ON THE VOWELS OF IMILIKE DIALECT OF THE IGBO LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This is a study of the vowels of Imilike dialect, a variety of Northern Igbo dialect. Its specific objectives include identifying the vowels of the dialect, determine their phonemic status, distributional pattern and phonotactic constraints and as well compare them with those displayed by the standard Igbo. Data for the study were collected using unstructured interview and observation. Data were analysed in the framework of generative phonology. Minimal pair test was conducted to identify the vowels of the dialect. The study reveals that the dialect displays eleven vowels including the open mid front unrounded vowel /ɛ/ and the central vowels, [ə] and [ẹ]. All except the central vowels are phonemic in the dialect. The central vowels are in free variation with other vowels in the dialect. All the vowels occur in word initial, word medial and word final positions except the central vowels which do not occur in word initial position. The study also attests to the strict operation of vowel harmony in the dialect as in other Northern Igbo dialects. The study concludes that Imilike dialect displays more vowels than the standard Igbo.

Keywords: Vowels, Imilike Dialect, Generative Phonology, Phonotactics.

1. Introduction

A vowel is a speech sound produced with little restriction of the airflow from the lungs out of the mouth and/or nose (Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams 2009:246). Its quality depends on the vocal tract during the passage of air. The vowels in whose production air flows freely through both the mouth and the nose are nasalized vowels. However, vowel sounds are not voiced. In other words, its production does not involve the vibration of the vocal cords. Nevertheless, they can be identified based on the following:

i. The height of the tongue
ii. The part of the tongue that is highest in the mouth and
iii. The shape of the lips (See Hyman 1975; Katamba 1989 among others).

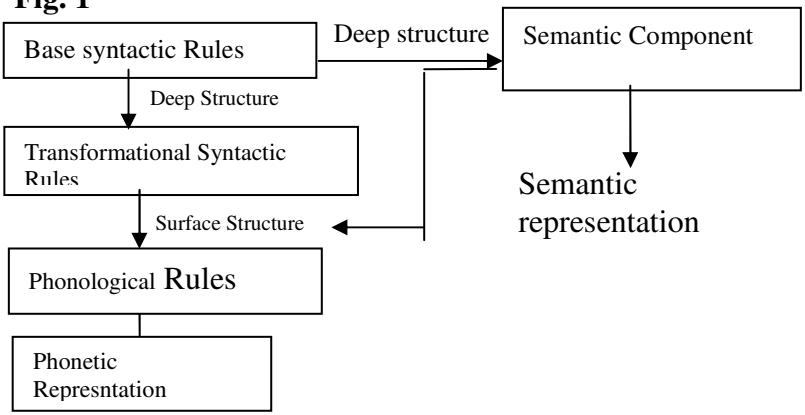
Earlier studies show that the Standard Igbo (SI) is made up of eight vowels (cf. Okonkwo 1974, Emenanjo 1978, Ikekeonwu, Ezikeojiaku, Ubani, and Ugoji 1999, Uba-Mgbemena 2006 among others). However, studies in other dialects of Igbo reveals that the vowel make up of some Igbo dialects varies from that of the SI. Hence, this study aims to discover if ID displays more vowels than the SI. In this light, the paper intends to identify the vowels in Imilike dialect (henceforth ID), determine their phonemic status as well their distributional pattern and constraints and in addition highlight their similarities and differences with those of SI. The study will be limited to ID. However, reference could be made to the SI or other dialects of Igbo where necessary.

Imilike dialect[1] is the name of an Igbo dialect spoken in a number of towns and villages in Enugu State. These include *Imilike Enu*, *Imilike Ani*, *Imilike Agụ*, *Umụndụ*, *Igugu* and *Ọba* all in Udenu Local Government Area of Enugu State. Nweya (2010) notes that ID is a member of the Northern Igbo Group of Dialects (NGD) as well as a member of Nsukka dialect clusters based on Nwaozuzu (2006) reclassification of Igbo dialects.

This work is done in the theory of Generative Phonology (GP). GP has its root from the theory of generative grammar. It developed during the 1960s and attained a standard form in Chomsky and Halle (1968). The major motivation for this theoretical framework was the clash between theoretical assumption and linguistic data under the theory of classical phonemics. (Oyebade 2008:9). The model assumes two levels of representation viz-the underlying representation (UR) and the surface representation (SR) which are linked together by phonological rules. In other words, a set of phonological rules apply to the underlying form of the language to yield the surface phonetic representation. Both underlying and surface forms are represented in features so the rules essentially changed feature specification. Clark, Yallop and Fletcher (2007:409) note that the model went through several modifications in 1960s and is represented thus in one of the versions as:

[1] The dialect is named after Imilike town where it is spoken.

Fig. 1 **A Generative Model of**



GP framework provides formal devices that enables one properly account for the sounds of a language. It views uttrerances as sequences of discrete segements which are bundles of unordered features arranged in an ordered sequence. These features were used to describe the vowel sounds identified in the dialect of study.

The data for this study were collected by the researcher using an unstructured interview, participant and non-participant observation[2]. The interviews were conducted using Ikekeonwu-swaddesh wordlists[3]. The wordlists include items such as parts of the body, kinship terminologies, common food items in the locality, household animals and items, animals in the environs, nature and natural phenomena, colour terminologies, emotional or social situations, numerals, plants, common verbs, common

[2] The data were collected among family members, neighbours, friends and visitors who are Imilike indigenes.
[3] The wordlist was adapted from Onwuka (2007:131-136).

adjectives, common interrogatives, common pronouns and miscellaneous words. In addition, the linguistic knowledge of the researcher and the privilege of being a native speaker helped significantly in the collection and analysis of data.

2. The Vowels of Imilike Dialect and their Phonemic Status

The SI, according linguists, displays eight vowels which include /a/, /e/, /ɪ/, /I/, /o/, /ọ/, /u/,/ụ/ (See Okonkwo 1974, Emenanjo 1978, Ikekeonwu, Ezikeojiaku, Ubani, and Ugoji, 1999, Ngoesi 2000, Ofomata 2004, Mbah and Mbah 2010, Emenanjo, E. N. et al. 2011). In contrast, The vowels of the dialect under investigation has three (3) vowels in addition to these eight totalling the vowels to eleven (11). They are as follows:

(1)	+EXP (+ATR)		-EXP (-ATR)	
	ɪ	u	ɪ	ʊ
	e	o	ɛ	ɔ
	ə	a	ẹ	

These vowels are usually described in auditory terms viz-the height of the tongue, the backness or frontness of the tongue and the position of the lips. The distinctive feature matrices are presented below:

Table 1

	ɪ	ɪ	e	ẹ	A	u	ụ	o	ọ	ə	ə̣
SYLLABIC	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
HIGH	+	+	–	–	–	+	+	–	–	–	–
LOW	–	–	–	–	+	–	–	–	–	–	–
BACK	–	–	–	–	–	+	+	–	–	–	–
ROUND	–	–	–	–	–	+	+	+	+	–	–
ATR	+	–	+	–	–	+	–	+	–	+	–
CENTRE	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	+	+

The vowels occur in the following words:

(2) [a][4] áshwá /áʃʷá/ 'market'
[e] èsè /èsè/ 'barn'
[ɛ] ẹ̀gà /ɛ̀gà/ 'root'
[ɪ] íkwè /ɪ́kʷè/ 'mortar'
[ɪ] ẹ̀shɪ́ /ɛ̀ʃɪ́/ 'sickness'
[o] óʒɪ́ókó /óʒɪ́ókó/ 'proper name'
[ɔ] ákpọ́kọ́ / ákp͡ɔ́kɔ́/ 'pepper'
[u] éshú /éʃʷ ú/ 'cow'
[ʊ] ụ́tàrà /ʊ́tàrà/ 'foofoo'
[ə] òbə́shí /òbə́ʃɪ́/ 'cat'
[ə̣] ẹ̀gə̣́rə̣́ /ɛ̀gə̣́ɪə̣́/ blacksmith

In (1) above, one can observe the presence of the open-mid front unrounded vowel /ɛ/ and the central vowels, [ə] and [ə̣]. The open-mid front unrounded vowel /ɛ/ is classified under [-

[4] The vowels have been listed in square bracket pending when their phonemic status is established .

EXP] rather than [+EXP] because it occurs mostly with the vowels from the [-EXP] set. The presence of these vowels in NGD have attracted the interest of scholars such as Ikekeonwu (1986), Nwaozuzu (2008), Ugwu (1987), Mbah and Mbah (2010) and Nweya (2010). The major issue is on the phonemic status of /ɛ/ and the pharyngealisation of the central vowels [ə] and [ə̣]. It is believed that /ɛ/ is not phonemic in SI and some Igbo dialects such as *Achalla* and *Ọka* as reported by Onwuka (2007).

To establish the phonemic status of the vowels, three basic principles were adopted. These are minimal pair, analogous environment and free variation. The latter determine the allophones of a phoneme while the former two determine the distinctiveness. Following Clark, Yallop and Fletcher (2007:92), minimal pairs provide solid evidence of phonemic contrasts of the difference that matters languages. To carry out minimal pair test, an environment is created and speech sounds are placed in a given environment to other speech sounds as below:

(3) /ɪ/ and /u/ as in /ɹí/ 'eat'

/ɹú/ 'reach'

/ɪ/ and /ʊ/ as in /tʃʊ́/ 'rule'

/tʃʷʊ́/ 'wash'

/e/ and /o/ ‘write’	as	in	/dé/	
			/dó/ ‘store’	
/a/ and /ɔ/ ‘worship’	as	in	/gɔ́/	
			/gá/ ‘pass’	
/ɛ/ and /a/ ‘appointment’	as	in	/ɛ̀gbà/	
			/agba/ ‘jaw’	
/ɛ/ and /a/ ‘a type of wine’	as	in	/ɛ̀kpɔ́ /	
			/àkpɔ́/	‘calling’
/a/ and [ạ] ‘land’	as	in	/àlà/	
			/alạ/ ‘land’	
[ə] and /ɪ/ ‘trumpet’	as	in	/òpə̀/	
			/òpɪ̀/ ‘trumpet’	

The minimal pair test reveals that nine (9) out of the eleven (11) vowels of the dialect are phonemic because they were able to bring about meaning difference between one word and another in the dialect. A phoneme according to Anagbogu, Mbah and Emeh (2010:96) is any sound that can distinguish meaning in a language. The implication of this is that the open mid front unrounded vowel /ɛ/ is phonemic in the dialect contrary to the view held by some scholars. Such scholars base their argument on instances where the sound is in complementary distribution with /a/ in which case it is a dialectal variant of /a/ as in

(4) /ɛ/ and /a/ as in 'hand'

ẹ́ká	/ɛ́ká/
áká	/áká/
'hand'	
ẹ́nyá	/ẹ́ŋá/
'eyes'	
ányá	/áŋá/
'eyes'	
ẹ̀kpà	/ɛ̀kpà/
'bag'	
àkpà	/àkpà/
'bag'	
ẹ́vụ́	/ɛ́vʊ́/
'pus'	
ávụ́	/ávʊ́/
'pus'	

ɛ̣dá /ɛ́dá/
'fall'
ádá /ádá/
'fall'

However, other instances where /ɛ/ and /a/ are in contrastive distribution in the dialect are exemplified below:

(5) /ɛ/ and /a/ as in /ɛ́gə̣/ 'farmland'

/ágʊ̣/ 'tiger'

/ɛ/ and /a/ as in /ɛ́hà/ 'name'

/áhà/ 'leaving'

/ɛ/ and /a/ as in /ɛ́ŋʊ́/ 'pumpkin

/áŋʊ́/ 'axe'

/ɛ/ and /a/ as in /ɛ̀kə̣́/ 'wealth'

/àkʊ̀/ 'termite'

/ɛ/ and /a/ as in /ɛ̀dʊ̀/ 'terrestial type of corn'

/àdʊ̀/ 'surviving'

Failure to accord /ɛ/ a full phonemic status as /a/ in the dialect will result to ambiguity as in the following example:

(6) /ɛ́gə̄/ ⟶ /ágʊ̄/ = 'farmland'

'tiger'

/ɛ́hà/ ⟶ /áhà/ = 'name'
'leaving'

/ɛ̀gbà/ ⟶ /àgbà/ = 'jaw'
'appointment'

/ɛ́ŋʊ́/ ⟶ /áŋʊ́/ = 'axe'
'pumpkin'

The example above shows that if /ɛ/ is substituted with /a/ in the cited example, a native speaker would not understand the word being referred to. Ugwu (1987:26) as Onwuka (2007:73) reported observe similar occurrence in Akụ, also a dialect of Northern Igbo. He observes that the open-mid front unrounded vowel /ɛ/ is phonemic as in the examples below.

(7) /e/ and /ɛ/ as in /ŋ́ké/
'possessive adjective'

/ ŋ́kɛ́/
'where'

/e/ and /ɛ/ as in /ṅdé/
'melting'

/ṅdɛ́/
'how'

Based on the foregoing, it is evident that open-mid front unrounded vowel /ɛ/ is phonemic in the dialect. It is the pharyngealised counterpart of /e/ in Igbo and is represented as /ẹ/ orthographically.

The presence of the central vowels [ə] and [ə̣] was also revealed in the vowel system of Imilike dialect as in (3) above. Nwaozuzu (2008:188) attesting to this notes that most speech communities under NGD have at least nine or as many as ten vowels which include the schwa [ə] and the front half open spread vowel /ɛ/. However, it was observed that central vowels unlike the open-mid unrounded vowel /ɛ/ are not phonemic in the dialect. Mbah and Mbah (2010:72-4) report that the central vowel can be pharyngealised depending on the vowel of the root and also in allegiance to the operative vowel harmony, strong in the NGD. Quoting Ikekeonwu (1987), they observe that it is a weak form standing for other vowels, though the weakening takes place at the segmental tier. At the tonal tier, it assumes the peak of syllabic prominence and bears the tone. In Imilike dialect, it occurs freely with other vowels as exemplified below:

(8)

	I D	**SI**
[ə̣]	àlə̣ /àlə̣/ 'land'	àlà /àlà/
[ə̣]	ɛ́pə̣̀tə̣̀ /ɛ́pə̣̀tə̣̀ / 'mud'	ápì̯tḭ̀ /ápì̯tḭ̀/

[ə]	ẹ̀kẹ́dẹ̀ /ɛ̀kẹ́dẹ̀/	àkẹ́dẹ̀ /àkẹ́dẹ̀/
	'beans'	
[ə]	óhà /óhà/	óhù /óhù/
	'slave'	
[ə]	ígá /ígá/	ígú /ıgú/
	'grindstone'	
[ə]	òpà /òpà/	òpì /òpı̀/
	'trumpet'	

They are not phonemic in the dialect because they cannot form minimal pairs with other vowels and as such cannot occupy a contrastive phonotactic position. It was observed from the data that [ə] is a reduced form of all the non-pharyngealised vowels while [ẹ] is a reduced form of all the pharyngealized vowels in accordance with vowel harmony. However, they occur more freely with /ʊ/, /ɪ/, /u/ and /ı/ and to a less extent [ə] or [ẹ] than it does with other vowels.

The fact that neither [ə] nor [ẹ] can form minimal pairs is based on the reason that in the environment where they appear to form minimal pair, they are variants of full standard Igbo vowels and substituting them with these vowels do not result to meaninglessness or ambiguity. Below are illustrative examples:

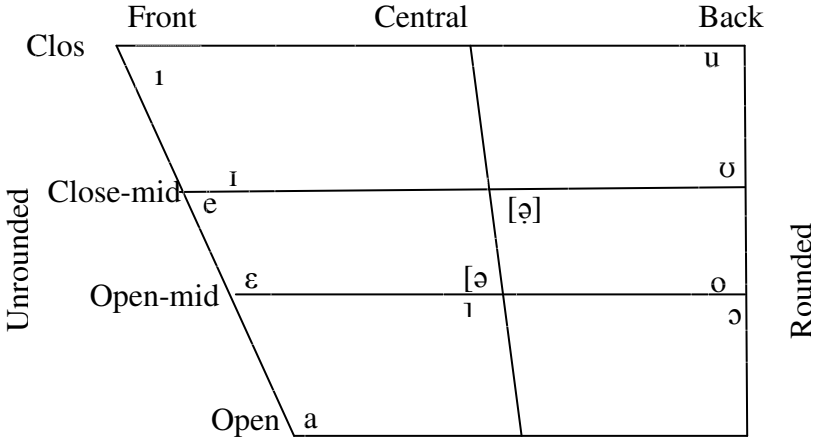
(9)	/a/ and [ẹ]	as	in	/àlà/	'land'
				/àlẹ̀/	'land'
	[ẹ] and /ʊ/	as	in	/ńkẹ́/	'firewood'
				/ńkʊ́/	'firewood'
	[ə] and /ı/	as	in	/m̀pà/	'horn'

/mpɪ/ 'horn'

[ẹ] and /ɪ/ as in /ɛ́pẹ̀tẹ̀/ 'mud'
/ápḭ̈tḭ̈/ 'mud'

Therefore, it could be deduced that the schwas are in free variation with other vowels since they occur in the same environment but do not bring about meaning difference. In summary, the vowels are represented using the vowel chart below. Note that the vowels in square bracket are not phonemic in the dialect

Fig. 2



The Phonetic Vowel Chart of Imilike Dialect

3. Distributional Pattern of the Vowels

Oyebade (2008:49) submits that there are predictable constraints with regard to what each language allows in the sequence of a morpheme. This constraint is expressed as sequence structure constraints and is referred to as

phonotactics of the language. The Igbo language in general permits vowel in all the phonotactic positions i.e. word-initial, word-medial and word-final positions, and in fact also admit sequence of two vowels in some words. The vowels of ID have the same phonotactic possibilities as in the SI. They occur in word-initial, word-medial and word-final positions excluding the central vowels [ə] and [ə̩] which do not occur in word-initial position. Below are typical examples:

(10) [ə] [ə̩]

òpà /òpà/ 'trumpet' ẹ́pà̩tà̩ /ɛ́pà̩tà̩/ 'mud'

èbàlè /èbàlè/ 'ram' átá̩rá̩ /átá̩ɪá̩/ 'sheep'

The open-mid front unrounded vowel /ɛ/ minimally occurs in word-medial position. Wherever it occurs, it is usually at a morpheme boundary as in the example below

(11) /ɛ/ == ụ́mẹ́ẹ́kā /ʊ́mɛ́ɛ́kā/ 'fingers'

nwẹ́ẹ́kā /ŋʷɛ́ɛ́kā/ 'finger'

ọ̀pànẹ́ẹ́kā /ɔ̀pànɛ́ɛ́kā/ 'lantern'

ánẹ́ẹ̄gá /ánɛ́ ɛ̄gá/ 'bush meat'

Furthermore, the existence of double vowels in ID is noteworthy. But unlike in the standard Igbo, it is only identical vowel sequence that exists in the dialect. This occurs mostly in some words where the SI would have a single vowel as in the example below:

(12) **ID** **SI**

ẹ́ráā /ɛ́ɪáā/ árá /áɪá/

'breast'

ọ́hwʊ́ụ̱́ /ɔhʷʊʊ ọ́hʊ́rʊ̱́ /ɔhʊɹʊ/
'new'
ẹ̀sáà /ɛsáà/ àsáà /àsáà/
'seven'
ọ́cháā /ɔtʃáā/ ọ̀chá /ɔtʃá/
'white/fair'
ójíī̃ /ojɪ/ òjí /òjí/
'dark'

The distributional pattern of the vowels in Imilike dialect is summarised in the table below following the foregoing analysis:

Vowels	Word-initial	Word-medial	Word-final
/ɪ/	ízù / ízù/ week	ìshíì /ɪʃɪ̃ì/ six	ímí /ɪmɪ/ nose
/ɪ/	ị̀dà /ɪdà/ drum	àchị̀chị̀ /àʃɪtʃɪ / dirt	ẹ̀shị́ /ɛʃɪ/ sickness
/e/	èbə̀lè /èbəlè/ ram	ìnènè /ɪnènè/ vegetable	èsè /èsè/ barn
/ɛ/	ẹ́kwà /ɛkʷà/ dress	ụ́mɛ́ɛ́kā /ʊmɛɛkā/ fingers	hɛ́ /hɛ/ they
[ə]	does not occur	òbəshí /òbəʃi/ cat	óbə̀ /óbə/ heart
[ə̩]	does not occur	ẹ̀gə̩́rə̩́ /ɛgə̩ɹə̩/ blacksmith	átərə̄ /átəɹə/ sheep
/a/	áféré /áféɹé/ plate	àgɓákp͡á /àgɓákp͡á/ early morning	yáá /jáá/ shake
/u/	úzù /úzù/ dust	ìrùrwè /ɪɹùɹʷè/ weed	ònwúnwú /òŋʷúŋʷú/

Table 2			red
/ʊ/	ụtụtụ /ʊtʊtʊ/ morning	tụtụtụ /tʊtʊtʊ/ far	ụgọhụ /ʊgɔhʊ/ fog
/o/	òkòkòrò /òkòkòɹò/ round	òròmé /òɹòmé/ orange	ógòdó /ógòdó/ bed
/ɔ/	ọdụ /ɔdʊ/ pestle	ụgọdụ /ʊgʊdʊ/ dog	ụyọ /ʊjɔ/ happiness

The table attests to the fact that all the vowels occur in the word initial, word medial and word final positions except the central vowels which occur only in word medial and word final positions.

4. Vowel Harmony (VH)

Vowel harmony is a phonological process whereby vowels occurring within a morpheme or across morpheme boundaries agrees in certain distinctive features. Clements (1977) in Chumbow 1982:66) identifies the following as the properties of VH:

a. **Phonetic Relatedness:** A phonetic feature always serves as the basis for the categorization of the vowels of the language into a mutually exclusive set.
b. **Root Control:** The root determines the harmonic category of affixes not vice versa.
c. **Bidirectionality:** It affects both prefixes and suffixes.
d. **Unboundedness:** There are no arbitrary imposed restrictions in the number of syllables affected by VH.

e. **Non Optionality**: There is no known case of root controlled harmony that operates optionally.

Studies such as Ihiunu and Kentowicz (1994) and Mbah and Mbah 2010) reveal that the feature [constricted pharynx] rather than [ATR] better reflects the intuition that [a,i,o, ụ] set is marked when compared with [e,i,o,u]. In other words, VH in Igbo is based on pharyngealisation. Pharyngealisation divides the vowels into two sets. Following Ihiunu and Kentowicz (1994), Mbah and Mbah (2010), it is assumed in this study that [±ATR] distinction is the variation in the size of the pharynx. The size of the pharynx can be expanded (when the root of the tongue is pushed forward by a corresponding lowering of the larynx) producing [+ATR] (i.e. non pharyngealised) vowels or contracted when the tongue is pulled backwards while the larynx is raised producing [-ATR] (non pharyngealised) vowels. ID has eleven vowels-a, e, ẹ, ɪ, ɪ, u, ụ, o, ọ, ə, ə. The vowels with sub-dots are pharyngealised while those without sub-dots are non-pharyngealised. These are represented in (13) below:

(13) **Set I (non-pharyngealised)**
Set II (pharyngealised)

ɪ	u		ɪ	ʊ
eo		ɛ	ɔ	
ə			a	ẹ

VH as a principle controls the distribution of vowels in ID as it does in Igbo language. Vowels of both sets do not co-occur in one and the same morpheme. The vowels have to come

from one set, either set I or set II. Simple lexemes whose origin could be traced to the dialect group strictly obey the harmony principle with few exceptions. The examples below are very illustrative. For example:

(14)

Set I			**Set II**	
/ĭzé/	ízé	'tooth'	/ákᵩ́/	ákᵩ́
	'kernel'			
/éʃĭ/	éshí	'pig'	/ɛʃĭ/	ẹ̀shị́
	'sickness'			
/òjĭ/	òyí	'cold'	/ɔjĭ/	ọ̀yị́
	'good'			
/òtùnè/	òtùnè	'buttocks'	/ʊtàɪà/	
ụ̀tàrà	'foofoo'			
/èbəlè/	èbàlè	'ram'	/átᵩ́ɪᵩ́/	
átᵩ́rᵩ́	'sheep'			

However, vowels /a/ and /e/ do not strictly obey the harmony principle as could be exemplified below:

(15) /áfɛ́ɪé/ áféré
'plate'
/ɔmábɛ́/ ọ̀mábẹ́
'masquerade'
/ɪtégənáā/ ìtégənáā
'nine'
/ɔtáńdʒɛ́ɪé/ ọ̀táńjéré
'black eyeliner'

This violation of VH principle is very rare in the dialect. In respect to 6(b) (c) and (d) above, VH determines the choice of affixes in the dialect just like in the SI. For instance, the

vowel of the verbroot determines the vowel of the affix to be added in line with the vowel harmony principle as in:

(16)	**i/ị**	+	**root**		**(infinitive)**
	í	+	lé	⟶	ílē
	/ílē/		'to look'		
	ị	+	chwṵ	⟶	ịchwṵ
	/ɪtʷʊ̄/		'to wash'		
	á	+	gbá	⟶	àgbá
	/àgbá/		'running'		
	á	+	tẹ́	⟶	átẹ́
	/átẹ́/		'throwing'		

This is applicable to other forms of affixation in the dialect. For instance, the 'rV' suffix used to form the simple past where 'r' is constant and the 'V' is variable depending on the vowel of the root is not obtainable in the dialect. The dialect replaces the variable vowel with the pharyngealized or non-pharyngealised central vowel depending on the vowel of the root. This gives rise to such form as 'r + ə/ẹ'. This occupies the V-slot in the 'rV' past, imperative and stative markers in the dialect. This is illustrated thus:

(17) Ó jèrə̀ áshwá ⟶ /ó dʒɛ̀ɪə̀ áʃʷá/ 'He went to the market'

Ó nwèɪə̀ égō ⟶ /ó ŋʷɛ̀ɪə̀ égō/ 'He has money'

Ọ chọ̀rẹ̀ ṵlọ̄ ⟶ /ɔ̀ tʃɔ̀rẹ̀ ʊ̀lɔ̄/ 'He wants a house'

This could be further illustrated with the present inceptive progressive aspect where a sequence of suffixes *–gə, -de, -me*

or *–gẹ, -dẹ, -ma* are joined sequentially in harmony with the vowel of the verbroot. For instance *-gə/-gẹ* marks inception, *-de/-dẹ* marks progression while *-me/-ma* marks perfection respectively. The interaction of the trio results to the present inceptive progressive. The root vowel controls the choice of the affixes by agreeing with them in the feature [± ATR] as exemplified below:

(18) a. Hé é-rī-gā-dē-mē ńrī. 'They have started eating.'

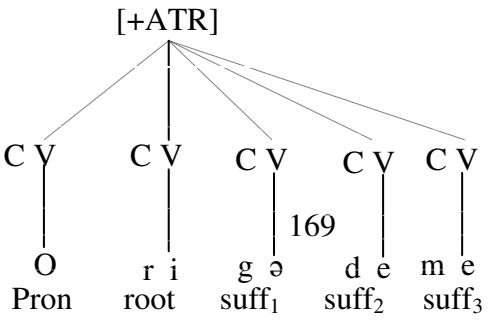
b. Hé é-jē-gā-dē-mē ẹ́gẹ̄. 'They have started going to the farm.'

c. Ọ chọ̄-gẹ̄-dẹ̄-mā ọ́rẹ̄. 'He/She has started searching for job.'

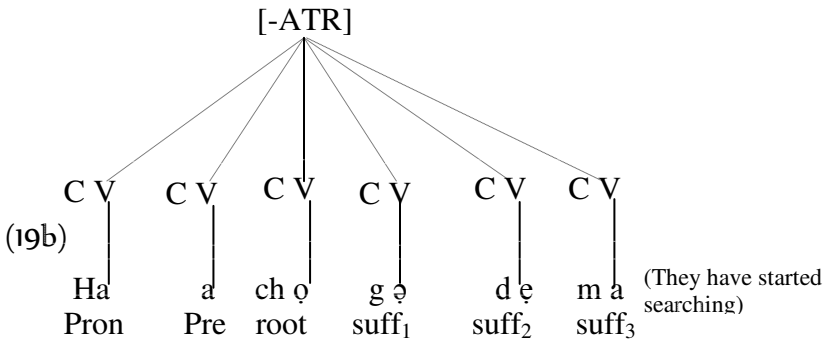
d. Ọ zẹ̄-gẹ̄-dẹ̄-mā áshwá 'He/She has started trading.'

In (18a & b), the verb is affixed with a prefix and three suffixes whose vowels harmonise with the vowel of the verbroot. Similarly, in (18c and d), the vowel is affixed with three suffixes but no prefix. It could also be observed that the pronouns participate in the harmony process since the feature spreads to their vowels. It is a typical demonstration of the bidirectional spreading of the harmony feature and is further illustrated in below:

(19a)



(He/She has started eating)



The diagrams show the bidirectional spreading of the feature [+ATR] in (19a) and [-ATR] in (19b) towards the prefix and the pronouns on the left and the suffixes on the right. It validates the view of Mbah and Mbah (2010:104) that vowel harmony is strict in the Northern Igbo Dialects notably Nsukka. In other words, the violation is very minimal and mostly occurs across morpheme boundary or in compound words (See Nweya 2010 for details).

5. Summary of Findings

It has been revealed in this paper that the phonology of ID is made up of nine phonemic and eleven (11) phonetic vowels. The eight popular vowels as in the SI, the open-mid front unrounded vowel /ɛ/ and the central vowels [ə] and [ə̣]

inclusive. The study reveals that /ɛ/ is phonemic in the dialect while the central vowels [ə] and [ə̩] are in free variation with the pharyngealised and non pharyngealised vowels respectively. The implication is that when the vowels of ID and those of SI are placed side by side, one would observe that ID displays more vowels than SI. The study further shows that the process of VH is stronger in the ID when compared with SI. Only few instance of violation with /a/ and /e/ occur in the dialect. Apart from the rich phonological system of ID, it is evident from the examples above that the dialect is also rich in vocabulary. In that regard, this paper recommends that vocabularies from various Igbo dialects should be adopted into the SI to enrich its lexicon. For instance, such words as those below are not common in the SI:

(20) ẹ̀gbà /ɛ̀gʊ͡bà/ ‘appointment’

ẹ̀kpọ́ /ɛ̀kp͡ɔ́/ ‘a type of wine’

ẹ̀gə̀rə̀ /ɛ̀gə̀ɹə̀/ ‘blacksmith’

ọ́mábẹ́ /ɔ́mábɛ́/ ‘masquerade’

ụ̀gòhụ́ /ʊ̀gɔ̀hʊ́/ ‘fog’

tụ̀tụ̀tụ́ /tʊ̀tʊ̀tʊ́/ ‘far’

6. Conclusion

This paper has been able to identify and describe the vowels of ID and other phonological features such as VH.

Generally, it reveals the phonological features of the dialect with emphasis on the vowel sounds. When these are compared with what is obtainable in SI, one would observe areas of similarities and differences. The major difference being that the dialect displays more vowels than the SI. The study points to the rich phonological features of Imilike dialect in particular and NGD in general. It suggests that further research be carried out in the dialect to examine the ongoing vowel shift observed in the phonological system of ID which may be as a result of contact with other dialects and languages.

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