Phonological patterning of words in Akpo and standard Igbo

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Abstract
There is a high degree of mutual intelligibility among the speakers of Akpo variant of Igbo (a satellite dialect of the Aguata main dialect cluster) and the standard Igbo. This not withstanding, a consistent difference in the phonological patterning of some words in the two variants of Igbo has been observed. The phonological patterning would often involve the substitution or alternation of the standard Igbo /ŋw/ or /w/ with /m/ in the Akpo variant. The paper tries to find out in what words such alternation occurs and what determines it. It discovers, among other things, that the substitution of /ŋw/ occurs mostly when the verbroot 'nwe' is used, though in only some specified contexts. The alternation of /w/ with /m/ occurs mainly, but not exclusively, when /w/ appears in the environment of '-we /-wa' inceptive extensional suffix.

1.0 Introduction

Every language is unique. However, there are many things that all languages have in common. One of such language universals is the use of a wide range of sounds by every language. Although a language could have many sounds that are in use in it, only some of such sounds are used for meaning distinction. This is to say that each language has diverse phones but employs a few of them distinctively, significantly or contrastively. The distinctive sounds or phonemes of a language have their patterns of combination for the realization of the morphemes and words of the language.

Interestingly, some phonemes could be substituted or alternated in some words with other phonemes without any change in the meaning of the words. Such is the case with phonemes involved in free variation. It could be within a language or dialect. For example, the standard Igbo phoneme /ɦ/ in the word *áhîâ* 'market' is in free variation with one of these phonemes / ɸ β f v ʃ ʃʷ ʒ / in some Igbo dialects: for instance, the Ikeduru-Igbo uses / ʒ / in place of /ɦ/ in the word. That is, the standard Igbo *ahịa* is realized as /áʒá/ in the dialect. The Adazi-Nnukwu-Igbo uses the voiceless bilabial fricative /ɸ/ to substitute /ɦ/ to have / áɸíá / 'market' (Eme,

2005). In the Caga Language, the f/s free variation is not dialectal. The standard form of the language has the following optional variants:

fwaiya / swaiya	'to be sad'
fafu / safu	'brown ants'
fuma / suma	'to dig'

(Mutaka, 2000:257)

The case is the same in Luba as we see in the following free variants with t/f phonemes. The examples are taken from Mutaka (2000: 258).

butuku / bufuku	'night'
dituku / difuku	'day'
dituwa / difuwa	'cooking stone'

All the instances of variation agree with Lyons (1981:86) that the segments "are substitutable for one another... in all contexts..." This is to say that in the Igbo dialects, for example, the appropriate segments substitute /fi/ whenever the standard Igbo word /áfiá/ is involved. What obtains in the Akpo-Igbo use of /m/ for the standard Igbo /ŋw/ or /w/ is different from the phenomenon of free variation because substitution occurs in some contexts of the word while some other contexts do not involve substitution. The case is especially so for m/ŋw alternation. This explains why we do not describe the phenomenon as a case of free variation but a case of phonological patterning of words.

2.0 Review of literature

Linguists agree that languages pattern their phonemes in some 'rule- governed' ways such that a speaker of a language could identify the possible words of his language even when such words are not yet in use (Emenanjo, 1978; Gimson, 1980; Ladefoged, 1982; Laver, 1994; Ikekeonwu et al, 1999; Roach, 2000; Clark et al, 2007). However, one cannot really explain why some potential words of a language are not acceptable as words even when their phonological make-up is in line with the 'rules' governing word-formation in the language.

According to Leech (1974:212), there is "arbitrariness of the phonological make-up of morphemes: mat, met, bat, bet and rat are all English morphemes but * ret is not". There is a possibility of * ret becoming an acceptable English word with time as it neither contravenes the phonotactic rules of English nor contains any phonetic impossibilities in the articulation of the sounds that comprise it.

Abercrombie (1967:76), in his discussion of the phonological patterning of words in language, points out that every language has some structural regularity, and this produces in the speakers of the language "deep-rooted habits of speech which are difficult to change". Thus, slang expressions, borrowed words and trade names conform to the pattern. He explains that newly coined words introduced into

a language or dialect could either gain acceptance or rejection basically on whether or not they conform to the phonological patterning of the language or dialect. Moreover, speakers of a language or dialect often find it difficult to produce words, phonological patterns of which go against the permissible phoneme combination of their variety.

The phonological patterning of words in some languages permits consonant clusters. Such languages that permit clusters may not allow initial consonants of more than two or three. Catford (1988:208), however, shows that Georgian, a Caucasian language, can have as many as initial six consonants. His examples are reproduced below:

/ rtŝ 'q' v a /	'to water'
/ prtŝkvna /	'to peel'

Yule (1996:56), while affirming the existence of definite patterns of phoneme combination in languages, says that there are nonce words of English with phonological patterns which are operational in the language. For such nonce words, "... your phonological knowledge of the pattern of sounds in English words would allow you to treat these forms as acceptable if, at some future time, they came into use. They represent 'accidental' gaps in the vocabulary of English". However, the nonce words with phonological pattern which is at variance with that of the language can hardly come into use or be acceptable in the language.

Languages and dialects differ from each other in some respects (Westermann and Ward, 1990; Wardhaugh, 1998). In their discussion of the difficulties of learning a new language, Westermann and Ward (1990:1) explain that languages differ from each other in such areas as grammar, idiom, vocabulary, production of the sounds which make up the language, in the way sounds are linked together to make words and sentences etc. This is to say that the phonological patterning of the words of a language or dialect forms only a fraction of the differing elements between two languages or dialects.

3.0 Substitution of the standard Igbo /ŋw/ with /m/ in the Akpo variant of Igbo

Based on the classification of the Igbo dialects by Ikekeonwu (1987), the Akpo-Igbo is a satellite dialect of the Aguata main dialect cluster. Unlike some Igbo dialects whose speakers find it difficult to use and comprehend the standard Igbo because of minimal intelligibility between the dialects and the standard Igbo, the Akpo-Igbo speakers are able to use the standard Igbo in free-flowing conversation. That is, there is an appreciable level of intelligibility between the Akpo-Igbo and the standard Igbo. However, its status as a full-fledged dialect is marked among others by phonological patterning.

Our interest in this paper is the phonological patterning of words involving the substitution of the standard Igbo labialized velar nasal /ŋw/ or labial velar approximant /w/ with the bilabial nasal /m/ in the Akpo-Igbo. The italicized words in the sentences in the following table illustrate the substitution of the standard Igbo phoneme, /ŋw/ with /m/ in the Akpo-Igbo.

	Standard Igbo	Akpo variant	Gloss
1	O *nwere* ihe o mere	O *mere* ihe o mere	There is something it matters.
2	O *nweghị* ihe o mere	O *mehe* ihe o mere	There is nothing it matters.
3	O *nwere* onye bịara?	O *mere* onye bịara?	Was there anybody who came?
4	Dim *nwere* ndị o tiri ihe	Dim *mere* ndị o tiri ihe	There were some people Dim beat up.
5	O *nweghị* mgbe ọ na-abịa	O *mehe* mgbe ọ na-abịa	There is no time he comes.
6	E *nwere* ndị ọma na ndị ọjọọ	E *mere* ndị ọma na ndị ọjọọ	There are good people and bad people
7	O *nwere* ndị anyị hụrụ	O *mere* ndị anyị hụrụ	There were people we saw.
8	O *nwere* ihe mere?	O *mere* ihe mereni?	Was there anything that happened?
9	Ọ bụ na o *nweghị* ihe ha mebiri?	Ọ bụ na o *mehe* ihe ha mebiri?	Was there nothing they damaged?
10	O *nwere* onye kwụ ya n'azụ	O *mere* onye kwụ ya n'azụ	There is somebody supporting him.

From the data, it is obvious that the substitution of /ŋw/ with /m/ usually occurs when the verbroot 'nwe' /ŋwé/ is involved. In fact, for the said substitution to take place, the 'nwe' verbroot applies in a similar way as English *there-expletive*. However, when it applies to mean 'have', the /ŋw/ is not substituted with /m/. The following examples exemplify this:

	Standard Igbo	Akpo	Gloss
11	O *nwere* oba ji	O *nwere* oba ji	He has a yam barn
12	Anyị *nwere* otu ụlọ	Anyị *nwere* out ụlwọ	We have a house
13	Eze enweghi ewu	Eze *enwehe* ewu	Eze does not have a goat
14	Adamma *enweghị* di	Adamma *enwehe* di	Adamma has no husband
15	Amaka *nweburu* ego	Amaka *nwedaara* ego	Amaka had money

Observe that in examples 11–15 the Akpo variant of Igbo does not substitute standard Igbo /ŋw/ in the verbroot 'nwe'. This is unlike what happened in examples 1–10 where /ŋw/ in standard Igbo alternates with /m/ in the Akpo variant.

4.0 Substitution of standard Igbo /w/ with /m/ in the Akpo variant

This section shows that the labial velar approximant /w/ in Standard Igbo is substituted with the bilabial nasal /m/ in Akpo-Igbo. This substitution does not apply wherever the standard Igbo /w/ occurs. That is, it occurs in some words. The words are shown in italics in the sentences in the table below.

	Standard Igbo	Akpo variant	Gloss
16	*bewe* akwa	*beme* akwa	start crying
17	*luwa* ọgụ	*luma* ọgụ	start fighting
18	*tinyewe* nnu	*tinyeme* nnu	start putting salt
19	*gbuwe* ya	*gbume* ye (ili)	keep on beating him
20	*kwuwu* ya aka	*kwumu* ya aka	start pushing it
21	*Riwe* nri	*rime* nni	start eating
22	*buwe* oche	*vume* oche	start carrying chairs
23	*kuziwere* ha	*kuzimere* ha	start teaching them
24	*kwutowa* ya	*kwutọma* ya	talk ill of somebody
25	*Tuwa* ya okwute	*tuma* ya okwute	start throwing stones at it
26	*ọ dịwala* mma	*ọ dịmana* mma	it is getting well
27	*chuwa* ha ọsọ	*chuma* ha ọsọ	start pursuing them
28	*rewe* ji na ede	*reme* ji na ede	start selling yams and cocoyams
29	*dawa* ada	*dama* ada	start falling down
30	*ṅụwa* ya ime	*ṅụma* ya ime	make (her) to become pregnant
31	*kwuwa* aka ọtọ	*kwuma* aka ọtọ	become upright
32	*dewere* m ya	*demere* m ya	(cause something to be somewhere for someone) keep it for me
33	*dowe* ya ebe a	*deme* ya ebe a	(cause something to be somewhere) keep it here

The above data illustrates that the alternation of the standard Igbo /w/ with /m/ in the Akpo-Igbo occurs mainly in words containing the inceptive extensional suffix -we/-wa 'begin to/start'. However, there are cases where the -we/-wa may not denote inception and the /m/ with /w/ substitution still occurs. This is the case in 31, 32 and 33. Here, it denotes causation (cf. Emenanjo, 1978:100).

5.0 Summary and conclusion

The paper has discussed the phonological patterning of some words involving the substitution or alternation of /ŋw/ or /w/ in standard Igbo with /m/ in the Akpo variant of Igbo. The substitution of /ŋw/ takes place when the verbroot 'nwe' /ŋwe/ behaves like the English *there-expletive*. When the verbroot 'nwe' means 'have', the substitution is blocked. For /w/ to be substituted with /m/, the /w/ usually comes in the form of a phonological make-up of the '-we/-wa' inceptive extensional

suffix. Substitution of /w/ with /m/ may, however, occur in a few words where '-we/-wa' is causative.

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