THE RELIGIOUS DIVIDE IN THE YORUBA TERMINOLOGY FOR GOD: A LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper has addressed the issue of the reflection of religious affiliation in the use of language. It specifically set out to ascertain whether the use any of the Ọlọ́run/ Ọlọ́hun *variant, in reference to 'God' has any religious connotation. In addition it sought to find out which of the variants correctly serves as the underlying form of the reduced form '*Ọlọ́un'. *The paper adopted a two-pronged methodological approach, first, through a phonological analysis of consonant deletion in Yoruba, and secondly, through a questionnaire based data collection. The phonological analysis focused specifically on the possibility of the deletion of [r] and [h] in Yoruba. The linguistic analysis showed that the reduced form could not have been derived from the variant with [r] but from that with [h]. The analysis from the results from the questionnaire showed that though the* Ọlọ́run *variant is predominant in the language community, the Muslim origin of the* Ọlọ́hun *variant is not in doubt. The study found that Christians and Muslims use the reduced variant without regard to its decidedly Muslim origin. The paper concluded by observing that linguistics and language use are veritable instruments of breaking down the barriers of religious divide.*

Introduction

The Yoruba language community is, within the larger Nigerian context, remarkable for peaceful coexistence in religious pluralism. The Yoruba society consists of a fluid mixture of Christians, Muslims and what today is known as Afrelists (adherents of what was formerly known as African traditional religion)[1]. It is even said that, in an average Yoruba extended family, there is a Christian, there is a Muslim and even Afrelists.

The Yoruba society is the home of religious tolerance in Nigeria, a place where violent religious confrontations have found hard to penetrate. This is not to say that the Yoruba society is free from religious

confrontations. The point simply is that, unlike certain other parts of Nigeria, the religious struggle is waged in the Yoruba society largely at the ideational level, rather than at the brutish level. One aspect of that religious struggle at the ideational level is the concern of this paper, namely the identifiable religious divide in the speech patterns of Yoruba Christians and Muslims. When you hear

'A dúpẹ́ f'Ọlọ́run'.   'We thank God'.
'Áámí' 'Amen'

you know you are listening to a Muslim.
When you hear

'A dúpẹ́ l'ọ́wọ́ Ọlọ́run'. 'We thank God'.
'   Ààmí' 'Amen'

you know you are listening to a Christian.
For the purpose of this paper, we ignore the long list of examples of code mixing, which particularly set the speech of Yoruba muslims apart, as, for example, in the following:

Wọ́n yan nọ́fílà. ' They offer optional (naflat) prayers'.
Ó yọ sàká.   'He gave alms'.
Ó lọọ kí áṣámú. 'He went to offer tarawiyy prayers'.[2]

What has set this study in motion is the quite interesting observation that there seems to be a religious linguistic divide in rendering the full form of the Yoruba word for 'God'. We see in business names and in witticisms on trucks the variant use of the word for 'God' as follows:

'Mo bá Ọlọ́run dúró'.   'I stand with God' (Christian).
'Mo bá Ọlọ́hun dúró'.   'I stand with God' (Muslim).
'Ọlọ́run kò ṣebi'.   'God does no evil' (Christian).
'Ọlọ́hun kò ṣebi'.   'God does no evil' (Muslim).

Given the Christian background of the author and given the fact that Yoruba is predominantly written with the ''Ọlọ́run' variant in educational and academic literature, the first reaction was to see in the 'Ọlọ́hun' variant an effect of marginal literacy. However, being confronted with more examples of this 'Ọlọ́hun' variant one is forced to ask which variant is actually the underlying form. Both Christian and Muslim speakers of Yoruba indiscriminately use the reduced form ''Ọlọ́un', the question is: which variant has undergone consonant deletion, that is, which consonant has been deleted /r/ or /h/? In other words, did the reduced form 'Ọlọ́un' derive from 'Ọlọ́run' or from 'Ọlọ́hun', we want to explore the possibility of linguistics providing an answer to this historical question. In

addition, we want to find out whether this 'Ọlọ́run / Ọlọ́hun divide is religiously significant. This sociolinguistic question was pursued through a questionnaire administered among various speakers of Yoruba.

In order to put the point at issue in its proper linguistic perspective, the paper first presents a linguistic basis for the discussion of the results of the questionnaire. The paper first discusses aspects of the linguistics of consonant deletion in Yoruba, making some reference to the historical linguistic perspective.

Methodology

Attempt was made to establish an empirical basis for an assertion on the distribution of the variant forms through a questionnaire. The questionnaire was made as succinct and as simple as possible. It specifically sought to determine whether the use of the variant forms for 'God' correlates with parameters such as dialects spoken, age, sex, and, most importantly, religion.

The questionnaire was administered among many categories of people within the mini-campus of the University of Ilorin. Some respondents were also found at the Queen Elizabeth School, Ilorin.[3]

The Linguistic Perspective

Linguistics has a critical role to play in the matter being discussed in this paper. It must help us to determine whether it is a trill [r] that has been deleted or a voiceless glottal fricative [h]. Irrespective of the sociolinguistic correlate of the use of the 'Ọlọ́run or the Ọlọ́hun variant, linguistics can determine the underlying form of 'Ọlọ́un'. The absence of clearly written documents concerning the emergence and variation of these words makes the exercise of linguistic reconstruction imperative. We shall consequently look at some relevant principles of historical linguistic reconstruction

Phonology of Sound Change

A basic tenet of historical linguistics, following the neo-grammarian school, is that language change is governed by the principle of the regularity of sound change[4]. A sound change can invariably be captured in terms of rule application. The phonology of sound change involves identifying the rule in question, the environment of rule application and the domain of rule application. The pattern that emerges will give a clue to the source of abbreviated forms. Given the fact that there is no

documented record on the process of change with respect to Yoruba, reconstruction method of historical linguistics becomes imperative.

One fact that constitutes a help to the present study is that Yoruba still has competing forms which allow us to easily link reduced forms to the full forms as in the following examples:

1 a. agogo   -->   aago   'bell/watch'
  b. òtítọ́   -->   òótọ́   ' truth'
  c. òwúrọ̀   -->   òórọ̀   'morning'
  d. ọ̀kánkán -->   ọ̀ọ́kán 'front'

In the set of data above, there is a deletion of the first consonant while the second vowel is completely assimilated by the initial vowel.

A further advantage available to this study is that composite parts of some of the words to be subjected to lexical reconstruction are still semantically transparent. In other words, the composite parts of these words still have meanings which are easily recognizable in the language. The following are some examples:

2 a.olùgbàlà   (olù#ì+gbà#là lord, nom. prefix, receive, be free) 'saviour'
  b.olùràpadà   (olù#ì+ rà# padà lord, nom. prefix, buy, return) 'redeemer'
  c.olùdáǹdè   (olù#ì+dá#ní#ì#dè lord, nom. prefix, break, part. nom. prefix, bind) 'deliverer'

The reduced forms above have largely resulted from vowel deletion. However, the issue before us deals more with consonant deletion, to which we turn in the next section.

Consonant Deletion in Yoruba

Consonant deletion is a very common phonological process in the languages of the world and very often a general rule of consonant deletion can be proposed. In French, for instance, there is a general rule which deletes a consonant at word boundary if followed by another consonant[5]. The rule is formalized as follows:

$$C \rightarrow \emptyset / \_\_\#C$$

There is no such general rule of consonant deletion in Yoruba, in spite of the fact that consonant deletion abounds in the language. The complication of consonant deletion in Yoruba is such that it has to be treated with reference to specific consonants. Two consonants, the [r] and

the [h] are of interest to us in this paper. Our data will show that [r] is generally more resistant to deletion than [h].

Referring to Oyelaran[6], Oyebade[7] shows the context in which [r] deletion is permissible, as exemplified in the following :

3   a. kúrò   --> kúò   'leave'   b. dúro --> dúo   'stand'
    c. koríko --> koóko   'grass'   d. férè --> féè   'soon'
    e. orúkọ --> oóko   'name'   f. wárápá --> wáápá 'epilepsy'
    g. èkùrọ́ --> èkùọ̀   'kernel'   h. àkàrà --> àkàà   'food item'
    i. òrìṣà --> òòṣa   ' idol'   j. wèrèpè --> wèèpè 'nettle'
    k. tìrẹ   --> tìẹ   'yours'   l. oríkì --> oókì   'appellation'
    m. àdúrà --> àdúà   'prayer'   n. èrèkẹ́ --> èèkẹ́   'chin'

An observation which underscores the resistance of [r] to deletion is the fact that most of the instances of [r] deletion are purely dialectal. Only a few of the deleted forms have gained acceptance in Standard Yoruba. These are tìẹ 'yours', féè 'soon', and èèkẹ́ 'chin' . This suggests that an r-deletion rule is yet to fully enter Standard Yoruba. The resistance of [r] to deletion is attested by the following set of examples (Oyebade)[8] :

4   a. ewúrẹ́   [9]*ewúẹ́   'goat'
    b. àdìrẹ   *àdìẹ   'dye'
    c. ògùrọ̀   *ògùọ̀   'palm wine'
    d. yàrá   *yàá   'room'

Even in the dialects which permit r-deletion in the set of examples in (3), r-deletion is not permitted here. The consonant /r/ is also resistant to deletion in the following:

5. a. abirùn (a+bi#irùn)   *abiùn 'handicapped person'
   b. adánrin (a+dán#irin)   *adán-in 'metal polisher'
   c. ìborùn (ì+bo#ọrùn)   *ìboùn 'neck cover'
   d. apanilẹ́rìn-ín (a+pa#ẹni#ní#èrín) *apanilẹ́ìn-ín 'comedian'
   e. òmìrán   *òmìán[10] 'giant'

This resistance to r-deletion is of crucial significance to our discussion of the form from which 'Ọlọ́un' is derived.

A consonant that prominently undergoes deletion in Yoruba is the glottal fricative /h/. The phenomenon of /h/ deletion was not addressed in earlier works on Yoruba phonology. The glottal fricative occurs in the following words:

6.   a. ihò   'hole'
     b. ìhòhò 'nakedness'
     c. ehoro 'hare'

   d. ahéré 'hut'

In the set of examples above, there is no deletion of the glottal fricative. Similarly, /h/ deletion does not take place in the following set of examples:

7.   a. àṣehàn   (à+ṣe#hàn)   *àṣeàn   'ostentation'
     b. ìfihàn   (ì+fi#hàn)   * ìfiàn   'revelation'
     c. àfọwóhun (à+fi#ọwọ́#hun)   * àfọwóun 'hand woven'
     d afọ̀nàhàn (a+fi#ọ̀nà#hàn)   * afọ̀nààn 'guide'

However, in the following set of data, there is a consistent /h/ deletion. The deletion of the consonant, even though optional, is possible in all cases:

8.   a. abánijẹohun (a+bá#ẹni#jẹ#ohun) ----- abánijẹun 'partaker in meal'
     b. àbíkóèhìn (à+bí#kó#èhìn) àbíkéìn 'last born'
     c. awímáyẹohùn (a+wí#má#yẹ#ohùn) awímáyẹùn 'one who stands by his
                                                                       word'
     d. apaèhìndà (a+pa#èhìn#dà) apèìndà 'back slider'
     e. èhìnkùlé[11] (#èhìn#kùlé#) èìnkùlé 'back yard'
     f. adáohunṣe (a+dá#ohun#ṣe) adáunṣe   'native doctor'

The sets of data presented have made very clear the environment in which /h/ deletion occurs. The consonant fails to delete when it occurs immediately after word boundary, but easily deletes when it follows a vowel occurring after a word boundary. The following set of data, however, shows that occurring after a vowel following a word boundary has not yet completed the structural description of the /h/ deletion rule:

9. a.   ihá   *iá   'native incendiary'
   b.   ìhà   *ìà   'side'
   c.   ihọ̀   *iọ̀   'hole'
   d.   ìhòhò   *ìòò   'nakedness'

The set of data above shows that the critical additional environment for the /h/ deletion rule is as   follows:

        /h/ ---> Ø /# V__   V
                          [+nasal]

      The data presented in (5) show that /r/ is not deleted in that environment. With this understanding, we are now in the position to see the verdict of linguistic analysis on the issue that triggered this present study, namely: whether it is 'Ọlọ́run' or 'Ọlọ́hun' that is the underlying representation of 'Ọlọ́un'. Clearly the latter derives from 'Ọlọ́hun'.

Etymology of the Yoruba Word for God

The Yoruba have several words to represent the Supreme Being, God. Among them are words like Olodumare or Eledumare, Oluwa and Obangiji. The Yoruba believe that Olodumare is most powerful in heaven and on earth (Idowu).[12] More commonly used names, however, are, as earlier mentioned are Ọlọ́run', 'Ọlọ́hun' and Ọlọ́un.

Apart from Obangiji, which is a loan word from Hausa Ubangiji, all the forms have something in common, i.e., the radical 'l'. In this regard, Yoruba is unique among all Nigerian languages. It is the only Nigerian language that shares the same root with the Semitic languages such as Hebrew and Arabic in the word for God, as shown in the following:

Hebrew : El in El-Shaddai, El- Elohim, Emmanuel etc.

Arabic: Allah

Yoruba: Olódùmarè, Elédùmarè, Olúwa, Ọlọ́run, Ọlọ́hun, Olọ́un, Olúọ̀run

The real reason for this similarity is not the focus of this paper. What needs to be noted is that the root is very pervasive in Yoruba language usage. As pointed out in a previous research, the root 'l' features to depict 'lord', 'owner' 'chief' and other words in the same semantic field. Its pervasiveness clearly shows that it is native to the Yoruba[13].

The Yoruba words 'Ọlọ́run', and 'Ọlọ́hun' can be shown to have been derived from

'Olú ọ̀run' (Lord of Heaven) and 'Olú ọhun' respectively. What poses a problem from the point of view of present day Yoruba is the status of the word 'ọ̀hun'. The word apparently exists only in combination with the word 'jẹ' 'eat' in 'jọ̀hun' approximately, 'eat a forbidden thing'.

Presentation and Discussion of Data

This paper has set out to find out whether the 'Ọlọ́run / Ọlọ́hun divide is religiously significant. This sociolinguistic question was pursued through a questionnaire administered among various speakers of Yoruba. This section is devoted to the presentation and discussion of the data collected from respondents.

These respondents were from different Yoruba dialect backgrounds, both male and female, Christians and Muslims, and belonging to different age brackets. The findings are based on following statistical representations:

1. Total number of respondents: 107

2. Dialects represented: Oyo, Ibolo, Igbomina, Ekiti, Egba, Ijesa, Ife, Ilorin, Owe, Yagba,
   Ijumu, Onko.
3. Age bracket: 18-25, 25-35, 35-50, 50 and above
4. Gender: Male,Female
5. Religion: Christianity, Islam
6. 'A' variant represents 'Ọlọ́run', 'B' variant represents 'Ọlọ́hun'
7. 'C' represents 'Christianity' while 'I' represents 'Islam'.

The findings are presented in the following tables[14]:

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Respondents by Age

Age bracket	18-25	%	25-35	%	35-50	%	50+	%	Total
Total	53		27		21		6		
A	33	62.26%	22	81.48%	18	85.71%	6	100%	73.83%
B	20	37.74%	5	18.52%	3	14.29%	-	0%	26.17%

Table 2: Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Respondents by Sex

Sex	Male	%	Female	%	Total
Number	58		49		107
A	41	70.69%	38	77.55%	73.83%
B	17	29.31%	11	22.45%	26.17%

Table 3: Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Respondents by Religion

Religion	Christianity	%	Islam	%	Others		Total
Number	69		36		2		105
A	62	89.86%	16	44.44%	-	-	74.29%
B	7	10.14%	20	55.56%	-	-	25.71%

Table 4a: Frequency and Percentage of Respondents by Dialect Background

Dialect	Egba			Ekiti			Ibolo			Igbomina		
Total	4			9			5			16		
Religion	C	I	%	C	I	%	C	I	%	C	I	%
A	1	3	100	8	1	100	2	-	40	12	-	75
B	-	-		-	-		1	2	60	-	4	25

Table 4b: Frequency and Percentage of Respondents by Dialect Background

Dialect	Ijesa/ife			Ilorin			Onko			Oyo		
Total	3			9			5			15		
Religion	C	I	%	C	I	%	C	I	%	C	I	%
A	3	-	100	-	1	11.11	5	-	100	4	5	60
B	-	-		1	7	88.88	-	-		1	5	40

The first thing to note before analyzing the data is that the 'Ọlọ́run' variant is the dominant variant in the Yoruba language community, being the form generally used in education. Specifically looking at the data we see a clear pattern. First we see that the age bracket is not significant in determining the use of either variant. There is a higher percentage, among all age brackets, of those who use the 'Ọlọ́run' variant as table 1 shows. Similarly, we find that sex is not significant parameter. Both males and females preponderantly use the 'Ọlọ́run' variant. The picture, however, changes when we consider dialect background and religion. A majority of the Christian respondents favour the 'Ọlọ́run' variant over 'Ọlọ́hun', while a greater percentage of the Muslim respondents opt for the 'Ọlọ́hun' variant.

We notice that in dialects such as Egba and Ekiti neither a Christian nor a Muslim uses the 'Ọlọ́hun' variant. Ibolo and Igbomina dialects show a clear Christian/Muslim divide in the choice of variant. The struggle for territorial dominance between the two variants seems to be at the fiercest in Oyo dialect. They are evenly divided among Muslims, while 'Ọlọ́hun' has made some in road into the otherwise exclusive preserve of 'Ọlọ́run' among Christians speaking the Oyo dialect.

An additionally interesting observation from the data is that there seems to be no other dialect where the 'Ọlọ́hun' variant is as dominant as in the Ilorin dialect. It is clear that the choice of the variant has

transcended religion to ones cultural closeness to the Ilorin dialect. The 'Ọlọ́hun' variant can actually safely be described as an innovation from the Ilorin dialect, having a semantic connotation which is largely religious.

Concluding Remarks

The linguistic analysis in this paper has clearly shown that 'Ọlọ́hun' is the underlying form of 'Ọlọ́un'. We have also noted that there is a clear religious divide in the use of 'Ọlọ́run' and 'Ọlọ́hun', in the sense that most of those who use the 'Ọlọ́hun' variant are Muslims. What is interesting is that this religious divide almost completely disappears in the use of the abbreviated form 'Ọlọ́un'. The Islamic origin of the 'Ọlọ́un' form is no longer significant, as most of those Yoruba speakers who ordinarily would use the term 'Ọlọ́run' very often use an abbreviated form 'Ọlọ́un' to refer to the Almighty God. The Christian concept of 'God' is the Lord of heaven (He who owns heaven also owns the earth) hence the term 'Ọlọ́run'. 'Ọlọ́hun' came from the idea of God as a Being who troubles those who do not worship Him as they should, put in another way, a Being who would feel offended if people refuse to worship Him.[15]

The religious divide between Christians and Muslims in the term used for God has been obliterated in the abbreviated form. The average Christian who freely uses the term 'Ọlọ́un' for God is hardly conscious of its Muslim origin, on the other hand, it will be interesting to know whether a Muslim who says 'Ọlọ́un' is actually thinking of God as a Being who troubles those who do not worship Him appropriately. Linguistics has come to the rescue here, to show that in relating as human beings to human beings, or more specifically, as language users there is no fundamental difference among people. Whatever differences exist between Christians and Muslims they are certainly not at the fundamental aspects of societal interactions, and language is one of such fundamental aspects.

Notes and References

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2. I am grateful to Dr. R.K. Omoloso for assistance regarding these translations.

3. I acknowledge the assistance of Mrs. Grace Oyebola, (former H.O.D Languages, Queen Elizabeth School, Ilorin) in collecting data from Queen School Staff.

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8. Ibid,p.73.

9. Asterisks indicate non occurring forms.

10. Notice, however, that forms like 'ọkùnrin', 'male', 'obìnrin' 'female' in the Oyo dialect of Yoruba and 'ibòmí-ìn' 'somewhere else', 'ẹlòmí-ìn' 'someone else', 'omí-ìn' 'another one' and several others in Standard Yoruba suggest that r-deletion is in the process of being admitted into Standard Yoruba.

11. The Yoruba words for 'tooth' 'ehín' and 'back' 'ẹ̀hìn' reveal a very interesting phenomenon. There are two competing forms in each case, i.e. ehín/eyín, ẹ̀hìn/ ẹ̀hìn, respectively. Only through a linguistic analysis can one know that the latter forms are derived from the deletion of the 'h' and the palatal glide formation between the vowels.

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13. Michael Oyebola. "Vowel Harmony in Yoruba: An Autosegmental Approach." *Centrepoint 11 (1),* Ilorin: University of Ilorin Publications Committee, 2003, pp.122-137.

14. I am grateful to Dr. Lere Adeyemi of the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Ilorin, for assistance in the format of data presentation.

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