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STUDYING THE PHONOLOGY OF THE OLÙKÙMI, IGALA, OWÉ AND YORÙBA LANGUAGES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS¹

Bolanle Elizabeth AROKOYO

University of Ilorin *

bolakoyo@unilorin.edu.ng

Abstract

This study presents a comparative analysis of the phonological systems of the Yorùbá, Owé, Igala and Olùkùmi languages of the Defoid language family of Benue Congo. Data were collected from native speakers using the Ibadan Four Hundred Word List of Basic Items. Using discovered common lexemes in the languages, the classification of the languages sound systems and syllable systems are carried out in order to determine the major patterns of differences and similarities. Some major sound changes were discovered in the lexical items of the languages. The systematic substitutions of sounds also constitute another major finding observed in the languages. It was established in this study that there exists a very strong relationship among these languages. The languages are found to be mutually unintelligible except for Owé that has a degree of mutual intelligibility with Yoruba. The paper concludes that the major reason for divergence is language contact.

Keywords

phonology, sounds, cognates, substitution, comparative

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* Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Ilorin, P.M.B. 1515, Ilorin, Nigeria.

ESTUDIANDO LA FONOLOGÍA DE LAS LENGUAS OLÙKÙMI, IGALA, OWÉ Y YORÙBA: UN ANÁLISIS COMPARATIVO

Resumen

Este estudio presenta un análisis comparativo de los sistemas fonológicos de las lenguas Yorùbá, Owé, Igala y Olùkùmi de la familia Defoid de Benue Congo. Los datos provienen de hablantes nativos a partir de la lista de cuatro elementos básicos de Ibadan. Utilizando lexemas comunes descubiertos en las lenguas, la clasificación de sus sistemas fónicos y silábicos se lleva a cabo con el objeto de determinar los patrones principales de diferencias y similitudes. Se han encontrado algunos cambios fónicos importantes en los elementos léxicos de las lenguas. Las sustituciones sistemáticas fónicas también constituyen otro hallazgo importante que se ha observado. En este estudio se ha establecido que existe una relación muy fuerte entre estas lenguas. Estas son mutuamente ininteligibles, excepto Owé, que tiene un grado de inteligibilidad mutua con el Yoruba. El artículo concluye que la razón principal de la divergencia es el contacto lingüístico.

Palabras clave

fonología, sonidos, cognatos, sustitución, comparación

1. Introduction

This paper examines the phonology of Olùkùmi, Igala, Owé and Yorùbá languages using the comparative method. These languages belong to the Yoruboid language family and by default a constituent of Niger Congo language family. A comparative approach is adopted for the study. The comparative approach contrasts lists of identical words in order to discover cognates. The importance of the comparative method is to determine historical and genetic relatedness of languages. The languages are compared at the phonological level in order to discover the differences and similarities and thereby make statements about the genetic relationship that exist among the languages.

Data were collected from native speakers of the languages using the *Ibadan Four Hundred Word List of Basic Items*. Secondary data were also used including data from the dictionaries of the languages (Anderson, Arokoyo & Harrison 2015; Arokoyo 2017; Arokoyo & Mabodu 2017). We examine the high level of cognates they share and the fact

that they are all to a large extent mutually unintelligible. The closest in the group is Owé and Yoruba. Owe is a dialect of Yoruba; speakers of Owe understand and speak Yoruba but other Yorubas do not understand neither can they speak Owe. The essence of Owe in this group is because of the closer affinity it shares with Olùkùmi and Igala.

1.1 Olùkùmi Language

Olùkùmi also called Ulukwumi, is a Defoid language spoken in Aniocha North Local Government Area of Delta State Nigeria. It belongs to Edekiri of the Yoruboid group in Benue Congo family of the Niger-Congo phylum (Lewis 2009). The Olùkùmi people have different stories of origin, one of which is that they migrated from Owo, which is a dialect of Yoruba. The fact however remains that they speak a language that is very close to Yoruba in all forms. According to (Obisesan 2012), the speakers acknowledge the fact that they speak a language that has close resemblance with Yorùbá language but do not see themselves as Yorubas.

The word Olùkùmi means my friend in Owé and Igala (pronounced *onuku mi* in Igala). The Olùkùmis are located in the midst of the Igbo speaking people of Nigeria and the language is struggling for survival. There is the Ugbodu and the Ukwunzu varieties. The Olùkùmi spoken in Ugbodu is much closer to Yoruba while the variety spoken in Ukwunzu is highly adulterated with Igbo (Arokoyo 2016).

1.2 Igala Language

The Igala language is a Yoruboid language spoken in the eastern part of Kogi State, parts of Delta, Edo and Anambra states of Nigeria. The language is much related to Yoruba, Oluwumi and Itsekiri languages. The Igala people have a population of over two million (Omachonu 2012). They are surrounded by different ethnic groups like the Ebiras, Binis, Idoma, Tiv, Igbo, etc. Igala is a well-researched language and very many scholarly works on Igala exist (Omachonu 2001, 2012; Okpanachi & Kadiri 2015; Adeniyi 2016).

1.3 The Owé Dialect

Owé is a dialect of Yorùbá. Owé refers to both the dialect and its speakers who are found within the Kabba district in the present Kabba-Bunu Local Government Area of Kogi State (Arokoyo 2009, 2013, 2017). According to oral tradition, the Owé people originated from Ile-Ife. The Owé speaking community is linguistically homogeneous. They are surrounded by the Bunu, Ijumu and Ebira peoples of Kogi State (Otitoju 2002).

1.4 The Yoruba Language

Yoruba is one of the three major Nigerian languages (the other two being Hausa and Igbo) spoken majorly in south western Nigeria. It is spoken as a first language in Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Ekiti, Lagos and parts of Kwara, Kogi and Edo states (Arokoyo 2010). It is spoken by about twenty million people (Mosadomi 2005). The Yoruba language is also spoken in several African and Southern and Central American countries such as Sierra Leone, Republic of Benin, Togo, Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago. A variety of this Yoruba is called Lukwumi, Olukwumi, etc.

The Yoruba language belongs to the Defoid family of the Benue Congo in the Niger Congo language family. The language has very many dialects with varying degree of mutual intelligibility. Varying degree of phonological, lexical and grammatical differences are noted in the dialects. Awobuluyi (2001: 15) lists some dialects of Yoruba; these include Ònkò, Òndó, Ijebu, Egba, Iboló, Èkítì, Owé, ìyàgbà, ìkálè, ìgbómìnà, Standard Yoruba, etc. Standard Yoruba which is believed to be the Oyo dialect is the variety that every Yoruba understands and can speak. The standard variety cuts across all dialects and knits the Yoruba people together. The diagram below shows the genetic classification of the languages.

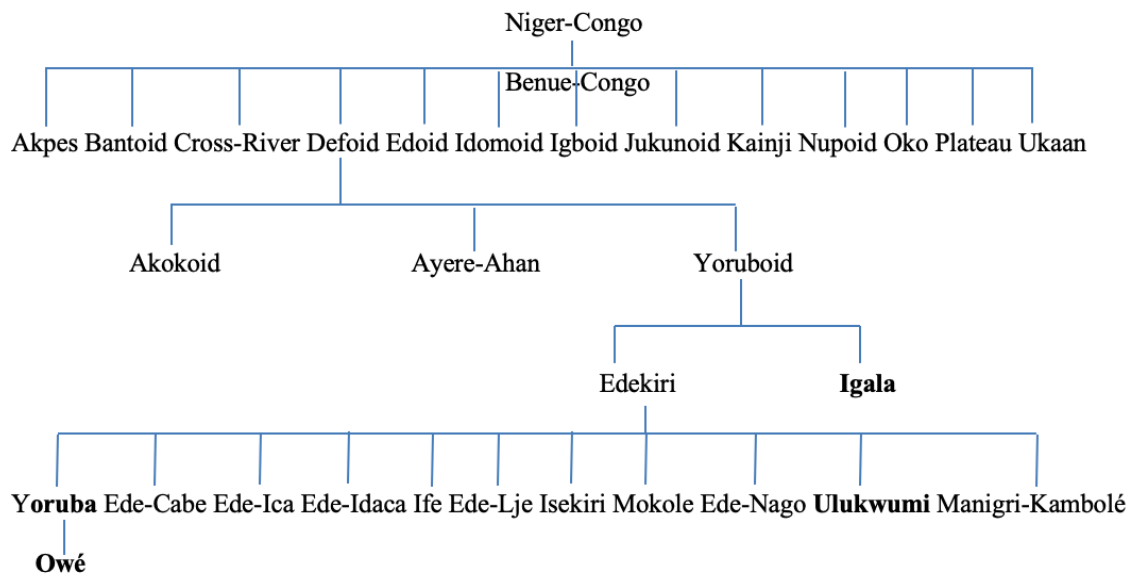


Figure 1. Genetic classification of the Olùkùmi, Igala, Owé and Yoruba (Arokoyo 2018: 5)

2. The Phonological Systems

2.1 The Consonant Systems

There are twenty-four consonants attested in the four languages. Olùkùmi attests twenty-one consonants with the presence of [g^w, ɣ and z]. Out of the four languages, it is only in Olukwumi that [z] is attested. Igala attests twenty-three consonants with the presence of [p, tʃ]. Owé attests nineteen consonants with the presence of the voiced velar fricative [ɣ] while Yoruba attests eighteen consonants. The consonant chart below showcases the consonants of the languages with the ones that are not common to all in parenthesis.

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Labio-velar	Glottal
Plosive	(p) b		t d			k g	kp gb	
Fricative		f	s (z)	ʃ		(y)	(gw)	h
Affricate				(tʃ) dʒ				
Lateral			l					
Nasal	m		n			ŋ		
Trill			r					
Approximant	w				j			

Figure 2. Consonant Chart of the Languages

2.2 Distribution of the Consonants

According to normal convention, consonants occur in different positions in a word in the languages. They occur in word-initial position, word-medial position or intervocalically. The data below show some of the consonants as they occur in cognates in the languages.

(1)	Olùkùmi	Ìgala	Òwé	Yoruba	Gloss
	owó	owó	owó	owó	hand
	obì	obì	obì	obì	kola nut
	omi	omi	omi	omi	water
	ìtọ́	ìtọ́	ìtọ́	ìtọ́	urine
	owu	owu	owu	owu	cotton
	òkúta	òkúta	òkúta	òkúta	stone
	ta	ta	ta	ta	shoot
	kpa	kpa	kpa	kpa	kill
	lọ	nọ	lọ	lọ	grind
	wá	lìa	ghá	wá	come
	ńkatà	àgbà	agbọ̀n	apèrè	basket

From the data in (1) above, we can see that consonants do not occur word finally in any of the languages because only open syllables are attested in the languages. Consonant clusters are also not allowed. Looking through the data, [ŋ] is the only consonant that cannot occur at the word initial position in Igala, Yoruba and Owé. It is phonetic in those languages as it occurs only when the alveolar nasal is contiguous to a velar nasal. The sound however occurs at the initial position in Olukumi. It is noted that most nouns begin with vowels while verbs are mostly consonant initialed in the languages.

2.3 The Vowel System

Each of the languages attests seven oral vowels and five nasal vowels. The diagram in figure 3 below showcases the vowel inventory.

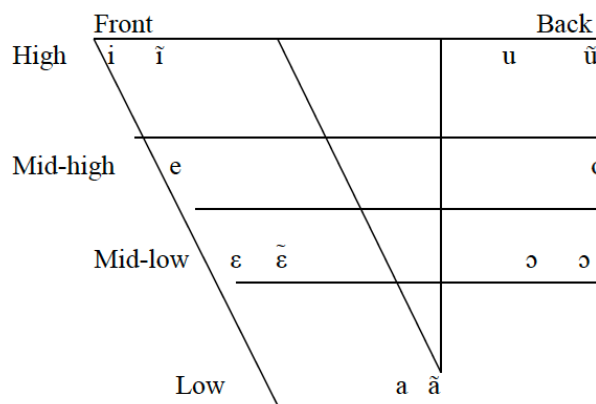


Figure 3. Vowel Chart of the Languages

Apart from standard Yoruba which does not allow the high back vowel [u] to begin a word, all the other languages attest [u] at word initial positions. Conversely, all oral vowels can occur in all positions except in Yoruba language where /u/ is not found at the word initial position. For example:

(2)	Olùkùmi	Ìgala	Òwé	Yoruba	Gloss
	usu	uchu	usu	isu	yam
	una	una	una	ina	fire
	ugba	ugba	ugba	igba	calabash
	use	uche	use	ise	work

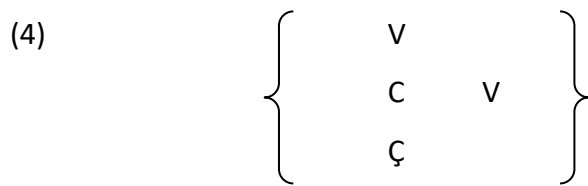
It has been noted that most dialects of Yoruba language especially the Okun, Ekiti, Akoko, and Owo axis attest [u] at word initial position; this is exemplified with data from Owé as indicated in (2) above. Both nasal and nasalized vowels are attested in the languages as exemplified in (3) below.

(3)	Olùkùmi	Ìgala	Òwé	Yoruba	Gloss
	eyín	eyin	eyín	eyín	teeth
	irun	iloji	irun	irun	hair
	inan	ìfí	unú	inú	stomach (internal)
	imọn	imọ	imú	imú	nose
	ẹrun	álu	ẹnu	ẹrun	mouth
	ẹne	ọnẹ	ọni	èniyàn/ ẹni	person
	obinrin	ọnobulẹ	obùrin	obìnrin	woman
	oma	oma	ọmọ	ọmọ	child

It is noted that nasal or nasalized vowels do not occur at word initial position in any of the languages.

2.4 Syllable Structure of the Languages

These Defoid languages like other Niger-Congo languages operate the open syllable system- V, CV type. From our data, V, CV, and Ç (where Ç stands for syllabic consonants) are the syllable structure type found in these languages. This is illustrated in (4) and (5) below:



(5)	Olùkùmi	Ìgala	Òwé	Yoruba	Gloss
	wa	lia	ghá	wa	come
	yan	du	mu	yan	choose
	ọwọ	ọwọ	ọwọ	ọwọ	hand
	inan	èfù	unú	inú	belly (external)
	eyín	eyin	eyín	eyín	teeth
	ùdí	òfé	udi	ìdí	buttocks
	ologbo	ọbàlà	ológbò	olóńgbó	cat
	ńkatà	àgbà	agbọn	apèrè	basket
	ebi omi	òlùgbẹ	àńgbẹ	òńgbẹ	thirst

The syllable structure above gives credence to the fact that the languages do not permit consonant clusters neither can a consonant end a word (also see data in 1 and 2 above). The languages also attest monosyllabic, disyllabic and polysyllabic words as exemplified in the data above. It is noted that most monosyllabic words are verbs in the languages.

3. Phonological Change: Substitution

These languages share correspondences both in sounds and meanings. Listed below are some sound changes noted in these languages with Yoruba mostly used as the basis for comparison:

- **s ~ tʃ (Igala)**

There is a systematic substitution of the voiceless alveolar fricative [s] with the voiceless palato-alveolar affricate [tʃ] by Igala language. This is illustrated in (6) below.

(6)	isu	uchu	yam
	isẹ	uche	work
	somi	chomi	wet
	se	che	do
	sí	chi	open
	ìsà/ùsà	ùchà	pot (Igala and Olukumi)

Igala and Olukumi substitute the voiced labio-velar fricative [gw] for the voiced bilabial approximant in some instances. For example:

(7)	ẹwà	ẹgwa	beans
	ẹwá	ẹgwa	ten
	wíwá (Owé)	gwugwà	greeting

- **dʒ ~ z (Olukumi)**

A systematic substitution of the voiced alveolar fricative [z] for the voiced palato-alveolar affricate [dʒ] is noted in Olukumi. This is exemplified in the data below.

(8)	oju [odʒu]	ozu	eye
	ojo [odʒo]	ozo	rain
	eji [edʒi]	ezin	two
	ojo [odʒó]	izọ	day
	aja [adʒá]	aza	dog
	ẹja [edʒa]	ẹzá	fish
	ajẹ [adʒɛ]	azẹ	witch

- **w, j, h ~ ɣ** (Olukumi and Owe)

Olukumi and Owé attest the voiced velar fricative [ɣ]. This is usually used in place of [w], [j] or [h] respectively.

(9)	ohun	oghun	[oɣũ]	thing
	eyin	eghin	[ɛɣĩ]	egg
	wá	ghá	[ɣá]	come
	àwa	àgha	[àɣa]	we
	ahón	ighón	[iɣó]	tongue

Many other sound substitutions are noted in the languages. There is the l ~ r substitution in Igala, for example:

(10)	ara/ ɔra	ola	body
	irun ori	iloji	hair
	orun	olu	sun
	àrún	ẹlu	five
	arun/ẹnu	àlù	mouth

The n~l substitution is also noted in Igala. For example

(11)	lọ	nọ	grind
	ólúku	ónúkù	friend
	ilẹ	anẹ	ground
	olòjò	onònòjò	guest/stranger

In Yoruba, there is the phonological rule of /n/ changing to /l/ in some positions; this is also the case in Owé. This rule seems not to apply at all times in Igala. There are other sound substitutions still noted across the languages especially as they pertain to vowels as exemplified in the data in (12).

(12)	àrún	ẹlu	five
	ẹnu	alu	mouth
	ọmọ	ọma	child
	ọni	ọne	person
	obirin	obireṅ	woman

The examples above show that there are many instances of what could be referred to as vowel shifts in the languages. These shifts and substitutions must have however occurred over time as each language began to take its shape especially as they have contacts with other languages.

4. Conclusion

This paper has briefly examined the phonological systems of the Yorùbá, Owé, Igala and Olùkùmi languages with particular emphasis on the sound segments and syllable structure. It has established and in line with (Akinkugbe 1976, 1978) that the Igala language is distinguishable as an individual language with its historical and environmental experiences. It also established that Olùkùmi, also taking into consideration its historical and environmental experiences is genetically related to Yoruba but cannot be classified as a dialect of Yoruba. Owé despite its affinity to Igala and Olukumi is also seen to be a dialect of Yoruba.

We conclude that the presence of [z] in Olukumi is as a result of their interaction with Igbo which attest the consonant. It is discovered that [gw] in Olukumi and Igala also arise as a result of language contact. The presence of [p] and [tʃ], the absence of [s] and the systematic changes in the vowels of Igala mark the major differences between it and the Yoruba language. The alveolar nasal [n] also remain intervocalic in Igala in positions where it has changed to the lateral in Yoruba and Owé. It should be noted that Igala attests both the voiceless bilabial [p] and the voiceless labio-velar stops [kp]. We conclude that [ɣ] is originally present in Yoruba but lost due to oversimplification.

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