

## *Contrastive Analysis of French and Yoruba Language*

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### **Abstract**

Language as an instrument of communication tends to produce divers effects through linguistic structure. All communication is grammatically governed by certain rules that have to be internalized in the listeners and speakers subconscious. It is evident however ,that the grammatical analysis of words are areas of importance in the study of language system. This paper tends to show the contrastive mode of the Yoruba vowel and consonants as compared with that of French language. The study reveals that vowel and consonant sounds in Yoruba language are always tonal and it is often accompanied by melodic register which has a harmonious and vocalic mechanism for oral expression. A process which helps in effective communication and shows an exceptional usefulness of sounds in Yoruba as when compared with French Language.

Keywords : Yoruba, French, Vowel, Consonant, Phonology, Communication and Language

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## **Introduction**

Language is a body of words common to a people of the same community or nation, the same geographical area, or the same cultural tradition. It is the human capacity for acquiring and using complex systems of communication. The scientific study of language is called linguistics. As an object of linguistic study, "language" has two primary meanings: an abstract concept, and a specific linguistic system, just like in "French". In his definition of language as the modern discipline of linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, explicitly formulated the distinction using the French word "*langage*" for language as a concept, "*langue*" as a specific instance of a language system, and "*parole*" for the concrete usage of speech in a particular language. Its structure is made up of significant units which when put together, form a complete structure of a sentence. According to Emile and Paytard (1970) : « The channels of communication are defined by the physical, social and psychological situation, by means of technic in which spoken words serve as a means of transmitting a message to an addressee of choice » (14). This reveals that language is the medium through which an information is communicated to someone or a group of people in a given situation. The aim of speaking and writing a language is basically to produce a pattern for transmitting a message. We cannot talk of communication without making mention of the message carried by the act. The message of communication of a given language reflects on the behaviour of the receiver. Jakobson stated that : « the message requires a contact, a physical channel and a psychological connection » (Jakobson 214). Each language of communication must have rules and according to Chomsky cited by Ahmadu Usman 2009, « to learn a language is to internalize the rules that govern the use of the language ». Our focus in this study is to do a contrastive analysis of sound in Yoruba in relation with French language. We shall expose the different types of sound (vowels and consonants) and expose areas of contrast.

## **Insight on Yoruba**

The different tradition of the Yoruba people trace its origin from Ile-Ife. The language is spoken by close to twenty five million people. Yoruba is one of the three major national languages in Nigeria, and also in some part of Benin and Togo. Yoruba is also spoken in Latin America such as Cuba and in Brazil by the descendants of African slaves. Yoruba is sub-divided in many dialects but among all there is a standard dialect spoken by the people of Oyo in Nigeria. It is obviously a tonal language due to its linguistic characteristics. Normally there are three levels of tone in the language which are « High » « Low » « Silent ». These levels of tones help in the articulation of different sounds in the language. Yoruba is known to be one of Nigeria's major languages and it has rich linguistic elements since inception. The language is made up of important vocabularies which varies according to the different dialects. The development of Yoruba Orthography dates back to the missionary era, with Rev. John Raban taking the lead. Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther adapted some part of Raban's Yoruba Orthography. There were a lot of academic discussions on the fundamentals as Yoruba language in the area of vowels and consonants, and this brought about many revisions of the Orthographies. In many of these Orthographic revision exercises, French Language and other European Languages were used as models, as efforts were made to modify some Yoruba words to be in harmony with

other words in other languages. There were controversies over the use of (kp) and (gb) which are in Yoruba but which are not in the European Languages. A comparative study of French and Yoruba phonological systems will reveal the differences which are assumed to be the cause of linguistic interference and the source of difficulties for second language learners, especially Yoruba learning French.

### **Essence of Contrastive Studies**

Language educators at both the secondary and tertiary Institutions and, indeed, at the primary school level are often confronted with pedagogical problems in the teaching of French. To many of the language teachers these problems defy solution. Their knowledge of theoretical linguistics is never brought to bear on language teaching and learning. The teacher has to teach French to students from diverse socio-linguistic backgrounds. To succeed as a language teacher, he needs to carry out comparative contrastive studies of French and the native languages of his students. The teacher who has made a comparative study of the phonological systems of the second language (French) and the native language (Yoruba) will know better what the real learning problems of his students are and how to solve them. The issue of inter-language and hence inter-lingual errors or even errors arising from interference can be tackled by contrastive analysis. The language teacher is also faced with the need to prepare teaching materials that meet the particular needs of his students. A linguistic comparison is basic and inescapable if the teacher wishes to make progress and not to just reshuffle the same old materials. Where the language teacher is given prescribed textbooks to use and he finds the book inadequate in both the linguistic and cultural contexts, his systematic comparative study will help in preparing supplementary exercises on very important aspects of the textbook.

A lot of achievements have been made in the area of language testing, especially in tests of French as a second language, as a result of linguistic comparison of French and students' native language. Although there are linguistic Universals, there are nonetheless features that are unique to languages. This uniqueness has to be borne in mind while constructing language tests. The application of linguistic comparison to language testing is important.

Contrastive linguistic study is capable of removing cross-cultural and cross-linguistic misinterpretation. If we ignore cultural and linguistic differences, we will misjudge our cultural neighbours as we constantly do today. Obviously, a form of language behavior which is generally comprehensive may have another meaning to others.

### **Statement of The Problems**

French and Yoruba, as languages, have co-existed in the discourse of Yoruba - French bilinguals for some time now. Historically, the growth of Yoruba -French bilingualism has not been without problems. French is a contact language in Nigeria, and in a situation such as this, the point of contact is usually the bilingual individual who does not know how and why he code-mixes and code-switches in his utterances nor does he know the root cause of language learning difficulties. Understanding more about language phenomenon is the general concern of linguists the world over. People hold different opinions about different languages. Some anthropological linguists who studied African languages viewed African Languages as little more than

echoes of noise, and that they are no match for European languages. Later studies (Greenberg 1970) revealed that the notion that African languages were inferior was disproved, as languages are of equal importance, and moreover have a lot of things in common. This paper aims at finding solutions to these research problems:

- a. Are there really similarities and differences between French and Yoruba phonological systems?
- b. In what areas are these similarities and differences?
- c. Do the differences, pose any learning problem?
- d. How are these learning problems solved?
- e. To what extent do the similarities facilitate or enhance learning of either of the two languages?
- f. What does a teacher gain from a contrastive study of this type?

In an attempt to solve these problems the paper covered certain grounds such as Alphabets, vowels, consonants, phonemes, and affixation.

### **French and Yoruba Alphabets**

French and Yoruba orthographic symbols differ significantly, though the direction of writing of both languages is from left to right thus:

French: a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

Yoruba: a b d e e f g gb h i j k l m n o o p r s s t u w y

Yoruba alphabetical system has the consonantal sound /g/ as in "igba (Calabash), "agbe" (gourd) and "agbalagba" (adult). There is also the vowel sound (o). These two orthographies (gb) and (o) have no equivalent in French alphabet. There is however the absence of c,q,v,x,z, in Yoruba alphabet. One can then begin to appreciate the initial disparity between Yoruba and French.

### **Vowel and Consonant Systems**

In both French and Yoruba we have the following consonantal sounds:

French: /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, /g/, /f/, /v/, [ʃ], [ʒ], /s/, [ʒ], /z/, /m/, /n/, /d/, /l/, /r/

Yoruba: /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, /kp/, /gb/, /f/, /s/, /s/, /h/, /dz/, /m/, /n/, /r/, /l/, /j/, /w/.

Consonantal phonemes unique to Yoruba are: /gb/, /kp/ and /dz/.

Consonantal phonemes unique to French are: [ʃ], [ʒ], [ʒ]

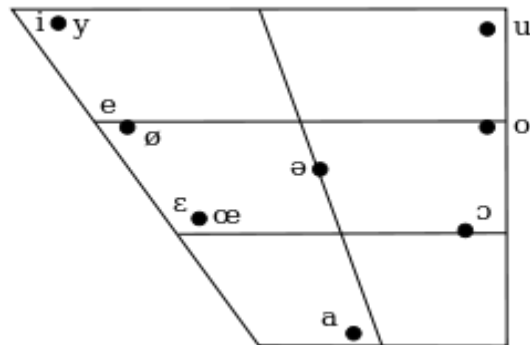
There are differences too in the French and Yoruba vowel phonemes, thus:

French vowels

French: /a/, /ã/, /e/ / ε /, / ə /, /i/, /o/, /ɔ/ /õ/, /œ/, /ø/, /u/, /y/

French semi-vowels: /j/, /ɥ/, /w/

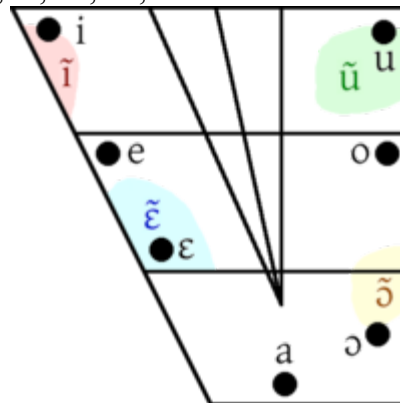
## Diagram of French Vowels



Oral vowels of French from Fougeron & Smith (1993:73).

## Diagram of Yoruba Vowels

Yoruba vowels: /a/, /e/, /ẽ/, /i/, /o/, /õ/, /u/.



Unrounded vowels are shown to the left of the dots and rounded vowels to the right. The speaker in question does not exhibit a contrast between /a/ and /ɑ/. Standard French contrasts up to thirteen oral vowels and up to four nasal vowels. The black points indicate the oral vowels and the colour regions show the nasal vowels. It is necessary to note that the open vowels are pronounced with a traditional tendency of the language. Eg. *e* (*ɛ*) = [ɛ], *o* (*ɔ*) = [ɔ] and for [ʃ], note *s* (*ʒ*). Lastly, the digramme *gb* carries a labio-vélaire opening [g̃b] (it is pronounced by an opening of a single movement not as it is in a sequence [g] + [b]). In Bénin for example, Yoruba is written with the alphabet of the national language and this shows the difference between Yoruba of Nigeria and that of Benin.

## Oral Vowels and Nasal Vowels of Yoruba

Close: [i], [u], [ĩ], [ũ]

Mid close: [e], [o]

Mid open: [ẽ], [ɔ̃]

Open: [a]

The nature of the first nasal vowel [ã] is always used in the Oyo dialect. This vowel is contrastive. It is always in function with vowel [ɔ̃]. It should be noted that nasal vowels are often represented by these vowels « n », « in », « un », « en », « on ». but there are exceptions in the case of [ñ] and [ɪ̃] for example: « inũ » which means « to the stomach » is pronounced as « inũ ».

The following areas of difficulty for Yorubas learning French have been identified :

French Vowel Phonemes: /ã /, /ø/, /œ/, /õ/ and /y/

French Consonant Phonemes: /ʒ/, /s/, /ʃ/, /z/, /v/.

Yoruba learning French have difficulties in distinguishing /ã/ and /e /; /u/, /y/; /i/ and /ε/. They pronounced "fille" and "fill" "vide" and "fide"; "comme" and "com" alike without any distinction of vowel length and quality. They also substitute /f/ for /v/, /s/ for /z/, /t/ for /ø/ and /d/ for /ə/.

Absence of some phonemes in Yoruba are responsible for the following errors. "Zaria" pronounced as "Saria" "Vide" as "Fide".

The low pitch consonants such as [t] [k] are hardly used but the achievement of [r] is observed in the Lagos dialect. There are no closing and centering diphthongs in Yoruba hence Yoruba learners of French find difficulties in the following: /ø/, /ʒ/, /ʃ/, /z/, /v/ and /ã/. Syllable final consonants are difficult for Yoruba students learning French. They find it difficult to distinguish between voiced and voiceless final consonants. The reason might be that most Yoruba words end in vowels and not in consonants. This is responsible for vowel insertion in French spelling, as in "écolu" for "école", "vieni" for "vien", etc. Consonant clusters whether initial or final in a syllable are also problematic, and there is the tendency for Yoruba students to drop one of the consonants, or even substitute the consonant cluster with another phoneme entirely. The consonant "l" is often not pronounced in words which end with "l" as in collatéral, communale, comportemental, etc. Significant differences are also found in the stress and into national patterns of French and Yoruba. Yoruba is a tonal language while French is not. French language relies on stress which is achieved by length, higher pitch or greater amplitude. This disparity makes Yoruba learners of French pronounce words or even speak without stressing any syllable or morpheme in sentences. Stress and intonation in French are capable of bringing about changes in meanings. Tones too in Yoruba are capable of bringing about changes in meaning, as in Oko (spear), Oko (hoe), Oko (husband) Oko (Vehicle), Igba (palm-wine tapper's climbing rope), Igba (garden egg), and Igba (time/period).

## Findings

Analysis of French and Yoruba phonological systems has revealed that: there are similarities and differences between French and Yoruba phonological systems.

## Differences

- a. Alphabets: there are 26 letters of the alphabet in French language, while there are 25 in Yoruba.
- b. Consonant and vowel phonemes: there are more consonant and vowel phonemes in French. There are no closing and centering diphthongs in Yoruba.
- c. Stress and Intonation: Yoruba has no stress and intonational pattern. Yoruba is however a tonal language.
- d. Vowel Harmony: Yoruba morphological system does not allow consonant clusters, a vowel must always follow a consonant. Most Yoruba words begin with vowels and end with vowels. This phenomenon accounts for the reason for vowel epenthesis in French loanwords.

Inflectional morpheme: Yoruba has no inflectional morphemes of the French types

### **Similarities:**

- a. Assimilation and Contraction. Both languages have these processes.
- b. Morphemes: There are free, bound and derivational morphemes in French and Yoruba.
- c. Synonyms and Antonyms: French and Yoruba have them.

It has been noted that the higher the degree of similarity between French and Yoruba phonological and morphological systems, the easier it is for the speakers of Yoruba to learn French. New or strange phonemes cause considerable "difficulty in bilingual education. The ease or difficulty of learning phonological categories, experienced by Yoruba's learning French can be attributed to:

- (a) The competing phonemic categories of French and Yoruba,
- (b) The allophonic membership of the phonemic categories, and
- (c) The distributions of the categories within their respective systems.

There are errors arising from interference, interlanguage phenomenon, imperfect mastery of first language (LI) before learning of a second language, and errors emanating from the linguistic differences between the two languages. The similarities have a facilitatory effect on learning because the systems in Yoruba can be transferred to French.

### **Conclusion**

A teacher who has done a contrastive study of French and Yoruba has a lot to gain. He knows the similarities and differences between the two languages. He also gets into grips with students' learning problems and has an insight into what constitutes an error and what is deviation from the norm. He understands the necessity for tact, patience and accommodation in teaching. Such a teacher is then better prepared in terms of the best methods of teaching any language. Contrastive analysis of French and Yoruba is a good method. The use of minimal pairs for teaching pronunciation and spelling has a salutary effect on teaching. Comparison of languages and cultures is very significant for these reasons:

- a. the need for the evaluation of language and culture contents of textbooks,
- b. the teacher has to prepare new teaching materials,
- c. the necessity for supplementing inadequate materials and
- d. for diagnosing difficulties arising from language variation or dialect differences. It is also significant for language testing purposes. Comparison exposes the teacher to diverse language testing techniques and enhances cultural understanding. It also helps in language research.

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