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Cloning the linguistic twin sisters: A Comparative Linguistic Study of French and Yoruba Languages

Alaje Olubunmi Oyebola
Osun State University Osogbo -Nigeria
olubunmi.alaje@uniosun.edu.ng
0000- 0003-2300-2474

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Abstract: *Phonology can be defined as the study of sound patterns and their meanings both within and across languages. There are innumerable appraisals of scholars on the phonology of French and Yorùbá languages as twin-sisters with little attention paid to the distinctive variance in their phonemic features. Premised on distinctive feature theory which identifies a set of features adequate for describing the segmental contrasts and phonologically important segment groups observed in languages, this study interrogates the differences in the types of syllables, formation of syllables and the components of the syllabic structures in French and Yorùbá languages with a view to identifying how these two languages negotiate their divergence in phonology and morphology. The study reveals that, that two languages are genetically related does not mean that the two will always share the same phonological, morphological, syntactic and grammatical similarities at all times. This study argues that the only workable way out of phonological, morphological, syntactic and grammatical difficulties for Yorubaphone French language learners is not via cloning the linguistic twin sisters.*
Keywords: *French and Yorùbá languages, Syllable, Syllabification of French, Phonological features.*
Résumé : *La phonologie peut être définie comme l'étude des modèles sonores et de leurs significations à la fois dans et entre les langues. Il existe d'innombrables évaluations d'érudits sur la phonologie des langues française et yorùbá en tant que sœurs jumelles avec peu d'attention accordée à la variance distinctive de leurs caractéristiques phonémiques. Fondée sur la théorie des traits distinctifs qui identifie un ensemble de traits adéquats pour décrire les contrastes segmentaires et les groupes de segments phonologiquement importants observés dans les langues, cette étude enquête les différences dans les types de syllabes, la formation des syllabes et les composants des structures syllabiques en français et yorùbá en vue d'identifier comment ces deux langues négocient leur divergence de phonologie et de morphologie. L'étude révèle que le fait que deux langues soient génétiquement liées ne signifie pas qu'à tout moment les deux partageront toujours les mêmes similitudes phonologiques, morphologiques, syntaxiques et grammaticales. Cette étude soutient que la seule solution viable aux difficultés phonologiques, morphologiques, syntaxiques et grammaticales pour les apprenants de langue française yorubaphone n'est pas le clonage des sœurs jumelles linguistiques.*

Corresponding author : Alaje Olubunmi Oyebola

Mots clés : *langues française et yorùbá, syllabe, syllabation du français, traits phonologiques, Sœurs jumelles linguistiques, yorubaphone.*

1. Introduction

The universalist assumption is that languages have similar phonological, morphological, syntactic and grammatical features. This assumption, therefore, accounts for the identified grammatical and phonological similarities between French and Yorùbá languages as scholars which include Folorunso (2016) refer to the two languages as "linguistic twin sisters" based on their Latin etymology. The similarities are seen in the morphological formulations and syntactic structures which explain the orthographies of these two languages.

Folorunso draws similarities in the etymology of French and Yorùbá languages with the averment that French, as a language, came from Spoken Latin words while Yorùbá is a product of Latin alphabets. Folorunso's discourse on Latin origin of French and Yorùbá underscores the fact that world languages usually have points of intersection in their phonology, morphology and syntactic patterns. Despite that French and Yorùbá languages are from different continents (Europe and Africa respectively), their phonological and morphological patterns confirm the traditional linguists' conceptualisation of linguistic universalism (a linguistic term which underlines the fact that world languages share similar origin and therefore, they have universal properties). In spite of this universalist perspective of the two languages, there is also a need for linguistic investigations into the linguistic differences of the two languages in relation to phonological properties, morphological formulations and syntactic structures.

The French language is developed from Vulgar Latin spoken by the Roman invaders. Being a Romance language of the Indo-European family, it evolved from the spoken Latin in Gaul. As a case on point, French language with the status of an international language is a common language of Francophone countries and spoken as a first language in France, Canadian provinces of Quebec, Ontario, Belgium, Western Switzerland, Monaco, parts of the United States and various European communities. According to Leon (1992), the standard French is based on the dialect of Île de France which has been the official standard language since the mid-16th century. This linguistic change was more rapid and severe in Northern France than it was in other European Romance region where standard French began to replace local dialects. Thus, standard French greatly reduced the use of the Occitan language of southern France.

In the transformation of Latin into French, diverse phonological rules began to operate and the most frequent of them is the suppression of the short vowels before and all vowels after the stressed vowels. This resulted in the formation of consonants that were subsequently simplified and this led to great changes in the sounds of words when compared to their Latin forms. French phonology is thus characterized by great changes in the sounds of words as compared to their Latin parent forms. The French language has the same letters as English language in both upper and lower cases but with different pronunciation as shown below.

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

/a//be//se//de//ə//ɛf//ɜe//aʂ//i//ji//ka//ɛl//ɛm//ɛn//o//pe//ki//ɛR//ɛs//te//y/'/ve//dublve//iks//igrɛk//zɛd//

Yoruba language (èdè Yorùbá), a tonal language with very little inflectional morphology and a strict subject-verb-object word order, belongs to the Yoruboid sub-group of the Niger-Congo group of languages. To Muhr (2016:21), it is a *pluricentric* language spoken in West Africa, principally in South-West Nigeria: Ọyọ, Ọṣun, Ògùn, Òndó, Lagos, Èkìtì, Kwara and Kogí states and outside Nigeria in Benin, Niger, Togo, United Kingdom, Brazil and parts of United States of America. Yorùbá language as one of the major and one of the three principal languages in Nigeria alongside Hausa and Igbo (its ethnic counterparts) is spoken by one of the largest ethnic and cultural groups in Nigeria. Asides, it is most closely related to the Itsekiri- the language spoken in the Niger Delta. Hair (1967:41) and Awoniyi (1995:43) assert that from approximately 400 languages spoken in Nigeria, Yoruba language create a niche for itself to maintain a special status. Being a documented West African language especially in the South-Western states of Nigeria, Bamgbose (1996:24) opines that it is the first African language to have a written grammar and a dictionary.

The development of a writing system for the Yorùbá language started in the mid - 19th century. Ajayi (1960), Ogunbowale (1970), Adetugbo (1973), Awobuluyi (1994) assert that this was done by a Christian missionary, Bishop Ajayi Crowther (a war captive freed and the first Bishop of West Africa and first African Bishop of the Church of England). His effort in translating the Bible from English into Yorùbá language in 1884 influenced the invention of the first regulations and rules for Yorùbá writing. However, in order to bring Yoruba orthography in line with actual speech, Ayo Bamgbose's 1965 *Yoruba Orthography* coupled with the reports of Yoruba Orthography Committee of 1969 and that of 1974/197. Ikotun (2014:47) affirms that the 1974/75 committee succeeded in removing redundant letters which did not have any grammatical or lexical functions in Yoruba spellings, this thus gave birth to the current Yorùbá Orthography. Although there are various dialects of the Yorùbá language as Fresco (1970), Opadotun (2009) and Mustapha (2015) opine, the Yorùbá dialect used for official correspondence, in news, television broadcast and taught in schools is referred to as the Standard Yorùbá language. Yorùbá language employs the Latin alphabet as shown below in upper and lower cases.

A B D E Ẹ F G GB H I J K L M N O Ọ P R S Ṣ T U W Y

a b d e ẹ f g gb h i j k l m n o ọ p r s ṣ t u w y

Language cloning creates the same user experience as the localization of one depends on the other. French and Yorùbá languages seemed to be clones of one another as they closely share similarities in phonological, morphological, syntactic and grammatical features. It could be easier to produce comparable sounds in both languages while navigating the emergence of functional and non-functional suprasegmental/prosodic features. However, it is observed that cloning the linguistic twin-sisters- French and Yoruba, is a process of disrupting not only the phonological features but syllabic structure

of French for Yoruba because not all African speech can fit the original foreign features perfectly.

2. Linguistic Varieties

Every language has a distinctive form. Identity is the relation each language bears only to itself. Jakobson (1942:224) emphasizes the importance of discriminative function of independent phonological oppositions. The close affinity of Yorùbá and Latin alphabets underscore the fact that French and Yorùbá languages are similar in their linguistic forms as it is evident in their lexicon, morphology, phonology and syntactic patterns. It is in the light of this view that this paper evaluates the linguistic variables of phonology, morphology and syntax in French and Yorùbá languages. Scholars such as Odudigbo (2014), Ajayi and Balogun (2014) have discussed the similarities between French and Yoruba languages from the perspectives of grammatical structures, usage, meaning and discursive patterns in oral and written modes. Their submissions uphold the view that French and Yorùbá languages are consistently related in lexical, morphological and syntactic properties.

3. Phonological convergence of French and Yorùbá Languages

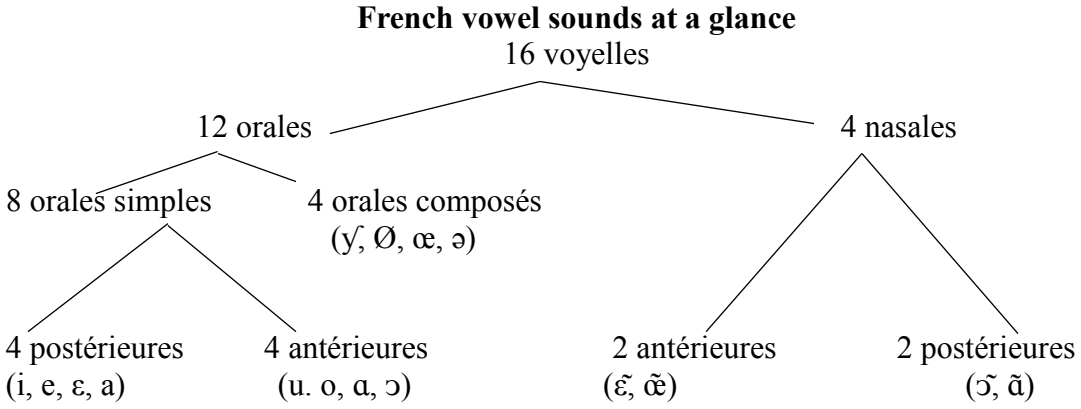
French and Yorùbá languages, apparently, share some common phonological features perhaps because of the same Latin root. Orthographically and phonologically, French and Yorùbá languages have consonant and vowel sounds that delineate their respective segmental phonological features. Both have their consonant sound, with very close similarities of oral and nasal and voiced and voiceless sound, categorized into mode, place and manner of articulation. In French and Yorùbá languages, a vowel is a constant phonological element. These two languages possess the two types of vowels - oral and nasal. In both languages, all vowel sounds are voiced. The oral vowels are produced entirely through the mouth while the nasal vowels are produced when the airflow passes through the mouth and nasal cavity. The nasalized vowels of both languages are written with the consonant **'n'** in Yorùbá and consonants **'n'** and **'m'** in French preceding an oral vowel. {Yorùbá**: an, ọn, in, un, ẹn.** French**: an, un, on, en, in, im, om)**

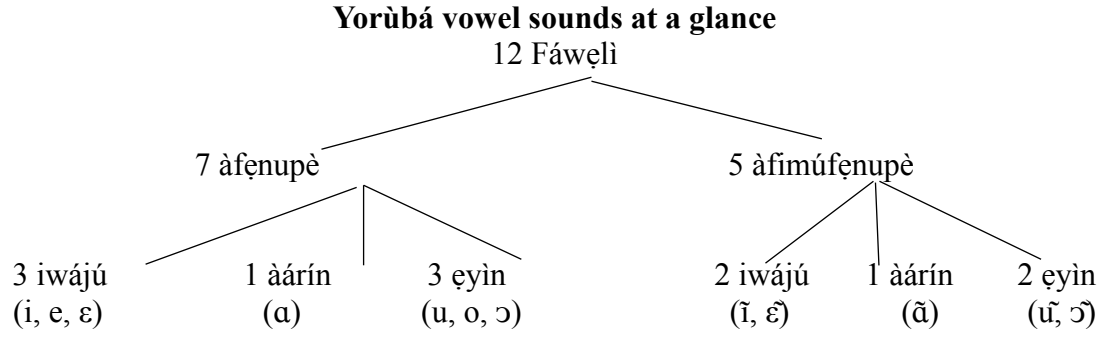
Yorùbá is a tonal language with three discrete level tones or phonemes of pitch: high, low and mid; the latter is the default tone. Tones are marked by using the acute accent for high tone **(á, ń)**, the grave accent for low tone (à, ǹ); while the mid tone is unmarked, except on syllabic nasals where it is indicated using a macron (a, n̄). Though French is not a tone language like Yorùbá, it uses four accent marks on vowels and one hanging on consonants. These French accent marks (the grave accent (è), the acute accent (é), the circumflex (ê), the trema (e) and the cedilla (ç) create similar phonetic features with Yorùbá words in that they differentiate pronunciation of words. These similarities have further established the common etymology of the two languages.

4. Phonological variance of French and Yorùbá Sounds

Jakobson et Morris (1956:122) emphasize the universality of the set of twelve oppositions and how the dichotomous scale is an inherent property of language. As close as French and Yorùbá languages are; and for the fact that they share the same origin, there exist differences in their phonological features. In Parisian French, **/i, u/** are

consistently close but the exact height of **/y/** is somewhat debatable as it has been variously described as a close and near-close vowel. On the contrary, in standard Yorùbá while oral vowel **/u/** is closed, oral vowel **/i/** is not closed. Adetugbo (1982:11) asserts that oral vowel **/u/** and nasalized vowels cannot occur in word initial position in standard Yorùbá language (except in some dialects) but in French, oral vowel **/u/** and nasalized vowels can occur in word initial position (ex: un (one), ultime (last)). This is probably because while standard Yorùbá has seven oral vowels (a, e, ɛ, i, o, ɔ, u) and five nasal vowel (ĩ, ɛ̃, ɔ̃, ã, ũ) sounds, standard French contrasts with 12 oral vowels and 4 nasal vowel sounds. Let us examine the diagram below:





Note:

- Voyelle / Fáwẹìi = Vowel
- Orale / Àfẹnupè = Oral sounds
- Oral composé = Combined oral sounds
- Nasale / Àfimúfẹnupè = Nasal sounds
- Antérieure / Iwájú = Front of the tongue
- Ààrín = Middle of the tongue
- Postérieure / Ẹyìn = Back of the tongue

5. Syllabic Structure / Syllabification of French and Yorùbá languages

Syllables are considered as the phonological building blocks in languages. Jones

(1972:56) defines syllabification as the process of breaking down a polysyllabic word into successive syllables. It usually obeys the phonological rules which determine the structure of a syllable in a language. Syllabic structure is the combination of allowable segments and typical sound sequences. In other words, the structure is based on sounds (transcription of words) and not letters. Syllable is language- specific because all languages have syllables. Syllables can be easily divided with the help of the accents. The accent dictates the breaking of words into syllables.

A syllabic structure, which typically consists of a syllable nucleus with optional initial and final codas, is made up of a single vowel, a consonant and a vowel or a nasal sound with the vowel as the nucleus of the syllable in any given language. In all languages notably English, French and Yorùbá, a vowel as a constant phonological element can stand alone as a syllable. However, unlike French which has diverse possible syllable structures, Yorùbá language has only 3 syllable structures. At the level of syllable, French and Yorùbá use the syllable-timed rhythm pattern. They recur at equal intervals of time as each syllable has equal length of time or duration. To Abercrombie (1967:97), the syllable of words in French and Yorùbá are isochronous in syllable-timed rhythm pattern.

6. Syllable Structure in French

French words consist predominantly of open syllables because French syllables tend to begin with a consonant and end with a vowel to give it her **CV** (where **C** refers to consonant and **V** refers to vowel) syllabic structure with several possibilities. These several syllabic structure possibilities rigidly have rules to follow in the breaking of French words into the syllabic structures. They include:

V = a single vowel
VC = vowel + consonant
CV = consonant + vowel

Examples:

Eau (water) = /o/ = V
Un (a / one) = /œ̃/ V
Il (he) = /il/ = VC
Elle (she) =/ɛl/ = VC
Peau (skin) = /po/ = CV
Chat (cat) = /ʃa/ = CV

Unlike Yorùbá language, French language with her diverse syllabic possibilities, accommodates consonant clusters with rigid breaking rules. That is, vowel + more than one consonant. Some of the possibilities are discussed below:

- When there is a consonant in between two vowels (VCV), the consonant goes with the second vowel to make a syllable while the first vowel stands alone to form a syllable.

Example: **VCV == V – CV**

ainé (first born) = /e-ne/ = V-- CV
avant (before) = / a--vɑ̃/ = V—CV
ami (friend) = /a—mi/ = V—CV
Été (summer) = /e—te/ = V—CV

- When there are two consonants between two vowels, the first consonant goes with the first vowel and the second consonant goes with the other vowel to make a syllable.

Examples : **CVCCV** == CVC – **CV**
Docteur = /dɔk-tœr/ = CVC -- CVC (doctor)
Apartement /a-paR-tə-mã/ = V – CVC – CV – CV (apartment)

However, this rule will not be applicable if the second consonant is one of the liquid consonants (**l or R**). In this exception, the two consonants go with the second vowel to form a syllable.

Examples: **CVCCV** == **CV – CCV**

Débris == /dɛ	bRi/ = CV— CCV (rubbish)
Aplomb == /a	plɔ̃/ = V— CCV (balance)
Tableau == /ta	blo/ = CV—CCV (board)

- When there are three or four consonants between two vowels, the first two consonants go with the first vowel while the other (third and fourth) consonants go with the second vowel. However, it should be noted that despite the fact that French accommodates consonant clusters, three or four consonants cannot be together except one of the consonants is **r, s and t** to form a syllable.

Examples : **VCCCV == VCC – CV**

Abstenir = /abs	te	niR/ = VCC—CV—CVC (to refrain)
Extrème = /ɛks	tRɛm/ = VCC—CCVC (extreme)	
Directrice = /di	Rɛkt	Ris/ = CV—CVCC—CVC (headmistress)
Apstinence == /aps	ti	nɑ̃s/ = VCC—CV—CVC

This rule will not be applicable if the third consonant is one of the liquid consonants (l or R). In this exception, the first consonant goes with the first vowel while the other two consonants go with the second vowel and if the third consonant is **r or l,** the **l or r** remains with the second consonant to form a syllable.

Example: **VCCCV == VC – CCV**
esclave = /ɛs-klav/

7. Syllable Structure in Yorùbá

Yorùbá word formation is mostly derivational and not inflectional. This means that its nouns and verbs are essentially invariant. This explains why most common monosyllabic structures in Yoruba is the **KF** structure (where K refers to 'Kọnsonanti' (consonant) and F refers to Fáwẹlì (vowel)). Unlike French, Yorùbá could be said to be a resource-scarce language because of her limited existence of digital resources which makes its computerization a unique challenge. Yorùbá has only three possible syllable types and the three types of syllabic structure are: consonant + vowel (CV), vowel alone (V), and syllabic nasal (N). They are written in Yorùbá language as:

F = Fáwẹlì (Vowel)
KF = Kọnsónántì àti Fáwẹlì (consonant + vowel)
N = Kọnsónántì àránmúpè (nasal consonant)

Examples:

ò = /o/ = F
rí = /ri/ = KF (see)
ọmọ = /ɔ-mɔ/ = F—KF (child)
dòdò = /do-do/ = KF—KF (plantain)
kònkò = /kɔ-n-kɔ/ = KF—N—KF (frog)
oríire = /o-ri-i-re/ = F—KF—F—KF (success)
àlàáfíà = /a-la-a-fi-a/ = F—KF—F—KF—F (peace)
gọngọsú = /gɔ-n-gɔ-su/ = KF—N—KF—KF (a fool)
òronbó = /o-ro-n-bo/ = F—KF—N—KF (lemon)

8. Linguistic Divergence of Syllables in French and Yorùbá Languages

In Yorùbá language, a syllable is the smallest tone bearing unit (Sílébù ni ègé tí ó kéré jùlọ tí a lè fi ohùn pè tàbí fi èémí gbé jáde lẹẹkan). On the other hand, Dubois (1992) defines a French syllable as a sound or a group of sounds pronounced in a single breath (La syllable est un phonème ou un groupe de phonèmes que l'on prononce d'une seule émission de voix). Ilori (2010:386) submits that the correspondence between French phonemes and letters of the alphabets is more complex and irregular when compared to that of Yorùbá. Obviously, the fact that French and Yorùbá are similar in rhythmic pattern does not make French a tone language but a syllable-timed language because French has very predictable stress which is always on the last syllable. Yorùbá is a tonal language with three level tones.

Unlike Yorùbá tones which can occur on both consonant and vowels, accents which have no significant representation are commonly used on only vowels in French. And as Ilori (2010:382) opines, French accents are not tone but distinguishing orthographic marks placed on certain vowels to indicate pronunciation for those vowels in order to distinguish them from other similar vowels. Yorùbá tones cum French accents are marked by the use of the **acute accent** for high tone (accent aigu = /), the **grave accent** for low tone (accent grave = \) and the mid accent (accent circomflêxe) which in

Yorùbá is unmarked but which in French looks like the falling tone placed on a vowel sometimes to indicate length. The syllable is the tone bearing unit in Yorùbá language but orthographically, tones are marked on vowels and syllabic nasals. The tones in Yorùbá determine the syllables of words and the sound on which the accent is marked is the voiced syllable.

Consequently, there are two types of syllable which includes open syllable and close syllable. A syllable is said to be open when it ends in vowel while a close syllable is that in which a consonant ends the syllable. All languages have open syllables. No language has only closed syllables. Unlike French words which can begin and end with consonants to accommodate the open and close syllable types, Yorùbá has only one syllable type which is open. To Adewole et al. (2016:53), in Yorùbá syllabic structure, a syllable cannot have more than one consonant. Owing to this shape of the syllable type in Yorùbá, there are no consonant-final syllables as most Yorùbá syllables begin with vowels and all end with vowels. The most frequent are those formed by a single vowel or by a consonant and a vowel.

Yorùbá is very strict with regards to its prohibition of closed syllables. There are no closed syllables in Yorùbá language. Many words in French can be analyzed as having a dormant final consonant (which is pronounced only in certain syntactic contexts when the next word begins with a vowel that creates room for her syllables to end in consonants) while Yorùbá words and syllables end in vowels. In Yorùbá language, each syllable has a distinctive tone and a syllable cannot have more than one consonant because consonant clusters are not permitted; unlike what is obtainable in French language where each syllable gets equal time and has the same length.

In French, three phonemes (**w, j, y**) share the characteristics of both consonant and vowels. This unique characteristic suggests why they are referred to as semi-vowel or semi-consonant (semi-voyelle/consonne) and are so used in syllables when they occur. In Yorùbá, the third syllabic structure; the syllabic nasal phoneme has six homorganic allophones which include: /m/, /M/, /n/, /ñ/, /Ñ/, and [Ñm]. They are phonologically consonants but share the characteristics of being syllabic and tone bearing with vowels in Yorùbá language. These syllabic nasals occur before other consonants in syllable junctions. Orthographically, the phoneme is represented by ***n*** except before '*b'* where it is represented with an '*m'*. The syllabic nasal forms a syllable nucleus by itself and it immediately precedes other consonants. But, when it precedes a vowel it is a velar nasal [ŋ],

Examples:

bèmbé = /be – m -- be/ = KF—N—KF (a type of drum)

gbangba = /gba – n –gba/ = KF—N—KF (in the open)

n ò lọ = /ŋ- ò-lọ/ = N—F—KF (I didn't go)

dùndú = /dù- n – dú/ = KF—N—KF (fried yam)

Unlike in Yorùbá, there is no syllabic nasal structure in French and even where the nasal consonant occurs in words, it cannot form a syllable by itself except it is combined with a vowel or another consonant.

Examples:

bon = /bɔ̃/ = CV = (good)

bonbon = / bɔ̃- bɔ̃/ = CV—CV (sweet)

apprendre = /a-pRɑ̃-dR/ = V-CCV-CC (to learn)

9. Conclusion

The study examines the points of convergence and divergence of the 'linguistic twin sisters' - French and Yorùbá languages. Findings revealed that French and Yorùbá languages originated from Latin and are similar in certain phonemic features. However, the dichotomy of their status is evident. French language has more phonemes than Yorùbá which necessitated the flexibility of its sounds combination.

Both languages have phonetic and syllabic structure, however, while Yorùbá has only three syllabic structure types, French has two with several possibilities. Yorùbá morphological system does not allow consonant clusters; as a vowel must always follow a consonant, thus, Yoruba concentrates on vowel harmony which makes all her syllables to be open; that is, they all end in a vowel and the most frequent are those formed by a single vowel or by a consonant combined with a vowel.

The observed morphological variation was due to inherent differences since both originated from a common source. French language accommodates consonant clusters but as a rule, many French words spelt and written with final consonants are not pronounced except for **c, r, f and l**; thus 80% of its syllables are open.

The study, with a view to identifying that every language has a distinct linguistic expression, concludes that the fact that these two languages evolve from the same root or source does not mean that they have or must have the same phonological and syllabic structure. In reality, cloning French and Yoruba languages is not a panacea for French language phonological difficulties for French language learners.

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