On the function of nasality in Proto Gbe nouns


1. A brief introduction to Gbe languages

- Spoken in Nigeria, Benin Republic, Togo and Ghana
- Divided in five branches by Capo (1991): Ewe, Gen, Aja, Fon and Phla-Phera
- Divided in two branches by Stewart (1994): ((Ewe + Gen) + Aja) + (Fon + Phla-Phera))
- Divided in three branches by Kluge (2005): ((Ewe+Gen)+(Aja)+(Fon+Phla-Phera))
- The most widely spoken Gbe languages are Ewe and Fon
- Gbe has been either classified as ‘New Kwa’ (Bennett & Sterk 1977) or as Volta Niger (comprising the languages formerly known as West Benue Congo; Blench 2006)

2. The suffix –i in Gbe

2.1. Its grammatical functions

- According to Capo (1991), it would mark compound nouns, diminutives, nouns similar to the underived base, and instruments.

(a) *asagwe or *asagwi ‘type of drum’ (Proto Gbe) \( \rightarrow \) aso ‘music instrument’ + go ‘gourd’ + i ‘compound marker’
(b) agäch ‘scorpion’ (Ewe) \( \rightarrow \) agál ‘crab’ + i ‘similarity’
(c) té ‘small head’ (Ewe) \( \rightarrow \) tá ‘head’ + i ‘diminutive’
(d) swe ‘small cutlass’ (Fon) \( \rightarrow \) so ‘to cut’ + i ‘instrumental’

Some issues with this analysis

- As pointed out by Gbeto (1997), diminutives are actually formed through the suffixation of –i along with a high tone.

(e) gwi, gwé ‘small gourd’ (Ewe) go ‘gourd’ + i ‘diminutive’

- The Fon examples in (2) raise an issue, however, as there is no semantic distinction between the forms with and without –i

(2) Examples showing free alternation between Fon nouns with and without –i

(f) Fon távo, távwe ‘table’
(g) Fon akotó, akweté ‘snail’
(h) Fon gwé, ogó ‘kind of fish’

- According to Gbeto (1997), in these cases, the tone would have been the actual semantic marker of the composite i + tone suffix. In these cases, the tone would have been elided leaving some examples freely alternating with or without –i, without any semantic or syntactic distinction.

Some issues with Gbeto’s analysis:

- There is no evidence, to my knowledge, of these examples having lost their tone.
- It does not take into account the source of the words in (3):

(3) Source language of some Fon nouns with and without –i

(i) Fon gó, gwé ‘greed’ \( \leftrightarrow \) Yoruba ago ‘greedy person’
(j) Fon lo, lwe ‘ghost’ \( \leftrightarrow \) Yoruba oro ‘religious cult’

1 Bowen (1858 :60): “a person sitting at one’s door daily to shame him into the payment of a debt”
k) Fon távo, tawwe ‘table’ ⇝ Yoruba itafo ‘table’
l) Fon akotó, akweté ‘snail’ ⇝ Yoruba ikoto, okoto ‘snail’
m) Fon gwlé, ogló ‘kind of fish’ ⇝ Unidentified language *og(o)ro or *og(o)lo

- All these examples showing a free alternation with and without the suffix –i are loanwords.
- Moreover, some other loanwords only marked by –i in Fon do not differ semantically from their source (4):

(4) Foreign origin of some Fon nouns marked by –i

n) Fon gláswé, glásé ‘glass’ ⇝ Unidentified language (ultimately from English glas ) *glaso ‘glass’

(5) Foreign origin of some Fon nouns marked by –i

q) Fon agbadá ‘war girdle’ ⇝ Yoruba agbadá ‘war girdle’
r) Fon agbadá ‘kind of male gown’ ⇝ Yoruba agbada ‘kind of male gown’
s) Fon akla ⇝ Yoruba? akara
t) Fon alá ‘velvet’ ⇝ Yoruba aya ‘stetch’
u) Fon aña ‘corpse stench’ ⇝ Yoruba aya ‘strench’

- Why would some loanwords be marked by –i and not others?

(6) Number of Fon nouns with different phonological structures, marked and unmarked by –i according to Rassinoux & Segurola (2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phonological Structure</th>
<th>oCV(CV)</th>
<th>aCaCo</th>
<th>aCaCa</th>
<th>aCa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of attested nouns unmarked by –i with such a phonological structure</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of attested nouns marked by –i with such a phonological structure</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- –i would thus be a nominalizing affix marking loanwords with an uncommon structure
- This feature would be consistent with another feature of –i, which is of making new words out of ungrammatical structures, that is compounding
- The function of marking loanwords with an uncommon phonological structure seems to be found in Ewe, although only as vestigial:

(7) Example of Ewe loanwords marked by –i

v) Ewe safui2 ‘key’ ⇝ Portuguese? ‘favi + -i’
w) Ewe atrakpwe ‘stairs’ ⇝ Dutch trwp ‘stairs’ + -i

- A more crucial example concerns the name of one of the 16 Ifa divination signs in Fon as can be seen in (x)

x) Proto Gbe túlúkp ‘divination sign’ ⇝ Yoruba? *ótúrókp3 ‘divination sign’ + -i

- túlúkp was most likely marked by –i because it had a structure uncommon in Proto Gbe, rather than because of –i’s other functions (similarity, instrumental, compounds). Indeed I have not been to reconstruct a word with this structure (*oCuCuCa) in Proto Gbe.
- –i as a nominalizer of loanwords with uncommon phonological structures and ungrammatical structures can thus be reconstructed for Proto Gbe.

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3 Manfredi (2008) gives ôtûlrókp for the Yoruba form, but Yoruba ɔ often goes back to *ã, especially after labial consonants. This fits better with the name of the sign in other languages which all have a /a/. Even still, ôtûlrókp + i could have given rise to *tûlkp (c*tûlkwp) in Proto Gbe.
3. Nasality in Gbe nouns

- Some loanwords with uncommon structure in Fon are not marked by –i, but by the adding of nasality

[8] Examples of nominal loanwords marked by vowel nasality after their integration in the Fon language.

a) Fon ká̰fá ‘apologies’ ↔ Yoruba gá̰fá ‘apologies’
   b) Fon agá̰nlá ‘Portuguese, Brazilian’ ↔ Unidentified language agá̰nda ‘Catholic European?’
   c) Fon akúlúzṵ ‘cross’ ↔ Portuguese a’kör ‘cross’

- This marking seems to be in complementary distribution with –i

- Nasality occurs with loanwords ending with nasalizable vowels in Fon (such as i, u and a, which have nasal equivalents in Fon, namely ḥ, ṵ and a̰).
- However –i only occurs with words ending with /o/, which is a vowel with no nasal equivalent in Fon.
- It thus seems that in Fon, nasality and –i would be variants in complementary distribution of a same morpheme.
- They would mark the integration of loanwords with an uncommon phonological structure as Fon nouns.
- A complementary distribution between nasality and –i is also found in Fon regarding nominal compounding (9).

[9] Examples of Fon nominal compounds marked by nasality spreading

d) Fon ŋʷa̰ɲá̰ ‘love’ ↔ ŋʷá̰ ‘smell’ + ji jí ‘the reception of’
   e) Fon zṵ̰kɔ́ ‘trash’ ↔ zṵ́ ‘mound’ + kɔ́ ‘earth’
   f) Fon gbɔ̀vɛ̰ ‘kind of wasp’ ↔ gbɔ ‘wasp’ + vɛ ‘to be red’

- This nasality spreading can only occur in the context where nasal harmony occurs.

g) The most favorable context for nasal spreading is the presence, in a word, of non-epenthetic identical vowels, one nasalized and the other(s), oral: /a̰kabá/ ‘bed’ ➔ [a̰kəmá]

h) The presence of identical vowels in a word, one being nasalized and the other(s) being oral: /fíńḌi ̰́kí/ ‘nothing’ ➔ [fíńńi ̰́kí] or [fíńńí]

i) The presence of vowels sharing a –ATR, labial or non-labial vowel harmony, one of them being nasalized and the other not: /fɛ́lījɛ́ɛ́/ ‘flour’ ➔ [fɛ́lə ̰jɛ́ə]

- None of the 50 examples of composition marked by –i recorded in Rassinoux & Segurola’s (2000) Fon-French dictionary occur in these contexts where nasality spreading can occur.
- It is thus likely that as in the case of integrated loanwords, nasality and –i are in complementary distribution when it comes to mark compounds.

4. Nasality in Proto Gbe nouns

- Nasality in Fon probably has a function of marking new nouns, may they be integrated loanwords or compounds.
- Could this feature be reconstructed for Proto Gbe?
- Ewe provides examples of new nouns marked by –i but none by nasality.
- In Fon, nasality seems to be a morpheme and –i one of its contextual allomorph, one may be tempted to reconstruct this situation for Proto Gbe
- It would seem more economical to postulate the loss of nasality in Ewe than its late apparition in Fon where it would have come to share a complementary distribution with –i as well as a new status of morpheme over the latter.
- Moreover, vowel nasality is known to have been lost in Ewe in most cases:

[10] Examples of Proto Gbe vowel nasality loss in Ewe

a) Proto Gbe *-dá ‘snake’ ➔ Ewe da, Fon dà ‘snake’
   b) Proto Gbe *-tj ‘water’ ➔ Ewe tj, Fon sj ‘water’
   c) Proto Gbe *-dɔ̀ ‘sickness’ ➔ Ewe dɔ̀, Fon aɔ̀ ‘sickness’
   d) Proto Gbe *-vɔdú ‘deity’ ➔ Ewe vodú, Fon vodú
   e) Proto Gbe *-lã ‘meat’ ➔ Ewe and Fon -lã

- Vowel harmony is also lost in Ewe (11)
Examples of Proto Gbe nasal harmony loss in Ewe

f) Proto Gbe */xɔ́ɬɔ̰/~*[xɔ̀ɬɔ̰] Ewe /xɔlg/ ‘friend’ ~ [xɔ̀ɬ]g], (not */xɔ́ɬɔ̰/) ‘friend’

g) Proto Gbe */agaba̰/~*[aga̰ma̰] ‘chameleon’ → Fon and Gen [aga̰ma̰] vs Ewe [aga̰ma] ‘chameleon’

h) Proto Western Gbe */agala̰/ ‘crab’ → Gen /agala̰/ ~ [aglá̰a̰] vs Ewe /aǵala̰/ ~ [agála̰]

- It is thus likely that nasality as a marker of new nouns was found in Proto Gbe, but lost in Ewe along with vowel nasality in several cases and nasal spreading.
- This would also explain the observation made by Gbeto (1997) about –i being more widespread in Ewe than in Fon; it would simply be because it would have replaced the lost nasality by -i in all contexts.

5. Conclusions

- The suffix –i in Proto Gbe nouns was marking similarity, perhaps instrumentality, but also newly integrated nouns with atypical phonological and grammatical structure
- In Fon, this latter function is expressed by both –i and nasality, which are in complementary distribution
- In Ewe, only –i is found in this respect
- The situation in Proto Gbe was probably similar to that in Fon as phonological nasality was largely lost in Ewe
- Noun marking nasality would however need to be found in other Gbe languages to vindicate this hypothesis.

6. References

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