

Ẹnà: An iterative affixation game in Yoruba

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It is widely thought that language games provide insight into the phonology of the natural language; speakers manipulate words in ways that can show us properties of the mental representations of the sounds (Hombert 1973, 1986, Bagemihl 1995, Botne & Davis, 2000). In this paper, we raise puzzles posed by a language game in Yoruba, in which the game forms of certain sequences are inconsistent with the general assumptions about the phonology of Yoruba, particularly the analysis that all VV sequences consist of two syllables (Orie & Pulleyblank 2002). The game, known as Ẹnà, involves copying vowels and tones onto a dummy syllable; it has previously been described only in little detail (Işola 1982) and has never been analyzed.

In Ẹnà, a dummy infix –gV- is typically added after all syllables, with the V and the tone copied from the preceding syllable, as shown in (a). However, our novel data shows that the treatment of VV sequences differs depending on other factors: pronouns and VV sequences with identical tone are treated as a single unit, while non-pronominal VV sequences with non-identical tone are treated as separate loci for dummy syllable insertion. (b) shows a VV sequence in which both V receive a dummy syllable insertion, while (c) and (d) show cases where a VV sequence has a single dummy syllable inserted. Note how when the tones differ, the tone on the dummy syllable is not a copy of the first tone, but rather instantiates the tone on the second (non-copied) original vowel. The game syllables are bolded.

	Yoruba		Enà
a.	abà	“village”	à g abà g a
b.	àpòowó	“sack of money”	à g apò g ò g ò-ogowó g ó
c.	rù ú	“carry it”	rù g ú
d.	bèròòwò	“begin a business”	bè g èrò g ò g òwò g ò

We suggest that, rather than targeting syllables, Ẹnà actually targets {vowel,tone} combinations, such that when VV shares an underlying vowel or a tone, only one dummy syllable is added. Yoruba pronominals are argued to be underlyingly just a mora with tone, without a vowel (Orie and Pulleyblank 2002), meaning that pronominals share an underlying vowel with the verb root. In these cases, there is only one insertion. Similarly, OCP requirements suggest that two adjacent identical tones are represented as a single tone, and there is only one dummy syllable in these cases too. In all other cases, the VV sequences receive two insertions.

Through the novel data presented here, we offer a contribution to the phonological literature on language games, as well as to the understanding of Yoruba phonology, particularly of the representation of VV sequences. The apparent insertion site of the dummy syllable in Yoruba, namely after {vowel,tone} combinations, is one that has not previously been reported, yet it follows directly from well-argued assumptions in the existing literature on the language.

References:

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