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Functions and Distribution of *n* in Yorùbá Orthography

Ọladiipo Ajiboye
University of Lagos

Abstract

Learners of Yorùbá Language either as a child or an adult L2 may likely encounter some difficulties in classifying the sounds corresponding to the letter *n* in the transcription or writing system. Indeed, as it is well known, in Yorùbá, this letter which legitimately is a basic consonant phoneme or sometimes an allophone of *l* may sometimes correspond to a Syllabic-N, or sometimes to a nasal vowel. This paper presents three data sets on the distribution of the consonant and the functions it performs in each case, dwelling on the areas of problems for Yorùbá child learning the language or a non-native speaker of Yorùbá learning it as L2. Having established that there are three types of *n*: (a) *n* as a consonant; *n* as a syllabic nasal; and *n* as a marker of nasal feature on a nasal vowel; the paper provides a number of clues on how to identify which particular *n* appears wherever it is found.

Keywords: orthography, lexical items, distribution, transcription, Yorùbá

Ọladiipo Ajiboye, PhD.
Department of Linguistics, African and Asian Studies
University of Lagos, Akoka-Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria.
Phone: +234 812 693 2123; Email: oajiboye@unilag.edu.ng

1. Introduction¹

There are certain things that are taken for granted or trivialized by adult native speakers of a language. This paper considers one of such cases, i.e. the occurrence of consonant *n* in Yorùbá writing system, and show, based on its function and distribution, that it may show up as a plain consonant, a syllabic nasal, or a marker of nasality on a preceding vowel. It discusses each instance and go further to show how this multipurpose function of *n* can constitute difficulties to a Yorùbá child or an L2 adult learner of the language. The paper ends with suggestions on how the difficulties can be surmounted.

2. *n* as a plain consonant

The most salient function of *n* is its realization as an alveolar nasal consonant occurring as an onset in a word, morpheme, or a syllable. I present two sets of data to show its distribution in Yorùbá. The first set shows the context where *n* occurs in lexical items. This is followed by the phrasal domain.

2.1. Occurrence of *n* consonant in lexical domain

As earlier mentioned, the plain *n* appears unambiguously as a consonant which predictably appears as an onset of a syllable exclusively found at the beginning of a morpheme, or word. The examples in (1) and (2) buttress this claim.

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|-----|----|----|-------------------|
| (1) | a. | ní | ‘to, at, in’ |
| | b. | ní | ‘possessive verb’ |
| | c. | ni | ‘own’ |

¹ The idea in this paper emanates from a problem concerning classification of the sounds corresponding to the letter *n* in the transcription of texts by Julien Meyer, one of the Collaborators in an ongoing Research project titled *Yoruba language and drummed speech, transcription and rhythmical analysis of a rare oral patrimony* at The Gipsa-Lab laboratory, Grenoble, France. Other Collaborators are Victor Manfredi (Boston University), Oba Billy Oḷajide (University of Ilorin), and Oḷadiipo Ajiboye (University of Lagos).

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|-----|----|---------|----------------|
| | d. | ni | ‘be’ |
| | e. | ni | ‘focus marker’ |
| | f. | òmìnira | ‘freedom’ |
| (2) | a. | nà | ‘beat’ |
| | b. | nù | ‘get lost’ |
| | c. | ná | ‘price (v)’ |
| | d. | náà | ‘deictic’ |

The examples in (1) and (2) combine to show the distribution of the consonant. Precisely, it is evident that there are three nasal vowels that can occur after *n*. The three vowels are [i], [u], [a]. As those examples show, orthographically, the nasal vowels occur as plain. However, if we transcribe the examples phonetically, the nasal diacritic is reflected on those nasal vowels as shown in (1’) and (2’) respectively.

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|------|----|------------|------|----|-------|
| (1’) | a. | [ní̃] | (2’) | a. | [nẫ] |
| | b. | [nĩ̃] | | b. | [nũ̃] |
| | c. | [nĩ̃] | | c. | [nẫ] |
| | d. | [nĩ̃] | | d. | [nẫ] |
| | e. | [nĩ̃] | | | |
| | f. | [òmìnĩ̃ra] | | | |

Note that every orthography is built on certain conventions as laid down by the Orthography Committee set up for that purpose (Bamgbose 1974, Williamson 1984, and Awobuluyi & Oyèláràn 2017). Such conventions are arrived at by the generality of all the stake holders of the language. One of such conventions for Yoruba is that which states that nasal vowels following a nasal consonant [m] and [n] should not be marked with any nasal symbol. That convention stands till today. I now turn to the occurrence of *n* in phrasal domain.

2.2. *n* as a consonant in phrasal domain

Apart from lexical items in isolation, it is also possible for those lexical words to find their way into the phrasal domain, where they co-occur

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with other lexical items. In such cases, it is possible for certain phonological changes to recur.

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|-----|----|-------------|-------------------|--|
| (3) | a. | ní ilé nilé | | ‘to/at/in house’ |
| | b. | ní owó | lówó/*níwó | ‘have money’ |
| | c. | ni ara rẹ̀ | nira rẹ̀ | ‘own his body’ |
| | d. | ni iyẹn | Adé ni iyẹn/niyẹn | ‘Adé be that/That is Adé’ |
| | e. | ni | ‘focus marker’ | Títí ni Adé/lAdé fẹ̀
‘It is Títí who Ade married’ |

Like the case reported in 2.1, no nasal symbol is found in the environment of nasal vowels following a nasal consonant due to the orthographic convention that imposes such conventional rule on nasal vowels in that environment. One striking difference between the case reported in 2.2 and that of 2.1 is that deletion of one of the two vowels that are juxtaposed usually takes place in (2.2), and depending on which of the two vowels that deletes, the nasal vowel can undergo some change too. To show this clearly, I present the examples in (3) in their phonetic forms shown in (3’).

- | | | | |
|------|----|--------------|------------------------|
| (3’) | a. | [ní ilé] | [nílé] |
| | b. | [ní owó] | [lówó/*níwó] |
| | c. | [nĩ ara rẹ̀] | [nĩrā/*lārā rẹ̀] |
| | d. | [nĩ iyě] | [adé nĩ iyě/nĩyě] |
| | e. | [nĩ] | [títí nĩ adé/lādé fẹ̀] |

I use the examples in (3’b & c) for illustration. In (3’b), the nasal vowel [ĩ] of the verb is deleted and the nasal consonant *n* cannot survive. That is why the [n] surfaces as [l] (cf. Oyelaran 1976 and Awobuluyi 1992). Any attempt to retain the nasal vowel will yield the output [nĩwó], which is not attested in the language. By contrast, in (3’c), [n] survives because the nasal vowel [ĩ] is not deleted. Similarly, any attempt to delete the nasal vowel will enforce [n] and [l] alternation, an output

[lārā]² which is not attested in the language. For the mid toned *ni*, its wide distribution is shown in (4) and (5).

(4) [ni] [Equative/Identifier/focus] Predicator

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|----|------------------|--------------------------------|
| a. | Ògá ni Fẹ̀muwẹ̀. | ‘Fẹ̀muwẹ̀ is Master’ |
| c. | Ògá ni. | ‘He is Master’ |
| d. | Ògá ni ọ́. | ‘You are a Master/superstar’ |
| e. | Ògá ni wọ̀n. | ‘They are Master/superstars’ |
| f. | Ògá ni mí. | ‘I am a Master/superstar’ |
| g. | Ògá ni yín. | ‘You are Master(s)/superstars’ |

(5) ni [M] (OWN EXCLUSIVELY)

Fẹ̀muwẹ̀ ni ó ni ajá méjì.

‘It is Fẹ̀muwẹ̀ who owns the two dogs’

(Oyelaran & Ajiboye, 2013)

The next discussion is on the kind of *n* that functions as a syllabic nasal.

3. *n* as a syllabic-N consonant

The last variety of consonant *n* to be examined is the syllabic *n* consonant which is usually represented with an archi-phoneme N in Yorùbá phonetics/phonology.

3.1. Syllabic-N consonant in lexical items

The instance of *n* functioning as a syllabic nasal has been thoroughly and widely discussed in the literature (Owólabí 2011, Oyelaran 1971, and Oyelaran 1990). The syllabic consonant in the cited literature and others is the ability of a consonant to behave like a nucleus in a syllable. By being a nucleus, such consonant can behave like vowels which naturally is the only one that can be the nucleus. In tone languages, such a consonant can stand alone as a syllable and it can bear tone.

² Note that *lara* is a possible word in Yorùbá which can mean to be jealous or to throw one’s body... like *ó lara rẹ̀ mólẹ̀* ‘he throws himself/his body on the ground’. However, that word does not have the underlying form [nī ara].

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|-----|----|-----------|-------------------------|
| (6) | a. | òronbó | ‘lemon’ |
| | b. | fẹ̀nfẹ̀ | ‘wide and flat’ |
| | c. | báńdélé | ‘personal name’ |
| | d. | báńtálé | ‘personal name’ |
| | e. | jẹ̀nrọ́lá | ‘personal name’ |
| | f. | kòngó | ‘drumstick’ |
| | g. | kòkò | ‘toad’ |
| | h. | báńgbádé | ‘personal name’ |
| | i. | apáńpá | ‘nickname’ |
| | j. | ònkọ | ‘writer/one who writes’ |

As it is clearly shown, the occurrence of *n* in those examples has two pointers that reveal its status as a syllabic nasal, first is the tone in each of the places where it occurs. The second is its occurrence preceding a consonant. One of the syllable rules in Yorùbá is that the language forbids consonant clusters. It must be pointed out that the phonetics/phonology of (6) is oversimplified as the syllabic nasal has phonologically conditioned variants.

3.2. *n* as a Syllabic-N consonant in non-lexical items

Apart from the lexical occurrence of syllabic nasal, it is also evident in Yorùbá that the syllabic nasal can occur as an independent morpheme or word. To be precise, the examples in (7) indicates that the syllabic nasal occurs as a progressive marker.

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|-----|----|------------------|--|
| (7) | a. | ó n bí | ‘s/he is vomiting.’ |
| | b. | ó n mí | ‘s/he is breathing.’ |
| | c. | ó n fà | ‘s/he is crawling’ |
| | d. | ó n rí bàbá àgbà | ‘s/he sees the old man (in question).’ |
| | e. | ó n tà | ‘s/he is selling.’ |
| | f. | ó n dẹ | ‘s/he is hunting.’ |
| | g. | ó n sà | ‘s/he is picking.’ |
| | h. | ó n lọ | ‘s/he is going.’ |
| | i. | ó n ná ojà | ‘s/he is pricing articles/goods.’ |
| | j. | ó n gé igi | ‘s/he is cutting a tree.’ |

- | | | |
|----|--------------|-------------------------------------|
| k. | ó n kà iwé | ‘s/he is reading.’ |
| l. | ó n gba ojà | ‘s/he is receiving articles/goods.’ |
| m. | ó n pa ewúré | ‘s/he is killing a goat.’ |

The examples show a wide distribution and occurrence of *n* as a syllabic nasal.

4. *n* as marker of nasality on preceding vowel

The third type of *n* that is found in Yorùbá is the one found in the environment of certain vowels. Recall that Yorùbá vowels can be divided into two depending on whether they are oral or nasal. Standard Yorùbá has seven oral vowels: *i*, *u*, *e*, *o*, *ɛ*, *ɔ*, *a*; and five nasal vowels. Since the five nasal vowels are subset of the oral vowels, there must be a way of differentiating the nasal vowels from their oral counterparts. There is one option that phonetics offers which is the use of a nasal diacritic [̃]. If this option is adopted, we would have those five nasal vowels as *ĩ*, *ũ*, *ẽ*, *õ*, *ã*. This would have produced words such as those in (8).

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|-----|----|------|------------|
| (8) | a. | idĩ | ‘maggot’ |
| | b. | igũ | ‘corner’ |
| | c. | iyẽ | ‘that one’ |
| | d. | àgbõ | ‘coconut’ |
| | e. | ègã | ‘despise’ |

However, the Committee which designed the Yorùbá writing system (Orthography) did not adopt this option which would have dealt with one of the problems of identification and separation of the three types of *n* under review or at least reduce them into two. They did not choose the option because of the problem of typing the diacritic especially during the era of typewriter. Instead, they use their linguistic knowledge to adopt consonant *n*, itself being a nasal segment to appear after a

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supposedly nasal or nasalised vowel.³ Under that convention, the examples in (8) are now to be rendered as (9).

- | | | | |
|-----|----|--------|------------|
| (9) | a. | ìdin | ‘maggot’ |
| | b. | igun | ‘corner’ |
| | c. | iyen | ‘that one’ |
| | d. | àgbọ̀n | ‘coconut’ |
| | e. | ẹ̀gàn | ‘despise’ |

Note too that the importance of differentiating nasal vowels from their oral counterparts goes beyond mere aesthetics or fashion. The fact of Yorùbá reveals that oral and nasal are contrastive segments, i.e. they contrast in words that are in minimal pairs to bring difference in meaning as shown in (10).

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|------|------|-----------|-------|-------------------|
| (10) | àdá | ‘cutlass’ | àdán | ‘bat’ |
| | rù | ‘carry, | rùn | ‘smell’ |
| | ẹ̀rí | ‘witness’ | ẹ̀rín | ‘laughter’ |
| | yẹ | ‘be fit’ | yẹ̀n | ‘that’ |
| | ìwọ̀ | ‘hook’ | ìwọ̀n | ‘measuring scale’ |

As I show in those examples, wherever *n* appears after a vowel, such vowels are nasal or nasalised. However, there are certain instances where *n* fails to show up or, put other way, there are certain cases where *n* is dropped in the context under review. Consider the examples in (11).

- | | | | |
|------|-----|-------|---------|
| (11) | I | II | |
| a. | omi | *omin | ‘water’ |
| b. | àmù | *amun | ‘pot’ |
| c. | iná | *inan | ‘fire’ |
| d. | òní | *ònín | ‘today’ |

³ Note that one of the principles of orthography designing is conventionality. By this, certain letters are adopted by conventions arrived at by consensus among members of the Committee to represent certain phonemes or allophones.

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|----|-----|-------|---------|
| e. | ɛnu | *ɛnun | ‘mouth’ |
| f. | omọ | *omọn | ‘child’ |

The reason as to why *n* is dropped is also conventional. In the wisdom of the Committee, if the preceding consonants are nasal, putting *n* after those vowels is considered redundant. This convention has one advantage of satisfying the principle of economy in the sense that there is a reduction of one character in each of those words. What remains to be shown is where we have two of the three *n* or even where the three appear in a lexical item.

5. When the two or the three *n* combine in a lexical item

There is also the possibility of the three types of *n* co-occurring in a word. In such instance, it takes a deep knowledge of syllable structure to be able to identify which *n* performs which function. Consider the following examples in (12). The syllable boundary is marked by a dot.

- | | | | |
|---------|------------|----------------|------------------------------------|
| (12) a. | títín | tí.ń.tín | ‘small’ |
| b. | tínínrín | tín.ín.rín | ‘slim, slender’ |
| c. | irungbọ̀n | i.run.gbọ̀n | ‘beard’ |
| d. | okinni | o.kin.ni | ‘needle’ |
| e. | ọ̀kùnrin | ọ̀.kùn.rin | ‘man’ |
| f. | Pọ̀nńlé | Pọ̀n.ń.lé | ‘personal name’ |
| g. | Ọ̀dúnńbákú | Ọ̀.dún.ń.bá.kú | ‘personal name’ |
| h. | itànná | ì.tàn.ná | ‘lamp’ |
| j. | ońkunnímú | o.ń.kun.ní.mú | ‘person with mucus
in the nose’ |

I use (12j) as illustration. The first *n* is a syllabic nasal. In a non-syllabified word, the clue to this is the appearance of a high tone on the consonant. The second occurrence is in the syllable *kun* where *n* is a marker of nasality on *u*; and the third occurrence of *n* in the syllable *ní* shows *n* as an independent consonant functioning as an onset. This case can be more challenging if tones are left unmarked as it is the case with some careless writers. Therefore, a deep knowledge of the syllable

structure will go a long way to know which is which when two or three variants of the consonant appear in a word.

6. Conclusion

This paper has briefly examined one problem relating to *n* in Yorùbá orthography which on the surface may look trivial and often taken for granted by native speakers of the language, but which, to non-native speakers of the language and native speakers who learn the language in schools, poses a serious challenge of identification of the particular *n* that is available. It has shown that there are three types of *n* in Yorùbá writing system: (a) *n* as a consonant; *n* as a syllabic nasal; and *n* as a marker of nasal feature on a nasal vowel. In other words, in Yoruba, this letter may sometimes correspond to a Syllabic-N, or sometimes to a nasal vowel, or sometimes to an allophone of *l* in the environment of an oral vowel. It is therefore onerous on non-native speakers to pay special attention to the distribution of the letter for proper identification and pronunciation. To identify the particular variant of *n* that occurs in a word, learners of the language should note that whenever consonant *n*:

- a. precedes a vowel, that *n* is a consonant.
- b. follows a vowel, that *n* marks nasality on the vowel.
- c. precedes a consonant within a lexical item or occurring as an independent morpheme, and in addition, it bears a tone, that *n* is a syllabic consonant. And
- d. whenever two *n*'s occur next to each other, the first marks a nasal feature and the second can be an onset *n* or a syllabic nasal.

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