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Prefix oni- in Yoruba
Antonia Y. Fglårin

1. Introduction

In Fglårin (1987), I pointed out that the prefix oni- is the only class-maintaining prefix in Yoruba. For example, it is the only prefix attached to a noun to form another noun. It can be prefixed to either a derived or a non-derived noun and the resulting meaning of the nouns derived with oni- prefixation is the “owner of .......” or “possessor of .......”. In some cases, the meaning can refer to a performer of an action or of a particular profession.

Examples (1) and (2) illustrate the prefixation of oni- to derived and non-derived nouns respectively.

(1.) oni- prefixed to derived nouns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbs</td>
<td>Derived nouns</td>
<td>oni-prefixation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. jà</td>
<td>ijà</td>
<td>onijà</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. so</td>
<td>éso</td>
<td>eléso</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. kù</td>
<td>òko</td>
<td>olókù</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. dé</td>
<td>òdé</td>
<td>olódé</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(2) Oni- prefixed to non-derived nouns.

a. oni + aqo
prefix 'clothes' --> alaqo
'owner of clothes'

b. oni + aqo
prefix 'legs' --> geqo
'owner of legs'

c. oni + aqo
prefix 'leaves' --> àeàeà
'owner of leaves'

d. oni + bàà
prefix 'shoes' --> onibàà
'owner of shoes'

e. oni + qàà
prefix 'child' --> oniqàà
'owner of a child'

Notice; however, that there are other cases where the oni- prefix also functions as a class-changing prefix. For example, the data in (3) illustrate the prefixation of oni- to adverbs to form nouns.

3. a. oni + jààgààgàà
prefix 'trouble making' --> onijààgààgàà
'a trouble maker'

b. oni + ààrààràà
prefix 'aimlessly' --> oniarààràà
'someone who does things aimlessly'

c. oni + bòò
prefix 'nonsense' --> onibòò
'someone who does nonsensical things'

Considering the existence of prefix ìì and the verb ni "to have", or "to possess" in Yoruba, some Yoruba scholars, e.g., Abraham (1956), Rowlands (1969), Owolabi (1981) and Awobuluyi (1983), assumed that oni- is a compound prefix which consists of two morphemes ìì (prefix) and the verb ni "to have". Others such as Akinlabi (1986) share a similar view with the scholars mentioned above except that they assume that the ìì of oni- is the second person pronoun singular subject that already exists in Yoruba.
On the other hand, there are other scholars, such as Bamgbose (1965, 1967, and 1984) and Ogundowale (1970), who assume that oni- is a single morpheme without providing evidence to support this assumption. In this paper, I will discuss the advantages of analyzing oni- as two morphemes q- and ni-. However, I will show that in spite of these advantages, based on facts of Yoruba, it is better to analyze oni- as an inseparable, single morpheme.

2.1 oni- As Two Separate Morphemes

The question of analyzing oni- as a sequence of q- "second person singular pronoun subject" + ni- "to have" as suggested in Akinlabi (1986) does not seem plausible because the meanings of nouns derived with oni- prefixation have nothing to do with the notion "second person singular". For example, the nouns derived in (1a) can refer to either the speaker or the hearer. It can also be used to refer to one person (singular) or many people (plural).

A more plausible analysis is one that analyzes oni- as q- (nominalizing prefix) + ni- "to have." This type of analysis will, for example, account for the forms in (3a-c) as shown in (4a-c) respectively.

```
(4)    I       II       III      IV
Verb+Noun Verb Phrases  q- Prefix Assimila-
      "     "  "  tion  Process

a. ni + ega --> lægø --> olægø --> olægø
   'to clothes' 'to have' 'owner of clothes'
   'clothes'

b. ni + ge → lægø --> olægø --> glesø
   'legs' 'to have' 'owner of legs'
   'legs'

c. ni + øwè --> løwè --> oløwè --> øløwè
   'leaves' 'to have' 'owner of leaves'
   'leaves'
```

The analysis in (4) assumes, first of all, the derivations of verb phrases in column II, in the
syntactic component. These verb phrases will further serve as inputs to the morphological process of $\tilde{g}$-prefixation as shown in column III. Finally, if the first vowel of the verb phrase is either $a$, $e$, $o$, or $\tilde{e}$, the prefix $g$- undergoes a vowel assimilation rule, which assimilates all the features of the prefix to the first vowel of the verb phrase as shown in column IV.

This analysis has several advantages:

i. It is economical in the sense that there will be no need of postulating an extra prefix since $g$ already exists in Yoruba as a nominalizing prefix and $\tilde{g}$ also exists as a verb.

ii. It serves as support to the claim that phrasal forms do serve as inputs to the morphological component of Yoruba.

iii. It also confirms the independent existence of the phrasal verbs, such as in column II, in Yoruba. This fact can be illustrated by comparing the sentences in (5) with the derivations in (4) above.

\begin{align*}
\text{(5) a. } & \text{Mo } + \text{ ni + asg } \rightarrow \text{ mo lâq } / \text{ mo ni asg } \\
& \text{ 'I' } \text{ 'have' } \text{ 'clothes' } \quad \text{ 'I have clothes' }
\end{align*}

\begin{align*}
\text{b. } & \text{ O + ni + ìṣẹ } \rightarrow \text{ O lẹẹs } / \text{ O ni ìṣẹ } \\
& \text{ 'You' } \text{ 'have' } \text{ 'legs' } \quad \text{ 'You have legs' }
\end{align*}

\begin{align*}
\text{c. } & \text{ Ò + ni + ìwé } \rightarrow \text{ Ò lëwọ } / \text{ Ò ni ìwé } \\
& \text{ 'He' } \text{ 'have' } \text{ 'leaves' } \quad \text{ 'He has leaves' }
\end{align*}

The examples in (5) show that the items in column II of (4) can exist as independent verb phrases in a sentential frame. Since nominalization of verb phrases through prefixation is a common phenomenon in Yoruba, it does look plausible to analyze $\text{un}-$ as two morphemes.

What this analysis implies, however, is that any noun that contains $\text{un}-$ is derived by prefixing $g$- to verb phrases that underlyingly consist of the verb $\text{ni}$- 'to have' plus an object noun or an adverb. In the next section, I will provide evidence to show that this is not the case in Yoruba.
2.2 Evidence in Support of oni- as a single morpheme

As pointed out in section 2.1, analyzing oni- as -oni + ni implies that any form or derived noun that has the structure oni+x must have the ni+x (i.e., "have x") counterpart as correctly shown in column II of (4). However, examples abound in Yoruba to show that there are nouns that have the structure oni+x but the ni+x counterparts either do not exist or sound awkward. For example:

(a) a. oniṣọwọ (derived from oniṣogọ) *niṣọwọ 'a trader' 'a trade'

b. oniwaɗuwâɗù 'oniwaɗuwâɗù ñiwaɗuwâɗù 'a restless person' 'to be restless'

c. oniṣângô 'oniṣângô ñiṣângô 'a worshipper'

d. olågô 'onî + âgô) *ingô 'collecting'

e. oniṣẹgún 'onîṣẹgùn ñiṣẹgún 'owner of medicine' 'medicine or a doctor'

f. oniđùrâ 'oniđùrâ ñiđùrâ 'standing as a surety'

g. oniṣbâdégbà 'oniṣbâdégbà ñiṣbâdégbà 'something that happens from time to time'

h. aiärînà 'onî + ärînà ñiärînà 'marriage broker'

i. oniṣènà 'oni + ènà ñiṣènà 'a carpenter' 'carpentry'

j. alâgbé 'oni + âgbè ñâgbè 'a beggar' 'begging'
If the starred phrasal forms in (c), which are supposed to serve as inputs to the g- prefixation process, are awkward or impossible forms in the language, then the derivation of the forms in (6a-j) from the structure \( \text{oni} + \text{x} \) will be highly questionable.

Aside from the question of the non-existence of some \( \text{oni} + \text{x} \) structures, a comparison of the behavior of prefix g- with that of the g- in \( \text{oni} \) shows that the two g's are not from the same source because they manifest different characteristics.

For example, the prefix g- in Yoruba harmonizes with some of the features of the following vowel, while the g in \( \text{oni} \) assimilates to all the features of the following vowel. Examples (7A) and (B) illustrate these different characteristics of prefix g- and g of \( \text{oni} \) respectively.

7. Prefix \( \text{g-} \)/\( \text{g} \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ì-ğẹ̀rè</td>
<td>ì-kọọ̀ẹ̀</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o-ro</td>
<td>ì-règ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ì-ye</td>
<td>ọ̀lágẹ̀</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. I II III IV

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>V-Deletion</th>
<th>V-Assimilation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>oni-ewè</td>
<td>olèwè</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>oni-ọsè</td>
<td>olọsè</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>oni-ọ̀ọ</td>
<td>olọ̀ọ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In (7A) the prefix \( \text{g-} \) is realized as \( \text{g-} \), if the following vowel is \( \text{g} \) or \( \text{g} \), while (7B) shows that the same prefix is realized as \( \text{g-} \), if the following vowel
is either q-, g-, or a (also see Folom in 1987). On the other hand, the last column of (8) shows that the q- of oni- in column I becomes completely assimilated to the features of the following vowel. If the q- in (8) is the same as the prefix q- in (7), the expected forms in column IV of (8a, b, and c) will be as represented in (9a, b, and c) below.

(9)  
a. foléwé  
b. folága  
c. folágg

The fact that (9a, b, and c) do not occur in Yoruba confirms the assumption that the q- in (8) is different from the prefix q- in (7). This being the case, it is wrong to assume that oni- is made up of two morphemes q- (prefix) and ni 'to have'.

3. Conclusion

In the above discussion, I have argued that oni- should be analyzed as a single unit that cannot be segmented into q- (prefix) and the verb ni 'to have'. This assumption is supported by the facts of Yoruba which show that not all the forms with oni- + Y structure have the ni + Y counterparts. In addition, this assumption is further supported by the different characteristics manifested by prefix q- and q- of oni-.

If oni- is made up of q- and ni, one would expect the q- of oni- to behave similarly to prefix q- which already exists in the language. Since the contrary is the case, I am assuming that oni- should be treated as a single morpheme instead of two separate morphemes.

NOTES

1. There are some phonological rules that interact here with oni- prefixation to derive the forms in column III in examples (11) and (2). The derivations of efíjá, oníija, alágg, and allágb below will
illustrate how such phonological rules interact with oni- prefixation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stems:</th>
<th>ags</th>
<th>eso</th>
<th>gns</th>
<th>ija</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>clothes</td>
<td>fruits</td>
<td>'child'</td>
<td>'a fight'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prefixation:</th>
<th>oni-ags</th>
<th>oni-eso</th>
<th>oni-gns</th>
<th>oni-ija</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V-Deletion:</td>
<td>on'aqs</td>
<td>on'eso</td>
<td>on'gns</td>
<td>on'iqa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone rules:</td>
<td>onásq</td>
<td>onéso</td>
<td>onégm</td>
<td>onijá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/n/&gt;[i]</td>
<td>oláqs</td>
<td>oléso</td>
<td>olégm</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V-assimi-</td>
<td>alásq</td>
<td>elése</td>
<td>olégm</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lation:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outputs:</td>
<td>alásq</td>
<td>elése</td>
<td>olégm</td>
<td>onijá</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the above derivations, a denasalization rule changes /ns/ to [i] in the environment of oral vowels apart from /i/, while a vowel assimilation rule assimilates all the features of /o/ to those of the initial vowel of the noun.

2. These adverbs are commonly referred to as ideophones (see Awoyale 1974 and Akinlabi 1985).

3. The -q represents a [-High], [-Low], and [-Back] vowel that is not marked for advanced tongue root. As I will illustrate later on, it is realized as -g- when the vowel of the following syllable is either /i/, /e/, /o/, or /u/. On the other hand, if the vowel of the following syllable is either /i/, /e/, /e/, /o/, or /u/, the prefix will be realized as -g-. The vowels /i/ and /u/ do not participate in the harmonic system in Yoruba (see Fglárin 1987 for details).

4. The verb phrases here have undergone a denasalization rule.

5. In Fglárin 1987, I argued that outputs of the syntactic component should be allowed to serve as inputs to the morphological component in Yorubá, since there are many verb phrases that undergo morphological processes such as prefixation and reduplication.
(5. This same assumption is applicable to prefix \textit{oni-}, which is the counterpart of \textit{oni-} in forms such as:

a. olági: derived from \textit{oni-ági} 'poor person'

b. eleqú: derived from \textit{oni-éqú} 'stumbling block'

See Awobuluyi (1983) and Bangbose (1984) for more examples of words with \textit{oni-}.

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Archangeli, Diana and Douglas Pulleyblank. 1986. "The Content and Structure of Phonological Representations." University of Arizona and University of Southern California, MS.


