

VOWEL ASSIMILATION IN MONOSYLLABIC VERB + NOUN CONSTRUCTION IN YORUBA REVISITED

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ABSTRACT

Vowel deletion is widely reported in monosyllabic verb+noun construction in Yorùbá language, particularly in cases where vowels are juxtaposed in a CV# VCV structure. The only exception to the deletion process is found in the greeting verb /kú/ that permits assimilation rather than deletion. This paper examines the exceptional behaviour from a dialectological perspective by looking at one of the Yorùbá dialects of the North –East dialect group. Findings in the paper suggest that the verb/kú/ is a shortened form of a longer form, the reduced form appears to undergo a process of assimilation as against the deletion process permitted by the longer form.

Keywords: Verb-noun construction, assimilation, deletion.

INTRODUCTION

Yorùbá language scholars have revealed that vowel deletion is one of the robust phonological processes in monosyllabic verb+noun construction of CV#VCV structure in the Yorùbá language. Ample data and in-depth analyses have been presented on the subject by scholars that include Bamgbose(1965,1989), Oyelaran(1972), Awoyale(1985), Badejo(1986), Pulleyblank (1988), Ola (1991),Pulleyblank and Orie (2002),Yusuff (2005),Abiodun(2005) among many others. The unresolved issue as far as the operation of the process is concerned is the inability to explain or posit rule (or rules) that guide the operation of the process. It has remained difficult to explain what determines which vowel to delete in a ...V₁#V₂... structure. There are examples that permit the deletion of V₁ as in

- (1) gbé owó → gbówó ‘steal/carry money’
ro èrò → rèrò ‘think’
san èsan → sèsan ‘pay back’
gba èkó → gbèkó ‘receive knowledge’

There are other forms where V₂ is deleted.

- (2) dá ọ̀ràn → daran ‘be in trouble, commit offence’
ro ẹ̀jọ́ → rojọ́ ‘state /explain a case’
ta ọ̀jà → tajà ‘sell goods’
lọ ata → lọta ‘grind pepper’

Awobuluyi’s (1992:5) observation appears to remain true even today. He says

“in contemporary standard Yorùbá, this phonological
Phenomenon operates in an unpredictable manner.”

Despite the inexplicable mode of operation, all monosyllabic verbs in the language, with the exception of /kú/ apparently induce deletion when they enter into a grammatical construction involving a noun that begins with a vowel. Rather than induce deletion, /kú/ permits assimilation, another very robust phonological process in the language.

The present paper offers an explanation that appears to resolve the strange behaviour of /kú/ among all the monosyllabic verbs in the language by presenting an analysis from a dialectological perspective. The paper focuses on Yàgbà dialect, one of the regional dialects that belong to the North-East Yorùbá group, (Akinkugbe 1978, Oyelaran 1976, Awobuluyi 1989, Adeniyi 2005).

This paper argues that the verb /kú/ has a longer form, which appears to be an older form, and which permits deletion rather than assimilation in some regional dialects of the language. The reduced form, /kú/, which is found in the standard dialect, and in many of the regional dialect permits assimilation rather than deletion. As contained in Abiodun (2010), a case of monosyllabic verbs permitting assimilation rather than deletion is not limited to /kú/, it is found in other structures where monosyllabic verbs collocate with lexical items that have undergone lexical reduction or deletion of a syllable, e.g

gò púpò	gò úpò	gò ópò	‘very stupid’
dùn púpò	dùn úpò	dùn ún-pò	‘very sweet’

This paper is divided into five sections. Section one is the introduction where we explain the focus of the paper, section two explains briefly variation in the manifestation of assimilation and deletion across the dialects of Yorùbá. Section three focuses on the behaviour of /kú/ in the standard dialect and in the Yàgbà dialect. Section four is a general discussion explaining the apparent reason why /kú/ permits assimilation in the standard dialect. Section five describes unresolved issue as far as assimilation in the language is concerned and section six concludes the paper.

Assimilation and Deletion in Yoruba

Yorùbá language scholars have demonstrated the robust operation of assimilation and deletion in the Yoruba language. Bamgbose (1965, 1989), Oyelaran (1972), Awobuluyi (1982), Awoyale (1985), Pulleyblank and Orie (2002), Abiodun (2000), and a great number of scholars have discussed very extensively the manifestation of assimilation, while others that include the scholars mentioned already and others like Badejo (1986), Abiodun (2005) have described deletion. These processes occur mostly when two vowels are juxtaposed across morpheme or word boundary. Some structures permit deletion while some permit assimilation, (Awoyale 1986). These processes also occur when vowels become juxtaposed as a result of consonant deletion in a lexical item or across a morpheme or word boundary (Abiodun 2010).

One very important point that we wish to draw attention to here is that there is variation in the operation of these processes across the dialects of Yorùbá. This is not unexpected because language scholars, among them Rickford (2002), Syal and Jindal (2007) and McGregor (2009), have demonstrated that dialects of a language often exhibit variation at the lexical, phonological and grammatical levels. Yorùbá language scholars that include Akinkugbe (1978), Adetugbo (1967), Awobuluyi (1992, 1998) and Olumuyiwa (1997) have demonstrated variation in the lexical, phonological and grammatical structures of Yorùbá.

For the purpose of this research, we present few examples of variation in the areas of assimilation and deletion. Oyeade (1995) shows that in the standard dialect of Yoruba, the underlying forms in below undergo both assimilation and deletion processes as shown below.

- (3)
- | | | | | | |
|-------|---|------|---|------|--------------|
| òtító | → | òító | → | òótó | truth |
| erúru | → | eíru | → | eéru | ashes |
| èdídú | → | èídú | → | èédú | charcoal |
| erírí | → | eírí | → | èérí | dirt |
| àrìrò | → | àìrò | → | ààrò | tripod stand |

However, Olatunde (2009) and Oladeji (2014) demonstrate that the items do not undergo any phonological process in Yàgbà, Owé and Ìjùmú dialects. Olarewaju (2016) also shows that the items do not undergo either assimilation or deletion in Ìgbómìnà dialect.

Another area of difference is in the deletion of /i/. A large number of works report that /i/ is almost always deleted when it is juxtaposed with another vowel across word or morpheme boundary in the standard dialect of Yorùbá, (Bamgbose 1965, Badejo 1986, and Pulleyblank 1988). However, in some examples where this vowel /i/ gets deleted in the standard Yorùbá, the vowel survives in Èkìtì and Mòbà dialects, e.g.

- (4)
- | | | Standard Dialect | Èkìtì/Mòbà Dialect |
|-----|-------|------------------|-----------------------|
| gbé | igi | → gbégi | gbígi 'carry wood' |
| ra | iyò | → rayò | riyò 'buy salt' |
| ji | owó | → jówó | jíó 'steal money' |
| ki | olóyè | → kólóyè | kílóyè 'greet chief' |
| sí | àpò | → sápò | sípò 'open (the) bag' |

Another piece of data that show variation is the assimilation process reported in bisyllabic verb and noun construction in the standard dialect (Pulleyblank and Orie 2002). These scholars provide the following examples, (p 103).

- (5)
- | | | | | |
|--------|-------|---|------------|----------------------------|
| gbàgbé | omọ | → | gbagbọmọ | 'forget child' |
| jéwó | ẹ̀sẹ̀ | → | jéwẹ̀ẹ̀sẹ̀ | 'confess sin' |
| parí | ẹ̀kọ̀ | → | parẹ̀ẹ̀kọ̀ | 'finish studies' |
| jáde | opó | → | jádoopó | 'come out of mourning' |
| tọ̀rọ̀ | owó | → | tọ̀roowo | 'beg for money' |
| bèèrè | ọ̀nà | → | bèèrẹ̀ọ̀nà | 'ask for (road) direction' |

Whereas these items undergo assimilation process in the standard dialect, Ilesanmi (2011) reports that the items do not undergo assimilation or deletion in the Èkìtì and Mòbà dialects of Yorùbá. Owójaiye (2012) and Olatunde (2016), however, report that in bisyllabic verb+noun construction as in (5) above, vowels undergo assimilation across morpheme boundary in fast speech, but do not undergo any process in slow speech in the Owé, Yàgbà and Ìjùmú dialects. Consider the following examples from taken from Olatunde (2016)

- (6)
- | | | | | |
|--------|--------|---|----------|---------------------------|
| parí | ẹ̀yọ̀n | → | parẹ̀yàn | 'complete prison service' |
| sanwó | aşo | → | sanwášo | 'pay for cloth' |
| gbàgbé | omọ | → | gbagbọmọ | 'forget child/children' |
| bẹ̀rẹ̀ | àjọ | → | bẹ̀ràjọ | 'start payment of thrift' |
| tọ̀rọ̀ | eyó | → | tọ̀rẹ̀yó | 'beg for money' |

As could be seen from the discussion in this section, Yorùbá dialects exhibit variation at the phonological level, particularly in relation to deletion and assimilation. The variation, as would be seen later in this paper, is relevant to the findings in this paper.

The Greeting Verb / kú /

This verb is very prominent in Yorùbá greeting forms. Abiodun(2006) in his classification of the Yorùbá greeting forms recognizes the / kú / form as the most prominent of the greeting forms. He says that “one hears it every day, everywhere and every time” (p 5). As already mentioned above, / kú / is the only monosyllabic verb that permits assimilation in a verb + noun construction, other verbs permit deletion. Awoyale(1985:5) remarks to the effect that

The behaviour of the greeting verb *kú* is inexplicable.

It is the only mono-syllabic verb that does not induce elision
at this boundary(V1#V2 in a verb + noun construction).

To support the claim that it does not induce elision but assimilation, we present the examples in (7) below:

- (7)
- | | | | | |
|----|--------|---|----------|-----------------------------------|
| kú | iṣẹ | → | kúuṣẹ | ‘greeting at work’ |
| kú | ìròlẹ | → | kúùròlẹ | ‘good evening’ |
| kú | ìdájí | → | kúùdájí | ‘good morning’ |
| kú | ìtọ́jú | → | kúùtọ́jú | ‘greeting for taking good care’ |
| kú | ìkàlẹ | → | kúùkàlẹ | ‘good evening’ |
| kú | ìjòkó | → | kúùjòkó | ‘greeting when at rest’ |
| kú | ìrọ́jú | → | kúùrọ́jú | ‘greeting when mourning’ |
| kú | alẹ | → | káalẹ | ‘good evening’ |
| kú | àárò | → | káàárò | ‘good morning’ |
| kú | àbò | → | káàbò | ‘welcome’ |
| kú | àtíjọ | → | káàtíjọ | ‘long time’ |
| kú | àlẹjò | → | káàlẹjò | ‘greeting when receiving a guest’ |

We observe a progressive assimilation in cases where the vowel of the noun is /i/ but regressive assimilation in cases where the noun begins with vowel other than /i/. Scholars have claimed that in a construction that permit assimilation, vowel /i/ invariably assimilates the feature of the vowel before or after it in a...V₁#V₂... construction, (Awobuluyi 1982,1992). Similarly /u/ assimilates the feature of any vowel after it.

There is a paradox as far as the assimilation described in this section is concerned. Our research shows that in the standard dialect the verb fails to induce assimilation (or deletion) where vowels other than /i/ and /a/ occur in the initial position of the following noun. This observation is captured in the data below:

- 8)
- | | | | | |
|----|--------|---|-----------|---------------------------------|
| kú | eré | → | kú eré | ‘greeting at play’ |
| kú | ebi | → | kú ebi | ‘greeting to mark hunger’ |
| kú | ewu | → | kú ewu | ‘congratulations’ |
| kú | oye | → | kú oyẹ | ‘greeting during harmattan’ |
| kú | ògbelẹ | → | kú ògbelẹ | ‘greeting during dry season’ |
| kú | orò | → | kú orò | ‘greeting during trouble’ |
| kú | òjò | → | kú òjò | ‘greeting when it is raining’ |
| kú | otútù | → | kú otútù | ‘greeting when it is cold’ |
| kú | òde | → | kú òde | ‘welcome’ |
| kú | oríre | → | kú orire | ‘congratulation’ |
| kú | odò | → | kú odò | ‘greeting at river side’ |
| kú | ẹwà | → | kú ẹwà | ‘greeting during hairdressing’ |
| kú | ẹgbin | → | kú ẹgbin | ‘greeting when one is insulted’ |

One wonders why the examples in (8) fail to undergo assimilation. When one compares the examples in (8) with the examples in (7) above, one gains the impression that / kú / permits

assimilation only when the following vowel is either /i/ or /a/. The case of /i/ may be argued on the ground that the vowel (/i/) in the Yoruba language behaves unpredictably. This explains Pulleyblank's (1988:233) remark in relation to the vowel in Yorùbá that

“Vowel /i/ in this language is singled out either as the only vowel that undergo certain rules or as the only vowel that does not”

The case of /a/ deserves attention; there is need to investigate whether /a/ behaves like /i/ in other constructions or whether the case of assimilation of /a/ in (7) is accidental. More will be said on this in section 6 of this work.

While it is true that assimilation does not occur in example (8) going by available data in the standard dialect, we found, however, that the examples undergo assimilation in Èkìtì, Mòbà and Ìjẹ̀sà dialects of Yorùbá. This further confirms the issue of variation in the deletion and assimilation process in the dialects of Yorùbá.

The Greeting Verbs in Yàgbà Dialect

Yàgbà (Iyàgbà) is one of the dialects in the North-East Yorùbá. Other dialects in the group are Owé, Ìjùmú, Bùnú and Ọ̀wọ̀rọ̀ (Akinkugbe 1978, Adetugbo 1967, Awobuluyi 1998, Adeniyi 2005). The North-East Yorùbá is spoken in Kogi State of Nigeria, speakers of the dialects in the dialect group call themselves “OkunYorùbá”.

Yàgbà, the dialect in focus in this paper is spoken in Ègbè, Odò-Èrì, Ọ̀kè-Èrì, Ìsánlú, Ayétorò-Gbèdè, Mòpà, Ọ̀gbè, Ọ̀gà, Àlù, Ifẹ̀-Olúkòtún and a few other communities. In this dialect, the greeting verb alternates between /kùrì/ and /kú/. We found that our language informants who are between seventy and eighty years of age used /kùrì/ consistently. They frowned at the use of /kú/ found in the speech of the younger generation, arguing that the use is a bastardization of the dialect. The younger generation between the age of twenty and sixty who have lived outside Yàgbà land for a while, use /kùrì/ when greeting older people, but use /kú/ when relating with their contemporaries. The speech form of the elderly people that manifest /kùrì/ is the focus of the research.

We present data from Yàgbà below:

- (9) a. kùrì ikérésì → kùrikérésì ‘greeting at Christmas’
 kùrì isallah → kùrisallah ‘greeting at Muslim festivals’
 kùrì imarket → kùrimákètì ‘greeting during buying and selling’
 kùrì imeeting → kùrimítìnì ‘greeting during or after meeting’
- b. kùrì iṣẹ → kùriṣẹ ‘greeting at work’
 kùrì ìtọ́jú → kùrìtọ́jú ‘greeting for taking good care’
 kùrì ìrọ́ju → kùrìrọ́jú ‘greeting when mourning’
 kùrì ìgbádùn → kùrìgbáládùn ‘greeting during merriment’
 kùrì ijó → kùrijó ‘greeting for dancing well’
- c. kùrì àbò → kùràbò ‘welcome’
 kùrì àlejò → kùràlejò ‘greeting when receiving a guest’
 kùrì alẹ → kùralẹ ‘good evening’
 kùrì ọgbẹ → kùrògbẹ ‘greeting during dry season’
 kùrì ọyẹ → kùroyẹ ‘greeting during harmattan’
 kùrì eji → kùreji ‘greeting when it is raining’
 kùrì ewu → kùrewu ‘greeting for escaping disaster’

kùrì	egidi	→	kúrègìdì	‘greeting during serious stress’
kùrì	ojumọ	→	kúrojúmọ	‘good day’
kùrì	ẹwà	→	kúřẹwà	‘greeting while dressing hair’

Items in (9a) contains borrowed words with a prosthetic vowel /i/ , those in (9b) are nouns that begins with /i/ , while those in (9c) begin with vowels other than /i/. A regular pattern is the deletion of /i/ that ends the greeting verb. The deletion process is captured in the rule:

$$(10) \left[\begin{array}{c} + \text{syll} \\ + \text{high} \end{array} \right] \rightarrow \emptyset / \text{ — } \# \left[+ \text{syll} \right]$$

The rule predicts that /i/ is invariably deleted when it precedes another vowel across a word boundary.

General Discussion

Our focus in this paper, to remind the readers, is to explain the inexplicable behaviour of / kú / among other monosyllabic verbs in the Yorùbá language. Whereas other monosyllabic verbs induce deletion, / kú / induces assimilation. The presentation so far shows that the greeting verb has two forms in Yorùbá. The form /kùrì/ found in Yàgbà and the shorter form / kú / found in standard dialect and some of the regional dialects of the language.

In our opinion, the behaviour of / kú / in the standard dialect is as a result of its historical derivation. The form is derived from a longer form /kùrì/, which is found in Yàgbà dialect. Lexical reduction through the deletion of a segment or a syllable is common in language, and Yorùbá is not an exception. Scholars have illustrated this with the following examples,

- (11a) kùrò → kúò ‘give way’
 dúró → dúó ‘wait/stand’
 tìrẹ → tìẹ ‘yours’
 dára → dáa ‘good’
 èrẹkẹ → èẹkẹ ‘cheek’
- b. òtító → òító → òótó ‘truth’
 erúú → eírú → eérú ‘ashes’
 èdídú → èídú → èédú ‘charcoal’
 èrírí → èírí → èérí ‘dirt’
 àrìrò → àìrò → ààrò ‘tripod stand’
- c. gò púpọ → gọ úpọ → gòópọ very stupid
 dùn púpọ → dun úpọ → dùnúnpọ very sweet
 ga púpọ → gaúpọ → gaápọ very tall
- d. gbe sí ibẹ → gbeibẹ → gbeebe put it there
 da sí ilẹ → da ilẹ → daálẹ free it
 ko sí ita → koíta → koóta put (them) outside

We notice the deletion of /r/ in (11a) resulting in the reduction of the items, we notice also the deletion of the first constant in each of the items in (11b). In (11c) the initial consonant of the word after the verb is deleted, and in (11d), a whole syllable is deleted. We notice tone realignment in 11c, d, but this will not be discussed because it is not relevant to the deletion/ and assimilation processes in focus in this paper. The very important point we wish to draw

attention to is the assimilation process that follows the deletion in (11b,c,d). It appears, based on the examples above that in the case of /kúri/ , a whole syllable was deleted reducing the form to /kú/, and like the examples assimilation follows as shown below:

- (12) kùrì àbò → kù àbò → káàbò
kùrì isẹ́ → kù isẹ́ → kúusẹ́

The point being made is that whereas Yàgbà retains the longer form of the greeting verb and permits deletion, the standard dialect and many other dialects of the language retain the reduced form, and rather than deletion, assimilation is manifested. We wish to remind our readers once again that phonological variation is found across the dialects of Yorùbá.

Unresolved Issue

We pointed out in section 3 that in the standard dialect and some regional dialects of Yorùbá, assimilation fails to apply in cases where the noun that follows /kù/ begins with any of the mid-vowel /o e ẹ ọ /. We pointed out, however, that assimilation applies in Mòbà, Èkitì and Ìjẹ̀sà dialects. This further points to the issue of variation, across Yorùbá dialects.

It is important to draw attention to the examples in (11d) where assimilation occurs after deletion of a syllable,

- gbe sí ibẹ́ → gbeibẹ́ → gbeébé
da sí ilẹ́ → da ilẹ́ → daálẹ́

Examples like this were used to explain assimilation in the case of /ku/ following the deletion of a syllable. However, just as assimilation fails to apply when a mid –vowel follows /kù/ in the standard dialect, assimilation also fails to apply when the verb in (11d) is followed by a noun that begins with a mid-vowel after the deletion of /sí/. e.g

- (13) gbesí òkè → gbeókè *gbeeke/gbóokè
dà á sí odò → dà á ódò *dàáàdò/dòóòdò
ko sí àpo → koápò *koopò/kaápò
mu sí àpò → mu ápò *muunpo/maápò
sọ ọ sí ẹwọn → sọ ọ ẹwọn *sọ́ọ́wọn/seééwọn

The question that agitates the mind is why assimilation fails when the vowel of the noun after the verb is a mid-vowel both in the case of /ku/ and the verbs in (13). Even the verb has vowel /i/ the process does not occur as shown in (14) below.

- (14) tì í sí odo → tì íodo *tiido/toodo
sì sí oke → siókè *siíkè/soókè
fì sí ẹnu → fì ẹnu *fíinu/fẹ́enu

The non-application of assimilation in (13) and (14) above deserves a thorough investing that is beyond the present paper. Further research, the authors believe, would help us in getting a clearer understanding as to why the mid-vowels fail to undergo assimilation.

CONCLUSION

We have tried in this paper to explain the apparent strange behaviour of /kú/ in Yorùbá. We argue that the verb is a reduced form of an older form (/kúri/) found in Yàgbà dialect. Since lexical reduction is more common in languages than lexical extension, we refrained from positing /kú/ as the older form. The paper further argues that the assimilation process is as a result of its reduced form. The paper anchors this position on available evidence in the

Yoruba language that assimilation occurs in other cases where lexical reduction or syllable deletion occurs. It is important to remark that there is an issue that deserves further investigation in the assimilation process involving / kú /. The verb fails to induce deletion where the following vowel that follows the verb is a mid-vowel. There is need to find out why only the high and the low vowels /i, a/ undergo assimilation.

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