

On the function of nasality in Proto Gbe nouns

Towards Proto-Niger-Congo: Comparison and Reconstruction, 2nd International Congress, Paris, September 1-3, 2016

1. A brief introduction to Gbe languages

- Spoken in Nigeria, Benin Republic, Togo and Ghana
- Divided in five branches by Capo (1991): Ewe, Gen, Aja, Fon and Phla-Phera
- Divided in two branches by Stewart (1994): ((Ewe + Gen) + Aja) + (Fon + Phla-Phera))
- Divided in three branches by Kluge (2005): ((Ewe+Gen)+(Aja)+(Fon+Phla-Phera))
- The most widely spoken Gbe languages are Ewe and Fon
- Gbe has been either classified as 'New Kwa' (Bennett & Sterk 1977) or as Volta Niger (comprising the languages formerly known as West Benue Congo; Blench 2006)

2. The suffix -i in Gbe

2.1. Its grammatical functions

- According to Capo (1991), it would mark compound nouns, diminutives, nouns similar to the underived base, and instruments.

(1) Illustration of the functions of the suffix -i in (Proto) Gbe according Capo (1991)

- a) *asɔ̄gwe or *asɔ̄gwi 'type of drum' (Proto Gbe) ← asɔ 'music instrument' + go 'gourd' + i 'compound marker'
- b) agá̄lɛ 'scorpion' (Ewe) ← agá̄lɔ 'crab' + i 'similarity'
- c) tɛ́ 'small head' (Ewe) ← tá 'head' + i 'diminutive'
- d) swe 'small cutlass' (Fon) ← so 'to cut' + i 'instrumental'

Some issues with this analysis

- As pointed out by Gbeto (1997), diminutives are actually formed through the suffixation of -i along with a high tone.

- e) gwí, gwé 'small gourd' (Ewe) go 'gourd' + i 'diminutive'

- The Fon examples in (2) raise an issue, however, as there is no semantic distinction between the forms with and without -i

(2) Examples showing free alternation between Fon nouns with and without -i

- f) Fon távo, távwe 'table'
- g) Fon akotó, akweté 'snail'
- h) Fon gwlé, ogló 'kind of fish'

- According to Gbeto (1997), in these cases, the tone would have been the actual semantic marker of the composite i + tone suffix. In these cases, the tone would have been elided leaving some examples freely alternating with or without -i, without any semantic or syntactic distinction.

Some issues with Gbeto's analysis:

- There is no evidence, to my knowledge, of these examples having lost their tone.
- It does not take into account the source of the words in (3):

(3) Source language of some Fon nouns with and without -i

- i) Fon gó, gwé 'greed' ← Yoruba ogo 'greedy person'¹
- j) Fon lo, lwe 'ghost' ← Yoruba oro 'religious cult'

¹ Bowen (1858 :60): "a person sitting at one's door daily to shame him into the payment of a debt"

- k) Fon távo, távwe 'table' ← Yoruba itafo 'table'
 l) Fon akotó, akweté 'snail' ← Yoruba ikoto, okoto 'snail'
 m) Fon gwílé, ogló 'kind of fish' ← Unidentified language *og(o)ro or *og(o)lo

- All these examples showing a free alternation with and without the suffix -i are loanwords.
- Moreover, some other loanwords only marked by -i in Fon do not differ semantically from their source (4):

(4) Foreign origin of some Fon nouns marked by -i

- n) Fon gláswe, gláse 'glass' ← Unidentified language (ultimately from English gla:s) *glaso 'glass'
 o) Fon akpálwe, akpále 'guinea fowl' ← Yoruba akparò 'partridge'
 p) Fon agbadé, gbadé 'corn' ← Yoruba àgbàdo, igbàdo 'corn'

- It would seem that -i was used to mark loanwords through their integration in Fon
- Most loanwords are however unmarked by -i as one can see in (5)

(5) Foreign origin of some Fon nouns marked by -i

- q) Fon agbadǎá 'war girdle' ← Yoruba agbadǎa 'war girdle'
 r) Fon agbaǎa 'kind of male gown' ← Yoruba agbada 'kind of male gown'
 s) Fon akla ← Yoruba? akara
 t) Fon alǎ 'velvet' ← Yoruba arǎ
 u) Fon aǎǎ 'corpse stench' ← Yoruba ayǎ 'stench'

- Why would some loanwords be marked by -i and not others?

(6) Number of Fon nouns with different phonological structures, marked and unmarked by -i according to Rassinoux & Sequrola (2000)

	oCV(CV)	aCaCo	aCaCa	aCǎ
Number of attested nouns unmarked by -i with such a phonological structure	0	2	45	26
Number of attested nouns marked by -i with such a phonological structure	4	3	0	0

- -i would thus be a nominalizing affix marking loanwords with an uncommon structure
- This feature would be consistent with another feature of -i, which is of making new words out of ungrammatical structures, that is compounding
- The function of marking loanwords with an uncommon phonological structure seems to be found in Ewe, although only as vestigial:

(7) Example of Ewe loanwords marked by -i

- v) Ewe safui² 'key' ← Portuguese? 'favi + -i
 w) Ewe atrakpwe 'stairs' ← Dutch tǎap 'stairs' + -i

- A more crucial example concerns the name of one of the 16 Ifa divination signs in Fon as can be seen in (x)

- x) Proto Gbe túlúkpǎ 'divination sign' ← Yoruba? *òtúrúkpǎ³ 'divination sign' + -i

- túlúkpǎ was most likely marked by -i because it had a structure uncommon in Proto Gbe, rather than because of -i's other functions (similarity, instrumental, compounds). Indeed I have not been able to reconstruct a word with this structure (*(o)CuCuCa) in Proto Gbe.
- -i as a nominalizer of loanwords with uncommon phonological structures and ungrammatical structures can thus be reconstructed for Proto Gbe.

² For this tonal configuration, cf. Rongier (2004)

³ Manfredi (2008) gives òtúlúkpǎ for the Yoruba form, but Yoruba ǎ often goes back to *ǎ, especially after labial consonants. This fits better with the name of the sign in other languages which all have a /a/. Even still, òtúlúkpǎ + i could have given rise to *túlúkpǎ (< **túlúkpǎ) in Proto Gbe.

(11) Examples of Proto Gbe nasal harmony loss in Ewe

- f) Proto Gbe */xɔ́fɛ̃/ ~ * [xɔ́fɛ̃] Ewe /xɔ́lɛ̃/ 'friend' ~ [xɔ́lɛ̃], (not *[xɔ́lɛ̃]) 'friend'
g) Proto Gbe */agabɛ̃/ ~ *[agɛ̃mɛ̃] 'chameleon' → Fon and Gen [agɛ̃mɛ̃] vs Ewe [agɛ̃mɛ̃] 'chameleon'
h) Proto Western Gbe */agalɛ̃/ 'crab' → Gen /agɛ̃lɛ̃/ ~ [agɛ̃lɛ̃] vs Ewe /aɛ̃galɛ̃/ ~ [agɛ̃lɛ̃]

- It is thus likely that nasality as a marker of new nouns was found in Proto Gbe, but lost in Ewe along with vowel nasality in several cases and nasal spreading.
- This would also explain the observation made by Gbeto (1997) about –i being more widespread in Ewe than in Fon; it would simply be because it would have replaced the lost nasality by –i in all contexts.

5. Conclusions

- The suffix –i in Proto Gbe nouns was marking similarity, perhaps instrumentality, but also newly integrated nouns with atypical phonological and grammatical structure
- In Fon, this latter function is expressed by both –i and nasality, which are in complementary distribution
- In Ewe, only –i is found in this respect
- The situation in Proto Gbe was probably similar to that in Fon as phonological nasality was largely lost in Ewe
- Noun marking nasality would however need to be found in other Gbe languages to vindicate this hypothesis.

6. References

- P. Bennett & J. Sterk (1977), South Central Niger–Congo: A reclassification'. *Studies in African Linguistics*, 8, pp. 241–273.
- R. Blench (2006), *Archaeology, language, and the African past*, Lanham: Altamira Press.
- T.J. Bowen (1858), *Grammar and dictionary of the Yoruba language, with an introductory description of the country and people of Yoruba*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution.
- H.B.C. Capo (1991), *A comparative phonology of Gbe*, Berlin; New York: Foris Publications; Garome, Bénin: Labo Gbe.
- S. Capo Chichi (2016), La nasalité en fon comme un marqueur de catégorie nominale, Presentation at the SRPP, 19 February 2016, Université Paris III, Laboratoire de Phonétique et de Phonologie.
- F. Gbeto (1997), Le maxi du Centre-Bénin et du Centre-Togo: une approche autosegmentale et dialectologique d'un parler Gbe de la section Fon, Köln: R. Köppe.
- B. Kligueh (2001), *Le vodu à travers son encyclopédie la géomancie afà*, Paris: Afridic.
- A. Kluge (2005), A synchronic lexical study of Gbe language varieties: the effects of different similarity judgment criteria, *Linguistic Discovery*, Volume 3, Issue 1, pp. 22-53.
- V. Manfredi (2008), Áfa, the Nri-Igbo counterpart of Ifá, Conference on Ifá divination in Africa & the Diaspora, Harvard University, 14 March 2008.
- J. Rassinoux & B. Segurola (2000), *Dictionnaire fon-français*, Madrid: SMA Société des Missions Africaines.
- J. Rongier (2004), *Parlons Ewé, Langue et culture du Togo*, Paris, Budapest, Torino: L' Harmattan.
- D. Westermann (1907), *Grammatik der Ewe-Sprache*. Berlin: D. Reimer.
- D. Westermann (1973), *Evefiala or Ewe-English dictionary: Gbesela Yeye or English-Ewe-dictionary*, Nendeln: Kraus reprint.