

Liaison in Igbo phonology

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Abstract

Liaison is a phonological process that deals with the insertion of a sound in between two words to serve as a connecting link between them. This paper is an investigation into the operation of liaison in Igbo with particular reference to the dialects spoken around Omambala region of Anambra State. A discussion on the nature and operation of the named phenomenon in the Igbo language is made, the true behavior reviewed and its operation in between words also ascertained. This is achieved through close examination of the formal and informal speech patterns of the native speakers of the communities within the region adopting the perceptual approach. The study found out that liaison in Igbo exists in three forms namely: when a linking lateral/l/ is inserted in between two nouns, when a vowel that ends the first word in a word boundary is lengthened and when a lateral is inserted across word boundaries, though the speeches where the linking lateral [l] is observed are rare in the language, and then the /m/-liaison. Based on the findings, it is recommended that further study on the operation of liaison be carried out to enable discovery of other possible manifestations of this phonological phenomenon in Igbo especially in those variants of the language that have not yet been explored.

Keywords: *liaison, phonology, vowel lengthening, insertion, word boundaries, Igbo language.*

Introduction

One of the salient features of language is that it has the ability of describing the systems and patterns of sounds that occur in it (Ladefoged (1982). ‘Phonology is the study of the use of speech sounds in language. In the study of phonology, certain phonological processes tend to modify or change the nature of speech sounds involved during speech production (Mbah and Mbah (2000), and among these phonological processes is ‘liaison’. Liaison is a recurrent theme in the study of adult phonology. The word ‘liaison’ originates from French and means a link or connection. In pronunciation and linguistics generally, liaisons are associated with the connection between two words; linking of final sounds of one word with the beginning sound of next word.

This study therefore is interested in identifying the phenomenon ‘liaison’ in the Igbo language and establishing the possible form of its existence in the named language’s phonology. The main representative study area for this work is Omambala region of Anambra state, Nigeria. Following Uwazuoke’s (2018) reclassification of dialects, the Igbo varieties spoken around Omambala region are categorized as Omambala Main Dialect of the East Niger Group of Nwaozuzu (2008), and the Onitsha Main dialect of Inland West Dialect Cluster of Ikekeonwu (1987). Data were gathered from representative dialect communities from the four Local Government Areas in Omambala viz: Ayamelum, Anambra East, Anambra West and Oyi. A total of sixteen respondents were interviewed from the four Local Government Areas. This does not mean that useful data from other Igbo communities were not used.

From the selected dialect communities, four respondents were chosen and engaged in formal and informal discussions which were recorded and the needed data sourced and used for

analysis. These data were written down orthographically, transcribed phonetically, tone marked and then glossed for easy comprehension of the dialect used. The data identified as liaison were categorized in three main forms:

- i. Intrusive /l/ or /l/- liaison
- ii. Vowel lengthening liaison
- iii. /m/- liaison

Liaison in French and English

Liaison as a phonological process has gained much attention in the field of linguistics especially in French and English. In French, this euphoric technique occurs when a word ending in a normally silent consonant is followed by a vowel or *h* meut in the sense that the consonant might be transferred onto the next word. Chevrot, Dugua and Michel (2008) posit that liaison is interpreted in French as an indicator of interactions between various levels of language organization. Dantricourt (2010) sees French liaison as a phonological process that takes place when an otherwise silent word-final consonant is pronounced before a following vowel initial word. He maintains that it is a process that has been evolving for centuries, and whose patterns of realization are influenced by a wide range of linguistic and social factors. In the words of Bybee (2001), ‘Liaison is the appearance of a vowel-initial word in words that in other contexts end in a vowel’. Durand and Lyche (2008) also see liaison as a multi-faceted phenomenon that is obligatory, optional, or forbidden, depending on the syntactic context.

Gonzalez and Gullamon (2009) present two traditional English accents (rhotic and non-rhotic accents in their study of /r/- liaison in English. According to them, English accents are traditionally divided into two groups according to the distribution of the phoneme /r/. They rightly put it that rhotic

accents are characterized by the pronunciation of the letter [r] as an r- sound in all positions of its occurrence, but in non-rhotic accents the situation is more complex. They posit that while letter [r] is always pronounced before the nucleus of the syllable (e.g. read /r:d/, dread /dred) in these accents, post-nuclearly, an r-sound can only be found when the letter [r] is immediately followed by a vowel sound across morpheme boundaries, this phenomenon they termed “linking” /r/. They further explained that /r/ is not found in words such as store /stɔ:/, or stock /stɔ:k/ in non-rhotic accents since [r] is followed by a pause or consonant sound. They however maintain that a linking /r/ is pronounced when the [r] is followed by a vowel sound across internal (e.g. storing /stɔ:riŋ/) or external morpheme boundaries (e.g. store it /stɔ:rit/). A related phenomenon to linking /r/ in non-rhotic accents is also discussed by them, a phenomenon they call intrusive /r/; an apenthetic r-sound in intervocalic positions where, historically, there has never been an /r/ in the pronunciation of the word and present day spelling does not contain the [r] e.g.,

The idea [r] of /ði aidɪər ɒv/
I saw [r] it /ai sɔ:rit/ etc

Other researchers that have made input in the study of liaison in the field of linguistics include Bennett, (1991); Oladipupo & Akiinjobi (2015) & Oladipupo (2014) etc. The following forms of liaison have been identified by some scholars as recorded by Oladipupo (2014):

- (i) Consonant- vowel liaison (carrying over of a word-final consonant to a word beginning with a vowel in a stressed syllable), e.g. *first of all* [fɜ:stɒvɔ:l], *not at all* [nɒtətɔ:l] (Kenworthy, 1987).

- (ii) r-liaison (linking and intrusive /r/), e.g. *far off* [fa:rɒv], *idea of* [aɪdɪərɒv] (Gimson, 1980; Roach, 2000; Skandera & Burleigh, 2005; Hannisdal, 2006).
- (iii) j-liaison (after /i/ or /ɪ/), e.g. *me and you* [mi:ɹənju:], *my own* [maɪəʊn] (Simo, Bobda & Mbangwana, 1993; Katalin and Szilárd, 2006).
- (iv) w-liason (after /u:/ or /ʊ/, e.g. *you and me* [ju:wənmi:], *allow us* [əlaʊwəs] Simo, Bobda & Mbangwana, 1993; Katalin and Szilárd, 2006).

Liaison in Igbo Phonology

Following (Hevrot, Dugua and Michel (2008), liaison in French is one of the Sandhi phenomena that are present in many languages, and the Igbo language is one of the many languages referred above. However, few scholars have mentioned the phenomenon in Igbo (e.g Eme, 2008; Mbah, 2012), hence the urge to embark on this work.

Liaison in Igbo shares the universal characteristic of linking and intrusion occurring at word boundaries. In Igbo phonology therefore, three cases of liaison are identified and are going to be discussed under the following headings:

Intrusive /l/ or /l/- liaison

This is the introduction of an unetymological /l/ that has not been traditionally in existence in the pronunciation of a word. The contemporary Igbo spelling of such word also does not contain the letter [l]. In Omambala variant of Igbo, such words usually consist of two lexical items (mainly noun), when pronounced in isolation. But in connected speech; when they are brought together, one of the nouns especially the second noun

assumes the function of an adjective and qualifies the other. See examples below:

Words in isolation			Words in associative construction	
No.	Noun	Noun (adj.)	Omambala Igbo	Standard Igbo
1.	umụ /ómò/ (children)	+ ani /ànì/ (ground)	umụ[l]ani /ómòlání/ (little children)	umụaka /ómòá [↓] ká/ (little children)
2.	ivi /íví/ (premature)	+ ukwa /ókwà/ (breadfruit)	ivi[l]ukwa /ívílókwa/ (premature breadfruit)	ifiukwa/ífí ókwa/ (premature breadfruit)
3.	umu /ómò/ (children)	+ eri /èrì/ (ancestral name)	umụ[l]eri /ómòléri/ (children of eri)	umụeri /ó [↓] móèrì/ (children of eri)
4.	nta /ń [↓] tá/ (hunt)	+ eje/é [↓] dzé/ (dare not go)	nte[l]eje /ńtèlèdzè/ (name of town)	nteje /ńtèdzè/ (name of town)

As earlier mentioned, the operation of liaison in the examples above is the same as what happens in non-rhotic accent of English. The intrusive /l/ here acts as a linkage or connection between ‘umụ/ómò/’ and ‘ani /ànì/’ in (1) and ‘ivi/íví/’ and ‘ukwa/ókwà/’ in (2), ‘umụ /ómò/’ and ‘eri /èrì/’ in (3), ‘nta /ń[↓]tá/’ and ‘eje/é[↓]dzé/’ in (4) in order to enhance

smoothness and fluency in the speech. The intrusive /l/ does not appear in the spelling of these words. It does not carry in it any meaning but is introduced in the native speakers' speeches to avoid hiatus and for euphoric purposes.

Other examples of intrusive /l/ can be found in some other areas of Igbo such as Agulu in Anaocha Local Government Area of Anambra State and Lekwesi Umuchieze in Umunneochi Local Government Area of Abia State. In Agulu, the following examples can be found:

Words in isolation			Words in associative construction	
No.	Noun	Noun (adj.)	Agulu Igbo	Standard Igbo
5.	ji /dʒi/ (yam)	+ oko /ókó/ (name of place)	ji[l]oko /dʒíló [↓] kó/ (plantain)	jioko /dʒíó [↓] kó/ (plantain)
6.	nshì /nʃí/ (faeces)	+ ephi /éφí/ (cattle)	nshì[l]ephi /nʃílé [↓] φí/ (cattle dung)	nsi ehi /nʃí é [↓] hí/ (cattle dung)
7.	akpa /àkpà/ (bag)	+ ido/idò/ (tylor ant)	akpi[l]ido /àkpílídò/ (tylor ant nest)	akpaido/àkpàídò/ (tylor ant nest)

In Lekwesi Umuchieze, Umunneochi Local Government Area of Abia State, we hear such words like:

Words in isolation			Words in associative construction	
No.	Noun	Noun (adj.)	Lekwesi Igbo	Standard Igbo
8.	mba /m̀bà/ (town)	+ ọ̀hà /òhà/ (public)	mba[l]ọ̀hà /m̀bàlọ̀hà/ (township)	m̀báòhà (township)

Vowel lengthening

This can be seen in Igbo when a vowel sound that ends first word is prolonged at word boundary. Where they occur in the Igbo language, the sound in question attracts an extra force. Vowel lengthening is what Eme (2008) meant when she talks about an interesting phenomenon in Igbo resulting from intersegmental co-ordination. According to her, liaison is simply a phonological process involving the introduction of a sound in between two words to serve as a connecting link between the two words. In her observations, the segments that can be used in liaison in the Igbo language are mostly vowels and in a few cases, the syllabic bilabial nasal. She mentions that during liaison, the segment comes in to form a smooth link between a preceding syllabic segment and a following consonant, which therefore calls for a transition from syllabic segment to a consonant at the word boundary without any perceivable juncture. She drew her examples from Akpo dialect thus:

Canonical form	After liaison	Gloss
Chí kà	Chî kà	God is greater
Chí nwè	Chî nwè	God's own
Chí dì	Chî dì	God is

Chí nyèrè	Chíi nyèrè	God gave
Ñchètá kà	Ñchètáà kà	Remembrance is greater
Ònyé mà échí	Ònyèè mà échí	Who knows tomorrow?

She maintains that liaison as a phenomenon in Igbo is more prevalent during relaxed speech than during very rapid speech. Similarly in Omambala dialect, such phenomenon is observed from our investigations. This type of liaison mostly operates with proper nouns (names of persons and places). These names can come in form of sentence that is complete as in example (9&10) one yet to be completed as in example (11&12) or in phrase form as in example (13&14). The emphasis placed on the vowel at the end of the first word calls for a slow speech and lengthening of the vowel sound:

No.	Canonical form (Omambala Igbo)	After liaison	Standard Igbo	Gloss
9.	aya meli m /ájá mèlím/	ayaamelim /ájá[à]mèlím/	aghamelum /áwámèlòm/	War did me
10.	echi di ime /éʃídi í [↓] mé/	echiidime /éʃí[i]dí [↓] mé/	Echidime /éʃídi [↓] mé/	Tomorrow is pregnant
11.	ovọ di /òvó dì/	ovọodi /òvó[ò]dì/	ofodi /òfódi/	There is justice
12.	onye ma /òné mà/	onyeema /òné[è]mà/	Onyema /ònémà/	Who knows?
13.	ike chukwu /iké ↓ʃú [↓] kwú/	ikeechukwu /iké[é] ↓ʃú [↓] kwú/	Ikechukwu / íké↓ʃú [↓] kwú/	God's power
14.	obi diki /òbí dí [↓] ké/	obiidiki /òbí[i]dí [↓] ké/	Obidiki /òbídí [↓] ké/	Hero's abode

/m/-Liaison

Mbah (2012) actually identifies this type of liaison in his discussion about circumfixation in derivational morphology. The /m/ sound is introduced in between in this situation to express the act of doing in nominalization. Nominalizations involving circumfix is a very productive process in Igbo according to Anagbogu, Mbah and Eme (2010). This type of ‘liaison- nominalization’ is also found in Omambala Igbo when the morpheme ‘a’ or ‘e’ is added to verb root to derive a noun. Examples are shown below with the verb roots ‘-gbà, -kpú, -lọ, -lé, -wú and -ni’, thus we have these nominal:

No.	Prefix		Verb Root	Nominalization	Gloss
15.	a	+	gbà	agbamndụ	covenant taking
	/á/		/gbà/	/àgbà[m]ndù/	
16.	a	+	kpú	akpụmisi	birthday celebration
	/á/		/kpú/	/àkpómísí/	
17.	a	+	lọ	alommụọ	new yam festival
	/á/		/lọ/	/àlọ[m]múó/	
18.	e	+	le	elemavịa	selling of goods (trading)
	/é/		/lé/	/èlé[m]ávía/	
19.	e	+	wu	ewumite	cooking of food (catering)
	/é/		/wú/	/èwú[m]itè/	
20.	e	+	ni	enimozu	burial ceremony (funeral)
	/é/		/ni/	/èni[m]ózú/	

Note: The sounds that are enclosed with square brackets in the above examples are the said liaisons observed in the language of study.

Conclusion

From our study, we found out that the phenomenon (liaison) is identifiable in every language with its operation in a particular language being peculiar to the language's system. In the Igbo language phonology, liaison mostly operates with nouns as seen in the examples above. The three forms of liaison identifiable in Igbo phonology from our findings are: /l/-liaison or intrusive /l/, vowel lengthening liaison and /m/- liaison with the m- liaison being more productive as it can act on all verb roots to form nominal.

Based on the findings, it is then recommended that further research work on the operation of liaison in Igbo be carried out. This to a great extent will enable discoveries of other possible manifestations of this phonological process in the language especially in the Igbo variants that have not been explored.

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