

A Tentative Phonological Sketch of Olùkùmi

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Abstract

This paper presents a tentative descriptive analysis of the phonological sketch of Olùkùmi, a language spoken in some parts of Delta State, Nigeria. In this study we examine the variety spoken in Ugboodu which has about 14,000 speakers. The data here come from the interview with the youths and elderly in Ugboodu community who were chosen randomly including the king of the town. With the aid of the Kwasu 500 wordlist, we examine the consonant sounds, vowel systems, tones and the peculiarities of some of these sounds in the language. We equally examine the syllable structure and some other phonological features such as: vowel harmony and nasalization. The findings amongst others show that Olùkùmi is a tonal language as tone plays a significant role both lexically and syntactically in the language. Also, it attests to an open syllable structure and exhibits the complete form of vowel harmony.

1.0 Introduction

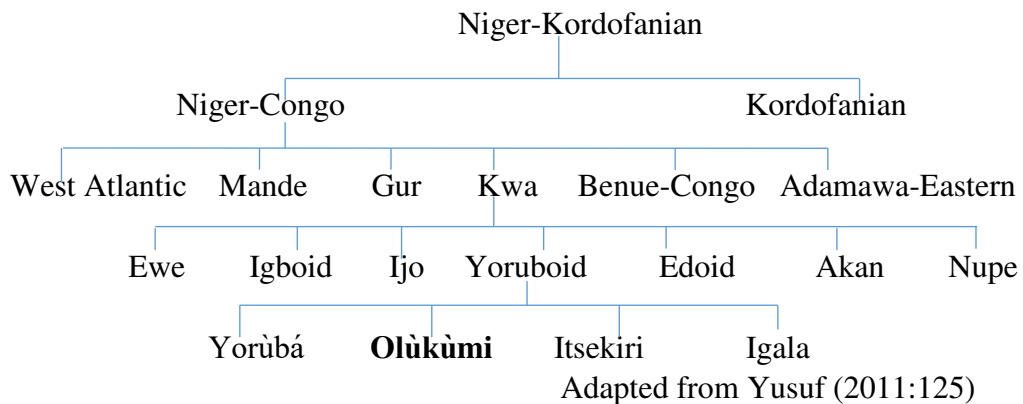
Olùkùmi is the language of the Odiani Clan in Aniocha North Local Government Area of Delta state. This clan comprises of seven communities namely; Ugboodu, Ukwu-Nzu, Ugbooba, Ubulubu, Ogodor, Idumogo and Anioma. ‘Olùkù’ in some dialects of Yorùbá such as Òwò, Èkìtì, some Àkókó dialects and so on, is called ‘bosom friend’. The principal speakers of the language are Ugboodu and Ukwu-Nzu. The other five communities are settlers from either Ugboodu or (and) Ukwu-Nzu. The language and its speakers are both called Olùkùmi by the speakers themselves and outsiders. The language is assumed to be closely related to Yorùbá language spoken in the South Western part of Nigeria. In fact, the speakers acknowledge the fact that they speak a language that has a close resemblance with Yorùbá language but do not accept being referred to as Yorùbá speakers.

According to oral narration, these two principal speakers migrated from Yorùbá-land. Ugboodu settlers migrated from Òwò/Àkókó axis in the present Òndó state between 9th and 11th century AD in search of greener pastures, to settle down in Benin during the

reign of Ogiso. Due to the fear of general insecurity of their lives, they later moved to Ewohinmi; an Esan speaking community before they finally got to their present place of abode. The Ukwu-Nzu are said to have migrated directly from Ilé-Ifè with their leader known as Ogbe in the early part of the 12th century. They also had a stopover at Benin before they finally settled in their present place of domicile. It is observed that the Olùkùmi spoken in Ukwu-Nzu has more Igbo infusion compared to the Ugbodu variant. For precision and easy understanding of the study area, Ugbodu community will be our case study. Hence, our sample is drawn from there.

This is the first attempt at fully describing the phonology of Olùkùmi to the knowledge of the researchers. What we have hitherto was a comparative analysis with other related languages by Arokoyo (2012), and about two undergraduate students' projects. About 14,000 people are mother-tongue speakers of the Olùkùmi language and most of them, according to the Olózá (i.e ruler) of the kingdom, live a closely knitted communal life.

The speech form of this study, Olùkùmi, is a closely related language to Yorùbá based on the empirical evidence gathered in the course of the investigation. Both the speakers and the language are referred to as Olùkùmi. The language belongs to the Yoruboid group in the Benue Congo family of Niger-Congo phylum.



2.0 The Sound System of Olùkùmi

2.1 Consonant Sounds

According to Crystal (1997), consonants in phonetics are sounds made by a closure or narrowing in the vocal tract so that the airflow is either completely blocked or so restricted that audible friction is produced; while in phonology, they are those units which function at the margins of syllables, either singly or in clusters. Olùkùmi has twenty-three distinct consonant sounds. The consonant sounds chart is presented in table 1 below:

Table 1: Olùkùmi Consonant Chart

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Labio-velar	Labialized velar	Glottal
Plosive	b		t d			k g	kp gb	k ^w g ^w	
Fricative		F	s z	ʃ		ɣ			h
Affricate				tʃ dʒ					
Nasal	m		n						
Trill			r						
Lateral			l						
Approximant					j			W	

2.1.1 Distribution of the consonant sounds

The consonants can occur in different positions in a word which are word-initial position, word-medial position or inter-vocalic but do not occur at word final. The phonemic and orthographic data in (1) show how the consonants occur in the speech form.

1.	Word initial	Word medial
[b]	Voiced bilabial stop as in: /bì/ bì ‘vomit’	/ɔbè/ ɔbè ‘soup’
[t]	Voiceless alveolar stop as in: /tà/ tà ‘sell’	/itábà/ itábà ‘tobacco’
[d]	Voiced alveolar stop as in: /dó/ dó ‘dwell’	/èdúdú/ èdúdú ‘charcoal’
[k]	Voiceless velar stop as in: /kòkò/ kòkò ‘gather’	/ɔkó/ ɔkó ‘hoe’
[g]	Voiced velar stop as in: /gún/ gún ‘pound’	/àgùtǎ/ àgùtàn ‘sheep’
[kp]	Voiceless labial-velar stop as in: /kpékpéjɛ/ pépéyɛ ‘duck’	/èkpùkpù/ èpùpù ‘wall’
[gb]	Voiced labial-velar stop as in: /gbá/ gbá ‘tall’	/ògbòdògbò/ ògbòdògbò ‘thigh’
[f]	Voiceless labio-dental fricative as in: /fùè/ fùè ‘swell’	/ɔfò/ ɔfò ‘word’
[s]	Voiceless alveolar fricative as in: /se/ se ‘make’	/usu/ usu ‘yam’

[ʃ]	Voiceless palato-alveolar fricative	As in: /òʃĩ/ òʃìn ‘left’	/eʃi/ eʃi ‘horse’
[h]	Voiceless Glottal Fricative	as in: /há/ há ‘run’	/ɔhè/ ɔhè ‘leg’
[dʒ]	Voiced palato-alveolar affricate	as in:	/idʒĩ/ ijin ‘tree’
[m]	Bilabial nasal	as in: /ma/ ma ‘mould’	/àmùnàmúná/ àmùnàmúná ‘star’
[n]	Alveolar nasal	as in: /néwá/ néwá ‘get’	/uná/ uná ‘fire’
[l]	Alveolar lateral	as in: /lílá/ lílá ‘big’	/ɔlózà/ ɔlózà ‘king’
[r]	Alveolar trill	as in: /rà/ rà ‘buy’	/orókòṅ/ orókòṅ ‘knee’
[j]	Palatal approximant	as in: /jèwá/ yèwá ‘remember’	/èjìn/ èyìn ‘back’
[w]	Labial approximant	as in: /wíwo/ wíwo ‘heavy’	/iwí/ iwín ‘faeces’
[z]	Voiced alveolar fricative	as in: /zɛ/ zɛ ‘eat’	/ezĩ/ ezin ‘rain’
[ɣ]	Voiced velar fricative	as in: /ɛɣé/ ɛghé ‘egg’	eɣiyó/ eghighó ‘smoke’
[g ^w]	Voiced labialized velar plosive	as in: /g ^w è/ gwè ‘wash’	/g ^w ég ^w à/ gwégwà ‘bad’
[tʃ]	Voiceless palato-alveolar affricate	as in: /utʃĩ/ uchín ‘greet’	

It is observed that sounds such as [ʃ, dʒ, ɣ, tʃ] can only occur at word medial position, while others can occur both at word initial and medial positions.

2.2 Vowel Sounds

Phonetically, vowels are sounds articulated without a complete closure in the mouth or a degree of narrowing which will produce audible friction... Phonologically, they are units which function at the centre of syllables (Crystal 1997). Nine oral vowels and seven nasal vowels are attested in Olùkùmi. The vowel charts of the speech form are presented in table 2 and 3.

	front	central	back
high	i ɪ		u ʊ
mid-high	e		o
mid-low	ɛ		ɔ
low		a	

Table 2. Olùkùmi Oral Vowel Chart

	front	central	back
high	ĩ ã		ũ õ
mid-high			
mid-low	ẽ		õ
low		ã	

Table 3. Olùkùmi Nasal Vowel Chart

The data in (2) show the phonemic and orthographic distribution of oral vowel sounds occurring at word initial, medial or final position in Olùkùmi:

2.2.1 Vowel Distribution

2.2.1.1 Oral Vowels

2.	Word initial	word medial	word final
[i]	Closed Front High Unrounded Vowel		
	as in: /ita/ ita ‘pepper’	/erihã/ erihan ‘brother’	/ní/ ní ‘put on’
[e]	Half-closed Front Mid-high Unrounded Vowel		
	as in: /ezò/ ezò ‘snake’	/àbéké/ àbéké ‘knife’	/ulé/ ulé ‘house’
[ɛ]	Half-open Front Mid-low Unrounded Vowel		
	as in: /èkù/ èkù ‘door’	/ògèdè/ ògèdè ‘plantain’	/èzè/ èzè ‘blood’
[a]	Open Central Low Unrounded Vowel		
	as in: /ádá/ ádá ‘machete’	/àkákàrà/ àkákàrà ‘crab’	/azá/ azá ‘dog’
[u]	Closed Back High Rounded Vowel		
	as in: /usé/ usé ‘work’	/òkúta/ òkúta ‘stone’	/udehú/ udehú ‘hawk’
[o]	Half-closed Back Mid-high Rounded Vowel		
	as in: /olùkù/ olùkù ‘friend’	/orókú/ orókún ‘knee’	/àkpò/ àkpò ‘bag’
[ɔ]	Half-open Back Mid-low Rounded Vowel		
	as in: /orò/ orò ‘neck’	/ògbòdògbò/ ògbòdògbò ‘thigh’	/kò/ kò ‘refuse’
[ɪ]	Half-closed Front Unrounded Vowel		

- as in: /ɪfẽfẽ/ ifɛnfɛn ‘mosquito’
- [ɯ] Half-closed Back Rounded Vowel
 as in: /ɛfũrũrũ/ ɛfũrũrũ ‘wind’ /ákpú/ ákpú ‘cassava’

2.2.1.2 Nasal vowels

The distribution of nasal vowel sounds is illustrated in 3.

- | | | | | | | | |
|----|-----|----------------|---------|----------------|---------|--------|----------|
| 3. | [ĩ] | as in: /zĩ/ | zín | ‘steal’ | /erĩ/ | erin | ‘song’ |
| | [ẽ] | as in: /ɪfẽfẽ/ | ifɛnfɛn | ‘mosquito’ | /ɛmũrẽ/ | ɛmũrɛn | ‘lizard’ |
| | [ã] | as in: /ɛrã/ | ɛran | ‘meat’ | /egigã/ | egigan | ‘basket’ |
| | [õ] | as in: /hó/ | hõn | ‘roast’ | /ɔdó/ | ɔdõn | ‘year’ |
| | [ũ] | as in: /òkũkũ/ | òkũkũn | ‘darkness’ | /urũ/ | urun | ‘thing’ |
| | [ĩ] | as in: /nĩnĩ/ | nũnũn | ‘being strong’ | | | |
| | [ũ] | as in: /irũmũ/ | irũnmũn | ‘moustache’ | | | |

It is observed that Olùkùmi nasal vowels occur at both word medial and final as shown. It can occur at the final position alone or at both medial and final positions in a word. No evidence of medial occurrence alone.

A close observation of the data provided so far, reveals that, to a very large extent, nouns in Olùkùmi begin with vowel sounds, while verbs and adjectives begin with consonant sounds. The language also begins word with vowel u and high tone syllable.

3.0 Some Phonological Features

3.1 The Tonal System of Olùkùmi

Olùkùmi is a tone language just like many African languages and attests the two types of tone; registered and contour tones because segments can be uttered at different relative pitches that result in different meanings. Olùkùmi has three level tones, high, mid and low and there is no restriction on how the tones co-occur. These are:

High – [˥] orthographically presented by an acute accent

Mid – [˨˨] generally left unmarked, but if necessary, a macron is used and

Low – [˩] presented by a grave accent

The tones are exemplified in lexemes in monosyllabic, disyllabic and polysyllabic words below:

4. Tone disparities;
- Low tone (L)
- | | | | |
|-----|------|---------|---|
| i. | bì | ‘vomit’ | L |
| ii. | gwẹ̀ | ‘wash’ | L |

iii.	ùgà	‘room’	LL
iv.	ẹlà	‘cow’	LL
v.	òròmẹ	‘hole’	LLL
vi.	ògbòdògbò	‘thigh’	LLLL
Mid tone (M)			
i.	zẹ	‘eat’	M
ii.	bi	‘ask’	M
iii.	ọma	‘child’	MM
iv.	ẹza	‘fish’	MM
v.	ogungun	‘bone’	MMM
vi.	ifẹfẹn	‘mosquito’	MMM
High tone (H)			
i.	yú	‘go’	H
ii.	dẹn	‘fry’	H
iii.	ádá	‘cutlass’	HH
iv.	ílá	‘okra’	HH
v.	óghóhó	‘horn’	HHH
vi.	gwélé	‘follow’	HH
Mixed tone			
i.	òwú	‘cotton’	LH
ii.	usẹ	‘work’	MH
iii.	dánghò	‘forget’	HL
iv.	ikẹkẹ	‘arrow’	MLH
v.	òbúkọ	‘goat’	LHM
vi.	átálawọ	‘palm’	LHMH

Lexical importance of tone is exemplified in 5.

5.	i.	ogungun	‘bone’	ògùngùn	‘medicine’
	ii.	ugbó	‘forest’	ùgbò	‘hole’
	iii.	alẹ	‘night’	alẹ	‘ground’
	iv.	họn	‘cry’	họn	‘roast’
	v.	bì	‘vomit’	bi	‘ask’

The difference in the above homograph words which could result in surface ambiguity has been greatly solved by assigning tones appropriately.

According to Oyebade (2011), the high tone has a variant that we may call ‘rising tone, the other gliding tone is the falling tone when it occurs after a high tone. The rising

tone is represented by a caron [ˇ], and circumflex [^] is used for the falling tone. However, falling tone is more attested in Olùkùmi compare to rising tone as evident in examples 6.

6. i. ìsâwèwè → ìsààwèwè ‘groundnut’
 ii. èfùrù → èfúùrù ‘breeze’
 iii. nẹ → nẹ̀ ‘the’

Tone also plays a vital role in Olùkùmi syntactic constructions. For instance it can turn a second person plural pronoun (2pl) to a third person plural pronoun (3pl) as given in (7) or change a declarative sentence to a question construction as exemplified in (8)

7. a. Àwan á yú ọ̀zà ni.
 2pl FUT go market be
 ‘You (pl) will go to the market.’
 b. Àwán á yú ọ̀zà ni.
 3pl FUT go market be
 ‘They will go to the market.’
 8. a. Olú á ra asọ ni.
 Olu FUT buy cloth be
 ‘Olu will buy cloth.’
 b. Olú á ra asọ ní.
 Olu FUT buy cloth QM
 ‘Will Olu buy cloth?’

The high tone on the second syllable of the first word in (7b.) construction, changes the person from 2pl to 3pl. Also the high tone on the clause final word in (8b) turns the declarative sentence in (a) to a polar question.

3.2 Syllable Structure

Olùkùmi attests to an open syllable system because the language does not allow consonant final in a word or consonant cluster within a word. The three syllable structures identified are vowel only (V), consonant and vowel (CV/CVV) and syllabic nasal (N). Examples are given below;

9. i. ó ‘he/she’
 V
 ii. ẹ-nẹ ‘person’
 V-CV
 iii. báà ni ‘yes’
 CVV CV
 iv. ń-wá ‘tongue’
 N-CV

- v. ñ-kà-tà ‘basket’
 N-CV-CV

4.0 Some Phonological Processes

The phonological changes that can occur in the realisation of an utterance in a given speech form is referred to as phonological processes. In this paper, we shall restrict ourselves to nasalization and vowel harmony.

4.1 Nasalization

Nasalization is one of the phonological features attested in natural languages. According to Abiodun (2011:52) an oral phoneme may acquire nasality and thereby become nasalized in the environment of nasal segment. In Olùkùmi vowel becomes nasalised when preceded by a nasal consonant. Examples are given in 4.

10. i. /omi/ → /omĩ/ ‘water’
 ii. /uná/ → /unǎ/ ‘fire’
 iii. /nwú/ → /ɲwũ/ ‘give’
 iv. /ení/ → /ɛní/ ‘mat’
 v. /imó/ → /imǒ/ ‘nose’

The process in the data above is captured in the rule below:

$$11. \quad V \xrightarrow{\quad C \quad} [+nasal]/ [+nasal] _$$

4.2 Vowel Harmony

Owolabi (1989:41) defines vowel harmony as an example of co-occurrence restriction among vowels such that all vowels that co-occur in a defined domain share one or more phonetic features in common. For instance, vowels harmonize on the basis of tongue root position in Ewe (Clement 1974), Ogori (Chumbow 1982) and Igede (Abiodun 1986) to mention but a few. Vowel harmony systems fall into two categories: full or complete and partial or incomplete systems (Abiodun 2011:62). Olùkùmi exhibits the complete form of vowel harmony. The nine vowels in Olùkùmi operate in the harmonic set below:

Set A		Set B	
i	u	ɪ	ʊ
e	o	ɛ	ɔ
a		a	

It is observed from the sets above that /a/ is a neutral vowel in the language as it can co-occur with vowels of both sets. The examples from harmonic set A (+ATR) and harmonic set B (-ATR) will help to explain the vowel harmony in the language:

12.	Harmonic set A	Harmonic set B
	i. /ezò/ ‘snake’	i. /ákpù/ ‘cassava’
	ii. /uri/ ‘rope’	ii. /òhè/ ‘leg’
	iii. /fùè/ ‘swell’	iii. /èfù̀̀r̀̀/ ‘wind’
	iv. /fifù/ ‘white’	iv. /tǽǽ/ ‘mosquito’

5.0 Conclusion

We have shown in this paper, the descriptive analysis of the phonological properties of Olùkùmi; a closely related language to Yorùbá. The study presents the sound system and the distribution of such attested sounds in the language. It shows that the language has twenty-three distinct consonant sounds, nine oral vowels and seven nasal vowels. It is observed that four of the consonant sounds [ʃ, ɖʒ, ɣ, ʈ] can only occur at word medial position, while others can occur both at word initial and medial positions. It also reveals that nasal vowels do not begin words in the language while oral can occupy word initial, medial and final positions. A close observation of the data indicate that to a very large extent, nouns in Olùkùmi begin with vowel sounds, while verbs and adjectives begin with consonant sounds. The language is a tonal language as tone plays a pivot role both lexically and syntactically in its structures. Furthermore, the study shows that Olùkùmi attests to an open syllable structure and exhibits the complete form of vowel harmony.

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