The Phonological Resolution of Low Tone Sequences in Ọ̀mùọ̀-Òkè Dialect of Yorùbá

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1. Introduction

This squib explores an intriguing tonal phenomenon in the Ọ̀mùọ̀-Òkè dialect of Yoruba, focusing on the resolution of low tone sequences in subject-verb constructions. While Standard Yoruba exhibits tonal alternations where a low-tone verb becomes mid before a direct object nouns (Ajiboye et al., 2011), Ọ̀mùọ̀-Òkè extends this tonal shift beyond transitive constructions. Specifically, a low-tone verb must raise to mid if preceded by another low-tone element, even when used intransitively. This squib highlights this phenomenon and considers its implications for the Obligatory Contour Principle (OCP) and the broader tonal system of Yoruba.

2. Tone Inventory and Restrictions in Ọ̀mùọ̀-Òkè

The Ọ̀mùọ̀-Òkè dialect maintains a three-way level tone contrast—low (L), mid (M), and high (H)—alongside two non-contrastive gliding tones, falling and rising. A key restriction within the dialect prohibits a low-tone verb from directly following another low-tone element within a simple clause. When such a sequence occurs, an additional syllable emerges after the verb, copying its vowel quality. This newly inserted syllable bears the original low tone of the verb, while the verb itself is assigned a default mid tone at the surface representation (Yip, 2002).

This tonal alternation aligns with the Obligatory Contour Principle (OCP), which prohibits adjacent identical tones within a given domain (Leben, 1973). The low-tone subject and the low-tone verb, therefore, cannot co-occur without modification, leading to the insertion of a compensatory syllable to maintain phonological well-formedness.

3. The Tonal Alternation: Data and Analysis

In Ọ̀mùọ̀-Òkè, the tonal alternation applies not only to transitive constructions but also to intransitive verbs, distinguishing it from Standard Yoruba. However, this analysis is not to compare this dialect with standard Yoruba but suffice to say that standard Yoruba has a case of low raising on transitive verbs (Ajiboye et al. 2011). Consider the tonal alternation patterns of the dialect in the subsequent subsections.

3.1. Low-tone verbs undergo tonal adjustment, surfacing as mid-tone in output

The verbs' tonal inputs are unacceptable at the output due to OCP violation. The violation is resolved through insertion of the exact copy of the verb at the clause final position while assuming the original low tone of the verb. The verb defaults to a mid-tone at the output.

Subject pronouns are monosyllabic and bear a low tone at the underlying level. They surface faithfully with a low tone, as shown in (1a–d). In contrast, the following verb with an underlying low tone surfaces with a mid-tone to satisfy the Obligatory Contour Principle (OCP) requirements. This tonal adjustment also triggers the insertion of an additional syllable to the right, preserving the original low tone of the verb. I do not think the rightward low tone syllable is an object pronoun. We would see the case of an object pronoun in section 3.2.

In example (e), where the nominal subject ends with a low tone, the construction behaves exactly like the case with pronouns. In (f–g), however, when the subject is a noun ending in a mid or high tone at the underlying level, it surfaces with a high tone.

Data 1.

a. /wɔ̀ gbà/ → [wɔ̀ gba à] 'You accepted'
   You(sg) accept
   L L → L M L

b. /ì̃ tà/ → [ì̃ ta à] 'You sold'
   You(pl) sell
   L L → L M L

c. /ɔ̃̀ sè/ → [ɔ̃̀ se è] 'They cooked'
   They cook
   L L → L M L

d. /mɔ̀ sṹ/ → [mɔ̀ sũ ṹ] 'I slept'
   I sleep
   L L → L M L

e. /ajɔ̀ rì̃/ → [ajɔ̀ rĩ ì̃] 'Ayo walked
   'Ayo walk'
   …L L → …H M L

f. /ale wɛ̀/ → [alé wɛ̀] 'Ale bathed
   'Ale bathe'
   …M L → …H L

g. /Adé fɔ̀ / → [Adé fɔ̀] 'Ade washed'
Ade wash
…H L → …H L

3.2. Contrast with transitive constructions

The tonal pattern differs when an actual direct object pronoun is present, distinguishing it from the OCP-driven repair seen in (1) (Pulleyblank, 1986). In data 2 below, the third person singular object pronoun has no underlying segments unlike other object pronouns in the dialect. However, all object pronouns bear the same tonal pattern. More importantly, the subject pronouns lose their underlying low tone, surfacing as mid at the output so as not to violate the OCP requirement that forbids the adjacency of identical tone between the subject pronoun and the following verb as demonstrated in data (2a-c). The surface high tone that appears on the final syllable of the noun in (d-e) may be an effect of a High Tone Syllable (HTS)[1] situated between a subject noun and the verb that immediately follows.

Data 2.

a. /wɔ̀   gbà (+3rd +Sg +Obj)/ → [wɔ gbà á] 'You got it right'
You(sg) get it/him/her
L L(H)   → M L H

b. /ɪ̀   tà   (+3rd +Sg +Obj)/ → [ɪ̃ tà á] 'You sold it'
You(pl) sell it/him/her
L L(H)   → M L H

c. /ɔ̃̀   sè   (+3rd +Sg +Obj)/ → [ɔ̃ sè é] 'They cooked it'
They cook it/him/her.
L L(H)   → M L H

d. /ajɔ̀ rì̀   (+3rd +Sg +Obj / → [ajɔ́ rì̀ ɪ́] 'Ayo walked it'
Ayo walk it/him/her
…L L(H)   → …M L H

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[1] Bámgbósé (1967, p. 35) refers to HTS as a "Subject-Predicate Junction Marker," whereas Adewǫlé (1998, pp. 95–96) considers it a clitic. Courtenay (1968, pp. 71–74) likewise offers a differing view. In contrast, researchers such as Awóbùlúyì (1975, 1978, 1992, 2001), Olumuyiwa (2008, 2012), and Oshodi (2011) argue that the HTS serves as a marker of past or present tense. Dechaine (1993, pp. 84, 483) identifies it as an agreement marker, while Bisang and Sonaiya (1999, p. 1) describe it as "an operator that actualizes or validates the relationship between a predicate and a subject within a state of affairs." More recently, Ibikunle and Orodiran (forthcoming) propose that the HTS is best understood as a high tone morpheme marking non-future tense in the language.

e. /ale wὲ   (+3ʳᵈ +Sg +Obj)   →   [alé wὲ έ] 'Ale bathed it'
   Ale bathe it/him/her
   …M L(H)   →   …M L H

f. /Adé fɔ̀   (+3ʳᵈ +Sg +Obj)/   →   [Adé fɔ̀ ɔ́] 'Ade washed it'
   Adé wash   it/him/her
   …H L(H)   →   …H L H

4. Theoretical Implications and Unresolved Questions

The Òmùò-Òkè data presents a compelling case of a morphophonological repair strategy driven by the OCP. The emergence of an additional syllable suggests an underlying pressure to maintain tonal distinction, akin to hiatus resolution strategies observed in other Yoruba dialects (Orie, 2001). However, a key puzzle remains: what is the status of the inserted syllable at the clause final position in intransitive constructions? Unlike a true object pronoun, it lacks referential meaning, yet it consistently surfaces to preserve phonological well-formedness.

Future research should investigate whether this insertion is a purely phonological epenthetic strategy or if it bears any morphosyntactic function (Goldsmith, 1976). Additionally, the interaction of this phenomenon with other tonal alternations in the dialect warrants further study.

5. Conclusion

This study sheds light on a previously undocumented tonal alternation in Òmùò-Òkè dialect of Yoruba, expanding our understanding of low-tone verb behavior across dialects. The pattern demonstrates that tonal processes in Yoruba are not merely syntactically governed but also heavily influenced by phonological constraints such as the OCP.

As we celebrate Douglas' invaluable contributions to the field of linguistics, this squib serves as a testament to the richness of tonal variation in African languages and the ever-evolving nature of phonological theory.

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