

**FACTS ABOUT
THE WORLD'S LANGUAGES:**
An Encyclopedia of the World's Major
Languages, Past and Present

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**THE H. W. WILSON COMPANY
NEW YORK AND DUBLIN**

*A New England Publishing Associates Book
2001*

YORUBA

Akinbiyi Akinlabi

Language Name: Yoruba. **Autonym:** *Aku, Anago*.

Location: Southwestern Nigeria, southern Benin, and eastern Togo. Varieties of this language are also found in Sierra Leone, the West Indies, Brazil, and Cuba.

Family: Yoruboid subgroup of the Defoid group of the Benue-Congo subfamily of the Volta-Congo family of the Atlantic-Congo subbranch of the Niger-Congo branch of the Niger-Kordofanian family.

Related Languages: The Defoid group consists of Yoruboid and Akokoid subgroups. Yoruboid consists of three closely related languages: Yoruba, Işekiri and Igala. The Akokoid subgroup includes Afa, Ahan, Arigidi, Ayere, Erushu, Igashi, Oyin, Udo, and Uro.

Dialects: The dialect areas of Yoruba are broadly classified as (1) Northwestern (NWY) including Oyo, Egba, Iboḷo, and Moba; (2) Southeastern (SEY) including Ondo, Owo, Ijebu, and the dialects spoken in and around Okitipupa: Ikale, Ilaḷe, Ijo-Apoi, etc.; (3) Central (CY) including Ife, Iḷeṣa, Irun, Ifaki, and Ekiti; (4) Northeastern (NEY) including Iyagba, Gbeḷe, Ikiri, Ijumu; and (5) Southwestern (SWY) including Tsabe, Ketu, and Ife (Togo).

The linguistic characteristics of NWY include the merger of Proto-Yoruba (PYOR) *gw and *ɣ with w, the merger of *ī and *ū with ī and ū respectively, and the development of PYOR *c to f. Present-day standard Yoruba is largely derived from this dialect group. SEY is marked by the retention of PYOR *gw and *ɣ, and by the merger of PYOR *ī and *ū with ē, and ō respectively. PYOR lenis *m' has developed to w̄ in this dialect group; and in the Okitipupa subgroup, PYOR *s has become h. There is no distinction between the second- and third-person plural pronouns in SEY. In CY, the PYOR *gw has changed to w, and *ɣ and *w have become ∅. CY retains PYOR *ī and *ū in prefixes, and in nonfinal stem positions. In NEY, PYOR *gw and *ɣ have merged with w, as in NWY. However, PYOR *w has shifted to ɣ before [e] and [a]. PYOR *s has also become h in this dialect group. Finally PYOR lenis *m' has developed to ŋ. SWY is the only dialect where PYOR lenis *k' has merged with its fortis counterpart. In all other dialect groups, it has merged with [g]. This dialect group retains PYOR *c, which has shifted to either f or s in all other dialects. Finally, SWY has lost vowel nasalization in all PYOR *gū sequences, and in some PYOR *kū sequences.

Number of Speakers: 20–25 million.

Origin and History

All the various tribes of the Yoruba nation trace their origin from a leader called Oduduwa and the city of Ile Ife in present-day southwestern Nigeria. Ile Ife is in fact fabled as the spot where God created man. The seven principal tribes that sprang from Oduduwa's seven grandchildren are the Oyos (from Oranyan) the Benins, Ilas, Owus, Ketus, Sabes, and the Popos. The other tribes are offshoots of one or the other of these seven tribes.

Linguistic evidence suggests that the Yoruba have always lived in their present habitat. Linguistic evidence further suggests that the area around Kaba (northeastern Yoruba) or a little south of it, may be the point of dispersion for the Yoruba, and the point where Proto-Yoruba-Igala (PYIG) was spoken.

As can be seen from the list of the main tribes, migration has taken place both eastward and westward, with some of the main tribes (Ketu and Sabe) located in the Benin republic, west of Nigeria. Other Yoruba tribes, including the Yoruba of Ife (Togo), Idaisa and Manigiri of the republics of Benin and Togo, may in fact not belong to the Oduduwa/Ile Ife tradition.

It was at Freetown, Sierra Leone, that Yoruba studies began in the early 19th century. The reason for this was that the African

language most widely spoken among liberated slaves resettled in Freetown in the early 19th century was Yoruba, or 'Aku' (from *oḷókú* or *eḷókú*, a form of greeting), as it was then known. Interest in Yoruba studies was centered in Freetown until around 1840 when the British government decided to send an expedition to the Niger, and when the Church Missionary Society (CMS) paid attention to the appeals of the Christian converts who had returned from Freetown to their original homes in Yorubaland. On the 1840 expedition was a Yoruba missionary, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a resettled slave who had received an education in Freetown. Crowther was trained and ordained as a priest by the CMS in 1843. The same year, the CMS published his first book on Yoruba, *Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language*. This was soon followed by a primer (1849), a grammar (1852), and a translation of the Bible (1867); all published by the CMS Crowther and the CMS could thus be credited with the founding of a written literature for Yoruba. Other prominent names in the development of Yoruba studies at that time were C.A. Gollmer, H. Kilham, T. King, J. Raban, and H. Townsend.

Orthography and Basic Phonology

The earliest formal attempts at devising an orthography for

Table 1: Consonants

		Labial	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Labio-Velar	Glottal
Stops	Voiceless		t		k	p [kp̚]	
	Voiced	b	d	j [j]	g	gb [gb̚]	
Fricatives	Voiceless	f	s	ʃ [ʃ]			
Nasals		m	n				
Approximants	Lateral		l				
	Central		r	y [j]		w	h

the Yoruba language started around 1850 and involved an international cooperative effort of missionaries in Freetown and in Abeokuta (Nigeria) and linguistics experts in Europe, around 1850. Prominent among these were J.F. Schon, S. Lee, C.R. Lepsius, C.A. Gollmer, J. Raban, H. Townsend, and S.A. Crowther. This original orthography survived with little changes for over a century. In 1875, a conference on the Yoruba language chaired by Crowther, which primarily discussed and resolved a number of anomalies in the orthography, was held in Lagos, Nigeria. The orthography was further revised in 1963, 1966, 1969, and 1974. The current orthography is the one revised in 1974.

Yoruba has 18 basic consonants, which are listed in Table 1 as written in the orthography, with the IPA symbol indicated where both notations differ. The consonant [gb̚], written as *gb* in the orthography, is a doubly articulated voiced labio-velar plosive and not a consonant cluster. Its voiceless counterpart, [kp̚], is written as *p* in the orthography since the voiceless bilabial plosive [p] does not exist in the language.

Some Yoruba consonants have contextual or positional variants. First, Yoruba oral sonorants have nasalized variants when produced before nasal vowels. The sonorant consonants /l, r, w, y, h/ are pronounced respectively as [n̠, ɾ̠, w̠, ỹ, h̠] before nasal vowels: /lũ/ → [nũ] 'to feed', /rĩ/ → [rĩ̠] 'to walk', /wĩ/ → [wĩ̠] 'to lend', /yũ/ → [ỹũ] 'to dispense', /hũ/ → [hũ̠] 'to weave'. Except for the *n/l* alternation, nasalized variants of sonorants are not indicated in the orthography.

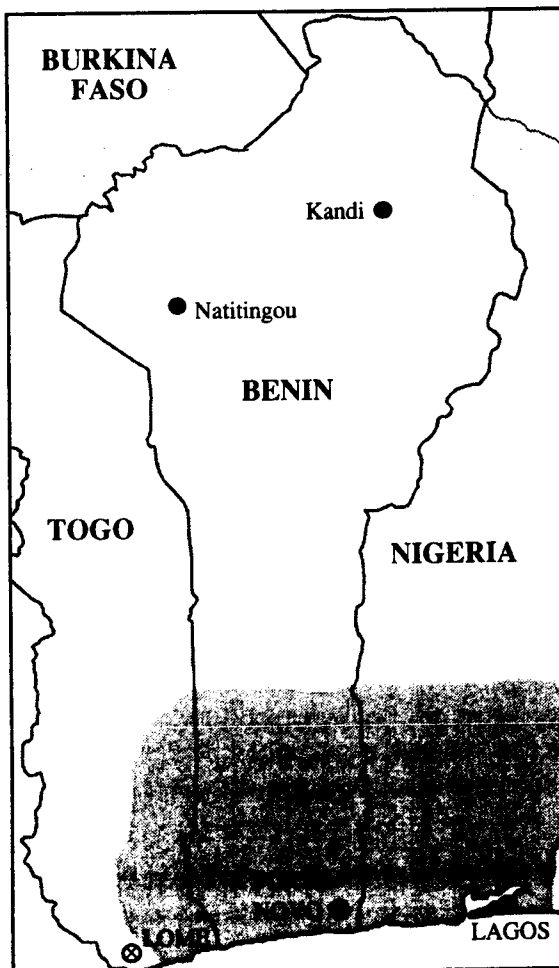
Secondly, when the nasal /n/ is syllabic, it has six variants whose places of articulation are based on the places of articulation of the following consonants. Therefore, it is a bilabial [m̠] before /b, m/, a labiodental [ɱ̠] before /f/, an alveolar [n̠] before /t, d, s, n, r, l/, a palatal [ɲ̠] before /ʃ, j, y/, a velar [ŋ̠] before the consonants /k, g, w, h/ and the vowel /o/, and a labiovelar [ŋ̠m̠] before /kp̚, gb̚/. This variation is not symbolized in Yoruba orthography, except that *m* is written before *b*, and *n* is written before other consonants, as indicated in the rightmost column.

[òròmbó]	'orange'	òròmbó
[bónfò]	'short skirt'	bónfò
[pańla]	'stockfish'	pańla
[íjájá]	'small piece (of meat)'	íjájá
[ògòṅgò]	'ostrich'	ògòṅgò

Vowels

i u
 e o
 ɛ ɔ
 a

Yoruba has seven contrastive oral vowels: *i, e, ɛ, a, ɔ, o, u*. The orthographic vowels *e, ɔ* are [ɛ], [ɔ], respectively, corresponding roughly to the vowels in the words "bet" and "bought" in American ENGLISH. All seven oral vowels are pronounced nasalized after nasal consonants. In this context, the midvowels [ẽ, õ] are perhaps the least nasalized: [mĩ] 'to breathe', [mṵ] 'to know', [mówó] 'take money' (<*mú* 'to take' *owó* 'money'), [mũ] 'to drink'.



Yoruba is primarily spoken in southwestern Nigeria, southern Benin and eastern Togo (shaded area).

In addition, Yoruba has four inherently nasal vowels [ĩ] [ĕ̃] [ɔ̃] [ũ], whose nasalization is not caused by a preceding nasal consonant. Instead, these vowels occur following oral consonants, as in *ikín* 'palnuts for Ifa divination', *iyen* 'that one', *ibon* 'gun', *ikún* 'type of squirrel'. In the orthography, contrastive nasalization is indicated with the nasal consonant (*n*) after the nasal vowel. Predictable nasalization, as in the preceding paragraph, is not marked in the orthography. Two of these vowels, [ɔ̃] and [ĕ̃], require comments. [ɔ̃] is indicated in the orthography as *an* following nonlabial consonants: *ikán* 'white ants', and as *on* following labial consonants: *ibon* 'gun'. The nasal vowel [ã], however, occurs contrastively in some dialects, for example, the Ikalè dialect. The remaining nasal vowel, [ĕ̃], is severely restricted, occurring only in a few related items: *iyen* 'that one', and *yen* 'that'. Though long vowels occur phonetically in Yoruba, vowel length is not contrastive. Long vowels occur most commonly as a result of vowel assimilation (see discussion below): *egúngún* → *eégún* 'masquerade', *òrùka* → 'ring', *òrìṣà* → *òòṣà* 'god'.

Yoruba has vowel occurrence restrictions known as "vowel harmony". In simple (monomorphemic) words in Yoruba, the last vowel of the word determines the rest of the vowels in the word. If the last vowel is produced with retracted tongue root (RTR) (*a, e, o*), then all the preceding vowels are RTR as well. However, in standard Yoruba only mid vowels (*e, o, e, o*) are fully involved in the harmony. The high vowels (*i, u*) do not participate in the harmony at all; that is, the high vowels can occur with any vowel. The following are examples of permitted and nonpermitted mid vowel sequences:

Permitted	Permitted	Not Permitted
o ... o oǝ 'day'	e ... e eṣè 'leg/foot'	*o ... o
e ... e eǝ 'case'	o ... e oṣè 'week'	*e ... e
e ... a eja 'fish'	o ... a oǝ 'market'	*e ... e
		*o ... e
o ... o oǝ 'rain'	e ... e ètè 'lips'	*e ... a
e ... o eǝ 'snake'	o ... e olè 'thief'	*o ... a

Another major phonological process in Yoruba is vowel assimilation. When two vowels are situated side by side without an intervening consonant, one of the vowels becomes completely assimilated to the other. Vowel assimilation in Yoruba is most commonly observed when two nouns are next to each other, one ending in a vowel and the other beginning with a vowel. In general, the first vowel of the second noun completely assimilates the preceding vowel, except when the second vowel is /i/, in which case it becomes completely assimilated to the first vowel. Examples of vowel assimilation include *owó adé* → *owá adé* 'Ade's money', *owó epo* → *owépo* 'oil money', *owó ilé* → *owó olé* 'house rent'.

The most documented phonological process in Yoruba is perhaps vowel deletion. As in vowel assimilation, vowel deletion occurs when two words are placed side by side, one ending with a vowel and the other beginning with a vowel. However, vowel deletion is most commonly found when lexical classes other than two nouns occur next to each other; such as when a noun occurs after a verb, for example, verb + object. Leaving the well documented exceptions aside, it is the first vowel in the sequence that gets deleted, except if the second vowel is /i/.

wá (H) 'look (for)'	èkó (LH) 'education'	→	wékó (HLH) 'look for education'
wá (H) + 'look (for)'	owó (MH) 'money'	→	wówó (HH) 'look for money'
wá (H) + 'look (for)'	okò (ML) 'vehicle'	→	wókò (HL) 'look for a vehicle'
wá (H) + 'look (for)'	okò (MM) 'husband'	→	wókò (HM) 'look for a husband'

Of crucial importance is the stability of tone in the processes of vowel assimilation and vowel deletion. When a vowel gets assimilated or deleted, its tone remains behind on the surviving vowel, except if the second vowel is a mid tone: *wá* (H) + *owó* (MH) → *wówó* (HH) 'look for money'. Tones are therefore independent from segments in Yoruba.

Finally, Yoruba has three contrastive tones: H(igh), M(id), and L(ow), which are generally realized on vowels and sometimes on nasal consonants, when they are syllabic as seen above. Tones carry a heavy functional load in Yoruba, since they distinguish the meanings of words like consonants and vowels do.

kó (H)	'to build'
kò (M)	'to sing'
kò (L)	'to reject'

However, there is a restriction on the distribution of the high tone; the high tone does not occur in word-initial position except in (marked) consonant-initial words. Thus, in vowel-initial words, while it is possible to have forms like *okò* 'vehicle' and *okò* 'spear', it is impossible to have a form like **okò* with a high tone on the initial syllable. Except for this minor restriction, tones occur freely in lexical representations, without apparent restrictions on word melodies.

Two of the three basic tones, the high tone and the low tone, have variants. The high tone (H) is pronounced as a low-rising tone (LH contour) after a low tone, and a low tone is pronounced as a high-falling one (HL contour) after a high one: *álá* (LH) → *àlá* (L LH) 'dream', *rárà* (HL) → *rárà* (H HL) 'elegy'. Contour tones are not indicated in the orthography except when they occur on long vowels, in which case the vowel is doubled and a single tone is indicated on each vowel.

Yoruba words result from a very simple syllable structure. Using the symbol C to stand for consonants and V to stand for vowels, Yoruba has only two types of syllables, V and CV (- marks syllable division):

V:	àlá	(à - lá)	'dream'
CV:	wá	(wá)	'come'

Other than pronouns that can be single vowels and so are representative of the V syllable, this syllable type is largely found as the initial vowel of nouns. The V also represents syllabic nasals, such as the *m* in *òrombó* (*ò-ro-m-bó*) 'orange', and *n* in *géndé* (*gé-ndé*) 'a sturdy young man', since syllabic nasals are the only consonants that are tone bearing like vowels.

Yoruba disallows consonant clusters. Thus it is impossible

to have a combination like [krim] (the pronunciation of the English "cream") which has the cluster *kr* at the beginning, or [silk] (the pronunciation of the English "silk") which has the cluster *lk* at the end.

Basic Morphology

Yoruba nouns are minimally VCV. That is, a noun in standard Yoruba is at least two syllables beginning with a vowel and followed by a C(onsonant)-V(owel) sequence: *omi* 'water', *apá* 'arm'. The majority of Yoruba nouns have this structure. Among the major word classes only nouns can begin with vowels. But nouns can also begin with consonants: *rárà* 'dirge', *gèlè* 'head tie', *gègè* 'goiter'. Simple nouns are in general not longer than four syllables: *ikarahun* 'big snail shell', *ijímèrè* 'brown monkey', *àjànòkú* 'elephant'. When they are this long or when they are longer, they are often ideophonic: *ògúlùntu* 'sand block, clod of earth'.

The initial vowel of a noun cannot be a nasal vowel, and it cannot be the vowel [u]. Therefore, there are no such nouns as **inlé* or **ulé*; standard Yoruba has instead *ilé* 'house'. The word *ulé* 'house' occurs in some eastern Yoruba dialects such as the Ondo dialect, but a word like **inlé* does not occur in any dialect. Since only nouns can begin with vowels in Yoruba, it follows that no word can begin with a nasal vowel or the vowel [u]. The second restriction on vowel-initial nouns is that they cannot begin on a high tone. So initial vowels of nouns are either low-toned or mid-toned. Yoruba does not have nouns like **ile*, **áṣo*.

Verbs are minimally CV. That is, the simple verb in Yoruba consists of a C(onsonant) followed by a V(owel). Except for a few disyllabic forms like *pàdè* 'to meet', all Yoruba verbs have the structure CV. Other major word classes begin with consonants, and are disyllabic or longer.

Word formation in Yoruba is the result of three derivational processes: prefixation, reduplication, and compounding. Nouns and verbs are not inflected for case, person, number, or gender.

Nouns may be formed from verb stems or from verb phrases through prefixation. Various kinds of nouns such as abstract, agentive, and instrument, are formed in this way. For example, the prefix /i/ or /à/ may be attached to a verb, a verb plus object, or serial verbs to form an instrument nominal: *ilu* 'opener' (< *lu* 'make a hole'), *àlòkù* 'used instrument' (< *lò* 'use', *ki* 'remain').

Abstract nominals and agentive nominals may be formed the same way, using other prefixes. Furthermore, negative nominals are formed by prefixing /à/ to a verb or a verb phrase: *àilò* '(act of) not going' (*lò* 'go'). Finally, possessor nominals are formed by prefixing /oní/ to a noun or to a noun phrase: *aláṣo* 'owner of cloth or seller of cloth' (< *oni* + *áṣo* 'cloth').

Nouns are also formed through reduplication, which may be partial or complete. Several forms of both types of reduplications exist. The most productive partial reduplication is one that forms gerundive nominals from verbs or verb phrases by reduplicating the first consonant of the stem followed by a "prefix" /í/: *lílò* 'going' (< *lò* 'go'), *jíjé* 'eating' (< *jé* 'eat').

Secondly, the first VCV of a noun may be reduplicated to form a word meaning "every (noun)". The first tone of the stem is spread onto the reduplicant, and the initial vowel of the stem assimilates the last vowel of the reduplicant: *oṣoṣù* 'every month' (< *oṣù* 'month'), *irìiròlè* 'every evening' (< *iròlè* 'evening').

One form of complete reduplication takes various lexical classes, including verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and numerals as input and produces an intensified output, or it can have a group meaning:

kíakíá	'very quickly'	kía	'quickly'
burúkúburúkú	'very bad'	burúkú	'bad'
dáradára	'good (adj.)'	dára	'good (verb)'

Another form of complete reduplication takes verb phrases as input to form agentive nominals.

woléwolé	'sanitary inspector'	(< <i>wò</i> 'look at', <i>ilé</i> 'house')
panápaná	'fireman'	(< <i>pa</i> 'kill/put out', <i>iná</i> 'fire')

Finally, reduplication may be combined with affixation. The formatives /kí/ and /ní/ may be inserted between a reduplicated noun base. /kí/ forms a nominal with the meaning 'any or bad (noun)' from a noun:

omokómo	'any child, bad child'	(< <i>omò</i> 'child')
èròkerò	'any thought, bad thought'	(< <i>èrò</i> 'thought')
òpòlòpò	'abundance'	(< <i>òpò</i> 'many')

Basic Syntax

The basic word order is SVO, and word order is crucial in expressing grammatical relations such as subject, object, and indirect object, because nouns are morphologically uninflected.

olú rí adé	adé rí olú
'Olu saw Ade.'	'Ade saw Olu.'

olú fún adé ní aṣò	adé fún olú ní aṣò
'Olu gave Ade clothes.'	'Ade gave Olu clothes.'

Word order is also used in expressing pragmatic functions such as focus. In focus construction, the focused item is fronted and is followed by the formative *ni*, for emphasis. The subject, object, verb, or even the entire sentence may be focused, as in the following examples:

olú pa eran
'Olu killed an animal.'

olú ni ó pa eran
Olu FOCUS 3.SG kill animal
'It was OLU that killed an animal.'

eran ni olú pa
animal FOCUS Olu kill
'It was an ANIMAL that Olu killed.'

pípa ni olú pa eran
killing FOCUS olú kill animal
'Olu KILLED an animal.'

olú pa eran ni
'It is the case that Olu killed an animal.'

When the subject is focused, its vacated position is occupied by a pronoun clitic; and in the case of a focused verb, the verb itself is reduplicated and a copy of the verb retains its vacated position. If the subject is a pronoun clitic, an equivalent independent pronoun is fronted, but the original clitic or the clitic *ó* stands in its vacated position.

wón pè wá
3.PL FOC. 1.PL
'They called us.'

àwón ni wón pè wá OR awón ni ó pè wá
3.PL FOC. 3.PL CALL 1.PL 3.PL FOC. 3.SG call 1.PL
'It is THEY who called us.'

Other word classes that may be focused include adverbs and nominal qualifiers.

Another interesting phenomenon related to word order is that of serial verbs; these are constructions in which a sequence of verbs occurs within a clause. Word order is crucial in this case since a reverse order of the verbs gives a different interpretation.

olú gbé àga wá BUT olú wá gbé àga
Olu carry chair come Olu came carry chair
'Olu brought a chair.' 'Olu came to carry a chair.'

In a serial construction the second verb in the sequence may express directionality (or sequence), duration, or consequence.

olú gbé àga lọ (directionality)
Olu come carry chair
'Olu brought a chair.'

olú jìyà kú (duration)
Olu suffer die
'Olu suffered until he died.'

olú mu ọtí yó (consequence)
Olu drink wine be.full
'Olu is drunk.'

The subject of the second verb can be the same as that of the first verb, as in all of the preceding examples, or it may be the object of the first verb, as in:

olú lo aṣọ nàà gbó
Olu use cloth DEICTIC be.worn.out
'Olu used the cloth until it was worn out.'
(aṣọ 'cloth' is subject of gbó 'be worn out')

Or it may be both the subject and object of the first verb:

olú lé ọmọ nàà wá ilé
Olu chase child DEICTIC come home
'Olu chased the child home.' (Omo, or Olu and Omo can be the subject of wá 'come')

In a declarative clause, when the subject stands before the verb phrase, the end of the subject noun phrase is marked with

a high tone, which is associated with the last syllable of this phrase. Thus, a final low tone is realized as a low-rising tone (LH), and a final mid tone is realized as a high tone. A final high tone remains unchanged. This tonal change is obligatory in the nonfuture tense, but optional in the future tense:

ọkọ̀ bàjẹ̀ (ọkọ̀ 'car') 'The car broke down.'

ọmọ̀ lọ (ọmọ̀ 'child') 'The child went.'

ajá gbó (ajá 'dog') 'The dog barked.'

Within the phrase, heads are initial. Thus in a noun phrase, determiners, adjectives, demonstratives, relative clauses, and others all come after the head noun:

ìwé mi ìwé yẹn
book my book that
'My book' 'That book'

ilé nílá ilé nílá yẹn
house big house big that
'Big house' 'That big house'

Contact with Other Languages

Because of British colonization, most of Yoruba's borrowed words are from English. There are also borrowings from ARABIC because of the influence of Islam. Hundreds of these words exist in the vocabulary, and they are regularly modified to fit the phonological constraints of the language, especially the syllable structure constraints. Consonant clusters are split with /i/ or /u/ and coda consonants are deleted: *dírẹ̀bà* 'driver', *sùkùrù* 'school'. Very commonly, however, the vowel harmony pattern of the language is violated in the loan vocabulary: *télò* 'tailor', *bébà* 'paper'. There are also a few borrowings from FRENCH and HAUSA.

From English: *ṣọ̀ṣì* 'church', *tíṣà* 'teacher', *kọ̀pòbù* 'cup', *títì* 'street'

From Arabic: *sábàbí sabab* '(cause)', *àdúrá al-du'á* '(prayer)', *ṣẹ̀rìà shari'ah* '(punishment, law)'

Common Words

man:	ọkùnrin	(be) long:	gùn
woman:	obìnrin	(be) small:	kéré
water:	omi	yes:	hẹn
sun:	òdòrùn	no:	rará
three:	ẹ̀ta	(be) good:	dára
fish:	eja	bird:	eye
(be) big:	tóbi	dog:	ajá
tree:	igi		

Example Sentences

(1) Olú rí adé.
Olu see Ade
'Olu saw Ade.'

(2) adé fún olú ní aṣọ.
Ade give Olu clothes
'Ade gave Olu clothes.'

(3) olú jìyà kú.
Olu suffer die
'Olu suffered until he died.'

Efforts to Preserve, Protect, and Promote the Language

Today, Yoruba is the official language in southwestern Nigeria, where it is used for government notices, radio, television, education through university level, and a thriving literature including books and newspapers. Yoruba was the first west African language in which a periodical was published (*Iwe Irohin Yoruba*, 1859–1867). Since the first grammar by Crowther in 1852, it has enjoyed excellent scholarship with studies on various aspects of the language, culture, and history. It is the most documented west African language.

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