

# Vowel Harmony in the North-East Dialects of Yoruba

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## **Abstract**

*This paper presents the vowel harmony system in the North-East Yoruba dialect group. The vowel system in the dialect group follows the pattern in the standard Yoruba, and other dialect groups that include the North-West Yoruba, South-West Yoruba and the South-East Yoruba where an incomplete or partial vowel harmony is observed. However, the vowel harmony system in the dialect group under focus provides a major evidence not found in the other dialect groups mentioned to support the hypothesis that proto-Yoruba possibly operated a ten-vowel system, and possibly also operated a complete vowel harmony system as suggested in Adetugbo (1967), Capo (1983) and Abiodun and Sanusi (1999).*

## **1. Introduction**

According to Yoruba language scholars that include Adetugbo (1967), Oyelaran (1976), Akinkugbe (1978) and Awobuluyi (1998), the North-East dialects group comprises Ijumu, Owe, Yagba and Oworo. Our research work shows that the group also includes Bunu and Gbede. All the dialects in this group are found in Kogi State of Nigeria. The dialects share boundaries with languages such as ‘Ebira, Oko (Ogori), Bassa, Idoma Ahan, and Ayere Igede’.

Language scholars have pointed out the predominance of vowel harmony system, constrained by the tongue root movement, in African languages. Clements (1974) remarks that scholars have shown that standard Yoruba (SY) and other dialect groups show evidence of vowel harmony system. However, whereas the SY and other dialect groups except the central Yoruba, operate an incomplete or partial vowel harmony system, the central Yoruba, which comprises Akure, Ekiti, Ijesa and Ife dialects, operate a near-complete vowel harmony system with [a] being the only neutral vowel. Adetugbo (1967:160) remarks in this regard that:

...central Yoruba (CY) has an almost complete system of the restriction of vowels in their occurrence to sets, i.e. only tense vowels or lax vowels co-occur.

The dichotomy of incomplete versus complete or near-complete vowel harmony system is a result of the difference in the number of vowels in the dialects of Yoruba. Bamgbose (1967:269) as well makes this observation:

In some other dialects of Yoruba such as Ijesa, Ekiti and Akure, the vowel harmony... is extensive even to the point of a difference in vowel system between these dialects and SY.

Those dialects of the language that operate a seven-vowel (oral) system with four or five nasalized vowels operate a partial vowel harmony system with (i, u, a) operating as neutral vowels. On the other hand, those dialects that operate a nine-vowel (oral) system and six nasalized vowels operate as complete (or near-complete) vowel harmony system where [a] overlap as a neutral vowel. The seven and nine vowel system and their harmonic sets are illustrated below:

**1a Seven-Vowel System**

i	ũ <sup>u</sup>
e	o
eẽ	õo
aã	

**Set I**

i	ũ <sup>u</sup>
e	o
aã	

**Set II**

i	ũ <sup>u</sup>
eẽ	õo
aã	

**Nine-Vowel System**

i	ũu
iĩ	ĩu
e	o
e	õo
aã	

**Set I**

i	ũu
e	o
aã	

**Set II**

i	ũ <sup>u</sup>
e	õo
ãã	

The North-East Yoruba dialect group manifests a seven-vowel system and a partial vowel harmony system illustrated in (1a) above. One notes, however, that the nasalized ( $\tilde{e}$ ) does not occur in the dialect group. None of the dialects in this group operates a nine-vowel system, thus, one may rightly expect an incomplete vowel harmony system.

Although the North-East dialect group operates a similar vowel harmony system with the North-West, South-West and South-East dialect groups, it offers a set of examples that are not found in these other dialect groups. This set of examples, seems to provide further evidence for the hypothesis that Yoruba in its earliest form possibly operated a ten-vowel system and a complete vowel harmony system as put forward in Oyelaran (1973), Capo (1985), and Abiodun and Sanusi (1999).

One other point of interest in the vowel system of this dialect group is that it appears to debunk the hypothesis in Oyelaran (1973) to the effect that dialects of central Yoruba that manifest a nine-vowel system possibly borrowed the vowel system from neighboring languages such as Ebira, Ogori and some Edoid languages where a nine-vowel system is attested.

## **2. Vowel Co-occurrence Pattern in NE Yoruba**

Bamgbose's (1967:268) observation is quite instructive as far as co-occurrence pattern in those dialects of Yoruba that manifest a seven-vowel system (NE Yoruba inclusive) is concerned. He remarks thus:

...the Yoruba system is an 'incomplete form of vowel harmony'... this restricted vowel harmony system applies only to nouns of the shape VCV and CVCV(CVCV do not include loan words and nouns formed through compounding)... In nouns of  $V_1CV_2$  shape...  $V_1$  cannot be a nasalized vowel or u; e, o as  $V_1$  also exclude a and  $\tilde{a}$  as  $V_2$ ; and o as  $V_1$  also exclude u as  $V_2$  only the vowels i and a as  $V_1$  can be followed by any vowel.

The observation above is quite true of the NE Yoruba; the addition to it is that [o] as  $V_1$  does not only exclude [u] as  $V_2$ , it also excludes [i]. In the same vein, [e] as  $V_1$  does not allow [i], [u] as  $V_2$ . The co-occurrence restrictions noted above contradict what obtains in the standard Yoruba as the piece of data below clearly suggest.

<b>2a.</b>	<b>SY</b>	<b>NEY</b>	
	ẹbí	abí	‘relations’
	ẹbi	àbi	‘guilt’
	ẹrí	àrí	‘evidence’
	ẹyi	àyì	‘type of skin disease’
	ẹṣĩ	aṣì	‘horse’
	ẹṅĩ	àṅĩ	‘back’
	ẹrĩ	àrĩ	‘laughter’
	ẹnì	anĩ	‘mat’
<b>b.</b>	<b>SY</b>	<b>NEY</b>	
	ẹrù	arù	‘load/baggage’
	ẹrú	arú	‘slave’
	ẹrù	àrù	‘fear’
	ẹwù	awu	‘gown/cloth’
	ẹtù	atù	‘guinea fowl’
	ẹrú	àrú	‘wooden handle for a hoe’
	ẹṅũ	arũ	‘mouth’
	ẹkũ	akũ	‘weeping’
	ẹgũ	àgũ	‘thorn’

Note the co-occurrence of [ẹ] with [I, u, ù, ì] in the standard dialect but [a] with [I, u, ì, ù] in the NEY. A general co-occurrence pattern in the dialect group is reflected in the data below.

	i	u	e	o	ẹ	ọ	a	ĩ	ũ	ã	õ
i	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
e	√	√	√	√	x	x	x	√	√	x	x
ẹ	x	x	x	x	√	√	√	?	√	√	√
a	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
o	√	√	√	√	x	x	x	√	√	x	x
ọ	x	x	x	x	√	√	√	?	?	√	√

### Affix Harmony

In the CY where vowel harmony constraint is very robust, prefixes and infixes harmonize with the feature [± ATR] of the vowel(s) of the root/stem

to which they are attached. Abiodun and Sanusi (1999) illustrate this fact by showing, for instance, that the genitive marker has two forms *oli/ọli*, one of the negative markers alternates between *ke/ke*, the singular pronouns in subject position have alternative forms *me/me*; *wo/wo*; *ó/ó*, and the infix realized as *kí* in the standard dialect alternates between *kí/kí*.

Apart from the alternative forms of prefixes, clitics and infixes in the CY, one notes relics of the vowel harmony constraint in those dialects with seven oral vowels. For instance in the Ibadan dialect, the third person singular pronoun alternates between *o/ọ*

The NEY dialect group does not reflect any form of vowel harmony constraint in affixation. Affixes and clitics do not show alternation to reflect the type of harmony constraint found in the CY or the relics of it as shown in some dialects.

The summary of our observation as far as the vowel harmony constraint in NEY is concerned is that the (-ATR) vowels as  $V_1$  in a VCV structure do not readily harmonize with the (+ATR) vowels and vice versa. Even where there is evidence of a co-occurrence, the data is always very scanty, as in,

ẹCĩ  
ọCĩ  
ọCũ

### General Discussion

Two issues arising from the presentation so far are attended to in this section. The first one is the claim advanced in Oyelaran (1973) to the effect that dialects of Yoruba that manifest a nine-vowel system, and a near-complete vowel harmony system developed the system through borrowing from languages that are close to them. The second contained in Capo (1985), Akinkugbe (1978) and Abiodun and Sanusi (1998) that proto-Yoruba operates a ten-vowel system.

Oyelaran (1973), possibly in trying to justify Stewart's (1983:33) position that,

...it is certainly wrong to exclude the possibility that some Kwa languages might some day be shown to have acquired Cross Height Vowel Harmony...

argues that “the nine-vowel dialects are mainly eastern dialects which have maintained contact with Edoid languages and Ebira...”, and as such the CY must have borrowed the feature from those languages. Abiodun and Sanusi (1999) agree with Stewart that a borrowing of Cross Height Vowel Harmony is not impossible. They however have reservations about its actual manifestation. They claim that

This hypothesis remains a matter of conjecture because no natural language with an elaborate vowel harmony system as displayed in CY has been shown to acquire the system through borrowing.

The finding in this research clearly leads one to doubt the validity of the borrowing hypothesis advanced in Oyelaran (1973) with regard to CY, or any dialect of Yoruba for that matter. The NEY dialect group still has a very close contact with Ebira, Ogori, Idoma and Igede, languages that operate a nine-vowel system with elaborate or near-complete vowel harmony system (see Ihionu (1985) on Ebira, Chumbow (1982) on Ogori, Armstrong (1973) on Idoma and Abiodun and Sanusi (1999) on Igede). Despite the contact that possibly spans a millennium between the NEY and these languages, not even one of the dialect group has borrowed the vowel harmony system. This observation casts further doubt on the hypothesis put forward in Oyelaran (1973).

On the basis of the robust vowel harmony system in the CY dialects group (Ekiti, and Ijesa), and further on the realization of the cognates shown below, Abiodun and Sanusi (1998) argues for a ten-vowel system in proto-Yoruba. The cognates are:

<b>Standard Yoruba</b>	<b>Ekiti Dialect</b>	
èrí	erí	‘testimony’
èbí	ebí	‘relatives’
èrù	erù	‘load’
ètì	eti	‘tough task’
èbi	èbi	‘guilt’
èbìtì	èbìtì	‘trap’
ètu	etu	‘antelope’
èrú	erú	‘slave’
èbùrú	èbùrú	‘short-cut’

Oyelaran (1973), considering the forms from the standard Yoruba only, and strongly maintaining the seven-vowel system for proto-Yoruba argues that the [ɛ] in the initial position (of the items in standard Yoruba) can be traced to [a] that has undergone raising in the environment of a high vowel, e.g.

àrí → èrí  
 abí → ɛbí  
 atu → ɛtu

Abiodun and Sanusi (1999), comparing the forms in the standard dialect with the forms in Ekiti dialect argue that rather than for the [ɛ] in the initial position in the standard dialect be traced to the low vowel which is [-ATR], it should be traced to a [+ATR] low vowel which must have been the counterpart of the [-ATR] vowel in the proto-form. They argued that /a/ merged with /ɛ/ in the standard dialect.

The NEY dialect group provides further evidence that merger actually occurred in the historical development of Yoruba. Consider the cognates below:

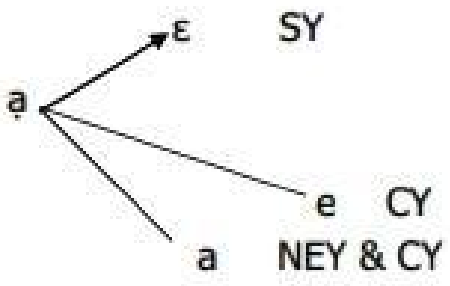
Standard Yoruba	Ekiti Dialect	NEY	
ɛbí	ebí	abí	‘relatives’
èbi	èbi	àbi	‘guilt’
èrí	èrí	àrí	‘testimony’
èyí	èyí	àyí	‘back’
ení	ení	aní	‘mat’
erú	erú	arú	‘slave’
èrù	èrù	àrù	‘fear’
èwù	èwù	àwù	‘gown/cloth’
erù	erù	arù	‘load’
ekú	ekú	akũ	‘weeping’
ègú	ègú	àgú	‘thorn’

Note the correspondent set ɛ: e: a in the data. /ɛ/ occurs in the initial position in the standard Yoruba, /e/ occurs in this position in the Ekiti dialect, and /a/ in this same position in NEY. It is important to notice that the second vowel (i.e. V<sub>2</sub>) is any of the following [i u ɪ ũ].

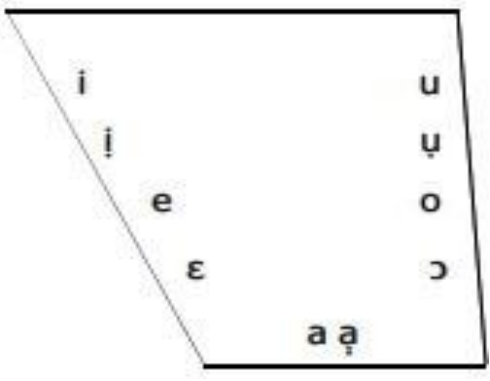
Our research shows that the forms in the NEY shown above are found in dialects other than the NEY. Findings show that the forms are attested in

the Ekiti dialect spoken in Isan Ekiti in Ekiti State, Obbo-Ayegunle and Idofin in Kwara State (Obbo-Ayegunle and Idofin are part of Ekiti of Kwara State). Apart from Ekiti dialect, the forms are also manifested in the Ọrọ dialect spoken in Oro-Ago, Ọla, and Ọyátẹ̀, all in the Irepodun Local Government Area of Kwara State. All the dialects mentioned operate a seven-vowel system like the NEY.

Our contention here is that the correspondence set presented above, i.e. ε:e:a, clearly suggests that vowel merger occurred in the historical development of Yoruba. The present paper supports the position of Abiodun and Sanusi (1999) that it is [a], the tenth vowel, which has today disappeared in all the dialects of Yoruba, that merged with other vowels. The merger is however not in one direction as could be observed in the diagram below:



We need to remind readers of our earlier observation based on the findings of scholars that some dialects of Yoruba operate a nine-vowel system where *ì* and *ù* are attested. These vowels according to Capo (1985) and Abiodun and Sanusi (1999) have also merged with other vowels in those dialects that operate a seven-vowel system. In the light of the above, the ten-vowel system of proto Yoruba is presented below:





The ten vowels form two harmonic sets shown below:

Set I [+ ATR]	Set II (- ATR)
i      u	i      ɥ
e      o	ɛ      ɔ
a	a

The hypothesis that vowel merger reduced the ten-vowel system to seven-vowel system in NEY and other dialect groups is not in any way strange or novel. Working on Ijoid languages, Williamson (1993) notes that the tenth vowel merged with other vowels in some Ijoid languages. Elugbe (1982) makes a similar observation in the Edoid languages; some of the languages according to Elugbe (1982) have developed to a seven – vowel system with [i ɥ ɔ] having merged with other vowels, while others developed to a nine-vowel system with only [a] having merged with other vowels. Abiodun (2001) claims that in Ukaan there is an on-going merger of [i u] with other vowels, while [a] which is already lost have merged with other vowels. Capo (1982), working on Gbe shows that some of the vowels, in the proto-form of the language have merged with other vowel. Pieces of evidence from different languages point to the apparent fact that vowel merger leading to a reduced vowel system appears more natural than vowel increment arising from borrowing as advanced in Stewart (1978), and argued for in the case of proto-Yoruboid in Oyelaran (1973).

### **Conclusion**

This paper has revealed that the vowel system in the NEY, all the dialects in the dialect group operate a seven-vowel system with a partial vowel harmony system. The paper has also contributed to the argument relating to the number of vowels in proto-Yoruba. A piece of data found in the dialect group leads us to join scholars that claim that the proto-form of the language operated a ten-vowel system that has been reduced through vowel merger.

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