

# Alternation of Lenis and Fortis Consonants in Èdó and Èsàn as Indicators of a Dynamic Sound Change in Èdo

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**Abstract:** Èdo and Esan belong to the group of genetically related languages referred to as the Èdoid group of languages, which in turn belongs, along with other Nigerian languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, Nupe, Idoma, and Izon, to the Kwa branch of the Niger-Congo language family. The similarities between the speech forms of Èdo and Esan compared to the other Èdoid languages are evidenced in the high number of cognate sets based on a lexical statistical analysis. This naturally implies that the behaviour of sound segments in any of the two languages could serve as indicators of any evolutionary trend in any of the two languages. It is observed that the phonetically weak consonants [m, n, ɲ] in Èdo lexical items alternate with their corresponding strong counterparts [m and l] in similar lexical items in Esan. The relative stability of the strong forms in contemporary Esan language seems to give credence to the claim of a dynamic sound change observable in contemporary Èdo language where the proto bilabial stops /b/, and /m/; the alveolar lateral stop, /l/, evolved into the relatively weak bilabial oral and labiodental nasal approximants, [β] and [m̥] respectively, and the alveolar lateral approximant [ɲ], which is currently being outrightly deleted in any position of the words in which it occurs, thus following the evolution pattern /l/ > [ɲ] > [ø]. The over bearing influence of the English language and the Nigerian pidgin, the two languages that have taken over practically all Èdo homes, and the non-teaching of the language in the Èdo State educational system have been identified as catalysts to the endangerment of the Èdo language that may go into extinction in the very near future if drastic measures aimed at reversing the trend are not urgently and diligently applied.

**Keywords:** Linguistic Relatedness, Lexico-statistics, Language Endangerment, Stop, Approximant, Evolution, Alternation, Catalyst

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## 1. Introduction

Èdo, Esan, Orra, Etsako, Urhobo, Isoko, etc., belong to a common linguistic phylum classified in (Elugbe, [7]) as Èdoid languages due to the common linguistic properties shared at varying degrees by these languages. The colonialists referred to speakers of these languages as the Edo speaking peoples of southern Nigeria (Bradbury, [3]), (Egharrevba, [4]), (Melzian, [11]), etc.

The Èdoid languages are classified as minority languages within the Nigerian linguistic landscape. In the very near future “it is very likely that many of these minority languages will be forced into extinction if nothing is done to preserve them now” (Omọzuwa, [15]). It is argued in the present study

that weakening and strengthening of some phonetic segments in lexical formatives are further evidence of the linguistic affinity between the Èdoid languages as demonstrated by the [m/m̥], [b/β], [l/n], [l/i], and [z/dʒ] alternations in Èdó and Èsàn. A dynamic sound change involving the weakening of stops and/or the outright deletion of such weak forms is observed in the Èdo language but not in Esan.

## 2. Linguistic Relatedness Between Èdo and Esan

It is a firmly established fact that the Èdo language is the core member of the larger group of genetically related languages and dialect clusters, usually referred to as the

Ẹdoid group of languages, which in turn belongs, along with other Nigerian languages such as Yoruba, Nupe, Idoma, and Izon, to the Kwa branch of the Niger-Congo family (Agheyisi, [1]). According to (Elugbe's, [7]) classification of the Ẹdoid languages, the languages spoken in Ẹdo State, Nigeria, fall into two sub-groups: the Proto North-Central Ẹdoid and the Proto North-Western Ẹdoid. He further sub-divided each of the two groups into two sub-groups according to their level of linguistic relatedness. Ẹdo and Esan are members of the Proto North-Central Ẹdoid languages.

The similarities between the speech forms of Ẹdo and Esan compared to the other Ẹdoid languages are a lot more than the differences that exist between the two languages. This is evidenced in the high number of cognate sets (i.e., the number of lexical items that manifest a high level of similarities in sound and meaning in the languages) based on a lexical statistical analysis, 91.4%, highlighted in (Omozuwa, [15]).

This high percentage of cognates in Esan relative to the Ẹdo language is in agreement with (Okojie, [12]) when he affirms that "even among present day generation, speaking Bini<sup>(1)</sup> may be difficult but it is unnecessary for an Ishan to learn it before understanding it." According to him, "it is easier for an Ishan to understand Bini – the original tongue, than Ora or Kukuruku language either of which has suffered further inflexion" due of course to their early contacts with their northern, western, and eastern neighbours. This is because Esan is culturally and linguistically more related to the Ẹdo language than any of the other members of the Ẹdoid group of languages. Geographically, it is also closer to the core Ẹdo areas than the other members of the group. In other words, the farther away an Ẹdoid speech community is from the core Ẹdo areas, the more divergent the speech forms.

### ***2.1. Review of Previous Research on the Diachronic Study of the Ẹdoid Languages***

The scarcity of available published materials on the diachronic study of the Ẹdoid group of languages cannot be overemphasized. It is pointed out in (Schaefer and Egbokhare, [21]) that "published evidence supporting linguistic relationship" among the Ẹdoid languages and dialects "...is minimal...". Procuring materials on diachronic studies is even a more difficult task because they virtually do not exist. Most of, if not all the available research materials in the study of the group of languages focus, essentially, on a synchronic study of the sound systems of the individual member languages, and sometimes a comparative inter-dialectal study of the languages. Such are the works of (Ikoyo-Eweto, [8]). According to her, "significant studies on the sound systems of Ẹdoid languages have been conducted but studies of the internal relations that may exist within them are rare." (Ikoyo-Eweto and Jamgbadi, [10]) also carried out a synchronic study of some Esan dialects. In (Ikoyo-Eweto, [9]) on a cross-language comparative study of three Ẹdoid languages; Ẹdo, Esan, and Qwan with the goal of identifying "some phonetic peculiarities..." among them, the three languages examined "exhibit interesting relatedness..."

and show what may be referred to as "total affinity in their vowel sound inventory." She stressed that "studying the constituent languages and dialects of the Ẹdoid languages would be a difficult task "where published evidence seems minimal."

([Ejele, [5]) worked on liquid elision in word final syllable in Esan without any reference to any diachronic implications. Another synchronic study of one of the members of the North-Western Ẹdoid languages in South-South, Nigeria, is the work of (Opoola and Olaide, [19]) on vowel elision in Ikhin. According to them, it "...is the first systematic exposition of grammatical conditions for vowel elision" in the language.

(Aziza, [2]) worked on the neutralization of contrasts in the vowel system of Urhobo, a south-western Ẹdoid language. Apart from her claim that "Proto-Ẹdoid (PE) vowels are \*/i, ɪ, e, ɛ, ə, a, ɔ, o, ʊ, u/, there was no attempt at any diachronic analysis. Besides, one wonders how the vowels under reference were obtained especially as the author did not provide any data to support the claim or any authority she relied on to make the assertion.

It is pointed out in (Schaefer and Egbokhare, [21]) that "published evidence supporting linguistic relationship" among the Ẹdoid languages and dialects "is minimal..." and (Schaefer and Egbokhare, [22]) emphasized the dearth of reference materials on the diachronic study of the Ẹdoid languages while highlighting "the potential historical inferences one can draw about economic lifestyle from lexical patterns of the Ẹdoid speaking Emai people." The authors are of the strong conviction that results of their study "have the potential of not only historical evolution within the Ẹdoid group but also population interaction..." These "potentials" are yet to be tapped, harnessed and explored by Ẹdoid scholars for a detailed diachronic analysis of the Ẹdoid languages.

(Elugbe, [6]) provides what could be described as one of the earliest attempts at "some tentative historical inferences from comparative Ẹdoid studies" based on the synchronic data therein. This formed the basis of (Elugbe's [7]) classification of the "Ẹdoid languages", a term coined by him.

The review of the available published works on individual members of the Ẹdoid languages reveal that majority of these studies focus mainly on the descriptive analysis of the sound inventories of the languages and their dialects without reference to how the sounds could be analyzed from a diachronic view point. This study, therefore, provides the first serious attempt to analyze the observed emergent sound changes identified, purely from the diachronic perspective with a view to further reaffirming the linguistic relatedness among members of the Ẹdoid group of languages.

The data in (1), (2), (3) below are further evidence of the linguistic relatedness between Ẹdo and Esan. The alveolar lateral stop, /l/, the bilabial stops, [b], and [m], for instance, are posited in Proto Ẹdoid from which the Ẹdo alveolar lateral approximant evolved as an allophonic variant of [l] the same way /b/ and /m/ weakened to [β] and [m],

respectively. In other words, the following sound evolution from proto Ẹdoid: /l/ > [ɿ] > [ø], /b/ > [β], /m/ > [m], is posited as the dynamic sound change occurring in the Ẹdo language. The stability of [b], [l], [m] in Esan lexical items compared to the weak forms [β], [ɿ], and [m], and especially the deletion of [ɿ] in similar lexical items in Ẹdo appear to lend credence to this trend in evolution of the sounds.

## 2.2. [m/ɱ], [b/β], [l/n], [ɿ/ɹ], and [g/dʒ] Alternations in Ẹdo and Esan

Strengthening and weakening, also called fortition and lenition, respectively, are two sides of the same coin. A commonly accepted phonological strength hierarchy is shown below:

- (1)
  - i. voiceless > voiced (sonority)
  - ii. stop > Affricate > fricative > approximant > vowel (zero). (Omozuwa, [16]).

The ultimate form of weakening is when a sound has no obstruction at all, and, consequently, drops. This is the case of the Ẹdo [ɿ] deletion/elision discussed in detail in (Omozuwa, [13]). It is observed from empirical data in Ẹdo and Esan, two genetically related languages from a common Proto Ẹdo language, that whereas the proto /l/ subsists in Esan, Ẹdo has experienced and still experiencing a weakening process whereby the alveolar lateral stop /l/ > the alveolar lateral approximant [ɿ/ and currently > ø; /b/ > [β], and /m/ > [m] in contemporary Ẹdo as seen in 2.3 below. Examples of [l/ɿ] alternation in the two languages are presented in (1) below:

### 2.2.1. [l/ɿ] Alternation in Ẹdo and Esan

- (2)
 

Ẹdo Esan Gloss  
 Iyasẹ [ɿjàsɛ́ɛ́] <sup>(2)</sup> Iyasẹ [ɿjàsɛ́ɛ́] “kingship title”  
 Ẹvboro [ɛ̀βò.ɹò] Ẹbholo [ɛ̀βòlò] <sup>(3)</sup> “village, country, people”  
 Ero [ɛ̀ɹò] Elo [ɛ̀lò] “kingship title”  
 Aro [à.ɹò] Elo [èlò] “eye”  
 Ọdionwere [òdjòwè] Ọdionwele [òdjòwélè]  
 “the oldest man in a village”  
 Ẹguare [ɛ̀gwàɹɛ́] Ẹguale [ɛ̀gwàlè] “palace”  
 Ọruemwinosẹ [òrùwɛ̀mɿ̀nɹòsɛ́] Ọlueminosẹ [ólwémínɹòsɛ́]  
 “he who makes things happen”  
 Ẹnwarẹ [ɛ̀ɳwàɹɛ́] Ẹwanlẹ [ɛ̀ɳwàlè] “wisdom”  
 N’onwarẹ [n’ónwàɹɛ́] Ọwanlẹ [òɳwàlè] “an elder”

### 2.2.2. [m/ɱ] Alternation in Ẹdo and Esan

The labiodental nasal approximant [ɱ] is lax compared to the bilabial nasal stop [m]. The weakening process is observed in the Ẹdo examples compared to the cognate equivalents in the Esan language which seems to have preserved the proto /m/ in all cases as seen in (3) below:

- (3)
 

Ẹdo Esan Gloss  
 Erhumwusẹ [ɛ̀rùɱwùsɛ́ɛ́] Eronmonsele [èròmònsɛ́lè]  
 “a name”

Uhunmwu [ùhùɱwù] Uhonmon [ùhòmmò] “head”  
 Ọkhaẹmwẹ [òxàɛ̀mɹɛ́] Ọkhaẹmon [òxàɛ̀mò] “chief”  
 Ekhaẹmwẹ [èxàɛ̀mɹɛ́] Ekhaẹmon [èxàɛ̀mò] “chiefs”  
 Aranmwẹ [à.ɹámɹɛ́] Elame [élàmè] “meat”  
 Idumwu [idùɱwù] Idunmu [idùmmù] “street”  
 Amwẹ [á.ɱɹɛ́] Okhuomẹ [òxwòmɛ́] “wife”

### 2.2.3. Other Instances of Weakening and Strengthening: [β/b], [l/n], [g/dʒ]

Others cases of the lax/strong alternations are observed in (3) where Esan appear to have systematically retained the strong forms relative to the equivalent lax forms in Ẹdo.

- (4)
 

Ẹdo Esan Gloss  
 Evbare [èβàɹɛ́] Ebare [ébàɹɛ́] “food”  
 Oliha [ólihá] Oniha [òníhà] “kingship title”  
 Ogie [ògɹɛ́] Ojie [ódɹɹɛ́] “king”  
 Ologbosẹ [ólogbòsɛ́ɛ́] Onogbosẹ [ònógbòsɛ́lè]  
 “kingship title”

The last three examples in (4) above appear to be the few instances where Ẹdo has the stop [l] and [g] (strong form) respectively whereas the alveolar nasal and the voiced alveopalatal affricate [dʒ] (weak forms) feature in equivalent words in Esan. However, in the last example, the [ɿV] and [IV] alternation subsists.

### 2.3. Sound Evolution Resulting in [ɿ] Deletion in Ẹdo

As pointed out earlier, it is posited that the Ẹdo alveolar lateral approximant [ɿ] evolved from the lateral stop /l/ in Proto Ẹdoid, and still retained in contemporary Esan language in all cases. This means that the Ẹdo language has experienced and still experiencing a dynamic sound change as evidenced in the weakening process of the Proto /l/ > [ɿ] > [ø] as seen in the examples in (5) below:

- (5)
 

Iyasẹ [ɿjàsɛ́ɛ́] => Iyasẹ [ɿjâlsɛ́] “kingship title”  
 Ẹvboro [ɛ̀βò.ɹò] => Ẹvbo [ɛ̀βò] “village, country, people”  
 Evbare [èβàɹɛ́] => Evbare [èβàɹɛ́] “food”  
 Okhuare [òxwàɹɛ́] => okhuare [òxwàɹɛ́] => okhuare [òxwàɹɛ́]  
 “basket”  
 Ero [ɛ̀ɹò] => Eo [èò] “kinship title”  
 Aro [à.ɹò] => Ao [àò] “eye”  
 Ọdionwere [òdjòwè] => ọdionwee [òdjòwèé] “the oldest man in a village”  
 Ẹguare [ɛ̀gwàɹɛ́] => Ẹguale [ɛ̀gwàlè] => Ẹguale [ɛ̀gwàlè]  
 “palace”  
 Ẹnwarẹ [ɛ̀ɳwàɹɛ́] => Ẹnwaen [ɛ̀ɳwàɹɛ́] “wisdom”  
 Ẹnonwarẹ [ènónwàɹɛ́] => Ẹnwaen [ɛ̀ɳwàɹɛ́] “an elder”

The [ɿ] elision/deletion and in some cases, the deletion of the whole [ɿ]-bearing syllable in (5) above is clearly observable. This results in the “clipping” of words in (6) below:

- (6)
 

Ẹvboro [ɛ̀βò.ɹò] => Ẹvbo [ɛ̀βò] “village, country, people”  
 Ẹguare [ɛ̀gwàɹɛ́] => Ẹguale [ɛ̀gwàlè] “palace”  
 Ologhoro [ólogyò.ɹò] => Ologhoo [ólogyòó] “type of dance”  
 Ẹnwarẹ [ɛ̀ɳwàɹɛ́] => Ẹnwaen [ɛ̀ɳwàɹɛ́] “wisdom”  
 Ẹnonwarẹ [ènónwàɹɛ́] => Ẹnwaen [ɛ̀ɳwàɹɛ́] “an elder”

This is because their base forms (before the arrow “=>”) are completely lost to many of the present generation of Èdó speakers. Indeed, one would have to rely on songs or equivalent words in Esan bearing the syllable final [ɪV] to be able to “reconstruct” such syllable-final [ɪV] words. It should be noted that the [ɛ], half open, in [ɛgwæ] from [ɛgwæɪ] after the deletion of [ɪ] results from the assimilation (vowel laxing) of [e], half-close, by the open (lax) vowel, [a] in the preceding syllable. This assimilation process is also observed in names such as the ones in (7) below:

(7)

Èvbohigahare [èβóhiyàɪɛ] => Èvbohigahae [èβóhiyàé] => Èvbohigahæ [èβóhiyàé] “name of a village”

Osaghare [òsáyàɪɛ] => Osaghae [òsáyàé] => Osaghae [òsáyàé] “personal name”, similar to the equivalent name in Esan: Oseghale [òséyàlè];

[Osemwèkhare [òséṁṣéxàɪɛ] => Osemwèkhæ [òséṁṣéxàé] => Osemwèkhæ [òséṁṣéxàé] “personal name”

Agbonghare [àgbòḍyàɪɛ] => Agbonghae [àgbòḍyàé] => Agbonghae [àgbòḍyàé] “personal name”

Èbosere [èbóséɪɛ] => Èbosere [èbóséé] Èbosè [èbósé] “personal name”

Erhunmwusere [èṙùṁṣùsɛɪɛ] => Erhunmwusere [èṙùṁṣùsèé] => Erhunmwusere [èṙùṁṣùsèé] “personal name” similar to the equivalent names in Esan:

Ebosèle [èbóséɪɛ], Erhònmòsèle [èṙòṁmòsèɪɛ], and other similar [ɪV] syllable-final names in Èdó where the vowel [e] is assimilated to the lax [ɛ] when it follows the half open or open vowels [ɛ] or [a], respectively, after the elision of the alveolar lateral approximant, [ɪ] in Èdó. Examples of similar weakening process are seen in the “vowel laxing” as assimilation process in (Omọzuwa, [17]).

The weakening process /ɪ/ > [ɪ] > [ø] observed in the Èdó language is comparable to a similar weakening process from Latin to Old French, then to Modern French as seen in (8) (Price, [20]) below:

(8)

Latin Old French Modern French Gloss

Vita > vide [viðə] > “vie” ‘life’

Nuda > nude [nyðə] > “nue” ‘nude’

Patre > padre [peðrə] > “pere” ‘father’

Ripa > [riba] > [riβa] > “rive” ‘river bank’

Since language is dynamic, this phonetic evolution in Èdó is not unexpected. In the language, “consonant deletion is now a common phonetic phenomenon” as affirmed in (Omọzuwa, [13]). The outright elision of [ɪ] anywhere it is present in a word is particularly stressed as evidenced in the words in (9) below:

(9)

Aro [àrò] => [àò] “eye”

Èrokhin [éroxɪ] => [éoxɪ] “chameleon”

Èro [èró] => [éó] “a name”

Asoro [ásóró] => [ásóó] “a name”

The gradual “replacement of the voiceless trill [ɾ] and the alveolar lateral approximant [ɪ] by the voiced alveolar trill [r] in the speech of the younger generations of Èdó speakers” is highlighted in (Omọzuwa, [14]). Thus, the younger generation of Èdó speakers pronounce the Èdó words in (10) below:

(10)

[ásóró] “Asoro” ‘personal name’

[èró] “Èro” ‘personal name’

[éṙá] “Èrhan” ‘tree/wood’

[éṙá] “Èrha” ‘father’

wrongly as in (11) below:

(11)

\*[ásóró] “Asorro”

\*[èró] “Èrro”

\*[éṙá] “Èrran”

\*[éṙá] “Èrra”, respectively.

It is further affirmed in (Omọzuwa, [14]) that this phenomenon which “seems to characterize the speech of the younger generation of Èdó speakers...” and which “could lead to the disappearance of these two r-sounds from the Èdó phonetic repertoire in the next few decades” is purely due to the over-bearing influence of the English language and the Nigerian Pidgin English that have taken over from the Èdó language in most homes. The non-teaching of the language in schools has further compounded the problem. This situation is not different in other Èdoid languages. In other words, considering the over-bearing influence of the English language and Pidgin English in contemporary Nigeria, the Èdoid languages, i.e., Èdó, Esan, Orra, Qwan, Etsako, etc., like other minority languages in the country, are merely struggling to survive vis-à-vis the majority languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo hence the urgent need to reintroduce the teaching of the Èdoid languages in the Èdó State educational system especially at the primary and post primary levels.

### 3. Conclusion and Recommendations

It is an established fact that the Èdó and Esan languages are genetically related languages that belong to the Èdoid language family group. Statistical evidence based on the analysis of cognate sets place the Esan language as more related to the Èdó language than any other member of the Èdoid group of languages. This naturally implies that the behaviour of sound segments in any of the two languages could serve as indicators of any sound change in any of the two languages.

It is observed that the phonetically weak consonants [ɱ n ɪ] in Èdó lexical items alternate with their corresponding strong counterparts [m and l] in equivalent lexical items in Esan. The relative stability of the strong forms in contemporary Esan language seems to give credence to the claim of a dynamic sound change observable in contemporary Èdó language where the Proto alveolar lateral stop, /l/, for instance, evolved in the relatively weak alveolar lateral approximant, and is currently being outrightly deleted in any position of the words in which it occurs, thus following the change pattern /l/ > [ɪ] > [ø]. This has resulted in the “clipping” of words having the [ɪV] word final syllables in polysyllabic words.

The over bearing influence of the English language and the Nigerian pidgin, the two languages that have taken over practically all Èdó homes, and the non-teaching of the Èdó language in the Èdó State educational system have been

identified as catalyst to the endangerment of the Edo language which may go into extinction in the very near future if drastic measures aimed at reversing the trend are not urgently and diligently applied. Some of the antidotes to the gloomy future of the continued existence of the Edo language would be the reintroduction of the teaching of the language at the various levels of the educational system in Edo State, Nigeria, on the one hand, and an aggressive public enlightenment campaign by the Edo State Government in conjunction with the Language and Culture Committee of the Royal Benin Traditional Council on the compelling need to speak the language in Edo homes and other spheres of human endeavours, on the other hand. Such activities would include religious services, cultural events, semi-official events, regular programs in the mass media, organizing regular seminars and workshops, etc. All Edo speakers should be proud to be identified with their language.

This work represents a preliminary study of the observed, emergent sound evolution in the Edo language based on a comparative analysis of the lenis-fortis alternation in Edo and Esan. It is our hope that it will stimulate further research interests aimed at having a more comprehensive, detailed comparative study of sound changes from a diachronic perspective involving other members of the Edoid languages. The results of such research efforts would, no doubt, serve as further justification for affirming the claim of a common linguistic ancestry for the languages.

## Notes

- (1) The use of the term “Bini” has been outlawed by the pronouncement of the Iyasẹ of the Benin Kingdom on the order of His Royal Majesty the King. The word “Benin” which came into use in the 14<sup>th</sup> century is recommended in its stead, especially in interactions in the English language, to be used interchangeably with the word “Edo” the original and authentic word for the language, the people, and the city housing the royal family. However, the native speakers use the word “Edo” in all interactions involving the Edo language. In such cases, the word “Benin” never features.
- (2) The harmonized and standardized Edo orthography, (Qmọzuwa and Eɓvbuomwa, [18]), is adopted in this paper.
- (3) The orthographic “vb” in Edo and “bh” in Esan represent the bilabial approximant [β]. The harmonization and standardization of the orthographies of the Edoid languages should be priority tasks to all stakeholders.

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