



# RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

## **M.Ed. In TESL Program Language Group Specific Informational Reports**

Produced by Graduate Students in the M.Ed. In TESL Program  
In the Feinstein School of Education and Human Development

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# YORUBA LANGUAGE

Spring 2011 ~ TESL 539

Informational Report

By Kaitlin Francis

# Introduction

- Yoruba is part of the Niger-Congo family of 1,419 languages spoken in Central and South Africa.
- It is one of more than 400 languages spoken in Nigeria, spoken by about 19 million people. Nigeria is one of the 22 most linguistically diverse countries in the world.
- About 22 million people worldwide are native Yoruba speakers.
- The Yoruba Diaspora includes: Benin, Togo, United Kingdom, United States, Cuba, and Brazil.



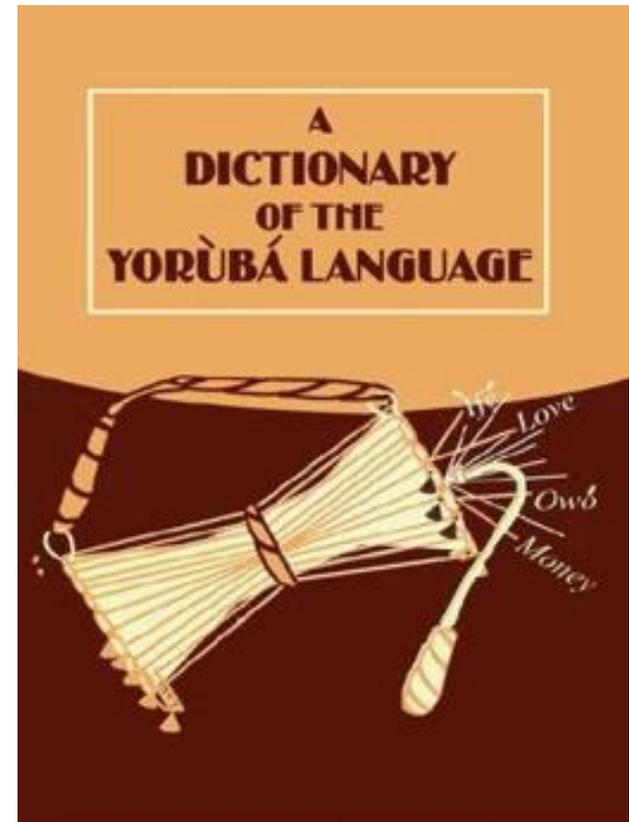
# Regional Varieties

- There are an estimated 12-26 Yoruba dialects that are spoken in different parts of Nigeria.
- There are 3 major dialect areas: Northwest, Southeast, and Central Yoruba.
- The areas exhibit major differences in phonological, lexical, and syntactic properties.



# Orthography

- Yoruba first appeared in writing during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Until then it had been little known outside of West Africa.
- By 1850, English Christian Missionaries started to develop a writing system based on the Roman alphabet. It became one of the first West African languages to have a written grammar and a dictionary.
- The standardized written form helped to create a uniform Yoruba identity despite differences in dialect. (UCLA Language Materials Project)



A a B b D d E e Ę ẹ F f G g GB gb H h I i J j K k L l

ah bi di hay hen fi gi gbi! in he! ji ki li

[a] [b] [d] [e] [ɛ] [f] [g] [gb̩] [h] [i] [j] [k] [l]

M m N n O o Ọ ọ P p R r S s Ş ş T t U u W w Y y

mi ni oh or! pi ri si shi ti uh! wi yi

[m] [n] [o] [ɔ] [kp̩] [r] [s] [ʃ] [t] [u] [w] [j]

### Nasal vowels (Awon Faweli Aranmupe)

an en in on un

[ã] [ɛ̃] [ĩ] [õ] [ũ]

- 7 oral vowels 5 nasal vowels
- Yoruba is a tonal language with 3 tones: high, mid, low.
- Additional letters ç , ô , ÿ and gb
- Does not use the letters c, q, v, x, z
- Diacritic marks are placed with certain letters to produce distinct sounds found in the Yoruba language.

<http://www.motherlandnigeria.com/languages.html>

[http://www.africa.uga.edu/Yoruba/sounds/ALPHABET/THE\\_ENTIRE\\_ALPHABET.wav](http://www.africa.uga.edu/Yoruba/sounds/ALPHABET/THE_ENTIRE_ALPHABET.wav)

# Problems with Phonology

- **Vowels**- Yoruba has a comparatively simple vowel system (7). No distinction is made in vowel length. All are pronounced short. Native Yoruba speakers often experience difficulty with long vowels in English.
  - Example: pull and pool & sit and seat
- **Consonants**- Yoruba language lacks consonant clusters. Vowels almost always follow a consonant directly. In English consonant clusters may sound indistinct or may be omitted.
  - Example: they/day, tree/three, thin/tin, knees/needs
- At the syllabic level, Screwdriver might come out this way to the Yoruba speaker.
  - su/ku/di/ra/fa/

# Problems with Phonology (cont.)

- **Stress & Rhythm**- Yoruba is tonal and syllable timed, while English is stress timed and intonational. This may create some problems for the English learner. In Yoruba, the stress is on the first syllable and syllables are assumed to be equal in length. Thus a Yoruba-English bilingual often stresses every syllable in the utterance he produces in English. This strongly affects the rhythm of English (Onike, 2009).
  - Example: cha'ra'cter instead of character or Ma'ry instead of Mary. This often causes speakers to experience a jerkiness in timing & intonation.

# Problems with Grammar

- Native Yoruba speakers often experience problems with quantifiers and pronoun/gender. Also, Yoruba has no definite or indefinite articles (Swan & Smith, 2001).
  - Uncountable nouns are often wrongly classified.  
Ex: “We had a rain this morning.”  
Other nouns that are commonly mistaken: firewood, food, furniture, luggage.
  - Definite articles are often omitted with names and titles.  
Ex: Do you want to speak to Teacher?
  - There is no class system of nouns in Yoruba. Therefore, learners often experience common errors with pronouns. There is a tendency to avoid pronouns in writing and it often sounds wordy and repetitive.

# Problems with Grammar (cont.)

- The verb system (such as tense) and the expression of passive. Choice of appropriate tense form can cause problems. The regular endings and use of auxiliaries in the simple present and past are often confused. (Swan & Smith, 2001).
  - “She want to speak English, but she don’t know how.”
  - “He doesn’t goes to school.”
  - “He didn’t came back.”
  - “I was having no money.”

# Communication Styles

*The following features are common amongst Yoruba speakers:*

- animation & emotional expression
- humor
- direct eye contact, although they may gaze at forehead or shoulders if they do not know you well, as very direct eye contact can be considered intrusive
- non-verbal gestures
- outgoing & friendly
- slightly louder tone
- direct communication
- lengthy personal greetings
- may smile to mask true feelings especially when disappointed or confused

<http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/nigeria.html>

# Sources

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