

PROBLEMS OF ALTERNATE LANGUAGE PHONOLOGY: A BI-DIRECTIONAL FOCUS ON IGBO AND YORUBA PHONEMES

INTRODUCTION

At the outset of contrastive studies in the 50s, the theorists seemed to have arrogated to the tool the absolute capacity of providing solutions for all language-learning problems (*learning* used here in contradistinction to *acquisition* [Mclaughlin 1987:20]). To those pioneer contrastive theorists, all language-learning problems were traceable to interference. Hence, "the general consensus in the 50s and 60s was that learners' errors could be predicted by comparing and contrasting the grammars of their L1 and of the target language' (Benson 2002:68). However, with further research in the area, it became clear that the tool had no such unlimited predictive power; though interlingual problems result from the negative influence of the first language (L1) on the target language (TL), there are also intralingual problems due to the complexities peculiar to the TL as well as other causes of problems. That was why a new tool, error analysis, was subsequently developed which identifies two categories of errors - interlingual and intralingual - at its explanation stage (see Anasiudu 1983).

That realization of the limitations in the predictive power of contrastive analysis led to the decline of its influence in the 70s. As Dulay and Burt (1972:240) put it, "the CA hypothesis in 1972 has come under a good deal of criticism, though no one has rejected it entirely. Many teachers accept it but consider its pedagogical use minimal. Many L2 theorists have reservations about it...". This led to the vast majority of errors being explained in developmental rather than in interlingual terms because the errors were considered similar to those of L1 acquisition (Benson 2002:68). The curtailment, as it were, of the predictive power of contrastive analysis might have arisen from the restrictive definition of interference by some who saw it simply as direct transfer of material from L1 to TL. Transfer is more complex than that, hence the current resurgence of interest in the tool. Therefore, the value of the tool could not have diminished. It is obviously the L1 that makes the Igbo/Yoruba man say /taŋk/ and the Hausa man say /saŋk/ for /θæŋk/.

Now that interference has been confirmed as a major source of learners' errors, it has become obvious too that it is most easily manifest

on the level of phonology. A language learner is usually identified by his foreign accent, characterized by the strange phonological features injected from his L1 into the TL (see Jibril 1979), such as the Indian retroflex manifest in their English as well as the tone-language native speakers' syllable timing in their English. The tool's pedagogic value has made imperative its use in preparing a suitable syllabus for TL learning, at least in grammatical-competence training.

It is pertinent to mention here that language learning concerns non-native languages, including the foreign language (FL), the second language (L2) and the alternate language (AL) as clearly distinguished by Wilkins (1972:156). We should recall that an AL is any one of the different indigenous languages co-existing in the same country. Massive research in FL and L2 has led to information glut in these areas while AL research is still a virgin ground. Yet, one had expected an increase in AL research following the promulgation of the current Nigerian policy on language education, which requires every Nigerian child to learn one of the three official indigenous languages besides his mother tongue at school. All the same, the problem of AL teaching is still comparable to that of FL/L2 teaching, the geographical contiguity of the L1 with the AL notwithstanding.

We will now embark on a systematic, bi-directional contrastive analysis of standard Igbo and standard Yoruba phonemes.

Phoneme Identification

Recalling that a phoneme is a minimal distinctive sound unit of any language, we will now employ the simple method of minimal pairing for the determination of the phonemes of each of these two languages under study. The minimal pairs will not be transcribed because both languages are virtually phonetic in the sense that each letter of either alphabet stands for one sound.

The phonemes of each language will be subcategorized into consonantal, vocalic and suprasegmental. However, the analysis of the phonemic inventories of the two languages will be alternated under each subcategory as a means of putting the differences, which are the basis of the learning burden, into perspective.

Inventories of Igbo and Yoruba Consonantal Phonemes

We will begin with the identification of the consonantal phonemes of each language using minimal pairing before building the required inventory.

Igbo Consonantal Phonemes

pùé	/p/	bùé	/b/
'sprout'		'carry'	
kùà	/k/	gùá	/g/
'sow'		'read'	
kwèé	/kw/	gwèé	/gw/
'sing'		'grind'	
ònyá	/n/	ònwá	/ɲw/
'sore'		'moon'	
tàá	/t/	dàá	/d/
'bite'		'fall'	
kpòò	/kp/	gbòò	/gb/
'call'		'vomit'	
mù	/m/	nù	/n/
'me'		'to hear'	
òñù	/ɲ/	òdù	
'joy'		'tail'	
chèé	/tʃ/	jèé	/dʒ/
'think'		'go'	
sàá	/s/	zàá	/z/
'wash'		'sweep'	
Òvòkò	/v/	òbòdò	
'name of a town'		'town'	
òhù	/h/	òdù	
'vision'		'tail'	
òyò	/j/	ògò	
'maracas'		'mercy'	
fèé	/f/	jèé	
'fly'		'go'	
ìshá	/ʃ/	ìkpá	
'crayfish'		'obstinacy'	
ághá	/ɣ/	ára	/r/
'war'		'madness'	
òlà	/l/	òkà	
'jewel'		'maize'	
éwú	/w/	égwú	
'goat'		'dance'	

From the foregoing, the following Igbo consonantal phonemes emerge: /p, b, t, d, k, g, kp, gb, kw, gw, m, n, n̄, h̄, h̄w, tʃ, dʒ, f, v, s, z, ʃ, ʧ, h, r, l, j, w/.

Yoruba Consonantal Phonemes

ibò	/b/	igò	/g/
'vote'		'bottle'	
adé	/d/	ayé	/j/
'crown'		'earth'	
ipò	/kp/	ihò	/h/
'post'		'hole'	
mi	/m/	ni	/n/
'me'		'is'	
ata	/t/	ara	/r/
'pepper'		'body'	
èkùtè	/k/	èbùtè	
'rat'		'destruction'	
igbó	/gb/	ijó	/dʒ/
'bush'		'dance'	
ifun	/f/	idun	
'intestine'		'bed bug'	
èsó	/s/	èlò	/l/
'nail'		'how much'	
owó	/w/	oró	
'money'		'agony'	
aṣo	/ʃ/	aro	
'cloth'		'cripple'	

From the minimal pairs above, the following Yoruba consonantal phonemes emerge: /b, t, d, k, g, kp, gb, m, n, dʒ, f, s, ʃ, h, l, r, j, w/.

The foregoing minimal pairs, therefore, reveal that the consonantal phoneme in either language is always syllable-initial. The pairs yield 28 Igbo and 18 Yoruba consonantal phonemes, showing that the former are larger in number. Consequently, a Yoruba learner of Igbo will encounter problems with the following strange consonantal sounds: /p, kw, gw, h̄, h̄w, tʃ, v, z, ʧ/.

One phoneme missing in the inventory of Yoruba consonantal phonemes and also in this list is /h̄/, which actually exists in Yoruba but as an allophone of /n/ (Dunstan 69:5). The pedagogic implication of the absence of these nine phonemes in Yoruba is the need for the Yoruba learner of Igbo to learn to produce each of them so as to be

able to speak Igbo effectively. Otherwise, he will resort to approximating these sounds by replacing them with Yoruba ones that are contiguous to them.

The Igbo learner of Yoruba, on the other hand, will have no problem with Yoruba consonantal sounds since none of them is strange except the phonetic value of /r/, which is a tap [r], not a roll that requires a series of taps as in Igbo.

Inventories of Igbo and Yoruba Vocalic Phonemes

We will continue with our practice of first identifying the vocalic phonemes of either language using minimal pairing before building the required inventory.

Igbo Vocalic Phonemes

ṣié	/i/	siá	/ɪ/
'cook'		'tell a lie'	
gòó	/o/	gòò	/ɔ/
'buy'		'deny'	
sèé	/e/	sàá	/a/
'draw'		'wash'	
bù	/u/	bù	/ʊ/
'carry'		'is'	

The minimal pairs above yield the following Igbo vocalic phonemes /i, ɪ, e, a, o, ɔ, u, ʊ/.

It should be indicated at this juncture that Igbo also has within its vocalic system the sound [ɛ] as an allophone of /e/. The two alternate in the Igbo vowel harmony system, /ɛ/ as the retracted-tongue-root (RTR) variant of /e/ which is an advanced tongue-root (ATR) vowel.

Yoruba Vocalic Phonemes

iwà	/i/	èwà	/ɛ/
'behaviour'		'beans'	
àdá	/a/	òdá	/ɔ/
'cutlass'		'drought'	
èdè	/e/	idè	
'language'		'bondage'	
owó	/o/	owú	/u/
'money'		'jealousy'	
irin	/i/	irun	/ũ/
'iron'		'chair'	

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ikán	/ ɔ̃ /	ikú
'termite'		'death'
iyen	/ ɛ̃ /	iyón
'that'		'pounded yam'

From the foregoing minimal pairs, we are able to identify the following Yoruba vocalic phonemes comprising oral and nasalized vowels: i, e, ɛ, a, ɔ, ɔ̃, u, ɪ̃, ɛ̃, ɔ̃, ɯ̃/.

However, Bamgbose points out in the *Orthographies of Nigerian Languages, Manual I* that some speakers of Yoruba have [ã] sound where the vowel is spelt *an*.

The minimal pairs above, which have enabled us to identify the Igbo and Yoruba vocalic phonemes, reveal that the vowel sound is, as in other languages, the nucleus of the syllable and therefore the tone-bearing unit. Besides, the emerging inventories reveal that Igbo has only 8 while Yoruba has 11 vocalic phonemes. The Yoruba vocalic phonemes are not only larger in number but also comprised of both oral and nasalized vowels while Igbo has only oral vowels. A Yoruba learner of Igbo would find two Igbo vocalic phonemes which are two corresponding front and back RTR vowels /ɪ, ω/ strange and so must learn to produce them before he can speak Igbo effectively. Otherwise, he would resort to approximating these sounds by producing utterances such as [àsi] for [àsɪ] 'lie' and [ùbɔ̃] for [ùbɔ̃] 'organ'. The other Igbo vowel sounds are familiar to him because they exist in his language. Even [ɛ̃], which is an allophone of /e/ in Igbo, is also familiar to him. An Igbo learner of Yoruba, on the other hand, has a more daunting learning task to face in his attempt to produce nasalized vowels. Since vowel nasalization is non-existent in Igbo, it becomes a learning burden to tackle. There is the need to organise an intensive practice of vowel nasalization for the Igbo learners of Yoruba to ensure that they achieve their goal. To be able to speak Yoruba effectively, they have to specifically learn to nasalize the vowels /ɪ̃, ɛ̃, ɔ̃, ɯ̃/ as well as such consonants as /r, j, w/ which are also nasalized when contiguous to nasalized vowels. However, an Igbo learner of Yoruba will have no problem with the Yoruba oral vowels because they have counterparts in the Igbo phonemic inventory.

Inventories of Igbo and Yoruba Suprasegmental Phonemes

We will still adopt our practice of beginning with the identification of the relevant phonemes of either language using minimal pairing before building the required inventory.

Igbo Suprasegmental Phonemes

óké	//	òké	/\
'male'		'rat'	

The minimal pair above yields two suprasegmental phonemes - the high tone and the low tone //, \/. However, Igbo has a third tonal phenomenon called downstepped high tone, which is not distinctive, as found in words like the following which have a high-step tone pattern each, *eze*, *mma*. Any change from the downstep to the high tone will not effect a change in the meaning of the words as a change to the low tone will.

Yoruba Suprasegmental Phonemes

àgbòn	/\	àgbòn	/-/
'chin'		'coconut'	
ogbòn	//	ogbòn	
'wisdom'		'thirty'	

In the above minimal pairs we are able to identify three suprasegmental phonemes including low, mid and high tones / \ - , / .

What emerges from the data on Igbo and Yoruba tones is that Igbo has only two distinctive tones against the three distinctive ones in Yoruba. The third tone in Igbo, the downstepped high tone, is not distinctive but an allophone of the high tone. In terms of production, the downstep is very similar to the Yoruba mid tone and so would not be difficult for the Yoruba learner of Igbo to produce. Therefore, the Yoruba native speaker's repertoire of suprasegmentals will obviously enhance his learning of Igbo since Igbo suprasegmentals will not constitute a learning burden for him. The Igbo learner of Yoruba, on the other hand, is faced with a difficult learning task. Though the Igbo down-step is similar to the Yoruba mid tone in terms of articulation, yet the latter is more freely distributed as opposed to the predictable occurrence of the former. That is the crux of the problem. Therefore, the Igbo learner of Yoruba will find the mid tone difficult to realize in positions other than where the down-step occurs in Igbo, particularly where it precedes the other tones. He has to be drilled intensively to realize the mid tone in such positions before he can attain mastery in speaking Yoruba.

Conclusion

The intention of this paper has been to predict the learning burden of either of the two alternate-language learners when faced with the

phonemes of the TL. The fact that they belong to the same language family - the Kwa group - (and so both are tone languages) has actually reduced the learning burden a great deal.

However, Igbo is richer in segmental phonemes with as many as nine of its consonantal phonemes /p, kw, gw, n, ŋw, tʃ, v, z, ʎ/ as well as two of the vocalic phonemes /ɪ, ω/ missing in Yoruba. The Yoruba learner of Igbo, therefore, has to master the production of these missing sounds in Yoruba before he can speak Igbo effectively. Yoruba, on the other hand, is more complex in vocalic phonemes by virtue of the existence of nasalization, which the Igbo learner of Yoruba has to learn as well as the mid-tone distribution before he can speak Yoruba effectively.

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