
An Investigative Study of Elisions in Igbo

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Abstract

Among the phonological processes that abound in the Igbo language is elision. Four types of elision are reported in Igbo in the existing literature: consonant elision, vowel elision, syllable elision and syllabic nasal elision. This poses a question on whether these are the only types of elision in the Igbo language. This paper investigates elision in Igbo. It seeks to find out if the types of elision existing in the Igbo language are limited to these four. The data for analysis are obtained from both the primary and secondary sources. The primary data are from Omambala main dialect of the Inland West Igbo Dialects Cluster (IWIDC), while the secondary data are from past works of scholars. A descriptive method is adopted for data analysis. From the results, more than four types of elision exist in the Igbo language. In addition to the four already existing elision types mentioned above, the study discovers a multi-syllables elision, which is found in lexicalised words in Anam speech variety. A further investigation of other dialects of Igbo can be done to find out if they also exhibit multi-syllables elision in lexicalised words.

Keywords: phonology, elision, phonological processes, types of elision, Igbo phonology.

1. Introduction

Through a continuous descriptive study of human language, more facts about the phonological, morphological and syntactic structures of different languages have been uncovered, and the Igbo language is not an exception. It is worthy of note that the description of the phonological process of elision in Igbo has also witnessed conflicting reports on types of elision existing in the language, based on the idiosyncratic nature of different variants of the language. Eme (2008), for example, identifies consonant elision, vowel elision, syllable elision and syllabic nasal elision; while Emenanjo (1978; 2015) presents only the consonant elision and vowel elision.

In this paper, the phonological process of elision in Igbo is reinvestigated with a view to ascertaining if the types of elision in the language are actually limited to consonant elision, vowel elision, syllable elision and syllabic nasal elision. Data from Qmambala main dialect of the Inland West Igbo Dialect Cluster (IWIDC) and reports of past researches on elision are analysed in order to establish the types of elision in the Igbo language. The paper is organised in six sections. Section one gives an introduction. Section two presents an overview of the Igbo syllable structure. Section three reviews related literature, while section four deals with the methodology. Section five handles data presentation and analysis. Finally, there is summary and conclusion in section six.

2. Igbo Syllable Structure

The syllable structure of Igbo is discussed in this section since the phonological process of elision occurs on syllable. Emenanjo (2015:47) succinctly presents the Igbo syllable structure, thus:

T
a (C) V or a N;

Where ‘C’ stands for the consonant, V is the vowel and N represents the syllabic nasal. The ‘T’ on top of the vowel represents the tone and is an evidence that vowels and syllabic nasals bear the peak of prominence and, therefore, carry tone in the language. The enclosing of the ‘C’ in a bracket signifies that the consonant is an optional element within a syllable, while the vowel is a compulsory element. Its position also shows that Igbo operates an open syllable where consonants do not end a word.

Following from Emenanjo (2015), some of the Igbo syllables are shown below with words exemplifying them:

CV	<i>ga</i> ‘go’; <i>nwa</i> ‘child’; <i>si</i> ‘cook’; <i>bu</i> ‘carry’; <i>ya</i> ‘his/hers/him/her/it’; <i>di</i> ‘husband’
V	o, ɔ, u, ɛ, i, i, etc., as in <i>o riri nri</i> ‘s/he ate food’.
VCV	<i>aka</i> ‘hand’; <i>anya</i> ‘eyes’; <i>àhụ</i> ‘body’; <i>arū</i> ‘abomination’; <i>egō</i> ‘money’; <i>agū</i> ‘lion’
VCVV	<i>ohia</i> ‘bush’; <i>ahia</i> ‘market’; <i>orĩa</i> ‘sickness’.
NCV	<i>nkụ</i> ‘firewood’; <i>mbè</i> ‘tortoise’; <i>nje</i> ‘virus’, <i>nnà</i> ‘father’; <i>nne</i> ‘mother’.
NCVCV	<i>mmadụ</i> ‘person’, <i>mmanụ</i> ‘oil’, <i>nnụnụ</i> ‘birds’.
NCVCVV	<i>mmehiè</i> ‘sin’, <i>nduhiè</i> ‘misleading’
VCVN	<i>òdụm</i> ‘tiger’, <i>akùm</i> ‘hippopotamus’.
CVCV	<i>riri</i> ‘ate’; <i>kurụ</i> ‘beat (with cane)/cultivated’; <i>gara</i> ‘went’; <i>nwunyè</i> ‘wife’.
VCVCV	<i>osisi</i> ‘tree’; <i>akukọ</i> ‘story’; <i>ajụju</i> ‘question’; <i>anwurụ</i> ‘smoke’; <i>ejùlà</i> ‘snail’.
NCVNVCV	<i>m̀m̀m̀m̀m̀</i> ‘celebration’; <i>nnànnà</i> ‘grandfather’;
VCVCVCV	<i>ìm̀m̀rìm̀</i> ‘a great number of/so many’; <i>agumagu</i> ‘reading book’; <i>anumànụ</i> ‘animal’.
NCVVVCV	<i>mbàise</i> ‘a town in Igboland’;

Mbah and Mbah (2010) also state that in Igbo, the elided segments are pronounced when the words containing them are pronounced in isolation or slowly. This suggests that elision takes place in fast speech.

Drawing a comparison between elision and assimilation, which is also part of the connected speech features parameter as discussed in Eme (2008), Emenanjo (2015) asserts that assimilation does not involve the disappearance or a contraction of vowels, but vowel elision does. He also points out that vowel assimilation is common in Igbo, while vowel elision is very limited although he notes that its occurrence seems to vary in different varieties of the language; thus supporting Eme (2008) and Mbah and Mbah's (2010) views that consonant elision is prevalent in Igbo.

Unlike Eme (2008) who presents four elision types in Igbo: consonant elision, vowel elision, consonant and vowel elision (that is, syllable elision), and syllabic nasal elision; Mbah and Mbah (2010) and Emenanjo (2015) present only consonant elision and vowel elision in the language.

4. Methodology

This paper is designed to be descriptive because of its facts finding nature. It describes Igbo data in order to confirm the types of elision existing in the language. The data for analysis are obtained from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data are from different varieties of Ọmambala main dialect of the IWIDC, while the secondary data are from past literature on Igbo.

In presenting the data, the tone-marking convention of Green and Igwe (1963) is adopted, which leaves high tone unmarked, marks low tone with a grave accent [`], and marks the down step tone with a macron [¯] orthographically or by first placing a down-

pointing arrow before the syllable, followed by an acute accent on the tone-bearing unit [↓ '] phonemically and phonetically.

5. Data Presentation and Analysis

In this section, secondary data from Utulu (2006), Eme (2008), Mbah and Mbah (2010), Ifediora (2011), Igboeme (2012) and Emenanjo (2015) are first represented and re-analysed, followed by the presentation and analysis of the primary data from Ọmambala dialect.

In (1) are sets of data that display instances of elision as identified by some scholars.

1 a. Utulu (2006) for Ewulum dialect:

- (i) ɛkpa + iji□ → ɛkpiji□
'bag' 'yam' 'yam bag'
- (ii) ile + agū → ilagū
'tongue' 'lion' 'lion tongue'
- (iii) nyè + ọkụ → nyọkū
'give' 'light' 'give light'

b. Eme (2008) for Inland West Igbo:

- (i) nwa + oke → nwokē
'child' 'masculine' 'male'
- (ii) anya + anwū → anyanwū
'eyes' 'sun' 'sunshine'

c. Ifediora (2011) for Ụmūndụ dialect:

- (i) /oŋe/ + /ifi/ → [oŋi↓fi]
'person' 'head' 'an elder/a superior (in an office)'
- (ii) /oŋe/ + /era/ → [oŋe↓rá]
'person' 'madness' 'mad person'
- (iii) /ɔru/ + /ɛka/ → [ɔrɛ↓ká]

‘work’	‘hand’	‘artisan’
(v) /ɛka/	+ /ɔ ^l rú/	→ [ɛkɔ ^l rú]
‘hand’	‘work’	‘career/handwork’

d. Igboeme (2012) for Oghè dialect:

- (i) imē + unọ → imunọ
 ‘inside’ ‘house’ ‘room’
- (ii) aja□ + upà → ajupà
 ‘sand’ ‘clay’ ‘clay soil’
- (iii) ùde + ishi → ùdishi□
 ‘cream/pomade’ ‘head’ ‘hair cream’
- (iv) imē + ahwọ → imahwọ
 ‘inside’ ‘belly’ ‘stomach’

e. Emenanjo (2015):

- (i) Ìgbò + ụzọ → Ìgbụzọ → Ìgbuzọ
 ‘a tribe’ ‘road’ ‘name of an Igbo town in the Anịoma area of Delta State’
- (ii) òkolo + ọbịà → òkolọ ọbịà → òkolọbịà
 ‘young man’ ‘stranger’ ‘young unmarried man’

Mbaise dialect:

- (iii) ọdọ + eme□na → ọde eme□na → ọdeme□na
 ‘another one/again’ ‘not to happen’ ‘let there be no repeat’
- (iv) ụzọ + àmaka → ụzààmaka → ụzàmaka
 ‘road’ ‘(be) good’ ‘what has happened is good/accepted/cherished’

Data in (1a-e) show instances of elision at boundary between two words. It is also observed that the first vowel at the boundary is elided. For example, the word *nwaoke* comprises of two words

nwa ‘child’ + *oke* ‘male’; the vowel of *nwa* elides to now realize *nwoke* ‘male child’. It is noticed in (1e i-iv), just as Emenanjo (2015) has noted, that for elision to occur, vowel assimilation takes place first as a precondition. This is also the case with data presented in (1a-d). The instances of elision after assimilation had taken place supports the Obligatory Contour Principle (OCP) introduced into phonology by Leben (1973); which prohibits the co-occurrence of adjacent identical elements. Uwaezuoke (2017) attests to the dropping of one of the adjacent identical vowels in Igbo, which he points out leads to gliding tone in the language because the tone of the elided vowel is not affected, but moves to the next tone-bearing element, as Goldsmith (1979) has noted.

Also, just as observed by Emenanjo (2015) for Mbaise dialect represented in (1e iii&iv), before elision occurs in the dialects, the adjacent tones on the vowels at the word boundary must be on the same pitch level, and regressive assimilation takes place first. Nwachukwu (1976) had earlier noted that vowel elision in Mbaise dialect takes place when two lexical items, which are nominal plus nominal or nominal plus verbal, combine to realize proper names or other concrete nouns. The first option in Nwachukwu’s (1976) assertion is seen in (1a-e i&ii), even when they are not from Mbaise dialect, while the second option is noticed in Mbaise data in (1e iii&iv). This is evidence that Nwachukwu’s observations are not restricted to Mbaise dialect. Vowel elision in (1) discloses that tones of the elided segments are not affected; rather, they dock to the next available tone-bearing unit.

However, before docking to the next tone-bearing unit, the tone is first strengthened to a high tone of the first vowel of the second word (See Uwaezuoke, 2019) (where the tones cannot harmonise, gliding tone occurs) or it could be said to have

assimilated the high pitch of the high tone of the initial vowel of the second word; an instance Uwaezuoke (forthcoming) refers to as tone assimilation. There are other sets of data in (2) which illustrate elision.

2 a. Utulu (2006) for Ewulum dialect:

- | | | | | |
|-------|-------|---|------|---------------|
| (i) | olulu | → | oulu | ‘cotton’ |
| (ii) | akikọ | → | aikọ | ‘story/ tale’ |
| (iii) | afufu | → | aufu | ‘hardship’ |
| (iv) | òlile | → | òile | ‘buying’ |
| (v) | omumo | → | oumo | ‘hoe’ |

b. Eme (2008) for Akpo dialect:

- | | | | | |
|-----|-------|---|-----|--------|
| (i) | òkukò | → | òkò | ‘fowl’ |
|-----|-------|---|-----|--------|

Standard Igbo (SI):

- | | | | | |
|-------|---------|---|-------|--------------|
| (ii) | osisi | → | oisi | ‘stick/tree’ |
| (iii) | aghughò | → | aughò | ‘cunning’ |

Amaezụ dialect:

- | | | | | |
|------|---------|---|-------|--------|
| (iv) | ekwukwọ | → | ekkwọ | ‘book’ |
|------|---------|---|-------|--------|

Akpo dialect:

- | | | | | |
|------|--------|---|------|--------|
| (v) | sònye | → | sòì | ‘join’ |
| (vi) | gbànye | → | gbàì | ‘pour’ |

c. Mbah and Mbah (2010) for SI:

- | | | | | |
|-------|---------|---|-------|----------------------|
| (i) | akpukpọ | → | aupkọ | ‘leather’ |
| (ii) | ajuju | → | aju | ‘question’ |
| (iii) | àinì | → | àinì | ‘quarter of a penny’ |

One good point to note in examples (2a, b i-iv, c) is that the consonant of the second syllable at VCVCV structure, which is usually the same as that of the third syllable, is dropped. Sometimes the dropping of consonant of the second syllable leads to its vowel assimilating the features of the first syllable, which is a vowel, as seen in (2b iv). The palatal consonant of the second

syllable is dropped in (2b v&vi), while its vowel takes its palatal feature as well as harmonises with the vowel of the first syllable. It is observed from the data in (2) that tones are not affected in consonant elision. Example (3) displays different set of data.

3. Eme (2008) from Ezza dialect:

- (i) ɛkwɔkwɔ → ɛkwɔ ‘book’
- (ii) ututu → utu ‘morning’

Syllable elision occurs in (3 i&ii). The words each contain three syllables of VCVCV structure, and it is the second syllable that is elided. Just as seen in (2), the consonants of the second syllable and the third syllable are similar. In syllable elision, the tone of the elided syllable does not elide, but rather docks to the next tone-bearing unit to the right. It is noticed that for syllable elision to occur, the tone of the affected syllable and the tone of the next syllable to the right must be of the same pitch. A different set of data is presented in (4).

4. Eme (2008) for Ezza dialect:

- (i) mmaɗù → maɗù ‘person’
- (ii) mbòsì → bòsì ‘day’
- (iii) n^hèke → t^hèke ‘when/since/during’

In (4i-iii) is the elision of the syllabic nasal at initial position of NCVCV words to realize only the second and the third syllables. This kind of elision is referred to as syllabic nasal elision. Here, the tone of the elided segment is also elided.

Some Igbo data from Ọmambala exhibit instances of elision.

Data from the dialect are presented and analysed thus.

5(i) Awkuzu; Ogbunike; Anaku varieties:

- awùwọ → [aùwɔ̀] ‘cunning’

- (ii) Ànam (Umùdọ̀rà) variety: awùwọ́ → [aàwɔ́] ‘cunning’
 (iii) Ogbunikē; Anàkù; Àgùlerì varieties: osisi → [oisi] ‘tree/stick’
 (iv) Àgùlerì; N̄sugbè varieties: akwùkwọ́ → [auk^wɔ́] ‘book’
 (v) Ànam (Umùdọ̀rà) variety: akwùkwọ́ → [aak^wɔ́] ‘book’
 (vi) Ntèjè; Àgùlerì varieties: dinē ēdinè → [d̄i¹é¹éd̄i^è] ‘lie
 down’
 (vii) Ìfite Ọgwari variety: egbugo → [egbuo] ‘has killed’
 (viii) Umùmboō variety: àkago → [àkɔɔ] ‘is old’
 (ix) Ìfite Ọgwari; Umùmboō variety:
 pānatago → [¹pánā^tɔɔ] ‘brought home’
 (x) Ìkem variety: àgboghò → [àgbɔɔ] ‘young unmarried girl’
 (xi) Ogbunikē; Ànam (Umùdọ̀rà/Umùzjàm) varieties:
 bükàliri → [bükàliri] ‘mostly’
 (xii) Anàkù variety: kwàkòtálù → [kwàkòtáà] ‘brought together’

In (5), there is consonant elision which affects the second syllable and final syllable. The dropping of the consonant of the second syllable in (5 i, iii & iv) does not affect the vowel of the syllable, but in (5 ii & v), the vowel is affected as it harmonises with the vowel of the first syllable. The consonant elision that affects the final syllable is perceived in (5vi-xii).

6(i) Anàkù; Umùòlū varieties: àbùwolu → [àb^woolu] ‘has become’

(ii) Àgùlerì variety: èdinèwo → [èd̄i^èwò] ‘has lied down’

Consonant elision that affects the third syllable at medial position of word occurs in (6). The vowel of the second syllable in (6 i) harmonises with the vowel of the third syllable because their tones are of the same pitch.

7 (i) Ntèjè; N̄sugbè varieties:

di + ya□ → di ya□ →
[di ↓é]

‘husband’ ‘her’ ‘her husband’

(ii) Ntèjè variety: duru + ya□ → duru ya□ →
[duru ↓é]

‘take’ ‘him/her’ ‘take him/her along’

(iii) Àgùlerì variety: m̀nye → [m̀ũrì] ‘lit’

(iv) Anàkù variety: nnū + ya → nnū ya → [n↓nũ
a]

‘marry’ ‘him/her’ ‘marry him/her’

(v) Anàkù variety: àsù + yā → àsù yā → [àsù
↓á]

‘wash/speak’ ‘it’ ‘wash/speak it’

(vi) Ìfite Ọgwari variety:

akwùkwọ + nyā → akwùkwọ nyā → [ak^w ↓ɔ]

‘book’ ‘his/hers’ ‘his/her book’

(vii) Anàkù variety: tinye → [tii] ‘put/insert’

Example (7 i-vii) show consonant elision at initial position, where the consonant of the pronoun *ya/nya* (that is, ‘y/ny’) is deleted leaving only the vowel ‘a’. This usually occurs when the pronoun follows a noun or a verb at boundary. In some instances, the vowel of the pronoun partially assimilates the features of the final vowel of the first word as seen in (7 i-iii), and in some cases, the assimilation becomes complete as found in (7 vi&vii).

8 (i) Awkuzu variety: m̀pa m̀ → [m̀pa ↓m̀]
father my ‘my father’

(ii) Ogbunikē variety: ch̀italu m̀ → [t̀f̄ita ↓m̀]
remind me ‘remind me’

- (iii) Anàkù variety: àda mū → [àda^lm̃]
 eldest daughter my ‘my (first) daughter’
- (iv) Ìfite Ọgwarị variety: anịgị mụ → [a^lgí m].
 do Neg. I ‘I do not’

From the data (8), there is vowel elision involving the vowel of the possessive/personal pronoun *mụ*. When this kind of elision occurs, the tone of the elided vowel docks to the remaining consonant, which also turns into syllabic nasal.

9. Ìfite Ọgwarị variety: zinnē → [zi^lně] ‘plenty’

Syllabic nasal elision is witnessed in Ìfite Ọgwarị data in (9). Unlike in (4) where the syllabic nasals elided occupy the initial position, the syllabic nasal elided in (9) is at the medial position of the word.

- 10 (i) Awkuzu variety: taàni → [taà] ‘today’
 (ii) Ogbunikē variety: taàtà → [taà] ‘today’
 (iii) Ìfite Ọgwarị; Umùmboō varieties: akwukwo → [ak^wɔ] ‘book’
 (iv) Ìfite Ọgwarị; Umùòlum̄ varieties: awùwò → [awɔ]
 ‘cunning’
 (v) Àgùlerì; Umùmboō: awùwò → [àwɔ]
 ‘cunning’
 (vi) Ìfite Ọgwarị variety: anịgị mụ → [a^lgí m] ‘I do not’
 (vi) Àgùlerì; Ìkem; Ànam (Umùdọrà) varieties:
 osisi → [osi] ‘tree’
 (vii) Ànam (Umùdọrà/Umùziàm) varieties: àtìtì → [àtì] ‘dirt’

Syllable elision occurs at word medial and final positions. In (10 i&ii), the final syllables are elided. Syllable elision occurs in examples (10 iii-vii) at medial position. Elision of the final syllable

of the word in (10i) affects the tone of the syllable as it also gets elided. It is seen in (10 v) that after the deletion of the second syllable, the tone of the first syllable completely assimilates the pitch of the tone of the second syllable, e.g. *awùwò* → [àwò] ‘cunning’; but in (10 vi), it is rather the tone of the third syllable that assimilates the pitch of the tone of the second syllable remaining at the deletion of its syllable, e.g. *anìgì mụ* → [a¹gì m] ‘I do not’. There is a tonal difference between Ìfite Ọgwari and Umùòlun̄ on one hand and Àgùleri and Ụmùmbò on the other hand, in that while in the former, the tone of the elided second syllable docks to the next tone-bearing unit to the right, e.g. *awùwò* → [awò] ‘cunning’; in the latter, the tone of the first syllable assimilates the pitch of the tone of the third syllable elided, e.g. *awùwò* → [àwò] ‘cunning’. Let us consider the data in (11).

11 (i) Ànam̄ (Ụmùziàm̄) variety:

umù	èze	Ànam̄	→	umùziàm̄
children	king	a community		‘a town’
				‘children of the king of Ànam̄’

(ii) Ànam̄ (Ụmùem̄) variety:

umù	ènwelụ	n̄	Ànam̄	→	Ụmùem̄
children	owner	1st Pers.POSS.	a community		‘a town’
					‘children of owner of Ànam̄’

In (11 i&ii), there is multiple syllable elision in the phrases *umù èze Ànam̄* and *umù ènwelụ n̄ Ànam̄*. For (11 i), the first syllable *e* of the word *èze* ‘king’, first syllable and the consonant of the second syllable in the word *Ànam̄* ‘name of a large community in Anambra East and Anambra West’ are deleted, while the half-open front unrounded vowel /e/ in the second syllable of *èze* ‘king’

changes to a high front unrounded vowel /i/. For $\text{umù} \text{ènwelụm} \text{Ānam}$ ‘children of the owner of Ānam’ in (11 ii), five syllables: *nwe*, *lụ*, *a*, *na* and *m* are elided to realize Umụēm , while the tones of the final vowel in umù ‘children’ and the initial syllable in ènwelụm ‘I own’ are strengthened to a downstep tone. This kind of elision is, in this paper, referred to as multi-syllable elision because deletion of the syllables occurs at the same time and in one phrase to realize the lexicalised words Umụziàm and Umụēm respectively.

From the foregoing analysis, five types of elision have been identified in the Igbo language: consonant elision, vowel elision, syllable elision, syllabic nasal elision and multi-syllables elision.

6. Summary and Conclusion

This paper re-investigated elision in Igbo in order to find out if actually the types of elision existing in the language are limited to consonant elision, vowel elision, syllable elision and syllabic nasal elision identified in past literature. Data obtained from both the primary and secondary sources were descriptively analysed. The results showed that five types of elision exist in the Igbo language. In addition to the four elision types in existing literature, there is a fifth type of elision, which this paper has named *multi-syllables elision* because many syllables are elided for the realization of the utterances umụziàm from $\text{umù} \text{èze} \text{Ānam}$ and Umụēm from $\text{umù} \text{ènwelụm} \text{Ānam}$ ‘two towns in Anambra West Local Government Area of Anambra State’. For example, in deriving Umụēm , five syllables of *nwe*, *lụ*, *a*, *na* and *m* are elided. The types of elision in the Igbo language are, therefore, not limited to consonant elision, vowel elision, syllable elision and syllabic nasal elision; but include multi-syllables elision found in Anam variety. This paper recommends an investigation of other dialects of Igbo to find out if they also exhibit multi-syllables elision in lexicalised words.

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