



Research Paper

## A Diachronic Study of the Loss of /w/ in some Lexical Items in Central Yoruba Dialect Group

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### Abstract

It is observed in Yorùbá language that the proto- segment /\*g<sup>w</sup>/developed into /w/ in some dialects groups which include the Central Dialect group, and that the sound is today lost in a large number of lexical items. This paper discusses the possibility to predict some of the diachronic phonology processes in the historical development of Yorùbá language. The data collection for the paper relies on the informants who are the native speakers of Yorùbá, Ígalà and Ísekírì languages. The data presentation shall be based on descriptive analysis. Findings show that the loss of /w/ in a large number of lexical items in the Central Yorùbá was not sporadic, rather, it is systematic and rule governed.

**Keywords:** Diachronic, phonological processes, central Yorùbá, lexical items, sporadic.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Linguistic analysis, as linguists have explained may be synchronic or diachronic. Whereas synchronic linguistics deals with the study of language in its present state, diachronic linguistics concerns itself with the study of historical development of language by explaining historical changes in the grammatical structure of a language. This is accomplished through a comparative study of related languages or dialects of a language (Jeffers and Lehiste 1986, Campbell 2001, Miller 2007).

Diachronic study of Yoruba phonology is not as robust as synchronic study. As far as our research shows, works that focus mainly on a diachronic study of the language include Adetugbo (1967, 1982), Freso (1970), Oyelaran (1976), Akinkugbe (1976), Capo (1985) and Abiodun and Sanusi (1999). Scholars, whose works focus on Yoruba dialect variation or comparative study of Yoruba dialects, limit their works to synchronic description and comparison.

The present paper agrees with the submission of earlier scholars that include Adetugbo (1967, 1982), Akinkugbe (1976) that the proto-segment /\*g<sup>w</sup>/ developed into /w/ in some dialect groups that include the Central Dialect group, and that the reflex is today lost in a large number of lexical items. On the loss of /w/ in Central Yoruba, Bamisile (1986) and Ajiboye (1999) have presented a discussion of the loss in Moba dialect. Olumuyiwa (1990) equally discussed the loss in Akure dialect, one of the dialects within Central Yoruba. These scholars focus on a synchronic description rather than a diachronic one, which is the focus of the present study. The present paper, however, as already pointed out, investigates the loss and provides systematic explanation that accounts for the loss from a diachronic perspective, postulating diachronic rules that account for the loss.

The paper is divided into five sections. Section one is the introduction where we present the focus of the paper. Section two presents a literature review explaining the works of earlier scholars on the loss/merger of /\*g<sup>w</sup>/ in the historical development of Yoruba. In section three, we present relevant data. Section four offers general discussion of the data while section five is the conclusion.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

As already pointed out in the introduction, there is no robust literature on the diachronic study of Yoruba. However, the researchers encountered a few works that were mentioned in the previous section above. They include Adetugbo (1967, 1982), Fresco (1970), Akinkugbe (1976), Oyelaran (1976), Capo (1985) and Abiodun and Sanusi (1999). The works of Adetugbo, Fresco and Akinkugbe mentioned above are directly relevant to this study because they focus on the reconstruction of the proto-consonants and vowels of Yoruba, and as must have been noticed from the foregoing the present paper looks at the loss of a consonant, that developed historically from /\*g<sup>w</sup>/.

Oyelaran (1976), Capo (1985), and Abiodun and Sanusi (1999) are not directly relevant because the focus of their works is on the postulation of a tenth vowel in proto-Yoruba. The scholars advance arguments for the postulation of the [+ATR] low vowel [a], which serves as the harmonic counterpart of [-ATR] low vowel, /a/. The focus of their works do not bear directly on the present research.

Coming back to the relevant works mentioned above, Adetugbo (1967, 1982) postulates [/\*g<sup>w</sup>] as one of the proto-consonants in Yoruba, claiming that the proto-form was derived through a process of labialization in the language. He claims very correctly also that the consonant shifted to velar fricative /ɣ/ in South East Yoruba (SEY) in a number of lexical items, and to /w/ in North-West Yoruba (NWY) and Central Yoruba. He submits further that the reflex /w/ was lost in some lexical items in Central Yoruba. Adetugbo (1982: 211) provides the following examples to buttress his claim.

1a.	SEY	NWY	CY	gloss
	oyó	owó	eó	'money'
	ayọ	awọ	aọ	'skin'
	yò	wò	ò	'look'
	oyíyo	eéwo	oío	'tumour'
	ọyọ	owọ	ọọ	'broom'
b.	SEY	NWY/CY		
	g <sup>w</sup> ò	wà/wọ		'dig'
	g <sup>w</sup> í	wí		'say, blame'
	g <sup>w</sup> ó	wó		'demolish'
	mé.g <sup>w</sup> á	mẹwàa		'ten'
	g <sup>w</sup> éé	wééré		'tiny'

Akinkugbe (1976) agrees with Adetugbo (1967) on the postulation of /\*g<sup>w</sup>/ as a proto-segment in Yoruba, she goes further, however, to claim that the shift of the proto-segment is not limited to proto-Yoruba but to proto-Yoruboid, a family group that has Yoruba, Igala and Itsekiri as daughter languages. Akinkugbe provides these examples

2.	Standard Yoruba	Igala	Itsekiri
	wẹ	g <sup>w</sup> ẹ	g <sup>w</sup> ẹ
	wà	g <sup>w</sup> a	g <sup>w</sup> a

From the foregoing, it is clear that scholars agree that proto-Yoruba contained /\*g<sup>w</sup>/, they agree that the proto-segment shifted to /ɣ/ in some dialect groups and to /w/ in other groups that included Central Yoruba. Furthermore, there is a consensus that /w/ is lost in a large number of lexical items in the Central Yoruba but retained in a few other items in the same dialect group. The only issue that remains for consideration and discussion is what motivates loss in some items but retention in other items.

### Data Presentation

In this section, we present data from Ondo dialect, which belongs to the South-East dialect group (SEY) where the proto-form is retained and robustly manifested, we also present data from Ibadan dialect, which belongs to the North-West dialect group (NWY), where the reflex (/w/) is widely manifested, and from Ado-Ekiti dialect, which belongs to the Central Yoruba group, where the reflex is lost in a large number of items. Our attention in the reconstructed form presented in (3) below, is mainly on the consonants under discussion and not the vowels. We shall, however, try as much as possible to be faithful to the vowel harmony feature, which according to Bamgbose (1976), Oyelaran (1976), Capo (1985), and Abiodun and Sanusi (1999) was full and robust in the proto-form of the language.

3.	Proto-form	SEY (Ondo)	NWY (Ibadan)	CY (Ado-Ekiti)	Gloss
<b>a.</b>	*ẹ̀g <sup>w</sup> ù	ẹ̀g <sup>w</sup> ú	ẹ̀wù	ẹ̀ù	‘gown/robe’
	*òg <sup>w</sup> ú	òg <sup>w</sup> ú	òwú	òù	‘cotton’
	*ig <sup>w</sup> ú	ig <sup>w</sup> ú	iwú	iú	‘grey hair’
	*g <sup>w</sup> ú	g <sup>w</sup> ú	wú	ú	‘swell-up’
	*g <sup>w</sup> ù	g <sup>w</sup> ù	wù	ù	‘germinate’
	*ùbèg <sup>w</sup> ù ùbèg <sup>w</sup>	o	ìbèwò	ùbèò	‘inspection’
	*og <sup>w</sup> ú	og <sup>w</sup> ú	owú	ou	‘rivalry’
	*eg <sup>w</sup> u	eg <sup>w</sup> u	ewu	eu	‘danger’
<b>b.</b>	*ag <sup>w</sup> ù	ag <sup>w</sup> o	awo	ao	‘cult’
	*ag <sup>w</sup> ù	ag <sup>w</sup> o	awo	ao	‘plate’
	*ag <sup>w</sup> ù	ag <sup>w</sup> ó	awo	aó	‘guinea fowl’
	*ag <sup>w</sup> ù	ag <sup>w</sup> ò	awò	aò	‘sunshade’
*ìdáng <sup>w</sup> ù	ìdángwò	ìdánwò	ìdánò	‘examination’	
*aség <sup>w</sup> ù	aség <sup>w</sup> ó	aséwó	aseó	‘sex worker’	
*g <sup>w</sup> ò	g <sup>w</sup> ò	wò	ò	‘look’	
*ùgbeyàg <sup>w</sup> ò	ùgbéyàg <sup>w</sup> ó	ìgbéyàwó	ùgbeyàó	‘marriage’	
<b>c.</b>	*og <sup>w</sup> ò	oyò	owò	oò	‘broom’
	*og <sup>w</sup> ó	oyó	owó	oo	‘hand/arm’
	*og <sup>w</sup> ò	oyò	owò	oo	‘honour’
	*ùkág <sup>w</sup> ó	ùkáyó	ikáwó	ùkáo	‘custody’
	*ùràng <sup>w</sup> ó	ùrànyó	irànwó	ùràno	‘assistance’
	*ag <sup>w</sup> ò	ayò	awò	ao	‘skin’
	*ùg <sup>w</sup> ò	ùyò	iwò	ùò	‘hook’
	*g <sup>w</sup> ò	yò	wò	ò	‘enter’
	*èg <sup>w</sup> òn	èyàn	èwòn	èòn	‘chain/prison’
*ìràg <sup>w</sup> ò	ìràyò	ìràwò	ìràò	‘star’	
<b>d.</b>	*g <sup>w</sup> ó	g <sup>w</sup> ó	wó	wó	‘collapse’
<b>e. i</b>	*òwe	òwe	òwe	òe	‘proverb’
	*g <sup>w</sup> é	g <sup>w</sup> é	wé	é	‘tie (head)’
	*g <sup>w</sup> é	g <sup>w</sup> é	wé	é	‘compare’
<b>ii.</b>	*ewé	ewé	ewé	ewé	‘leaf’
	*wèrè	wèrè	wèrè	wèrè	‘mad person’
	*wéré	wéré	wéré	wéré	‘quickly’
<b>iii.</b>	*g <sup>w</sup> á	ya	wá	á	‘come’
	*g <sup>w</sup> à	ya	wà	à	‘available’
	*àg <sup>w</sup> a	àya	àwa	ia	‘we’
<b>iv.</b>	*àwàdà	àwàdà	àwàdà	àwàdà	‘jest’
	*ùg <sup>w</sup> à	ùg <sup>w</sup> à	iwà	ùwà	‘character’
	*eg <sup>w</sup> à	eg <sup>w</sup> à	ewà	ewà	‘beauty’
	*og <sup>w</sup> á	og <sup>w</sup> á	owá	owá	‘name cogloemen)’

### III. DISCUSSION

Considering the pieces of data presented above, it is clear that whereas South-East Yoruba retained the proto-form in many items as manifested in (3a,b,d,e i and e iv), the proto-form shifted to /y/ in (3c, e iii). Furthermore, the labio-velar approximant is also found in the dialect group in (3e, ii). The situation in North-West Yoruba is different, the reflex /w/ is consistently manifested in the dialect group in the entire data. In the Central Yoruba however the proto-form /g<sup>w</sup>/ and its reflexes /y, w/ are lost in (3a,b,c,e i and e iii) but /w/ is found in a few items as reflected in (3d,e ii and e iv).

Talking of the loss of /w/ in Central Yoruba the present researchers observe that the reflex is consistently lost before back rounded vowels /u o ɔ/ as reflected in examples (3a-c). Interestingly, the reflex is

also lost before the mid-high front vowel /e/ as demonstrated in (3e i). It is also lost before the low vowel /a/ as shown in (3e iii). As readers would have noted, however, the reflex (/w/) is found before the mid-high front vowel in (3e ii), and before the low vowel /a/ in (3e iv).

Focusing first on those examples where the segment is lost in (3a-c), the apparently glaring fact is that the segment is lost due to the influence of [+back +round] vowels that follow it. It is important to note that the labia-velar approximant is equally [+back +round] and also [+labial]. The lips are directly involved in the production of the vowels and also in the production of the approximant. While the lips maintain a round posture in the production of the vowels, the lips not only form an obstruction along the passage of the airstream, it also maintains a round shape in the production of the approximant. The weak consonant dropped before a vowel with which it shares the features [+round, +back] and also the feature [+labial], considering the fact that the rounding of vowels involves the lips.

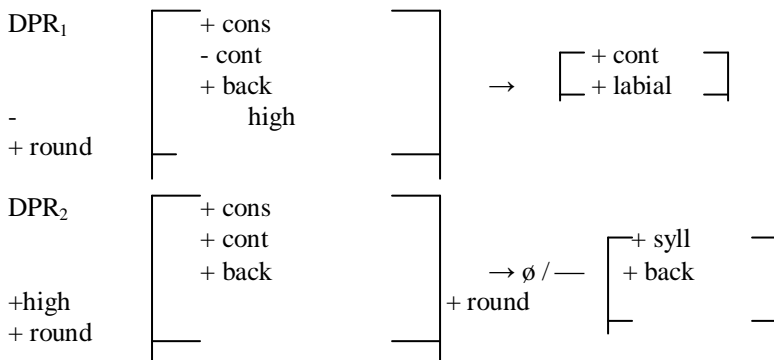
A second factor that should be considered along with the first one is that strong consonants are known to undergo weakening or lenition in the historical development of languages. Campbell (1998:41) defines lenition as “a variety of changes in which the resulting sound after the change is conceived as somehow weaker in articulation than the original sound. Lenition thus typically include changes of stops or affricates to fricatives, of two consonants to one, of full consonants to glides (j or w)...” We call attention to the last section of the quotation that says full consonants may change to glide. As observed in the data presented, a plosive changed to glide /\*g<sup>w</sup>>w/ in North-West Yoruba. However, as scholars have pointed out, segments derived through lenition may eventually be lost. Millar (2007:071) affirms this when he remarked that “it is possible for a lenition to continue to the point at which the affected segment disappears entirely.” The scholar gives the example of the lenition of /\*k>h>ø/ in the history of the English language. He says,

Instances of [h] in native English words generally derive from the lenition of an earlier \*[k] ... but this [k] was lenited first to [x] and then to [h] and the modern lenition of [h] to zero merely completes a process of lenition stretching over several thousand years (p. 073).

The case in the Yoruba language appears similar to the one cited in Millar above. The presentation and discussion so far suggest that /\*g<sup>w</sup>/ went through lenition to the point of being lost. The realization of /w/ in some other dialect groups is a clear indication that /\*g<sup>w</sup>/ went through a transition of changing to /w/ in the central Yoruba dialect group, before it went through a further lenition to zero:

$$*g^w > w > \emptyset$$

From the foregoing, we infer here that Central Yoruba dialect group operated two diachronic phonological rules (DPR) in its historical development. The first rule changed the proto-form /\*g<sup>w</sup>/ to the labia-velar approximant /w/, while the second rule accounts was the deletion or loss of the approximant. The rules are:



Whereas DPR<sub>1</sub> applied in the Central Yoruba group in all environments based on our data, DPR<sub>2</sub> appears to be constrained by environment. The deletion only occurred where the glide is followed by a [+back +round] vowel. The sample derivations below demonstrate the application of the rules.

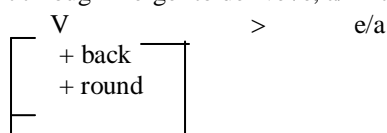
4.	UR:	/agwɔ/	/ògwú/	/gwè/	/gwí/	/gwò/	/gwá/
	DPR <sub>1</sub> :	awɔ	òwú	wè	wí	wò	wá
	DPR <sub>2</sub> :	aɔ	òú	-	-	ò	-
	SR:	[aɔ]	[òú]	[wè]	[wí]	[ò]	[wá]
	Gloss:	cult	cotton	bath	say	enter	look for

**Residual Cases**

Looking critically at the data presented in (3), one would notice that DPR<sub>2</sub> fails in one particular example [wó] ‘collapse/fell (of a tree)’. The labial-velar approximant does not delete before a [+back, +round] vowel. In the same vein, the process of loss occurs before front vowel /e/ and low, back vowel /a/. Let us repeat examples below:

- |    |     |      |                   |
|----|-----|------|-------------------|
| 5. | i.  | òe   | ‘proverb’         |
|    |     | ue   | ‘gizzard’         |
|    |     | é    | ‘tie (head gear)’ |
|    |     | é    | ‘compare’         |
|    | ii. | á    | ‘come’            |
|    |     | à    | ‘available’       |
|    |     | ùara | ‘anxiety’         |
|    |     | ùà   | ‘ceremony’        |

In explaining this residual cases, we consider possible arguments that could account for the loss of /w/ before /e/ and /a/ as demonstrated in (5i, ii) above. The first consideration is that instances of /e/ and /a/ in these examples (except for /ùàra/ where only the final /a/ is relevant) were possibly diachronically back rounded vowel (s) that went through merger to derive /e, a/ in the present-day form of the dialect. This implies a change of the form.



We cannot determine the form of the V because, in the first place, there is no record of the oldest form or an older form of Yoruba as we have in English where, in the literature, we have Old English, Middle English and Modern English, (Algeo 2010, Chamonikolasova 2017). Secondly, we could not trace the form of the vowel through the present-day dialects of Yoruba because no relic is found, the vowels are /e/, /a/ in all the dialects as found in Central Yoruba. The only point we advance here is that the V was a [+back, +round] vowel, and the rule formed as DPR<sub>2 applied</sub> above to derive the present-day forms.

It is possible to wonder why a [+back, +round] vowel would change to [-back, -round] in the environment of [+back, +round] vowel, after all the initial vowel in the first two examples in (5i) and in the third and fourth examples in (5ii) are [+back +round]. The point to note here is that diachronically, there existed a consonant between the vowels, and there is no evidence that consonants in Yoruba were/are transparent to the effect that in a V<sub>1</sub>CV<sub>2</sub> structure, C was/is transparent and could therefore block V<sub>2</sub> from changing features.

Another residual problem that deserves attention is the manifestation of /w/ before /e/ and /a/, considering the data in (5) where it is lost.

- |      |            |   |
|------|------------|---|
| 6 i. | ewé        | ‘leaf’  |
|      | wéré       | ‘quickly’                                     |
|      | èwe        | ‘youth’                                       |
|      | àwé        | ‘friend’                                      |
| ii.  | ẹwà        | ‘beauty’                                      |
|      | wàrà(wàrà) | ‘immediately/quickly’                         |
|      | ẹwá        | ‘ten’   |
|      | ọwá        | ‘name/conglomerate (as in ọmọ ọwá, ọmọ ẹkùn)’ |

The argument here is that the /e/ and /a/ in these examples were not derived from [+back, +round] vowel(s). They were [-back -round] diachronically, and therefore, could not induce the deletion of /w/. The case is that whereas /w/ was lost in the examples in (5i,ii) because a [+back, +round] vowel occurred after the /w/ diachronically, the /w/ in (6i, ii) occurred diachronically before a [-round] vowel, and therefore did not delete.

**IV. CONCLUSION**

The major thrust of this paper is that it is possible to predict some of the diachronic phonological processes in the historical development of Yoruba. It is established in the paper that the loss of /w/ in a large number of lexical items in the Central Yoruba was not sporadic, rather, it is systematic and rule governed. Other dialect groups of the language did not operate a diachronic deletion of /w/, though it is clear that lenition of /g<sup>w</sup>/ to the velar fricative occurred in the South-East dialect group.

Diachronic phonological changes remain a robust feature in the human language. While it is true that the complete vowel harmony structure of the proto-form of Yoruba and its later development to partial harmony in most of the dialect groups have been widely accounted for, (Adetugbo 1976,1982, Fresco 1970), there are

other changes that are yet to be attended to. For instance, there is evidence of \*tsf>f/s/h, also nasal vowels developed to oral vowels in initial position, and, in fact, other different changes. There is a need to present a systematic account of such changes in the historical development of the language as this may help in reconstructing an older form of the language.

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