

Understanding Yeri infixal allomorphy Yeri is an endangered Torricelli language spoken in Papua New Guinea. The language has five infixes, all of which occur after the first syllable of the verb stem, a typologically rare position. Three are object infixes and agree in gender and number with third person objects. The remaining two infixes include an imperfective ‘now’ morpheme and an additive ‘also’ morpheme. All five infixes display a range of related allomorphy, presented in Table 1, with the object infixes showing a subset of the imperfective and additive allomorphy. All data comes from my own fieldwork.

Table 1: Infixal allomorphs

	3SF	3SM	3PL	IPFV	ADD
-C-	-∅-, -h-	-n-	-y-	-m-	-p-, -b-
-CV-	-he-	-ne-	-hi-	-me-, -ma-	-pe-, -be-, -pa-, -ba-

Synchronically, the distribution of allomorphs is only partially predictable. Some tendencies are clear: (i) the -CV- allomorphs are generally restricted to monosyllabic and disyllabic verbs, (ii) the -Ce- imperfective and additive allomorphs often precede a bilabial consonant or a nasal, and (iii) the -Ca- allomorphs generally occur when the following vowel is high. Despite these tendencies, all -CV- allomorphs must be lexically specified due to numerous exceptions like *ati/a<m>ti* ‘blow’ and *goti/go<me>ti* ‘remove’, where allomorph selection does not follow these generalizations. Additionally, when object infixes co-occur with imperfective or additive infixes, their form is restricted to the single consonant allomorph (e.g. *owil/o<n><me>wil/*o<ne><me>wil* ‘take’).

In this paper, I consider language internal evidence as well as comparative data from other Torricelli languages to provide an explanation for the current synchronic distribution of the Yeri infixal allomorphs. Evidence from clear cognates in Agi, Yeri’s closest geographic and genealogical relative, suggests that all allomorphs arose from an original -CV- form. A historical process of vowel dissimilation, similar to processes discussed in Blust (1996), Lynch (2003), and Blevins (2009), resulted in what were originally phonologically-conditioned allomorphs -Ce- and -Ca-. Yeri still preserves reflexes of this process in the allomorph selection of specific suffixes as well as in the imperfective and additive allomorph selection for a small class of verbs. Supporting evidence can also be found when comparing Yeri and Agi lexical cognates (e.g. Yeri: *walkega*, Agi: *walkaga* ‘bird of paradise’), as well as cognates to the Yeri infixes in other Torricelli languages (e.g. Agi: -ha- 3SF, -na- 3SM, -ma- IPFV, Halu: -na 3SM, -ma- IPFV).

Finally, an additional process of vowel reduction/deletion can account for the synchronic distribution of the -C- allomorph and the restricted distribution of the -Ce- allomorph. The -Ce- allomorph remains in only those positions where vowel reduction/deletion is less likely to occur. For instance, most verbs which select the -Ce- allomorph are disyllabic. As primary stress regularly falls on the penultimate syllable in Yeri, the vowel in the -Ce- allomorph always receives stress in disyllabic verbs, making it resistant to reduction and deletion. Similar explanations involving resistance to deletion can be provided to account for the object allomorph co-occurrence restriction and the tendency for -Ce- allomorphs to precede voiced bilabials and nasals.

References

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