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¹A Survey of the Phonology of the Okun Dialects

Abstract

This study attempts an analysis of the phonological systems of the Okun dialects which are dialects of Yorùbá. This paper examines what constitutes their differences and similarities that make them to be regarded as different dialects. The classification of the dialects sound systems, tonal systems, syllable systems are carried out and the major differences are examined.

Introduction

The Okun dialects which comprise Owé, Ìyàgbà, Ìjùmú, Bùnú and Òwórò are spoken in the southern axis of Kogi State. The dialects are distinguishable as individual dialects but they are mutually intelligible to an extent. Mutual intelligibility is a test used by linguists to decide whether two linguistic communities speak different languages or different dialects of the same language (Steinberg, 1999).

A classification of the dialects according to their structural characteristics is carried out in this study. This study is divided into various sections accordingly.

The Okun People

Owé, Ìyàgbà, Ìjùmú, Bùnú and Òwórò peoples are referred to as the Okun people. Okun, which is a form of greeting, has become the common identity of the people who largely share some history and linguistic affinity. The people are believed to have migrated from Ile-Ife. According to Otitoju (2002:3) 'Okun confederation has always been referred to as a collection of different units who lived independent of each other with its own social organization though with bonding similarities.' In effect, each of these peoples has a separate history of origin and each group has its particular experiences.

Okun is a dialect of Yorùbá with its own peculiar features. The Okun people understand each other with varying degrees of mutual intelligibility. The Nupe wars of the 19th century left an indelible mark on the Okun people and dialects. The interaction with the Hausa especially because of the geopolitical zone the people have found themselves has an impact on the dialects.

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The Okun people being studied are presently spread across six Local Government Areas of Kogi State. These are Kabba-Bunu, Yagba-West, Yagba-East, Mopa-Muro, Ìjùmú and Lokoja Local Government Areas. The Okun people have kiths and kins in Kwara, Ondo and Ekiti States.

The Owé People and Dialect

According to oral tradition, the Owé people originated from Ile-Ife. Owé refers to both the people and their dialect. According to oral tradition, it is believed that the progenitors of the Owé people namely; Aro, Reka and Balaja together with their families left Ilé-Ifè to settle north-wards as a result of unavailability of farm land. They found three separate settlements. According to Baiyere (1999:3), 'the three separate settlements grew until they merged into one single town, Kabba, comprising three clans called Katu, Odolu and Kabba. The Owé people can also be found in neighbouring villages like Òtù-Egunbe, Gbólékò, Kákun, Ègbédá, Òkèdayò, Apánga etc. The Owé speaking community is linguistically homogeneous. The Owé people are surrounded by the Bunu, Ijumu and Ebara peoples of Kogi State.

The Ìyàgbà People and Dialect

It is difficult to say precisely which of the numerous historical towns in Yoruba land the Iyagbas came from. The most widely held belief is that they descended from a certain princess known as Iya-agba (old woman) who migrated from Ile-Ife because of the overpopulation there resulting from insufficient land for farming. This woman settled in Akata-Ere. Ìyàgbà is derived from Ìyá-àgbà. The Yagbas are today found in three adjoining Local Government Areas namely Yagba-East, Yagba-West and Mopa-Muro. Towns and villages in Yagba land include Egbe, Isanlu, Mopa, Efo-Amuro, Odo-Ere, Odo-Eri, Ponyan, Ejiba, Oranre, Ejuku, etc.

The Ìjùmú People and Dialect

The Ìjùmú people, unlike the other groups who regard themselves as one and have one history of descent, are from different towns and villages with different historical backgrounds. The term Ìjùmú is an ancient name chosen for a modern administrative unit referred to as Ìjùmú Native Authority which was founded in 1937. Today, that same administrative unit is called Ìjùmú Local Government Area.

About twenty-four towns and villages speak Ijumu dialect. Some of these towns are Ife, Ighara, Ogidi, Egbeda-Ega, Iyamoye, Aduge, Iyah-Gbede and Okoro-gbede.

The Bùnú People and Dialect

Bùnú people also migrated from Ile-Ife. It is believed that Ollẹ Bunu who is the first settler in Bunuland is a direct descendant of Oduduwa (Otitoju, 2002:54). He was believed to have left Ile-Ife in annoyance because of the misunderstanding with his younger brother. The Abinu people (Bùnú) are made up of Kiri, Akumerindinlogun, Okemeta and Okemesan groups. They are the

second group that makes up Kabba-Bunu Local Government Area. Some of the villages that make up Bunuland are Ọlẹ, Akutupa, Okebukun, Apaa-Bunu, Agbẹde-Bunu, Odo-Apẹ, Ayede-Ọpa, Aghara-Bunu, etc.

The Ọwọ̀rọ̀ Dialect and People

The foundation of Ọwọ̀rọ̀ is traceable to two great hunter brothers who left Ile-Ife, a Yoruba town to hunt for food. One brother according to history, settled at ‘Owọ mi rọ, coined Ọwọ̀rọ̀. It is spoken in the North-West of Lokoja in Kogi State, Nigeria. Ọwọ̀rọ̀ is located on a mountainous terrain above thirty-six (36) kilometers to the North-West of Lokoja, the Kogi State capital. Ọwọ̀rọ̀ spreads across sixteen (16) communities in Lokoja Local Government Area of Kogi State. These communities include the following towns and villages: Agbaja, Emu, Tajimu, Jakura, Otube, Owara, Igbo-nla, Filele, Ijiho, Akpomo-ba, Obajana, Akpata, Osokosoko, Banda, Karara and Ogbagbon. Agbaja is the largest Ọwọ̀rọ̀ speaking community, hence, it may be said to be the representative of Ọwọ̀rọ̀.

The major occupation of the Ọwọ̀rọ̀s is farming and hunting. However, villages like Filele, Owara, and Banda are surrounded with rivers and as such they do a lot of fishing. Ọwọ̀rọ̀ represents one of the many Yoruba set ups in the political Northern Nigeria. By this set up and physical location, the Ọwọ̀rọ̀s form a transitional belt between the north and the south, and a notable link between Northerners and Southerners.

The Phonological System of Okun Dialects

Phonology, one of the levels of linguistic studies is concerned with the study of sounds. It is also defined as the scientific study of the organization of speech sounds in languages. Gimson (2001:6) says that phonology ‘concerns how sounds function in a systematic way in a particular language’. Ladefoged (1975:23) also states that:

phonology is the description of the systems and patterns of sounds that occur in a language. It involves studying a language to determine its distinctive sounds and to establish a set of rules that take place in the set of changes that take place in these sounds when they occur in different relationships with other sounds.

We will examine the phonology of the Okun dialects at both segmental and suprasegmental levels.

Segmental Phonology

Sounds and phonemes in language are referred to as segmental. Jones (1967:47) sees a phoneme as “a family of sounds in a given language which are related in character and are used in such a way that no member ever occurs in a word in the same phonetic context as any other member.” Phonemes are the distinct segments that make up the total inventory of sounds.

A phoneme is the smallest linguistic unit of a language. Consonants and vowels make up the phonetic inventory of all human languages. These are also attested in the Okun dialects.

The Consonants of Okun Dialects

Consonants are described by Bobda and Paul (1993:4) as sounds produced by the obstruction or the blockage of the air stream which is eventually released. There are twenty-two consonants attested in the Okun dialects. Owé and Ìjùmù and Bùnù attest nineteen with the absence of [p, ŋ and ɸ] respectively. Ìyàgbà attests twenty consonants with the absence of [p and ɸ] but with [ŋ]. Ọwọ̀rọ̀ attests twenty-one consonants with the absence of [ŋ] and the presence of [p and ɸ]. The consonant chart below showcases the consonants of the dialects with the ones that are not common in parenthesis.

Fig. 1 Consonant Chart of the Okun Dialects

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Labio-velar	Glottal
Plosive	(p) b		t d			k g	kp gb	
Fricative		F	S	(ɸ)		π		h
Affricate				→				
Lateral			l					
Nasal	m		n		ɲ	(ŋ)		
Trill			r					
Approximant	w				j			

Distribution of the Consonants

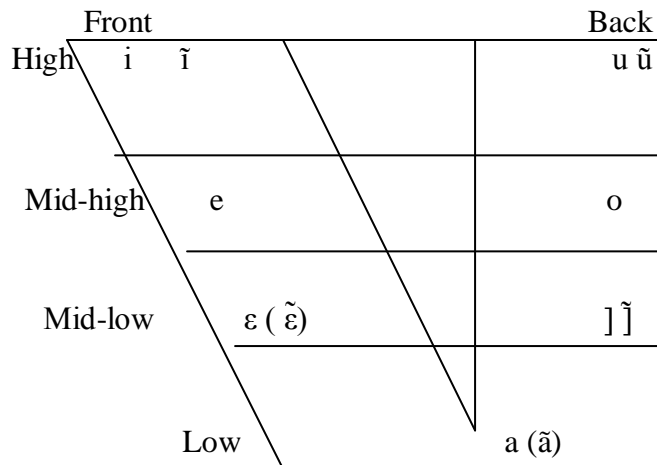
The consonants attested in the dialects can occur in different positions in a word. They can occur in word-initial position, word-medial position or intervocallically. Consonants do not occur word finally in all the dialects. The data below will show some of the consonants as they occur in the dialects.

	Owé	Ìyàgbà	Ìjùmù	Bùnù	Ọwọ̀rọ̀	Gloss
[b] Voiced bilabial plosive						
Word Initial	bó	bó	bó	bó	bó	train
Word Medial	ebi	ebi	ebi	ebi	ebi	hunger
[t] Voiceless alveolar stop						
Word initial	tà,	tà,	tà	tà	tà	sell
Word Medial	itó	itó	itó	itó	itó	urine
[p] Voiceless bilabial plosive						

The Vowel System

Vowels are sounds produced with very little obstruction to the air in the vocal cavity. The dialects attest both oral and nasal vowels; some of the vowels become nasalized when they are preceded by nasal sounds. Each of the dialects has seven oral vowels. While Ìyàgbà and Ọwọ̀rọ̀ have five nasal vowels like Standard Yoruba, the others have three nasal vowels each. The nasal vowels [ẽ̃ and ã̃] are only attested in Ìyàgbà and Ọwọ̀rọ̀ dialects. The diagram below showcases the vowel inventory.

Vowel Chart of Okun Dialects



Phonological Change: Substitution

These dialects share correspondences both in sounds and meanings. Some phonological correspondences are noted in these dialects, some are exemplified below:

	Owé	Ìyàgbà	Ìjùmú	Bùnú	Ọwọ̀rọ̀	Gloss
f → s → h	fúré	sáré	háré	híré	sáré	run
f → h	òfọ̀n	òfọ̀n	òfọ̀n	òfọ̀n	ohọ̀n	neck
f → h	funfun	funfun	funfun	funfun	hunhun	white
r → y	ransé	ransé	ransé	ransé	yansé	send
i → u	ìhìn	ìhìn	ìhìn	ìhìn	ìhìn	knife
ọ → a	ọlọ	ọlọ	ọlọ	ọlọ	alọ	grinding stone

There seems to be a rule that changes *f* to *h* in Ọwọ̀rọ̀ dialect, *r* also changes to *y* in the dialect. The *f*, *s* and *h* sound correspondences are also noted among the dialects. Owé is the only dialect that attests *u* at word initial level. It should be noted that Yoruba, which is the standard form does not allow the vowel *u* to begin a word. This is only attested in the Ekiti dialects and also in Owé.

Tone System of Okun Dialects

Pitch variations that affect the meaning of a word are called tones. The meaning of a word depends on its tone in the majority of the languages of the world. Pike (1947:3) described a tone language as a ‘language having significant and contrastive but related pitch on each syllable’. c:41) defined a tone as ‘a language in which pitch is used to contrast individual lexical items or words.

Tone aids pronunciation thereby enhancing communication which is the major function of any human language. The dialects attest the high tone, low tone and mid tone. The examples below show tonal occurrences in the dialects. The examples below indicate some tonal occurrences.

Owé	Ìyàgbà	Ìjùmú	Bùnú	Ọwọ̀rọ̀	Gloss
kú	kú	kú	kú	kú	die
àwù	àwù	àwù	àwù	àwù	clothe
funfun	funfun	funfun	funfun	hunhun	white
irun	irun	irun	irun	irun	hair

Syllable Structure of the Okun Dialects

Ladefoged (1975:244) defines a syllable as “the smallest possible unit of speech.” According to Jones (1978:55) “each sound which constitutes a peak of prominence in a word is said to contain as many syllables as the peak of prominence.” A syllable consists of one or more than one phoneme. It is a sequence of phonemes with one and only one syllabic ‘nucleus’ or ‘peak’. According to Pike (1947) a syllable consists of an ‘onset’ and a ‘core’. It is a phonological unit which consists of three phonetic parts; the onset, the peak or nucleus and the coda. There are two major types of syllables; the open syllable and the closed syllable. Okun Dialects operate the open syllable system; this means that consonants do not end words in the dialects. According to elicited data, the syllable structure of these dialects is V, CV, CVV and Ç. The syllable structure above gives credence to the fact that the dialects do not permit consonant clusters neither can a consonant end a word. The syllable structure of Okun Dialects can be generally represented as follows:

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{ccc} (C) & V & (V) \\ & & \text{Ç} \end{array} \right\}$$

Morpheme Structure of the Okun Dialects

The morpheme structure of the Okun Dialects is dependable on the syllable structure. Monosyllabic morphemes, disyllabic morphemes, trisyllabic morphemes and quadrisyllabic morphemes are attested in the dialects. The data below will show the various morpheme structures in the dialects

Monosyllabic Morphemes

Owé	Ìyàgbà	Ìjùmú	Bùnú	Ọwọ̀rọ̀	Gloss
bó	bó	bó	bó	bó	train
tà	tà	tà	tà	tà	sell

Disyllabic Morphemes

Owé ìtò ohì kpukpa	Ìyàgbà ìtò ohì kpukpa	Ìjùmú ìtò ohì kpukpa	Bùnù ìtò ohì kpukpa	Òwòrò ìtò ohì kpikpa	Gloss urine left red
Trisyllabic Morphemes					
Owé ìdàgbon ìlèmù ólúku	Ìyàgbà ìdàgbon ìlèmù ólúku	Ìjùmú ìdàgbon ìlèmù ólúku	Bùnù ìdàgbon ìlèmù ólúku	Òwòrò ìdàgbon àlèmù ólúku	Gloss jaw orange friend
Quadrisyllabic Morphemes					
Owé kètèkètè pèpèlèjú erukutu	Ìyàgbà kètèkètè	Ìjùmú kètèkètè	Bùnù kètèkètè egunyeye pèpèlèjú erukutu	Òwòrò kètèkètè egunyeye pèpèlèjú dust	Gloss horse vulture forehead dust

Conclusion

This paper has briefly examined the phonological systems of the Okun dialects. It has established that the dialects are distinguishable as individual dialects with their various historical and environmental experiences but they are mutually intelligible to an extent. The influences of neighbouring communities and erstwhile political taskmasters like the Nupe especially cannot be overemphasized in whatever constitutes differences in the dialects. There are so many words that are of Nupe, Hausa and Igala origin in the dialects. The most affected is the Òwòrò dialect.

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