

ASSIMILATION IN OGHÈ DIALECT OF ÌGBÒ

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Abstract

Oghè dialect is one of the phonologically unresearched dialects of the Ìgbò language of Nigeria, West Africa. This work is motivated by the need to study the phonologies of different Ìgbò dialects in order to develop a Standard Ìgbò phonology. The study investigates the phonological process of assimilation in Oghè, assimilation being a strategic phonological process in Ìgbò phonology. Oghè consonants and vowels are also investigated as preamble to a better understanding and more systematic account of assimilation in Oghè. The assimilatory processes revealed and established in Oghè dialect are vowel assimilation (including vowel harmony), consonant assimilation and nasalization. The study also reveals that in Oghè dialect, the half-open front unrounded vowel /e/ has two allophones [e] and [ɛ] contrary to what obtains in some other Ìgbò dialects like Ọgbahù, Ọwèrè, Ìsuikwuato, as well as Standard Ìgbò. Oghè dialect does not have /ŋ^w/, voiced labialized velar nasal consonant which is present in Standard Ìgbò, and most of the dialects of Ìgbò, including the Ọgbahù dialect. This study further shows that Oghè dialect has the consonant phoneme /v/, a voiced labio-dental approximant which is absent in Standard Ìgbò, although present in Ọgbahù dialect of Ìgbò in Anambra State, Nigeria. It is also revealed in this study, that aspiration is distinctive in Oghè plosives /p^h, b^h, t^h, d^h, k^h, g^h/, like in the Mbàise dialect of Ìgbò, unlike Standard Ìgbò.

Keywords: Assimilation, phonology, Ìgbò, Oghè, Ọgbahù.

Oghè dialect is spoken by Oghè people in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State of Nigeria. Of all the levels of linguistic analysis, it is at the phonological level that differences in the dialects of a language are more easily noticed (Ogu, 1992: 82). Assimilation, in phonology, is defined as the modification of sounds in the direction of similarity to the neighbouring phonological environment. Thus, in assimilatory processes, segments take-on features of neighbouring segments.

1. Consonants and Vowels of Oghè Dialect

There are thirty-four consonant phonemes in Oghè dialect. These are: /m, n, ŋ, p, p^h, b, b^h, t, t^h, d, d^h, k, k^h, g, g^h, k^w, g^w, kp, gb, ʃ, dʒ, r, f, v, s, z, ʃ, ʒ, ʎ, h, l, v, j, w/. All the plosives /p, b, t, d, k, g/ have their distinctive aspirated counterparts /p^h, b^h,

t^h, d^h, k^h, g^h/. Oghè dialect has eight oral vowel phonemes. These are: /i, ɪ, e, o, a, ə, u, ʊ/. They are divided into two vowel harmony groups (to be discussed in section 3, under Vowel Harmony).

2. Vowel Assimilation

Vowel assimilation is the process whereby two dissimilar vowels may become similar in quality. In Oghè like other dialects of Ìgbò, most words begin and end in vowels. This therefore results in changes across morpheme boundaries. When two unidentical vowels follow each other in an utterance, vowel assimilation may be complete or partial, progressive or regressive.

In progressive assimilation, vowel V₁ at word boundary of the first word assimilates the features of vowel V₂ of the second word. It is of the form below:

- 1) V₁ V₂ → V₁V₁
 /ónó/ → [ón ò] ‘It is’
 V₁ V₂
 it be

In example (1) above, complete progressive assimilation is in operation,
V₁V₂ → V₁V₁

Regressive assimilation takes the form below:

- V₁ V₂ → V₂V₂ (also called anticipatory assimilation)
- 2) /ónó # ìtè/ → [ónîttè] ‘mouth of pot’
 V₁ V₂ V₂V₂
 mouth pot
- 3) /ɪ! gba # ɔsɔ/ → [ɪ! gbɔɔsɔ] ‘to run’
 V₁ V₂ V₂V₂
 to run run
- 4) /òdò # àní/ → [òdáàní] ‘land rope’
 V₁ V₂ V₂V₂
 rope land
- 5) /gbá # égbè/ → [gbéégbè] ‘shoot gun’
 V₁ V₂ V₂V₂
 shoot gun

In examples (2) through (4) above, complete regressive vowel assimilation is manifested, whereby V_1V_2 become V_2V_2 . Vowel harmony is a form of partial assimilation and it is treated fully below in section 3.

3. Vowel Harmony

Vowel harmony is a phenomenon whereby vowels of a language are restricted in such a way that all the vowels in a simple word must share certain common features. This is typical of the Ìgbò language which Oghè is a dialect of. There are eight significant vowels in Oghè /i, ɪ, e, o, a, ɔ, u, ʊ/. These eight vowels are neatly divided into two groups. The way these vowels co-occur is what is referred to as vowel harmony.

Francis Oyebade (1989) says that vowel harmony is always based on one phonetic feature or another and these account for the alternation perceived in some affixes. The most common phonetic property of vowel harmony in African languages is the Advanced Tongue Root [ATR] feature.

Oghè dialect fits into the above definition of vowel harmony. Vowels are divided into two harmony groups, with only vowels of one group occurring within one simple word.

Group I	Group II
i u	ɪ ʊ
e o	a ɔ
[+ ATR]	[- ATR]

In Oghè, vowel /e/ as well (as its allophone [ɛ]) is not restricted to co-occur with the vowels in group I, it can co-occur with the vowels from group II. Vowel /e/ has two allophones [e] and [ɛ], unlike some other Ìgbò dialects like Ọgbahù, Ọwèrè, Ìsuikwuatọ and Standard Ìgbò. Likewise vowel /a/ is not restricted to co-occur with the vowels in group II, it can co-occur with vowels from group I. These two vowels can be regarded as central vowels in Oghè but for easy illustration and understanding each of them is placed in the group where it occurs more frequently. Examples of groups I and II vowel harmony in Oghè dialect are shown below:

Group I Vowels

- | | | |
|-----|---------|----------------|
| 6a. | /ílé/ | ‘tongue’ |
| b. | /ímí/ | ‘nose’ |
| c. | /ítè/ | ‘pot’ |
| d. | /ígwè/ | ‘iron (metal)’ |
| e. | /éví/ | ‘cow’ |
| f. | /ózá/ | ‘corpse’ |
| g. | /étító/ | ‘boil’ (noun) |

h.	/ú!nú/	‘salt’
i.	/ú!gbó/	‘farm’
j.	/òwú/	‘thread’
k.	/òkpú/	‘cap’

Group II Vowels

7a.	/ídṣídṣí/	‘housefly’
b.	/ító/	‘three’
c.	/íjǐjǐ/	‘house’
d.	/álá/	‘breast’
e.	/áká/	‘hand’
f.	/ámò/	‘penis’
g.	/ó!nó/	‘mouth’
h.	/ókpà/	‘leg’
i.	/ó!vé/	‘soup’
j.	/ótá/	‘bow’
k.	/ó!lól/	‘mud’
l.	/ómò/	‘children’

3.1 Vowel Harmony in Grammatical Construction

Six out of the eight vowel phonemes in Oghè as well as in Standard Ìgbò have two forms which are conditioned by vowel harmony in their subject pronouns. Examples of these in Oghè are shown below:

/i/ and /ɪ/ (infinitive prefix)

8a.	/ídàá/	‘to fall’
b.	/ívèé/	‘to fly’
c.	/ímàlól/	‘to know’

/o/ and /ɔ/ (he, she it)

9a.	/ó dàlá/	‘he fell’
b.	/ó nàá/	‘he asked’
c.	/ó zàá/	‘he replied’
d.	/ó ḍǐlì/	‘he went’
e.	/ó zùlù/	‘he stole’
f.	/ó wèlì/	‘he took’

/e/ and /a/

10a.	/é gòté ó/	‘I bought’
b.	/é kèè mó/	‘I divided’
c.	/é méǐféému/	‘I have finished’
d.	/á góó mó/	‘I counted’

- e. /á zàá mó/ ‘I replied’
 f. /á nàá mó/ ‘I requested’

There are some affixes that are conditioned by vowel harmony. There are the infinitive prefixes (i/i) and the negative suffixes (gi/gi).

Infinitive Prefixes:

Group I				
	prefix	verb stem	infinitive	gloss
11a.	í	-gò	ígò	‘to buy’
b.	í	-kèé	íkèé	‘to divide’
c.	í	-gbù	ígbù	‘to kill’
d.	í	jǐ	íjǐ	‘to cook’
Group II				
	prefix	verb stem	infinitive	gloss
12a.	í	-chó	íchó	‘to look for’
b.	í	-sá	ísá	‘to wash’
c.	í	-zò	ízó	‘to trade’
d.	í	-jí	íjí	‘to wear’

Negative Suffixes:

	/gi and gi/	
13a.	/ó gó!gí/	‘he did not buy’
b.	/ó gbú!gí/	‘he did not kill’
c.	/ó kéé!gí/	‘he did not divide’
d.	/ó jǐ!gí/	‘he did not cook’
e.	/ó hó!gí /	‘he did not choose’
f.	/ó jí!gí /	‘he did not wear’
g.	/ó má!gí /	‘he did not know’

3.2 Exceptions to the Rule of Vowel Harmony

There are few exceptions to the vowel harmony rules. According to Hyman (1975:235) just like other phonological rules, vowel harmony can be blocked by a

strong grammatical boundary. For instance, these two verbs /gá/ ‘go’ and /fè/ ‘cross’ when compounded, the result is [gáfè] ‘go across’. As has been said earlier (in section 3), vowels /e/ and /a/ do not always obey the rule of vowel harmony in Oghè.

More examples for cases of boundary blocking of vowel harmony in Oghè are shown below:

- | | | | | |
|------|--------------------------|---|-----------|--------------|
| 14a. | /àhó # ìsé/
year five | → | [àhòìsé] | ‘five years’ |
| b. | /gbá # fè/
run across | → | [gbáfè] | ‘run across’ |
| c. | /wóké # ómá/
man good | → | [wókéómǎ] | ‘good man’ |

4. Consonant Assimilation

In Oghè dialect, like the Standard Ìgbò, consonant assimilation has to be in homorganicity, that is, the place of articulation of a syllabic nasal is predictable by the place of articulation of the consonant that follows it. In other words, it is a case of partial assimilation, whereby the assimilation is in terms of place of articulation of the conditioning segment and the assimilating segment. Some examples are shown below:

- | | | | | |
|------|----------------------|---|----------|------------------------|
| 15a. | /ńvó/
nail | → | [ńvó] | ‘nail (finger or toe)’ |
| b. | /ńkító/
fire wood | → | [ńkító] | ‘fire wood’ |
| c. | /ńmà/
knife | → | [ńmà] | ‘knife’ |
| d. | /ńgù/
spear | → | [ńgù] | ‘spear’ |
| e. | /ńkítá/
dog | → | [ńkítá] | ‘dog’ |
| f. | /ńkù/
wing | → | [ńkù] | ‘wing’ |
| g. | /ńbè/
tortoise | → | [ńbè] | ‘tortoise’ |
| h. | /ńgwèlè/
lizard | → | [ńgwèlè] | ‘lizard’ |
| i. | /ńnòndò/
bird | → | [ńnòndò] | ‘bird’ |

The pattern in the above examples is that the syllabic nasals take on the phonetic features of their following consonants. The place of articulation of each syllabic

nasal is determined by the place of articulation of the following consonant (homorganicity).

5. Nasalization

Nasalization is an assimilatory process whereby nasality is superimposed on an oral speech sound. Nasalization occurs when a non-nasal segment assimilates the nasality feature of a preceding nasal segment. Examples in Oghè dialect are:

- 16a. /s!nó/ → [s!nó] ‘mouth’
b. /ímí/ → [ímí] ‘nose’

In Oghè, unlike some other dialects of Ìgbò there are some cases of nasalized vowels which do not occur in the environment of nasal consonants. The consonant preceding a nasalized vowel is not always a nasal but sometimes an oral sound. The only vowels affected in this type of nasalization are the close back rounded vowels /u, ɯ/. Examples include the following:

- 17a. /láhǫ/ ‘sleep’
b. /áwǫ/ ‘sunshine’
c. /ìwǫ/ ‘law’
d. /óhǫ/ ‘slave’
e. /ósǫ/ ‘bat’

There are two ways of analyzing nasalized vowels in Oghè dialect. First, an underlying nasal consonant is posited at word final position. Then, by nasal spreading, the nasal consonant will nasalize the preceding vowel and then get deleted as in the examples below:

- 18a. /láhóN/ → láhóN → [láhǫ] ‘sleep’
b. /áwóN/ → áwóN → [áwǫ] ‘sunshine’
c. /óhùN/ → óhùN → [óhǫ] ‘slave’
d. /ìwúN/ → ìwúN → [ìwǫ] ‘law’
e. /ósóN/ → ósóN → [ósǫ] ‘bat’

The second alternative is that nasalized vowels may be seen as vowels which are inherently nasalized and this nasalization cannot be linked to a nasal consonant. This second analysis seems to be more plausible than the first analysis.

6. Conclusion

From the above account of assimilation in Oghè dialect, the need for a Standard (current) Ìgbò phonology becomes imperative. This could only be achieved by studying and assessing the phonologies of as many different Ìgbò dialects as possible. Some strategic linguistic (phonological) features revealed in Oghè are absent in Standard Ìgbò. There is evidently an urgent need for the establishment of a current systematic phonological theory for the Ìgbò language.

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