

## Two Types of *Oní* in Yorùbá: A Critique

Fọlọrunṣọ Ilọri, *Ph.D.*

*Department of Linguistics, African and Asian Studies*

*Faculty of Arts, University of Lagos*

*filori@unilag.edu.ng*

### **Abstract**

*The issue of the morphemic status of **oní** in Yorùbá grammar is far from settled. This paper critiques Taiwo (2011)'s claim that Yorùbá has two **oní** - one divisible and the other indivisible. It presents both morphological and semantic evidence to disprove the claim that since **oní** in words like **ẹlégàn** 'detractor', **alákàn** 'crab', **eléwo** 'who', **ọlọde** 'watchman', **olólùfẹ** 'lover', etc. does not have the genitive-possessive 'owner of ...' interpretation which it has in similar words like **oníṣu** 'owner/seller of yam', **ọlọgbón** 'wise fellow', etc., it should be considered indivisible in such context. This is in addition to the set premise in the analysis that the agentive morpheme **o-** in the assumed indivisible **oní-** cannot be substituted with **àì-**, the so-called negative morpheme. This paper argues to the contrary that **ní** in such instance has genitive-associative interpretation and is thereby morphologically separable from {**o-**} in such words. It concludes that the semantics of the examples provided by Taiwo (2011) to back up its proposed claim does not only contradict it but interestingly reinforces the fact that there is only one **oní** in Yorùbá which is consistently decomposable into the agentive/experiential morpheme {**o-**} and the root (verb) morpheme **ní** which is semantically interpretable as to have/own/possess or associated-with, as the case may be.*

**Keywords:** oní, morphology, genitive-possessive, genitive-associative, semantics

### **Introduction**

Taiwo (2011:62) agreed with earlier works (Awobuluyi, 2008; Oyebade, 1986; Ilòri, 2010 and 2011) that the item **oní** is not a single morpheme but a word made up of two morphemes; the agentive {o-} ‘one who ...’ and the verb **ní** ‘to have/own/possess’. He however went further (Ibid:63-64) to claim that Yorùbá has another agentive prefix **oní-** which unlike the first is indivisible citing examples of words such as **ẹ̀lẹ̀gà̀n** ‘detractor’, **alákà̀n** ‘crab’, **eléwo** ‘who’, **olòdẹ̀** ‘watchman’, etc. This paper probes the morphology and semantics of the examples put forward in the work to motivate the claim. It argues that the claim and the examples provided to establish it are inconsistent, unfounded, and grossly misleading.

### **The Claim and Its Premises**

#### **The Claim**

According to Taiwo (2011:63-64),

..., bí a bá sàgbéyẹ̀wò àwọ̀n ọ̀rọ̀ kan níbití isọ̀ {oní/oni} tí jẹyọ̀, ó ẹ̀ẹ̀sẹ̀ kí á má le pín wọ̀n .... Ẹ̀ jẹ́ kí a yẹ̀ àwọ̀n ọ̀rọ̀ wọ̀nyí wò.

(..., if we examine certain words where the expression {oní/oni} occurs, it is possible we may not be able to divide them .... Let us examine these words)

eléwòó ← {oní} + èwó

alákà̀n ← {oní} + akà̀n

ọ́lọ́dẹ ← {oní} + ọ́dẹ

ẹ́lẹ̀wọ̀n ← {oní} + ẹ̀wọ̀n

oníyà ← {oní} + iyà

ẹ́lẹ̀gà̀n ← {oní} + ẹ̀gà̀n

Ní àwọ̀n àpẹ̀rẹ̀ òkè yí, isọ {oní/oni} kò fí ìtumò ẹnítí ó ni ǹnkan hàn, fún idí èyí, kò ní ẹ́ẹ̀şe láti fí mọ́fíimù iyísòdì /àì-/ rọ̀pò /o/ tí ó wà lára isọ {oní/oni} .... Isọ {oní/oni} ní ìtumò tí ó yàtò sí fifi ìní hàn. Ó lè fí ìtẹ̀numọ̀ tàbí ìtumò m̀ìràn hàn gẹ̀gẹ̀ bí ó ẹ̀ fojú hàn ní isàlẹ̀ yí.

(In these examples above, {oní/oni} does not indicate the meaning of one who owns something, for this reason, it would be impossible to substitute the /o/ in the expression {oní/oni} with the negative prefix /àì-/. The expression {oní/oni} has a different meaning from showing possession; It may indicate emphasis/focus or other meaning as evident below.)

oní- + èwó → eléwó

oní- + akàn → alákàn

Àpẹ̀rẹ̀ méjéèjì tí ó wà lókè yí n fí ìtẹ̀numọ̀ hàn. Àmọ̀ ẹ́, *alákàn* lè ní ìtumò ẹnì tí ó ni akàn bákannáà.

(These two examples above indicate emphasis. However, *alákàn* may also have the meaning of one who owns akan/crab.)

oní- + ọ́dẹ → ọ́lọ́dẹ

fí ìtumò ẹnì tí ó ẹ̀ isẹ̀ ọ́dẹ hàn;

(means ‘one who practices hunting as profession’)

oní- + èwòn → èlèwòn

fí ìtumò ẹni tí ó wà ní èwòn hàn;

(means ‘one who is in prison’)

oní- + iyà → oníyà

fí ìtumò ẹni tí ó n jẹ iyà hàn;

(means ‘one who is suffering’)

### **The Premises**

Taiwo (2011)’s claim was hinged on two premises:

(i) Since the so-called indivisible prefix **oní-** does not have the genitive possessive *owner/seller/possessor of ...* interpretation, it is not the same as the **oní** that has that kind of interpretation, which he considered divisible.

(ii) the agentive morpheme **o-** in the indivisible **oní-** cannot be substituted with **àì-**, but the **o-** in the divisible **oní** can be so substituted, as illustrated in (1) culled directly from Taiwo (2011:61-62).

1a. oníṣu ← o- + ní + ṣu

àìníṣu ← àì- + ní + ṣu

b. ọlọgbón ← o- + ní + ọ- + gbón

àìlọgbón ← àì- + ní + ọ- + gbón

c. onítibí ← o- + ní + tí + ibí

àìnítibí ← àì- + ní + tí + ibí

- d. eléyíí ← o- + ní + èyí  
àiléyíí ← àì- + ní + èyí

Since, according to him, such substitution of **o-** with **àì-** is not possible in the words in (2):

- 2a. (i) e-léwòó  
(ii) ?\*àì-léwòó

- b. (i) a-lákàn  
(ii) ?\*àì-lákàn

- c. (i) ẹ-lẹwòn  
(ii) ?\*àì-lẹwòn

- d. (i) ọ-lọḍẹ  
(ii) ?\*àì-lọḍẹ

- e. (i) o-níyà  
(ii) ?\*àì-níyà

- f. (i) ẹ-lẹgàn  
(ii) ?\*àì-lẹgàn

the **oní-** there is indivisible (Ibid:63). By implication, the àì-initialled words in (2) are not well-formed going by Taiwo (2011: 61)'s remarks:

bí a bá fi mọ̀fìimù ìyísódì /àì-/ rọ̀pò /o-/ tí ó bèrè {oní/oní}, yóò fún wa ní ìsọ tí ó ẹ̀ é gbà tí ìtumò rẹ̀ yóò sì jẹ̀ ìdàkejì tàbí òdì.

(if we substitute /o-/ that begins {oní/oní} with the negative morpheme /àì-/, it would give us a well-formed expression whose meaning would be the opposite or negative.)

This explained why they are starred.

We shall however show in this study using Taiwo's exact examples and additional relevant ones that his claim and the premises upon which it was based are false and misleading. We shall begin by interrogating each of the two premises and afterwards employ facts deduced from them to critically examine the claim in its entirety.

### **Interrogating the Premises**

#### **The Genitive Possessive Criterion**

This criterion, as employed by Taiwo (2011), says **oní-** does not have genitive-possessive interpretation in the context where he considered it indivisible. The question to ask and answer in respect of this is: is it really true as claimed given the context and examples provided that the so-called indivisible **oní-** does not have genitive-possessive interpretation? The answer to this is capital NO if we consider the examples and interpretations provided (p. 63) **oní-+ọ̀dẹ̀→ọ̀lọ̀dẹ̀** 'hunter' means *ẹ̀ni tí ó ń ẹ̀ ẹ̀ iṣẹ̀ ọ̀dẹ̀* 'one who practices hunting (as profession)'; **oní- + ẹ̀wọ̀n→ẹ̀lẹ̀wọ̀n** *ẹ̀ni tí ó wà ní ẹ̀wọ̀n* 'one who is in prison'; **oní- + ìyà→oníyà** *ẹ̀ni tí ó ń jẹ̀ ìyà* 'one who is suffering'; and **oní-**

+ègàn→èlégàn *eni tí ó n pègàn (èniyàn)* ‘one who backbites’. Interestingly, the work itself on the same page admitted that **alákàn** may have the meaning of *one who owns/has/sells (crab)*. This admission outrightly points to the agentive {o-} and the root morpheme **ní** ‘to have/own/sell’ as the morphological source of **alákàn**.

One other salient fact in the examples provided is that each of the words in question as suggested in the interpretations supplied has the agentive interpretation of *eni tí ó ...* ‘one who ...’ which is associated with the agentive morpheme {o-} in the literature. If this is true, then all we are left with to account for is the interpretation of **ní** in the context which appears to be so hidden to the extent that Taiwo (2011) had to settle for the whole of **oní** as the morpheme that produces that interpretation. This evidently cannot be true since the work itself admitted that **ní** has the genitive-possessive reading in **alákàn**. So, what the probe should be at this juncture is about the specific interpretation **ní** has in the other group of words.

Following Owolabí (1976), we are of the opinion that **ní** in the other group of words where Taiwo (2011) says **oní** is indivisible has genitive-associative interpretation. On that basis therefore, the semantic interpretation of **olóde** would be *one who is associated with ode-sise (hunting, as profession)* the logical sum of which gives us the meaning ‘hunter, watch-man, guard’ signalled by the lexeme **olóde** in Yorùbá; **elèwòn** would be one associated with **ewòn** ‘prison’ either as *eni tí ó wà ní ewòn* ‘one who is in prison’ or *eni tí ó ti sèwòn rí* ‘someone who had once been in prison, i.e. a former prison inmate’; **oníyà**

as one associated with **ìyà** ‘suffering, hardship’ by experiencing it, i.e. *eni tí ó n̄ jẹ̀ ìyà* ‘one who is suffering’; and **ẹ̀lẹ̀gàn** ‘despiser’ would be the one associated with despise in that he/she carries it out *eni tí ó n̄ pẹ̀gàn (ènìyàn)* ‘one who despises’ (cf. **apẹ̀gàn** which also features the agentive morpheme *one who ...* though with a different form, {**a-**}).

Based on the foregoing, we conclude that **ní** has both genitive-possessive and genitive–associative interpretations in the so-called indivisible **oní-** of Taiwo (2011).

### **The àì- Criterion**

This criterion is more of an offshoot of the first. It holds that since **àì-**, its so-called negative prefix, cannot substitute for the agentive morpheme {**o-**} of **oní-** in the context in question, {**o-**} in that **oní-** cannot be isolated as a morpheme, and by implication, **oní-** in such context is an indivisible morpheme.

Apart from the fact that this is an arbitrarily set and strange criterion, it was based on a premise that has long been proven wrong in the literature (Awobuluyi, 2001; 2008; Oyebade and Ilori, 2006; etc.) i.e. the claim that **àì** is a negative prefix in Yorùbá. However, for the sake of argumentation, we shall ignore that fact for the time being and pretend that **àì** is a negative prefix as claimed. This in the long run makes the inadequacies of the **àì-** criterion glaring.

So, is it really true that **àì** replaces {**o-**} in the context and examples provided by Taiwo (2011:63) rewritten in this paper as (1a-d)? Our answer is NO! First and foremost, contrary to the claim in the book, the **àì** forms there are not the

derivational opposites of the **oní** forms. For instance, **àiníṣu** ‘event of not-having-yam’ is not the opposite of **oníṣu** ‘one who owns or sells yam’ just as **àlògbón** ‘event of not-having-wisdom’ is never the opposite of **ològbón** ‘a wise person’. The reason is simple: the morphemes used and the overall interpretations of the negative words and their purported positive opposites are worlds apart. While the negative forms are *events* the positives are *agent/owner of* nominals. The negative opposite of **oníṣu** is **alàiníṣu** ‘one who doesn’t own/has yam’ and not **àiníṣu** ‘event of not-having-yam’ which has a completely different meaning. Similarly the opposite of **ològbón** ‘one who has wisdom = a wise person’ cannot be **àlògbón** ‘event of not-having-wisdom’ but **alàlògbón** ‘one who does not have wisdom = an unwise person’. As a matter of fact, the two contrasted forms have separate derivational inputs and outputs. What these facts tell us is that each of them is derived through separate morphological processes and steps and as such cannot be contrasted as done by Taiwo (2011). For instance, the positive forms of the negative events of **àiníṣu** and **àlògbón** should be **iníṣu** ‘event of having yam’ and **ilògbón** ‘event of having wisdom’ respectively and not **oníṣu** and **ològbón** as claimed. The same goes for **onítibí** versus **ànitibí** (1c) and **eléyí** versus **àléyí** (1d). The negative form of **onítibí** should be **alànitibí** while the positive form of **ànitibí** ‘(event of) not having that thing’ is **initibí** ‘(event of) having that thing’ and not **onítibí** ‘that person, one who owns that thing’ as claimed in the book<sup>1</sup>.

The implication of these is that the examples provided by Taiwo (2011) to establish his criterion in contexts where he claimed **oní** is divisible do not even support the claim. What this reveals is that the criterion of substituting the agentive morpheme {o-} with **àì** to determine when **oní** is divisible or otherwise was ill-conceived. To really see the misleading prowess of the criterion, let us consider the second group of examples where **oní** is claimed to be indivisible because the agentive {o-} cannot be substituted by **àì**, i.e. (2a-f).

A careful consideration of each of those pairs of words show that the claim made about them has two fundamental problems. One, just as we have noted in the examples in (1), those automatically generated negative words (done in line with what Taiwo did in 1a-d) are not the opposites of the positive ones! For instance, **àìléwòó** ‘act of not having èwó (àkàrà)’ is not the opposite of **eléwòó** ‘one who has èwó’. A negative event morpheme/nominal cannot be the opposite of an agentive morpheme/nominal. Ditto with **alákàn** and **àìlákàn**; **elẹ̀wòn** and **àìlẹ̀wòn**; **olóḍẹ** and **àìlóḍẹ**; and **oníyà** and **àìníyà**. The actual agentive negative forms of the words are as listed in (3).

<b>Word</b>	<b>Negatived-opposite</b>
3a. e-léwòó  / e-léwo ‘one associated with èwo “which” = <i>who</i> ’	aláìléwòó ‘one who doesn’t have èwó’ *aláìléwo
b. a-lákàn	aláìlákàn

	‘one who has akàn’	‘one who doesn’t have akàn’
c.	ẹ-lẹwòn ‘one associated with prison’, ‘thing that has chain’	aláilẹwòn ‘thing that doesn’t have chain’
d.	ọ-lọde ‘one associated with hunting (= hunter)’, ‘thing/one/place that has hunter <sup>2</sup> ’	aláilọde ‘thing/place that doesn’t have hunter’
e.	o-níyà ‘one who has/associated with suffering’	alàiníyà ‘one who doesn’t have/associated- with suffering’
f.	ẹ-lẹgàn ‘one who is associated with despise = despiser’ cf. apẹgàn ‘despiser’	aláilẹgàn ‘one/thing is without despise or not associated- with despise’

This fundamental flaw makes the so-called àì-criterion a ruse in that the idea that motivated it was ill-conceived, ab-initio.

The second piece of evidence that exposes the inadequacy of the criterion is in the well-formedness or otherwise of the àì- negatives/opposites of words for which Taiwo (2011) claimed àì- cannot substitute for the {o-} of oní-. The starred words in (2a-f) are examples of such words. They are starred because they are not supposed to be well-formed going by the àì-criterion. However, a careful look at the

morpho-semantics of the words show to the contrary that each of them is a well formed Yorùbá word in its own right, just like their counterparts in (1a-d). Their only problem, which is exactly the problem that the so-called well-formed negative/opposite forms in (1a-d) have in relation to their assumed positive counterparts, is that, contrary to the claim, they are not the negative forms of the words in question. They are *event nominals* while their assumed positive forms are *agentive nominals*. So there is contradiction in the semantics. The appropriate negative forms of the words in (2) to our understanding are as constructed in (3a-e).

If these observations are anything to go by, then the conception and application of the àì-criterion is flawed.

### **Examining the Claims**

Putting the claims in perspective, the so-called indivisible **oní**, according to Taiwo, indicates emphasis/focus in **oní**+**èwó**→**eléwòó** (or is it **oní**+**èwo**→**eléwo**), **oní**+**akàn**→**alákàn** and two other meanings illustrated with: **oní**+**ode** →**olode** ‘hunter’ which he said means *enití ó se isé ode* ‘one who practices hunting (as profession)’; **oní**+**ewòn**→**eléwòn** *eni tí ó wà ní ewòn* ‘one who is in prison’; **oní**+**iyà**→**oníyà** *eni tí ó n jẹ iyà* ‘one who is suffering’; and **oní**+**egàn**→**elégàn** *eni tí ó n pègàn* (*èniyàn*) ‘one who backbites’

After careful examination, we are of the opinion that the claim that **oní**- is an indivisible prefix indicating focus in **eléwòó** is not only morphologically inconsistent but misleading. While one is not exactly sure of the exact word intended,

whether it is **eléwòó (àkàrà)** ‘one who has/own or sell crumbs of bean cake’ or **eléwo** ‘who (in particular)’ as in **eléwo nìyẹn?** ‘who is that?’, the best option is to examine the two possibilities. There is no evidence that supports the said focus interpretation of **oní** in the word **eléwòó**. The interpretation clearly signals a combination of the agentive {o-} plus the genitive-possessive **ní** and **èwó (àkàrà)** ‘bean cake crumbs’. For **eléwo** ‘who (in particular)?’, the already identified agentive {o-} and genitive-associative **ní** combined with **èwo** ‘which’ are the inputs. The morphological breakdown is ‘one who is associated-with **èwo**’. This may appear strange at first until one considers two basic facts: (i) there are two content question operators equivalents to ‘who’ and ‘which’ in the semantics of **eléwo**: **who** integrated in the meaning of the agentive morpheme {o-} *eni tí ó* ... ‘one **who**...’ and ‘which’ in **èwo** itself. Therefore, the somewhat emphatic reading associated with **eléwo** is traceable to the interaction of these two operators in a single word where **èwo** the second in the linear ordering of the operators reinforces the interpretation of the first ‘who’ in the meaning of the agentive {o-}. There is no contradiction in the fact that such non-redundant duplication (whether total or partial) in natural language, especially Yorùbá, often results in emphasis<sup>3</sup>. (ii) It is also crucial to note that one possible derivation explanation of **èwo** itself is the combination of **èyí** ‘this’ and **wo** ‘which’ (cf. Awobùlúyì 2013:36), a fact which evidently adds up to the emphatic reading of **eléwo**. Therefore, its morphological structure would be as constructed in (4).

4. o- ní [èyíwo→ èwo] → eléwo

one-who associate-with this which

‘one-*who* is associated-with ‘the *which* of this’= ‘who (in particular)’

Semantically, the logical interpretation of **eléwo** is roughly that of *one who is associated-with the-which-of-this*. Interestingly, this logical interpretation is seen in clause contexts such as (5), morphologically decomposable as illustrated in (6).

5. **Eléwo** nínú yín ni kì í tún sọmọ àlè o!?’<sup>4</sup>

‘WHO/WHICH among you is also not a bastard?’

6. o- ní [èyíwo] nínú yín ni kìí tún sọmọ àlè ?

‘Who associated-with *the-which-of-this* among you is also not a bastard?’

If these observations are therefore anything to go by, then, the claim that the indivisibility of **oní-** accounts for the seeming emphasis in **eléwo** is misleading.

On the claim that **oní-** signals *emphasis in alákàn* ‘crab’, one cannot but disagree for two obvious reasons:(i) one of the semantic interpretations of **oní** alluded to by Taiwo (2011) himself is *one who owns/has/sells (crab)* when he said “Àmọ sá, alákàn lè ní ìtumò ẹni tí ó ni akàn bákannàà” (although, **alákàn** may have the meaning of one who owns **akàn**). This admission by Taiwo clearly points to the agentive {o-}and the verb **ní** ‘to have/own/sell’ morphological source for **alákàn**. (ii) the other semantic interpretation which one may suspect to have

informed the focus claim is connected with the meaning of **alákàn** when interpreted as **crab** to mean *something/creature that has/possesses a-kàn*. In this instance, **akàn** does not denote crab itself but some peculiar attribute/feature of crab or its kind of animal which may have formed part of the conceptual consideration in the lexicalisation of the word. Evidence for this is found in the near obsolete word **alákàsà**<sup>5</sup> ‘lobster, crayfish, prawn’ of a sister animal family of **alákàn** ‘crab’ in Yorùbá. This fact too interestingly points to the same agentive {o-} and **ní** ‘to have/possess’ morphological source for **o-ní-akàn**, i.e. an animal that has/possesses the attribute/feature of akàn/akàsà - whatever that means!

By implication therefore, the focus claim for **oní-** in such context is evidently born out of observational inadequacies about the relevant data.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has shown that it is not sacrosanct for **oní** to have genitive-possessive interpretation to be divisible since it employs two homophonous but semantically different genitive **ní** morphemes in the contexts associated with it. One **ní** has the well known genitive-possessive interpretation while the other is a genitive-associative root morpheme.

One additional fact/lesson that this study has brought to the fore is that the prefix **o-** in **oní** is not even exclusively agentive. There are instances where it is semantically experiential as evident in **eléwòn** ‘one who has experienced incarceration or imprisonment’ and **oníyà** ‘one who experiences

suffering’. Therefore, having isolated the prefix {o-} and the root morpheme (the verb) **ní** with its two related but different semantic interpretations successfully in the context where **oní** is said to be indivisible by Taiwo (2011), it is clearly evident that the claim that **oní** in such context is indivisible does not hold any water.

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### **End Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Note that there exists two types of ì here: the one in àì which denotes negation and the other in #ì + ní + işu # which is an ‘event of’ morpheme.

<sup>2</sup> **hunter** here ranges over at least two senses: (a) watchman/guard e.g. Àdúgbò **òlódẹ** ni àdúgbò yẹn ‘That neighbourhood has guards’ or ‘That neighbourhood is a neighbourhood of guards.’ Cf. Àdúgbò **aláìlódẹ** ‘unguarded neighbourhood’; and (b) hunting trap, e.g. **odẹ** nàà pa ìgalà ‘the hunting trap killed an antelope’.

<sup>3</sup> cf. **kiá/kiákíá** ‘quickly/very quickly’; **gan-an/ gan-an-gan-an** ‘exact/very exact’; and so on.

<sup>4</sup> Culled from a Yorùbá home-video (Saworo Idẹ). It was a king’s rude speech to some group of chiefs after one of them had replied the king that he was not a bastard and was immediately arrested by the king orderlies. Note that **èwo** can replace **eléwo** in this context. However, the two, though related, are different in that **eléwo** is more emphatic, not because **oní** in itself signals emphasis but because two items which are equivalents of content question operators ‘who’ and ‘which’ interact in the semantics of **eléwo**: **who** integrated in the meaning of the agentive morpheme {o-} *eni tí ó ...* ‘one **who** ...’ and ‘which’ in **èwo** itself.

<sup>5</sup> See *A Dictionary of Yorùbá Language* (1957).