

THE CLASS SYSTEM OF IGEDE NOUNS

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Various scholars have claimed that Igede is a noun class language. A full study of the class system, however, has not been carried out and documented. Nouns carry class prefixes which are mainly vowels. The vowel prefixes distinguish not only sets of nouns, but also singular and plural nouns. One crucial aspect of the class system is the symmetrical pattern of the class markers along the lines of vowel height, roundness, frontness and the feature ATR.

Quelques chercheurs sont de l'opinion que igede est une langue à classes. Pourtant jusqu'à présent une étude approfondie de ce système de classes n'a pas été faite et documentée. Les noms portent des préfixes qui consistent surtout des groupes de noms, mais aussi entre singulier et pluriel. Un aspect important de ce système c'est le schème symétrique des marqueurs de classe selon la hauteur, l'arrondissement, l'antériorité et le trait ATR des voyelles.

0. INTRODUCTION

Igede is an Idomoid language that has been extensively studied¹. It is spoken in the Oju Local Government Area of Benue State. Various scholars have revealed that the language is a Noun Class language, where sets of nouns are distinguished by means of affixes. Such affixes further distinguish between singular and plural nouns (Welmers, 1973). While it has long been established that Igede is a noun class language, a well-documented study of the class system does not exist. For instance, scholars have shown that the language makes use of vowel prefixes to distinguish nouns, but have not shown how they interact with the vowels of the root morpheme. The concord system has also not received attention.

The present study focuses on the nature of the class system in the language. We look at the prefixal morphemes and their interaction with vowels of the roots, establish the classes of nouns, and also focus on the concord system.

1. VOWELS OF IGEDE

Various studies claim that Igede operates a 10-vowel system (Bergman, 1971, 1974; Armstrong, 1981, 1983, 1985) as follows:²

i			u
	i		ɯ
	e		o
	ɛ	ə	ɔ
		a	

Table 1

Relying solely on oral perception, our study with three language helpers (from Oju) shows a 9-vowel system. The schwa [ə] does not occur in the speech of these informants. When they were asked to produce lexical items containing the schwa taken from Armstrong (1983, 1985), the following was recorded:

¹Such studies include: Bergman (1971), Bergman and Bergman (1974), Armstrong (1981, 1983, 1985) among others.

²The following symbols have been used: i lower high front unrounded vowel; ɯ lower high back rounded vowel; e lower mid front unrounded vowel; ɔ lower mid back rounded vowel; ə lower mid central unrounded vowel (schwa); dʒ voiced alveopalatal affricate.

1.	From Armstrong	Present informants	
	ugb̩	ugbe	'skin'
	ijw̩	ijwa	'bee'
	el̩	ele	'louse'
	il̩	ula	'bow'
	y̩	yɛ	'say'

While oral perception is considered not as reliable as instrumental analysis, we think the schwa has probably undergone merger with other vowels in the speech of our present informants.

One important point regarding schwa is that it does not occur in word-initial position in the lexical items presented in Bergman and Bergman (1974) and Armstrong (1983, 1985)³. The immediate focus of this paper is on the initial vowels of the nouns and not those in medial or word-final positions, and since schwa tends to be restricted in its occurrence, we feel it is not crucial to the present discussion. The 9-vowel system, as the basis of our own study is presented in Table 2:

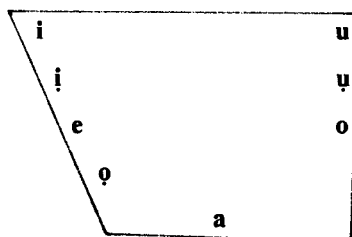


Table 2

2. NOUNS AND GRAMMATICAL NUMBER

Grammatical number of singular and plural is overtly marked in Igede by the use of vowels. As already mentioned, nouns are vowel initial so that when a consonant initial noun is borrowed into the language, a vowel is attached before the initial consonant to make the borrowed item conform to the morpheme structure condition of the language.

To effect plurality, the initial vowel of a singular noun is normally substituted with another appropriate one. The substitution is patterned, and one of the main objectives of this presentation is to show the patterning that underlies the substitution. Consider the following:

2.	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>	
a.	u --> e		
	ūdō	ēdō	'basket'
	ùbè	èbè	'room'
	ùkùnógú	èkùnógú	'bone'
	ugbódu	egbódu	'shoe'
	ūdžwo	ēdžwo	'thorn'
	úgbōdžì	égbōdžì	'orange'

³Armstrong (1983) alone contains over 100 items.

b. ɸ --> a	úrū	árū	'ear'
	ūfū	āfū	'leaf'
	ùgbò	àgbò	'plantain'
	ūlẹ	ālẹ	'hoe'
	úbwó	ábwó	'hand'
c. o --> i	okùnǐ	ikùnǐ	'nose'
	ógò	ígò	'calabash'
	obwé	ibwé	'door'
	olóhí	ilóhí	'thief'
	òdzígá	ìdzígá	'rat'
d. o --> i	ònú	ínú	'mouth'
	òhò	ìhò	'soup'
	òbá	ìbá	'mat'
	ògbẹ	ìgbẹ	'penis'
	òtá	ìtá	'pot'
e. e --> a	émẹ	ámẹ	'breast'
	érù	árù	'farm'
	éta	áta	'leg'
	elẹlẹ	alẹlẹ	'tongue'
	èdzwó	ádzwó	'stone'

2.1 SUBSTITUTION PRINCIPLE

Before discussing in detail the substitution principle we present an overview of the substitution:

3. a. The substitution preserves the vowel harmony constraint in the language.
- b. All the rounded vowels are utilized in the singular group i.e. [u, ɸ, o, ɔ]
- c. All the unrounded vowels except [ɛ] are utilized in the plural group i.e. [i, ɪ, e, a]
- d. Unrounded [ɛ] is utilized in the singular group
- e. There is a cross-height pairing between the singular and plural prefixes.

Two important principles are noticeable from the above. The first relates to 3a i.e. the harmony preserving constraint, and the second relates to 3e i.e. cross-height pairing of the singular and plural prefixes.

Igede operates a vowel harmony system whereby the vowels are divided into two harmonic sets, viz:

Set I:	[i, u, e, o]
Set II:	[ɪ, ɸ, ɛ, ɔ, a]

The feature [ATR] underlies the harmony system so that vowels agree in their [ATR] feature within a phonological word. The harmony constraint is normally preserved except for a few cases where [a] co-occurs with vowels in set I (Abiodun, 1986).

Within the singular prefixes are both [+ATR] and [-ATR] vowels:

[+ATR]	[-ATR]
u-	ɸ-
o-	ɔ-
	ɛ-

These prefixes harmonize with the [ATR] feature of the root vowels as shown in 2 above. Similarly the plural prefixes consist of both [+ATR] and [-ATR]:

[+ATR]	[-ATR]
i-	i-
e-	a-
	a-

Because of the harmony constraint, only [+ATR] plural prefixes can substitute for [-ATR] singular prefixes, while [-ATR] ones substitute for [-ATR]. The pairing on the basis of the substitution is illustrated thus:

4.	<u>Sing</u>	<u>Plur</u>		<u>Sing</u>	<u>Plur</u>
a. [+ATR]	u-	e-	b. [-ATR]	ɯ-	a-
	o-	i-		ɛ-	a-
				ɔ-	ɛ-

With regard to cross-height pairing, a singular prefix does not normally agree in height with its plural substitute. A high vowel does not pair with another high vowel. Combining this cross-height principle with the harmony preserving principle, the substitution pattern can be summarised as in Tables 3 and 4:

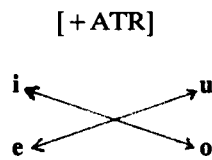


Table 3

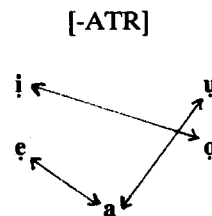


Table 4

We observe a non-one-to-one pairing in Table 4 and also the utilization of unrounded [ɛ] in the singular group. These two observations do not characterize Table 3. The asymmetrical patterning may be due to the assumed merger of schwa [ə], but then we expect that the merger should also have consequences on the [+ATR] vowels, as we believe schwa belonged to the [+ATR] set. We tend to believe this because schwa co-occurs with [+ATR] vowels in all items (where it occurs) in the works of Armstrong (1983), Bergman (1971) and Bergman and Bergman (1974).

We believe that [ɯ] pairs with [a] because [a] is the lowest [-ATR] in the vowel system. Note that [u] pairs with [e] the lowest [+ATR]. The [ɯ] [a] pairing leaves [ɛ] stranded, and since it appears that the language favours maximal utilization of the vowels, [ɛ] is used as a singular prefix. Since there is no other stranded vowel with which [ɛ] can pair it pairs with [a], which [ɯ] is already paired with.

The question remains, however, why [ɛ] does not pair with either [u] or [i]. We guess that it does not pair with [u] because the language does not favour round vowels in the plural group. One expects a pairing with [i] because [ɔ], which is on a level with [ɛ], pairs with [i]. However, it probably does not do so because it is the 'odd man out' in the singular group; being the only unrounded vowel, it behaves contrary to expectation. It is equally possible that it pairs with [a] because [a] is the only adjacent unrounded [-ATR] with no intervening [+ATR] vowel. Note that [ɛ] is between [e]

and [i]. We conclude that one cannot rule out the possibility that the assumed merger of schwa is responsible for the asymmetrical pairing, nor can we disregard the other possibilities mentioned. It is equally possible that a combination of these assumed possibilities account for the asymmetrical pairing patterns.

3. CLASSES OF NOUNS

We postulate five different classes, based on the tongue root position. Since the harmony constraint determines the use of prefixes we recognise five classes as follows:

5.	<u>Classes</u>	<u>Class marker</u>	<u>Prefixes</u>
	1	U-	u-/u-
	2	I-	i-/i-
	3	E-	e-/e-
	4	O-	o-/o-
	5a	a-	
	5b	a-	

The pairing patterns (cf. 2.1 above), however, are determined both by the cross-height constraint and the harmony constraint, so that the five classes relate to each other through the pairing patterns. For instance, class 1 pairs with class 3 as [u] pairs with [e], class 2 relates to class 4 as [i] pairs with [o] and [i] with [o].

4. CONCORD SYSTEM

Other features that one may find in a noun-class language are an overtly-marked concord agreement between nouns and any element that follows them (i.e. modifiers and verbal elements), and a semantic relationship between nouns within a class. While no semantic relationship can be found between nouns in a class, there is a concord system within the language. Each noun modifier in a grammatical construction normally takes a concord marker that agrees with the noun (being modified). Similarly, a verb phrase takes a concord marker, a marker that also refers to the head noun. We illustrate this in 6.

6a i.	ūdō basket	ótúkà big	ójénwe new	òkpókpo one	'one new big basket'
ii.	ēdō baskets	ítúkà big	íjénwe new	ìmíjè two	'two new big baskets'
iii.	uļẹ hoe	ótúkà big	ójénwe new	òkpokpo one	'one new big hoe'
iv.	ale hoes	ítúkà big	íjénwe new	íta three	'three new big hoes'
v.	ógò calabash	ótúkà big	ójénwe new	òkpokpo one	'one new big calabash'
vi.	ígò calabashes	ítúkà big	íjénwe new	írú five	'five new big calabashes'
vii.	ọbà mat	ótúkà big	ójénwe new	òkpokpo one	'one new big mat'
viii.	ìbá mats	ítúkà big	íjénwe new	ìmíjè two	'two new big mats'
ix.	ẹdzwọ stone	ódzídze small	ójénwe new	òkpokpo one	'one new small stone'
x.	ādzwọ stones	ídzídze small	íjénwe new	íta three	'three new small stones'

xi.	òkpélè sheep	ódzídzé small	òkpokpo one	'one small sheep'
xii.	ìkpélò sheep (pl)	ídzídzé small	ìnè four	'four small sheep'
b i.	òkpélò sheep	ógbú die		'The sheep died'
ii.	ìkpélò sheep (pl)	ígbú die		'The sheep (pl) died'
iii.	òkpélò sheep	òhụ scatter	ítẹ pepper	'The sheep scattered pepper'
iv.	ìkpélò sheep (pl)	ìhụ scatter	ítẹ pepper	'The sheep (pl) scattered pepper'

We observe that concord markers have the forms: **o-**, **o-**, **i-**, **i-**.

The variation as revealed by the data (cf. 5.) is determined by the number (sg or pl) of the head noun, and the vowel harmony constraint in the language. When the head noun is singular, the concord marker takes the forms [o/o]. If it is plural they are [i/i] e.g.

ūdō	ótúkà	ójénwe	okpokpo
édō	ítúkà	ìjénwe	ìta

That we have two forms for the singular [o/o] and two for the plural [i/i] can be traced to the harmony constraint. We said earlier that vowels within a phonological word agree in relation to the [ATR] feature. To preserve the harmony constraint the [ATR] feature of the stem determines that the concord prefix [o/i] goes with [ATR] e.g.

ójénwe, ìmíjè, òkpokpo, ùjénwe

while [i/o] goes with [-ATR] e.g.

ítúkà ótúkà ìta

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