

VOWEL ASSIMILATION IN ÈKÌTÌ DIALECT OF YORÙBÁ LANGUAGE¹

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Abstract – Vowel assimilation is a common phonological process in Yorùbá language and its numerous dialects. However, the occurrence of this process differs in the language and its dialects. It is against this backdrop that this study investigates vowel assimilation in Èkìtì dialects of Yorùbá. The paper, which is basically descriptive, makes a careful comparison of the phonological process in the dialects and Standard Yorùbá language. The paper shows that unlike Standard Yorùbá, vowel assimilation is confined to certain constructions in Èkìtì dialects. The paper also posits that unlike Standard Yorùbá which employs two assimilation rules, Èkìtì dialects employ one assimilation rule. The rule is however, blocked when there need to maintain contrast.

Keywords: Èkìtì; Dialects; Yorùbá; Vowel; Assimilation.

1. Introduction

The inadequate attention paid to the study of Yorùbá dialects probably informs Awóbùlúyì's (1992, 1998) appeal to Yorùbá linguists to research more into these dialects. He believes such dialects deserve to be studied in their own right and thereby be preserved in written record for posterity. In addition to this, the linguist is of the opinion that the study of these dialects will provide some grammatical expositions that may teach us new things that would help to clarify some linguistic issues that are likely to remain hidden in Yorùbá language. Ever since the appeal, there have been a number of scholarly works on different Yorùbá dialects. This present study is also a response to Awóbùlúyì's call. The study which is basically descriptive affords us the opportunity to describe vowel assimilation as it were in Èkìtì dialects of Yorùbá language without being unduly hampered by the dictates of any phonological theories. We assume this would shed light on what is permitted and or disallowed in the dialects.

Èkìtì dialect is one of the dialects of the Central Yorùbá (CY) dialect group. According to Awóbùlúyì (1998:2), other dialects in the group are Ìjẹ̀ṣà, Ìfẹ̀ and Mòbà. Èkìtì dialect is spoken mainly in Èkìtì State as well as in some parts of Ondo State of Nigeria. In Ekiti State, Èkìtì dialect is spoken in fourteen local government areas of the sixteen local government areas in the State. These local governments are: Adó, Ìdó/Òsì, Gbónyìn, Ìjẹ̀rò, Oyé, Ìkòlé, Ìṣẹ̀-Òrún, Èfòn-Alààyè, Emùré, Ìkéré, Ìrẹ̀pòdùn/Ìfẹ̀lódùn, Èkìtì West, Èkìtì East and Èkìtì South West. Each town or village in these local governments speaks a variant of the dialect. Aggregation of these variants is regarded as Èkìtì dialects.

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2. Assimilation

Crystal (2008, p. 39) says “assimilation occurs when there is influence of one distinct sound segment upon the articulation of another, so that the sounds become alike or identical” physically or intrinsically. Assimilation may be partial or total. It is partial when a sound segment acquires some of the phonological features of the segment that precedes or follows it. Consider (1) below:

1. iN-balance → imbalance
 iN-possible → impossible

/N/ becomes [m] before bilabial consonants due to the effects of place of articulation of the consonants. In total assimilation, the two segments have identical features as in

2. ilé + ìwé → ilé èwé ‘school’
 house book house book

Where vowel /i/ now becomes identical with vowel /e/ which influenced it.

Assimilation can also be classified in terms of direction in which it works. It can be regressive, that is, the changing or conditioned segment is modified due to the influence of the conditioning segment following it. This is right to left assimilation where $v_1 + v_2 \rightarrow v_2 + v_2$ in a word boundary. For Example:

3. Yorùbá
 V₁ V₂
 i. aṣo + òkè → aṣoòkè
 cloth top ‘native-women cloth’

where v_1 takes all the features of v_2 .

- ii. V₁ V₂
 kú àlẹ̀ → káàlẹ̀
 greeting evening
 (verb) ‘good evening’

where v_1 (ú) takes all the segmental features of v_2 (à) but retains its prosodic feature, in this case, the tone.

Assimilation can also be progressive, that is, left to right type, where $v_1 + v_2 \rightarrow v_1 + v_1$ in a word boundary. In this case, the conditioning vowel comes before the conditioned vowel such that there is forward movement between the assimilating and the assimilated vowel as in (4).

4. Yorùbá
 V₁ V₂
 i. ilé iṣẹ̀ → iléesẹ̀
 house work ‘office’
 V₁ V₁
 ii. ètù ìbọ̀n → ètùùbọ̀n
 powder gun ‘gunpowder’

Oyèbádé (1998:58-62) identifies four major domains of assimilation. These are vowel-vowel assimilation; consonant-consonant assimilation, consonant-vowel assimilation and vowel-



consonant assimilation. Majorly, standard Yorùbá and its dialects operate vowel-vowel assimilation.

3. Vowel assimilation in Yorùbá

Vowel assimilation is a phonological process that has been well studied by many scholars of the language. Some of these scholars include Awóbùlúyì (1964, pp. 72-79, 1982; 1992); Bámgbóšé (1965, pp. 160; 1990, pp. 47-50), (Oyèláràn (1971), Awóyalé (1985) and Oyèbádé (2007, pp. 227-233). Vowel assimilation is seen as the transformation of a distinct vowel to become similar to another vowel. There are two principal types of vowel assimilation that are known to occur at word boundary in Yorùbá. According to Awóbùlúyì (1982:1), they are schematized by the following two assimilation rules:

Assimilation Rule 1

$$V1 + V2 \rightarrow V1 + V1$$

Assimilation Rule 2

$$V1 + V2 \rightarrow V2 + V2$$

Assimilation Rule 1, which holds for vowel /i/ only under normal circumstances, is preservative (progressive) because it shows that the second of the two juxtaposed vowel assume the form of the first vowel. In other words, the feature of V1 perseveres until it shows up on the following segment as witnessed in (5).

5. Yorùbá

- | | | | | |
|-----|------|--------|---|--------------------|
| i. | Iṣé | ìlú | → | iṣéìlú |
| | v1 | v2 | | v1 v1 |
| | work | town | | 'community work' |
| ii. | erù | igi | → | erùugi |
| | load | sticks | | 'load of firewood' |

Assimilation rule 2 which is anticipatory (regressive) requires the first of two abutting vowels to take the form of the vowel occurring immediately to its right if the vowel stands for any oral vowel other than /i/ as shown in (6) below:

6. Yorùbá

- | | | | | |
|------|-------------|-------|---|-------------------|
| i. | iyá | egbé | → | iyé egbé |
| | v1 | v2 | → | v2 v2 |
| | mother | union | | 'female leader' |
| ii. | ará oko | | → | aróoko |
| | v1 v2 | | | v2 v2 |
| | fellow farm | | | 'a rustic fellow' |
| iii. | owó èjè | | → | owéèjè |
| | v1 v2 | | | v2v2 |
| | money blood | | | 'blood money' |

4. Vowel assimilation in Èkìtì dialects

In this section, we shall examine the environments typical for occurrence of vowel assimilation in Èkìtì dialects. These environments can be classified into two: (a) contiguous segment assimilation and (b) non-contiguous assimilation:

a. Contiguous Segment Assimilation

As in standard Yorùbá, this type of vowel assimilation occurs across word boundary. Èkìtì contiguous vowel assimilation typically occurs in the following environments:

- i. Grammatical elements and subject noun
- ii. Grammatical elements and subject pronoun
- iii. The greeting verb **kú** and vowel initial noun
- iv. Subject NP and negation markers
- b. Non-Contiguous Assimilation
 - i. Poly-morphemic words
 - ii. Numerals

4.1 Contiguous segment assimilation

4.1.1. Grammatical elements and subject noun

In Èkìtì dialects, the grammatical elements **kí** ‘if’ and **şé** ‘question marker’ have their final vowels assimilated to that of the following vowel initial noun as exemplified below.

7. Ìkéré

Kí

- i. **kí ulé wó** → **kú ulé wó**
if house collapse ‘if the house collapse’
- ii. **kí adé á** → **ká adé á**
if Adé come ‘if Adé comes’
- iii. **kí ẹlédè jẹ** → **kẹ ẹlédè jẹ**
if pig eat ‘if pig eats it’

Şé

- i. **Şé olè ni** → **Şó olè ni?**
? thief foc ‘is he a thief?’
- ii. **Şé ọbọ lo pè á** → **Şọ ọbọ lo pè á**
? monkey foc call us ‘Do you think we are fools?’
- iii. **Şé adé lọ** → **Şá adé lọ**
? Adé go ‘Did Adé go?’

Assimilation rule 2: ($V_1 + V_2 \rightarrow V_2 + V_2$) accounts for vowel assimilation in (7).

4.1.2. Grammatical elements and subject pronoun

Similar to what obtains in standard Yorùbá, the grammatical elements: **bí** ‘if’ and **ńjẹ, şé** (question markers) in Èkìtì dialects have their final vowel assimilated to that of the following pronouns in (8)

8. Ìdó – a dialect in Èkìtì

Bí

- i. **bí o gbe** → **bó o gbe**
if you carry ‘if you carry it’
- ii. **bí a lọ** → **bá a lọ**
if we go ‘if we go’
- iii. **bí ọn lọ** → **bón ọn lọ**
if they go ‘if they go’

Ìsẹ̀

Njẹ̀

- i. Njẹ̀ ọ̀ lọ → Njọ̀ ọ̀ lọ?
? you go 'Did you go?'
- ii. Njẹ̀ a sùn → Njá a sùn?
? we sleep 'Did we sleep?'
- iii. Njẹ̀ ọ̀n á → Njọ̀n ọ̀n á?
? they come 'Did they come?'

Ìlúpéjú – a dialect in Èkìtì

Sẹ̀

- i. Sẹ̀ o gbe → Sọ̀ o gbe?
? you carry 'Did you carry it?'
- ii. Sẹ̀ a ri → Sá a ri?
? we see 'Did we find it?'
- iii. Sẹ̀ ọ̀n á → Sọ̀n ọ̀n á?
? they come 'Did they come?'

Like (7) above, the vowel assimilation rule in (8) is assimilation rule 2.

4.1.3 The greeting verb *kú* and vowel initial noun

Also, like Yorùbá, vowel assimilation occurs between the greeting verb **kú** and the initial vowel of following noun in Èkìtì dialects. The vowel of the verb is assimilated to the initial vowel of the nominal as shown in (9)

- 9.
- i. kú ẹ̀yẹ̀ → kẹ̀ẹ̀yẹ̀
? harmattan 'Greeting during harmattan'
- ii. kú ọ̀sín → kọ̀ọ̀sín
? afternoon 'good afternoon'
- iii. kú ọ̀úrò → kọ̀ọ̀úrò
? morning 'good morning'
- iv. kú oriire → kóoriire
? luck congratulations
- v. kú ulé → kúulé
? house 'greetings for somebody met at home.'

Vowel assimilation does not occur in (9v) above for obvious reason. The vowel of the greeting verb and the initial vowel of the nominal are similar. Again, vowel assimilation rule 2 is applicable here.

4.1.4 Subject NP and negative marker

Olúmúyìwá (2006, p. 28; 2010, p. 3) says 'the negation markers in Èkìtì are **kẹ̀**; **i**; **rì**; **mòò**/**mọ̀**'. Two of these four negation markers: **kẹ̀** and **i** are relevant to our discussion on vowel assimilation in the dialects. Like in standard Yorùbá, the subject NP in Èkìtì may be a noun or pronoun.

4.1.5 The negation marker *kè* ‘not’

When the consonant of the negativizing morpheme **kò** ‘not’ gets deleted in Yorùbá, its standard vowel **ò** is assimilated to the vowel of the pronoun as shown in 10.

10.	Pronoun	Negative Maker	Verb		
	n	ò	lọ	→ n n̄ lọ	‘I didn’t go’
	mi	ò	lọ	→ mi ì lọ	‘I didn’t go’
	ẹ	ò	lọ	→ ẹ ẹ̄ lọ	‘You didn’t go’
	a	ò	lọ	→ a à lọ	‘We didn’t go’
	wọ̀n	ò	lọ	→ wọ̀n ọ̀n lọ	‘They didn’t go’

Assimilation rule 2 would normally have been expected in (10) above but assimilation rule 1 is applied. Any attempt to make assimilation rule 2 apply willingly in (10) would end up creating an ambiguous output string of this form:

11. O ò lọ - you did not go for (10) above which is diametrically opposed to the intended meaning.

This is why the application of vowel assimilation rule 2 is blocked to the advantage of Rule 1 for semantic reasons in order to avoid or at least minimize homonymy (Awóbùluyì 1992, p. 9).

Èkìtì dialects also obligatorily delete the negator’s consonant, thereby enabling its stranded vowel to assimilate to the last vowel of any preceding item as shown in 12 (a-c).

12.	Adó – a dialect in Èkìtì		
	I	II	III
a.	Sànyà kè sùn Sànyà NEG sleep	→ Sànyà è sùn consonant deletion	→ Sànyá à sùn ‘Sànyà did not sleep’
b.	A kè sùn We NEG sleep	→ A è sùn consonant Deletion	→ Á à sùn ‘We did not sleep’
c.	[NP Ø] ó kè sùn HTS NEG sleep	→ [NP Ø] ó è sùn HTS consonant sleep Deletion	→ [NP Ø] é è sùn ‘He did not sleep’

As Olúmúyìwá (2006, p. 38) says, ‘Salàwú (1998, 2001) believes the tonal change in the last syllable of the subject NP in step III of 12(a-b) occurs because a verb phrase immediately follows it’. On the contrary, Olúmúyìwá (2010, p. 4) is also of the opinion that the tone in question is the high tone syllable (the HTS) ó which regularly occurs before the negation **kè** in Èkìtì dialects. This is shown more clearly in (13).

13.	I	Base form	II
	Sànyà ó kè sùn Sànyà HTS NEG sleep		A ó kè sùn We HTS NEG sleep
	Sànyà ´ è sùn Sànyà HTS NEG sleep	HTS Vowel Deletion	A ´ è sùn We HTS NEg sleep
	Sànyá è sùn Sànyà NEG sleep	Tone Transfer	Á è sùn We Neg sleep

Sànyá à sùn
Sànyà NEG sleep
'Sànyà did not sleep'

Vowel Assimilation

Á à sùn
We NEG sleep
'We did not sleep'

Vowel assimilation does not occur in the type of construction in 12a in Yorùbá. There is no utterance like 14.

14. Sànyà ò sùn → *Sànyà à sùn/Sànyò ò sùn

However, like Standard Yorùbá, if vowel assimilation rule 2 is not blocked to the advantage of rule 1 that occurs in 12(a-b) in Èkìtì dialects, we shall have an ambiguous output string of this form.

15. Sànyé è sùn → *é è sùn.

Just as it did in (10), the rule is actually appearing to serve the purpose of maintaining contrast by obviating homophony in the dialects.

As contained in Olúmúyìwá (2010, p. 4), Ø in 12(c) indicates a phonetically null third person pronoun, which shows that the subject pronoun's position is vacant. As the pronoun never shows up in its position in this utterance type in Èkìtì dialects, the HTS necessarily retains its vowel there. Only the consonant of the negator that gets deleted, and that deletion paved the way for the vowel of the HTS to assimilate to the vowel of the negator as in the derivation in (16) below.

16.

[NP Ø]	ó kẹ̀ sùn HTS NEG sleep	Base form
[NP Ø]	ó è sùn HTS NEG sleep	Deletion
[NP Ø]	é è sùn HTS NEG sleep s'He did not sleep'	Assimilation

Just as we have in examples (7-9) above, vowel assimilation rule 2 accounts for assimilation in (16).

4.1.6 The negative marker *i* 'not'

Like **kẹ̀**, the HTS occurs regularly before the negation marker **i** in Èkìtì dialects. Witness its occurrence in (17).

17. Ìgèdè – a dialect in Èkìtì

i.	Ayò ó i sùn Ayò HTS NEG sleep	→	Ayò ' i sùn	→	Ayó i sùn Ayò did not sleep
ii.	Sògo ó i sùn Sògo HTS NEG sleep	→	Şògo ' i sùn	→	Şògó i sùn 'Şògo did not sleep'
iii.	[NP Ø] ó i sùn HTS NEG sleep	→	[NP Ø] ó i sùn	→	[NP ø] é i sùn 'He did not sleep'
iv.	[NP Ø] ó i şe olè HTS NEG be thief	→	[NP Ø] ó i şe olè	→	[NPØ] é i şe olè 'He is not a thief'

As shown in 17 (i-ii) above, Olúmúyìwá (2010, p. 6) reports that the vowel of the HTS gets deleted with its tone subsequently transferred to the last syllable of the subject NP. However, in 17 (iii-iv) where the subject NP in the form of the third person singular subject pronoun fails to show up, the HTS retains its form. There is partial assimilation between the HTS and the negator **i**. This is shown more clearly in (18) below:

18. ó + i → é + i → ei

This type of assimilation is known to operate extensively in Yorùbá dialects, especially the Òyó dialect, (Abímbólá and Oyèláràn 1975: 44-45) as shown in (19).

19.

i. òyìnbó → òìnbó → èèbó ‘white man’
 ii. mo fì gé e → mo í gé e → me e gé e ‘I used it to cut something’

4.2 Non-contiguous assimilation

Non-Contiguous assimilation occurs in some poly-morphemic words in Èkìtì dialects. These words are words with nominalizing prefix **oní** and some numerals.

4.2.1 Nominalization with agentive morpheme *Oní*

In Standard Yorùbá as well in Èkìtì dialects, the vowel **o** in **oní** is assimilated to the initial oral vowel of the following noun if the initial oral vowels in question are not **i** or **u**. Hence in both Standard Yorùbá and Èkìtì dialects, we have:

20.	Yorùbá			Èkìtì (Ayédùn)			
	A	B	C	A	B	C	
	Base	Deletion	Assimilation	Base	Deletion	Assimilation	
i.	oní ɪgi	onígi	—	oní ɪgi	onígi	—	‘owner/seller of plank’
ii.	oní ɪʃu	oníʃu	—	oní uʃu	oníʃu	—	‘owner/seller of yam’
iii.	oní owó	olówo	olówo	oní eó	oleo	eléo	‘rich person’
iv.	oní eja	oléja	eléja	oní eja	oléja	eléja	‘owner/seller of fish’
v.	oní ɔkò	olókò	olókò	oní ɔkò	olókò	olókò	‘driver’
vi.	oní aʃo	oláʃo	aláʃo	oní aʃo	oláʃo	aláʃo	‘owner/seller of cloth’

In Yorùbá and many of its dialects, Èkìtì inclusive, the popular view holds that **l** and **n** are allophones of the same phoneme, with the former occurring before oral vowels only and the later before nasal vowels. As noticed in 20 (i-ii), the rule by which the **o** gets assimilated to the oral vowel of the noun does not operate when the oral vowels in question are **i** or **u**. However, in 20 (iii-vi), the rule of vowel assimilation that often accompanies **l** ~ **n** alternation is applied. Vowel assimilation rule 2 accounts for assimilation in 20 (iii-vi).

4.2.2 The numerals

The derivation of some numerals in Èkìtì dialects involves vowel assimilation. Consider (21):

21.

	I		II		III		IV
i.	òkàn lé èwá one plus ten	→	òkàn 1' èwá	→	òkànléwá	→	òkànlówá eleven
ii.	èjì lé èwá two plus ten	→	èjì 1' èwá	→	èjìlèwá	→	èjìlówá twelve
iii.	ètà lé èwá three plus ten	→	ètà 1' èwá	→	ètàlèwá	→	ètàlówá thirteen
iv.	èrìn lé èwá four plus ten	→	èrìn 1' èwá	→	èrìnlèwá	→	èrìnlówá fourteen

As the derivation of these four numeral shows in (21), **ẹ** in **èwá** acquires (+ back) feature in **a** (cf. Yusuf 2007:45) to become **ọ**. However, in Èkìtì dialects spoken in Arámọkọ and Èrìò, the assimilation is full. Vowel **ẹ** is assimilated to **a** as witnessed in (22) below.

22.

i.	òkàn lé èwá one plus ten	→	òkan 1' éwá	→	òkànléwá	→	òkànláwá eleven
ii.	èjì lé èwá two plus ten	→	èjì 1' éwá	→	èjìlèwá	→	èjìláwá twelve
iii.	ètà lé èwá three plus ten	→	ètà 1' éwá	→	ètàlèwá	→	ètàláwá thirteen
iv.	èrìn lé èwá four plus ten	→	èrìn 1' éwá	→	èrìnlèwá	→	èrìnláwá fourteen

Notice that vowel assimilation rule 2 also account for assimilation in (22).

5. Other environments of assimilation

There are other environments in Yorùbá where vowel assimilation occurs but not in Èkìtì dialects. These environments are: nominal + nominal junction and in mono-morphemic words.

5.1 Nominal + Nominal

Notice that we have shown in examples (4-6) above that vowel assimilation occurs in nominal + nominal junction in Yorùbá. For example:

23.

i.	ìlé ìwé house book	→	ìlé èwé 'school'
ii.	ètù ìbọ̀n powder gun	→	ẹtuùbọ̀n 'gunpowder'
iii.	owó èjẹ̀ money blood	→	owéẹ̀jẹ̀ blood money
iv.	ẹrú owó slave money	→	eróowó 'subservient of money/a slavish-yes man to money'

Ògúnşakin (1984, p. 12-13) is of the opinion that this type of vowel assimilation occurs in Èkìtì dialect spoken in Ìkòlé as in:

24. i. ulé ìwé → uléèwé
house book 'school'
- ii. ẹmu ikòlé → ẹmuukòlé
palmwine ikòlé Ìkòlé's palmwine

However, new findings as contained in Olúmúyìwá (1990:72) show that vowel assimilation does not occur in nominal junction in Èkìtì dialects. More so, Ìkòlé and most Èkìtì dialects exhibit the occurrence of /u/ word-initial (cf. Olúmúyìwá 2006:107). As such, the type of vowel assimilation described in (24) is not attestable in the dialects.

There is no utterance like:

25. i. ulé uwe → *uléèwé/ulúùwé
house book
- ii. ẹmu ùkòlé → *ẹmuukòlé
- iii. irá òrun → *iróòrun
people heaven masquerade
- iv. ùlé ẹjò → *uléẹjò
house case 'court'

5.2 Mono-Morphemic words

In some mono-morpheme words in Yorùbá, vowel assimilation may occur, as witness in (26) below.

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|--------|---|----------|---|--------------------|---------|
| 26. | Base | | Deletion | | Vowel Assimilation | |
| | agogo | → | aogo | → | aago | 'clock' |
| | orirun | → | oirun | → | oòrùn | 'sun' |
| | efífún | → | eífín | → | èéfín | 'smoke' |

The type of assimilation described (26) above is not attested in Èkìtì dialects. What we have in such words in the dialects is consonant deletion. This is exemplified below:

27. Emùré – a dialect in Èkìtì
- | | | | | | |
|--------|---|----------|---|--------------------|---------|
| Base | | Deletion | | Vowel Assimilation | |
| agogo | → | aogo | → | *aago | 'clock' |
| orirùn | → | oirùn | → | *oorun | 'sun' |
| àkíké | → | àíke | → | *àáké | 'axe' |
| efífí | → | èífí | → | *èéfí | 'smoke' |

6. CONCLUSION

An attempt has been made in this study to examine vowel assimilation in Èkìtì dialects. The paper explained the concept of assimilation and vowel assimilation in Yorùbá. It was able to show that Yorùbá employ two rules to account for vowel assimilation. Also, the paper shows the environments in which vowel assimilation occurs in Èkìtì dialects. As observed in the

study, these environments are classified into two: Contiguous segment assimilation and non-contiguous assimilation. Unlike standard Yorùbá, vowel assimilation does not occur in nominal + nominal junction and in mono-morphemic words in Èkìtì dialects. The conclusion to be drawn from the occurrence of vowel assimilation in the Èkìtì dialects shows that, unlike Standard Yorùbá which employs two vowel assimilation rules, Èkìtì dialects employ one assimilation rule: $V_1 + V_2 \rightarrow V_2 + V_2$. However, the rule is blocked whenever there is need to maintain contrast by obviating homophony in the dialects. In addition, the finding of this study have provided a baseline input for more linguistic data coming from Èkìtì dialects of Yorùbá for dialectal and dialectological studies.

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