

Classification of Abesabesiⁱ

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Abstract

Àbèsàbèsì is the name of the language known in literature as Akpes. The language is spoken in nine communities. The communities are: Ìbaràm(ù), Ìyànì, Èkiròmì (Ìkáràm(ù), Àsẹ, Àkpès, Gèdègédé, Èṣùkù, Dája, Ìlúḍotun. Àbèsàbèsì linguistic communities are bilingual. Agoyi 2008 says Àbèsàbèsì has four dialects: Èkiròmì (spoken in Ìkáràmù and Àsẹ), Akpes (spoken in Àkùnù and Ìlúḍotun in Àjowá), Ìluẹ̀nì (spoken in Ìbaràm(ù), Ìyànì, Gèdègédé) and Èṣùkù spoken in Èṣùkù, Dája). Akpes is classified as a separate branch of the Niger-Congo family. Agoyi (1998, 2001) argues that Akpes (Ekiromi) be reclassified as Edoid. The reasons for her proposal are based on the inflection for number, as well as Lexico-statistics of word lists of about 66 basic items. Agoyi (2008) shows that Akpes and Èkiròmì, two Àbèsàbèsì languages, attest {ATR+ROUND} harmony which is not a common linguistic feature in Africa; nonetheless, there is a striking similarity in the [ATR] and [LOW] vowel harmony that Ilueni one of the Abesabesi language lects, attests with the [ATR], [LOW] harmony found in Okpe (Pulleyblank (1986)). It is argued that [ATR+ROUND] drives [LOW] vowel Harmony in Qṣùgù, another Abèsàbèsì lect. The phenomenon can be traced to the [LOW] vowel feature inherent in the proto Language. Gerunds in all Àbèsàbèsì lects manifests down step which is similar to Degema tone system (Elugbe 2011:11),

The lects also attests the loss of lexical tone on the verbs. Elugbe 2011:12 refers to such phenomenon as an Edoid innovation.

Work plan

Earlier Attempts on Àbèsàbèsìⁱⁱ (Akpes) Classification

Àbèsàbèsì Sound System

Lexico-statistics

Morphological Evidence

Inflection for number

Prefix and Suffix for forming gerund

Vowel Harmony

Èkiròmì

Akpes

Ìluẹ̀nì

Qṣùgù

Okpe Pulleyblank (1986)

Tone System

Down step Lexicon & Gerunds

Earlier Attempts on Àbèsàbèsìⁱ (Akpes) Classification

Hansford et al. (1976:38), the first research to light on (Àbèsàbèsì) Akpes, sees the language as ‘Unclassified Kwa’. Wiilliamson (1987:16) was the first to classify Akpes as aseparate branch of Benue-Congo. Williamson (1989) in Bendor-Samuel (1989:267) reclassifies Akpes -Ukaan ‘as a co-ordinate group of single node (New) Benue –Congo, a sub-family of Volta-Congo’. Agoyi 2001 suggests that Akpes (Àbèsàbèsì) should be subsumed into Edoid.

Elugbe (2011) has incorporated and modified the sugestion of Agoyi 2001. Elugbe’s recent proposal is that Àbèsàbèsì, Ukaan and Edoid should form an Akedoid phylum. We will examine the proposal and make suggestions in this paper.

Àbèsàbèsì Sound System

Sounds:

Table 1 Àbèsàbèsì Consonant Phonemes

Place→ Manner↓	Bila bial	Labi o-dental	Alve olar	Palat al- Alveolar	Pala tal	Vel ar	Labi o-velar	Glot is
Plosive	p b		t d			k g	kp gb	
Nasal	m		n		ɲ	ŋ		
Fricative		f	s	ʃ				h
Affricate				tʃ	dʒ			
Tap			r					
Approxim ants			l		j		w	

In this table of consonants only the significant sounds are considered. The language attests Labialization of some consonants which I am convinced are induced by a following round vowel, which fused with the consonant. Examples are [b^w, k^w, h^w, tʃ^w] [in [ɛb^wi] ‘goat’ [ik^wi] ‘pen knife’, [ih^wi] ‘urine’, [itʃ^we] ‘guinea corn’] are proposed to be written as /ɛbui, ikui, ihui, itʃui/ underlyingly.

Table 2 Àbèsàbèsì Vowels: (i) Oral

i	u
e	o
ɛ	ɔ
a	

(i) Nasalized Vowels:

ĩ	ũ
ẽ	õ
	ã

Lexico Statistics

A table of cognates analysed contains eighty-four lexical items. 20 Edoid languages are compared with Àbèsàbèsì words for the lexical items. At the end the similar lexical items of each of the languages with Àbèsàbèsì show high % similarity as reflected on the following table.

Table 3ⁱⁱⁱ

	De	Eg	Ep	Er	Is	Ok	Ur	Uv	Ed	Ao	Au	Av	Un	Go	OI	EI	Ib	Uh	Eh	Uk
AB	57	72	71	56	45	54	54	48	45	45	51	41	51	43	24	48	41	28	40	34

The table shows significant resemblance of cognates in all the linguistic communities. It is possible that argue the lexical items are borrowed. However considering the distance of the location of the Edoid language speech communities from Àbèsàbèsì, we feel borrowing is not a plausible explanation. Degema is hundreds of kilometers from the Àbèsàbèsì speaking communities. In addition the similar lexical items are wide. It is also possible to argue that Àbèsàbèsì borrowed lexical items from Ukaan since Ukaan is a neighbouring language; this phenomenon will be discussed in the next section. The chance that Àbèsàbèsì will borrow many lexical items from Edoid is also very slim. It also possible to argue that the resemblance is by chance, but the number involved is too large for the chance theory. The only plausible account of the phenomenon, to our understanding is that Àbèsàbèsì and Edoid are sister languages from a proto language family PAE (Elugbe 2011:13).

Morphological Evidence

Àbèsàbèsì attests inflection for number that is similar to the Edoid group of Languages. In all the lects, a- is plural marker for [+ human] nouns while i- marks [-human] nouns (Agoyi 1998, 2008). The phenomenon is represented in 1 thus

1.	Akpes	Èkiròmì	Ìluṣẹ̀nì	Ọ̀ᚳ̀ᚳ̀ùgù					
a.		[+human]							
	sg	pl	sg	pl	sg	pl	sg	pl	Gloss
	ᚳ̀nĩ	anĩ	ᚳ̀nĩ	anĩ	ᚳ̀nĩ	anĩ	ᚳ̀nĩ	anĩ	person
	oṅo	aṅo	oṅo	aṅo	oṅe	aṅe	owe	awe	wife
	ᚳ̀misi	amisi	ᚳ̀misi	amisi	ᚳ̀misi	amisi	ᚳ̀misi	amisi	king
	otfoi	atfoi	otfoi	atfoi	otfoi	atfoi	otfoi	atfoi	witch
	otu	atu	otu	atu	otu	atu	otu	atu	thief
	owosi	awosi	owosi	awosi	owosi	awosi	owosi	awosi	husband
b.		[-Human] Nouns							
	sg	pl	sg	pl	sg	pl	sg	pl	
	ɛbui	ibui	ɛbui	ibui	ɛbui	ibui	ɛbui	ibui	goat
	ena	ina	ena	ina	ena	ina	ena	ina	cow
	ebo	ibo	ebo	ibo	ebo	ibo	ebo	ibo	dog
	eṅo	iṅo	eṅe	iṅe	eṅe	iṅe	eṅe	iṅe	female
	òdùgù	ìdùgù	òdù	ìdù	ùdùg/kù	ùdùg/kù	odugu	ìdùgù	leg
	afa	ifa	anfa	infa	anfa	infa	afa	ifa	leave

Ukaan and Edoid feature inflection for number. However, Ukaan inflection is both ATR harmony and noun class driven. This is unlike the phenomenon in Àbèsàbèsì which is restricted to [+ human] and [-human] nouns makers which implies that the language behaves more like the Edoid language. If the inflection is a borrowed feature from Ukaan which is a neighboring language, we expect the language to feature the type of noun class distinction present in Ukaan. The only similarity we observed in Ukaan and Àbèsàbèsì is the inflection for number.

The phenomenon is closer to the one most Edoid languages attest (see Elugbe 1986:132-255) than it is to Ukaan.

Another Morphological feature is seen in the suffixes used for the formation of Gerunds. In my Àbèsàbèsì research, I have been curious to find that the language attests prefixation and suffixation which is not a common feature in all the neighbouring languages. However placing the Àbèsàbèsì and the Edoid languages (especially Degema see Elugbe 2011:10) gerunds side by side I perceive strong related root.

Vowel Harmony

In Agoyi 2008, I grouped Àbèsàbèsì dialects into 4. My criteria for grouping are the behaviour of vowels within syntactic structure that feature Aspectual Markers.

The findings are summarized as follows:

Akpes: [ATR + ROUND] . Verb roots /u, o/ with [+ATR+ROUND] choose aspectual element with vowel /o/ which has [+ATR+ROUND] features.

Vowels /i, e,/ that have [+ATR –ROUND] choose /e/ that is a [+ATR –

ROUND] vowel. The vowels that have [-ATR] feature choose /a/ a [-ATR]

Vowel. Gerund morpheme and pronoun verb object or noun qualifier

alternates /ɔ/ and /a/. Agoyi 2008 presume the phenomenon to be the manifestation of low vowel harmony in which all [-LOW] choose /ɔ/ and [+LOW] vowel choose /a/.

Ekiromi: [ATR+ROUND] In which the i) [+HIGH +ROUND] vowel /u/ choose /o/

ii) [+ATR] vowels /i, e/ choose /e/

Ìluẹ̀nì: [+ATR] vowels /i,e,o,u,/ choose /e/ while [-ATR] vowels /ε,ɔ,a/ choose /a/

Ìluẹ̀nì: The pronoun qualifier and objects attests a loss of the harmony in Ìluẹ̀nì

Ọ̀ṣùgù: This dialect manifests a gradual loss of the vowel harmony feature. The vowel harmony feature in pronoun qualifier/object and Gerund suffix are similar to Akpes. At the syntactic level all [+ATR] vowels /i,e,o,u/ choose /ɔ/ that has [-ATR -LOW +ROUND] features.

The only feature the vowels have in common is the [-LOW] feature. Agoyi argues that the inherent [+ROUND] vowel harmony constraint in the language drives the choice of the [+ROUND] vowel at the stage of the gradual loss of the [ATR +ROUND] harmony found in the language.

All the [-ATR] vowels choose /a/.

Note that Ìluẹ̀nì disallows the [+ROUND] feature in its constraint ranking. In Ìluẹ̀nì lexical items that features vowel disharmony the language chooses the front [-LOW] vowel /ε/

2.	Akpes	Ekiromi	Ìluẹ̀nì	Ọ̀ṣùgù:
	oɔ	oɔ	eɛ	oɔ
	ombɔ	áye	ombε	áye

Tone

Elugbe (2002) argues that Akpes (Àbèsàbèsì) manifests ‘a classic two tones plus down step. Considering the context of the discuss Elugbe (2011) is right. However after thorough examination of Àbèsàbèsì lexical items in isolation it is observed that the language attests three level tones in addition to down step.

Àbèsàbèsì tones are evident in lexical items in isolation such as:

3a. Low Tone

L L L	L L	LL	L L L	LL	L L
òdùg(ù) ‘leg’	òbò ‘gun’	òkò ‘navel’	òkòdò ‘lizard’	èjò ‘tortoise	òkpì ‘selve;
L L	L L	L L	LL	LL	
òbũ ‘body/wall’	àkpòm ‘load’	òkùm ‘dust’	òsò (addition to)	ègè ‘door’	
LL	LL	LL (L)	LL (L)		
ìbù ‘cola nut’	ìtù ‘heap’	ètèn(i)	èfès(i) ‘mat’		

3b. Mid Tone:

MM	M M	MM	MM	MM(M)
ākū ‘belly’	ɔ#kū ‘rope’	ōnū ‘mouth’	ɔ#sɔ# inlaw	āsūg(ū) ‘ear’
MMM	MMM	MM(M)		
e#bi#N(i)# ‘drum’	ε#bu#i# ‘goat’	e#Σi#N(i)# ‘he goat’		

At intial stage in my study of Àbèsàbèsì I thought the mid tone is a down step tone. Thorough investigation reveals that the three level tones are contrastive and can occur in word initial, media and final positions. I feel it is not possible for any human language to feature down step tone at word initial position. If we assume that the mid tone is down step, we will not be able to give a theoretical account of how it becomes a down step.

3c. High Tone

H M H M HMM H L

áyē ‘mother’ ómū ‘palm frond’ álūkā palm kernel ógbè ‘local belt’ ɔ#ni#

M H M L M L L M (M) M L L

ɔ#múdē pistol òkūrè ‘cane’ òsīŋ(ī) ‘father’ āgògò ‘local bowl for carrying load’

M L L MLL

ɔ#mìjṅà ‘knife’ āwèrè local door

L H

òsé father (only occurs with pronoun objects as eg òsé na ‘my father’ òsé u ‘his father’)

LH LHL

èdé® ‘that’ ètjé/ì ‘crecket’

M M MM MM MM MM MM

ɔ#bɔ# ‘hand’ a#ku# ‘belly’ o#nu# ‘mouth’ o#tu# ‘thief’ ɔ#ni# ‘person’ a#wá# ‘arm

MM MM MM

ōjō ‘wife’ a#ko# ‘bark of tree’ a#tjì# ‘egg’

MML

ɔ#tɛ#gè sibylline/ junior

Down Step Tone

Tone on the lexical items in example 4 below is puzzling.

4. L M(DS)L MM(DS)L MM(DS)L

àdʒa#à ‘pot’ a#jò#ò ‘eye’ ɔ#hɔ#ò ‘neck’

There two possible account of the tones. We can argue that they manifest down step Mid (M) tone or that they manifest Mid (M) and Low (L) tones in isolation. The second claim is more plausible with a careful examination. Analysis of the lexical items in syntactic domain does not support the Down Step hypothesis. Analysis of the following data in 5 will unveil the pause.

5. A	B
Lexical items	Noun Phrase
ɔ#nī 'person'	ɔ#ní nā my person
òsīŋī 'father'	òsé nā my father
áyē 'mother'	áyé nō my mother
ɔ#tʃāmīsī 'friend'	ɔ#tʃāmīsí nā my friend

In column B observe that the tone on the last syllable of each lexical item changed from Mid (M) to High (H). But the lexical items in 4 arouse our curiosity.

While the last syllable gives the impression of a Down Step Mid (M) tone, the actual tone on the lexical items are Mid (M) and Low (L) tone. The behavior of the lexical items syntactic domain confirms that they actually manifest Mid (M) and Low (L) tones in Isolation. Examples are as in 6:

6a. Noun Phrase

àɖzá na	ajó no
pot my 'my pot'	eye my 'my eye'
ɔhó na	àɖzá ájé no
neck my 'my neck'	pot mother me 'my mother's pot'
ajó ɛjawu	
eye monkey 'monkey's eye'	

The items feature Mid (M) tone in some other constructions such as:

6b.

àɖza Òjó	ajo Òjó	ɔho Òjó
pot Òjó 'Òjó's pot'	eye Òjó Òjó's 'eye'	neck Òjó 'Òjó's neck'
àɖza isòm/òsòm(ì)		
pot soup 'soup's pot'		

Note that all the lexical items in 5a manifest Mid (M) tone on the last syllable. The items feature High (H) tone in construction with pronoun qualifier in 5b. The implication is that the language features a floating High (H) tone. The tone automatically shows up on the last syllable of the noun head in the construction. The question we need to answer is what happens to the Low tone on the lexical items in 4? We need to consider the lexical items in 5a with noun qualifiers. We find examples such as:

7 ɔ̃nĩ Ọ́jó	ɔ̃sĩNĩ Ọ́jó
Person Noun 'Ọ́jó's person'	father Noun 'Ọ́jó's father'
áyē Ọ́jó	ɔ̃#t̃jāmĩsĩ Ọ́jó
mother Noun 'Ọ́jó's mother'	friend Noun 'Ọ́jó's friend'

In 7 the tone on the last syllable of the noun head in each phrase does not change see examples in 5a. The implication is that the lexical items in example 4 above delete the last vowel with its tone in syntactic construction. The Mid tone on the remaining vowel is deleted in constructions that feature floating High (H) tone. We can argue that there is a vowel that initially anchored the tone but the current study has not been able to trace the shape of the vowel. Note that most of the qualifiers in 5 are pronouns. The language also features MID tone on the last syllable of the lexical items in 6b. Also note that the qualifier in each phrase is noun

The Gerund in Àbèsàbèsì

Elugbe 2011 reports the feature of 'gerund/ verbal noun in AIKA and Edo' as 'morphological evidence' for proposing an Akedoid branch of Edoid language family. Data from Agoyi 2008 as well as recent data collected on Àbèsàbèsì gerund/verbal nouns support Agoyi 2001 and Elugbe's argument for classifying Àbèsàbèsì and UKAAN as a branch of Proto Akedoid. The gerund suffix morpheme in Proto Edoid as shown in Elugbe 2011:10 is similar to the one identified in Agoyi 2008:73-77, in the data, underlying form and alternant are:

Underlying form a#ni#

Alternants

Èkiròmì: o[ni# if verb stem vowel is [+ATR]

 a#ni# if verb stem vowel is [-ATR]

Ìluẹ̀nì: e#ni# If verb stem vowel is [+ATR]

 a#ni# if verb stem vowel is [-ATR]

Akpes and Ọ̀ṣùgù: ɔ̄ni# if verb stem vowel is [-LOW]

a#ni# if verb stem is [+LOW]

Verb root with [+ATR] vowel with [-ATR] vowel

8.	Èkiròmì	to#	itòni 'pounding'	lɔ#	i#lani#		throwing
	dò		īdòo#nĩ wanting/searching	jali	i#sàa##nĩ		selling
	ṭé		i#ṭòni# 'laying eggs'	sɛ#mè	i#sèma#ni#		'greeting'
	ku#		i#kòni# 'falling'	sàgì	i#sàga#ni#		'calling'
	hu#		i#hòni# 'dying'	kpa#ni#	i#kpàa#ni#		'deceiving'
	ni#Ni#		i#nìNo#ni#	sá	i#sàa#ni#		'finish'
	Ìluẹ̀nì	to#	e#tènēnī 'pounding'	lɔ#	a#làa#ni#		'throwing'
	dò		ēdèe#ni wanting/searching	jaji	a#sàa##nĩ		'selling'
	ṭé		e#ṭèni# 'laying eggs'	sɛ#mè	a#sèma#ni#		'greeting'
	ku#		e#kèe#ni# 'falling'	sàgì	a#sàga#ni#		'calling'
	hu#		e#hèe#ni# 'dying'	kpa#ni#	a#kpàa#ni#		'deceiving'

Verb root with [-LOW] vowel with [+LOW] vowel

Àkpes	to		itɔ̄ni 'pounding'	sà	i#sàa#ni#		'knowing'
	dò		īdò#####ɔ̄ni wanting/searching	jaji	i#jàya##nĩ		'selling'
	ṭé		i#ṭòni# 'laying eggs'	sàgì	i#sàga#ni#		'calling'
	hi#®		ihò®ɔ̄ni# 'reaching'	ta#	i#tāa#ni#		'going'
	ku#		i#kɔ̄ni# 'falling'	sá	i#sàa#ni#		'finishing'
Ọ̀ṣùgù	to		ītɔ̄ni 'pounding'	sà	i#sàa##ni#		'knowing'
	dò		īdòɔ̄ni wanting/searching	jali	i#sàa##nĩ		selling

hi#®	ihò®ɔ#ni#	'reaching'	kpa#ni#	a#kpàni#	
'deceiving'					
tʃé	i#tʃòɔ#ni#	'laying eggs'	sàgì	i#sàga#ni#	'calling'
hi#®	ihò®ɔ#ni#	'reaching'	ta#	i#táa#ni#	'going'
sɛ#mè	i#sèmɔ#ni#	'greeting'	sá	i#sàa#ni#	
'finishing'					

The gerund morpheme in the data above especially the Ìlùèni data is similar to Degema Gerund morpheme (-↔#m/am) in the examples below:

9. DE	Degema	hir	ùhír↔#m	'surrounding'
		tɛv	Ytévá#m	descending (Elugbe 2011:10-11).

Although in the examples in 8, the Gerund morpheme manifests VCV syllable structure, we noticed that Àbèsàbèsì always deletes the last vowel in fast speech, but in slow speech the vowel surfaces.

Note that Degema features -↔#m in [+ATR] environment and -am in [-ATR] environment. The phenomenon is similar to Ìlùèni that also features -en(i) in [+ATR] environment and an(i) in [-ATR] environment. Observe that the consonant of the Gerund Morpheme in the two languages are nasal. While Degema uses bilabial nasal, Àbèsàbèsì uses alveolar nasal. The fact that Àbèsàbèsì features prefixes and suffixes in Gerund that are vowel harmony controlled which is alien to languages within the immediate environment of Àbèsàbèsì speakers, but present in Edoid, underscores the fact that Àbèsàbèsì and Edoid originate from a close proto language family. It is possible to claim that the above morphological feature is an innovation/borrowed feature by the Àbèsàbèsì speakers.

But this point loses its force if one considers the distance between Degema speakers and Àbèsàbèsì communities. The feature is alien to Yoruba, the second language widely spoken in the communities.

Tone on Gerund

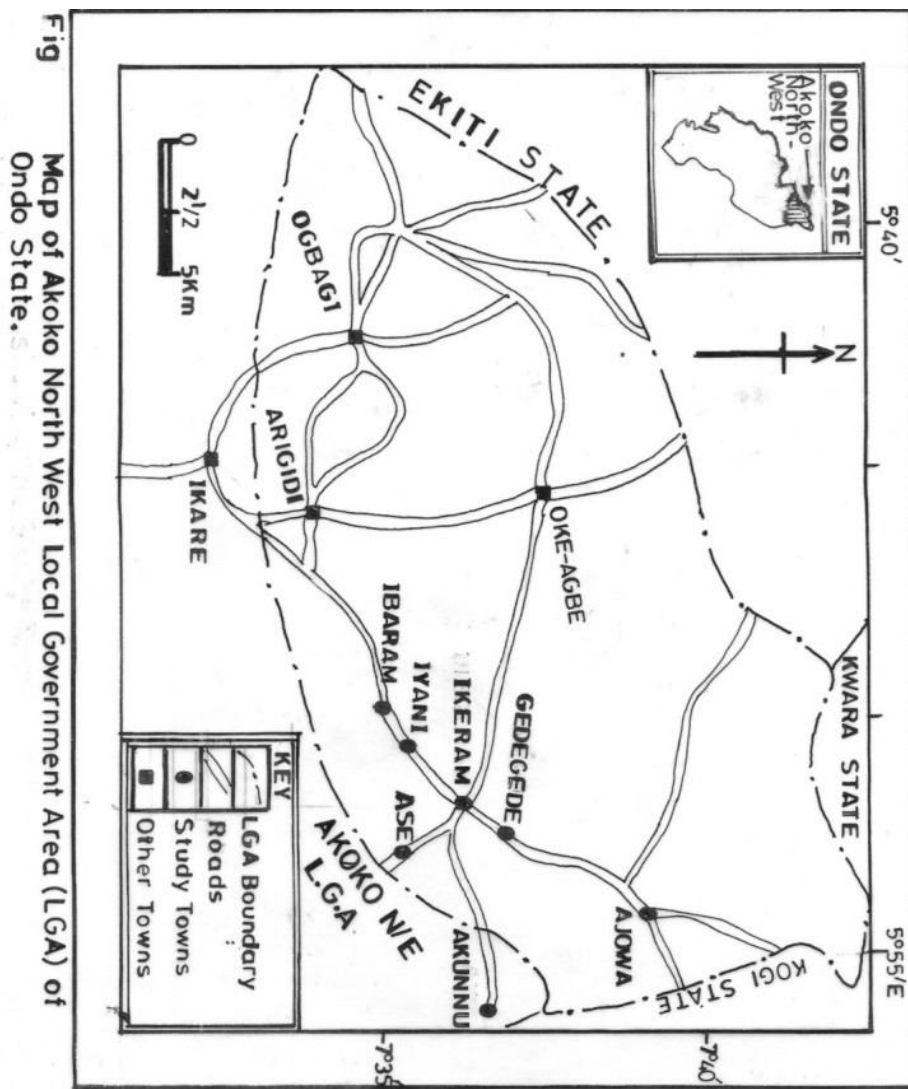
Considering the Gerund in Àbèsàbèsì, Elugbe's suggestion that Àbèsàbèsì Gerunds feature down step tone is right. However Àbèsàbèsì shows that most of the root verbal lexical items feature Mid (M) tone. One interesting feature of the Gerund is the automatic appearance of Low tone on the derived lexical item. It is possible to assume that the tone is an underlying tone on the lexical item, but lexical items like tʃé 'to lay egg' and sɛ#mè 'to greet' feature HIGH (H) and MID (M) tone respective in the underlying representation. Why could these items not retain the tonal feature in the root morpheme when the gerunds are formed? I am of the opinion that the principle of Gerund formation has an automatic down step constraint which it must obey; it is ranked higher than any other constraint in such a morphological process.

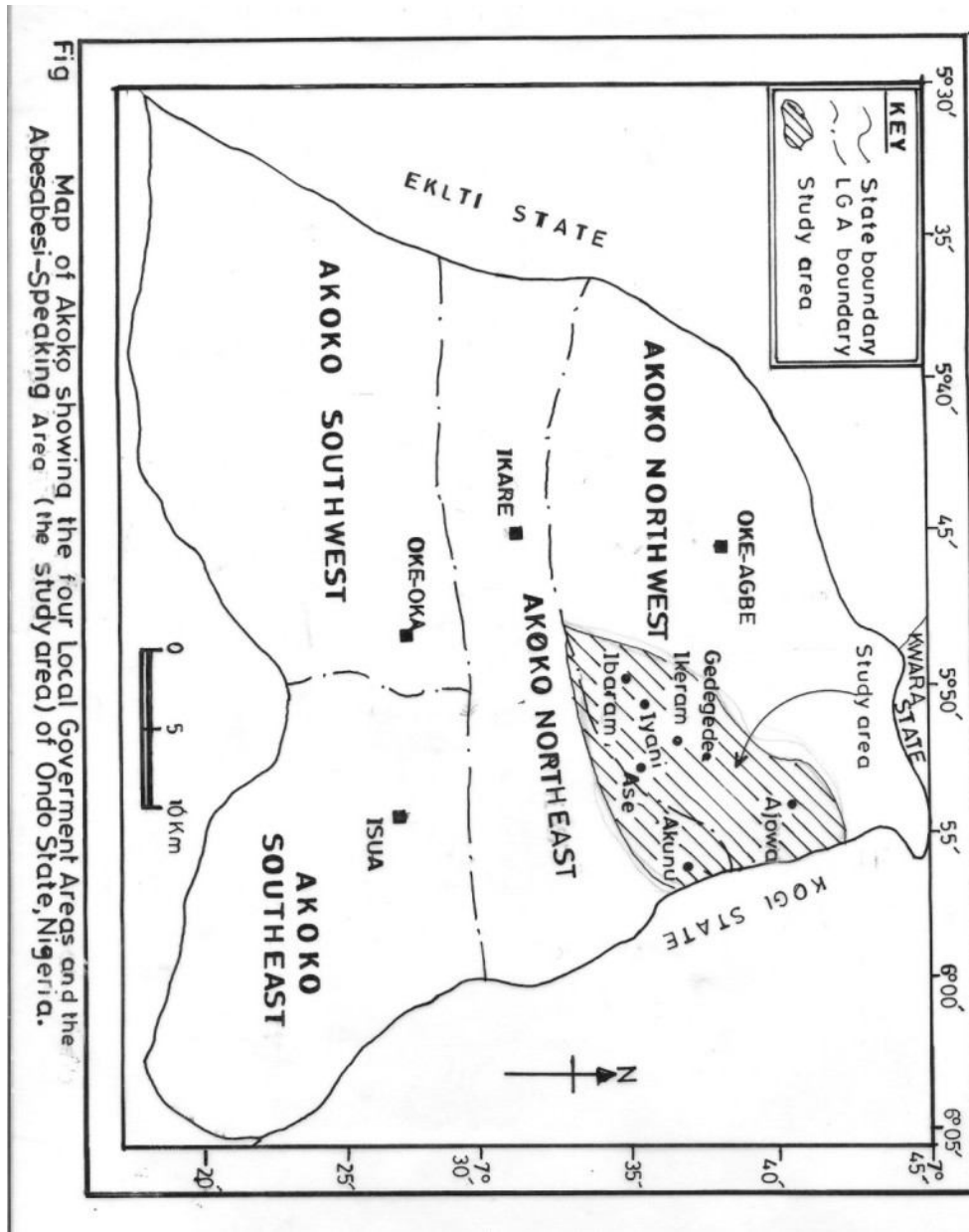
Elugbe 2011 observed such down step as a feature in Degema’s Gerunds. The implication of the forgoing is that down step tone is possibly a feature of proto-Akedoid which might have been lost in many of the sister languages or are still there but only used by elders who are the custodians of the proto language. Note that most of the languages are highly endangered because the younger generation is not interested in the local languages.

Conclusion

This paper undertakes a mass comparison of Àbèsàbèsì and the Edoid. All the findings point to the close genetic relation between the languages. We suggest that the features the languages have in common are enough to classify them as one language family.

Appendix 1





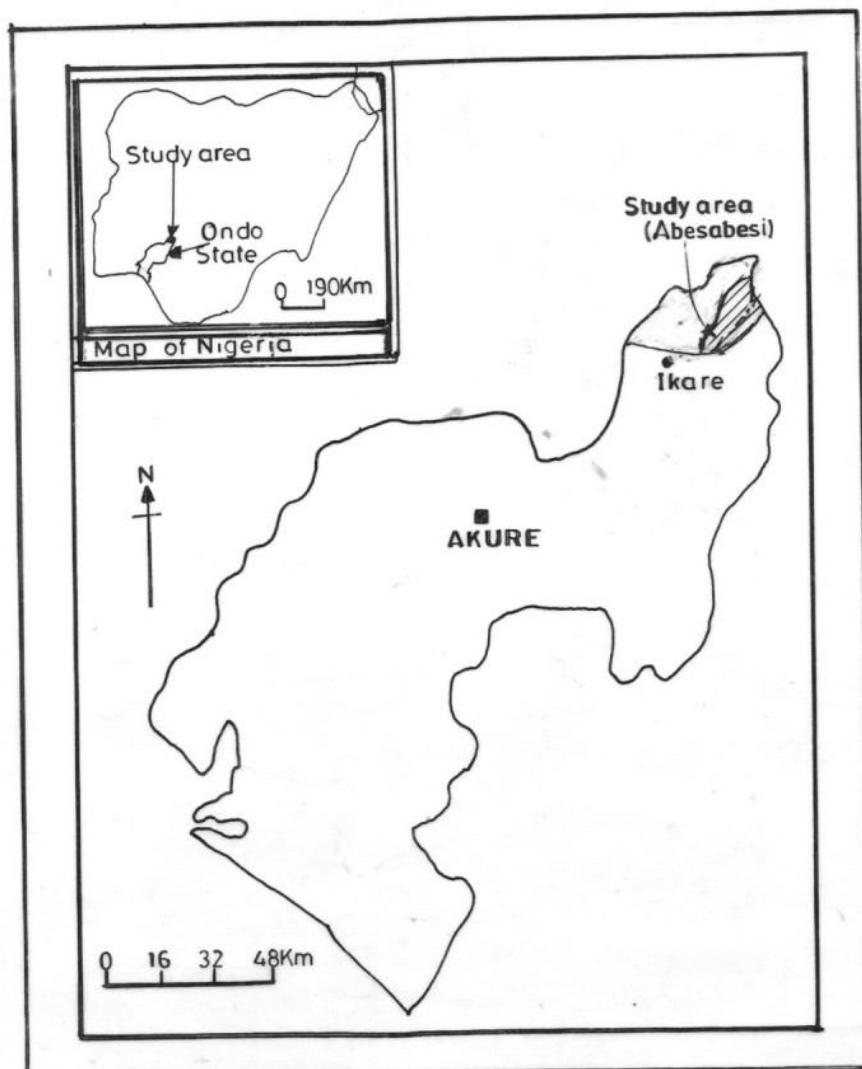


Fig Map of Ondo State showing the study area (Abesabesi) in Akoko North West Local Government Area.

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ⁱⁱ Àbèsàbèsì is rooted in the morpheme *Àbèsì* 'we' a term commonly used among speakers of the language known in literature as Akpes. Àbèsàbèsì is commonly used to refer to speakers languages (lects) usually referred to as Akpes. Therefore, I adopt the most acceptable term to the speakers in these various communities.

ⁱⁱⁱ De=Degema Eg= Egeṅ Ep= Epie Er= Erua Is= Isoko Ok= Okpe Ur= Urohbo Uv= Uvbie Ed =Edo Ao= Aoma Au= Auchì Av= Avbianwu Un= Uneme Go= Gotuo Ol= Oloma Em =Ehuṅ Ib= Ibilo= Uh= Uhami Eh= Ehuṅ Uk= Ukue.