1 General Information

Yoruba is a Benue-Congo language spoken mainly in Nigeria by about 30 million native speakers. It is spoken in the western states of Nigeria. Its loan words are mostly from Arabic, English, Hausa and Igbo languages. Its dialects include: Egba, Ijebu, Oyo/Ibadan, Ekiti, Igbomina, Ijesa, Ikale, Ife and Onko.

2 Grammar

2.1 Phonology

2.1.1 The Yoruba Sound System

Yoruba has eighteen consonants (1) and seven oral vowels (2). It also has five nasal vowels (3).

(1)

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<th>Bilabial</th>
<th>Labiodental</th>
<th>Alveolar</th>
<th>Palatoalveolar</th>
<th>Palatal</th>
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1 If [l] and [n] indeed alternate as argued in Awobuluyi 1991, then the total number of the Yoruba consonants will be 17.

2 Yoruba nasal vowels are four if we take the allophonic variation between [ā] and [ɔ̄] into consideration.
Furthermore, Yoruba has three level tones: high, mid and low represented with [ˈ], [ˉ] and [̀] respectively. Tones usually occur on vowels. The three level tones determine the meanings that each word has in Yoruba. For example, a form that has the same form (i.e. vowels and consonants) can have different meanings depending on the tones that it has:

(4) Igba ‘two hundred’
Igbá ‘calabash’
Ìgbà ‘time’
Ìgba ‘the season when perennial crops have the least production’
Ìgbá ‘garden egg’
Igbà ‘climbing rope’

(5) ọkọ ‘husband’
ọkọ́ ‘hoe’
ọ́kọ̀ ‘spear’
ọ kọ̀ ‘vehicle’

Out of the three basic (high, mid and low) tones that are attested in the language, only the high tone cannot occur on a word initial vowel (Ola 1995, among others). This is why potential words such as those given in (6) are not possible in the language.

(6) * órí (cf. orí) ‘a head’
* ígò (cf. igò) ‘a bottle’
* épè (cf. épè) ‘a curse’
* éwúro (cf. ewúro) ‘bitter leaves’

3 The mid tone is usually left unmarked on vowels.
4 Syllabic nasals can also bear tones in Yoruba. They are sonorous (e.g. òrombó ‘orange’).
2.1.2. **The Syllable Structure**

Yoruba allow only open syllables. This is why the following forms are excluded from the language.

(7) * [a.tak]  (cf. Ata ‘pepper’)
    * [o.kef]  (cf. òkè ‘mountain’)
    * [i.lal]  (cf. ilá ‘okra’)
    * [i.bot]  (cf. ibò ‘election’)

Loan words that have closed syllables in the source languages are made to conform to the forms acceptable in the language:

(8) ṣẹ́ẹ̀tì  ‘shirt’
    kọ̀ọ̀sì  ‘course’

Here, vowel /i/ is inserted to re-syllabify the coda from the English loan.

Consonant clusters are not allowed in Yoruba either. Therefore consonant clusters in the loan words are re-syllabified. The most common method for consonant cluster simplification is vowel insertion. For example, vowel /i/ is inserted to simplify consonant clusters in (9).

(9) sìlèètì  ‘slate’
    kíláàsì  ‘class’
    dèrèbà  ‘driver’
    tèrélà  ‘trailer’

2.2 **Morphology**

Yoruba has some productive methods of word derivation. The main morphological processes in the language include: affixation, compounding and reduplication.
2.2.1 Affixation

Yoruba uses prefixation and infixation to derive new words. Each of the Yoruba oral vowels (except /u/ in the standard dialect) can be used as a prefix to derive a new word. Each of the usable six oral vowels – a, e, ẹ, i, o, ọ - has two forms as a prefix: mid toned and low toned. They are attached to verbs to derive nouns (10).

(10) i. Low toned prefixes

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ọ} + \text{dẹ} \ 'to be soft' & = \  \text{ọdẹ} \ 'idiot' \\
\text{i} + \text{ṣẹ} \ 'to break' & = \  \text{iṣẹ} \ 'poverty' \\
\text{è} + \text{gün} \ 'to pierce' & = \  \text{ègún} \ 'thorn' \\
\text{è} + \text{ró} \ 'to think' & = \  \text{èrò} \ 'thought' \\
\text{ò} + \text{kú} \ 'to die' & = \  \text{òkú} \ 'corpse' \\
\text{à} + \text{rè} \ 'to go' & = \  \text{àrè} \ 'wonderer'
\end{align*}
\]

ii Mid toned prefixes

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ẹ} + \text{ru} \ 'to carry' & = \  \text{ẹru} \ 'load' \\
\text{ọ} + \text{dẹ} \ 'to hunt' & = \  \text{ọdẹ} \ 'hunter' \\
\text{a} + \text{ṣẹ} \ 'to sieve' & = \  \text{aṣẹ} \ 'sieve' \\
\text{i} + \text{yọ} \ 'to rejoice' & = \  \text{iyọ} \ 'salt' \\
\text{e} + \text{we} \ 'to wrap' & = \  \text{ewe} \ 'leaves' \\
\text{o} + \text{dì} \ 'to fold' & = \  \text{odi} \ 'malice'
\end{align*}
\]

Infixes are (usually) inserted between two forms of the same word to derive a new word:

(11) ilé \ ‘house’ \ ilé + kí + ilé \ (ilékílé) \ ‘a bad house / any house’

ombo \ ‘child’ \ omọ+ kí + omọ \ (omọkọmọ) \ ‘a bad child’

2.2.2 Compounding

Yoruba also derive new words by combining two independent words:
2.2.2 Reduplication

Yoruba derive nominal items/adjectives from verbs through a partial reduplication of verbs (13). New nouns can also be derived by a total reduplication of an existing noun (14).

(13) jel ‘to eat’ = jije ‘edible’
    se ‘to cook’ = sise ‘cooked’

(14) omọ ‘child’ = omọomọ ‘grand-children’
    iyá ‘mother’ = iyá ayá ‘grand-mother’

2.3 Basic Word Order

Yoruba is an SVO (Subject Object Verb) language.

(15) Olu ra aga
    Olú buy chair
    ‘Olu bought a chair’

The subject position is always filled.

(16) i. O ra aga
    he buy chair
    ‘he bought a chair’

ii. * ra aga
    buy chair
    *for ‘he bought a chair’
This suggests that it is not a pro-drop language. The only context in which the subject noun phrase could be omitted is when a third person singular pronoun occurs before a negation marker kó or a future tense marker yóó:

(17) Kò lọ  
    NEG go  
    ‘He did not go’

(18) yóó lọ  
    will go  
    ‘He will go’

2.4 Parts of Speech

The parts of speech that are attested in Yoruba include Verbs, nouns, adjectives, prepositions.

2.4.1 Yoruba Verbs

Yoruba verbs are mainly monosyllabic:

(19) lọ  ‘to go’  
    sùn  ‘to sleep’  
    kú  ‘to die’  
    kán  ‘to break’  
    fẹ  ‘to like/love’

A small percentage of the Yoruba verbs have more than one syllable:

(20) gbàgbé  ‘to forget’  
    télè  ‘to follow’  
    láálí  ‘to insult’
Some of the Yoruba verbs are discontinuous morphemes. They are called splitting verbs in the traditional grammar (Awobuluyi 1978):

(21)  

a. **fihan** ‘to introduce’

\[\text{Olu fi Ade han Ola} \]
\[\text{Olu ? Ade appear Ola} \]
\[\text{‘Olu introduced Ade to Ola’} \]

b. **bajé** ‘to get spoiled/ to damage’

\[\text{Ojo ba isu naa jé} \]
\[\text{Ojo ? yam the ?} \]
\[\text{‘Ojo damaged the yam’} \]

More than one verb can occur in a sentence. This is usually referred to as serial verbal constructions.

(22) \[\text{Olu sáré lọ sí Ìbadán} \]
\[\text{Olu run go to Ibadan} \]
\[\text{‘Olu went to Ibadan quickly’} \]

Yoruba verbs do not inflect for tense. Two types of tenses – future and non-future- have been identified for Yoruba (Awoyale 1989, Bamgbose 1990). The future tense is marked with ‘yo•o•’:

(23) \[\text{Olu yóò lọ sí Ìbadán} \]
\[\text{Olu will go to Ibadan} \]
\[\text{‘Olu will go to Ibadan.’} \]

The non-future tense is usually associated with the High Tone Syllable
(24) Jímo ̀ọ́ lọ si Ìbàdàn
Jimo HTS go to Ibadan
‘Jimo went to Ibadan’

Yoruba also uses infinitival sentences:

(25) Olú ti gbà láti lọ si Ìbàdàn
Olu ASP accept to go to Ibadan
‘Olu has accepted to go to Ibadan’

Yoruba uses a lot of aspect and mood morphemes in its sentences. Some of them are listed below.

(26) ASPECT

ti ‘has’
ámáa ‘usually will …’
a ti máa ‘usually will …’
máa ŋ ‘usually is …/ was…’
ti máa ‘will have…’
ti ŋ ‘has/had been …’
ŋ PROGRESSIVE
kíi ‘usually don’t’

(27) MOOD

yóó ‘shall/will’
máa ‘shall/will’
gbódò ‘must/should’
lè ‘can’
níí will not
máà ‘do not’
ìbá ‘would have’
ibàà ‘even if’

Yoruba does not mark any agreement between the verb and the number feature of the nouns.

(28)  Adé fèràn owó
       Ade  like  money
       ‘Ade likes money’

(29)  Adé àti Olú fèràn owó
       Ade and Olu like money
       ‘Ade and Olu like money’

2.4.2 Yoruba nouns

Yoruba nouns are mainly disyllabic. Most of them start with vowels:

(30)  ògo ‘glory’
       ewà ‘beauty’
       asán ‘vanity’
       áánú ‘mercy’

Yoruba nouns do not inflect for number. There are no morphological differences between a singular and a plural noun. Compare the form for the noun ì•we• ‘book’ in (31) and (32).

(31)  Olú ra ìwé ní ìbàdàn
       Olu buy book at Ibadan
       ‘Olu bought a book at Ibadan’

(32)  Olú ra ìwé méjì ní ìbàdàn
       Olu buy book two at Ibadan
       ‘Olu bought two books at Ibadan’
2.4.3 Yoruba Prepositions

Each of the Yoruba prepositions has a verbal homophone- ni 'at', sí 'to', fún 'for', pèlù 'with', and la•ti 'from'. The prepositions can be divided into three groups with respect to stranding. The first group consists of the prepositions that can be stranded by moving their complement to a sentence initial position. Examples of the prepositions in this group are sí • 'to' and fún • 'for'.

(33) Kí ni Olú da omi sí__
    what be Olu pour water to
    ‘what did Olu pour water into?’

(34) Ta ni Adé ra àpò fún __
    who be Ade buy bag for
    ‘who did Ade buy a bag for?’

The second group consists of the prepositions which could not be stranded. Examples of the prepositions in this group are ti/la•ti 'from' and ni • 'at'

(35) * Ibo ni Olú ti wá láti __
    where be Olu ASP come from
    for: ‘where did Olu come from?’

(36) *Ibo ni Olú wà ní __
    where be Olu exist at
    for: where is Olu?

(35') Láti Ibo ni Olú ti wá
    from where be Olu ASP come
    where did Olu come from?’

(36') Ibo ni Olú wà
    Where be Olu exist
    ‘where is Olu?’
Only a pied-piping option (35') and (36') is available for the intended reading in (35) and (36). The preposition can optionally be dropped after pied-piping in an acceptable version of (36') (Adesola 1993).

The third group of preposition allow pied-piping and stranding. In addition, it could also allow resumption. A notable member of this group is pèlù ‘with’, which is followed by a resumptive pronoun in (37).

\[
\text{(37) } Kí \text{ ni } \text{ Adé } \text{ hó } \text{iṣu } \text{ pèlù } u \text{ rè} \\
\text{what be } \text{ Ade } \text{ peel } \text{ yam } \text{ with } \text{ it} \\
\text{‘what did Ade peel the yam with? / what did Ade use to peel the yam?’}
\]

2.5. Clause Structure

Yoruba uses mono-clausal and multi-clausal sentences. An example of the Yoruba mono-clausal (simple) sentences is the declarative sentence in (38).

\[
\text{(38) } \text{Ade } \text{́} \text{ ra } \text{ àpò} \\
\text{Ade buy bag} \\
\text{‘Ade bought a bag’}
\]

The multi-clausal sentences could be a compound sentence conjoined with a conjunction/disjunction (39a) or a complex sentence in which one sentence is embedded under another one (39b).

\[
\text{(39) a. } \text{Ade } \text{́} \text{ ra } \text{ àpò } \text{ṣùgbọ́n } \text{Olú } \text{ kò } \text{ mò} \\
\text{Ade buy bag but Olu NEG know} \\
\text{‘Ade bought a bag bought Olu did not know’}
\]

\[
\text{b. } \text{Olú } \text{sọ } \text{ pé } \text{Adé } \text{rí } \text{bàbá } \text{òun} \\
\text{Olu say that Ade see father him} \\
\text{‘Olu said that Ade saw his father’}
\]
The subordinator - *pé* ‘that’- is used to introduce the embedded clause in (39b). Another subordinator in the language is *kí* ‘that’ (40). (This subordinator is analyzed as a subjunctive marker in Dechaine (1999)).

(40) Ọlú gbà kí Adé rí bàbá ọun
      Olu accept that Ade see father him
     ‘Olu agreed that Ade should see his father’

The two subordinators can co-occur in a sentence:

(41) Ọlú sọ pé kí Adé lọ sì ìbàdàn
      Olu say that that Ade go to Ibadan
     ‘Olu said that Ade should go to Ibadan’

The third subordinator *tí* occurs mainly in relative clauses:

(42) Ọmọkùnrin tí Olú rí ní ọjà ní àná wá sì ìbàdàn ní òní
      boy that Olu see at market at yesterday come to Ibadan ? today
     ‘the boy who Olu saw at the market yesterday come to Ibadan today’

2.6 **Samples of Constructions**

2.6.1 **Focus Constructions**

Every nominal phrase/item can be moved to the sentence initial position for focusing in Yoruba.

(43) Ọlú ra iwé
      Olu buy book
     ‘Olu bought a book’

(44) Ọlú ra iwé
      Olu buy book
     ‘It was a book that Olu bought’
The focus particle in (44) is \textit{ni} (Awoyale 1995, 1997).

A verbal item can also be moved in Yoruba. However it must be nominalized as in (46).

\begin{enumerate}
\item[(45)] \texttt{Ọlọ́run jè ọba}  \\
\hspace{1cm} God be king  \\
\hspace{1cm} ‘God is a king’
\item[(46)] \texttt{Jijé ni Ọlọrun jè ọba}  \\
\hspace{1cm} ? be God be king  \\
\hspace{1cm} ‘It is actually the case that God is a king’
\end{enumerate}

A copy of the ‘moved’ verb is left in-situ as in (46). A resumptive pronoun can also occur in place of the moved element in Yoruba:

\begin{enumerate}
\item[(47)] \texttt{Adé ni a sòrò nípa rè}  \\
\hspace{1cm} Ade be we talk about him  \\
\hspace{1cm} ‘Ade was the person who we talked about’
\end{enumerate}

The sentence is actually ungrammatical if the resumptive pronoun \textit{rè} is omitted in (47). (48) is excluded.

\begin{enumerate}
\item[(48)] *\texttt{Adé ni a sòrò nípa _}  \\
\hspace{1cm} Ade be we talk about
\end{enumerate}

On the other hand, resumptive pronouns are not allowed at all in some contexts. For example, when the noun phrase complement of a verb is moved, a resumptive pronoun cannot occur in its place. (49) is acceptable while (50) is not acceptable.

\begin{enumerate}
\item[(49)] \texttt{Àga ni Àdió rà ___}  \\
\hspace{1cm} Chair be Adio buy  \\
\hspace{1cm} ‘It was a chiar that Adio bought’
\end{enumerate}
2.6.2 Serial Verb Constructions

Yoruba allows a sequence of more than one verb in a single mono-clausal sentence:

(51) Olu PROG cook meat sell

‘Olu is cooking meats and selling them’

(52) Ade PROG buy meat eat

‘Ade is buying meats and eating them’

One of the most noticeable features of the serial verb constructions is that there is only one possible tense marker for all the verbs in a single clause. There is only one tense node in each clause. One of the other noticeable features is that the transitive serial verbs tend to share objects among themselves (Baker 1989). For example, the verb se• ‘to cook’ and ta• ‘to sell’ are sharing the object noun phrase ẹran ‘meat in (51).

2.6.3 Interrogative Sentences

Yoruba uses Yes/no questions and content questions. The yes/no question particles are attached to the sentence initial position (53) or the sentence final position (54).

(53) QM Olu come

‘Did Olu come?’

(54) Olu come QM

‘Did Olu come?’
The other yes/no question markers that can be attached to the sentence initial position are: ńjẹ́, ụnụ, and ńgbọ́. The other yes/no question markers that can occur in the sentence final position are: ni, and kọ́. The sentence initial yes/no question marker and the sentence final yes/no question markers can co-occur in a sentence:

(55) Ọ̀ṣẹ̀ Ọlú wá bí
QM Ọlú come QM
‘Did Olu come?’

However it is not possible to use a sentence initial yes/no question marker at the sentence final position or vice-versa.

Content questions mostly involve moving one phrase to the sentence initial position for questioning:

(56) Ọ̀dẹ̀ ra ́iwé
Olu buy book
‘Olu bought a book’

(57) Kí ni Ọ̀dẹ̀ rà ___
what be Ade buy
‘What did Ade buy?’

A question noun phrase can appear in-situ in cases involving multiple question nouns.

(58) Kí ni ta ni rà ___
what be who buy
‘What did who buy?’ (‘or what was the thing that who bought’)

2.6.4 Logophoric Constructions

Yoruba requires that a particular pronoun be used when someone’s perspective is being reported. In (59), the third person singular pronoun ọ̀un has to be used if the perspective of
Olú is being reported. In that case, òun must be the same person as Olú. On the other hand, another third person singular pronoun o is not required to be the same person as Olú (60).

(59) Olú sọ pé òun wá
    Olu say that he come
    ‘Olu said that he came’

(60) Olú sọ pé ó wá
    Olu say that he come
    ‘Olu said that he came’
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