

**Yoruba: A Grammar Sketch: Version 1.0**  
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**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).<sup>1</sup> It also has five nasal vowels (3)<sup>2</sup>.

(1)

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Labio-velar	Glottal
Stop	b		t d		ɟ	k g	k͡p g͡b	
Fricative		f	s	ʃ				h
Nasal	m		n					
Trill			r					
Lateral			l					
Glide					y		w	

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

<sup>2</sup> Yoruba nasal vowels are four if we take the allophonic variation between [ã] and [õ] into consideration.

(2)	i	u	(3)	ĩ	ũ
	e	o			
	ɛ	ɔ		ẽ	õ
		a			ã

Furthermore, Yoruba has three level tones: high, mid and low represented with [ ´ ], [ ¯ ] and [ ˘ ] respectively.<sup>3</sup> Tones usually occur on vowels.<sup>4</sup> 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'  
 ọkó 'hoe'  
 ọkò 'spear'  
 ọkẹ '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. ìgò) 'a bottle'  
 \* épè (cf. èpè) 'a curse'  
 \* éwúro (cf. ewúro) 'bitter leaves'

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<sup>3</sup> The mid tone is usually left unmarked on vowels.

<sup>4</sup> 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. ìbò 'election')

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

- (8) ɣɛ̀ɛ̀ti 'shirt'  
kò̀ò̀sì '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) sílɛ̀ɛ̀ti 'slate'  
kíláàsì 'class'  
dɛ̀rɛ̀bà 'driver'  
tɛ̀rɛ̀là '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

ò + dẹ 'to be soft'	=	òdẹ	'idiot'
ì + şẹ 'to break'	=	ìşẹ	'poverty'
ẹ + gún 'to pierce'	=	ẹgún	'thorn'
è + rò 'to think'	=	èrò	'thought'
ò + kú 'to die'	=	òkú	'corpse'
à + rè 'to go'	=	àrè	'wonderer'

ii Mid toned prefixes

ẹ + rù 'to carry'	=	ẹrù	'load'
ọ + dẹ 'to hunt'	=	ọdẹ	'hunter'
a + şẹ 'to sieve'	=	aşẹ	'sieve'
i + yò 'to rejoice'	=	iyò	'salt'
e + wè 'to wrap'	=	ewè	'leaves'
o + dì 'to fold'	=	odì	'malice'

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'
	ọmọ 'child'	ọmọ + kí + ọmọ	(ọmọkọmọ) 'a bad child'

### 2.2.2 Compounding

Yoruba also derive new words by combining two independent words:

- (12) ẹran 'meat' + oko 'farm' = ẹranko 'animal'  
 ìyá 'mother' + ọkọ 'husband' = iyakọ 'mother-in-law'

### 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) jẹ 'to eat' = jíjẹ 'edible'  
 sẹ 'to cook' = sísẹ 'cooked'
- (14) ọmọ 'child' = ọmọọmọ 'grand-children'  
 ìyá 'mother' = ìyá àyá 'grand-mother'

### 2.3 Basic Word Order

Yoruba is an SVO (Subject Object Verb) language.

- (15) Olú ra aga  
 Olu 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 *kò* or a future tense marker *yóò*:

(17) *Kò lọ*  
NEG go  
'He did not go'

(18) *yóò lo*  
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'  
*tẹlé* '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. **fi hàn** 'to introduce'

Olu **fi** Ade **han** Ola

Olu ? Ade appear Ola

'Olu introduced Ade to Ola'

b. **bàjẹ** 'to get spoiled/ to damage'

Ojo **ba** isu naa **jẹ**

Ojo ? yam the ?

'Ojo damaged the yam'

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

(22) Olú **sáré lẹ** sí Ìbàdàn

Olu run go to Ibadan

'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) Olú yóò lẹ sí Ìbàdàn

Olu will go to Ibadan

'Olu will go to Ibadan.'

The non-future tense is usually associated with the High Tone Syllable

(24) Jímoṛ ọ̀ lọ̀ sí Ìbàdàn  
Jimo HTS go to Ibadan  
'Jimo went to Ibadan'

Yoruba also uses infinitival sentences:

(25) Olú ti gbà **láti** lọ̀ sí 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 n	'usually is .../ was...'
ti máa	'will have...'
ti n	'has/had been ...'
n	PROGRESSIVE
kĩ	'usually don't'

(27) MOOD

yóo	'shall/will'
máa	'shall/will'
gbòdò	'must/should'
lè	'can'
níí	<i>will not</i>
máà	'do not'
ìbá	'would have'



ìbáà            'even if'

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

(28) Adé fẹ̀ràn owó  
Ade like money  
'Ade likes money'

(29) Adé àti Olú fẹ̀ràn 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'  
ẹ̀wà 'beauty'  
asán 'vanity'  
àánú '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 /i•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- *ní* 'at', *sí* 'to', *fún* 'for', *pèlú* '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 *si* •'to' and *fu*•n '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 *pẹ̀lú* 'with', which is followed by a resumptive pronoun in (37).

- (37) Kí ni Adé hó işu pẹ̀lú u rẹ̀  
what be Ade peel yam with it  
*'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).

- (38) Adé ra àpò  
Ade buy bag  
*'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).

- (39) a. Adé ra àpò şùgbón Olú kò mò  
Ade buy bag but Olu NEG know  
*'Ade bought a bag bought Olu did not know'*
- b. Olú sọ pé Adé rí bàbá òun  
Olu say that Ade see father him  
*'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) Olú gbà kí Adé rí bàbá òun  
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) Olú sọ pé kí Adé lọ sí 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 ojà ní ànà wá sí 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) Olú ra ìwé  
Olu buy book  
'Olu bought a book'

- (44) Ìwé ni Olú rà \_\_\_\_  
book be Olu buy  
'It was a book that Olu bought'

The focus particle in (44) is *ni* (Awoyale 1995, 1997).

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

(45) Ọlọrun **jẹ** ọba  
God be king  
'God is a king'

(46) **Jijẹ** ni Ọlọrun **jẹ** ọba  
? be God be king  
'It is actually the case that God is a king'

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:

(47) **Adé** ni a sọrò nípa **rẹ**  
Ade be we talk about him  
'Ade was the person who we talked about'

The sentence is actually ungrammatical if the resumptive pronoun *rẹ* is omitted in (47). (48) is excluded.

(48) \***Adé** ni a sọrò nípa \_\_\_\_  
Ade be we talk about

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.

(49) Àga ni Àdió rà \_\_\_\_  
Chair be Adio buy  
'It was a chair that Adio bought'

- (50) \***Àga** ni Àdió rà á  
Chair be Adio buy it

### 2.6.2 Serial Verb Constructions

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

- (51) Olú ñ se ẹran tà  
Olu PROG cook meat sell  
'Olu is cooking meats and selling them'

- (52) Adé ñ ra ẹran jẹ  
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) **Şé** Olú wá  
QM Olu come  
'Did Olu come?'

- (54) Olú wá bí  
Olu come QM  
'Did Olu come?'

The other yes/no question markers that can be attached to the sentence initial position are: *njé*, *tábí/ábí*, and *n̄gbó*. The other yes/no question markers that can occur in the sentence final position are: *ni*, and *kó*. The sentence initial yes/no question marker and the sentence final yes/no question markers can co-occur in a sentence:

- (55) *Ṣé Olú wá bí*  
 QM Olu 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) *Adé ra ìwé*  
 Olu buy book  
 'Olu bought a book'

- (57) *Kí ni Adé 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 *o•un* has to be used if the perspective of

*Olu* is being reported. In that case, *oun* must be the same person as *Olu*. On the other hand, another third person singular pronoun *o•* is not required to be the same person as *Olu* (60).

(59) *Olu* sọ pé *oun* wá  
Olu say that he come  
'Olu said that he came'

(60) *Olu* sọ pé *ó* wá  
Olu say that he come  
'Olu said that he came'



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