

ASSIMILATION AND CONTRACTION IN YORUBA

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1. In Yoruba, when a word precedes another word beginning with a vowel, a modification or an elision of the final vowel of the preceding word or the initial vowel of the following word often takes place.¹ The modification consists of an assimilation of the vowel to the other vowel with which it is in contact. For example, $\text{ɔ̀bẹ̀ ilá} \rightarrow \text{ɔ̀bẹ̀ēlá}$ 'okra soup'.² The elision of the vowel results in a contraction of the two words. For example, $\text{ra ẹ́ja} \rightarrow \text{reja}$ 'buy fish'.

1.1. ASSIMILATION

Assimilation involves the replacement of one of the two vowels in contact by the other, i.e.

$$V_1 + V_2 \rightarrow V_1 + V_1 \text{ or } V_2 + V_2$$

It is typical of the junction between nominal + nominal, pronoun subject + negative preverb, a set of items + pronoun subject, and the verb *kú* 'greetings' + nominal complement.³

1.11. NOMINAL + NOMINAL

The junction of nominal + nominal involves an assimilation of the initial vowel *i* of the following word.⁴

$\text{ará ilú} \rightarrow \text{aráálú}$	townsman
$\text{ɔ̀jɔ̀ ìsinmi} \rightarrow \text{ɔ̀jɔ̀̀sinmi}$	Sunday
$\text{ilé iṣé} \rightarrow \text{iléeṣé}$	office
$\text{ẹ̀rù igi} \rightarrow \text{ẹ̀rùugi}$	bundle of wood

1.12. PRONOUN SUBJECT + NEGATIVE PREVERB

The negative preverb *ò* is assimilated to the preceding pronoun subject.

$\text{mi } \grave{o} \text{ l} \text{ɔ} \rightarrow \text{mi } \grave{i} \text{ l} \text{ɔ}$	I didn't go
$\text{n̄ } \grave{o} \text{ l} \text{ɔ} \rightarrow \text{n̄ } \grave{h} \text{ l} \text{ɔ}$	I didn't go
$\text{a } \grave{o} \text{ l} \text{ɔ} \rightarrow \text{a } \grave{a} \text{ l} \text{ɔ}$	we didn't go
$\text{ẹ } \grave{o} \text{ l} \text{ɔ} \rightarrow \text{ẹ } \grave{ẹ} \text{ l} \text{ɔ}$	you didn't go
$\text{w} \text{ɔ} \text{n } \grave{o} \text{ l} \text{ɔ} \rightarrow \text{w} \text{ɔ} \text{n } \grave{o} \text{n } \text{l} \text{ɔ}$	they didn't go

1.13. SET OF ITEMS + PRONOUN SUBJECT

The items *ṅjé*, *ṣé*, *ṣẹbí*, *ṣebí*, *àní*, *àṣé*, *tí*, *tàbí*, *àbí*, *pé*, *kí* and *bí* have their final vowels assimilated to that of the following pronoun subject.⁵

¹ Elision or modification of vowels within a word does not come within the scope of this paper.

² In this and subsequent examples, a modified form of the orthography is used. Tones are indicated as follows: high (´), low (˘), mid (no mark, except on a syllabic nasal where it is marked (ˉ)), and the low tone elided in a contraction is indicated by a dot (·). As in the orthography, nasality is indicated by adding *ŋ* to a letter representing an oral vowel, except in the case of a third person singular pronoun complement and a nasalised vowel occurring after a nasal, where this *ŋ* is omitted.

³ The junction in these structures is well described by Rowlands in 'Types of Word Junction in Yoruba', BSOAS, XVI, 1954.

⁴ Assimilation of vowels other than *i* is an occasional feature of the Lagos dialect of Yoruba (e.g. $\text{ará } \grave{o} \text{k} \grave{e} \rightarrow \text{aróòk} \grave{e}$ 'a northern Yoruba').

⁵ The third person singular pronoun after *bí*, *kí*; and the first person plural pronoun after *kí* enter into a contraction i.e. $\text{bí } \acute{o} \rightarrow \text{bó}$; $\text{kí } \acute{o} \rightarrow \text{kó}$; and $\text{kí } \text{a} \rightarrow \text{ká}$.

E.g.

̀̀jẹ́ ó lọ	→	̀̀jọ́ ó lọ	did he go?
kí o lọ	→	kó o lọ	you should go
tí a bá lọ	→	tá a bá lọ	if we go
bí ẹ́ bá lọ	→	bẹ́ ẹ́ bá lọ	if you go
o mọ́ pé ó lọ	→	o mọ́ pọ́ ó lọ	you know that he went

Since the first person singular pronoun is consonant-initial, it cannot be assimilated to a preceding item; but the consonant w initial of the third person plural pronoun is elided, and assimilation takes place as above, i.e.

tí wọ́n bá lọ	→	tọ́n ọ́n bá lọ	if they go
bí wọ́n bá lọ	→	bọ́n ọ́n bá lọ	if they go

1.14. THE VERB KÚ + NOMINAL

The vowel of the verb kú is assimilated to the initial vowel of the following nominal, except i. The vowel i of the nominal is assimilated to the vowel of the verb.

kú àbọ́	→	káàbọ́	welcome
kú alẹ́	→	káalẹ́	good evening
kú ilé	→	kúulẹ́	greetings on my arrival ⁶

1.2. CONTRACTION

Contraction involves the elision of one of the two vowels in contact, i.e.

$$V_1 + V_2 \rightarrow V_1 \text{ or } V_2$$

It occurs in a combination in which the second of the words in contact is either a pronoun or a noun (which may or may not have qualifiers). Although in both cases, only one of the vowels in contact is retained, there is a difference in how the tones are contracted. On this criterion therefore, we may distinguish two types of contraction:

- (a) Pronoun Contraction
- (b) Noun Contraction

1.21. PRONOUN CONTRACTION

In a pronoun contraction, the two vowels in contact are identical. The rules for contraction are as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \acute{V} + V &\rightarrow V \\ V + \acute{V} &\rightarrow \acute{V} \end{aligned}$$

The pronoun contraction is typical of two structures:

- (a) A verb-complement structure where the complement is a third person singular pronoun.

ó rí i	→	ó ri	he saw it
mo gbé e	→	mo gbe	I lifted it
kò mú u	→	kò mu	he didn't take it
şe é	→	şé	do it
mo jẹ́ ẹ́	→	mo jẹ́	I ate it
kò pa á	→	kò pá	he didn't kill it ⁷

⁶ In the junction of kú + nominal, assimilation of u rarely takes place before vowels other than a, i.

⁷ The contraction $V + \acute{V} \rightarrow \acute{V}$ is not possible when the verb is preceded by a high-tone syllable e.g. ó jẹ́ ẹ́ cannot be contracted *ó jẹ́.

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- (b) A structure involving the set of items in 1.13 above plus a following first or second person pronoun, where the final vowel of the item has already been assimilated to that of the pronoun.

ibi <u>tí</u> a lọ	→	ibi <u>tá</u> a lọ	→	ibi <u>ta</u> lọ	the place we went to
sé ẹ mọ	→	<u>şé</u> ẹ mọ	→	şẹ mọ	do you know?
ó ní <u>kí</u> o wá	→	ó ní <u>kó</u> o wá	→	ó ní <u>ko</u> wá	he said you should come

1.22. NOUN CONTRACTION

In a noun contraction, the two vowels in contact may be identical or different. As far as the tones are concerned, the rules for contraction are quite simple: a high tone plus a mid tone is contracted to a high tone, a high tone plus a low tone is contracted to a high tone but the elided low tone still remains phonologically significant in the contraction (this elided low tone is indicated by a dot),⁸ a mid tone plus a low tone is contracted to a low tone, i.e.

- (1) $\acute{V} + V \rightarrow \acute{V}$
- | | | | |
|---------|---|---------------|---------------------------|
| gbé odó | → | gbó dó | lift the mortar |
| ní ọwọ | → | lọ wọ | have a broom ⁹ |
- (2) $\acute{V} + \grave{V} \rightarrow \acute{V}$.
- | | | | |
|--------|---|---------------|--------------|
| mú iwé | → | mú. wé | take a book |
| ní ọwọ | → | lọ. wọ | have respect |
- (3) $V + \grave{V} \rightarrow \grave{V}$
- | | | | |
|--------|---|--------------|-------------|
| ka iwé | → | kà wé | read a book |
| ta ẹwà | → | tẹ wà | sell beans |

The noun contraction is typical of the junction between a verb (or one of the set of items in 1.13) and a following nominal.

The difficulty of formulating phonological rules to account for which of the two vowels in contact is to be elided, when these vowels are different, has long been recognised.¹⁰ For example, a vowel in contact with another vowel may be elided in one case and not in another; e.g.

(ọ + a)			
fọ aşọ	→	fọşọ	wash clothes
fọ ape	→	fape	wash the pot
(ẹ + o)			
fẹ owó	→	fówó	want money
şẹ owó	→	şẹwó	change money

and two different vowels in contact with the same vowel may both be elided, or one of

⁸ See below for a minimal pair in which a contraction involving a high tone plus a mid tone is contrasted with one involving a high tone plus a low tone. The nature of the influence of the elided low tone on the tone of the surviving vowel of the contraction and that of the syllable which follows it is still the subject of further investigation.

⁹ Before oral vowels, **n** is replaced by **l**.

¹⁰ See Ward: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE YORUBA LANGUAGE, Cambridge 1952. Rowlands: 'Types of Word Junction in Yoruba', BSOAS, XVI, 1954. Abraham: DICTIONARY OF MODERN YORUBA, London 1958. Siertsema: 'Stress and Tone in Yoruba Word Composition', LINGUA, VIII, 1959.

them may be elided and the other retained. E.g.

(e/ɔ + a)

gbé aṣɔ → gbáṣɔ lift the clothes

gbɔ ariwo → gbáriwo hear a noise

(i/a + e)

rí ewé → réwé see leaves

gbá ewé → gbáwé sweep leaves

The diversity in the contraction of individual items may be illustrated by the following:

(1) The vowel of the same verb may be elided before one nominal and not before another.

gbé inɔ → gbénɔ take the fire

gbé odó → gbódó lift the mortar

(2) The vowel of the same nominal may be elided when preceded by one verb, and not elided when preceded by another.

fɔ aṣɔ → fɔṣɔ wash clothes

gbé aṣɔ → gbáṣɔ lift clothes

(3) The vowel of a verb may be elided or retained before the same nominal (and vice versa).¹¹

jẹ iyón → jeyón } eat pounded yam
jijón }

Examples such as these tend to discourage any further inquiry into this problem and to lead to one of two conclusions: that elision of vowels is not governed by any rules at all, or that if governed by rules, these rules are lexical and we have to know a particular verb and a particular nominal before we can know their contraction. The first of these conclusions is false because, except for rare cases such as (3) above, the choice of the vowel to be elided in the contraction of a verb-nominal combination is generally not free. It is fixed. An elision of the wrong vowel in such a contraction produces an item which is different from the one intended. For example,

fɔ aṣɔ → fɔṣɔ wash clothes

but NOT

faṣɔ pull clothes

The second conclusion is also defective as will be shown by the principles indicated below.

Two scholars of Yoruba have already attempted to indicate the principle involved in the elision of vowels in a noun contraction. Bowen says that 'The stronger of any two concurring vowels is retained in preference to the weaker'.¹² According to him, vowel strength depends on whether the vowel is long or short, grave or acute, accented or unaccented, open or close. But since 'these elements of strength and weakness may be variously distributed', and since the principle formulated by him may be 'reversed to prevent ambiguity', it is impossible to know which of the two vowels in contact is to be elided. Rowlands gives an arrangement of nominals and verbals 'in an ascending scale according to the degree of survival of their vowels'.¹³ As he himself admits, the scope of this kind of analysis is severely limited.

¹¹ In some cases the alternative contracted form is restricted to a verb-nominal combination where the nominal is followed by a qualifier. E.g. ʃe iṣé → ʃiṣé 'work', but ʃe iṣé olúkó → ʃiṣé olúkó or ʃeṣé olúkó 'take up a teaching job'.

¹² Bowen: GRAMMAR AND DICTIONARY OF THE YORUBA LANGUAGE, Washington, 1858, pp. 6-7.

¹³ Rowlands, op. cit., pp. 382-5.

A third scholar who is not principally concerned with this problem but who has made four observations about it is Siertsema.¹⁴ The first observation is that the final syllable of the noun is always retained after a contraction has taken place. This is irrelevant to the problem of what happens to the vowels in contact. The fourth observation is a repetition of a suggestion by Rowlands ('already hinted at by Rowlands') that the vowel of the more familiar word in a verb-nominal collocation is likely to be dropped. The third observation is that a verb having a lexical mid tone loses its vowel, while a verb having a lexical low tone keeps its vowel. This is not borne out by the facts (cf. *jẹ* 'eat' in *jẹ iṣu* → *jẹṣu* 'eat yams'; *tà* 'sell' in *ta epo* → *tepo* 'sell oil'). The second observation is that the vowel of the initial low-tone syllable of the noun (other than *ì* in many cases) is always retained when preceded by a verb having a high tone. This observation is valid, but as will be shown later, it has a wider application than is here suggested. It is clear from this short review that these observations have not carried us any nearer to a solution to this problem.

In the sections that follow, an attempt will be made to suggest the principles (which are mainly phonological) which govern the elision of vowels. Most noun contractions will conform to these principles. The exceptions will be so few as to be negligible.

In discussing noun contractions, it is necessary to distinguish between collocations of verb and noun which are always contracted and those that are not. In the former, the question of predicting which vowel is to be elided does not arise because the verb-nominal collocation only occurs in its already contracted form. Examples of such collocations are:

<i>rọntí</i>	remember
<i>pẹlú</i>	be with
<i>jà.de</i>	go out
<i>gbilẹ</i>	take root

In the latter where the verb-nominal collocation can occur uncontracted as well as contracted, the problem of which vowel is elided in the contraction arises. The principles to be given therefore apply only to this type of verb-nominal collocation.

The following principles govern the elision of vowels in noun contractions:

- (a) The vowel *i* whether of the verb or of the nominal is almost always elided.

<i>gbé inọ</i>	→	<i>gbénọ</i>	lift the lamp
<i>gba iṣẹ</i>	→	<i>gbaṣẹ</i>	take a job
<i>wo ilẹ</i>	→	<i>wolẹ</i>	look at the ground
<i>jí aṣọ</i>	→	<i>jáṣọ</i>	steal clothes

(Exception)

<i>bí ọmọ</i>	→	<i>bímọ</i>	have a baby
<i>jẹ iyọ̀n</i>	→	<i>jiyọ̀n</i>	eat pounded yam
		<i>jeyọ̀n</i>	

- (b) Except before the vowel *i*, the vowel *u* of the verb is almost always elided.

<i>ju igi</i>	→	<i>jugi</i>	throw a stick
<i>lu ilẹ</i>	→	<i>lulẹ</i>	hit the ground
<i>bu omi</i>	→	<i>bomi</i>	take water
<i>ru epo</i>	→	<i>repo</i>	carry oil
<i>bú ọba</i>	→	<i>bọba</i>	abuse the king

¹⁴ Siertsema, *op. cit.*, pp. 398-400. I am grateful to Professor Siertsema for referring to her observations in this article at the Fourth West African Languages Congress, Ibadan, March 1964.

- (c) The initial low tone syllable of a nominal (other than *i*) is usually retained.¹⁵

kọ ẹkọ	→	kẹ.kọ	learn a lesson
şe àjẹ	→	şàjẹ	engage in witchcraft
ra ẹrọ	→	rẹrọ	buy a cornmill
dé ọyọ	→	dọ.yọ	reach Oyo town

- (d) The initial vowel of a nominal whose first two syllables consist of two identical vowels is usually retained.

sọ òótọ	→	sòótọ	speak the truth
ra oògùn	→	roògùn	buy medicine
kó eegun	→	kéegun	collect bones
gbé aago	→	gbáago	lift the clock

- (e) In the case of the other vowels, it is more useful to determine the elision of the vowel from the verb rather than from the nominal, because nominals beginning with different vowels show much less variation in the elision of their vowels than verbs ending in different vowels.

gba ewé	→	gbewé	take the leaf
gba ẹja	→	gbeja	take the fish
gba owó	→	gbowó	take the money
gba ọmọ	→	gbọmọ	take the child
gba ewé	→	gbewé	take the leaves
tẹ ewé	→	tẹwé	spread the leaves
wọ ewé	→	wọwé	shed leaves
kó ewé	→	kéwé	collect the leaves

The following additional principles apply to vowels of the verb not covered by principles (a) to (d) above.

- (i) The nasal vowel of the verb is usually elided and nasality is transferred to the initial vowel of the nominal¹⁶ with the following exceptions:

- (1) The nasalised vowel \bar{u} of the verb is usually retained before the initial vowel *o* of the nominal. Before other vowels, its retention is optional.
- (2) Nasality is dropped when the nasalised vowel \bar{u} is elided in the sequence *fun*, *mu* (occurring with a high or a mid tone) before an initial vowel of the nominal other than *ɔ*. Before *ɔ*, the retention of nasality is optional in the sequence *fun*, and obligatory in the other sequence.

EXAMPLES

I. NASALISED VOWEL ELIDED

(Nasality transferred)

pín epo	→	pénpo	share the oil
rọn awọ	→	ránwọ	sew the leather

(Nasality dropped)

mú owó	→	mówó	take money
fún ewúré	→	féwúré	give (it to) the goat

¹⁵ A few nominals such as ọ̀nọ̀, ẹ̀nyọ̀n, ọ̀kọ̀n and vowel-initial numerals, e.g. ẹ̀ke.jì, ẹ̀kẹ̀.ta have their initial low tone syllables elided. E.g.

la ọ̀nọ̀	→	lànọ̀	make a path
pa ẹ̀nyọ̀n	→	pànyọ̀n	kill a person
fẹ̀ ẹ̀ke.jì	→	fẹ̀.ke.jì	marry the second one

¹⁶ Rowlands (op. cit., p. 384) calls this feature 'sandhi nasalisation'.

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II. NASALISED VOWEL RETAINED

ṣon owó → ṣonwó pay up
 gbón epo → gbónpo scoop out the oil

- (ii) The vowel *a* of a verb having a high tone is usually retained, except in the case of *bá* and *wá* where this vowel is elided.

gbá epo → gbápo fry the oil
 já ewé → jáwé pluck the leaves
 dá owó → dáwó contribute money
 fá ọ̀bẹ̀ → fábẹ̀ scrape off the soup
 bá ọ̀kọ̀ → bọ̀kọ̀ find transport
 wá ẹ̀ja → wẹ̀ja look for fish

- (iii) The vowel *a* of a verb which has a mid tone when followed by a complement is usually retained unless this verb is one of a pair of verbs which differ by one having a low tone and the other a mid tone when they are not followed by a complement. (Two exceptions are the verbs: *gbà* 'get' and *pa* 'kill' where *a* is elided even though these verbs do not have such a contrast.)

la ẹ̀nu → lanu open the mouth
 ka owó → kawó count the money
 pa ẹ̀ṣẹ̀ → paṣẹ̀ rub the feet
 pa ẹ̀yẹ̀ → peyẹ̀ kill a bird
 gba owó → gbowó get money

When the pair of verbs contrast as specified above, the vowel *a* of the verb having a low tone is elided, and that of the verb having a mid tone is retained.

{ (tà) ta epo → tepo sell oil
 { (ta) ta epo → tapo spill oil
 { (rà) ra ẹ̀ṣẹ̀ → reṣẹ̀ buy the feet
 { (ra) ra ẹ̀ṣẹ̀ → raṣẹ̀ rub on the feet

- (iv) In the cases which are not covered by (i) to (iii) above, the vowel of the verb is usually elided.

gbọ̀ ariwo → gbáriwo hear a noise
 gbé ọ̀lọ̀ → gbọ̀lọ̀ lift the grinding stone
 fẹ̀ ọ̀kọ̀ → fọ̀kọ̀ get a husband
 kó ewé → kéwé gather the leaves
 jẹ̀ ewé → jewé eat leaves

This residual principle, taken together with the cases where the vowel of the verb is elided in the principles earlier stated, shows that the overall tendency in a noun contraction is for the vowel of the verb (i.e. the vowel of the first word of the contraction) to drop out.

A casual study of the examples of verb-nominal contractions is enough to show that such contractions are liable to be ambiguous. For example, *kọ̀mọ̀* is a contraction of the nominal *ọ̀mọ̀* 'child' and three different verbs: *kọ̀* 'teach', *kó* 'collect', and *kí* 'greet'. In practice, ambiguities are often avoided by leaving structures uncontracted (e.g. *fokùn* 'use the rope' as opposed to *fi okùn* 'swing the rope'), by departing from the expected pattern of elision (e.g. *bọ̀ aṣọ̀* → *bọ̀ṣọ̀* 'remove clothes' and not *báṣọ̀* which is the only possible contraction of *bá aṣọ̀* 'find clothes'), and by making use of a structure which cannot be contracted (e.g. *dẹ̀ wọ̀n lẹ̀ṣẹ̀* 'tie them in the feet' in preference to *de ẹ̀ṣẹ̀ wọ̀n* → *deṣẹ̀ wọ̀n* 'tie their feet').