THE DERIVATION OF GENITIVE NOUNS IN FOUR BENUE-CONGO LANGUAGES: YORUBA, UKAAN, IGEDE AND EBIRA

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Languages within a family are supposed to share similarities at different levels of grammar as clear evidence of their genetic relationship. The four Nigerian Languages studied in this paper: Yoruba, Ebira, Igede and Ukaan are according to scholars genetically related. One expects on account of this to see areas of similarity as evidence of the relatedness. In this paper, we present morphological evidence that suggests that the languages must probably have been related in the distant past.

Les langues qui appartiennent à la même famille doivent avoir certains points de convergence qui sont une bonne justification de leur rapport génétique. Les quatre langues nigérianes étudiées dans cette communication: Yoruba, Ebira, Igede et Ukaan ont un rapport génétique selon les opinions des intellectuels. Compte tenu de cette constatation, on espère de voir les points de convergence comme une manifestation de leur rapport génétique. Dans cette communication, nous montrons un rapport morphologique qui semble indiquer que ces langues ont eu un rapport génétique dans un passé lointain.

0. INTRODUCTION

Scholars in the area of comparative linguistics have pointed out that Yoruba, Ukaan, Igede and Ebira are genetically related languages. The languages, they claim, belong to the large Benue-Congo family (Williamson 1989). Each of the languages belongs, however, to a different family within the larger family. Yoruba, for instance, belongs to the Yoruboid sub-family (Akinkugbe 1978, Adetugbo 1967, Capo 1989); Ukaan belongs to the Edoid group (Agoyi 1998); Igede belongs to the Idomoid group (Armstrong 1981, 1983, 1989); while Ebira belongs to the Nupoid group (Blench 1989).

Because of the relatedness of these languages, they share similarities at all levels of language structure, and as one would expect, they share differences on account of their separation, which scholars believe spanned thousands of years.

In the present paper, we take a look at one area of similarity, which is the genitive construction that will be shown to be highly productive in the languages. Apart from being highly productive in all the languages, the derivation follows a similar pattern of prefixation, except in Ukaan where it appears to be derived through compounding. The prefixes across the languages are similar to the extent that one may reasonably claim that they originated from a common ancestor.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first section is the introduction, section two contains data from the four languages under study, section three focuses on a general discussion of the derivation of the genitive nouns across the languages, and section four is the conclusion.

1. GENITIVE NOUNS

The genitive nouns that form the focus of this paper indicate in most cases ownership, and also dealership (in Yoruba). We also have examples where the nouns indicate

possession of a given quality, and other examples that indicate vocation. Consider the following examples in Yoruba.

(1) **oní** + **epo** → **elépo** owner of / dealer in oil
oní + **ọgbọ́n** → **ọlọ́gbọ́n** a wise person
oní + **ijó** → **oníjó** a dancer

In the subsection below we present data from each of the languages.

1.1 DERIVATION OF GENITIVE NOUNS IN YORUBA

As illustrated in (1) above, the genitive nouns in Yoruba language are derived through the prefixation of the highly productive [**oní**], and the less productive [**onĩ**], which is found in some derived genitive nouns (see (2b) below). It is important to remark that this writer is not unaware of the controversy as to whether these morphemes [**oní**] / [**onĩ**] constitute a morpheme each, or each is a combination of two morphemes [**o** + **ní**] / [**o** + **nĩ**], (Bamgbose 1986, Awobuluyi 1967, Oyebade 1986). This controversy, however, is not the focus of this paper, it will, therefore, not be discussed further. We illustrate the derivation below.

(2) a. **oní** + **ijó** → **oníjó** dancer
oní + **ilé** → **onílé** landlord
oní + **ewé** → **eléwé** owner of / dealer in leaves
oní + **epo** → **elépo** owner of / dealer in oil
oní + **ẹran** → **ẹlẹ́ran** owner of / dealer in meat
oní + **ẹja** → **ẹlẹ́ja** owner of / dealer in fish
oní + **oko** → **olóko** owner of farm land
oní + **owó** → **olówó** wealthy person
oní + **ọsàn** → **ọlọ́sàn** owner of / dealer in oranges
oní + **ọ̀pẹ** → **ọlọ́pẹ** owner of / dealer in oil-palm
oní + **aṣọ** → **alášọ** owner of / dealer in clothes
oní + **ata** → **aláta** owner of / dealer in pepper

b. **onĩ** + **òṣì** → **olòṣì** a pauper
onĩ + **ààyè** → **alààyè** living person
onĩ + **ẹ̀tàn** → **ẹlẹ̀tàn** deceitful person, a liar
onĩ + **èṣù** → **elèṣù** devil's incarnate
onĩ + **ọ̀tẹ̀** → **ọlọ̀tẹ̀** a rebel

Scholars have discussed extensively the various phonological changes that are responsible for the different realization of [**oní-**] when attached to a noun that begins with a vowel. The phonological processes include:

1. Deletion of the final vowel of the genitive morpheme where the noun stem begins with a vowel.
2. Nasalization of the initial vowel of the stem if it is [**i**].
3. Denasalization, whereby **n** → **l** where the noun stem begins with a non-high vowel.
4. Assimilation across segment where the noun stem begins with a vowel other than [**i**].

5. Re-alignment of the high tone of the deleted vowel to the immediate vowel to its right side.

Consider the derivation below:

(3)	Underlying form	Deletion	Denasalization	Assimilation	Surface form
	onḯ + ijó	**on ́ ijo**	—	—	**onḯjó**
	onḯ + ewé	**on ́ ewé**	**oléwé**	**eléwé**	**eléwé**
	onḯ + aṣọ	**on ́ aṣọ**	**oláṣọ**	**aláṣọ**	**aláṣọ**
	onḯ + gbèsè	—	—	—	**onḯgbèsè**

Tone realignment is possible at any level after deletion has occurred.

The genitive morpheme in the language performs an inflectional function only as it does not alter the lexical category of the stem.

1.2 DERIVATION OF GENITIVE NOUNS IN UKAAN

Abiodun (2000:262–265) claims that the genitive noun in Ukaan is derived through compounding rather than prefixation, as shown in (4).

(4)					
	ọ̀nḯ + òkpó	→	**ọ̀nɔ̀̃kpó**	owner of calabash
	ọ̀nḯ + èkèrè	→	**ọ̀nɛ̀̃kèrè**	owner of a pot
	ọ̀nḯ + àtò	→	**ọ̀nɑ̀̃tọ̀**	a liar

Two arguments favour compounding:

1. **ònḯ** ‘person’ occurs as a free morpheme in the language, e.g.:
   ọnḯ ò - ṣí ŋɑ́̃nɑ̀̃ ègʷú
   person CD-one bought house
2. Ukaan operates a vowel harmony system with only [**i,u**] behaving as neutral vowels – [**ọ**] does not co-occur with high (+ATR) vowels in a phonological word. Thus, one expects that if [**ọnḯ**] is a prefix, it would alternate between [**ọnɪ́**] and [**ọnḯ**] to reflect the vowel harmony system in the language. This, as can be seen, is not the case.

Since we have no new evidence to suggest that the genitive noun is derived through prefixation, we shall maintain the earlier claim that it is derived through compounding. Consider the derivations below taken from the Ikaan dialect of the language:

(5)					
	ọ̀nḯ # ìɣʷé	→	**ọ̀nɪ̀̃ɣʷé**	owner of money / wealthy person
	ọ̀nḯ # ìkàṣ	→	**ọ̀nɪ̀̃kàs**	king / owner of a town
	ọ̀nḯ # èkèrè	→	**ọ̀nɛ̀̃kèrè**	owner of a pot
	ọ̀nḯ # ẹ̀nọ́m	→	**ọ̀nẽ̀nṍm**	owner of meat
	ọ̀nḯ # ẹ̀ŋɑ̃̀dó	→	**ọ̀nẽ̀ŋɑ̀dó**	owner of maize
	ọ̀nḯ # òkpó	→	**ọ̀nɔ̃̀kpó**	owner of calabash
	ọ̀nḯ # ọ̀ŋù	→	**ọ̀nõ̀ŋù**	owner of child
	ọ̀nḯ # ọ̀hṹn	→	**ọ̀nõ̀hún**	owner of soup
	ọ̀nḯ # ùkọ́g	→	**ọ̀nũ̀kọ́g**	owner of grinding stone
	ọ̀nḯ # ùkáhḯ	→	**ọ̀nũ̀káhḯ**	owner of farm
	ọ̀nḯ # ụ̀fá	→	**ọ̀nụ̃̀fá**	owner of leaf
	ọ̀nḯ # ụ́wḭ́	→	**ọ̀nụ̃̀wḭ́**	owner of salt

ọ̀nḭ́	#	**ḭ̀jọ́**	→	**ọ̀nḭ̀jọ́**	owner of yam
ọ̀nḭ́	#	**ḭ̀jọ̀gọ́**	→	**ọ̀nḭ̀jọ̀gọ́**	owner of okro
ọ̀nḭ́	#	**àtò**	→	**ọ̀nã̀tò**	a liar
ọ̀nḭ́	#	**àjọ́**	→	**ọ̀nã̀jọ́**	owner of yams
ọ̀nḭ́	#	**àṣọ̀**	→	**ọ̀nã̀ṣọ̀**	owner of market / trader

Although a free morpheme, the final vowel of [**ọ̀nḭ́**] is deleted whenever it is joined to another noun to derive the genitive noun, and the nasality of the deleted vowels spreads to the initial vowel of the stem. The tone of the deleted vowels never invariably re-aligns or re-links with the vowel to its right.

1.3 DERIVATION OF GENITIVE NOUN IN IGEDE

The genitive noun in Igede is derived through prefixation. The genitive morpheme, which is invariably attached to a noun stem as a prefix, alternates between [**oli-**] and [**ọlḭ**], a reflection of the full vowel harmony system that operates in the language (Abiodun 1989, 1991). The derivation is illustrated below.

(6) a.

oli	+	**īdzū**	→	**ōlīdzū**	owner of yam
oli	+	**īgo**	→	**ōlīgo**	owner of calabash
oli	+	**ùbè**	→	**òlùbè**	owner of room
oli	+	**úgbōdzī**	→	**ólúgbōdzī**	owner of orange
oli	+	**ówú**	→	**ólówú**	owner of cotton/thread
oli	+	**ògbì**	→	**òlògbì**	owner of guinea corn
oli	+	**ēnī**	→	**ōlēnī**	owner of water
oli	+	**édzē**	→	**ólédzē**	owner of song / singer

b.

ọlḭ	+	**ḭtḛ̄**	→	**ọlḭtḛ̄**	owner of pepper
ọlḭ	+	**ḭtsá**	→	**ọlḭtsá**	owner of arrow
ọlḭ	+	**ẹmā**	→	**ọlẹmā**	owner of salt
ọlḭ	+	**ér̤ṳ̄**	→	**ọ́lḛ́r̤ṳ̄**	owner of farm
ọlḭ	+	**ọ̀dzī**	→	**ọ̀lọ̀dzī**	owner of mortar
ọlḭ	+	**ọba**	→	**ọlọba**	owner of mat
ọlḭ	+	**àgbṵ́**	→	**ọ̀làgbṵ́**	owner of ashes
ọlḭ	+	**ajḭ**	→	**ọlajḭ**	owner of beans
ọlḭ	+	**ṵ́vọ́hī**	→	**ọ́lṵ́vọ́hḭ́**	owner of cat
ọlḭ	+	**ṵtḛ**	→	**ọlṵtḛ**	owner of root

As one may observe from the data, the [**oli-**] allomorph is used when the noun stem has [ATR] vowels as in (6a), while [**ọlḭ-**] is used when the noun stem has [ATR] vowels as in (6b). One notes that the tone of the initial vowel of the root spreads to the vowels of the prefix, but that the final vowel of the prefix is invariably deleted. At least, however, the initial vowel of the prefix carries a tone similar to the tone of the initial vowel of the root in the derived form.

1.4 DERIVATION OF GENITIVE NOUN IN EBIRA

The genitive noun in Ebira is derived through prefixation. The genitive morpheme is [**onĩ**] but its surface realizations depend largely on the vowel harmony system in the

language on the one hand, and on the initial vowel of the noun stem on the other hand. We illustrate below:

(7) a. **onĩ** + **iresi** → **onĩ́resi** owner of a dog
onĩ + **ínómĩ** → **onĩ́nómĩ̀** owner of bird
onĩ + **ùròmĩ** → **onũromi** owner of orange
onĩ + **udzi** → **onũdzi** owner of basket
onĩ + **eŋ̀** → **eneŋ̀** owner of water
onĩ + **etsè** → **enetsè** a drunkard
onĩ + **ozi** → **onozi** owner of child
onĩ + **ozè** → **onozè** owner of road

b. **ọnĩ** + **ịtsẹ́tsa** → **ọnĩ́tsẹ́tsa** owner of plate
ọnĩ + **ịkọ́pụ** → **ọnĩ́kọ́pụ** owner of cup
ọnĩ + **ụ̀rá** → **ọnũ̀rá** owner of pig
ọnĩ + **úvẹ̀nẹ̀** → **ọnũ̀vẹ̀nẹ̀** owner of mat
ọnĩ + **ẹ̀tsụ́kà** → **ẹnẽ̀tsụ́ka** owner of cassava
ọnĩ + **ẹkẹ̀hẹ̀** → **ẹnẽkẹ̀hẹ̀** wealthy person
ọnĩ + **ọ̀rị̀hí** → **ọnõ̀rị̀hí** owner of slave
ọnĩ + **àpápà** → **anãpápà** owner of maize
ọnĩ + **anõ** → **anãnõ** owner of salt

It is observed that the genitive marker also alternates in Ebira between [**onĩ**] and [**ọnĩ**], also a reflection of the vowel harmony system in operation in the language. The allomorph [**onĩ**] goes with stem with [ATR] vowels, and [**ọnĩ**] with [–ATR] vowels. We note also that the final vowel of the genitive morpheme gets deleted in the course of the derivation. It is further observed that there is assimilation across segments whenever the noun stem begins with a non-high vowel. Further more, there is no realignment of tone after deletion of the final vowel of the genitive morpheme. Finally, the initial vowel of the stem gets nasalized after the final vowel of the prefix has nasalized vowel in the final part of the prefix.

2. GENERAL OVERVIEW AND DISCUSSION

From the data presented above, we make the following observations:

1. The genitive construction is a productive morphological process in the four languages under study.
2. The genitive morphemes are similar in form in the languages [**ọnĩ**, **oli**, **ọnĩ**, **ọlị**].
3. The deletion of the final vowel of the morpheme is common to the languages.
4. In Igede and Ebira, the genitive morphemes show allomorphic variation along the full vowel harmony system that operates in the languages.
5. There is no allomorphic variation in Yoruba and Ukaan where partial harmony operates.
6. There is tone realignment in Yoruba and Ukaan after vowel deletion, but no such realignment is attested in the other languages.
7. There is the nasalization of the initial vowel of the stem where there is no change of [**n**] to [**l**].

Considering the level of similarity in the derivation of genitive nouns in the languages under study, two possible arguments may be advanced to account for the similarities. It is possible to claim that the similarities are due to borrowing resulting from contact between the languages. The alternative argument is to claim that the languages inherited the morphological process from a common ancestor, and that the period of separation between the languages has not changed the pattern of the process. As we shall argue below, the two positions are quite logical but the position that the similarity is as a result of common origin is to be preferred.

Arguing in favour of borrowing, it is possible to claim that in terms of proximity, the languages are quite close. In fact, Yoruba, Ukaan and Ebira share boundaries, Igede and Ebira also share boundaries. It is widely claimed in linguistic literature that borrowing is a common feature of language contact, and this being the case, the similarity in the morphological process may be as a result of borrowing.

This position raises the question of which language(s) borrowed from which. Without wasting time and space, we wish to state these languages appear to have been in contact for so long that it may be difficult, if not impossible, to determine the direction of borrowing. While future research may yield more positive results on the direction of borrowing, we hold to the belief in the present paper that the similarity is not due to borrowing.

Thus, rather than pursue the argument in favour of borrowing any further, we prefer to argue in favour of a common origin. While similarities between languages may be attributed to borrowing, it is not always the case that all similarities are traceable to borrowing. In this particular case, the process is so productive, and the pattern so regular in each of the languages, that one may not be correct in suggesting borrowing.

Scholars have claimed that these languages are genetically related, and that the relationship is responsible for shared features between these languages at different levels of language structure. These being the case, we posit here that the similarity in the derivation of genitive noun in the languages is further evidence supported by data to illustrate the hypothesis that they (the languages) have a common origin.

Coming to the difference in the form and shape of the morpheme, and the phonological changes in the derivational process, we believe that they are the result of the many years of separation. Considering the observation that two languages show allomorphic variation while two do not, the simple explanation for this is that whereas those languages that reflect variation in the form of the genetic morpheme operate a full vowel harmony system, those that do not show alternation operate a partial vowel harmony system.

One interesting thing in respect of the morphemic alternation is that some dialects of Yoruba that operate a full vowel harmony system, namely Èkìtì and Ìjẹ̀ṣà, demonstrate alternation in the shape of the genitive morpheme. The morpheme alternates between [**olí**] and [**ọlí**] in these dialects, (cf. Abiodun and Sanusi 2001). Apparently then, it is only in Ukaan that the morpheme does not alternate.

The apparent reason for this is that whereas the derivation is through prefixation in the other languages, it is through compounding in Ukaan. We suspect that this is so because the morpheme, which originally operated as a prefix, a bound morpheme, eventually acquired the status of a free morpheme in the historical development of the language. Upon this, it ceased to operate like a prefix.

One area that deserves comments is the difference between the consonants in the morpheme across the languages. Whereas we have the alveolar nasal [**n**] in Yoruba, Ukaan and Ebira [**oni**], we have the lateral sound [**l**] in Igede, [**oli**]; interestingly however, some dialects of Yoruba have the lateral sound, e.g.:

(8)	Standard Yoruba	Èkìtì dialect	
	oníjó	**olíjó**	dancer
	oníkòkó	**olíkòkó**	cocoa farmer
	onílé	**olúlé**	landlord

The difference with regard to [**n**] and [**l**] across the language is a reflection of development along different directions. The ancestor language possibly had a voiced alveolar lenis stop, which developed into the alveolar nasal in Ebira and Ukaan, the lateral sound in Igede, and both the alveolar nasal and lateral in Yoruba. These possibly explain why [**l**] and [**n**] are allophones of the same phoneme in Yoruba.

One other area of difference is the assimilation process observed in Yoruba and Ebira as against the non-occurrence of the process in Ukaan and Igede. It is interesting to note that vowel assimilation is a widely attested and productive phonological process in Benue-Congo languages. The manifestation of the process in the derivation of the genitive noun is, therefore, not strange. One should add, however, that vowel assimilation is much more common between contiguous vowels than it is between vowels that are separated by a segment. Be that as it may, we posit here that the assimilation process where the derivation of the genitive noun is concerned is an innovation in those languages where it is in operation. We suspect that it is an extension of the assimilation process between two contiguous vowels across a word or morpheme boundary, to vowels that are separated by a segment also across a morpheme boundary. Our claim that it is an innovation is supported by the observation that the process is not as productive as the assimilation between contiguous vowels.

On tone differences, we observe that the initial vowel of the morpheme carries a mid tone in all the languages. It is only in Ukaan, where the morpheme does not behave like a prefix, that the vowel carries a low tone. The low tone, we believe, is a reflection of the tone system in Ukaan. Abiodun (2000) reports that initial vowel of nouns in Ukaan invariably carries a low tone assigned by default rule. This explanation leads us to suspect that the vowel must have had a mid tone in the ancestor language, with the languages inheriting the mid tone. The general tone pattern in Ukaan is, however, responsible for the low tone on the initial vowel in the language.

The final vowel on the other hand carries a high tone in Yoruba [**oní**] and in Ukaan but a mid-tone in Yoruba [**onĩ**] and in both Igede and Ebira. The deletion of the vowel leads to the high tone (where [**oní**] is concerned), relinking with the initial vowel of the noun stem in Yoruba. In Ebira, Igede, Ukaan and in Yoruba [**onĩ**] there is no relinking of tone, as the pattern of the noun stem does not change. The point being made is that the vowel apparently carried a high tone in the ancestor language. Whereas Yoruba operates a rule that allows the tone to relink after vowel deletion where high tone is involved only, Igede, Ukaan and Ebira do not operate such a rule. This may not be totally strange because there are cases in the Moba dialect of Yoruba where the high tone never relinks. Precisely, when the noun stem has a low (L-L) tone pattern, the high is lowered, as illustrated in the following example.

(9) **oní + ẹ̀pà → ẹlẹpà** owner of / dealer in groundnut
oní + òò → oloò trader
oní + ẹ̀wà → ẹlẹwà owner of / dealer in beans

3. CONCLUSION

The discussion in this paper has added to our knowledge of the similarities and differences between the four Benue-Congo languages that are the focus of our research. The body of evidence in the paper with regard to data and argumentation buttresses the claim made by scholars in the area of comparative linguistics that these languages are genetically related; and that further research in the area of morphology, if carried out, has the potential of yielding positive evidence of their relatedness.

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