



THE PHONOTACTICS OF KI IN IZÓN FOCUS CONSTRUCTIONS

BY

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Abstract

That focus places prominence on certain constituents and leaves out (back)ground information in information structure is not new. Also, language-specific parameters observed in foci and their markings are established in the literature. However, a literature gap exists on the variants of the Izón focus marker identified as kị. A seeming challenge in pedagogy is envisioned in distinguishing its variants in syntactic frames. This study is cast within the phonological processes of elision, epenthesis, tonal reassociation, and vowel reassignment. Data are drawn from utterances of Izón competent speakers in interpersonal interactions and innate knowledge of the researcher. The study avers that kị is heterogenous, conditioned by contagious onset(less) morphemes and manifests as ke, ko, ku, ki, etc., having elided its onset vowel and conversely too, that kị remains stable when it co-occurs with onset morphemes but may insert an /o/ epenthesis when a time adverbial or place argument is the focus. All phonological processes conform to the CV syllable structure of the language.

Keywords: focus, Izón, prominence, elision, epenthesis, reassociation, reassignment

1.0 Introduction

Focusing is one universally expressed syntactic phenomenon that involves emphasis or prominence of some element(s) in constructions. Lambrecht (1994:206) identifies a focus construction as the ‘new knowledge hitched to the topic post’. That is the unknown information about a topic in a discourse setting. There is no known natural language that does not purposefully place prominence on constituents for focus. Still, the means through which it is expressed in natural languages could be different and, most times, diverse (Gundel, 1988 and Givon, 1991). Though this is the case, it is worth noting that these languages hardly express focus the same way. While some may employ the use of suprasegmental features such as tonal undulations, stress or pitch, others choose to employ distinct morphological declensions which may select certain syntactic slots (depending on the focused element) into which they will be inserted in information structure²⁷ ~IS~ (Prince, 1981; Halliday, 1967; and Chafe, 1976).

Chafe (1974) opines that information structure ~IS~ is a phenomenon of information packaging that responds to the immediate needs of interlocutors. As opposed to syntactic structure which is concerned with lexical categories and their interrelationship/connection in constructions, IS deals with the knowledge of interactants on the discourse elements in which the syntactic frames are employed and how their common knowledge and the sum of the information that people assume

²⁷ This refers to the knowledge and state of affairs that language users have about the content of the structure of their speech which is dependent on text structure, background information and innate conventions about the subject matter of discourse (Kekai, 2017).



they share (Clark, 2006), relates to their background knowledge. Sentences in IS are divided into **focus** and **ground** and the latter is further broken down into **link** and **tail**²⁸ (Vullduvi, 1990) and often, the presupposed or known information. Focus refers to the new or unknown information that is introduced into a discourse, often with an element which could be an argument; in the objective or subjective case, a predicate focus, or sentence focus (Saskia, 2016). Studies acknowledge that languages express focus by several means such as intensifiers, exclusives, non-scaler additives, particularizers, etc. (Xu, Y., C. X. Xu and X, 2004; Szendroi, K, 2004). These studies tend to represent information in ~IS~, such as; the background and focus with syntactic processes like clefting, topic or focus.

Studies of focus have identified preferences for indicating focus in languages. bn (2019) for instance, opines that for Ñjò -Kóo, there is no distinction between sentence and verbal focus, only one focus strategy is employed for both. Focus in an information structure ~IS~ requires new, important or stressed information to be inserted into the structure either for emphasis or attention. Several ways of marking focus are isolated: morphologically, structurally or prosodically, through clefting focus, and topicalization with discourse markers of a language. The aim of this study, therefore, is to identify the focus marker in Izón²⁹ in order to examine the structural variants in constructions for ease of interpretation, description in pedagogy and for documentation.

1.1. Background to the study

Studies show that natural languages exhibit several formal phenomena, such as syntactic alternations, insertion, subject/object inversion, head positioning, morphological markings, assimilation, deletion, etc., some of which are invariably associated with ~IS~. Though these phenomena exist in natural languages, there is enough evidence to show that parameter settings constrain some languages from manifesting them in the same way so as not to violate language-specific parameters (Chomsky, 1981; Chomsky and Lasnik, 1993).

There is a dearth of information, particularly on focus marking and the variations that surface on the element identified herein as focus marker (henceforth, FOCm) in Izón, which results in wrong pedagogical interpretations. The ~FOCm~ specifically identified in this study as **ki** manifests in various forms in competent speakers' speech and structural representations, even for the Kabu dialect (one of the twenty-eight (28) dialects of the language collectively called Izón deployed for this study).

Izón

The name Izón is synonymous with its people and culture. It is one of a group of four closely related languages collectively called Ijaw or Ijo and spoken in Delta, Edo, Bayelsa, Akwa-Ibom, Ondo and Rivers states. This language group includes Eastern Ijo, which comprises Kalabari, Okrika, Ibani, and Nkoro; Nembe and Akassa; Buseni, Okodia, and Oruama; as well as Izón (Williamson, 1983; Jenewari, 1977). Kekai (2016) states that Izón, an Ijoid language, has an estimated speaker population of about ten million. Although Greenberg (1955) suggests that the Ijoid languages belong to the Kwa family, linguists consider Ijaw (Ijoid) to form a divergent branch, particularly due to its word order (SOV) and the absence of a noun class system. Consequently, it is regarded as a distinct branch and should be classified accordingly (Welmers, 1973; Williamson, 1989; Dimmendaal, 2011; Jenewari, 1989). Two tonemes are in use: an unmarked or grave tone (ˊ) and an acute tone (ˋ). On a single word, the tones [-H] and [+H] can occur side by side, e.g., àrí 'deceive' and àrú 'canoe'. Similarly, a grave [-H] or an acute [+H] tone may occur sequentially in clusters, e.g., dùrù 'shout' and pélé 'cut'.

²⁸ For a thorough understanding of link and tail, read Vullduvi, (1990)



Kabu, the dialect employed for this study is spoken in Belta and Bayelsa states in South-South Nigeria. All twenty-eight dialects of the language are mutually intelligible to its speakers including Kabu (Williamson, 1965; Emenanjo, 2003).

There is enough evidence to claim that the ~FOCm~ **kɪ** may manifest as **ka**, **ko**, **ke**, etc. in the surface realization of competent speakers' utterances. In **1a**, for example, **kɪ** changes its structure by eliding its high front vowel, /i/ and reassigning the features of the low/back open vowel of the succeeding third-person singular object pronoun /á/ 'her'. In **1b** also, the data show that an /o/ epenthesis is inserted into the frame. In which case, the resultant ~FOC~ marker is either **ka**, comprising **k**, the consonant of **kɪ** and the following onsetless morpheme or **ko**, comprising **k** and the epenthetical element /o/ as the structures below show. The surface realisations are indicated to the left with the deleted segment of **kɪ** in parentheses.

- 1a. È yin k(i) a tɪn -mẹ ==> È yin ká tɪn -mẹ
 1_{SG}. mother FOC ~3_{SG}~ call -PST
 'It was my mother that called her.'
- b. à wɛnɪ wari k(i) o mu -mẹ ==> à wɛnɪ wari ko mu -mẹ
 ~3_{SG}~ walk house ~FOC~ clit go PST
 'It was house that she walked to'

As observed in some other natural languages such as Edo, a left-to-right deletion is in place wherein the vowel of the onset morpheme **kɪ** is elided. The onsetless vowel /á/ which translates as 3_{SG} in **1a** reassigns to **k** to derive **ka** while an epenthetical /o/ reassigns to **k** to derive **ko** in **1b**.

It is important to note that /o/ is inserted even though the construction conforms to the ~CV~ structure of the language. That is, /o/ is inserted in the environment of an onset morpheme **mu** 'go'. Two interpretations are therefore apparent from the data above: that the focus marker **kɪ** becomes **ka** in the environment of the onsetless morpheme [a] 'her' or that **kɪ** becomes **ko** also in the environment of an onsetless /o/ epenthesis, as the schema in **3** and **4** below illustrate:

3. [kɪ] ==> [ka] / [a] # -----
 4. [kɪ] ==> [ko] / /o/ # -----

The resultant ~FOC~ markers, **ka** and **ko** in **1a** and **b** are dual constituent morphemes consisting of the residual consonant of the focus marker, /k/ and the onsetless morpheme [á] 'her' in **1a** and the epenthesis o in **1b**.

Combinations such as these, in which the derived morphemes [ka] and [ko] are inherently dual constituents but are interpreted simply as ~FOC~ markers, are prevalent in Izón focus constructions. Such diverse manifestations are a bane to teachers and learners of the language. The constraint, therefore, is how to decipher the morpho-phonological constituents of each focal marker, their diverse indicators, and the focus elements in constructions. For learners, understanding the triggers of vowel elision, vowel insertion, reassignment, and tonal reassociation is vital for interpretability.

1.2. The aim and objectives of the study

This study aims at identifying the focus marker/element and its variants in Izón focus constructions. The purpose is to deconstruct the inherent features that account for its diverse manifestations in structures, as it co-occurs with other constituents in syntactic frames. The objective of the present study therefore, includes several aspects geared towards the following goals:

- to identify the focus marker of Izón
- to determine if focus is marked by preposing or postposing the focal element
- to identify the phonological processes involved in the variants identified and
- to ascertain the dual component nature of derived ~FOC~ markers.

2.0. Phonological processes

Essentially, four phonological processes capture the seemingly changing features exhibited by the Izón focus marker **kɪ**, as displayed in competent speaker's daily interactions and required by



learners for understanding its distinct components in constructions. They include: **elision/deletion**, **reassignment**, **insertion** and **tonal reassociation**. For clarity, these terms, which constitute the major phonological processes observed in the derivation of Izón focus constructions, are defined.

- i. **Elision/deletion:** This simply refers to the deletion or omission of one or more segments in a word, phrase, or syllable. Though also productive in slow speech for some natural languages, it is more common to omit segments, which can be consonants or vowels, depending on parametric variations in languages. Elision is very productive in rapid speech even in languages, Izón inclusive. Kekai, (2016) acknowledges that words like **bára** ‘hand’ are realized as **brá** in the Kabu dialect of Izón and some other dialects. That in the environment of approximants like the liquids /r/ and /l/, V₁ is often elided. This is also observed in the Ogbe-Ijó dialect. Deletion may occur at word boundary, word initial or medial positions. However, elision/deletion is often governed by certain phonological constraints based on the syllable structure pattern of the language. For instance, in Izón, vowels are constrained from occurring sequentially in constructions. What this means is that, peradventure a morpheme with an open syllable³⁰ morpheme precedes an onsetless morpheme, depending on several factors and mostly conditioned by ease of articulation in rapid speech, either the final vowel at word boundary or that of the onsetless morpheme is elided. This phonological process is common in Izón focus construction and will constitute one of the processes employed for the analyses in this study.
- ii. **Reassignment:** Sound reassignment in linguistics refers to a sound change in which a sound segment is replaced with a different one in a language. In most cases the replaced sound is completely elided for the insertion of a new sound, while in some others the sound changes to become like a following one. Such sound changes are often environmentally conditioned, occurring only in certain environments, or it may be a general change to the speech sound that exist over time. The former seems to fit our purpose as rightward reassignment in focus constructions take place only to avoid violation of the vowel-cluster constrain. Hence, the onset vowel of the focus marker gets deleted when it occurs in contagious with an onsetless morpheme. This phonological process is also deployed in this study.
- iii. **Epenthesis:** Also called **vowel** insertion, epenthesis is a phonological process in which a vowel is inserted into a word or phrase. It is mostly done for ease in pronunciation, to conform to some language-specific constraints such as for separating vowels in hiatus, breaking consonant clusters or even as a poetic device. Vowel insertion can be found in different languages and dialects and affects the phonetic structure of words. It is common in African languages and Izón is not an exception. Observation reveals that in Izón focus constructions, vowel insertion occurs after the elision of the vowel segment of the focus marker of the language. Though the status and function of the inserted vowel in Izón focus constructions is yet to be determined, as it surfaces only in certain environments, this phonological process will constitute one of the theoretical frameworks employed for analysing the Izón focus constructions to ascertain its varied structural representations.
- iv. **Tonal re-association:** This is the process in which a floating tone associates with the tonal tier of a preceding or succeeding tone thereby resulting in tonal change. Since tones operate on separate tiers, Goldsmith (1976), when a sound is elided, the floating tone docks to the next available tone-bearing segment sometimes resulting in contour

³⁰ Izón is an open syllable language.



tones. Izón, being a pitch accent language in which some syllables or morphemes with sequential tone types are given equal prominence (Ndimele and Efere, 2003), downstep (\downarrow), a contrastive drop in tonal pitch from a preceding tone (Leben, 2014) or upstep (\uparrow), a phonemic upward shift or raising in tone between syllables or morphemes is apparent (cf Kekai, 2016). Consider the data below with sequential tone, resulting in an upstep low in **5a** and **b** and a downstep in **5c** and **d**, in the constructions.

5a. /b́iɛn/ # /ɛ̀yó/ => [bǝjɛ́j'ó]	deficate # place	'toilet'
b. /àndá # ò zi/ => [and'òzi]	wrestle # drum	'wrestling drum'
c. /wùrù # bóú/ => [wùrùb \downarrow ou]	alkohol # drink	'drink (alkohol)'
d. /bèni # zúu/ => [bèni \downarrow zu]	water # fetch	'fetch water'

The illustrations in **5a** to **d** above show that two phonological processes may take place when contrastive as well as like tones occur in series in Izón after the deletion of vowels before word boundaries: an upstep (the heightening of contrastive tones) or downstep (the lowering of a sequence of lows).

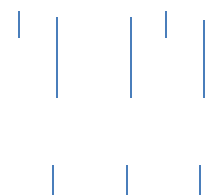
In focus constructions, having elided the vowel segment of the ~FOCm~, the tone is left stranded; it thus docks to the next available tone-bearing unit ~TBU~ and reassociates with V₁ of the morpheme across word boundary as shown in **6** below.

6. **buru be ába k̀i emi** ==> **buru be ába k(i) \downarrow emi**
 yam ~DET~ barn ~FOC~ ~PRS~
 'The yam is in the barn'

This tonal reassociation and phonological processes involved are better explained using the autosegmental principles proposed in Goldsmith (1976) which posits that, all segments are autonomous as such, should be represented separately in tiers as shown in the illustration for the construction, **sán # ɛ̀yó** ==> [sány'ó] 'washroom' in Fig 1 below where V₁ across word boundary is elided and the tonal segment linked to the following ~TBU~.

FIG 1. **sán # ɛ̀yó** ==> **[sány'ó]**

CV Tier:	C	V	#	V	C	V	==>	C	V	#	V	C
V												
C Tier:	s			j				s			j	
V Tier:		a		e		o			a		e	o
Tonal Tier:	[+H]			[-H]		[-H]		[+H]			[-H]	
[+H]												



As is obvious in Fig 1, V₁ of the onsetless morpheme across word boundary is delinked because it is elided in the structure and its low tone progressively reassociates with that of the succeeding high, resulting in an upstep tone.

The sequential ordering of tones in Izón constructions led to Williamson (1983) selection of a convenient convention for marking tones in Izón and adopted for this study namely that:

- An initial +H tone (') is marked.
- An initial low tone (̀) is left unmarked.
- A change in tone from a preceding tone is marked.



- d. Where there are no changes after the initial tone, subsequent tone bearing segments are left unmarked.

Since tone plays a vital role in the semantics of morphemes both in isolation and when co-articulated with other morphemes in constructions, a convention of this nature will not only make for ease and convenience in tone marking but will also be relevant for the deconstruction and interpretation of the tonal changes observed after the elision of the onset vowel of the focus marker **kì**.

3.0. Data and methodology

The data for this study are drawn from spontaneous utterances of Izón competent speakers as they went about their day-to-day activities. This was achieved with the help of a hyper-sensitive audio Wave pad application downloaded from the Google Play Store onto a cell phone. Being a native speaker of Izón, some data also fall within the purview of intuitive knowledge. Personal interviews and interactions with native speakers of **Mein**, **Kabu** and **Gbaramatu** dialects served to justify the claim that **kì** is the focus marker of the language and further distinguish the similarities or otherwise of **kì** in sentences, its co-occurrence features and variants conditioned by extraneous factors.

Of particular importance is how to identify through the associative relevant phonological processes, the distinctive features of **kì** in different environments in constructions, the triggers and the changes it undergoes to derive the surface realizations observed. The constructions were analyzed using the four processes identified as contributing to the interpretation of the diverse structures of the focus marker. The examples below serve to illustrate the phonological processes described with **Tare**, a Personal Name ~PN~, being the focus and preposed element of the ~FOCm~ **kì** in both constructions. While in sentence 7, the ~FOCm~ precedes an onsetless morpheme, **àru** ‘canoe’, in sentence 8 it precedes an onset morpheme, **dáa** ‘hook’. Hence, the surface realizations of **kì** are different in both structures. Note the differences in **kì** in addition to the changes in the tones of the structures. In the rest of this study, all deleted segments are in parenthesis.

	Underlying representation	Surface realization
7.	Tarí k _ì àru fẹ́ -mẹ ~PN SBJ~ ~FOC~ canoe ~OBJ~ buy -PST ‘It was Tare that bought the canoe.’	=> Tarí k(i) àru fẹ́-mẹ =>Tari ka [↓] ru fẹ́-mẹ
8.	Tarí k _ì dáa t _í mí-mẹ ~PN~ ~FOC~ hook ~RET~ ‘It was Tare that was hooking.’	=> Tarí k _ì dáa t _í mí-mẹ

The reader will notice that in both sentences 7 and 8, the focus is on Tare. However, while the vowel of **k_ì** is elided in sentence 7, the vowel in sentence 8 remains intact. After elision, the tone of the vowel is displaced as it realigns with the following tone of the ~TBU~ of the onsetless morpheme to its left. This tone reassignment results in a downstep tone. Conversely, in sentence 8, the tonal and vowel segments of the ~FOCm~ **k_ì** stay structurally stable since the structure follows the ~CV~ pattern of the language, with the onset morpheme **k_ì** preceding the onset morpheme **dáa** ‘hook’.

A close examination of the environmental features of both structures shows that an onsetless morpheme succeeds **k_ì** in sentence 7, unlike in sentence 8, where an onset morpheme follows it. Therefore, the immediate question is how a non-native speaker and learner can determine the factors affecting such stable structures in sentence 8, compared to the unstable one in sentence 7. The straightforward answer is that vowels occurring in sequence across word or morpheme boundaries are not permitted in the language; hence, elision deletes one of the vowels, in this case,



the vowel to the right, and reassigns the vowel across the word boundary to the stranded consonant, **k**. The stability and resistance to elision in 8 are due to the presence of an onset morpheme across the word boundary, namely, **dáa** ‘hook’, which aligns with the ~CV~ syllable structure of the language.

In the rest of this paper, the co-occurrence features of the ~FOCm~ **kí** with onsetless and onset morphemes will be examined and thoroughly analysed to identify the underlying morpho-phonological processes that produce such variations. Any other phonological processes that may be incidental to the analysis of the Iẓón ~FOCm~ will also be discussed.

3.1. **kí** preceding onsetless morphemes in constructions

Iẓón employs a total of nine (9) vowels neatly harmonized into three sets following their tongue root position during articulation. While the third set is a neutral low-vowel /a/ and may occur with any of the two other sets, the harmony system constrains the two other sets of vowels, i.e., plus and minus Advance Tongue Root ~+ATR~ vowels, from co-occurring within lexical formatives. The harmony system, just like tones, contributes to the semantic distinctions of morphemes. The two sets may, however, co-occur in post-lexical formatives. The vowels are captured in 9 with some morphemes to illustrate the contribution of the harmonized sets to distinct meanings in 10.

9. Set i. /i, e, o, u/ ~+ATR~
 Set ii. /ɪ, ɛ, ɔ, ʊ/ ~-ATR~
 Set iii. /a/ ~NEUTRAL~
 ~+ATR~ ~-ATR~

10.

- | | | | | |
|----|-------|------------|--------|--------------|
| a. | béin | ‘full’ | bẹ́in | ‘cross’ |
| b. | fúru | ‘steal’ | fụ́rụ | ‘smell’ |
| c. | téi | ‘play’ | tẹ́i | ‘leave’ |
| d. | beri | ‘ear’ | bẹ́rị | ‘widen’ |
| e. | gbóun | ‘obstruct’ | gbọ́un | ‘break open’ |

The vowel of the ~FOCm~ **kí** falls under the ~-ATR~ group in the Kabu dialect but copies the ~+ATR~ feature of a succeeding vowel when it precedes it. Thus, its surface form could be + or ~-ATR~ depending on the ~ATR~ feature of the succeeding vowel.

The nine vowels can occur at word initial, medial, and final positions. Observation of Iẓón competent speakers’ interactions reveals that vowel clusters may occur in lexical formatives, especially for **Kabu**. Hence, morphemes such as, **báí** ‘tomorrow’, **tíẹ** ‘stand’, **fẹ́í** ‘buy’ etc. can be found in its lexicon. However, when an onset morpheme precedes an onsetless morpheme in constructions, either the vowel before the word boundary or the vowel of the onsetless morpheme across the word boundary may be elided. This probably accounts for why the vowel of **kí** often elides when it precedes onsetless morphemes. The data in 11 drawn from language speaker’s intuitive knowledge illustrate the varied nature of **kí** in focus constructions. The elided vowels are enclosed in parenthesis. Consider the structures below.

11.

- a. e yin kí oru kari -yi ==> e yin k(i) oru kari -yi
 1_{SG} mother ~FOC~ idol worship ~PROG~
 ‘It is my mother that is worshipping idol’
- b. fún fei dou-yi owei kí ẹmọmọ ari -mẹ ==>
 fún fei dou-yi owei k(i) ẹmọmọ ari -mẹ
 book buy ~PROS~ man ~FOC~ ~COMM~ talk ~PST
 ‘It is the man who is about to buy the book that talked.’
- c. Tári ereinbíri kí bó -mẹ ==> Tári ereinbíri k(i) ò bó -mẹ
 ~PN~ midday ~FOC~ come ~PST
 ‘It was at midday that Tare came.’
- d. è daụ kí enì arú fẹ́i -mẹ ==> è daụ k(i) ènì arú fẹ́i -mẹ



- ~1SG~ father ~FOC~ ~1SG~ dress buy ~PST~
 ‘It was my father that bought my dress’.
- e. Èbiyè Tárí fún kị kàn -mẹ ==> Èbiyè Tárí fún ki kàn -mẹ
 ~PN~ ~PN~ book ~FOC~ tear ~PST~
 ‘It was Tari’s book that Ebiye tore.’
- f. bè má kị íngò dẹ̀n -nìmi ==> bè má k(ì) ingo dẹ̀n -nìmi
 ~DET~ ~FEM~ ~FOC~ poor ~DEG~ ~PRS~
 ‘It is she who is the poorest’
- g. e yin k(ì) ọ̀bá bulu yọ̀. -mọ -mẹ ==>
 e yin k(ì)[↑] ọ̀bá bulu yọ̀. -mọ. -mẹ
 ~1SG~ mother ~FOC~ tributary inside paddle ~DIR~ ~PST~
 ‘It was my mother who paddled towards the tributary’
- h. á. yin. k(ì) ube fẹi -mẹ ==> á yin k[↑]ube fẹi -mẹ
 ~SG~ mother ~FOC~ pear buy -PST~
 ‘It was her mother who bought the pear.’

In 11a, b, and d, all the focus markers precede onsetless morphemes as such, the vowels of **kị** namely, /i/ gets elided. V_1 of the onsetless morphemes across word boundary is then assigned to **k**. The resultant morphemes are dual unit morphemes composed of **k** and the succeeding onsetless morphemes coarticulated in rapid speech. These differ from 11c and e where an /o/ epenthesis is inserted into the structure and assigned to **k** in 11c and **kị** remains stable in 11e respectively. The stability of the focus marker in 11e is attributable to the need for conformity with the ~CV~ syllable structure constraint of the language. The data indicate that the ~FOCm~ of the language is heterogeneous as it is realized as **ko**, **kẹ**, **ke**, **ki**, **kọ** and **ku** in 7a, b, d, f, g and h. The vowel in **kị** can therefore phonetically change its structure corresponding to the nine vowels of the language. Based on the three rules proposed below, namely:

Rule 1: Delete the onset vowel of the ~FOCm~ element iff the segment succeeding it is a vowel or an onsetless morpheme. This is to conform to the ~CV~ constraint of the language.

Rule 2: Reassociate the floating tone of the elided vowel with that of the tone of the succeeding morpheme. This will result in tonal change where -H+H==>downstep low ($H^↓H$) and a +H+H==>upstep high ($H^↑H$). E.g.

Rule 3: Reassign V_1 of the onsetless morpheme to the remnant consonant **k** of the ~FOCm~ **kị**

A look at the data in 11c and e shows that **kị** manifests differently when it co-occurs with onset morphemes, as the next section will exemplify.

3.2. ki preceding onset morphemes in constructions

Ịzọ̀n employs a total of thirty consonants that are not permitted to occur in clusters. However, peradventure they do, a vowel insertion occurs. The inserted vowel may be semantically relevant to the interpretation of the construction even though its main function is to block the occurrence of consonant clusters. However, Kekai (2016) posits that the elision of a vowel segment may result in consonant clusters, especially within the environment of liquids in some dialects of Ịzọ̀n, such as Kabu. This is also recently observed in the Ogbe-Ijọ dialect. Hence, morphemes like **bára** ‘hand’, **bịrẹ** ‘plantain’, and **kịlẹ** ‘wean’ are pronounced, **bra**, **brẹ** and **kle** respectively in these dialects. As opposed to the focus constructions examined above where the co-occurrence of **kị** with onsetless morphemes results in vowel elision, tonal reassociation and vowel reassignment, it seems to be the



case that in constructions where the ~FOCm~ **kí** precedes consonants, the structure of the resultant ~FOCm~ may vary: It may remain stable or go through the phonological processes of elision, insertion, reassignment and tonal reassociation as the data below, drawn from native speakers' interaction show.

12.

- a. e yin. wári k(i) o mu -dò
1SG~ mother house ~FOC~ ~CLIT~ go ~PFV
'It is home that my mother has gone to'
- b. endi bẹ akí ni. eri agọ̀nọ k(i) o tua
fish DET take clitic grill top ~FOC~ ~CLIT~ put
'Place the fish on the grill'
- c. amínì be búọ̀-dò kùraj k(i) ó fun-wari o sùọ -mẹ
~3SG~ ~DET~ pass ~PFV~ year ~FOC~ ~CLIT~ school ~CLIT~ enter ~PST
'It was last year that she went to school'
- d. eréma pike k(i) o pua-si -mẹ
woman morning. ~FOC~ ~CLIT~ fish ~PST
'It was in the morning that the woman went fishing'
- e. e daụ bubori efie k(i) o. yọụ-pụa. -minimi
~1SG~ father evening time ~FOC~ ~CLIT~ travel - FUT
'My father will travel in the evening'

In all the examples in 12a through d, the vowels of the ~FOCm~ **kí** get elided, an epenthetical /o/ is inserted and reassigned to **k** to derive **ko** even though they are succeeded by onset morphemes. A close look at the semantics of the focus elements shows that /o/ surfaces when time adverbials and place arguments are preposed. This accounts for why **wári** 'house' and **eri agọ̀nọ** 'top of grill', being place arguments, are the foci in 12a and b, and **búọ̀-dò kùraj** 'last year' **pike** 'morning' and **bubori efie** 'evening' being time adverbials are the foci in 12c, d and e. Two assertions are apparent on the insertion of /o/ epenthesis:

- i. It surfaces when the focus element is a place argument and
- ii. It surfaces when the focus element is a time adverbial.

As indicated above, a stable **kí** is also possible in focus construction where an onset morpheme precedes it. In which case, the vowel of the ~FOCm~ is neither elided nor is there an epenthesis. The implication of this is that the surface realisation of the structure remains as it were in the underlying form, as evidenced in the structures below, drawn from competent speakers' interactions.

13.

- a. Ebi Tare bina-arau kí gbàa - mẹ
~PN~ ~PN~ sister. ~FOC~ say ~PST
'It is said that Ebi is Tare's sister'
- b. Èbiye kị fíyaj fị -mẹ
~PN~ ~FOC~ food eat ~PST
'It was Ebiye that ate the food'
- c. Tare Ebiye fùùn kị kàan -mẹ
~PN~ ~PN~ book ~FOC~ tear. ~PST
'It was Ebiye's book that got torn'
- d. Preyé fùlọ kị tọn -yi
~PN~ soup ~FOC~ serve ~PROG
'It is soup that Preye is serving'



As the data in **13a - d** show; unlike the data in **12c - e**, all the ~FOC~ markers **kí** are stable. The vowels are not elided, and no epenthetical element is inserted as such; the structures are devoid of all the phonological processes, namely, elision, insertion, reassignment and reassociation of tone observed in **12**. This is because all the structures conform strictly to the ~CV~ structure of the language. In **13a**, for instance, **kí** precedes **gbàa** 'say' an onset morpheme in the same way as it precedes **fíyáí** 'food', **kàan** 'tear' and **tón** 'serve' in **13 b-c**.

A pros statement can thus be made that the ~FOCm~ **kí** may elide its vowel segment and insert an /o/ epenthesis dictated by the presence of a place argument of time adverbial as foci when it precedes an onset morpheme or remain stable in the same environment but without place arguments and time adverbials as foci. These variations observed in focus constructions as regards the ~FOCm~ lead to the conclusion made herein that in Izón, the basic ~FOCm~ is **kí** but having elided its vowel segment, an epenthetical element /o/ identified as a semantic role marker reassigns with it to derive **ko** in conformity with the language's ~CV~ syllable structure. Similarly, having elided its vowel, **k** may also be reassigned with an onsetless morpheme that follows it to derive dual unit morphemes with the ~FOCm~ **kí** taking on the forms: **ki, ko, ku, ke, ka** etc. Finally, the ~FOCm~ may also remain stable in the environment of onset morphemes without any of the phonological processes taking place.

4.0. Conclusion and recommendation

This study sought to identify and examine the Izón focus marker, having observed that there is variation in its surface realization, resulting in pedagogic challenges for Izón teachers and learners. To be able to adequately capture the differences in the form of the ~FOCm~ in structural representation for pedagogy and learnability, four phonological processes, namely, elision, epenthesis, tonal reassociation and vowel reassignment, were deployed, having observed that these processes surface in Izón focus constructions. These processes were thus employed for the elucidation and analysis of ~FOCm~ in structures. Having isolated the morpheme **kí** as ~FOCm~ of the language, analyses revealed that focal elements are often preposed, thus, conforming to the language's Head initial parameter settings following Chomsky (1981) and Chomsky & Lasnik (1993). The analyses also revealed that the ~FOCm~ can take on different forms depending on the features of the sound in its environment. Thus, if the following morpheme is an onsetless one, the vowel of **kí** is elided and reassigned to V₁ of the succeeding onsetless morpheme to derive any form corresponding to the nine canonical vowels of the language. **kí** can thus become, **ki, ko, ku, ke, ka** etc.

Conversely, where the morpheme across word boundary is an onset morpheme, **kí** either remains stable or an **o** epenthesis is introduced, translating as the focus element with an inherent time adverbial and a place argument status. In which case, **k** also reassigns to /o/ to derive **ko**.

Tones being the sole preserves of vowels, the floating tone of the ~TBU~ of the ~FOCm~ **kí** docks onto the ~TBU~ of the onsetless morpheme following it after the elision of the vowel housing it, reassociates with **k** to derive either an upstep or downstep depending on the features of the tone of the vowel to which it is reassociated. These pose challenges for language teachers and learners as the canonical vowel is often not identified in analyses. The conclusion, therefore, is that the variants of **kí** could be **ka, ko, ke, ku**, etc., depending on the features of the morpheme following it in constructions.

We recommend the inclusion of strategies that will isolate the phonological processes participating in the surface forms of focus constructions. Such strategies should include drills on vowel and consonant deletion, vowel insertion (technically called epenthesis), tonal reassociation, etc. These



strategies will help alleviate the task of understanding the intricacies and idiosyncrasies manifested by the Izon marker **ki** in focus constructions.

4.1. Suggestions for further studies

The upcoming research aims to explore how the Mein, Kabu, Gbaramatu dialects articulate the focus marker **ki** in various constructions. With around twenty-eight dialects of Izon, we anticipate that the overt manifestation of **ki** might differ significantly among other dialects. However, we expect that the findings herein will not only shed light on these dialects but also contribute valuable insights that could reflect broadly on language universals applicable to this and many other languages. Further investigation on these and other dialects within the Ijoid group is suggested. Such research should focus on employing experimental methods composed of learner-centred drills for acquiring new concepts, structural forms, and interactions within more natural and pragmatic settings to encourage learner engagement in pedagogy.

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Abbreviations

+ ATR	Plus Advance Tongue Root
-ATR	Minus Advance Tongue Root
Clit	Clitic
FOCm	Focus Marker
FUT	Future
OBJ	Objective
PFV	Perfective
PN	Personal Name
PRS	Present
PST	Past
Q	Question
RES	Resumptive
RET	Retrogressive
SBJ	Subjective
TOP	Topic
2SG	Second Person Singular
3SG	Third Person Singular