Focus in Ewe

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The basic word order in Ewe is SVO, as shown in (1).

(1) Kòfì ṣu mángò-nyè-wò.
Kòfì eat mango-1s-pl
‘Kofi ate my mangoes.’ (2009-10-01)

Topicalised and focalised elements can appear in left-peripheral positions, with and without associated particles:

(2) Mángò-nyè-wò (yá) Kòfì ṣu.
mango-1s-pl TOP Kofi eat-3p
‘As for my mangoes, Kofi ate them.’ (2009-10-01)

(3) Mángò-nyè-wò (yé) Kòfì ṣu.
mango-1s-pl FOC Kofi eat
‘Kofi ate MY MANGOES.’ (2009-10-01)

A variety of uses. Focus fronting, with and without an accompanying focus particle, can be used in a variety of contexts.

• Cleft:

(4) Mé-nyè nufíálá yé Kɔmlá nyè ḍò.
neg-be teacher FOC Kɔmlá be neg
‘It’s not a teacher that Kɔmlá is.’

• Wh focus:

(5) Núkà-é wò-dzrá-à le fiásé lá mè?
what-FOC 3p-sell-HAB in shop DET at
‘What do they sell in this shop?’ (BC, p. 54)

• Nominal predicate focus:

(6) Wò sùkúvi-é Kɔmlá nyè-à?
2s child-FOC Kɔmlá be-Q
‘Is Kɔmlá your student?’ (BC, p. 41)

*We would like to express our thanks to our informant Jeannette Enaku, and to Enoch Abob and Félix Ameka. References to Warburton et al. (1968) are indicated as ‘BC’.
Contrastive focus:

(7) A:  Mè-xl bé ãgbõlè-dèlà-wó dè-nà ãgbèhl-gbèlè le Ámèrìkà.
    1s-read tat farmer-pl cultivate-HAB cassava-field at America
    ‘I read that farmers grow cassava in America.’

B:  Àò, bli-gbèlè wó-dè-nà.
    no maize-field 3p-cultivate-HAB
    ‘No, they grow maize.’  (2010-01-20)

No resumption. In clauses with a fronted questioned or focused DP, there is no re-
sumption of that element with a clitic:

(8) a. Núkà-é né-qi(-í)?
    what-FOC 2s-eat-3s
    ‘What did you eat?’

b. Mángò-é mé-qi(-í).
    mango-FOC 1s-eat-3s
    ‘It’s a mango that I ate.’

(9) a. Àmekà yé nè-gbłó √ ná / *në?
    who FOC 2s-speak to / to:3s
    ‘Who did you talk to?’

b. Yawò yé mé-gbłó √ ná / *në.
    Yawo FOC 1s-speak to / to:3s
    ‘It’s Yawo that I talked to.’

Questions:

- Under what conditions is focus fronting possible or required?
- What is the distribution of the focus particle (y)é?
- Is the focus particle a head in the complementiser domain (Foc⁰) or DP-internal?
- How does focus in Ewe relate to the left periphery of other languages?

Our informant. Monolingual speaker from Kpalimé, Togo. Judgements may deviate
from Standard Ewe. For example, in our speakers dialect, topicalised elements are not
generally resumed with a clitic.

1 Focus fronting

Under what conditions is focus fronting possible or required?
**Wh questions.** Wh questions in Ewe require fronting, as shown in (10) and (11).

(10) a. ̀Afikât(é) né-nyè?
    citizen.of.where-FOC 2s-be
    ‘Where are you from?’  (2009-08-24)
   b.  * È-nyè ̀afikât?  
    2s-be citizen.of.where

(11) a. ̀Amèkà-é nè-kpô?  
    who-FOC 2s-see
    ‘Who did you see?’ (2009-08-24)
   b.  * E-kpô amèkà?  
    2s-see who
   (Acceptable as an echo question.)

Responses to wh questions do not always require focus fronting:

    citizen.of.where-FOC 2s-be 1s-be American
    citizen.of.where-FOC 2s-be American-FOC 1s-be  
    ‘Where are you from? I’m (an) American.’ (2009-08-17)

**Exhaustive focus.** Fronting is possible with exhaustive focus, but not obligatory:

(13) a. ̀Kòfî dìì-nà ̀akòkèwó kò.  
    Kofi eat-HAB banana-PL only 
   b. ̀akòkèwó kò (̀yè) ̀Kòfî dìì-nà.  
    banana-PL only FOC Kofi eat-HAB
   c. ‘Kofi only eats bananas.’ (2010-01-20)

**Contrastive focus.** Fronting is possible with contrastive focus, but not obligatory:

    1s-read that farmer-PL cultivate-HAB cassava-field at America
    ‘I read that farmers grow cassava in the US.’
    no 3P-cultivate-HAB wheat-field
    no wheat-field FOC 3P-cultivate-HAB
    ‘No, they grow wheat.’ (2010-01-20)

**Choice questions.** Fronting is possible with choice questions, but not obligatory:

(15) a. ̀Kòfî dè-nà ̀agbèlè-ègbèlà àlo ̀azi-ègbèlà à?  
    Kofi cultivate-HAB cassava-field or wheat-field q
   b. ̀Agbèlè-ègbèlà àlo ̀azi-ègbèlà ̀Kòfî dè-nà?  
    cassava-field or wheat-field Kofi cultivate-HAB
    ‘Does Kofi grow cassava or wheat?’ (2010-01-20)
Conclusion. Focus fronting in Ewe wh questions is obligatory. The patterns in Ewe and English in this respect are parallel:

(16) Q: What did you eat t_i?
   A: I ate [ your chocolates. ]

With all other types of focus, fronting is optional. Fronting of focused items other than wh phrases is allowed with focus types which in English only allow fronting in the guise of a cleft:

(17) a. It’s only bananas that John likes.
    b. *Only bananas does John like.
    c. ?Only bananas John likes.

(18) I read that farmers grow cassava in the US.
    a. No, it’s wheat that they grow.
    b. *No, wheat they grow.

(19) a. Is it cassava or wheat that John grows?
    b. *Cassava or wheat does John grow?

2 The focus particle yé

When is the focus particle yé obligatory?

Particle dependent on fronting. As shown in (20), yé cannot appear after a postverbal constituent such as an object to focus that constituent.

(20) Nyèmé-xlê nyàdzôdzôgbâlê ô...
    1s:NEG-read newspaper  NEG
    Context: ‘I didn’t read the newspaper.’
    a. Ágbâlê sia yé mè-xlê.
       book    this FOC 1s-read
       ‘I didn’t read the newspaper.’
    b. # Mè-xlê ágbâlê sia yé.
       1s-read book  this FOC

However, yé is not always required for this wh fronting.

(21) Afíkà nè-tsó?
    who  2s-come.from
    ‘Where do you come from?’

(22) Àmékà gbó Sényô dzê?
    who  at  Senyo lodge
    ‘At whose place is Senyo lodging?’
(23) Nùkà-wò nè-fële lè fìásé lâ mè?
   what-pl 2s-buy in shop the at
   ‘What (things) did you buy at the shop?’ (BS, p. 55)

Similarly, the short answers to such questions do not require yé after the fronted focused item either:

(24) Àfìkà nè-tsó? Ghana-(yé).
   who 2s-come from Ghana-FOC
   ‘Where are you from? Ghana.’ (2005-08-17)

Clefts. We will make the assumption that one of the defining characteristics of a cleft in Ewe is that the focused element is accompanied by a copular element. Negative clefts are readily available:

(25) Mé-nyé mìfiálá yé Kómá nyé ò.
    NEG-be teacher FOC Kómá be NEG
    ‘It’s not a teacher that Kómá is.’

A straightforward affirmative cleft is unavailable:

(26) a. Dòyôlàyé wò-nyé.
    doctor FOC 3s-be
    ‘He’s a doctor.’ (2009-08-07)
   b. *É-nyé dòyôlàyé (wò-nyé.)
    3s-be doctor FOC 3s-be

Félix Ameka (p.c.) reports that an affirmative cleft does exist in Ewe, exemplified in (27c), but our speaker rejects these:

(27) a. Mè-ðù àkóììú.
    1s-eat banana
    ‘I ate a banana.’
   b. Àkóììú-é mè-ðù.
    banana-FOC 1s-eat
    ‘I ate a BANANA.’
   c. Àkóììú-é wò-nyé mè-ðù.
    banana-FOC 3s-COP 1s-eat
    ‘It’s a banana that I ate.’ (Félix Ameka, p.c.)

There seems to be a distinct preference to include the focus marker yé in a negative cleft, but here too, its inclusion seems to be optional:

(28) Mé-nyé mìfiálá (yé.) Kómá nyé ò.
    NEG-COP teacher FOC Kómá COP NEG
    ‘Kómá is a teacher.’ (2009-10-01)

(29) Q: Amékà nè-kpà lè àsìnì?
   who 2s-see in market
   ‘Who did you see at the market?’
   A: Mé-nyé àmè ṅfìkè (yé.) mè-kpà ò.
    NEG-be person any FOC 1s-see NEG-Q
    ‘I didn’t see anyone.’ (2009-08-17)
Subject/non-subject asymmetry. Aboh (2007) notes that while some speakers of Gbe languages accept *wh* fronting without a concomitant focus particle in the general case, the particle is still obligatory in subject questions.

(30) a. Ámekà yé yi ãfütà?
   who foc go beach
   ‘Who went to the beach?’

   b. ?? Ámekà yé yi ãfütà?

However, our informant also allows the focus particle to be omitted in other contexts where the subject is something other than ámekà ‘who’:

(31) Nükà (yé ) dżé dźé dzí wò?
   what foc fall at on you
   ‘What happened?’

(32) Ámekà-wó (yé ) yi dżé dàwófè lá?
   who-pl foc go ? workplace det
   ‘Who has gone to work?’

(33) Agbàlé kà (yé ) gédé ànyígà?
   book which foc fall ground
   ‘Which book fell on the floor?’

Exhaustive focus. The particle kò/kòé ‘only’ is normally placed after the DP it restricts, as in (34).

(34) Miáwó kòé vá.
   1p only come
   ‘Only we came.’

Kòé is relevant to the distribution of the focus particle, because it might include yé:

(35) kò + yé → kòé

‘Only’ has two forms: kò and kòé. The form kòé is required after a subject immediately preceding the verb.

(36) Agbèlí yá fofó-nyè *kò/kòé dò.
    cassava top father-1s only cultivate
    ‘Only my father grows cassava.’

(37) Ame to so *kò/kòé vá.
    person only come
    ‘Only three people came.’

The direct object in Ewe can be preposed in sentence initial position, In this initial position, it can be followed by either kò or kòé.

(38) Agbàlé kò/kòé Yawò xịlé.
    book only Yawo read
    ‘Yawo read only a book.’
If kòé is kò + yé, then yé is required after an exclusively focused subject, but not with other exclusively focused phrases.

Kòé and yé can't co-occur.

(39)  a. Akɔx dù-wò kò (yé) Kòfì djù-nà.
   banana-PL only FOC Kofi eat-HAB
   banana-PL only FOC Kofi eat-HAB
   ‘Kofi only eats bananas.’ (2010-01-20)

Conclusion. The only contexts in which (y)é is obligatory involve subject focus:

• The focus particle is preferred, but not strictly required, in subject wh question.

• If kòé ‘only’ is analysed as kò + yé, then subject ‘only’ phrases always require the focus particle.

What the particle yé contributes to the clause can be described as follows:

• Yé disambiguates focused subjects from normal ones.
  But: This function is redundant when the subject is a wh phrase or a phrase modified by ‘only’.

• Yé disambiguates between topicalised and focused non-subjects in the left periphery.
  But: This function is redundant wherever these are also distinguished by clitic resumption.

3 The syntactic analysis of the focus particle yé

Is the focus particle yé a Foc0 head in the complementiser field (Aboh, 2004), as in (40a), or somewhere inside the DP, as in (40b)?

(40)  a. 

    FocP  
    /\     
   DP   Foc'  
  / \   / \  
 NP  yé IP  
 
 b. 

    FocP  
    /\     
   DP   Foc'  
  / \   / \  
 NP  yé IP  

Clause-final ye. It was shown that a focused DP cannot be followed by ye to the right of the verb. However, ye can appear clause-finally to focus the entire clause, as shown in (41b).

(41) Núkà Kòfi gblù ná-wò?
    what Kofi say to-2s

    Context: ‘What did Kofi tell you?’ (2006-??-??)
  a. É-gblù bé wó-tú síkú lá.
    3s-say that 3p-close school DET
    ‘He said that the school has been closed.’
  b. (Bé ) wó-tú síkú lá (ye. )
    that 3p-close school DET FOC
    ‘That the school has been closed.’

This suggests that ye is in the complementiser domain:

(42)

Medial ye. We assume that ye is not available medially, as in these two as yet untested sentences:

(43) Kòfi lè gútí ( *ye. ) ṭún-m.
    Kofi at orange FOC eat-PROG
    ‘Kofi is eating an orange.’

(44) Mè-kpó Kòfi ( *ye. ) lè ìsìmè.
    1s-see Kofi FOC at market
    ‘I saw Kofi at the market.’

Left-peripheral kò/kò é. Recall that subjects must be followed by the form kò ‘only’, which we have given this tentative analysis:

(45) kò + ye → kòé

(46) a. Ýawò kòé vá.
    Yawo only come
    ‘Only Yawo came.’
  b.

The impossibility of kò with subject focus is then reduced to the strong preference for ye with focused subject which we already observed for subject wh questions.
**Kò/kòé in the right periphery**  
Kò and kòé can also follow the object with any kind of modifier in its canonical postverbal position. In the following examples, the object is followed by the demonstrative sìa ‘this’ or even by the article lù ‘the’:

(47) **Yawò xlè ágbálé lá kò/kòé.**  
Yawo read book det only  
‘Yawo only read the book.’

**Medial kò/kòé ‘only’**:

(48) **Mè-kpó [ Kòfi kò/kòé ]dp [ lè sìaìmé ]pp**  
1s-see Kofi only at market  
‘I saw only Kofi at the market.’ (2010-01-20)

(49) **Progressive: Sbj lè Obj V-ñí**  
Kofi at orange only eat-prog  
‘Kofi is eating only an orange.’ (2010-01-20)

**Number effects with kò/kòé.**

(50) a. **Ágbálé kò/kòé Yawò xlè.**  
book only Yawo read  
‘Yawo read only the book.’

b. **Ágbálé-wó kò/kòé Yawò xlè.**  
book-pl only Yawo read  
‘Yawo read only the books.’ (2009-08-17, 2009-10-01)

(51) a. **Mè-kpó Yawò kò/kòé.**  
1s-see Yawo only  
‘I saw only Yawo.’ (2009-08-10)

b. **Mè-kpó Yawò kpì Kwàsí kò/kòé.**  
1s-see Yawo and Kwasi only  
‘I saw only Yawo.’ (2009-08-10, 2009-10-01)

**Conclusion.**  
Ignoring kò/kòé, on the basis of medial DPs, it appears that yí is not DP-internal. This makes the Foc head analysis most likely.

Sketch of an analysis of kò/kòé:

- *Kòé* is derived from kò+yé only in left-peripheral positions.

- kò/kòé are also independently distinct forms of ‘only’ and of ‘alone’. Number effects (not discussed here) restricting the appearance of the form kòé is related to the adverb/adjective distinction.

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**4 The structure of the left periphery**

How does focus in Ewe relate to the left periphery of other languages?
*Foc > Top.  No type of focus can be followed by a topic.

Recall that there is also topic fronting, with an optional accompanying particle:

(52) Mángò-nyè-wó (yá) Kòfí ġí-ú.
  mango-1s-pl TOP Kofi eat-3p
  ‘As for my mangoes, Kofi ate them.’ (2009-10-01)

A topic must precede a plain focused phrase:

   fufu-1s-eat Kofi TOP rice foc 3s-prepare
   ‘I ate the fufu. As for Kofi, it’s rice that he ate.’ (2008-08-17)

   fufu-1s-eat rice foc Kofi TOP 3s-prepare

The sentences in (54a) and (54b) show that a *wh phrase and a topicalised phrase may cooccur, but that the topic must precede the wh phrase.

(54) Mé-nyá bé nè-flè amàgbé-wó lè fiásé mè,
   1s-know that 2s-buy vegetable-pl in shop at
   ‘I know that you bought some vegetables at the shop,’

   a. gàkè lè āsìmè yá nükà-é nè-flè?
      but in market top what-foc 2s0buy
      ‘but what did you buy at the market?’ (2009-08-07)

   b. *gàkè nükà-é āsìmè yá nè-flè?
      but what-foc market top 2s0buy

Similarly, a topic cannot be followed by a subject modified by kò(é) ‘only’.

(55) a. Fòfò-nyè kòe dò ègbèh.
   father-1s only cultivate cassava
   ‘Only my father grows cassava.’ (2009-08-17)

b. Ègbèh yá fòfò-nyè dò.
   cassava top father-1s cultivate
   ‘Cassava, my father grows it.’

c. *Ègbèh yá fòfò-nyè kòe dò.
   cassava top father-1s only cultivate
   intended: ‘Cassava, only my father grows it.’

Multiple topics. A topicalised subject preceding a topicalised object is generally deemed ungrammatical, as in (56).

(56) a. [ Nyè ègbèlè ] yá Yawò xlè.
    1s book TOP Yawo read
    ‘My book Yawo read.’ (2009-08-17)

   Yawo 1s book TOP 3s-read

(57) * Kòfí ġí-ú mèh sà, vá Yawò ( yá ) mèh sà mè-çí-ú ò.
   Kofi eat rice this but Yawo TOP rice this neg-eat-3s neg
   Intended: ‘Kofi ate this rice, but Yawo didn’t eat this rice.’ (2009-08-17)
With the order OSV, the subject itself may be followed by \( y\text{a} \), as in (58).

(58) Kôfi ām\(h\) sà, \(v\)à m\(h\) sà Yawô ( y\(h\) ) mëq\(u\)-í \(d\)
Kôfi eat rice this but rice this Yawô TOP NEG-eat-3S NEG
‘Kôfi ate this rice, but Yawô didn’t eat this rice.’

Conclusion.

- We propose that the left periphery in Ewe is organised as follows:

(59) Topic > Focus/Wh > IP

- While multiple topics are possible, there are ordering restrictions between them.

This conclusion is dependent on the assumption that \( y\text{a} \) is a topic marker. Note also that it is not clear whether the subject followed by \( y\text{a} \) in (58) is in spec-IP or in spec-TopP.

5 Conclusions

Fronting.

- Topicalised and focused elements can appear in left-peripheral positions in Ewe.

- Fronting is possible under the following conditions: \( \text{wh} \)-questions, Informational Focus, Exhaustive Focus, Contrastive Focus, and choice questions.

- Fronting is never obligatory, except in \( \text{wh} \) questions. (However, it is not clear whether subjects are fronted when followed by focus particle \( y\text{ê} \) or by \( k\text{o}\text{ê} \) ‘only’.)

The focus particle \( y\text{ê} \).

- The particle \( y\text{ê} \) appears only to the right of an element fronted to the left periphery. It can never appear within the IP. Only when the whole clause is focused can it be followed by \( y\text{ê} \).

- \( y\text{ê} \) does not encode a particular type of focus.

- The particle \( y\text{ê} \) is obligatory only in subject questions (on the right of \( ã\text{mëk\(Ä\) } \)‘who’).

\( k\text{o}/k\text{o}\text{ê} \) ‘only’.

- The particle meaning ‘only’ has two forms: \( k\text{o} \) and \( k\text{o}+y\text{ê}\rightarrow k\text{o}\text{ê} \).

- \( k\text{o}\text{ê} \) is always required on the right of the subject ‘only’ phrases (like the focus particle \( y\text{ê} \)).

- Number effects in the distribution of \( k\text{o} \) and \( k\text{o}\text{ê} \) may be due to the existence of two difference lexical items, one meaning ‘only’ and the other meaning ‘alone’.
The structure of the left periphery.

- The structure of the left periphery in Ewe is as follows:
  
  (60) Topic > Focus/Wh > IP

- While multiple topics are possible, there are ordering restrictions between them.

References


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