

A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE 9TH VOWEL PHONEME IN IGBO¹

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In this study the author provides some linguistic evidence to support his argument that /ɛ̄/ is an autonomous vowel phoneme in the Enuani dialect. First, he uses some minimal pairs to show instances where it contrasts with both /e/ and /a/. In addition, he compares the Enuani vowel harmony set with the eastern Igbo set, pointing out that whereas the former has 9 vowel phonemes with the vowel phoneme /ɛ̄/ inclusive, the latter has 8 without it. Finally, he uses unitary words to show instances where /ɛ̄/, /e/, and /a/ either co-occur or do not co-occur in the Enuani dialect. With the above points he conclusively argues that /ɛ̄/ is a vowel phoneme in the Enuani dialect.

0. Introduction

Among the Igbos who live on the West bank of the River Niger are the Enuanis who make up the present Aniocha Local Government Area in Bendel State of Nigeria. The major dialect spoken by this people is the Enuani dialect which is quite intelligible to their Igbo neighbours in Oshimili, Ndokwa, and Ika Local Government Areas in Bendel State and also across the Niger. Our study of the Enuani dialect reveals that like the

¹This paper originally appeared as Monye [1987]. I have decided to write a reappraisal on it following the criticisms by some of my colleagues which I consider quite incisive. Some of the criticisms centre on the need to use some minimal pairs to show instances where /ɛ̄/ contrasts with /a/ as it does with /e/, the latter of which I only discussed in my earlier presentation. Yet another incisive criticism on the paper was the need to do a comparative study of the Enuani vowel harmony set with that of the eastern Igbo dialect as well as using unitary words to show instances where /ɛ̄/, /e/, and /a/ co-occur among themselves and also where they occur or do not occur with both the "dotted" and "non-dotted" harmony set in the Enuani vowel chart. Consequently, the present study shall fully address these criticisms while incorporating my earlier views which I still find pertinent in this study.

dialects of the above-mentioned local government areas west of the Niger, it has a 9th vowel phoneme /ɛ/. This feature contrasts with what obtains in most Igbo dialect areas east of the Niger, where 8 vowel phonemes have been recorded. Probably more out of ignorance than from empirical evidence, a number of scholars of Igbo linguistics have come to the erroneous conclusion that since the 9th vowel phoneme phenomenon is not noticeable in a majority of the Igbo dialect areas east of the Niger it is non-existent in the Igbo language. That is why, for instance, there is hardly any mention of this phoneme in most of their works including articles, stories, books, etc. For example, there is no instance of the use of /ɛ/ as a vowel phoneme in any of F.C. Ogbalu's works [1962, 1972a, 1972b]. Similarly, both G.E. Igwe and M.M. Green do not mention it in their works [1962, 1964, 1967, 1970]. Further examples could also be cited with the works of Carnochan [1960] and those of B.F. Welmers and W.E. Welmers [1968a, 1968b]. And, even in the works of Kay Williamson [1966, 1968, 1972] and Nolie Emenanjo [1978], /ɛ/ is either regarded as an allophone of the vowel phoneme /e/ or as a phonemic vowel which is found in some "peripheral" dialects.² Others have considered it a variant of the phoneme /a/. We have also noticed that there is hardly any Igbo linguist who has given this vowel phoneme a close study. Consequently, in this study, our aim is to demonstrate with ample evidence that it is a vowel phoneme in Igbo, and that it deserves the attention of the Igbo linguist.

In this study we shall provide some linguistic evidence to demonstrate that /ɛ/ has the full status of a vowel phoneme in the Enuani dialect and that it is neither a variant nor an allophone of either the /a/ or /e/ vowel phoneme. Pursuant to achieving this objective we shall do the following:

1. Compare the Enuani vowel chart with that of the eastern Igbo dialect.
2. Use minimal pairs in the Enuani dialect to show that /a/ contrasts with /ɛ/.

²It is not clear what Emenanjo [1978] really means by the term "peripheral dialects" here. One does not know whether he is trying to imply "border". That is, dialect areas which share common boundaries with other language groups as the people of Ika Local Government Area in Bendel State, for example, share common boundaries with the Ishans and Binis, and as the people of Ndokwa Local Government Area in Bendel State also share common boundaries with the Isokos and Urhobos. But even then, do we not have instances of this in Anambra and Imo States where the people of Nsukka, for example, share common boundaries with the Idomas and also where the people of Owerri share common boundaries with the Ikwerres in Benue and Rivers respectively? Has such a phenomenon as this resulted in the evolution of another vowel phoneme in these "peripheral" Igbo dialect areas? Or, is Emenanjo trying to imply "small" or "minor" dialect areas? That is, small communities whose dialects are distinct from those of the supposedly major dialect groups? Granted that "peripheral" in this context is taken to mean "minor" or "small", has Emenanjo done any demographic study of all the Igbo dialect areas which study led him to the conclusion that the western Igbo dialects are "peripheral"?

3. Use minimal pairs in the Enuani dialect to show that /e/ contrasts with /ɛ/.
4. Provide data to show that both /e/ and /ɛ/ co-occur with the non-dotted harmony set whereas /a/ co-occurs only with the dotted ones and /ɛ/ co-occurs with both /e/ and /a/.

1. Comparison between Enuani and Eastern Igbo Dialect Vowel Chart

A close look at the vowel chart of both the Enuani and eastern Igbo dialects reveals that they are quite dissimilar. For instance, both Williamson [1972:xiii] and Emenanjo [1975:122] have observed that there are 8 vowels in the eastern Igbo dialect whereas our investigations reveal that there are 9 vowels in the Enuani dialect. Thus, in the eastern Igbo dialect the vowel chart is composed as follows:

set I

<i>i</i>	<i>ɥ</i>
<i>o</i>	<i>a</i>

set II

<i>i</i>	<i>u</i>
<i>o</i>	<i>e</i>

In the Enuani dialect the vowel chart is composed as follows:

set I

<i>i</i>	<i>ɥ</i>
<i>o</i>	<i>a</i>

set II

<i>i</i>	<i>u</i>
<i>o</i>	<i>e</i>
	<i>ɛ</i>

A careful look at set I in both dialects above reveals that it consists of the dotted harmony set whereas set II consists of the undotted ones. However, we notice that whereas there are four vowels in set II of the eastern Igbo dialects there are five vowels in that of the Enuani dialect and that /*ɛ*/, which we do not find in the former dialect, is the 5th vowel in the latter. Later in this study, we shall compare the vowel harmony set of both dialects.

2. The Contrast between the /*a*/ and /*ɛ*/ Vowel Phonemes in the Enuani Dialect

In this section, we shall provide linguistic evidence to demonstrate that /*ɛ*/ is an autonomous vowel phoneme in the Enuani dialect and that it is neither a variant nor an allophone of the /*a*/ vowel phoneme. Let us now examine the following minimal pairs in the dialect where it is evident that it contrasts with /*a*/ and cannot therefore be either a free variant or a conditioned allophone of it:

- | | | |
|-----|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| (1) | <i>ɛkwè</i>
<i>akwà</i> | ‘careful and neat person’
‘cloth’ |
| (2) | <i>ɛsɛ</i>
<i>àsà</i> | ‘clean, neat’
‘public, open’ |
| (3) | <i>ngɛlɛ</i>
<i>ngàlà</i> | ‘to gossip’
‘pride’ |
| (4) | <i>ɛbè</i>
<i>àbà</i> | ‘lame man’
‘charm, sorcery’ |
| (5) | <i>ɛsɛlɛ</i>
<i>ɛsàlà</i> | ‘slim’
‘pepper soup’ |
| (6) | <i>lɛlɛlɛ</i>
<i>làlàlà</i> | ‘gently’
‘hurriedly, fast’ |
| (7) | <i>pɛ</i>
<i>pà</i> | ‘slice’
‘to carry’ |
| (8) | <i>gwɛgwɛgwɛ</i>
<i>gwàgwàgwà</i> | ‘alluring’
‘restive, coarse’ |

- (9) *ewelē* 'good luck'
awalā 'funny, humorous'
- (10) *mfèlẹ* 'to be fast'
mfála 'to boast, brag'
- (11) *èkpè* 'a type of yam'
àkpà 'bag'
- (12) *èpẹ* 'neatness'
àpa 'pant'
- (13) *gèlẹ* 'to gossip'
gàla 'to be costly'
- (14) *sèkèè* 'very dirty'
sàkàà 'very bogus'

For the avoidance of doubt, we have tone-marked the above fourteen minimal pairs in the Enuani dialect to distinguish their specific lexical meanings.³

3. The Contrast between the /e/ and /ẹ/ Vowel Phonemes in the Enuani Dialect

In this section we shall use minimal pairs in the Enuani dialect to demonstrate that as /a/ contrasts with /ẹ/ so does /e/ contrast with it, and as such, it could be rightly argued that it has the full status of an autonomous vowel phoneme in the dialect. Consider the following minimal pairs.

- (15) *ifè* 'to disgrace oneself'
ifè 'to worship'
- (16) *èlẹlẹ* 'moi-moi or bean pudding'
èlèlè 'profit'

³We need to remark that the tone mark pattern adopted here is as follows:

1. The unmarked for high, e.g. *aka* 'hand'.
2. The marked for low, e.g. *isī* 'blindness'.
3. The step, e.g. *isī* 'head'.

- (17) *òsẹ̀* 'God'
òsè 'convulsive fits'
- (18) *ẹ̀kẹ̀* 'a very careful and neat person'
ekè 'gizzard'
- (19) *m̀gbẹ̀lẹ̀* 'loaning, borrowing'
m̀gbẹle 'loaning, borrowing'
- (20) *kpẹ̀li* 'to insult'
kpeli 'to adjucate for, argue on behalf of'
- (21) *ẹ̀kpẹ̀* 'a type of yam'
èkpè 'time'
- (22) *hẹ̀ni* 'take up, bring up'
heni 'raise an object'
- (23) *kpẹ̀chi* 'make filthy'
kpechi 'to litigate again'
- (24) *kwẹ̀li* 'to peel and eat, e.g. yam'
kweli 'to agree'
- (25) *ntẹ̀tẹ̀* 'to lead gingerly'
ntète 'to economize'

4. Comparison between the Enuani and Eastern Igbo Dialect Vowel Harmony System

Here, we intend to briefly examine the difference, if any, between the Enuani and eastern Igbo dialect vowel harmony system so as to enable us to find out the vowels which co-occur with each other and which do not. Secondly, such an exercise, we hope, will help us to find out if /ẹ̀/ can co-occur with both /e/ and /a/. As we have earlier noted, the eastern Igbo and Enuani dialects have the following vowel sets:

Eastern Igbo		Enuani	
set I		set I	
<i>i</i>	<i>ɥ</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>ɥ</i>
<i>ɔ</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>ɔ</i>	<i>a</i>
set II		set II	
<i>i</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>u</i>
<i>o</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>o</i>	<i>e</i>
			<i>ɛ</i>

In the eastern vowel harmony system we notice that /a/ can co-occur with dotted and undotted vowels in both sets I and II whereas it can only co-occur with dotted vowels in the latter. For example, let us compare the following word lists in the two dialects:

Enuani Dialect		Eastern Igbo Dialect	
1. <i>òlòmɛ</i>	‘orange’	<i>òlòma</i>	‘orange’
2. <i>èkwùmɛ</i>	‘sheabutter’	<i>òkwùma</i>	‘sheabutter’
3. <i>òlìsɛ̀</i>	‘God’	<i>òlìsà</i>	‘God’
4. <i>eìlòkɛ̀</i>	‘thought deeply’	<i>eìlòka</i>	‘thought deeply’
5. <i>ɛ̀wɛ̀lɛ̀</i>	‘good luck’	<i>awɛ̀lɛ̀</i>	‘good luck’
6. <i>ɛ̀dù</i>	‘bitter kola’	<i>àdù</i>	‘bitter kola’
7. <i>ɛ̀fɛ̀</i>	‘dress’	<i>àfɛ̀</i>	‘dress’
8. <i>ɛ̀kpɛ̀lɛ̀</i>	‘horn’	<i>àkpɛ̀lɛ̀</i>	‘horn’
9. <i>ɛ̀kpɛ̀tĩ</i>	‘box’	<i>akpàtĩ</i>	‘box’

10.	<i>ẹfẹlẹ</i>	'plate'	<i>afele</i>	'plate'
11.	<i>ekwene</i>	'don't agree'	<i>ekwena</i>	'don't agree'
12.	<i>emeke</i>	'has done marvellously'	<i>emeka</i>	'has done marvellously'

In the above table, the words to the left are from the Enuani dialect whereas those to the right are from the eastern Igbo dialect. In the first wordlist, in item number 1, *òlòmẹ/òlòmá* 'orange', we notice that whereas the vowel /a/ in the eastern Igbo dialect co-occurs with the "undotted" vowel /o/ in set II of the vowel chart, the vowel /ẹ/ which is in set II of the Enuani dialect vowel chart co-occurs with the vowel /o/ which is also in set II of the same chart. A cursory look at the other words in the same table reveals that in the eastern Igbo dialect /a/ co-occurs with all the "undotted" vowels /u/, /o/ and /e/ as indicated below:

/a/	and	/u/	in No. 2.	-	<i>òkwùma</i>	'sheabutter'
/a/	and	/i/	in No. 3.	-	<i>òlísà</i>	'God'
/a/	and	/o/	in No. 4.	-	<i>eIòka</i>	'thought deeply'
/a/	and	/e/	in No. 5.	-	<i>awelē</i>	'good luck'
/a/	and	/u/	in No. 6.	-	<i>àdù</i>	'bitter kola'
/a/	and	/e/	in No. 7.	-	<i>áfè</i>	'dress'
/a/	and	/e/	in No. 8.	-	<i>àkpele</i>	'horn'
/a/	and	/i/	in No. 9.	-	<i>akpàtĩ</i>	'box'
/a/	and	/e/	in No. 10.	-	<i>afele</i>	'plate'
/a/	and	/e/	in No. 11.	-	<i>ekwena</i>	'don't agree'
/a/	and	/e/	in No. 12.	-	<i>emeke</i>	'has done marvellously'

We notice that it also co-occurs with the "dotted" vowels /ụ/, /ọ/ and /ĩ/ as indicated below:

/a/	and	/ụ/	as in	<i>abụ</i>	'song'
				<i>agụ</i>	'lion'
				<i>anụ</i>	'meat'

/a/	and	/o/	as in	<i>afɔ</i>	‘stomach’
				<i>ànɔ</i>	‘four’
				<i>asɔ</i>	‘spittle’
/a/	and	/i/	as in	<i>akɪ</i>	‘palmfruit’
				<i>àsɪ</i>	‘lie’
				<i>ànĩ</i>	‘earth’

This feature sharply contrasts with what obtains in the Enuani dialect where /ɛ/ can only co-occur with the “undotted” vowels /i/, /u/, /o/ and /e/ as exemplified in the same table above repeated hereunder:

/ɛ/	and	/o/	in No. 1.	-	<i>òlòmɛ</i>	‘orange’
/ɛ/	and	/u/	in No. 2.	-	<i>èkwùmɛ</i>	‘sheabutter’
/ɛ/	and	/i/	in No. 3.	-	<i>òfìsè</i>	‘God’
/ɛ/	and	/o/	in No. 4.	-	<i>ełòkɛ</i>	‘thought deeply’
/ɛ/	and	/e/	in No. 5.	-	<i>ɛwɛlɛ</i>	‘good luck’
/ɛ/	and	/u/	in No. 6.	-	<i>èdù</i>	‘bitter kola’
/ɛ/	and	/i/	in No. 9.	-	<i>ɛkpètĩ</i>	‘box’
/ɛ/	and	/e/	in No. 11.	-	<i>ekwenɛ</i>	‘don't agree’
/ɛ/	and	/e/	in No. 12.	-	<i>èmekɛ</i>	‘has done marvellously’

From the evidence of what we have observed above we can rightly conclude that whereas /a/ can co-occur with both dotted and undotted vowels in both sets I and II of the eastern Igbo vowel harmony set it can only co-occur with the dotted ones in Set I of the Enuani vowel harmony system with the possible exception of the vowel phoneme /ɛ/ with which it can co-occur even though they belong to sets I and II respectively of the Enuani dialect vowel chart. We shall examine this phenomenon presently.

The next task before us is to carefully go through the vowel phonemes /ɛ/, /e/ and /a/ with the object of finding out whether or not they can co-occur with both the “dotted” and the “undotted” harmony sets in the Enuani dialect as well as among themselves. In the main, our examples shall be demonstrated with unitary words, and we shall examine the vowels as they take both initial and final positions in the words chosen for our study.

/ɛ/ with /e/ in final position: There is no instance of this in the Enuani dialect according to our investigations, at least, in unitary words.

5.2. The vowel /ɛ/ with “dotted” vowels. As far as our investigations go there is no instance where /ɛ/ co-occurs with the “dotted” vowels (set I) in the Enuani vowel chart. However, there are a few instances where it co-occurs with the vowel /a/ only in the final position as indicated below:

/ɛ/ with /a/ as in:	àse	‘neat and decent’
	ànè	‘a lazy fellow’
	àlè	‘a sleek and beautiful object’
	àgègè	‘a type of fruit with black coat when ripe’
	anèṅnèṅ	‘a succulent violet bead-like fruit’

There are also some instances where /ɛ/ co-occurs with /a/ and /u/ with the latter in the final position as in

achenu	‘coral bead’
àkèmù	‘pap’
àlèfù	‘white yam’
àjèdù	‘a prostitute’

6. Co-occurrences of the Vowel /e/ with other Vowels

6.1. The vowel /e/ with “non-dotted” vowels. We shall now find out instances where /e/ co-occurs with the “non-dotted” vowels, /i/, /o/, /u/, and /ɛ/ in both initial and final positions.

/e/ with /i/ in initial position:	efĩ	‘cow’
	èbĩ	‘storm’
	eĩ	‘snail’

/e/ with /i/ in final position:	ĩfè	‘the moon’
	ibè	‘colleague’
	ijè	‘journey’

/e/ with /o/ in initial position:	<i>ego</i>	'money'
	<i>eɪɔ</i>	'mushroom'
	<i>ebo</i>	'kindred group'
/e/ with /o/ in final position:	<i>ofe</i>	'soup'
	<i>ogè</i>	'time'
	<i>osè</i>	'pepper'
/e/ with /u/ in initial position:	<i>èbù</i>	'wasp'
	<i>esu</i>	'millepede'
	<i>emù</i>	'sickness'
/e/ with /u/ in final position:	<i>ùbe</i>	'pear'
	<i>ùkè</i>	'trouble'
	<i>ùme</i>	'bereavement'

As for the instances where /e/ co-occurs with /ɛ/, see above where we have already examined instances where /ɛ/ co-occurs with /e/.

6.2. The vowel /e/ with “dotted” vowels. Our investigations reveal that there is no instance where /e/ co-occurs with the “dotted” vowels in the Enuani vowel harmony system.

7. Co-occurrence of the Vowel /a/ with other Vowels

7.1. The vowel /a/ with the “non-dotted” vowels. As far as our investigations go, there is no instance where /a/ co-occurs with the “non-dotted” vowels in the Enuani vowel harmony system except in the situation where it co-occurs with the vowel phoneme /ɛ/ as already indicated above.

7.2. The vowel /a/ with “dotted” vowels. Let us now examine instances where /a/ co-occurs with the “dotted” vowels /ɪ/, /ɔ/ and /u/ both in initial and final positions.

/a/ with /i/ in initial position:	<i>àsí</i>	‘a lie’
	<i>ànǐ</i>	‘earth’
	<i>àpí</i>	‘uncircumcised penis’
/a/ with /i/ in final position:	<i>ítà</i>	‘story’
	<i>ìbà</i>	‘fever’
	<i>ìhà</i>	‘people’
/a/ with /o/ in initial position:	<i>àtọ</i>	‘three’
	<i>abọ</i>	‘yam basket’
	<i>afọ</i>	‘stomach’
/a/ with /o/ in final position:	<i>ọkà</i>	‘maize’
	<i>ọsa</i>	‘squirrel’
	<i>ọbà</i>	‘position’
/a/ with /u/ in initial position:	<i>abụ</i>	‘song’
	<i>alụ</i>	‘crime’
	<i>anụ</i>	‘meat’
/a/ with /u/ in final position:	<i>ùba</i>	‘prosperity’
	<i>ụkà</i>	‘church’
	<i>ụla</i>	‘sleep’

8. Conclusion

In this study we have tried to demonstrate that /e/ is neither an allophone nor a variant of either the /a/ or /e/ vowel phoneme but is, indeed, an autonomous vowel phoneme in the Enuani dialect. That by implication means that there are 9 vowel phonemes in the Enuani dialect as against the 8 that have been recorded in the eastern Igbo dialect. To demonstrate that /e/ has the full status of a vowel phoneme and that it, indeed, is the 9th vowel phoneme in the Enuani dialect, we have tried to do a comparative study of the Enuani and eastern Igbo vowel charts where we discovered that whereas the former has 9 vowels the latter has 8 vowels. We have also observed that whereas in the eastern Igbo vowel chart all the vowels in sets I and II do co-occur and harmonize with one another it is only the ones in set I which can co-occur and harmonize among themselves as it is also

only the ones in set II that can co-occur and harmonize among themselves in set II in the Enuani vowel chart. To further demonstrate that /e/ like /a/ and /e/ is an autonomous vowel phoneme in the Enuani dialect we have used some minimal pairs to show that it contrasts with both vowel phonemes. And more importantly, we have, by the use of some unitary words in the dialect, shown instances where it co-occurs with both /a/ and /e/ which evidence unquestionably demonstrates that it can neither be an allophone nor a variant of either of these vowel phonemes but, actually, is an autonomous vowel phoneme in the Enuani dialect.

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