A Monosystemic Approach to the Study of the Ebira Language Sound System

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Abstract
The study, *A Monosystemic Approach to the Study of the Ebira Language Sound System* attempts to identify the sound system of Ebira language, its characteristics and peculiarities. The study therefore sets out to achieve the specific objectives: describe the areas of vowel harmony and elision, examine the tone distributions in Ebira Language, identify and describe the syllable structures of Ebira language. The study focuses on Ebira Okene, a dialect spoken in Kogi State central. Concepts like phonology, phonemes, vowel harmony, vowel elision, tone and syllable structure, reviewed and works like Scholz (1976) and Adive (1984). The theoretical model adopted for this study is the monosystemic approach by Daniel Jones. Furthermore, the data for this research was collected through a structured interview, recorded through the use of instruments like phone, computer, pen, jotter book and introspective evidence. The researcher uses probability sampling or random sampling procedure for the selection of the data. The made bare the fact that, the nine vowels of Ebira language operate in two harmonic sets. Ebira is an open syllable language having no syllables with final -C (consonant). Syllables Types 1, 2 and 3 are combined in organized structures to form words and other grammatical constructions. Ebira has three level tones and two kinetic tones The level tones (high, mid, and low) have a very wide distribution. The two kinetic tones (high-falling and low-rising) do not occur word initial or word medial, except high-falling tone which occurs on the one syllable verb prefix denoting person and number. This research may be a stepping stone for those who wish to delve into the study and description of the language in terms of its phonological components.

Key words: Phonemes, Vowel harmony, Tone, Syllable, Syllable structure.

Introduction

This paper centers on The Phonological Analysis of the Sound System of Ebira Language. The sound system of a language is a pivotal aspect of that language. An analysis of the sound system of Ebira language is therefore really important. Ebira language belongs to the Kwa Niger-Congo family group. The Kwa languages are spoken by Nupe, Gwari, Igbira and Gode Greenberg (1963). The Ebira language is

used as a means of communication in the market and also used for worshipping at churches and mosques. The language is spoken in towns like Adavi, Okehi, Ajaokuta, and Ogori-Magongo. The speakers of Ebira language are republican by nature, outspoken and very hardworking. In addition, they are also known for the preservation of their culture despite much influence and threats from the western world. Thus, analyzing the sound system of the language is instrumental to the documentation and standardization of the language. This research may be a stepping stone for those who wish to delve into the study and description of the language in terms of its phonological components. Essentially, any effort, no matter how little, contributed towards studying and developing any of the minority languages in Nigeria is in itself very significant, hence the need for this study.

Critical Review
Tone
One important aspect of suprasegmental phonology is tone, which refers to the pitch contour of a word or phrase. Tone in its simplest definition is a contrastive pitch. That is, pitch patterns form the structure of words rather than sentences. According to Yip (2002), tone is "the use of pitch to distinguish words or morphemes from one another." This definition highlights the crucial role that pitch plays in the phonology of tone languages, and the fact that different pitch contours can be used to differentiate words that would otherwise be homophones. Ladd (2008), on the other hand, defines tone as "the use of pitch in the phonology of a language to signal lexical and/or grammatical distinctions between words and/or morphemes." This definition emphasizes the fact that tone can serve different functions in different languages, and that it can convey both lexical and grammatical information.

Thus, in languages with tonal systems, the pitch contour of a word can change its meaning. For example, in Mandarin Chinese, the word "ma" can mean "mother" if pronounced with a high level tone, "hemp" if pronounced with a rising tone, "horse" if pronounced with a falling-rising tone, and "scold" if pronounced with a falling tone. In this language, each syllable has one of four tonal categories, which can change the meaning of the word. As such, Roach (1991) identified five types of tone. Level tone, falling tone and rising tone are categorised as the simple tones. While fall-rise tone and rise-fall tone are categorized as complex tones. Tone is typically indicated using diacritics or tone marks, which are added to the written representation of a word. For example, in pinyin, the Romanised writing system used for Mandarin Chinese, tone marks are used to indicate the pitch contour of each syllable. Overall, Tone is an important aspect of suprasegmental phonology because it can carry lexical and grammatical information that is not conveyed by individual segments or consonants. The study of tone and other suprasegmental features is crucial for understanding the phonology of different languages and the ways in which they convey meaning.

Syllable Structure

Supra-segmental phonology cannot be broken up into discrete units of utterances. The basis of operation for the supra-segmental features is the syllable, many of which will combine to make up utterances. One fact about the syllable, according to Ladefoged (1989), is that it is a necessary unit in the mental organisation and production of utterances. It is for this fact that people believe that, even if they cannot define the syllable, they can count the number of syllables in any given word or sentence. If they are asked to do this, according to Roach (1983), they often tap their fingers as they count, which illustrates the syllables importance in the rhythm of speech. They are able to do this simply by identifying the vocalic elements(s) i.e. vowels in such a word or sentence or at times by considering the peaks of prominence of sounds making up the word or sentence. It becomes apparent therefore that two categories of segmental phonemes i.e. consonant and vowel combine to form the syllable.

In defining the syllable phonetically, an appeal is made to two sub-theories namely: the prominence theory and the chest pulse theory. The prominence theory holds that there are some sounds which are more prominent than others; these loud sounds form the peaks of the respective syllables. But the chest pulse theory claims that in any utterance, there are a number of chest pulses accompanied by increase in air pressure. Line with the second theory-the phonological theory that Gimson (1991) defines the syllable as: "a unit of a higher level than that of a phoneme or sound segment, yet distinct from that of a word or morpheme".

Collapsing these definitions, therefore, one may describe the syllable as an intermediate level of phonological organisation; that is, intermediate between individual segmental units (consonants and vowels) and their combination into words. Put differently, a syllable refers to a pronounceable unit at a higher level than that of a phoneme, but distinct from that of a word or morpheme. It was noticed by Omachonu (2011) that the notion of syllable from many indications, is a psychological real unit. For instance, according to Clement and Keyser, speakers of unwritten languages, if asked to divide a word into its constituent parts, will usually divide it into syllables rather than individual sound segments e.g. education will be /e-dʒu-keɪ-ʃn/ i.e. four syllables.

According to them, it may even prove difficult to convince such speakers that further syllabifications or divisions are possible. This, they assert, was true of English speaking children before the introduction of the alphabetic writing system. The combinatory sequence of syllabic segment(s) which a language permits is referred to as the syllable structure of the language. It could be CV pattern, CVV, CCV, VC, and so on. Every language places a constraint(s) as to the patterning of its syllable structure. Structurally, a syllable may be divided into three parts; the peak, the onset, and the coda. The onset consists of all segments that precede the peak and are tauto-syllabic with it. Sounds in this position are always consonants. The Coda, on the other hand, consists of all the tauto-syllablic segments that follow

the peak. The Coda, therefore, is the consonant sound after the nucleus. Lastly, the peak of a syllable is as well the nucleus of that syllable-the core.

Vowel Harmony

Vowel harmony is a phonological phenomenon in which the vowels within a word or morpheme are influenced by each other, resulting in a systematic pattern of vowel harmony. Specifically, the vowels in a word or morpheme are required to match in terms of certain phonetic features such as height, frontness, or rounding. For example, in some languages with vowel harmony, if the first vowel in a word is a back vowel, then all subsequent vowels in that word or morpheme must also be back vowels. Similarly, if the first vowel in a word is a front vowel, then all subsequent vowels must also be front vowels. Some languages may also have multiple patterns of vowel harmony, each based on a different set of features. This concept has been analysed by numerous scholars over the years. Goldsmith (1976) is of the opinion that vowel harmony is a phonological process in which certain phonetic features of a vowel in a word or morpheme determine the phonetic features of the other vowels in the same word or morpheme. The features that determine vowel harmony may include height, backness, and rounding, among others. Similarly, in the words of Clements (1983), vowel harmony is a phenomenon in which the vowels within a word or morpheme share a common property, such as frontness, backness, or rounding. This property is often determined by the first vowel in the word or morpheme, and subsequent vowels must share this property in order to maintain the harmony.

Thus, these definitions and views highlight the fact that vowel harmony is a complex phonological process that involves the systematic alignment of vowels within a word or morpheme. The exact mechanisms and constraints that underlie this process may vary across languages and theoretical models, but the underlying goal is to maintain a consistent and predictable pattern of vowel harmony within the phonological system. There are numerous types of vowel harmony that have been identified by linguists over the years, Gimson (1962), in his book "An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English", provide a comprehensive analysis of vowel harmony and its various types. While English itself does not exhibit vowel harmony, Gimson's analysis provides a useful framework for understanding the phenomenon in other languages. Gimson notes that vowel harmony can be classified into three main types, based on the phonological feature that determines the harmonic grouping of the vowels. These three types are: Backness harmony, frontness harmony and height harmony. In the backness type of vowel harmony, the backness of the vowels in a word or morpheme must be uniform. This is the most common type of vowel harmony, and is found in languages such as Turkish, Hungarian, and Finnish. Also, in the frontness type of vowel harmony, the frontness of the vowels in a word or morpheme must be uniform. This type of vowel harmony is found in some languages, such as Chukchi and Toda. While In the height type of vowel harmony, the height of the vowels in a word or morpheme

must be uniform. This type of vowel harmony is found in some dialects of Arabic. Gimson also notes that some languages exhibit a combination of two or more types of vowel harmony. For example, in some dialects of Turkish, both backness and rounding harmony are present. Gimson's analysis emphasizes the importance of understanding the phonological features that determine vowel harmony, and the ways in which these features interact with other aspects of the language's phonology. By doing so, linguists and language learners can gain a deeper understanding of the complex sound patterns that underlie vowel harmony in various languages.

Thus, vowel harmony is a fascinating phenomenon that plays an important role in the sound patterns of many languages, and studying it can deepen our understanding of how the human vocal tract produces and perceives speech sounds.

Elision

Elision in phonology refers to the omission of a sound (a phoneme) in speech, particularly during casual conversation. This phenomenon is quite common and can involve the removal of an unstressed vowel, consonant, or syllable. Often, elision is represented in writing by an apostrophe to indicate the missing sounds. For example, in English, contracted forms such as "isn't" (is not), "I'll" (I shall/will), and "they'd" (they had/they would) are instances of elision where vowels and/or consonants are omitted. Similarly, in rapid speech, words like "library" may be pronounced as /laibri/, omitting the whole syllable. Elision is not a uniform process and does not follow strict rules. It tends to occur more frequently in certain styles of speaking, such as casual, spontaneous, or rapid speech. The degree of elision can vary, with some sounds being fully pronounced in slower speech, while in faster speech, they may be articulated but not audibly realized, or in very rapid speech, they may not be observable at all. From "The Handbook of Phonological Theory" by Goldsmith (1995): "Elision refers to the omission of a segment, usually a vowel, resulting in two adjacent consonants coming together, as in the pronunciation of 'government' as /ˈɡʌvərmənt/." This definition from Goldsmith emphasizes the omission of a segment, typically a vowel, resulting in adjacent consonants merging together. An example is the pronunciation of "government" as /ˈɡʌvərmənt/, where the middle vowel is omitted. This emphasizes the context of fast speech and the replacement of the omitted segment by neighboring sounds. The concept of elision is also closely related to the principle of least effort or "economy of effort," which suggests that if a word or expression remains perfectly intelligible without a certain sound, people tend to omit that sound. Over time, consistent elision can lead to changes in the standard form of words, reflecting the evolution of language. Thus, elision is a natural linguistic process that facilitates more efficient and fluent speech by allowing speakers to omit certain sounds under specific conditions, contributing to the dynamic nature of language.

Ebira Phonology

The phonological analysis of the sound system of Ebira language is an area that has received numerous inserts from scholars over the years. The earliest investigation into the structure of minor languages like Ebira was carried out by missionaries and British administrative masters. Although these scholars laid more emphasis on Nupoid languages (the language family Ebira belongs to) in general, a couple of them made mention of Ebira language in their works. In 1846, Clarke, who was a baptist missionary, published a collection of vocabularies of African languages. He includes two varieties of Ebira vocabulary in his collection. This is the earliest record of Ebira dialects.

Five years later in 1854, Koelle mentions three varieties of Ebira: Opanda, Igu and Ebira-Hima, in his book. He lists about 200 vocabulary items and about 40 phrases for each. Cust, in 1883, records two dialects of Ebira: Panda and Hima in his work. Johnson and Christaller (1886) published a collection of vocabularies of Niger and the Gold Coast languages. It is said that Johnson translated the Psalms and Catechism into the Ebira language.

The earliest work on the language in the 20th century was done by Thomas. Thomas (1914) mentions Igara as a dialect of Ebira in his book. He includes a word-list of 31 items of Ebira. Similarly, Westermann and Bryan (1952) include Ebira as one of the three dialect clusters of the Nupe group in their book. They list four dialects for Ebira which are: Igbirra-Panda, Igbirra-Ihima, Igbirra-Egu, and Igara. In addition, Brown (1958) in his record repeats the four Ebira dialects listed by Westermann and Bryan. He only adds a note that all the dialects of Ebira are mutually intelligible.

It is observed from the above that references to Ebira in the works listed are very general and extremely limited linguistic remarks. The literature about the Ebira language from the sixties onwards differs markedly from the earlier contributions. It was from the sixties that specific linguistic articles on the language began to surface, starting from Greenberg (1963), who surveyed languages of Africa and classified them from massive word lists. His classification of Ebira under the Kwa language family is generally accepted as standard.

The next main linguistic investigation into the language is by Scholz (1976) of Summer Institute of Linguistics. Scholz stayed in Ebira land from 1973 to1976. He developed a practical Orthography for the language and published some literacy and religious pamphlets. He also supervised the translation of the Ebira New Testament. His main linguistic publication is "Igbirra Phonology" published in the microfiche series of SIL.

More recently in 1984, Adive became the first native of Ebira to write comprehensively on the structure of the language. His thesis, "A Descriptive Study of the Verbal Piece in Ebira" expounds on the phonological, morphological and syntactic structure of the language. One of the areas covered by his work is the phonological analysis of Ebira language. He identified a total of 32 phonemes in

Ebira language, thirteen of these phonemes are vowels, and nineteen are consonants. He also analyzed the syllabic structure of the language.

As observed, the Ebira language lacks a detailed study of its phonological structure. In order to achieve accuracy in the phonological description of the language, this study will assess some of the findings made in previous works, more particularly Adive's "A Descriptive Study of the Verbal Piece in Ebira". While Adive's work focused more on identifying the phonemes of the language, this work embodies segmental and suprasegmental features such as tone, syllable structure, vowel harmony and vowel elision.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is the monosystemic approach by Daniel Jones. The monosystemic approach recognizes the phoneme as constituting a minimum contrastive phonological entity in itself. This model allows the grouping of phoneme into separate families. It further gives room for constructing the system of alphabetic writing of a language by means of using minimal pairs without much difficulty.

Also, in carrying out this research, primary and secondary sources of data were used. The primary data in which this study is based are mostly tape recordings. The recordings cut across age, sex, status, social background and education. The secondary data include findings from previous researches that are related to this one. These include *Aspects of Igede Phonology: A Monosystemic Approach* by Ekpeme (1990) and *The Phonological Aspects of Koro Language: A Monosystemic Approach* by James (1993).

Furthermore, the data for this research was collected through a structured interview that was tape recorded. Also, other instruments used for data collection are phone, power bank, computer, pen, jotter book and introspective evidence. In sourcing for data, the researcher used probability sampling or random sampling procedure and data analysis was guided by the monosystemic approach.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Findings

The findings of this research cuts across segmental and suprasegmental levels. At the segmental level, vowel harmony and vowel elision are the areas of focus. The findings at the suprasegmental level, on the other hand, are limited to tone and syllable structure.

Vowel Elision

Vowel elision refers to the omission or removal of one or more vowel sounds, usually to simplify pronunciation or to maintain a natural flow of speech. This can occur in various languages and dialects. As Ebira is an open syllable language, the last segment of any word is always a vowel. The first segment of nominals, with the possible exception of certain bound pronouns, is always a vowel, while verbals and some function words always start with consonants. Therefore, very frequently

two vowels, labelled here as and V1 a V2, come in juxtaposition. V1 is the final vowel of the first item, and V2 is the initial vowel of the second item. Within a grammatical phrase, one of the two juxtaposed vowels is elided and the other one is retained. Thus, vowel elision in Ebira occurs in two forms as discussed below.

The first trigger of vowel elision is the /i/ occurs as V1 (final vowel) and /i̩/ as V2 (initial vowel). The monosyllabic verb of CV structure /si/ 'to want', is used as a typical word where the final vowel is /i/, that is V1. Similarly, the verb /si̩/ 'to take', is used as a typical word having /i̩/ as its final vowel, V1.

Nominals having /i/ and /i̩/ as their initial vowels, such as in /izi/ 'bambara nuts' and /i̩ŋo̩/ 'scales', illustrate /i/ and /i̩/ as V2 at word junctures. When the vowels /i/ and /i̩/ are juxtaposed at word junctions, in either order, /i̩/ is elided and /i/ is retained. That means that the raised close front vowel /i/ dominates the lowered close front vowel /i̩/ at word junctions. This is illustrated in the examples below:

i + i > i   si (want) + izi (bambara nuts) > sizi "i want bambara nuts"
i + i̩ > i   si (want) + i̩ŋo̩ (scale) > sino̩ "I want scale"
i̩ + i > i   si̩ (take) + izi (bambara nuts) > sizi "I take bambara nuts)
i̩ + i̩ > i̩   si̩ (take) + i̩ŋo̩ (scale) > sino̩ "I take the scales"

The second trigger of vowel elision is when the /i/ sound occurs as V1 (final vowel) and the /u/ sound occurs as V2 (initial vowel). The verbs /si/ and /si̩/ are used here again as words having final /i/ and final /i̩/. The nominals /uji/ 'basket' and /u̩ji̩/ 'sugar cane' are used as examples of typical words having /u/ and /u̩/ as initial vowels. When /i/ occurs as V1 and /u/ as V2, /i/ is elided and /u/ is retained. When /i/ occurs as V1 and /u̩/ occurs as V2, neither is retained; instead the resulting vowel is /u/. When /i̩/ occurs as V1 and /u/ occurs as V2, /i̩/ is elided and /u/ is retained. The following examples illustrate these changes:

i + u > u   si (take) + uji (basket) > suji "want basket"
i + u̩ > u   si (take) + u̩ji̩ (sugar cane) > suji̩ "want sugar cane"
i̩ + u > u   si̩ (take) + uji (basket) > suji "take basket"
i̩ + u̩ > u̩   si̩ (take) + u̩ji̩ (sugar cane) > su̩ji̩ "take sugar cane"

Vowel Harmony
The vowels of a language in which harmony operates are usually in two groups. Various terms have been applied by linguists working on West African languages where vowel harmony operates to refer to the two groups. Some used the terms Fortis and Lenis to refer to them. Recently Stewart applied the terms Advanced Tongue Root (+ATR) and Unadvanced Tongue Root (-ATR) to refer to the two vowel harmonic sets in the Akan language. Akan is a language of Ghana. It belongs to the Kwa language, the same family that Ebira belongs to.

However, for the purpose of this research, I will be adopting Adive's terms: Harmonic Vowel Set A and Harmonic Vowel Set B. Thus, the nine vowels of Ebira language operate in two harmonic sets. These are:
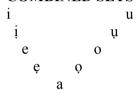SET A   i e a o u

SET B   i̥ ẹ ḁ ọ u̥

These harmonic sets can be arranged as follows:

SET A

i   u
 e   o
     a

 SET B
   i̥   u̥
      ẹ   ọ
          a

COMBINED SETS

i   u
 i̥   u̥
   e   o
    ẹ   ọ
        a

The vowel /a/ is common to both sets, as shown above and in the following examples:

Table 1

COMBINATION	WORD 1	TRANSLATION	WORD 2	TRANSLATION
a – i	Ayi	"chicken pox"	Iya	"pounded yam"
a - i̥	ayi̥	"flour	i̥pa	"calabash"
a - e	Age	"a jug"	Eebaa	"yes, indeed"
a - ẹ	ahẹ	"song"	ẹha	"pear"

Syllable Structure

At the suprasegmental level, the syllable structure of Ebira language is examined in this research. The smallest units of structure in the phonology of Ebira are Consonants (C), Vowels (V) and Tones (T). The structure of the Syllable (S) can be described in terms of these three elements. Every syllable has a vowel or a syllabic nasal as its nucleus. In CV syllables the C is a marginal element. Tone is a distinctive identification feature of the syllable. Every syllable bears tone which is evinced by the pitch of the voiced parts, regularly carried by the vowel or the syllabic nasal. Thus the nucleus of the syllable always carries one of the three level tones or one of the two kinetic tones of the language.

Tones on the syllables are marked as follows:

High tone   / ´ /

Level tone   unmarked

Low tone   / ˋ/
High - Falling tone   / ˆ/
Low - Rising tone   / ˇ/

Ebira has three syllable types. The three syllable types consist of V (vowel) plus tone, N (syllabic nasal) plus tone, and CV (consonant vowel) plus tone. These are described below.

The syllable type 1 in Ebira language consists of a vowel plus tone.

It is often described using the general formula below:

     S1 --------- T(V)

Tone is looked on here as being a prosodic element of the syllable as a whole, and the structure is therefore rewritten as T(V). Examples are given below:

Table 2

WORD	SYLLABLE STRUCTURE	TRANSLATION
ộ ré	V̂ CV́	'he saw'
ộ mè	V̂ CV̀	'he did'
ọ̀zè	V̀CV̀	'road'
ọyị	VCV	'sun'

As illustrated above, the V syllables may occur initially or medially or finally in the phonological word. In grammatically complex words, up to 3 V syllables may occur in succession word initially, and up to 2 may occur in succession word medially or finally. For example:

Table 3

WORD	SYLLABLE STRUCTURE	TRANSLATION
Àpáápà	V̀CV́V́CV̀	'maize'
Ùsúù	V̀CV́V̀	'anklet'

Syllable type 2 is made up of tone plus nasal. It has the general formula below:

     S2 -------- T (N)

Syllable Type 2 is similar to Syllable Type 1 in that it has a single segmental element, but it is a syllabic nasal, and not a vowel, that carries the tone and is the nucleus. All Type 2 syllables are followed in the same word by a CV syllable. They do not occur in word finally and therefore none of the syllabic nasals ever carry either of the two kinetic tones of the language since kinetic tones only occur on word-final syllables. The articulation of the syllabic nasal is homorganic with the consonant that immediately follows it. Examples are given below:

Table 4

WORD	SYLLABLE STRUCTURE	TRANSLATION
ǹdá	ŃCV́	'father'
ǹɲá	ŃCV́	mother'
àm̀pò	V̀NCV̀	'bag'
ìhíɲ̀nà	V̀CV́NCV̀	'nine'

Syllable Type 3 consists of tone plus consonant and vowel. IG has the general formula below:

S3 ---------- T (CV)

Examples are given below:

Table 5

WORD	SYLLABLE STRUCTURE	TRANSLATION
hí	CV́	'to call'
sì	CV̀	'to look for'
ne	CV	'to throw'
hèré	CV̀CV́	'to vomit'

Monosyllabic verbs and the first syllable of polysyllabic verbs are all of structure CV. Ebira is an open syllable language having no syllables with final -C (consonant). Syllables Types 1, 2 and 3 are combined in organized structures to form words and other grammatical constructions. Most words in the language consist of one to four syllables, only a few consist of more than four.

In essence, the syllable structures listed below give a summary of the structure of words of one to four syllables in the language.

Monosyllables
V   N-   C
Disyllables
VV   VCV   NCV   CVV   CVCV
Trisyllables
VVV   VVCV   VNCV   VCVV   VCVCV   CVVCV   CVCVCV   CVNCV
Quatrosyllables
VVCVCV   VNCVCV   VCVVCV   VCVNCV   VCVCVCV   VCVCVV
CVCVCVV   CVCVCVCV

Tone
Tone is another important suprasegmental component of Ebira language that is examined in this research. Tone in Ebira functions at two distinct levels. It functions at the lexical level and at the grammatical level. In Ebira language, Tone is symbolized as follows:
High tone.   - H -   marked(´)

Mid tone.   - M -   unmarked
Low tone.   - L -   marked(ˋ)

It can be observed from the above that Ebira has three level tones and two kinetic tones. Lexical tone is directly related to the syllable structure as stated earlier. Every syllable has a tonal feature as one of its phonological components.

The level tones (high, mid, and low) have a very wide distribution. The two kinetic tones (high-falling and low-rising) do not occur word initial or word medial, except high-falling tone which occurs on the one syllable verb prefix denoting person and number. The low-rising tone [ˇ] is found to occur only in the nine monosyllabic verbs listed below:

Table 6

WORD	TRANSLATION
hě	'to find something'
rě	'to lick'
ɲě	'to wipe'
jě	'to stand', 'to wait'
zě	'to answer'
rǒ	'to make a hole'
nǫ̌	'to make announcement'
tǫ̌	'to pick small items'
ɲǎ	'to break something with stone'

At the lexical level, tone is phonemic in that it minimally distinguishes two or more lexical items. It is easy to observe some lexical contrasts on monosyllabic items especially verbs of CV syllable structure. Tone is an identification feature of the verb word. This is exemplified below:

Table 7

TONE	WORD	TRANSLATION
High	Sí	'to pay'
Low	Sì	'to want'
High	ɲí	'to have'
Mid	ɲi	'to choose'
Low-rising	hě	'to find something'

A full range of lexical tone on disyllabic verbs is also examined. A full range of nine lexical tone patterns that can occur on two CVCV syllable verbs are exemplified below:

Table 8

TONE PATTERN	WORD	TRANSLATION
HH	Hárá	'to plane'
HM	Dúdu	'to be together in action
HL	Hínè	'to be sweet'
MH	Diví	'to be bad'
MM	Hara	'to scratch lightly'
ML	tẹsị̀	'to care for'
LH	hẹ̀ní	'to shake'
LM	vị̀dị	'to be first'
LL	Hàrà	'to gather'

Tone also distinguishes two or more nominal lexical items of VCV syllable structure.

Table 9

WORD	TRANSLATION
Ùsè	'cough'
usé	'question'
Ìhì	'a case'
ihî	'loss'

A system of nine contrastive tone patterns occurs on two VCV syllable nouns.

Table 10

TONE PATTERN	WORD	TRANSLATION
HH	ị́dá	'hill'
HM	Íze	'grass cutter'
HL	Ákù	'inner room'
MH	ahẹ́	'song'
MM	Uye	'meat'
ML	anẹ̀	'egret'
LH	òsé	'wife'
LM	òrụ	'crow'
LL	Ídú	'lion'

It is important to note that nouns of more than 3 syllables have extended pattern, using the same high, mid, and low tones. These nouns and verbs are described here in relation to tones in isolation only.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study is important in the field of linguistics and language study. The significance of this study is based on the fact that Ebira is a little known indigenous minority language on the verge of extinction. This study draws attention to the language by bringing it to fore of linguistic analysis or description. The Ebira native speakers, and even non-native speakers of the language, may find this research useful as it describes the structure of the language. This study is also of benefit to the researcher himself as it increases his knowledge of the language system. It is also of benefit to future researchers who might work on similar aspect of the language. Furthermore, studies in Ebira language are limited. This research may be a stepping stone for those who wish to delve into the study and description of the language in terms of its phonological components. Essentially, any effort, no matter how little, contributed towards studying and developing any of the minority languages in Nigeria is in itself very significant, hence the need for this study.

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