

Exclusive focus in Yoruba: a preliminary study*

Ka-Fai Yip
Yale University
kafai.yip@yale.edu

1. Introduction

➤ Two types of exclusive focus particles

- English *only*:

Adverbial-adnominal distinction (Jackendoff 1972, Büring & Hartmann 2001, Hole 2013)

(1) John **only** gave Mary a book (adverbial *only*, potential focus associates: V, DO, IO, VP)

(2) John gave **only** Mary a book (adnominal *only*, potential focus associate: IO)

- Yoruba ‘only’: *kan* and *nikan* (Bisang & Sonaiya 2000, Howell 2016)¹

(3) *John kan fun Mary ni iwe* (potential focus associates: V, DO, IO, VP)^{2,3}
John only give Mary SEC book
‘John **only** gave Mary a book.’

(4) *John fun Mary nikan ni iwe* (potential focus associate: IO)
John give Mary only SEC book
‘John gave **only** Mary a book.’

- Co-occurrence of both particles with the *same* focus association
 - English: rare, if not impossible (but see Bayer 2020:64-65)
 - Yoruba: attested

(5) *John **only** gave **only** Mary_F a book (focus associate: IO)

Intended meaning: ‘The only one that John gave a book to was Mary.’

(6) *John kan fun Mary_F nikan ni iwe* (focus associate: IO)
John only give Mary only SEC book
‘The only one that John gave a book to was Mary.’

- Similar phenomena (sometimes called ‘only’-concord) are attested cross-linguistically: Cantonese (P. Lee 2019), Dutch (Barbiers 2014), German (Bayer 2020), Korean (Y. Lee 2004, 2005), Mandarin (Hole 2017), Vietnamese (Hole 2013, 2017, Erlewine 2017, Sun 2020, 2021)
- Operator-particle approach (Lee 2004, Horvath 2007, Cable 2010, Quek and Hirsch 2017)
[OP_{only} ... [F_{only} *focused element*] ...]
(where OP_{only} = ‘only’ operator head, F_{only} = semantically inert particle)

* This preliminary work originates from my term paper for “Semantic Investigations in an Unfamiliar Language” taught by Prof. Veneeta Dayal at Yale. I thank the language consultant, Aishat Adekunle, for providing the Yoruba data. I am also grateful to Prof. Veneeta Dayal and my classmates for comments and suggestions.

¹ There is one more particle *lasson* ‘only’ which is not reported in Bisang & Sonaiya (2000). *Lasson* ‘only’ is generally interchangeable with *nikan* ‘only’. For simplicity, I will only illustrate with *nikan* ‘only’ in this handout.

² Abbreviations: 1, 2, 3 = first, second, third person respectively; COP = copular; FOC = focus marker; NEG = negation; PL = plural; PROG = progressive aspect marker; SEC = secundative preposition; SG = singular.

³ *Ni* here is a preposition to introduce the theme argument *iwe* ‘book’, which is called “secundative preposition” in Atoyebi, Haspelmath and Malchukov (2011). It should be distinguished from copular *ni* and focus marker *ni*.

- Brief background on Yoruba (Adesola 2005)
 - A Benue-Congo language mainly spoken in Nigeria by about 30 million native speakers
 - Basic word order: SVO
 - Has three tones (not marked in the transcription in this handout)
- Today's plan
 - Describe the focus association patterns of *kan* 'only' and *nikan* 'only'
 - Examine the concord-like use
 - Discuss the plausibility of the operator-particle approach

2. Properties of the 'only' particles

- Basic properties
 - *Kan* 'only': Always pre-verbal

(7) *John kan fun Mary ni iwe* (reproduced from (3))
 John only give Mary SEC book
 'John **only** gave Mary a book.'

(8) *(*Kan) John fun (*kan) Mary ni iwe*
 only John give only Mary SEC book

- *Nikan* 'only'
 - May follow NPs (and VPs & clauses when it is sentence-final), but not verbs

(9) *John fun Mary nikan ni iwe* (reproduced from (4))
 John give Mary only SEC book
 'John gave **only** Mary a book.'

(10) *John o je pizza nikan*
 John NEG eat pizza only
 'John not only ate a pizza.'

(11) **John fun nikan Mary ni iwe*
 John give only Mary SEC book

- May undergo *ni*-focus movement along with the preceding NP

(12) *Mary nikan ni John fun _ ni iwe* (focus movement)
 Mary only FOC John give SEC book
 'John gave **only** Mary a book' = (4)/(9)

- Focus association
 - Note: no prosodic clues for focus (e.g. stress). Focus can only be determined by syntax/ contexts
 - *Kan* 'only'
 - Focus associate: verbs

(13) A: It seems that Ayo grows and sells beans.

B: O *kan* *n-ta_F* *won ni.*
3SG only PROG-sell 3PL FOC
'He only sells them.'

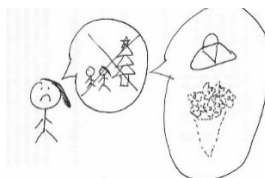
(adapted from Bisang & Sonaiya 2000:190)

- Other constituents: direct object (DO), indirect object (IO), verb phrase (VP)
- Storyboard: "Christmas Ball" (see Appendix)

(14) Target constructions in "Christmas Ball"

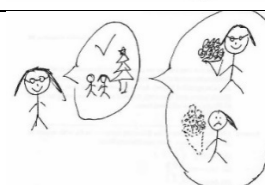
[4]: DO focus

Mary says no, because John gave only **a handbag** to her, but not flowers.



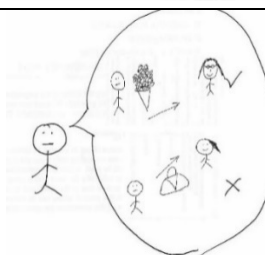
[5]: IO focus

Ade says yes, because John gave flowers only **to her**, but not Mary.



[7]: VP focus

John thinks that he should have only **given flowers to Ade**. He should not have given the handbag to Mary.



- *kan* 'only' is able to associate with any constituents in its scope: IO, DO and VP (& V)

(15) ... *tori John kan fun oun ni* *bag_F*. (for [4] DO focus)
because John only give her SEC bag
'...because John only gave her (Mary) **a bag**.'

(16) ... *tori John kan fun* *oun_F* *ni flower* (for [5] IO focus)
because John only give her SEC flower
'...because John only gave **her (Ade)** flowers.'

(17) *John ro pe oye ko kan* *[fun Ade ni flowers]_F* (for [7] VP focus)
John think that should 3SG? only give Ade SEC flower
'John thinks that he should have only **given Ade flowers**.'

- But not subjects:

(18) **John_F* *kan fun Mary ni iwe* (subject)
John only give Mary SEC book
Int.: 'Only John gave Mary a book.'

- *Nikan* 'only'
 - Must follow the focus associate

- May associate with DO, IO and VP

- (19) ... *tori John fun oun ni [bag_F] nikan.* (for [4] DO focus)
because John give her SEC bag only
'...because John gave her (Mary) only a bag.'
- (20) ... *tori John fun [oun_F] nikan ni flower* (for [5] IO focus)
because John give her only SEC flower
'...because John only gave her (Ade) flowers.'
- (21) *John ro pe oye ko [fun Ade ni flowers]_F nikan* (for [7] VP focus)⁴
John think that should 3SG? give Ade SEC flower only
'John thinks that he should have only given Ade flowers.'

- And subjects:

- (22) *[John_F] nikan ni o feron Ade* (subject)⁵
John only FOC 3SG love Ade
'Only John loves Ade.'

- And even clauses:

- (23) *[pe o feron Ade]_F nikan ni John sa* (complement clause)⁶
that 3SG love Ade only FOC John say
'The only thing John said is that he loves Ade.'
- (24) *[Ti John ba je banana]_F nikan ni, ikun ma doon* (adjunct clause)
when John if eat banana only FOC, stomach will hurt
'Only when John eats a banana, his tummy will feel bad.'

- *Nikan* 'only' (unlike *kan*) CANNOT associate with a focus at a distance:

- (25) **John fun [Mary_F] ni iwe nikan* (potential focus associates: DO, VP, CP, *IO)
John give Mary SEC book only
Int.: "John gave only Mary a book."

- Resembles English sentence-initial *only* (potential focus associates: S, CP)

- (26) a. Only *[John_F]* read a book.
b. (What happened was that) only *[John read a book]_F*, but not Mary bought a sandwich.
c. *Only John read *[a book_F]*.
Int.: "the only thing John read was a book but not a magazine."

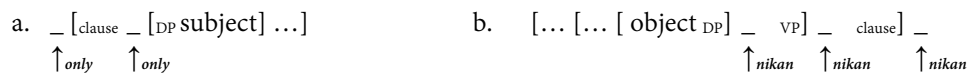
⁴ *Nikan* 'only' here may alternatively associate with the DO *flowers*. Indeed, association with DO is the most natural reading. VP association is less preferred yet possible.

⁵ In-situ subject focus with *nikan* 'only' is still possible but less plausible:

(i) *?John_F nikan feron Ade*
John only love Ade
'Only John loves Ade.'

⁶ The salient reading for (23) is however "John said that the only one John loves is Ade". In this salient reading, the moved focus with *ni* does not align with but embeds the exclusive focus with *nikan*.

(27) English sentence-initial *only* and Yoruba sentence-final *nikan*



- Whether focus association at a distance is possible:
 - Yes: English adverbial *only* Yoruba *kan*
 - No: English adnominal *only* Yoruba *nikan*

3. Co-occurrence of the ‘only’ particles

3.1. Co-occurrence of *kan* and *nikan*

- With the same focus associate (concord-like use)⁷
 - Elicited by the storyboard “Christmas Ball”
 - Emphasis on the single focus associate
 - Share the same truth conditions with sentences containing one particle⁸
 - To be distinguished from a scalar reading & a downplaying reading (see below)

(28) ... *tori John kan fun oun ni bag_F nikan.* (for [4] DO focus)
 because John only give her SEC bag only
 ‘...because John gave her (Mary) only a bag.’

(29) ... *tori John kan fun oun_F nikan ni flower* (for [5] IO focus)
 because John only give her only SEC flower
 ‘...because John gave only her (Ade) flowers.’

(30) *John ro pe oye ko kan [fun Ade ni flowers]_F nikan* (for [7] VP focus)
 John think that should 3SG? only give Ade SEC flower only
 ‘John thinks that he should have only given Ade flowers.’

- Scalar use
 - Both *kan* ‘only’ and *nikan* ‘only’ have scalar readings
 - The concord-like use is also possible in scalar readings

(31) [Context: Everyone except Ade bought at least ten books in a bookstore]

a. *Ade kan ra iwe mej_F*
 Ade only buy book two
 ‘Ade just bought two books.’

⁷ Only readings with a single focus associate, but not multiple focus readings, are considered ‘concord-like use’. To provide an example for the multiple focus reading:

(ii) *John kan [fun Mary ni iwe_{F-nikan} nikan]_{F-kan}* (VP and DO)
 John only give Mary SEC book only

Lit.: “John **only** gave Mary **only** a book” = “The only thing John did was giving only a book to Mary.”

⁸ Preliminary data with negation suggests that the concord-like reading retains even if one of the ‘only’ is negated, as in (iii). Interestingly, the focus associate *handbag* is now outside the scope of *kan* ‘only’. Yet, the reading remains a concord-like one, rather than a multiple focus reading.

(iii) *Ko kin she handbag_F nikan ni John kan fun Mary*
 NEG COP? do? handbag only FOC John only give Mary
 “John not only gave her a handbag.”

There is however no further concord-like data for now.

- b. Ade ra iwe meji_F nikan
 Ade buy book two only
 ‘Ade bought just two books.’
- c. Ade kan ra iwe meji_F nikan
 Ade only buy book two only
 Lit: ‘Ade just bought just two books.’ = (a)-(b)

- Downplaying reading of *kan* ‘only’
- *Kan* ‘only’ may occasionally serve as a “casual” use, alike to English *just*
 - Perform a downplaying function⁹

(32) Teacher *kan_{casual}* sa fun John ko she German_F nikan
 Teacher just say to John 3SG? do German only
 ‘(Oh, it’s nothing.) The teacher just told John to take only German.’

3.2. An operator-particle account?

- Bipartite analysis of focus and the operator-particle approach
- Focus constructions involve two heads:
 A higher Op head and a lower F head (Y. Lee 2004, 2005, Barbiers 2014, Erlewine 2017, 2020, Quek & Hirsch 2017, Bayer 2020, Sun 2020, 2021)
 - Op head = genuine focus-sensitive operator
 - F head = semantically inert particle (or agreement morpheme)

(33) John (only) gave (only) Mary_F a book

(34) [_{TP} John [_{Op} [_{vP} gave [_F [_{DP} Mary]_F] a book]]]
 ↑ *adverbial only* ↑ *adnominal only*

- The operator and the particle may spell out as different elements in other languages

(35) Nam **chĩ** mua **mõi** [cuõn sách]_F (Vietnamese, adapted from Erlewine 2017: 331)
 Nam OP_{only} buy F_{only} CL book
 ‘Nam only bought **the book**.’

- Yoruba? *Kan* = operator, *nikan* = particle?

(36) A hypothetical bipartite structure of ‘only’ in Yoruba

[_{TP} John [_{OP-kan} [_{vP} fun [_{DP} Mary]_F F-*nikan*] ni iwe]]]
 John only give Mary only SEC book
 ‘John only gave **Mary** a book.’

⁹ The downplaying ‘only/just’ can be distinguished from scalar ‘only’ in other languages, such as Cantonese. Cantonese has two sentence-final particles bearing restrictive focus. While *zaa3* ‘only’ may have both scalar and non-scalar uses and does not have the sense of downplaying, *ze1* ‘just’ only has a scalar use with the downplaying function (Sybesma & Li 2007:1755):

- (iv) Ngodei hokhaau jau loeng-cin jan **zaa3**.
 we school have two-thousand people ZAA
 “Our school only has 2,000 people.”
- (v) Ngodei hokhaau jau loeng-cin jan **ze1**.
 we school have two-thousand people ZE
 “Our school only has 2,000 people. (Don’t think too much of it.)”

➤ Complications

- *Kan* ‘only’ never associates with a subject
 - Obligatorily null OP head associating with a subject

(37)_{[CP OP [[John]_F F-*nikan*] ni [TP o [VP fun Mary ni iwe]]]}
 John only FOC 3SG give Mary SEC book
 ‘Only John gave a book to Mary.’

- Scopal behavior of *nikan* ‘only’
 - Taglicht (1984), Rooth (1985), Quek & Hirsch (2017), Erlewine (2020):
 English adverbial *only*: must take surface scope
 English adnominal *only*: could take a wide scope over a matrix predicate

(38)a. The teacher advised John to **only** take German_F (*only >advise, advise > only)

b. The teacher **only** advised John to take German_F (only >advise, *advise > only)

(39) The teacher advised John to take **only** German_F, ...

a. ...if John took Spanish and German, the teacher would be mad (advise > only)

b. ...but the teacher said nothing about Spanish (only >advise)

- *Nikan* ‘only’: NO scopal ambiguity

(40)a. *Teacher sa fun John [ko she German_F nikan]* (*only>advise, advise>only)
 teacher say to John 3SG? do German only
 ‘The teacher advised John to take only German_F.’

b. *German_F nikan ni teacher sa fun John [ko she _]* (only>advise, *advise>only)
 German only FOC teacher say to John 3SG? do
 ‘The teacher advised John to take only German_F.’

- While bipartite analysis seems intuitive to Yoruba exclusive focus particles, both *kan* ‘only’ and *nikan* ‘only’ display exceptional behavior that requires extra stipulations.

4. Conclusion

➤ Two types of exclusive focus particles

- Whether they may associate with focus at a distance
 - The same form in English: *only* (adverbial & adnominal)
 - Different forms in Yoruba: *kan* & *nikan*

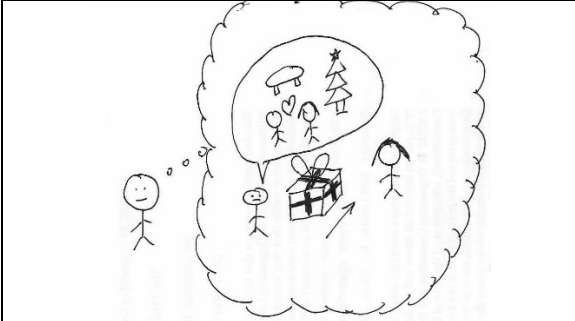
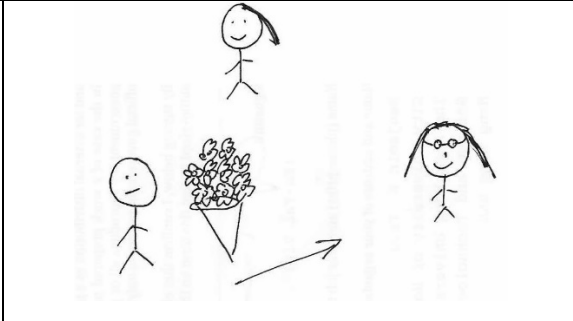
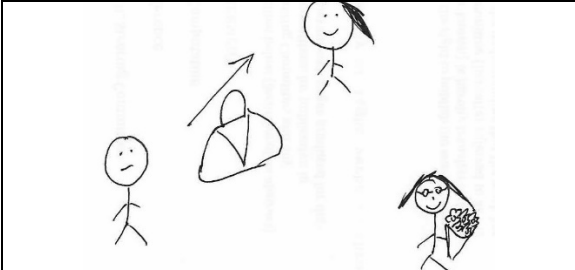
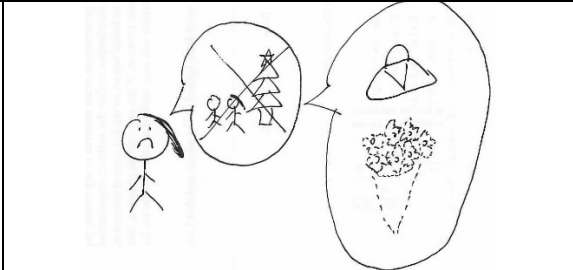
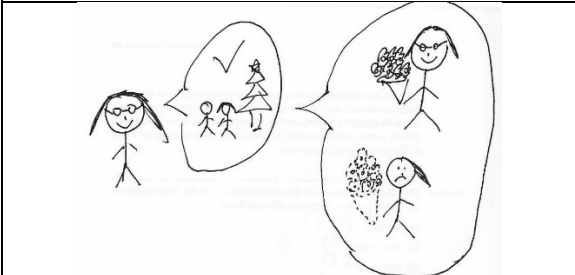
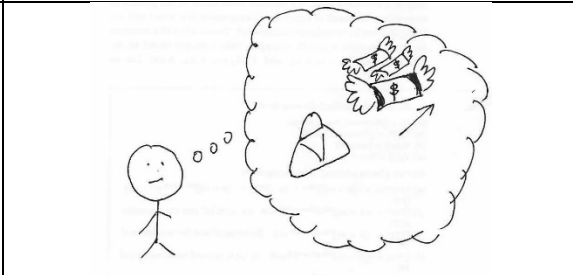
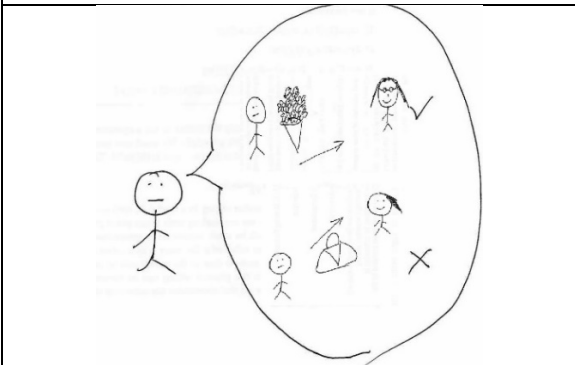
➤ The operator-particle account

- Explaining Yoruba *kan* & *nikan*
 - Captures different association patterns & different forms
 - Captures co-occurrence (particle = semantically inert)
 Not reducible to the scalar/downplaying reading (*pace* Hole 2017, P. Lee 2019)
- BUT:
 - *Kan* ‘only’: Failure to associate with subject focus
 - *Nikan* ‘only’: Lack of scope ambiguity

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Appendix: Storyboard “Christmas Ball”

 <p>[1] John plans to give a gift to a girl for inviting her to a Christmas ball</p>	 <p>[2] John gives flowers to Ade.</p>
 <p>[3] John gives a handbag to Mary.</p>	 <p>[4] Mary says no, because John gave only a handbag to her, but not flowers.</p>
 <p>[5] Ade says yes, because John gave flowers only to her, but not Mary.</p>	 <p>[6] John thinks he wasted money on buying the handbag.</p>
 <p>[7] John thinks that he should have only given flowers to Ade. He should not have given the handbag to Mary.</p>	