

Ede Idaasha and Yoruba: a brief study in language change due to migration and independent development

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0. Introduction

Yoruba language and culture dominates the South West of Nigeria. Arguably Samuel Crowther's Bible translation and subsequent literacy development led to a newly coherent sense of self-identity as 'Yoruba' among the varied but related peoples inhabiting a number of villages and towns there. Dialect variation exists but seemingly has a minimal impact on mutual intelligibility. However, at one point possibly in the 17th Century a group (or several groups) migrated from Egba (Nigeria) and surrounding areas to what is now neighbouring Benin. Thus they became geographically isolated from those Yoruba dialects that remained in situ. Based on interviews with a speaker of Ede Idaasha (one such Yoruboid language) this paper surveys some areas of change found.

The Ethnologue notes that with around 100,000 speakers in 2002, Ede Idaasha (or Idaacha, henceforth simply 'Idaasha') is the second largest

“of 8 languages that make up the Ede language cluster (Yoruboid) that spreads over southwestern Nigeria, southern and central Benin, and into southern and central Togo. The cluster also includes Ede Cabe, Ede Ica, Ife, Ede Ije, Ede Nago, Kura Ede Nago, Manigri-Kambole Ede Nago. The various people groups seek to maintain their individual identities yet recognize the wider 'Yoruba' community.”

(Gordon 2005:Languages of Benin).

1. Historical Background: Language, Culture and Self-Identity amongst Ede

The term 'Yoruba' appears to be derived from a Hausa designation of people living near the town of 'Oyo', so it seems reasonable to suggest that a self-conscious 'Yoruba' designation was not originally of major importance to any of these people. In fact, a people's self-identity may only crystallise when under external pressure or in contact with others from whom the people want to distinguish themselves on socio-cultural grounds. Such differentiation may have occurred in response to Hausa incursions from the north in Nigeria, and following the experiences of various migrating 'Yoruba' people in what is now Benin and Togo. Baloubi (2005:22) surveys more of the ambiguous and indecisive evidence and traditions about the migration.

In Benin and Togo, migrants encountered people with different cultures and languages. Some working adults apparently maintained some business and social links with relatives in Nigeria. They held to Yoruba-style culture and customs more than adopting neighbouring expressions. Unlike their neighbours, the 'Yoruba'-related peoples of Benin and Togo eat Fufu and Eba (peculiarly Yoruba/Igbo Cassava-flour food). Worshipping 'Egu', using masks and honouring particular fetishes, the traditional religion of the Idaasha is considerably closer to that of the Nigerian Yoruba than to neighbouring Fongbe peoples. The Idaasha also dress more like Yoruba than like other Beninese.

The Ife people in Togo are similarly related to Yoruba and to Idaasha, but were further scattered because of war. Prosper Nongnide (the interviewee) worked as an intern in a village in Togo called Idacha which had clearly been founded by some Idaasha speakers. Ife was influenced by contact with local languages such as Ewe, whilst in Benin the Idaasha lived near or amongst people speaking Fongbe. Over two

centuries of contact, these neighbouring languages have been responsible for various changes in the language as a stimulus for their development independent of Standard Yoruba in Nigeria.

Earlier investigations of the need for Bible translation in Idaasha were confused by the discovery that the Idaasha who migrated temporarily to work in Yoruba-speaking Nigeria understood Yoruba well. However, this does not represent the majority of the Idaasha population who maintain their language as distinct from surrounding languages, and from Yoruba. Therefore a definite need for Bible translation seems to exist. Prosper Nongnide explains that while Yoruba is marginally intelligible to an Idaasha speaker, and Idaasha to a Yoruba speaker, most Idaasha cannot speak Yoruba. The situation then would seem similar to that of Danish and Swedish.

Since many of the Edekiri ‘Yoruboid’ languages are very similar, Bible translators have begun using computer tools (AdaptIt) to adapt the Ife Bible translation for Idaasha and other languages. Clearly the utility of such moves depends on sound analysis of the differences between Ife and Idaasha. There may be scope for producing an adapted version of the Yoruba Bible too, for comparison, since Idaasha is related to both.

2. Phonological Comparison

The phoneme inventory of Idaasha very closely resembles that of Standard Yoruba (cf Hartell 1993) with [p] as an allophone of /b/ and [n], [ŋ] allophones of /m/, no voiced fricatives and the labial-velar double-articulations /kp/ and /gb/ characteristic of several Nigerian languages. Some dialects pronounce [ʃ] where

others (in more remote locations) pronounce [tʃ] or [c] hence the variation between ‘Idaacha’ and ‘Idaasha’.

Table 1: Segmental Consonant Phonemes of Idaasha with common allophones

	bilabial	labio-dental	alveolar	palato-alveolar	palatal	velar	labial-velar	glottal
voiced plosive	b		d			g	gb	
voiceless plosive	[p]		t			k	kp	
voiceless fricative		f		s	ʃ			h
nasal	m		[n]			[ŋ]		
lateral			l					
tap			r					
approximant			j				w	

The sets of vowels are very similar with Idaasha having 7 oral vowels, but adding a fifth nasalized vowel /ã/ to Yoruba’s set of four nasalized vowels:

Table 2: Segmental Vowel Pronemes of Idaasha

Oral Vowels			Nasalised Vowels		
Front (unrounded)	Mid	Back (rounded)	Front (unrounded)	Mid	Back (rounded)
i		u	ĩ		ũ
e		o			
ɛ		ɔ	ẽ		õ
	a			ã	

/h/ appears mainly in borrowed words (from Fongbe) or ideophones, either word-initially or word-medially, possibly occurring less than in standard Yoruba:

- (1) a. ìhà ‘a type of mouse’
 b. àhaya ‘a type of bush’
 c. hísíhísí ‘a type of home plant’
 etc. (Baloumbi 2005:46)

As with Standard Yoruba Idaasha has high, mid and low tones. While in Standard Yoruba, a contraction process leads to a rising tone, this is not observed in Idaasha,

but instead in similar situations the contraction works differently producing a falling tone:

- (2) a. dá ‘buy’
 b. èwù ‘shirt’
 c. dêwù ‘buy a shirt’: Idaasha
- (3) a. kó ‘learn’
 b. ìwé ‘book’
 c. kôwé ‘learn book’: Idaasha
 d. kówě ‘learn book’: Standard Yoruba

(Data from Baloubi 2005:90)

Baloubi (2005:91) also explains some other tone rules where Idaasha and Standard Yoruba differ. Seemingly then, the phonology of Idaasha differs with Standard Yoruba only in the area of tone and in the nasalized vowels.

3. Lexical Comparison

Most differences seem to occur within the lexicon. In two centuries of development in contact with Fongbe and in a country with French as the national language, Idaasha words have clearly been borrowed from these sources. In contrast Yoruba has borrowed from English, though some Idaasha words share this source of vocabulary:

- (4) a. ìkpéré ‘meeting’: Idaasha
 b. kpéré ‘meeting’: Fongbe
- (5) kókó ‘porridge’ in both Idaasha and Fongbe
- (6) bókĩĩ ‘bucket’: Idaasha (from English)
- (7) kásikĩ ‘helmet’: Idaasha (from French caske)
- (8) kòlétĩ ‘offering, collection’: Idaasha (from English)
- (9) bèrédĩ ‘bread’: Idaasha (from English)

Although Idaasha allows a CVCV structure for words, it is notable that in (4) above and others provided by Baloubi (2005:128), when a Fongbe word has been borrowed an additional *i-* prefix has been added. Apparently Fongbe words never begin with a vowel, but the reason for the change when incorporated into the Idaasha lexicon and the extent of similar processes in the lexicon has not been investigated.

Collecting a thorough Idaasha lexicon and performing a comparison with a Standard Yoruba lexicon (possibly keyed by some semantic value system such as the Dictionary Definition Program codes), would help identify the degree of similarity and identify particular words and classes of words which differ. For this a comparison tool such as Paralex (Rowbory 2008a) would be helpful. We had no access to such a lexicon.

One of the most obvious differences is in the set of pronouns. As in Standard Yoruba, there is a set of short pronouns, and a related set of full forms. Baloubi (2005:125) provides a comparative table:

Table 3: Comparison of Pronouns in Yoruba and Idaasha

	Short form		Full form	
	Yoruba	Idaasha	Yoruba	Idaasha
1 st singular	mo	ṃ	èmi	wòm
2 nd singular	o	o	íwɔ	wòɔ
3 rd singular	ó	ó	òũ	ùnũ
1 st plural	à	à	àwa	àa
2 nd plural	ε	e	ènyĩ	ĩnyĩ
3 rd plural	nwɔ̃	à	àwɔ̃	àã

Clearly these differences can be fairly substantial, but these regularly-used words display a degree of apparently random change. In some languages the most commonly-used words (such as pronouns) resist change, but here they seem the most conducive to change. However there is no evidence that similar sound changes

have affected any more of the lexicon. The early stages of lexical diffusion could be at work, but a more thorough study of sound differences would be required to ascertain the extent of any analogous sound changes.

The Ethnologue (Gordon 2005) lists lexical similarities of 65%-91% between the other Ede languages and Yoruba. This suggests some comparisons of lexicons have already been made. No mention is made of any semantic shift observed between Idaasha and Yoruba. However, we should expect some semantic shifts to occur, and since this can be a source of translation-hindering false friends, it will be important to describe this.

4. Grammatical Comparison

There is no space here for a detailed grammatical (morphosyntactic) comparison of Idaasha with Yoruba. However, the SVO word order is retained, and the plural morpheme (a suffix -a) is identical, but some differences beyond the set of different pronouns may exist.

5. Conclusions

Culturally, phonologically, lexically and grammatically Idaasha is very closely related to Yoruba and several other Yoruboid languages spread Westwards from Nigeria in the classification: Niger-Congo → Atlantic-Congo → Volta-Congo → Benue-Congo → Defoid → Yoruboid → Edekiri. Some mutual intelligibility exists and these languages might be considered on the border between dialects and independent languages. It seems likely that with continued geographical separation and under different geographical influences the languages will diverge from one another.

Apart from changes in tone phonology rules, the main area of difference appears to be in the lexicon, which is not very surprising given the brief time since the migration that began the divergence. However a full comparative analysis of the lexicons of the Ede language cluster, comparing with Yoruba and Ife would be helpful to inform future language development and translation work in these languages. It is notable that the pronoun set has changed so markedly and it would be interesting to try to trace the origin of changes, and examine the rest of the lexicon for similar sound changes to determine the extent of lexical diffusion or any Neogrammarian-style regular sound changes affecting the whole lexicon, due to the influence of French or Fongbe.

6. Bibliography

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