni Adé ɕe pèlú ìwé?
 What FOC Ade do with book
 ‘What did Ade do with the book?’
- Answer: b. [Rírà] ni Adé ra ìwé.
 NOM-buy FOC Ade buy book
 ‘He [bought]_F the book.’
 [Answer with verb focus infelicitous].
 (Jones, 2006:156)

- Question: 8a. Kí ni Adé ɕe?
 What FOC Ade do
 ‘What did Ade do?’
- Answer: b. [Ríra ìwé]_F ni ó ra ìwé.
 NOM-buy book FOC 3SG buy book
 ‘He [bought a/the book]_F.’ [Answer with VP focus infelicitous]
 (Jones, 2006:156)

For Jones, (7b) and (8b) are not appropriate as answers to the questions in (7a) and (8a). Jones further argues that the questions in (7a) and (8a) can rather be answered with *basic clause*, as demonstrated in (9b).

- 9a. Question: Kí ni Adé se?
What FOC Ade do
'What did Ade do?'
- b. Answer: Ó ra ìwé.
3SG buy book
'He bought the [book]_F.'
- (Jones, 2006:156)

Jones later provided contexts in which verb or VP focus answers content questions even without basic clauses, as shown in (10) below.

Context 5:

Our friend is wearing a really ugly dress that you know belong to me. You ask, "did you give Sandra that dress?" I laugh and say:

(Jones, 2006:157)

10. Rará, [Títà]_F ni mo tà á fún un.
No, NOM-sell FOC 1SG sell 3SG for 3SG
'No, I sold it to her.'
- (Jones, 2006:157)

Our argument here is that basic clauses are not the only valid answers to the content questions in (7a) and (8a); nor is it necessary to establish a specific context before a verb or VP focus, as in (10), can answer them. Jones appears to have restricted the content questions in (7a) and (8a) exclusively to the question word *kí* 'what'. Had the questions involved other wh-words, such as *ibo* 'where' or *báwo* 'how' - Jones's claim would be unsustainable.

Furthermore, a close examination of the context Jones cites reveals a methodological flaw: the prompt provided ("Did you give Sandra that dress?") with a verb focus answer in (10) is a polar question - not a content question - as it lacks a content question word. It is therefore unjustifiable to use a polar question to support a claim about content questions in this discourse. Ultimately, content questions formed with words other than *kí* can indeed be felicitously answered by verb or VP focus, as demonstrated in (11) and (12).

Question: 11a. Ibo ni Adé ti rí ìwé?
Where FOC Ade PERF see book
'Where did Ade get the book?'

Answer: b. [Rírà]_F ni Adé ra ìwé.
Buying FOC Ade buy book
'Ade BOUGHT the book.'
[Answer with verb focus felicitous].

Question: 12a. Báwo ni ẹ ẹe lọ sílé lánàá?
How FOC 2PL do go LOC-house LOC-yesterday
'How did you go home yesterday?'

Answer: b. [Rírìn]_F ni a rìn lọ sílé lánàá.
Walking FOC 1PL walk go LOC-house LOC-yesterday
'We WALKED home yesterday'
[Answer with verb focus felicitous].

Evidently, verb focus in (11b) and (12b) aptly and appropriately answers the content questions in (11a) and (12a). Therefore, Jones's (2006) proposal that wh-questions cannot be answered with verb or VP focus cannot be generalized, as his argument relies on a restricted set of content question words. The contextual examples in (11) and (12) render Jones's claim invalid.

Another notable insight into why verb or VP focus fails to answer wh-questions involving *kí* 'what' in Yorùbá is that *kí* is a monosyllabic content question word. Similarly, the monosyllabic content question word *ta* 'who' cannot be answered with verb or VP focus, as demonstrated in (13) and (14) below.

Question: 13a. Ta ni Ẹlálá n pè?
Who FOC Ẹlálá PROG call
'Who is Ẹlálá calling?'

Answer: b. [Pípè]_F ni Ẹlálá n pè.
NOM-buy FOC Ẹlálá PROG call
Ẹlálá is CALLING.'
[Answer with verb focus infelicitous].

Question: 14a. Ta ni ó jí owó?
 Who FOC HTS.3SG steal money
 ‘Who stole the money?’

Answer: b. [Jíjí owó]_F ni ó jí owó.
 NOM-buy money FOC HTS.3SG steal money
 ‘S/he STOLE THE MONEY.’
 [Answer with VP focus infelicitous].

Answering *ta*-content questions with verb or VP focus is indeed infelicitous, as shown in (13b) and (14b). This appears to support Jones’s claim, but only because both *kí* ‘what’ and *ta* ‘who’ are monosyllabic content question words. In contrast, polysyllabic content question words such as *ibo* ‘where’ and *báwo* ‘how’ can be appropriately answered using verb or VP focus, as illustrated in (11b) and (12b).

Another reason verb or VP focus fails to answer content questions with *kí* or *ta* is that these words inquire about [$\pm$ human] arguments, i.e., concrete lexical nouns. Conversely, verb or VP focus constructions (7b, 8b) generate action nominals or gerund-like nominals rather than concrete nouns. This contrast between real nominals and action nominals creates a structural and semantic mismatch in question-answer pairs, producing the infelicity Jones observed in (7b) and (8b). By contrast, a content question word like *báwo* interrogates the manner of an action rather than a concrete nominal. Because both the question and the verb or VP focus represent action nominals, they align semantically and yield a felicitous answer, as shown in (11b). Consequently, Jones’s claim that verb or VP focus cannot answer wh-questions in Yorùbá cannot be generalized, as it rests on restricted data lacking holistic language-internal evidence.

6 Conclusion

This study has investigated the semantics of content questions in Yorùbá by addressing a persistent gap in a domain dominated by syntactic accounts. By focusing on constructions where content question phrases (wh-elements) feature in-situ, the paper brought analytical attention to how pragmatic context, discourse goals, and alternative propositions interact to determine meaning in Yorùbá interrogatives. It integrated Information Structure (Chafe, 1976; Prince, 1981; Halliday, 1994; Lambrecht, 1994; Erteschik-Shir, 2007; van der Wal et al., 2025) and Alternative Semantics (Hamblin, 1973; Karttunen, 1977; Rooth, 1992, 2015) frameworks to account for both the formal composition and the context-driven interpretations of clause-final in-situ questions in Yorùbá language.

The paper has two central contributions: one, it showed that in-situ content questions in Yorùbá are not semantically equivalent to their ex-situ counterparts; rather, they encode specific pragmatic readings dictated by three distinct construals - clarity (seeking resolution of discourse ambiguity), assurance (seeking confirmation of an unexpected proposition), and amazement/displeasure (expressing speaker attitude or emotional stance). Two, it refuted Jones's (2006) assertion that verb or VP focus cannot serve as an answer to content questions in Yorùbá. By distinguishing between restricted and unrestricted content questions, it demonstrated in the analysis that verb or VP focus accurately answers unrestricted content questions in the language. By bridging formal semantics and pragmatic information packaging, the study has provided a unified account of how in-situ interrogatives function in natural Yorùbá language speech.

References

- Aboh, E. O. (2010). The phonology-syntax interface. In E. O. Aboh & J. Essegbey (Eds.), *Topics in Kwa syntax* (pp. 41–68). Springer.
- Aboh, E. O., & Pfau, R. (2011). *What's a wh-item got to do with it?* Oxford University Press.
- Adeoye, J. A. (2018). The structure of negation in Úwù. *Kansas Working Papers in Linguistics*, 39, 40–56. <https://doi.org/10.17161/KWPL.1808.27150>
- Akerele, T. (2021). Corpus approach to the typology of content questions in Yorùbá. *African Journal of Language Research*, 3(1–2), 44–62.
- Ariel, M. (2000). Accessibility theory: An overview. In T. Sanders, J. Schilperoord, & W. Spooren (Eds.), *Text representation: Linguistic and psycholinguistic aspects* (pp. 29–87). John Benjamins.
- Bamgbóṣé, A. (1990). *Fonólójì àti gírámà Yorùbá*. University Press.
- Bobaljik, J. D., & Wurmbrand, S. (2015). Questions with declarative syntax tell us what about selection? In J. G. Angel & O. Dennis (Eds.), *50 years later: Reflections on Chomsky's Aspects* (MIT Working Papers in Linguistics, Vol. 77, pp. 13–32). MIT Working Papers in Linguistics.

- Cable, S. (2010). *The grammar of Q: Q-particles, wh-movement, and pied-piping*. Oxford University Press.
- Chafe, W. (1976). Givenness, contrastiveness, definiteness, subjects, topics, and point of view. In C. N. Li (Ed.), *Subject and topic* (pp. 25–55). Academic Press.
- Chang, Q. (2016). *Wh-question constructions in Colloquial Singapore English* [Doctoral dissertation, National University of Singapore]. National University of Singapore Scholar Bank.
- Cheng, L. L.-S. (1991). *On the typology of wh-questions* [Doctoral dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. MIT Libraries Digital Repository.
- Clark, H. H. (1996). *Using language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Déchaine, R.-M. (2001). On the left edge of Yorùbá complements. *Lingua*, 111(2), 81–130. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0024-3841\(00\)00026-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0024-3841(00)00026-6)
- Erteschik-Shir, N. (2007). *Information structure: The syntax-discourse interface*. Oxford University Press.
- Faure, R., & Palasis, K. (2021). Exclusivity! Wh-fronting is not optional wh-movement in Colloquial French. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, 39(1), 57–95. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11049-020-09472-y>
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics: Vol. 3. Speech acts* (pp. 41–58). Academic Press.
- Gundel, J. K. (2003). Cognitive status, information structure, and pronominal reference to causally introduced entities. *Journal of Logic, Language and Information*, 12(3), 281–299. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1024107122851>
- Gunlogson, C. (2003). *True to form: Rising and falling declaratives as questions in English*. Routledge.
- Hagstrom, P. (1998). *Decomposing questions* [Doctoral dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. MIT Libraries Digital Repository.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar* (2nd ed.). Edward Arnold.

- Hamblin, C. L. (1973). Questions in Montague English. *Foundations of Language*, 10(1), 41–53.
- Heritage, J. (1984). *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ilọri, J. F. (2010). *Nominal constructions in Igálà and Yorùbá* [Doctoral dissertation, Adekunle Ajasin University].
- Ilọri, J. F. (2017). Interrogative projections in Yoruboid languages. *Journal of West African Languages*, 44(1), 1–17.
- Jones, S. (2006). Focus in Yorùbá: A semantic/pragmatic account. *Papers in Linguistics*, 46(8), 143–160.
- Karttunen, L. (1977). Syntax and semantics of questions. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 1(1), 3–44. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00351935>
- Kiss, É. K. (1998). Identificational focus versus information focus. *Language*, 74(2), 245–273. <https://doi.org/10.2307/417867>
- Lambrecht, K. (1994). *Information structure and sentence form: Topic, focus, and the mental representation of discourse referents*. Cambridge University Press.
- Olaogun, S. (2017). On the so-called interrogative nouns in Yorùbá. *Journal of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria*, 20(1), 243–247.
- Ọlaogun, S. (2018). Yes/no and wh-questions in Njò-kóó: A unified analysis. *Corela*, 16(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.4000/corela.6562>
- Oshodi, B. (2016). Question formation and focus construction in Ọwò: A Yorùbá dialect. *Macro Linguistics*, 4(4), 126–142.
- Potts, C. (2005). *The logic of conventional implicatures*. Oxford University Press.
- Prince, A. S. (1981). *Toward a theory of feature structure in phonology*. Indiana University Linguistics Club.
- Roberts, C. (2012). Information structure in discourse: Towards an integrated formal theory of pragmatics. *Semantics and Pragmatics*, 5, Article 6, 1–69. <https://doi.org/10.3765/sp.5.6>

Rooth, M. (1992). A theory of focus interpretation. *Natural Language Semantics*, 1(1), 75–116. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02342617>

Rooth, M. (1996). Focus. In S. Lappin (Ed.), *The handbook of contemporary semantic theory* (pp. 271–297). Blackwell.

Rooth, M. (2015). *Replication data for alternative semantics* [Data set]. Harvard Dataverse. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/29845>

Sudo, Y. (2013). Biased polar questions in English and Japanese. In D. Gutzmann & H.-M. Gärtner (Eds.), *Beyond expressives: Explorations in use-conditional meaning* (pp. 275–295). Brill.

van der Wal, J. (2025). *On the expression of information structure in Bantu*. Leiden University Press.

Ọlaide Akinwande

Department of Linguistics, African & Asian Studies

University of Lagos, Akoka, Lagos, Nigeria

oaakinwande@unilag.edu.ng

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4818-0082>