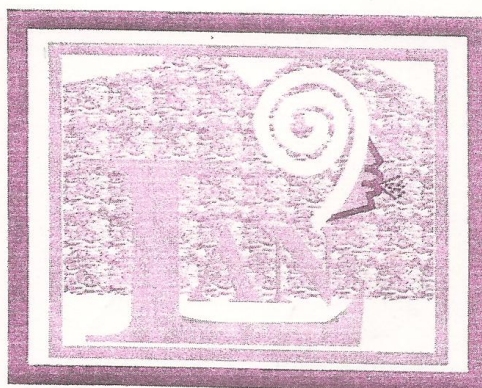


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**Shift of Markedness in some Yorùbá Common Nouns: A Case of
Phonological Preference**

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Common nouns in Yorùbá have phonological variants (i.e., the basic and the derived forms). The two forms are grammatically acceptable in the language. However, among the speakers of Standard Yorùbá¹, there appears to be a preference for one phonological form of a noun than the other. This phonological preference results from speakers' consciousness about the linguistic aesthetics, purity and elegance of the spoken form of the language. This has led to a **shift of markedness** from the derived forms of such category of nouns to their basic forms. In other words, the derived forms of the nouns that were hitherto, in the development of the language, considered as being phonologically marked, are now being shifted to and considered to be phonologically more elegant, attractive and prestigious. On the other hand, the basic forms are now being considered as archaic, unpopular, and the speech form of the conservative speakers of the language. Consequently, the use of the basic forms of such category of nouns is now restricted to two major dialects of Yorùbá (i.e. Èkiti and Ijèsà dialects). The aim of this paper is to provide illuminating empirical data on how the preferred forms are phonological derived from their basic forms and to discuss the linguistic and sociolinguistic implications of such shift of markedness for the language, its learners, and users.

Key words: Yorùbá, common nouns, markedness, Èkiti, Ijèsà, dialect, phonology, basic and derived forms.

1.0 Introduction

The phenomenon of language change appears to be universal among natural languages. In other words, no language remains static over a long period of time. Language change may affect individual lexical items or phrases in a particular language that is undergoing such change. In his attempt at explaining the phenomenon of language change among natural languages, McGregor (2009:276) observes the processes of language change and states as follows:

You are probably aware of changes that have occurred in your own language within your lifetime: new words that have come into use, and others that have gone out of use, or at least out of fashion. You are probably also aware of differences between the speech of your generation and that of your parents' and grandparents' generations.

The relevance of the above quotation to the theme of this paper is in the fact that the type of language change that is being considered in this paper is a type of change that is sociologically conditioned. This led to a shift from one phonological variant that is

becoming out of fashion to the alternative phonological variant that is now in common use.

Our observation of the database for this study revealed that, as a result of speakers' consciousness of the phonological elegance of the derived forms of certain common nouns in Standard Yorùbá, speakers of the language tend to prefer such derived forms to the corresponding basic forms of the nouns. Therefore, effort is made in this paper to define the concept of linguistic markedness and to present and analyse relevant empirical data on the category of common nouns under consideration. In his classification of this category of common nouns, Oyeade (2008: 86) simply referred to their basic forms as *emphatic* and their derived forms as *non-emphatic*. He did not make any observation as to whether or not one form is marked and the other form is unmarked.

Attempt is also made in this paper to discuss the linguistic and sociolinguistic implications of such shift of markedness for the language, its speakers and learners. The theoretical framework adopted for our analysis is the *Generative Phonology* approach, as initiated by Chomsky and Halle (1968) and developed in its various subsequent versions.

1.1 Defining Linguistic Markedness

Following De Lacy (2006), *Markedness* can be defined as the tendency of languages to show a preference for particular structures or sounds. He further argued that markedness is part of our linguistic competence, and is determined by three conflicting mechanisms in the brain: (a) pressure to preserve marked sounds ('preservation'), (b) pressure to turn marked sounds into unmarked sounds ('reduction'), and (c) a mechanism allowing the distinction between marked and unmarked sounds to be collapsed ('conflation'). According to him, markedness offers an important insight into the understanding of human language. Given the De Lacy's analysis above, the second mechanism (i.e. the pressure to turn marked into unmarked ('reduction')) is the mechanism that is applicable to our data in this study.

According to *Wikipedia*, the Internet Free Encyclopedia, as modified in (2009),

Markedness is a linguistic concept that developed out of the Prague School. A marked form is a non-basic or less natural form. An unmarked form is a basic, default form. For example, *lion* is the unmarked choice in English - it could refer to a male or female lion. But *lioness* is marked because it can only refer to females. The unmarked forms serve as general terms: e.g. *brotherhood* of man is sometimes used to refer to all people, both men and women, while *sisterhood* refers to women.

Given this working definition of markedness, it is obvious that what obtains in our data under consideration is the reverse of the notion of markedness, because it is the basic form that is marked. Thus the justification for our use of the term - '*Shift of markedness*'.

The encyclopedia makes a further clarification that *markedness* is a very fuzzy notion, especially if it is not made clear whether something is marked phonetically, morphologically, syntactically, or semantically. There are many sets of varied criteria

to determine which forms are considered more marked and which are not: Some quantify markedness in terms of statistical frequency of use, others define it in psycholinguistic terms, yet others use merely their own intuitions on the subject. When correctly and stringently used the term is very effective at describing the relations of forms in a paradigm. For example, the derived unmarked forms shown in (2.0) below form a paradigm whose regular syllable structure (i.e. VVCV) is quite predictable in the language.

2.0 Data Presentation²

<i>Marked (underlying form)</i>		<i>Unmarked (derived surface form)</i>	
i.	/àdirò/	→	[ààrò] 'hearth/fireplace'
ii.	/òjijà/	→	[òòjà] 'comb'
iii.	/èkíkānā/	→	[èèkānā] 'finger nail'
iv.	/èbibi/	→	[èèbi] 'vomit'
v.	/èrūrū/	→	[èérū] 'crumbs'
vi.	/èdídú/	→	[èédú] 'charcoal'
vii.	/ajijā/	→	[aájā] 'cockroach'
viii.	/orirū /	→	[oòrū] 'sun'
ix.	/èkpikpà/	→	[èèkpà] 'tape worm'
x.	/oriru /	→	[ooru] 'heat/vapour'
xi.	/ogūgū/	→	[oògū] 'charm/medicine'
xii.	/egūgū/	→	[cegū] 'bone'
xiii.	/àwúrɔ/	→	[àárɔ] 'morning'
xiv.	/òrùka /	→	[òòka] 'ring'
xv.	/òlilɔ/	→	[òòlɔ] 'grinder'
xvi.	/òrùlé /	→	[òòlé] 'roof'
xvii.	/èkpíkápá/	→	[èèkpá] 'crust'
xviii.	/òkūkū/	→	[òòkū] 'darkness'
xix.	/egígū/	→	[eégū] 'masquerade'
xx.	/erùkpɛ/	→	[èèkpɛ] 'sand'
xxi.	/èfífɔ/	→	[èéfɔ] 'broken pieces of plates/clay pot'
xxii.	/èkpikpo/	→	[èèkpo] 'peel'
xxiii.	/èrírí/	→	[èérí] 'dirt'
xxiv.	/ètítú/	→	[èétú] 'pus'
xxv.	/àtītā/	→	[ààtàn] 'dunghill'
xxvi.	/erírú/	→	[èérú] 'ashes'
xxvii.	/àdídū/	→	[àádū] 'parched corn, ground and mixed with palm oil'
xxviii.	/èbíbú /	→	[èébú] 'insult'
xxix.	/erirà/	→	[èèrà] 'ants'

xxx. /èsúsú/ → [éésú] 'voluntary monetary contribution'

2.1 Phonological Derivation of the Unmarked Forms from the Marked Forms

As could be observed in (2.0) above, two phonological processes are involved in the derivation of the unmarked forms from the marked forms. The two processes are – *consonant deletion* and *vowel assimilation*. These two phonological rules are very common in the phonology of Standard Yorùbá. Thus, many scholars of Yorùbá language have worked extensively on the two processes in Yorùbá (see Awobuluyi (1978), Bamgbose (1990) and Oycbade (2008) among others). In this paper, we shall label the two rules as R1 and R2. Both R1 and R2 are formally stated in (2) and (3) respectively:

(2) R1: $C \longrightarrow \emptyset / V - V \dots$

Prose Statement: In a VCVCV structure, the first consonant that is occurring intervocalically becomes deleted to produce VVCV structure.

(3) R2: $V_2 \longrightarrow V_1 / - V_1 V_2 \dots$

Prose Statement: At the word-initial position, where there are two contiguous vowels ($V_1 V_2$), V_2 becomes V_1 , through a process of progressive or perseverative vowel assimilation, to produce ($V_1 V_1 C V_3$) from the structure – ($V_1 V_2 C V_3$).

The two phonological rules stated in (2) and (3) above can be formally applied to our data in (1) as exemplified in (4) below:

(4) Derivational Processes

	<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>D</u>
R1:	/àdirò/	/òrùlé /	/òjjà /	/èbíbi/
R2:	àirò	òùlé	òjà	èbí
	ààrò	òòlé	òòjà	èèbí
<i>Derived Surface Form:</i>	[ààrò]	[òòlé]	[òòjà]	[èèbí]
	'hearth/fireplace'	'roof'	'comb'	'vomit'.

2.2 Observations

- It should be noted that the two phonological rules applied in (4) above occurred in a *feeding order*. That is, it was the output of R1 (consonant deletion) that served as the input for R2 (progressive or perseverative vowel assimilation), to derive the surface form.
- It could be observed from the derivational processes in (4) that the two phonological rules did not affect the *tonal patterns* in both the basic and the derived forms of the lexical items under consideration. Consequently, the application of the two rules did not bring about any changes in meanings of the

affected lexical items. Thus, the phonological variation is only *phonetic* and not *phonemic*.

3.0 Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Implications of the Shift of Markedness

Theoretically, it is a truism that adequate linguistic information about the surface or derived form of a given word or constituent can only be traced to its basic or underlying representation. Therefore, for both pedagogical and research purposes, there is always the need to have access to information about how words are derived from their corresponding basic forms. In other words, it is the basic form that provides the required linguistic clue about how the surface form of a word is derived.

The linguistic implication of this for our data under consideration is that if the 'shift of markedness', as discussed in this paper, is consistently upheld, there is every possibility that the marked basic forms of the common nouns will gradually go out of use; since they are already going out of fashion.

Pedagogically, learners of Yorùbá as first or second language are expected to be taught about how the double vowels at the word-initial position of each of the unmarked derived forms came about. However, supposing the marked basic forms are no longer in existence, it would be highly difficult to teach such un-existing forms to the learners of the language. In his reaction to this linguistic phenomenon, Stubbs (1976:109) makes the following remarks:

It is quite misleading, and counter to all the linguistic evidence, to treat nonstandard dialects as erratic deviations from the standard language; they are highly organized systems in their own right.

While criticizing native speakers' negative attitude to nonstandard variants of a language, Tallerman (2005:3) makes the following observation:

Some people have the idea that certain forms of language are more beautiful, or classier, or are simply correct. But the belief that some forms of language are better than others has no linguistic basis; it's actually about social factors. Since we often make social judgements about people based on their accent or dialect, we tend to transfer these judgements to their form of language. We may then think that some forms are undesirable, that some are 'good' and some 'bad'. For a linguist, though, no native speakers produce 'bad' grammar.

4.0 Conclusion

Effort is made in this paper to present empirical data on the phenomenon of 'shift of markedness' in some Yorùbá common nouns. The paper discussed the processes by which the unmarked surface forms are phonological derived from their corresponding marked basic forms, through the application of consonant deletion and vowel assimilation rules. It was observed that the two phonological rules did not bring about any changes in the meanings of the affected lexical items. Thus, the phonological variation could be described as being *phonetic* rather than *phonemic*.

The linguistic and sociolinguistic implications of the 'shift of markedness' for the language, its speakers and learners were briefly highlighted and discussed. The paper finally expressed the fear about the possibility of having the marked basic forms becoming totally archaic or obsolete in Standard Yorùbá. Consequently, the marked basic forms may eventually disappear from the written literature of the language.

Notes

¹As rightly defined by Mosadomi (2005:231) 'Standard Yorùbá' refers to the North-Western Yorùbá. It is this variant of the language that has been chosen to be the **norm** because of its uniformity and wide use in schools, textbooks, and the media.

²The items in (1) are transcribed using the I.P.A. symbols rather than the Standard Yorùbá orthographic symbols. Yorùbá is a tone language with **three** discrete tone levels:

- High [/]
- Mid [unmarked]
- Low [\]

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