

# A SYNCHRONIC CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF ENGLISH AND YORUBA MORPHOLOGICAL SYSTEMS: A RECIPE FOR LANGUAGE EDUCATION

BY

**Dr. A. A. Olaoye**

## **ABSTRACT**

*The literature of linguistics is replete with separate studies of the morphological systems of English and Yoruba. Researchers concentrated their attention on pure linguistic analysis with little effort on comparative studies and implications for language teaching. This paper is on synchronic, contrastive study of English and Yoruba morphological systems. It is a sociolinguistic as well as psycholinguistic study in which the similarities and differences of the two languages are highlighted, with their implications for teaching and learning. The paper compared the two systems — alphabets, vowel and consonant phonemes, stress and intonation patterns, morphemes, tense, parts of speech, proverbs, idioms and loanwords. It was hypothesized that certain linguistic learning difficulties encountered by Yorubas are caused by the morphological disparities in English and Yoruba. The writer believes that there is the need for language teachers to undertake comparative studies of the two languages involved for methodological reasons. The author then suggests some techniques for teaching English to Yorubas. The paper concludes that, although English and Yoruba morphological systems differ very significantly in many respects, there exists language universals all languages, which language educators should take advantage of in teaching.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the literature of bilingual education, particularly language in contact, there has been the University assumption that comparative study of foreign and native languages provides educational guide in foreign language learning. Studies in the area of languages in contact and its effects on bilingual education, (Haugen 1953, Weinreich 1953) have revealed that many linguistic distortions heard among bilinguals correspond to describable differences in the languages involved. It is also assumed Lado (1957) that individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture. This transfer is done both productively and respectively, when speaking the language and when attempting to understand the language and the culture as practised by the native speakers.

Comparative study is a system whereby the features of two languages are compared and contrasted in order to bring out areas of similarities and differences in phonology, morphology, lexis, syntax and semantics. Comparative analysis is one of the oldest approaches to linguistic studies. This approach dates back to the early 19th Century when the comparison of the so called Indo-European languages (English, French, Germany, Portuguese) and those of the Africans were made an integral part of the studies in Europe. Linguists then were preoccupied essentially with the comparison of language features for the purpose of establishing language families.

Diachronically, Yoruba written literature dates back to the first quarter of the 19th century. The earliest collection of Yoruba words in print dates back to 1817. The collection was done by the English Diplomat-Bowdich. The vocabulary consisted of only Numerals. After the Bowdich Numerals of 1819 which introduced linguists to Yoruba Language, the next vocabulary of Yoruba to appear in print was collected by Mrs Kilham (1828), Clapperton (1829) and Raban (1830-1832). The development of this work was done by the missionary Rev. John Raban - the author of the first book on Yoruba, with his informant - Samuel Ajayi Crowther - the founding father of Yoruba Literature.

The development of Yoruba Orthography dates back to the missionary era, with Rev. John Raban taking the lead. Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther adapted some part of Raban's Yoruba Orthography. There were a lot of academic discussions on such fundamentals as Yoruba diacritics, tone marking and consonant clusters, and this brought about many revisions of the Orthographies. In many of these Orthographic revision exercises, English Language and other European Languages were used as models, as efforts were

made to or relexicalise Yoruba words to be in harmony with other words in other languages. There were controversies over the use of (kp) and gb) which are in Yoruba but which are not in the European Languages. A comparative study of English and Yoruba morphological systems will reveal the differences which are assumed to be the cause of linguistic interference and the source of difficulties for second language learners, especially Yoruba learning English.

### **ESSENCE OF COMPARATIVE STUDIES**

Language educators at both the secondary and tertiary Institutions and, indeed, at the primary school level are often confronted with pedagogical problems in the teaching of English. To many of the language teachers these problems defy solution. Their knowledge of theoretical linguistics is never brought to bear on language teaching and learning. The teacher has to teach English to students from diverse socio-linguistic backgrounds. To succeed as a language teacher, he needs to carry out comparative/ contrastive studies of English and the native languages of his students. The teacher who has made a comparative study of the morphological systems of the second language (English) and the native language (Yoruba) will know better what the real learning problems of his students are and how to solve them. The issue of interlanguage and hence interlingual errors or even errors arising from interference can be tackled by contrastive analysis.

The language teacher is also faced with the need to prepare teaching materials that meet the particular needs of his students. Linguistic comparisons is basic and inescapable if the teacher wishes to make progress and not to just reshuffle the same old materials. Where the language teacher is given prescribed textbooks to use and he finds the book inadequate in both the linguistic and cultural contexts, his systematic comparative study will help in preparing supplementary exercises on very important aspects of the textbook. A lot of achievements have been made in the area of language testing, especially in tests of English as a second language, as a result of linguistic comparison of English and students' native language. Although there are linguistic Universals, there are nonetheless features that are unique to languages. This uniqueness has to be borne in mind while constructing language tests. There are also dialectal differences which need to be recognised too. The application of linguistic comparison to language testing is promising.

Comparative linguistic study is capable of removing cross-cultural and

cross-linguistic misinterpretation. If we ignore cultural and linguistic differences, we will misjudge our cultural neighbours as we constantly do today, for a form of language behaviour that to one has certain meaning may have another meaning to others. And if we do not know of the difference in meaning, we ascribe to our neighbours the intentions that the same behaviour will imply for us, and would pass on them the same judgement as our conferences.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEMS**

English and Yoruba, as languages, have been co-existing in the discourse of Yoruba - English bilinguals for some time now. Historically, the growth of Yoruba - English bilingualism has not been without problems. English is a contact language in Nigeria, and in a situation such as this, the point of contact is usually the bilingual individual who does not know how and why he code-mixes and code-switches in his utterances nor does he know the root cause of language learning difficulties.

Understanding more about language phenomenon is the general concern of linguists the world over. People hold different opinions-about different languages. Some anthropological linguists who studied African languages viewed African Languages as little more than echoes of noise, and that they are no match for European languages. Later studies (Greenberg 1970) revealed that the notion that African languages were inferior was disproved, as languages are of equal importance, and moreover have a lot of things in common. This paper aims at finding solutions to these research problems:

- a. Are there really similarities and differences between English and Yoruba morphological systems?
- b. In what areas are these similarities and differences?
- c. Do the differences, pose any learning problem?
- d. How are these learning problems solved?
- e. To what extent do the similarities facilitate or enhance learning of either of the two languages?
- f. What does a teacher gain from a comparative study of this type?

In an attempt to solve these problems the research covered certain grounds such as Alphabets, nouns- verbs, adjectives, phonemes, affixation, derivational and inflectional morphemes, tenses, Yoruba idioms, proverbs and loan words. Other aspects such as allophones, allomorphs, verbo-nominal

collocation, prepositions, adverbs and pronouns are not dealt with in this study.

## ENGLISH AND YORUBA ALPHABETS

English and Yoruba orthographic symbols differ significantly, though the direction of writing of both languages is from left to right thus:

English:-        a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t  
                      u v w x y z  
Yoruba:         a b d e e f g h h i j k l m n o o p r  
                      s s t u w y

Yoruba alphabetical system has the consonantal sound /g/ as in "igba (Calabash), "agbe" (gourd) and "agbalagba" (adult). There is also the vowel sound (o). These two orthographies (gb) and (o) have no equivalent in English alphabet. There is however the absence of c,q,v,x,z, in Yoruba alphabet. One can then begin to appreciate the initial disparity between Yoruba and English.

## Vowel and Consonant Systems

In both English and Yoruba we have the following consonantal sounds:

English:         /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, /g/, /f/, /l/, /r/, /s/, /z/,  
                      /z/, /h/, /ts/, /dz/, /m/, /n/, /d/, /θ/, /s/, /l/, /r/,  
                      /lj/, /w/, /j/s  
Yoruba:         /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, /kp/, /gb/, /f/, /s/, /s/, /h/, /dz/,  
                      /m/, /n/, /r/, /l/, /j/, /w/.

The phonemes that are unique to English are:

/q/, /J/, /ts/, /z/, /J/, /v/

Consonantal phonemes unique too Yoruba are:

/gb/, /kp/ and /s/.

There are differences too in the English and Yoruba vowel phonemes, thus:

English:         /i:/, /i/, /e/, /æ/, /a:/, /J/, /J:/, /u/, /ʌ/, /ə:/, /ə/.

Yoruba:         /a/, /e/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /o/, /u/.

The following areas of difficulty for Yorubas learning English have been identified (Dunstan 1969):

English Vowel Phonemes: /ʌ/, /æ/, /ɪ/ and /i:/

English Consonant Phonemes: /ts/, /s/, /ʒ/, /θ/, /z/, /v/.

Yoruba learning English have difficulties in distinguishing /æ/ and /a:/; /u/ and /u:/; /i/ and /i:/. They pronounced "feel" and "fill" "beat" and "bit"; "cord" and "cod" alike without any distinction of vowel length and quality. They also substitute /f/ for /v/, /s/ for /z/, /t/ for /ʒ/ and /d/ for /θ/. Absence of some phonemes in Yoruba are responsible for the following errors.

"Zaria" pronounced as "Saria"

"Van" " " "Fan"

"Thin" " " "tin"

"That" " " "dat"

There are no closing and centring diphthongs in Yoruba hence Yoruba learners of English find difficulties in the following: /ei/, /əu/, /ai/, /au/, /Ji/ and /iə/, /Eə/, /nə/. Syllable final consonants are difficult for Yoruba students learning English. They find it difficult to distinguish between voiced and voiceless final consonants. The reason might be that most Yoruba words end in vowels 'and not in consonants. This is responsible for vowel insertion in English spelling, as in "buloku" for "block", "buredi" for "bread", etc. Consonant clusters whether initial or final in a syllable are also problematic, and there is the tendency for Yoruba students to drop one of the consonants, or even substitute the consonant cluster with another phoneme entirely. The consonant "1" is often not pronounced in words which end with "1" as in political, economical, geographical, etc.

Significant differences are also found in the stress and into national patterns of English and Yoruba. Yoruba is a tonal language while English is not. English language relies on stress which is achieved by length, higher pitch or greater amplitude. This disparity makes Yoruba learners of English pronounce words or even speak without stressing any syllable or morpheme in sentences. Stress and intonation in English are capable of bringing about changes in meanings. Tones too in Yoruba are capable of bringing about changes in meaning, as in Oko (spear), Oko (hoe), Oko (husband) Oko (Vehicle), Igba (palm-wine tapper's climbing rope), Igba (garden egg), and Igba (time/period).

## ENGLISH AND YORUBA MORPHEMES

In Yoruba, three kinds of morphemes have been identified (Adesuyi

1985), viz: free, bound and derivational. Free morphemes can stand on their own without the addition of bound morphemes, e.g. "ilu" (Drum), "oko" (farm) "omo" (Child), etc. Bound morphemes are made up of two or more morphemes but some bound morphemes in English cannot be split into two "meaningful parts". These words cannot be split: recreational, redemption, premonition, etc. In Yoruba, bound morphemes can be formed in three ways, viz:

addition of vowels such as /z, i, e, e, o, o,/ e.g. "bo" (arrive) becomes abo (arrival) with addition of vowel (a). With the addition of (i) "Segun" (conquer) becomes "isegun" (victory) and with the additional of /e/ "ru" (carry) becomes "eru" (load).

Collection of vowels, e.g.

"ai" + "ri" becomes "airi" (lacking)

"ai" + "gbo" becomes "aigbo" (without hearing)

Joining collective vowels with consonants, e.g.:

"alai" + "gbon" becomes "alaigbon" (a fool)

alai + "moore" becomes "alaimoore" (an ingrate)

English language on the other hand has both derivational and inflectional suffixes by which bound morphemes are formed. Yoruba too has derivational suffixed but has no inflectional suffixes, and this is a distinct morphological disparity that is capable of confusing Yoruba learners of English.

## **YORUBA AND ENGLISH NOUNS**

English nouns differ very significantly from Yoruba nouns in many respects. Most Yoruba nouns begin with a vowel, though some of them begin with consonants. In English language nouns begin with either a vowel or a consonant. A number of phonological and morphological processes take place in the formation of Yoruba nouns, the equivalent of which does not exist in English. There are two forms of nouns - the full form and the reduced form. In reduced form the middle syllable loses its consonant while its vowel is assimilated by the preceding syllable. These processes are called consonant ellision and vowel assimilation. For instance "otito" (truth) full form, becomes "ooto" the reduced form; "egungun" (bone) become "egun", "agogo" (clock/watch) becomes "aago", etc. The full forms occur in the written medium while the reduced forms occur in the spoken medium.

Another marked area of differences between English and Yoruba nouns

is the classes of nouns. Yoruba Human Nouns, such as "emi" (1), "iwo" (you), "awa" (we), "eyin" (you), "awon" (they), etc are called personal pronouns in English. Non-human nouns, such as "ola" (tomorrow), "oni" (today), etc are called adverbs in English. Quantity nouns, such "meta" (three) "okan" (one) are known as either nouns or determiners in English. Demonstrative nouns, such as "eyi" (this one), "dudu" (black), "funfun" (white) etc. can be used as determiner or pronoun, while "black" and white are adjectives in English. Place nouns, e.g. "ibi" (here) or "ibi" (place/location) "kinni" (what) do not belong to noun classes in English. "Here" is an adverb while "what" is a relative pronoun in English. Manner nouns in Yoruba do not differ significantly from those of English, except for such words as "kiakia" (quickly) and "pelepele" (carefully) which are adverbs and could also be used as adjectives. Relative Head noun like "titi" (while/until) functions as conjunctions in English. Interrogative nouns, such as "tani" (who?) "ewo" (which?) etc. are called interrogative pronouns in English. There are significant morphological differences in English and Yoruba plural nouns, gender and in the articles. Yoruba has no plural marker apart from the word "awon". It is also a genderless language. This is one of the sources of errors committed by Yoruba learners of English. Noun combinations of Yoruba types are not possible in English. Two nouns may combine together to form different relationships in Yoruba. For instance, possessive case is realised from the combination of two Yoruba nouns: "keke Olu" (Olu's bicycle); "obe Ibrahim" (Ibrahim's knife), etc. Other relationships are: (a) Space, e.g. "ori aga (on the chair); (b) Time, e.g. "owuro ola" (tomorrow morning); (c) Use, e.g. "iwe eri (testimonial/certificate); (d) Material, e.g. "obe ata" (pepper stew). Noun combinations in English do not express relationships. Rather they form a new part of speech entirely. For instance, garden (n) + egg (n) becomes garden egg, "garden" being used as an adjective, just like "flower" in "flower pot" functions as an adjective.

**Verbs:** Yoruba verbs are problematic because this is a part of speech which has generated a lot of controversies and whose definition is far from being conclusive. There are no such controversies on the status of English verbs. There are many types of Yoruba verbs, such as serial, splitting, echoing, nominal assimilating, particle selecting, report, impersonal, causative and symmetrical verbs. English verbs are not so classified. There are, however auxiliary verbs in both English and Yoruba.

**Adjective:** Yoruba adjectives present a lot of problems to Yoruba learners of English. The assertion that there are not Yoruba adjectives coupled with the unending controversy on the status of Yoruba verbs are daunting enough.



Students learning Yoruba and English are thus thrown into a vortex of confusion. English adjectives raise no such controversy. Four major areas of difficulty in Yoruba adjectives are being suggested as sources of errors in Yoruba - English studies. The first is that Yoruba has no comparative and superlative degrees similar to those in English Language. The Yoruba comparative and superlative marker is "ju" or "julo" which means surpass. English has "-er", "-est", "more" and "most" as markers. Yoruba learners of English who have not mastered English grammar often say "my mother tall pass your mother". The concept of "ju" or "julo" (surpass) is being transferred to English.

The second area is in word order of qualifying adjectives. In Yoruba, nouns precede adjectives while in English it is the adjective that precedes noun. English adjectives are difficult to order, though there are specific rules to be followed. The third area of difficulty is in the categorization of Yoruba adjectives as stative verbs. Words like "dudu" (black), "ga" (be tall), etc are regarded as adjectivisable verbs by some linguists, while others maintain that they are predicative adjectives (Awobuluyi, 1970). The consequence of this unsettled case is that Yoruba speakers of English tend to ellide "to be" before some English adjectives, hence they say "O poor" (it is poor)", Iwe na expensive" (the book is expensive), "ko" bad rara" (it is not bad at all). The words "poor", "bad" and "expensive" are used as though they are verbs. The use of the modern grammatical equivalent of "to be" is the Yoruba word "wa" as in "iwe" na wa expensive" (the book is expensive). The fourth area is in loan words. Yoruba speakers of English borrow English adjectives and use them as verbs. This is a case of the transfer of syntactic categories of Yoruba to English Syntactic categories. it can therefore be rightly said that English lexis and syntax differ from those of Yoruba because every language has its unique rules.

## **ENGLISH AND YORUBA PROVERBS**

In Yoruba discourse or in the ethnography of communication of the Yorubas it is a mark of wisdom and erudition to interlace or interlard one's utterances with proverbs. Proverbs enrich or enhance oracy. Proverbs are the exclusive preserve of the elders. The youth are however not prevented from the use of proverbs as long as their proverbs have the ceremonial apauge or what is called cultural apology that accompanies proverbs, such as "Toto, o' se bi owe" i.e. I crave your indulgence for speaking in proverbs, or "E fori ji mi" i.e. I beg of

pardon/please forgive me. The apology is well taken or accepted by the elders when they say, "wa pa omiran", meaning you will live to speak more proverbs. This is a well-wish. Culturally there is nothing similar to this procedure in the ethnography of speaking among the English. Although the introduction of proverbs into utterances may seem to driver a wedge into discourse, this habit has nonetheless become so ingrained that Yorubas practise it with relish. Yoruba proverbs reflect the aspirations, customs, belief, ideologies, philosophy and ethos of the people. Yoruba proverbs are of varying types. There are those that make eternal statement (omnitemporal), some are warnings, advice, admonition, ridicule, praises, etc, while some are generalisations. Proverbs of these types also abound in English. The problem here is that Yoruba translate and transliterate Yoruba literally into English, and this leads to syntactic and semantic muddle.

### **ENGLISH AND YORUBA IDIOMS**

Idioms exist in the two languages, and they share a lot of things in common. Nevertheless, idioms creat some problems of interpretation. Since an idiom is a form of expression that is peculiar to a language, it cannot be interpreted literally. There are certain linguistic constraints in the use of idioms. The first is that idioms cannot be split or reordered lexically. Secondly some idioms cannot be inflected for tense or number. We can say for instance, the politicians " played to the gallery" but we cannot say "they played to the galleries".

### **LINGUISTIC ADOPTION**

According to Garba (1979) no language in any society which has come in contact with any other society or societies is entirely pure. All such languages have adopted some loan words from other languages. A loan word taken over from one language into the vocabulary of another language. Loanwords are milestones or date-marks in the history of philology. Yoruba and English have been enriched linguistically; Yoruba has borrowed many words from English while English has done the same from Latin, French, Amerindian, Greek, etc. There are morphologically adapted or integrated borrowed words from English. In Yoruba morphology no syllable ends with consonant. English words which end with consonants and which are borrowed often go through the process called vowel epenthesis or vowel insertion as in "Ofisi" for office, "soosi" for church, and

"feremu" for frame. The reason is that Yoruba words have few instances of consonant clusters, and most Yoruba words end with a vowel. English loan words are therefore relexified in order that they conform with Yoruba morphological form. Other loan words are unintegrated; they are left intact as they are spelt and pronounced in the lending language. The consequence of the above phenomena is that Yorubas learning English have difficulties in spelling and pronunciation of borrowed words.

## **FINDINGS**

Analysis of English and Yoruba morphological systems has revealed that: there are similarities and differences between English and Yoruba morphological systems.

### **Differences:**

- a. Alphabets - there are 26 letters of the alphabet in English, while there are 25 in Yoruba.
- b. Consonant and vowel phonemes: - there are more consonant and vowel phonemes in English. There are no closing and centring diphthongs in Yoruba hence Yorubas are fond of diphthong monophthongization.
- c. Stress and Intonation:- Yoruba has no stress and intonational pattern. Yoruba is however a tonal language.
- d. Vowel Harmony:- Yoruba morphonological system does not allow consonant clusters, a vowel must always follow a consonant. Most Yoruba words begin with vowels and end with vowels. This phenomenon accounts for the reason for vowel epenthesis in English loanwords.
- e. Vowel reduction:- weakening of unstressed vowels to SCHWA /ə/ takes place in English only.
- f. Syllable structure: English allows syllables of  $C^3VC^4$  , while Yoruba allows CVCV or VCV.
- g. Inflectional morpheme:- Yoruba has no inflectional morphemes of the English types,
- h. Tenses: " English tenses are different from those in Yoruba. Past tense form has no marker in Yoruba or has no equivalent of English tense marker.

- i. Parts of Speech: English nouns, verbs and adjectives are significantly different from those in Yoruba. In Yoruba, adjective comes from the noun it qualifies; Yoruba adjectives are post-positive while they are proposed in English.
- j. Gender: Yoruba is a genderless language. English has gender e.g. "he", "she", "it".

### **Similarities:**

- a. Assimilation and Contraction. Both languages have these processes.
- b. Morphemes: There are free, bound and derivational morphemes in English and Yoruba.
- c. Synonymy and Antonymy: English and Yoruba have them.
- d. Idioms - these are never translated literally in the two languages.
- e. Proverbs: There are proverbs in the two languages.

It was found that the above differences constitute the major sources of errors in English. It has been noted that the higher the degree of similarity between English and Yoruba phonological and morphological systems, the easier it is for the speakers of Yoruba to learn English. New or strange phonemes cause considerable "difficulty in bilingual education. The ease or difficulty of learning phonological categories, experienced by Yorubas learning English can be attributed to (a) the competing phonemic categories of English and Yoruba, (b) the allophonic membership of the phonemic categories, and (c) the distributions of the categories within their respective systems. There are errors arising from interference, interlanguage phenomenon, imperfect mastery of first language (L1) before learning of a second language, and errors emanating from the linguistic differences between the two languages. The similarities have a facilitatory effect on learning because the systems in Yoruba can be transferred to English.

### **Implications for Language Teaching**

Synchronic contrastive analysis is a psycholinguistic exercise which all language teachers should endeavour to know. It is a comparative study of the present developmental stage of the two languages. To effectively teach any language to a non-native speaker the teacher himself must be a bilingual. He therefore needs to do the following;

- a. analysis of sound systems: Segmental and suprasegmental phonemes, stress, intonation, phonetic features and their variants.
- b. comparison of units: he should take up each phoneme of the two languages and check:
  - phonetically similar phonemes
  - phonemes and their allophones
  - morphemes and their allomorphs
  - whether the phonemes/morphemes and their variants are similar in both languages.
- c. Draw the vowel trapezium of the two languages using the IPA symbols.
- d. Compare syllable structure
- e. Construct minimal pairs
- f. Provide many illustrations (diagramatic) and examples in the area of form and meaning, word order, inflection, function words, parts of speech, tenses, cognate words, etc.
- g. Be a good model who displays no cultural biases or is ethnocentric.
- h. Emphathise transferrally, i.e. he should put himself in his students' situation and help them accordingly. Jeering at mispronunciation has a disastrous consequence on learning. Errors should be corrected immediately but with tact and decorum either by the teacher or the students.

## **CONCLUSION**

A teacher who has done a comparative study of English and Yoruba has a lot to gain. He knows the similarities and differences between the two languages. He also gets into grips with students' learning problems and has an insight into what constitutes an error and what is deviation from the norm. He understands the necessity for tact patience and accommodation in teaching. Such a teacher is then better prepared in terms of the best methods of teaching any language. Contrastive analysis of English and Yoruba is a good method. The use of minimal pairs for teaching pronunciation and spelling has a salutary effect on teaching.

Comparison of languages and cultures is very significant for these reasons:

- a. the need for the evaluation of language and culture contents of

- textbooks,
- b. the teacher has to prepare new teaching materials,
  - c. the necessity for supplementing inadequate materials and
  - d. for diagnosing difficulties arising from language variation or dialect differences. It is also significant for language testing purposes. Comparison exposes the teacher to diverse language testing techniques and enhances cultural understanding. It also helps in language research.

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