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A Comparative Phonology of the Olùkùmi, Igala, Owe and Yoruba Languages

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Abstract

This study presents a comparative analysis of the phonological systems of the Yorùbá, Owé, Igala and Olùkùmi languages with the objective of comparing and finding a reason for their similarities and differences and also proffering a proto form for the languages. These languages belong to the Defoid language family and by default a constituent of Niger Congo language family. Owé along with the other Okun dialects is traditionally regarded as a dialect of Yorùbá. The paper examines what constitutes their similarities and differences that make them to be regarded as different languages. A comparative approach is adopted for the study. Data were collected from native speakers of the languages 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. We have been able to establish in this study that there exists a very strong relationship among these languages, with the discovery of some common lexemes. We, however, discovered that the languages are mutually unintelligible except for Owé that has a degree of mutual intelligibility with Yoruba. The major reason for divergence is language contact as each group has experiences, relationships and contacts with different peoples and languages.

Introduction

This study presents a comparative analysis of the phonological systems of the Yorùbá, Owé, Igala and Olùkùmi languages with the objective of comparing and finding a reason for their similarities and differences and also proffering a proto form for the languages. 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. Data were collected from native speakers of the languages using the *Ibadan Four Hundred Word List of Basic Items*. 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 Owe 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.

Olùkùmi Language

Olùkùmi is a Defoid language spoken in Aniocha North Local Government Area of Delta State Nigeria. It belongs to Edekiri of the Yoruboid group in Kwa family of 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 Ugboodu and the Ukwunzu varieties. The Olùkùmi spoken in Ugboodu is much closer to Yoruba while the variety spoken in Ukwunzu is highly adulterated with Igbo.

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, Olukwumi and Itsekiri languages. The Igala people have a population of about two million. They are surrounded by different ethnic groups like the Ebiras, Binis, Idoma, Tiv, Igbo, etc. very many scholarly works on Igala exist.

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). 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 Ebiras peoples of Kogi State (Otitoju, 2002).

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, 2009). 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 Kwa family of 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, Èkìtì, 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 Phonological System of the Languages

The Consonant Systems

There are twenty-three 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, ʃ]. 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.

Fig. 1 Consonant Chart of the Languages

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

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 intervocallically. Looking through the data, [ŋ] is the only consonant that cannot occur at the word initial position in the language. It is phonetic as it occurs only when the alveolar nasal is contiguous with a velar nasal.

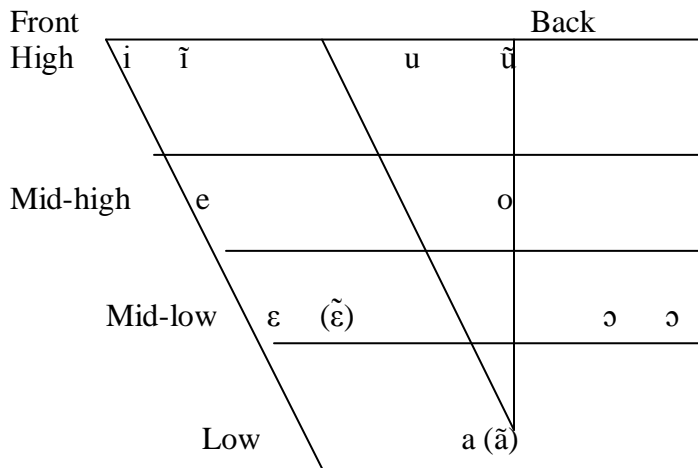
Consonants do not occur word finally in any of the languages; this is because only open syllables are attested in the languages. The data below will show some of the consonants as they occur in cognates in the languages.

1.	Olùkùmi	Ìgala	Òwé	Yoruba	Gloss
	ọwọ́	ọwọ́	ọwọ́	ọwọ́	hand
	obì	obì	obì	obì	colanut
	ọmì	ọmì	ọmì	ọmì	water
	ìtọ́	ìtọ́	ìtọ́	ìtọ́	urine
	owu	owu	owu	owu	cotton
	òkúta	òkúta	òkúta	òkúta	stone

The Vowel System

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

Figure 2: Vowel Chart of the Languages



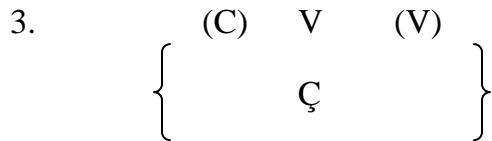
Apart from standard Yoruba which does not allow the high back vowel [u] to begin a word, all the other languages attest [u] at word initial positions. For example:

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 Ekiti, Akoko, Owo axis attest [u] at word initial position. Both nasal and nasalized vowels are attested in the languages.

Syllable Structure of the Languages

These Yoruboid languages like other Niger-Congo languages operate the open syllable system- CV type. From our data, V, CV, CVV and Ç are the syllable structure type found in these languages. This is illustrated below:



The syllable structure above gives credence to the fact that the dialects do not permit consonant clusters neither can a consonant end a word.

Phonological Change: Substitution

These languages share correspondences both in sounds and meanings. Listed below are some sound changes noted in these languages:

- **s ~ tʃ (Igala)**

isu	uchu	yam
ise	uche	work
somi	chomi	wet
se	che	do

- **a ~ ɛ ɛ ~ a (Igala)**

àrún	ɛlu	five
ɛnu	alu	mouth

- **r ~ l (Igala)**

ara	ola	ora	ara	body
àrún	ɛlu			five

- **gw (Igala and Olukumi)**

èwà	ɛgwa	beans
èwá	ɛgwa	ten
gún	gwun	pound
bọ	gwọ	take off
bù	gwu	break

- **j ~ z (Olukumi)**

oju	ozu	eye
ojo	ozo	rain
eji	ezin	two

ojo	izo	day
aja	aza	dog

- **w, y, h ~ ɣ** (Olukumi and Owe)

ohun	oghun	thing
eyin	eghin	egg
wá	ghá	come

Conclusion

This paper has briefly examined the phonological systems of the Yorùbá, Owé, Igala and Olùkùmi languages. 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 a dialect of Yoruba language. Owé despite its affinity to Igala 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. [tʃ] and the systematic changes in the vowels of Igala mark the major differences between it and the Yoruba language. We conclude that [ɣ] is originally present in Yoruba but lost due to oversimplification.

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