

Ebonyi Journal of Language and Literary Studies
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fokumo@yahoo.comDepartment of English and Communication Studies,
Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State, Nigeria**Abstract**

This paper looks at the syllable structures in Ukwuani with a view of identifying the syllable structure types and patterns in Ukwuani- an Igboid language spoken in the Southern part of Delta State. The data for the study were collected by the researcher who is a competent native speaker of the language using the Ibadan Four Hundred Word List. The generative framework was applied to analyze the data from which generalizations were made. The study identifies three basic syllable structure types in the language as: the vowel (V), the consonant and vowel (CV) and the syllabic nasal (N). There are no cases of consonant clusters in Ukwuani. This work will serve as a reference material in the study of Ukwuani, particularly, in the analysis of some doubtful segments. The syllable structure types and patterns will help in Phonological analysis since the syllable structure is the organizational template upon which the phonological system is built. It will add to the study of Phonology in general.

Keyword: *syllable structure, onset, rime, consonants and vowels.*

Introduction

Communication is an essential element of human existence. It forms the core of our day to day activities since we share or transmit information, ideas, thoughts, feelings and messages from one person to another through it. One major feature that distinguishes human communication from animal communication is that humans make use of speech sounds to convey meaning. Since speech sounds are used to signal meaning, the sound system cannot be fully understood except they are carefully studied. To communicate effectively in any language, the language speaker must be proficient in the pronunciation of words in the language. In line with this, Hyman (1975:1) notes that a language learner must master the production and perception of the sounds of a given language and when to use the sounds. Speech sounds are carefully arranged to form syllables and syllables into phonological words. Each word contains a peak of prominence preceded or followed by a less prominent margin.

The syllable structure of any language is paramount in phonological analysis of any language because it is the organizational template upon which the phonological system is built. A syllable is defined as a phonological constituent composed of zero or more consonants followed by a vowel, and ending with a shorter string of zero or more consonants (Goldsmith 1990: 1108).

Crystal (1997: 373-374) defines the syllable as a unit of pronunciation typically larger than a single sound and smaller than a word. He however, notes that providing a precise definition of the syllable is not an easy task as there are several theories in both phonetics and phonology which have tried to clarify matters. Phonetically, it is defined on the basis of the articulatory effort needed in the production, employing the 'pulse and motor' theory proposed by Stetson (1892-1950) which argued that each syllable corresponds to an increase in air pressure from the lungs released as a series of chest pulses. Another alternative phonetic approach defines the syllable in auditory terms where the prominence theory argues that some sounds are more sonorous than others and that peak of sonority corresponds to the centre of a syllable. These peaks are best illustrated by vowels which are said to have greater carrying power. The less sonorous sounds provides valleys of prominence and are best illustrated by the closures and narrowings which produce consonants

On the other hand, phonological views of the syllable focus on the way sounds combine in individual languages to produce typical sequences. They established two classes of sounds which are consonants and vowels. The vowels can occur on their own or at the centre of a sequence of sounds while the consonants cannot occur on their own and they also occur at the edges of a sequence. The consonant vowel (CV) sequence is a pattern that is found in all languages of the world. This type is called an open syllable.

Hooper (1972) views the syllable as a linear string of phonemes. He claims that, the syllable itself has no internal structure. Sommerstein (1977: 200) mentions that many phonological processes can be expressed with greater generality if the syllable and its boundaries are allowed to be mentioned in their statement, thus, Hooper gave some examples where the use of syllable boundaries enables us to virtually eliminate disjunction from structural descriptions. However, in the views of (Fugde, 1969, Halle and Vergnaud 1980 and Vergnaud and Halle 1979, Hockett, 1973), the syllable has a hierarchical internal organization. That means that, there are intermediate units between the syllable and the phoneme. Vergnaud and Halle (1979) divide the syllable into two units which they call the onset and the rime (where the onset is the first consonant or consonant cluster of the syllable and the rime is the vowel and any consonant that comes after it) for example /br/ is the onset of the word 'bright' and /s/, the onset of 'sip', while the rimes are /ait/ and /ip/ respectively. The onset is not obligatory because there could be an onset less syllable such as 'of'. The rime contains the nucleus which is always a vowel and functions as the peak of the syllable and the coda which is the consonant that comes after the vowel.

This paper identifies the syllable structure types and patterns in Ukwuani.

Methodology

This research paper adopts a generative framework in the analyses of the data. The data were collected through the instrument of the Ibadan Four Hundred Word List which contains words of everyday usage. The wordlist represents the speech of Chief Maluabuchukwu Akonye (75 years), Mr Raymond Olise (55) and Mrs. Rose Odika (66). They are competent native speakers of Ukwuani from Obiaruku in Ukwuani Local Government Area. They have lived in the locality since birth and speak the language fluently. The researcher being a competent native speaker of Ukwuani verifies and analyzes the data. The data were represented using the IPA symbols. Words were used from the wordlist based on the examples needed to show the analyses.

The Syllable Structures of Ukwuani

Ukwuani, (an Igboid language) as in most Igboid languages, as well as, African languages operates the open syllable structure which does not allow a final consonant. The open syllable is either formed by a vowel or a consonant and a vowel. The onset which is also known as the beginning margin, does not allow a cluster of consonants as in the case with English. Although, Williamson (1968) classifies four syllable structure types with the inclusion of a CCV (where the second C is a labialized or palatalized sound) in Ukwuani, this study identifies three basic syllable structure types in the languages: the vowel (V), the consonant and vowel (CV) and the syllabic nasal (N). We analyzed and interpreted the CCV structure as shown in Okumo (2013), as cases of single complex unites in contrast with the plain counterparts. This is because the univalent segments do not exhibit such structure.

Emenanjo (1978) summarized the syllable structure of Igbo as:

T
(C)
S

where T represents tone, C a consonant, S a syllabic element and (?), optionality. In Ukwuani, as in Igbo above, the tone bearing unit constitutes the peak. It is either a vowel or a syllabic nasal and forms the only obligatory element in the language.

The three syllable structure types are illustrated below:

The V Syllable Structure Type

The vowel constitutes the peak in the V syllable structure type as exemplified in 1,2, 3 and 4.

oꝯeꝯ “he/she/it”

1) [ɔ] “he/she/it”
 ↓
 V

e “yes”

2) [è] “yes”
 ↓
 V
 í “you”

3) [I] “you”
 ↓
 V

oꝯfeꝯ “soup”

4) [o -f e] ‘soup’
 ↓ ↓ ↓
 V CV

From examples 1-4, we show that the vowel forms the peak and only element in the syllable.

The CV Syllable Structure Type

This syllable structure type is made up of a consonant and a vowel. Here the consonant is the onset while the vowel is the nucleus. This type of structure is the commonest in the world languages (cf. Welmers 1971).

gheꝯ “fry”

5) [Φé] “fry”
 ||
 CV

taꝯ “chew”

6) [tá] “chew”
 ||
 CV

le_ɛ “sell”7) [le⁴] “sell”
$$\begin{array}{c} | \\ | \\ CV \end{array}$$
de_ɛ “write”8) [de⁴] “write”
$$\begin{array}{c} | \\ | \\ CV \end{array}$$
bu_ɛ “carry”

9) [bú] “carry (thing)”

$$\begin{array}{c} | \\ | \\ CV \end{array}$$
fu_ɛ “see”

10) [fú] “see”

$$\begin{array}{c} | \\ | \\ CV \end{array}$$

In this language, most verb roots take the CV structure form.

The N Syllable Structure Type

The N represents the syllabic nasal which stands as the peak and only element of the syllable. As a syllable, the nasal bears the tone thus, it behaves like a vowel. The nasal always occurs before a consonant with which it is homorganic, as it takes on the place of articulation as the following consonant: a bilabial syllabic nasal before a bilabial consonant, an alveolar before alveolar consonant and a velar before velar consonant. This is exemplified below showing the underlying and surface forms.

/Nne/ → [nne_ɛ]11). Ud Form: /N⁴ne⁴/

↓

Sf Form: [ńné] “mother”

/Nti/ → [ńti_ɛ](12) Ud Form: /N⁴ti_ɛ/

↓

Sf Form: [ńti_ɛ] “ear”

/Ńmá/ → [mámá]

/Ńkú/ → [ŋ⁴kú]

13). Ud Form: /Ńmá/

(14) Ud Form: /Ńkú/

↓

Sf Form: [mámá] “good”

↓

Sf Form: [ŋ⁴kú⁴] “firewood”

/Ńkwa/ → [ŋ⁴kwa]/Ńkpí/ → [m⁴kpí⁴]

15). Ud Form: /Ńkwa/

(16) Ud Form: /Ńkpí/

↓

Sf Form: [ŋkwa] “covenant”

↓

Sf Form: [m⁴kpí⁴] “he-goat”

In the analysis above, the archiphoneme /N/ represents the nasal sound in the underlying form. The underlying nasal segment takes on the place feature of the following consonant. Hence, the following consonant dictates what the nasal would be. This process can be formalized in rule 1 below which states that a nasal consonant takes on the place of assimilation as the following consonant. This is a homorganic nasal assimilation.

Rule 1

C
[+ nasal] → $\left[\begin{array}{l} \gamma \text{ anterior} \\ \beta \text{ coronal} \\ \gamma \text{ High} \\ \epsilon \text{ back} \end{array} \right] / \left[\begin{array}{l} \gamma \text{ (anterior)} \\ \beta \text{ coronal} \\ \gamma \text{ High} \\ \epsilon \text{ back} \end{array} \right]$

Examples of the N syllable structure are shown in 17-22 below

- 17) m⁴ “me”
[m] “I/me/my”
 ↓
 N
- 18) n⁴no⁴ “salt”
[n⁴- nú] “salt”
 | | |
 N-CV
 ⁴-⁴ko⁴ “firewood”

- 19) [ḡ-ᐁkuᐁ] “firewood”



ń- toᐁ “ashes”

- 20) [ń- toᐁ] “ashes”



m-ᐁboᐁ “stick

- 21) [m-ᐁboᐁ] “stick”



m-boᐁ “nail” (fingers)

- 22) [m-boᐁ] “nail” (fingers)



The analysis so far has shown that Ukwuani operates syllable structure patterns which do not accept consonant cluster and a final consonant. The vowel or the syllabic nasal constitutes the peak of the syllable it is homorganic with the following consonant as it takes on the place of articulation as the following consonant.

Conclusion

The syllable structure of any language is very important in phonological analysis since it serves as the organizational template upon which the system is built. As in most African languages, Ukwuani like the Igbo, operates an open syllable structure which does not permit a final consonant. The vowel is the only obligatory unit in the language. It bears tone and can stand alone as a syllable or together with a consonant. There are no codas, as well as, clusters of consonants at the edge, that is, at the C slot as is the case with English.

This paper identifies three syllable structure types which are: vowels (V), consonant and vowel (CV) and the syllabic nasal (N). The V and the N can function as peaks of the syllable hence they bear tones.

It is hoped that this study will contribute to the study of Ukwuani phonology in particular and Phonology as a whole. The researcher recommends that more research work be done in the language to document it and to help avoid endangerment.

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