



DIACRITICAL MARKS IN FRENCH AND YORUBA LANGUAGE; POINT OF CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE

By

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Abstract

Language is not only a tool for communication but also a carrier of culture, identity, and meaning. Among the many features that give language its richness, diacritical marks play a crucial role in shaping pronunciation, meaning, and interpretation. Diacritical marks play an important role in many languages because they guide pronunciation and meaning in words that are homographs. In both French and Yoruba, these marks serve as essential linguistic tools, although they operate in different ways. In the two languages the utilisation of these accents is very important because without them there will be a lot of confusion for the speakers of the languages. This study examines the points of convergence and divergence in the use of diacritical marks in French and Yoruba. French employs diacritics such as the acute (é), grave (è), circumflex (â), cedilla (ç), and diaeresis (ë) mainly to influence pronunciation, indicate historical spelling, or distinguish between similar words. Yoruba, on the other hand, uses tone marks and under dots to indicate tonal variation and vowel quality, which are crucial for meaning since Yoruba is a tonal language. The paper adopts a comparative and descriptive approaches to highlight how these orthographic features reflect deeper phonological and cultural realities. It reveals that although both languages share the use of diacritics as visual guides in written communication, Yoruba and French depend heavily on them for semantic clarity. By examining these similarities and differences, this study contributes to cross-linguistic understanding and emphasizes the importance of diacritics in preserving linguistic identity and accuracy in communication.

1.0. Introduction

Language carries the weight of human experience, and even the smallest marks on a page can shape meaning in profound ways. Diacritical marks—those seemingly minor signs placed above or below letters—serve as powerful tools that guide pronunciation, clarify meaning, and preserve linguistic identity. In both French and Yoruba, diacritics are not mere decorative elements; they are essential components of the writing system.

French, a widely spoken Romance language, uses diacritical marks such as the acute accent (é), grave accent (è), circumflex (ê), diaeresis (ë), and cedilla (ç). These marks often signal differences in pronunciation, distinguish between words, or reflect historical developments in the language. For example, the difference between é and è can subtly alter pronunciation and sometimes meaning, while the cedilla ensures that c retains a soft sound before certain vowels.

Yoruba, a major language spoken in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria, employs a different system of diacritics rooted in its tonal nature. Yoruba uses tone marks—high (´), mid (unmarked), and low (˘)—to distinguish meaning between words that may otherwise appear identical. For instance, a single sequence of letters can produce entirely different meanings depending on the tone applied. In addition, underdots are used to differentiate vowel qualities, further enhancing clarity and precision in written communication.



Despite these differences, both French and Yoruba demonstrate a shared commitment to using diacritics as tools for linguistic precision. This raises important questions: To what extent do these languages converge in their use of diacritical marks? Where do they diverge, and what do these differences reveal about their phonological systems?

This study seeks to answer these questions by examining the roles, functions, and implications of diacritical marks in both languages. By comparing French and Yoruba, the paper not only highlights structural similarities and differences but also underscores the cultural and linguistic significance embedded in these small yet powerful symbols. Ultimately, this exploration provides deeper insight into how writing systems adapt to the needs of their speakers and preserve meaning across contexts.

2.0. Concept of Diacritics

According to Crystal (2008, p.142), diacritic is a mark added to a symbol to alter the way it is pronounced. Diacritic marks (or ‘diacritics’) include the various accents (‘ ^ ` etc) and other signs of devoicing (^) and nasalization (~). These diacritics are used on vowels and syllabic nasal consonants to indicate the languages tones. The major ones that shall be considered in this write up are:

1. The acute accent (‘) for the high tone in Yoruba..
2. The grave accent (`) for the low tone in Yoruba.
3. The optional macron (-) for the middle tone in Yoruba
4. The circumflex accent (^)
5. The Umlant (¨)
6. The Cedilla (,)

The first three are used in Yoruba language while French language makes use of the first two, the fourth, the fifth and the sixth one. It is highly essential to put accents in their proper places because an incorrect or missing accent is a spelling mistake just as an incorrect or missing letter would be. We shall therefore look at each of them in detail.

3.0. A Brief History of the Yoruba Language

Yoruba is one of the three major indigenous languages of Nigeria (alongside Hausa and Igbo) and it is a member of the Volta-Niger branch of the Niger-Congo family of languages. It is spoken by about 22 million people in Southwest Nigeria, Benin, Togo, the U.K, Brazil and the USA. Yoruba first appeared in writing during the 19th century. The first Yoruba publications were a number of teaching booklets produced by John Raban in 1830-2. The person who made the biggest contribution to Yoruba literacy was Bishop Ajayi Crowther (1806 – 1891), who studied many of the languages of Nigeria, including Yoruba and wrote and translated in some of them. Crowther was also the first Christian bishop of West African origin. Yoruba orthography appeared in about 1850, though it has undergone a number of changes since then.

Yoruba is a tonal language i.e the pronunciation of words in Yoruba language is tonal; where a different pitch conveys a different word meaning grammatical distinction. This means that pronouncing words in Yoruba is based on what is called’ *àmì ohùn* meaning Tone marks. These marks are applied to the top of the vowel within each syllable of a word or phrase.

Dò-Low with a falling tone, depicted by a grave accent.

e.g. àṣà (ò ò) culture
èdè (ò ò) language

Re- Mid with a flat tone, depicted by an absence of any accent.

Pupa (re re) red



Tuntun (re re) new

Mí-High with a rising tone, depicted by an acute accent.

Kólá (mi mi) name of a person

Dúpé (mi mi) name of a person

Understanding the use of tone marks is the key to properly reading, writing and speaking the Yoruba language. This is because some words have similar spelling but at the addition of tone marks, these words could have very different meanings.

Here are some paired examples:

- A). Ọkọ (re re) husband
 Ọkó (re mi) hoe
 Ọkò (re do) vehicle
- B). Àgbòn (do do) jaw
 Agbòn (re do) basket
 Àgbon (do re) coconut
- C). Ìgbà (do do) time
 Igba (re re) two hundred
 Ìgbá do mi) garden egg
- D). Òjó (do mi) name
 Òjò (do do) rain
 Ojo (re re) coward

If the accents are not put on the words above when used in a sentence it will definitely lead to confusion. It is very important to insert accent makes on words written in the Yoruba language and to place dot under the letters that require it. It is very difficult to read and understand the meaning of sentences if this is not done.

4.0. FRENCH LANGUAGE

French is an important world language. it is a Romance language that originated from Latin and developed in the region of northern France. Today, it is spoken by over 300 million people worldwide across Europe, Africa, the Americas, and parts of Asia, making it one of the most influential global languages. French is an official language in many international organizations such as the United Nations and the African Union, and it plays a significant role in diplomacy, education, literature, and culture. Known for its rich vocabulary, expressive style, and historical contributions to philosophy and the arts, French is also widely studied as a foreign language, especially in countries like Nigeria where it serves as an important tool for regional and international communication. According to Ade Ojo (2002: 2)

It is in fact the 5th intercontinental world language after English, Spanish, Arabic and Portuguese in terms of the sheer number of its speakers who are found in all the five continents. French is the second most important language of the world coming after English, with the two endowed with the potentials and a past history of privileged acceptance and usage in interpersonal, diplomatic, business and socio-cultural relations all over the universe. French is the language with the second largest number of speakers in the EU, coming after German. It is one of the three languages (with English and Arabic) that are used by the OAU for its official transactions and publications. It is actively and



competently spoken by more than 140 million peoples in the world and gladly learnt and used by another 300 million in non-Franco- phone countries who have been ‘somehow’ exposed to the learning of French and who can (manage to) express themselves in it. He adds that French belongs to the enviable Club of 12 of the world’s 5440 languages that are spoken by more than 100 million users.

Ade Ojo adds that, French unlike African languages, which are tone languages, is an intonational language, meaning that it is (and has to be) spoken with an intonation which is a melody that allows the level of the voice to rise and fall. The pitch produced allows the speaker to bring out the feeling behind the message or utterance (in a declarative sentence or Statement, an information question, a yes /no question or an imperatives sentence). For example, it is through the intonation that the contrast in the following statement comes out: *Tu Veux ou tu ne veux pas?* (you want or you don’t want?).

4.1. Different Types of Sentences and Their Intonation

A). For a statement or a declarative statement, the speaker ends the statement with a falling intonation e.g

Je vois le professeur (I see the teacher).

B). For an information question that the answer is not no or yes, the speaker starts by raising his voice and ends the question with a falling intonation e.g.

Où allez-vous? (Where are you going?)

C). The yes/no question viz a question that can be answered with just a ‘oui’ (yes) or a ‘non’(no) is started with a falling sound and is ended with a rising intonation e.g.

Question: Tu parles français? (do you speak French?).
Answer: Oui, je parle français. (Yes, I speak French).

D). An imperative or command sentence has a falling intonation e.g.

Viens! (Come)
Parle français! (speak French!)

4. 2. French Accents

There are four French accents for vowels and one accent for a consonant. These are:

a). **The grave accent (`)**: This accent can be found on an A, E or U. On the A and U, it usually serves to distinguish between words that would otherwise be homographs e.g. ou (or) vs où (where)

a (has) vs à (to or at)
dès (as from) vs des (some)

It only alters pronunciation when over the letter E to [ɛ] e.g.père (father),
mère (mother) etc

b). **The acute accent (´)**: The accent can only be found on an E. It changes the letter’s pronunciation to [ay] e.g. étudiant (student), médecin (doctor), marché (market). .

c). **The accent circumflex (^)**: The accent circumflex can be on an A,E,I or U. The circumflex usually indicates that an S used to follow that vowel, e.g. forêt (forest).It also serves to distinguish homographs; e.g. du (contraction of de + le) vs dû (past participle of devoir et tache (spot) vs tâche (task).

d). **The accent tréma (¨)** : dieresis or umlaut can be on an E,I.or U. It is used when two vowels are next to each other and both must be pronounced e.g. naïve, Saül Ambiguë, and Noël. It equally serves to distinguish between homographs e.g. mais (but) vs maïs (maize)

e). **The cedilla (,)**: is found only under the letter C. It changes a hard Csound (like K) into a soft C sound (like S) e.g. garçon, leçon. The cedilla is never placed in front of E or I, because C always



sound like an S Infront of these vowels. Ajiboye (2006:25) submits that the cedilla could be found whenever C is followed by a , o or u e.g. ça, leçon, déçu. (see About.com French Language File /// C / users /Document/ French Accents- Diacritical marks used in French accessed 20th November ,2014)

5.0. Similarities Between French and Yoruba Accents

Going through our discussions on the diacritics used in French and Yoruba language, we discover that the diacritics are used on vowels in a syllable. Aduke (2008:6) says in French a syllable is made up of a consonant plus a pronounced vowel, a vowel only or a consonant plus a semi – vowels. There are single syllables and double syllables:

Single syllable	Double syllable
Là (CV) there	bébé (CV-CV) baby
Île (CV) island	découragé (CV-CV-CV-CV) discouraged
À (V) to, at	été. (V-CV) summer

The examples given above showed that accents are mostly placed on vowels in a syllable in French. The same thing happened in Yoruba where the diacritics are used on vowels in a syllable. According to Bamgbose (2005:26) there are three possible syllable structure in Yoruba , a consonant + vowel (CV), a vowel alone (V), and a syllabic nasal. Every syllable bears one of the three tones (high, mid and low).The syllable in Yoruba could be also single or double syllable.

Single syllable	Double syllable
Wá (CV) come	Dúpé (CV-CV) name of a person
A (V) we	Òkú (V-CV) dead person
	Pa n la (CV-N-CV). stock fish

Our findings also reveal that accents are not only placed on vowels, there are some consonants that make use of accents for correct pronunciation. Let’s look at the following examples both in French and Yoruba

Yoruba	French
Bá –n-gbó-sé (name)	Garçon (boy)
Kò-ṅ-kò (frog)	Leçon (lecture)

From the examples given above, the syllabic nasal (n) also carries accent in Yorùbá , while the consonant (c) also has an accent in French.

Another area of similarity between the two languages is that, they make use of accents to distinguish homonyms. Let consider these pairs of word in the two languages.

Yoruba	French
a) O –ko (re re) husband	a). Là (adverb=here)
O- kó (re mi) hoe	La (article=the)
O-kò (re do) vehicle	
b) A-gbón (re mi) hornet	b). Mais (conjunction=but).
À-gbon (do re) coconut	Maïs (noun=maize)
À-gbòn (do-do) jaw	
c). Ò-jò (do do) rain	c). Tache (noun=stain).
Ò-jó (do-mi) name	Tâche (noun= task).
O-jo (re re) coward	
d). Ìgbà (do do) time	Dès (preposition=as from)
Ìgbá (do mi) garden egg.	Des (partitif article=some)



- | | | |
|-----|-------------------------|---------------------|
| | Ì-gbá (re mi) calabash | |
| e). | Apa(re mi) arm | Ou (conjunction=or) |
| | Àpà (squanderer). | Où (adverb=where). |

Looking at the pairs of the words above, if not because of the proper accents placed on them, there would have been a confusion in their meaning. To buttress this point, Ajiboye (2006:25) opines ‘it is important to master the use of these accents, as loss of intended meaning may arise if they are not properly applied. ‘He says again that accents are crucial to spelling in French. Omitting one of them is like omitting a whole letter’. The differences between the pair of words are due to accents placed on them

6.0 Areas of Divergence Between the Two Languages

Since French language is a European language and Yoruba is also one of the African languages, there bound to be differences between the usages of their accents. Aduke (2008:6) says ‘accents are fixed in French and must be learnt along with each word’. All the accents placed on French words have been there right from the onset, they are rules that must be adhered to strictly. Words such as: garçon, dès , là où etc will continue to exist like that as decided by French academy, but this is not so in Yoruba language.

Secondly, another area of divergence observed between the two languages is that in many African languages, words change their meanings with a change of accent and intonation. For example in Yoruba language, the word o-j-o has three different meanings:

- | | | |
|-----|---|---------|
| Òjò | = | rain |
| Ọjọ | = | name |
| Ojo | = | coward. |

According to Aduke(ibid), ‘note that such changes as noticed in the Yorùbá language do not occur in French. Even though accents add nothing to the meaning of a word, they are no less important in French’.

We also discovered that, Yorùbá accent is easy to learn and put on different words than that of French. BisBus International (1997-2010) submits ‘the easy way to learn how to pronounce words with these accent marks is to compare them with three of the tones played on the organ of the Piano’. These are (do re mi)

Conclusion

This paper has tried to shed more light on the diacritics that we make use of both in the French and the Yoruba languages, though emerging from different linguistic traditions, serve fundamentally similar purposes: they guide pronunciation, clarify meaning, and preserve the integrity of each language. In French, diacritics such as the *accent aigu* (é), *accent grave* (è), *accent circonflexe* (ê), *tréma* (ë), and *cedille* (ç) primarily function to indicate vowel quality, historical spelling changes, and phonetic distinctions. While they are sometimes seen as optional in informal digital communication, their presence remains essential in formal writing and in avoiding ambiguity.

In contrast, diacritical marks in Yoruba are indispensable and non-negotiable. As a tonal language, Yoruba relies heavily on diacritics—namely the acute accent (´), grave accent (`), and macron (¯)—to indicate high, low, and mid tones respectively. These tonal markings are not merely phonetic aids but carriers of meaning; a change in tone can result in entirely different words. Therefore, the omission or misuse of diacritics in Yoruba can lead to serious misunderstandings and loss of meaning.

Despite these differences, both languages demonstrate that diacritical marks are not ornamental but functional elements of orthography. They reflect deeper linguistic structures—phonology in French and tonology in Yoruba—and contribute significantly to readability, comprehension, and accurate communication.



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