A Sociophonetic Analysis of Selected Vowel Phonemes in the Usages of Igbo Speakers of English

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Abstract

This study is a sociophonetic investigation of selected vowel phonemes in the usages of Igbo speakers of English. Using the contrastive analysis theory, the researchers highlight the areas of similarities and differences of English and Igbo vowel systems with a view to predicting the difficulties that Igbo speakers of English experience in learning and using the English language as a second language. It is a study that follows the sociophonetic research tradition in which the researchers adopt the descriptive research design and simple random sampling technique. It focuses purely on the articulation of central vowels, centering diphthongs, and decentering diphthongs by Igbo speakers of English. Since many English vowel phonemes such as the central vowels-- /A/, /3:/ and /ô/and the diphthongs are not in the vowel system of the Igbo language, the researchers recommend that Igbo speakers of English should make conscious efforts to master the correct pronunciation of the English vowel phonemes in order to make themselves comprehensible or intelligible to other users of the English language.

Keywords: sociophonetics, sociolinguistiics, phonetics, vowel phonemes and contrastive analysis.

Introduction

This study is based on the areas of sociolinguistics and phonology. It is concerned with English pronunciation produced by Igbo speakers of English in Enugu State, Nigeria.

Incontrovertibly, there has been a great concern by the state government, English language teachers, parents and examination bodies on the pronunciation problems of students in secondary schools. Jibril (1982), Banjo (1992) and Jowitt (2005) aver that there are lots of linguistic changes in terms of pronunciation in Nigeria as a result of social factors, especially contact with students from various linguistic backgrounds.

Research Questions

The primary research questions that the present study intends to answer are:

1. to what extent do students' pronunciations determine the realization of diphthongs?
2. how do students' pronunciations determine the realization of central vowels?

Related Literature

Language acquisition and language learning are two concepts in applied linguistics that are closely related, yet different in many ways. Wilkins (1972) asserts that the term language acquisition implies the process where a language is acquired as a result of natural and largely random exposure to language, while language learning is where the exposure is structured through language teaching. Hence, language acquisition takes place in a first language (Ll) situation while language learning takes place in a secondary (IQ) or fòreign (FL) language situation. Ngonebu (2008) opines that language learning deals with learning a second, third or even a forth language at a later stage in life. The circumstances of the first language learning situation and the second language situation are completely at variance. While the Ll learning has no previous iinguistic exposure other than the Lai, 1.2 learning ccmes when the Ll has been acquired to an appreciable degree of efficiency. The 1.2 learning has also undergone physiological and maturational changes and these changes inhibit him from using the same learning strategies that he used as an infant, or make available to him some whole new range of strategies, which he did not possess before (Baruah, 2006).

Using the effectively puts enormous stress on the learner. The tendency of the learner when faced with 1.2 tasks is to develop his or her own strategies by digressing into the Ll for an outlet. In the words of Ngonebu (2008), in the bid to function effectively in the 1.2 context, the 1.2 learner transfers the Ll acquisition and communicative strategies into the 1.2. These strategies may, in one way or the other, be facilitative or inhibitory of the language learning efforts. Facilitatory strategies enable the learning of a second or foreign language to be a relatively much easier task. However, strategies that are inhibitory result in what is called mother tongue interference and lead to errors and poor performance in the target language. For instance, in Enugu State, the majority of the citizens have a complete mastery of at least two distinct speech forms — the local speech of the community and another

speech form (like the English language) for wider communication. Complete mastery of the second language, however, is often difficult for most people to achieve, especially where a prestigious speech form is involved. Errors occur and are most noticeable in the pronunciation of the second language.

The Concept of Sociolinguistics

The first attested used of the term sociolinguistics was by Thomas Callan Hodson in the title of a 1939 paper. Sociolinguistics in the West first appeared in the 1960s and was pioneered by linguists such as William Labov in the US and Basil Bernstein in the UK (Charlie, 2013).

Prasad (2008) sees sociolinguistics as the study of language in relation to society. Syal and Jindal (2007) opine that sociolinguistics is a branch of linguistics that deals with the explanation ofthe relation between language and society. Sociolinguistics is based on the fact that language is not a single homogeneous entity, but has different forms in different situations.

Sociolinguistics and the Sociology of Language

Burton, Dechaine and Vatikiotis-Bateson (2012) believe that sociolinguistics looks at how social structure affects language use, and so it is related to pragmatics or how people make conversations work while sociology of language focuses on how linguistic usage shapes social dynamics. Ike (2007) believes that the terms are similar, but have different emphasis. According to him, while sociolinguistics has the intentional implication that it is part of the study of language, which itself implies that the important value of sociolinguistics is in the light which it throws on the nature of language in general by providing facts about language that illuminate understanding or the study of society in relation to language, sociology of language, on the other hand, is the converse of sociolinguistics definition. It includes in its scope issues outside the scope of sociolinguistics notably macrosociology of language which deals with the relations between society and language as a whole, as well as being an important area of research from the point of view of sociology and politics — raising issues such as the effects of multilingualism on economic development and the possible language policies a government may adopt, all of which throw less light on the nature of language or usually leaves unanalyzed the notion of language which happens to be the domain of sociolinguistics. Sociolinguistics is, therefore, as similar to sociology of language as it is different. The focuses may be similar, but the emphases are definitely different (Ike, 2007).

The Concepts of Phonetics and Phonology

Anagbogu, Mbah and Eme (2010) define phonetics as that branch of language studies which is interested in studying the sounds used in language, how the speaker produces

these sounds, how these sounds travel to the listener, and how the listener eventually hears and understands the speaker. For Ladefoged (1982), phonetics is concerned with describing the speech sounds that occur in the languages of the world. Roach (1983) avers that phonetics is a comparatively straightforward business of describing sounds that we use in speaking. On the other hand, phonology is the subfield of linguistics that studies the structure and systematic patterning of sounds in human language. According to Akmajian, Demers, Farmer and Harnish (201 0), the term phonology is used in two ways. On the one hand, it refers to a description of the sounds of a particular language and the rules governing the distribution of those sounds. Thus, we can talk about the phonology of English, German, Igbo or any other language. On other hand, it refers to that part of the general theory of human language that is concerned with the universal properties of natural language sound systems (that is, propertles reflected in many, if not all human languages).

The Concept of Sociophonetics

While sociolinguistics deals with all aspects of language variation, sociophonetics studies only socially-conditioned phonetic variation in speech that correlates with social factors like speaker's gender, age, social class (Finegan, 2012). According to Ike (2007), sociophonetics refers to the study of phonetic variations linked to the use of language in its social contexts in society. The goal of sociophonetic research, in the words of Hay and Drager (2007), is to blend sociolinguistic and phonetic methods, techniques and principles with a view to establishing that language variation is not only systematic but also embedded with social meaning. In that connection, sociophonetics interacts with other fields of study like first and second language acquisition, forensic linguistics, dialectology, conversation analysis and computational linguistics, among others (Foulkes and Hay, 2015).

The emergence of the sociophonetic research tradition has been spurred by the view that language varies, especially at the phonetic level. Labov (1966) holds the view that speech variability maybe influenced by speakers' social backgrounds — gender, age, social class and ethnicity. But beyond these factors, variation in speech has also been accounted for by groups and social networks affiliation and communicative context which comprise linguistic style or register of speech, social context, the topic of discussion, the addressee and the intention of the speaker (Foulkes and Hay, 2015).

Sociophonetic research is not limited to speech production, but also extends to speech perception. In the words of Ike (2007), sociophonetics includes diatopical or geographical varieties, distratic varieties or social differences in speech and diaphasic or individual

phonetic variations that appear as a result of speaking in different communicative situations.

Sociophonetics, therefore, not only helps us to identify phonetic variations of language, it also helps us to adopt appropriate varieties for particular situations (Syal and Jindal, 2007). It addresses the questions of how socially constructed variation in the sound system is used and learnt. The term, sociophonetics, was first used by Denise Deshaies-Lafontaine in their 1974 dissertation on Quebecois French, with early work in the field focusing on answering questions, chiefly sociolinguistic, using phonetic methods and data. The field began to expand rapidly in the 1990s: interest in the field increased and the boundaries of the field expanded to include a wider diversity of topics. At present, sociophonetic studies often employ methods and insight from a wide range of fields including psycholinguistics, clinical linguistics and computational linguistics.

The Vowels of Fnglish and Igbo

Speech sounds of all languages are classified, first and foremost, into vowels and consonants. These two categories are defined differently in different descriptions. The most misleading way of defining them is in terms of the letters of an alphabet. Thus, in some "grammar" books of English, the letters a, e, i, o, u, of the Roman alphabet are labelled as vowels, and the rest as "consonants". According to Sethi and Dhamija (1999), this is most misleading and confusing because vowels and consonant are essentially categories of speech sounds. When we label some letters of the alphabet as "vowels" and others as "consonant", we assume a perfect correspondence between the letters and the sounds they stand for in a given language.

Such correspondence, unfortunately, is not perfect in any language; indeed in a language like English, it is far from being even barely satisfactory. For the purpose of the research therefore, we reject such definition of vowels and consonants. Korangteng (2005) opines that the articulation of a vowel is not accompanied by any closure or narrowing in the speech tract that will prevent the escape ofthe airstream through the mouth or give rise to audible friction.

In the words of Prasad (2008), a vowel sound IS a speech produced by the unimpeded passage of the breath (modified by the vocal cords into voice) through the mouth. Okoli (2007) says that the vowel is the nucleus of a syllable. Every syllable must contain a vowel, which gives it the sound effect since vowels are generally voiced. In other words, the vowel is the essence of a syllable, as there will be no syllable without a vowel or a vowel-like element. In the production of vowel sounds, the oral cavity is open, thus allowing for different configurations of the tongue to characterize the vowels.

Sethi and Dhamija (1999) define speech sounds — vowels and consonants differently. According to them, speech sounds can be defined in phonetic terms and in linguistic terms, that is, in terms of the production of sounds and their function in a given language, respectively. According to them, in phonetic terms, a speech sound is defined as a vowel if, in the production of it, there is, in the pharynx and the mouth, no obstruction, and no narrowing of a degree that would cause audible friction. All other sounds are taken as consonants. However, if we want to define a sound as a vowel or a consonant in linguistic terms, then we must study the functions of the sound in a given language, that is, in relation to the grammar of that language. If we take the initial sounds in the English words "yard" and "well' it is clear that in the production of these sounds, there is no obstruction or narrowing of such a degree in the mouth as would cause audible friction. The two sounds must therefore be regarded as vowels. And indeed, in strictly phonetic terms, they are vowels (Sethi and Dhamijah, 1999). Nevertheless, the English language regards them as consonants. This is so because the two sounds function in English grammar as consonants. For example, they take the article a, rather than an, in front of them (a yard, a well). (Sethi and Dhamijah, 1999).

Theoretical Underpinning

This study is anchored on the theory of contrastive analysis. The theoretical foundations for what became known as the contrastive analysis hypothesis were formulated in Robert Lado's Linguistics Across Cultures (1957). In this book, Lado claimed that those elements which are similar to the learner's native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult. While it was not a new suggestion, Lado was the first to provide a comprehensive theoretical treatment and to suggest a systematic set of technical procedures for the contrastive study of languages.

One of the popular approaches advocated by some specialists in language studies for tackling language teaching and learning problems is the use of contrastive analysis (CA) (Baruah, 2006). Contrastive analysis is also known as contrastive linguistics (Cl.). It is based on the assumptions of behaviourism that second language learners or users encounter difficulties, which result from the structural differences between their native and the target languages, so if second language acquisition is disturbed by the habits of one's native language, it is advisable to focus on the two languages. Thus, the CA analyst takes the two languages, makes a structural scrutiny of the two languages with a view to pointing out the similarities and differences. From here, a guess of possible difficulties for the second language learners or users are subsequently made. Contrastive analysis, therefore, is the study of two languages with the aim of pointing out their structural differences and similarities for scholarly use. Anchoring on this, this study investigates the differences and

similarities of the English and Igbo vowel systems to see how the Igbo learner of the English language would learn and use the English language with ease.

Methodology

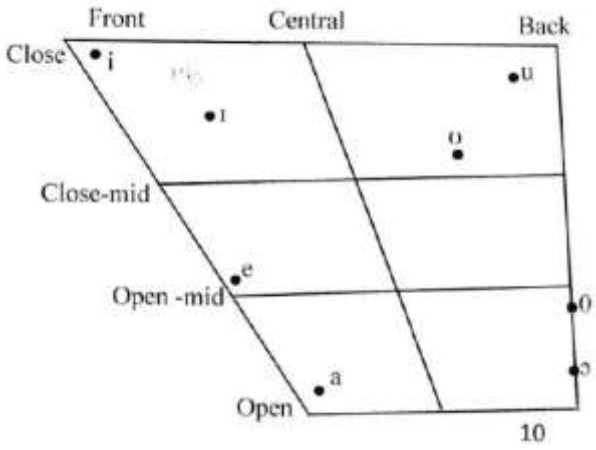
The sound system of any language is made up of two broad components--the segmental and the prosodic features. A comprehensive analysis should study both components, but the scope of this study isidelim ited to the segmental features, precisely the vowel phonemes to allow for an in-depth study. The target population for this study comprised SS3 students across the two local government areas of Enugu State — Enugu North and Enugu South. All the students are Igbo native speakers, thus they all learn English as a second language. The researchers also selected secondary schools in urban and rural areas of Enugu State. The purpose is to identify the sociolinguistic concept of the differences that exist in the pronunciations of students based on class. Also, everyday conversation among young Igbo speakers of English will be recorded, transcribed and analyzed to find their realizations of English sounds. It is germane to present the vowel chart of the Igbo language because many people may not be familiar with it as extensive studies have not been carried out in that area. The sound system of English, on the other hand, abounds and can be referred to.

Through simple random sampling, ten schools in Enugu North and Enugu South Local Government Areas were selected for this study. The students of SS3 were used for this study. The distribution of sample schools and students across the two local government areas are presented in the table below:

S/N	Name of School	Location	Number of Students	Class
1	Konigin Des Friendes College	Urban	26	SS3
2	Spring of Life International School.	Urban	26	SS3
3	May Blossom High School	Urban	26	SS3
4	Pine Crest International School	Urban	26	SS3
5	Federal Government College Enugu	Urban	26	SS3
6	Community Secondary School Ituku	Rural	26	SS3
7	Holy Angels Secondary School Amaechi	Rural	26	SS3
8	Community Secondary School Obe	Rural	26	SS3
9	Community Secondary School Akpugo	Rural	26	SS3
10	Emmanuel College Amaechi	Rural	26	SS3

Out of these schools, twenty-six students were sampled from each school forming a sample
size of two hundred and sixty students.

FINDINGS/DISCUSSIONS



English has front, central and back vowels whereas Igbo has only front and back vowels.

English	**Igbo**
Front / iː, ɪ, e, æ,/	Front / i, ɪ, e, a/
Central /ɜː, ə, ʌ/	Back /u, ʊ, o, ɔ/
Back /ʊ, uː, ɔ, ɒ, aː/	

With the exception of the English /aː/, all the back vowels of both English and Igbo are rounded. Front and central vowels are unrounded. Additionally, it is pertinent to state that the Igbo language has no diphthongs.

Research Q1: To what extent do students' pronunciations determine the realization of diphthongs?

Urban

Sound	Number of right	%right	Number of wrong	%wrong
/ei/	100	76.923	30	23.077
/əu/	70	53.846	60	46.154
/iə/	80	61.538	50	38.462
/eə/	70	53.846	60	46.154
/uə/	90	69.231	40	30.769

Rural

Sound	Number of right	%right	Number of wrong	%wrong
/ei/	60	46.154	70	53.846
/əu/	24	18.462	106	81.538
/iə/	40	30.769	90	69.231
/eə/	56	43.077	74	56.923
/uə/	22	16.923	108	83.077

The Tables above show that greater percentage performance was recorded in all the diphthongs in urban schools than in rural schools. Of the diphthongs, /ua/ 22 (16.923) and /əu/ 24(18.462) were the lowest and poorest sounds produced in rural schools. While the highest diphthong performance

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/au/ 24(18.462) were the lowest and poorest sounds produced in rural schools. While the highest diphthong performance was recorded in lei/ sound 100 (76.923%) students in urban schools. Urban schools performed better in the production of lei/ sound 100(76.923%)as compared to other diphthongs.

Research Q2: How do students' pronunciations determine the realization of central vowels?

Urban

Sound	Number of right	%Right	Number of wrong	% wrong
/ʌ/	84	64.615	46	35.385
/ɜ:/	80	61.538	50	68.462
/ə/	99	76.154	31	23.846

Rural

Sound	Number of right	%Right	Number of wrong	% wrong
/ʌ/	24	18.462	106	81.538
/ɜ:/	35	26.923	95	73.077
/ə/	45	34.615	85	65.385

The tables above show the extent of pronunciations of the central vowel sounds among senior secondary schools in Enugu State. From the table, we could see that we recorded low performance in the production of the sounds as compared to others in both urban and rural schools. For the sounds /ʌ/, /ɜ:/, and /ə/, 84 students (64.15%), 80 students (61.538%) and 99 students (76.154%) got them right in the urban secondary schools, while 46 (35.385%),50 (68.462%) and 31 (23.846%) got them wrong as compared to their rural counterpart where they recorded the lowest performance of the pronunciation of the sounds. It clearly shows that the percentage of students who pronounced /ʌ/, /ɜ:/ and /ə/ are very low in rural 24 (18.462%),35 (26.923%) and 45 (34.615%) compared to their urban counterpart.

The RP Diphthongs as used by Igbo Speakers of English

(1) /eɪ/ as in cake

Many Igbo speakers of English use the monophthong [e] for the RP /ei/ vowel. This means that there is no glide from [e ⟶ ɪ]. Many people do not make the [e] long enough to reflect that it is a long vowel.

Words	RP	Igbo Speakers' pronunciation
Say	/seɪ/	[se]
Day	/deɪ/	[de]
today	/tədeɪ/	[tode]
make	/meɪk/	[mek]
Rain	/reɪn/	[ren]
wait	/weɪt/	[wet]

- /əʊ/ as in go

The glide from [ə to o] is not common among Igbo speakers of English. A few try to glide from [o] to [o] hence [oo], instead. Many generally prefer to use a back rounded monophthong [ɔ] for RP /əʊ/ in words such as [kold] for /kəʊld/ (cold) or [bo] for /bəʊ/ (bow) or [froz] for /freʊz/ (froze).

/ɪə/ as in hear

Many Igbo speakers of English pronounce RP /ɪə/ in words such as media, malaria, material, academia, junior with [-ɪa], so [mɪdia] instead of /mɪdɪə/. Many other words are rendered with a glide that has the more open [ɛ] as the second element. Examples of words include here, peers, appear, experience, years, areas, hence [hɪɛ] for /hɪə/. Where the /ɪə/ words are spelt with '- io –' or 'iou' such as period, various, serious, obvious, etc. they are realized with [ɪɔ] – hence [pɪrɪɔd] instead of /pɪərɪəd/ for period. In some words, /ɪə/ is spelt 'e' as in period, experience, serious, series, and /ɪə/ is pronounced [ɪ], as in [sɪrɪɔs] for /sɪərɪəs/ serious

- /eə/ as in hair

The glide RP /eə/ is not a common phoneme in the vowel system of Igbo. Igbo speakers of English use either [ɛ(:)], [e(:)] or [aɪ] for RP /eə/ words. [ɪa] is used instead of /eə/ by Igbo speakers of English in words like care, careful, share, pear, where, here, therefore while [[ɛ(:)

] or [e(:)] in words like awareness, prepared, swear, swearing and measure. Many /eə/ words spelt with '-a-'and followed by 'r' have [e] in the English language spoken by Igbos, and this is the sound in area, various and parents, hence [eria] for [eəriə/ area or [parents] for /peərənts/.

- /ʊə/ as in tour

Igbo speakers of English use one form or another monophthong for the /ʊə/ vowel in many words, the commonest being [ɔ(:)] . the spelling for most of the [ɔ] words are –'our' and 'ur (e)' as in 'your' and 'yourselves/yourself' as well as 'ensur (e) (ing)', 'maturing'. The Igbo speakers' use of /ɔ:/ for this vowel is not unusual as the English pronouncing Dictionary records [ɔ:] as one of the alternative pronunciations for most of the /ʊə/ words here. What makes the Igbo speakers' form different is the length feature; while RP /ɔ:/ is relatively long, Igbo speakers' form is the short [ɔ] in many of these words.

Another monophthong used by Igbo speakers of English for the /ʊə/ vowel is [u]. The words 'plural' and 'during' with '-ur-' spelling have the [u] vowel as in [plural] instead of /plʊərl/ and [during] is [durin] for /dʊərɪŋ/.

Where Igbo speakers of English use a glide for /ʊə/, the final element is [a]; hence [ʊa], as used in some '-ua-' spelt words such as actual, intellectual, conceptual, actually and you're. Hence 'actual' becomes [aktʃual] instead of /æktʃʊəl/

These three vowels - /aɪ/, /aʊ/, /ɔɪ/ are often pronounced correctly by Igbo speakers of English in terms of sound quality and length. (Okoli, 2007).

The RP Central Vowels as Used by Igbo Speakers of English

- /ʌ/ as in cut

Igbo speakers of English pronounce /ʌ/ as [ɔ], [o] or [aʊ]: Examples

Word	RP	Igbo Speakers' Pronunciation
Monkey	/mʌŋkɪ/	[monkɪ]
Mother	/mʌðə/	[moda]
Honey	/hʌnɪ/	[honɪ]
Southern	/sʌðn/	[saoten]
Enough	/ɪnʌf/	[enof]
Nourish	/nʌrɪʃ/	[norɪʃ]

- / ɜ: / as in girl

Many Igbo speakers of English substitute [ɛ] or [a] for [ɜ:] across board with very little use of length variations. Additionally, Igbo speakers of English pronounce [o] as [ɜ:] in many English words containing – our, – ur and – or

Word	RP	Igbo Speakers' pronunciation
work	/wɜ:k/	[wok]
burn	/bɜ:n/	[bon]
journey	/dʒɜ:nɪ/	[dʒonɪ]
Murder	/mɜ:də/	[moda]
serve	/sɜ:v/	[sav]
perfect	/pɜ:fekt/	[pafet]
Term	/tɜ:m/	[tɛ̀m]
earth	/ ɜ:Θ/	[et]

- /ə/ as in mother

Two sounds often used as substitutes for /ə/ by Igbo speakers of English are [ɛ] and [ɔ]. [ɛ] is commonly spelt 'e' as in cholera [kɔlɛra] for /kɒlərə], problem, agreement, equipment, different. Often, [ɛ] is used in /ə/ words realized with [a] in word final position, when there is a coda. For example, 'matter' or 'number' will have [a] at the end, but 'matters' or 'numbers' will most likely have [ɛ] followed by the consonant; thus [mata] for /mætə/ but [matɛs] for

/mætəz/. Additionally, Igbo speakers of English use [o] in place of /ə/ in words ending in /ʃən/ as in action [akʃon] instead of /ækʃən/.

In a number of words where the /ə/ is spelt -o -, Igbo speakers of English use [o] or [ɔ] or [ʊ] as in the following examples:

[o] colloquium, occasion, protect, provides, position.

[ɔ] opportunity, configured, conceptual, condition, economic

[ʊ] today which should be /tədei/

Conclusion

This study compared the vowel systems of the English Language and the Igbo language and found out that while there are areas of similarities there are as well areas of differences, which could pose problems for the Igbo speaker of the English Language. The vowels /i, e, u, o, and a/ are similar in both systems while the difference include a complete absence of central vowels and diphthongs in the system of the Igbo language. This could lead to the complications encountered by the Igbo learners of the English Language in the study of the English Language.

Recommendations/ Further Research

Based on the findings of the inquiry, it is recommended that Igbo speakers of the English Language should make a conscious effort to master the correct pronunciation of the English sounds in order to make themselves intelligible to other users of the English Language since English has come to stay in Nigeria. This will be easy since the areas of difficulties have been exposed and the possible problems to be expected have been predicted.

Further Research

A similar study should be carried out to determine the similarities and/ or differences found at the nonsegmental level of the English Language and the Igbo Language. This follow up study will go a long way in promoting the teaching, learning and speaking of the English Language among Igbo speakers of the English Language.

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