

Vowel Deletion in Urhobo Culture and Tradition: Implications for Urhobo Language Teaching and Learning

Emuobonuvie M. Ajiboye

Department of Languages and Linguistics

Delta State University, Abraka

Delta State – Nigeria

muoboajiboye@gmail.com

Abstract

Williamson (1984:1) states that the spoken language is more basic, more important and more natural than the written language; it has priority over the written language and should be a guide to the written language. Languages do have disparities between these two forms – the spoken and written aspects of language. For example, there are nuances of spoken forms that are usually not acceptable in the written form. Being acquainted with these nuances places the language learner at an advantaged position to communicate effectively using the oral form of the language. One of such nuances of oral communication in Urhobo is ‘vowel deletion’. This paper is a morpho-phonological description of vowel deletion in Urhobo spoken Language. It aims at providing relevant information which would facilitate or enhance effective teaching and learning of oral communication in Urhobo language. The data used for the study are drawn from authentic materials gathered from native speakers’ oral discourse of some Urhobo vocations and proverbs. For some grammatical reasons vowels can occur in sequence. It was discovered, however that morpho-phonologically, V_1 often gets deleted where vowels occur in sequence in Urhobo language.

Key words: Vowel deletion; morpho-phonology; oral communication; spoken language; authentic materials

1.1 Introduction

Human language exists in two major forms: spoken and written forms. According to Williamson (1984:1) the spoken form of human language is more important and is also the most basic. For example, she

explains that a normal child would grow up speaking a language of his immediate environment without any special training. This is not the case unlike the written form. The written form of language has to be deliberately learned and formally if not separately understood. Furthermore, she adds that any language that has no spoken form, even when its written form exists, is considered a to be a “dead” language, e.g. Latin. Latin is known to exist only in its written form. Spoken language thus has priority over written language. To teach writing, the spoken language becomes a guide. It therefore becomes necessary as a first step in language studies to begin with learning the sounds of a language.

A study of the sounds of a language is at different levels. A very popular level is the phon(et)ics and phonology of the language, for very early learners. There are however some phonological processes in a language which need to be learned, especially for the middle and higher level language learners, which would enhance a smooth flow of oral communication in a language. One of such is vowel deletion. It is very productive process in the spoken form of the Urhobo language. This phenomenon has had a bearing on the written form of the language for a very long time. In many written works in Urhobo, one finds an apostrophé in the place of vowels that are deleted. This mode of writing which has a bearing on the way the native speaker speaks is currently being discouraged. Among other Urhobo scholars there is an insistence on representing every word fully when writing. Ege (1985) in his preface for instance, states among other things as follows, that

- (i) the written form of Urhobo should be different from spoken one;
- (ii) that the written form should follow strictly grammatical rules;
- (iii) that every word must stand by itself and have its complete meaning. In case of doubt about a word, find out the root of the word;
- (iv) that a complete word must have its correct spellings;

A careful listening to news casting in Urhobo also shows a deliberate attempt to represent every word when reading the news such that the newscaster “does not flow” as in a normal speech. A practical example can be found in Akusu’s radio presentation compared with

Odjeba’s below (Section 3.1 B). The latter is more conversational than the former in that there are more elipses in the latter’s presentation.

2.1 Vowel deletion

This phonological process also referred to as elision in the literature, involves the loss of a vowel within a word, across morpheme and word boundaries. Segments that can be identified in slow or deliberate pronunciation of a word can be elided either in the environment of another sound or in quick speech. Examples can be found in many Nigerian languages as shown below :

1. **Yorùbá** (Source- Abíódún, 2007:60-61)

rà ɛrǎ	————→	rɛrǎ	‘buy meat’
gbé owó	————→	gbówó	‘steal money’
kó ɛrǎ	————→	kérǎ	‘be in trouble’

2. **Èbirà** (Source - Abíódún, 2007:60-61)

yí ɛnǎ	————→	yénǎ	‘to steal the load’
tú ɛvú	————→	tévú	‘to hit a goat’
ná uye	————→	núye	‘to sell meat’
mè óre	————→	móre	‘to cook yam’

Several examples can be found of instances in Urhobo where vowel deletion occurs in constructions that show possession or similar associative constructions. Some of these are presented here.

3. **Urhobo** (Source - Aziza 2007 a: 304; c: 310, 311,314)

ékpèti rẹ ùghé		ékpètiùghé
[ékpètiyùghé]		
box of spectacle		‘television’
éwùn rẹ àwòn	————→	éwùàwòn
[éwũáwò]		
dress of legs		trousers
énu rẹ àgbàrà	————→	énú àgbàrà
[énũ àgbàrà]		
top AM chair		‘on the chair’
ótọ rẹ úrhé	————→	ótọ ‘ úrhé
[ótòùré] ground AM tree ‘under the tree’		

In the three languages above, one observes that it is V_1 that gets deleted in a VV sequence. However, in Yorùbá as well as in Urhobo, there are instances of V_2 deletion.

4. **Yorùbá** (Source: Pulleyblank 1988:117)

fọ asọ	fọsọ	'wash clothes'
rán etí	rántí	'remember'
pa ẹsẹ	pasẹ	'beat a rhythm with the feet'
tẹ ewé	tẹwé	'set leaves'

5. **Urhobo** (Source – Aziza 2007a:285)

úkó	+ òmé	→	úkó-mé	[úkómé]
cup	mine		'my cup'	
éwù	+ òwé	→	éwù-wé	[éwùwé]
dress	yours		'your dress'	

In 4 above, Pulleyblank uses the examples of verb-noun combinations in Yorùbá to illustrate instances of V_2 deletion in the language. Urhobo also has instances of V_2 deletion as illustrated by Aziza in the possessive pronoun constructions in 5. In the Urhobo data, the initial vowel of the possessive pronoun which occurs in sequence to the final vowel of the noun gets deleted to form the nominal phrases. According to Taylor (1994:iii), the relevant domain of vowel deletion is the syllable. She further states that

The conditions on vowel deletion rules can be reanalyzed as properties of syllable structure. Vowel deletion must be constrained in some way so that it generates a set of syllable structures which can be licensed legally.

Yul-Ifode (1999: 164-165) identifies two kinds of elision that relate to the deletion of vowels. One is the deletion of a vowel in an unstressed syllable called **syncope**. Here, the segment omitted is in a word other than the final position. She gives an example in English where:

if a stressed syllable is followed by two unstressed ones, the vowel which immediately follows the stressed syllable is omitted in colloquial speech, particularly if it is followed by a single sonorant consonant as in '**chocolate**' [tʃəkəleɪt], '**happening**' [hæpənɪŋ]. [sic]

The other is the loss of a final unstressed vowel. It is the deletion of a segment or segments from the final position in a word. It is called **apocope**. The example given is of the French word for ‘church’ **église** [eglizə] and ‘table’ **table** [tablə] which is pronounced as /egliz/, /tabl/ respectively.

In the section that follows we proceed to present raw data from the field showing the practical occurrence of vowel deletion in the Urhobo language, in poetic and prosaic forms.

3.0 Methodology

In order to relate the present study to the natural situations that surround the use of the language and in line with our conceptual framework which elevates the spoken language above the written form, authentic materials were gathered from oral discourses on vocations in Urhobo and some Urhobo proverbs. Authentic materials are materials that are natural to the use of a language. The data on Urhobo vocations are prose documents meant to compare a semi-formal use of the language with an informal use of the language. The full texts are not presented here. Extracts that would illustrate our present concern are presented for analysis. These have been split into sentence forms to ease glossing.

3.1 Data for the study

The following are the data on which the analyses would be based
A - Some Urhobo proverbs (sourced from public domain)

1. (a) UF: È.é kpò Àvwràkà ré nò úghé rẹ éshàrè
(b) SF: È . é kp’ Àvwràkà ré n’ úgh’éshàrè
3sg asp/pseudo pass go Abraka to watch men
“ One goes to Abraka to watch men”
2. (a) UF: È dè nènè ési rẹ ógbènẹ, kẹ à.á tòrhẹ
óbò

- (b)SF: È dè nèn' ési r' ógbènè, k' à. á tòrh' óbò
3sg if follow behavior of eel, then 3sg.asp burn hand "If one is mindful of mean things, he would get his fingers burnt"
3. (a) UF: À.á vuè òrhuèrò nè èkì fà.á rè èé
(b) SF: À.á vu' òrhuèrò n' èkì fà.á rè èé
3sg.asp/pseudo pass tell blind that market scatter.asp
PST NEG
"One does not tell the blind that trading (has) is over"
4. (a) UF: Ò rè ò. ó vwó ùnú (òyèn ó) vwò òtá
(b) SF: Ò r' ò. ó vw' ùnú vw' òtá
3sg that_{RES}P.asp possess mouth (that_{RES}P) possess word
"The one who is affluent has the say"
5. (a) UF: Ùwèvwìn (rè) è.é jì òmà óyè.én vwèrè
(b) SF: Ùwèvwìn è.é j' òmà óyè.én vwèrè
Message (that) 3sg. asp/pseudo pass send body that.
asp fast "The task performed by oneself is faster"
6. (a) UF: Ómirègwà.á nè ìsòn rè òkpàrèvwì.íí
(b) SF: Ómirègwà.á n' ìsòn (r') òkpàrèvwì. íí
Adult male.asp pass out feaces of careless disposal. NEG
"A matured one does not demean himself"
7. (a) UF: Òmà.á vwèrhè òhwó fàn órhà. àá
(b) SF: Òmà.á vwèrh' òhwó fà' órhà. àá
Body.asp sweet person confess withcraftcy. NEG
"One does not deliberately demean himself in public"
8. (a) UF: Óbò tè ùwùrhié kè èrhàrè.èé
(b) SF: Óbò t' ùwùrhié k' èrhàrè.èé
Hand touch ash (not to talk of) fire .NEG
"You cannot be affected by a strife you are not party to"
9. (a) UF: Àsò.ó jè á sà.á mrè òviè.èé
(b) SF: Àsò.ó j' á sà.á mr' òviè.èé
Night.asp allow 3sg can.asp see king.NEG "Night makes one not to see the king", That is, "Night time beclouds vision"
10. (a) UF: Ìsòn dà gàn, óbò ivè kòyè èvwò riè ùnùsò
(b) SF: Ìsòn dà gàn, óbò ivè kòyè èvwò
riè ùnùsò Faeces if hard, hands two that 3sg asp/pseudo
pass use open anus "When faeces is hard the two hands are

- employed to open the anus” That is, “A hard task requires double effort”
11. (a) UF: Ọgbá dà.á chà ọphièrè kẹ ò.ó shè
 (b) SF: Ọgbá dà.á ch’ ọphièrè kẹ ò.ó shè. Strong if.asp wedge lazy then 3sg.asp fall “When the mighty supports the lazy he fails”
 (a) UF: Ọkpàghà dà.á và kẹ ọ.ọ hẹrié ábọ
 (b) SF: Ọkpàghà dà.á và k’ ọ.ọ hẹri’ ábọ
 Oil bean when.asp explode then 3sg.asp open hand. “When the oil bean pod explodes it opens the fingers”
12. (a) UF: Ónò ọyén étìyìn nà? È vwíró (vwò) sívwì òjì, sívwì ọ ré ó vwó ògbà (b) SF: Ónò y’ étìyìn nà? È vwíró sívw’ òjì, sívw’ ọ r’ ó vw’ ògbà Who that there the? 3sg use save thief, save 3sg that_{RES P} has compound “‘Who goes there?’ saved both the thief and the owner of the place”
14. (a) UF: À á vwẹ àmwá òhwò ọfá vwò brù èdè rè òrè.ẹẹ
 (b) SF: À á vw’ àmw’ òhw’ ọfá vwò br’ èd’ òrè.ẹẹ 3sg asp/pseudo pass take cloth person other to plan day of feast.NEG “One does not plan a feast on borrowed robes”
15. (a) UF: Ọghwù.ú mù òvié sàvwà èvwàrhà àá
 (b) SF: Ọghwù.ú m’ òvié sàvw’ èvwàrhà àá Anger.asp carry king cut bead.NEG “The king does not abase himself when angry”
16. (a) UF: Èràvwè rè ò.ó mù úfi chọ, ọ dà mrẹ ùrhè rè ò.ó gùnù rù kẹ ọọ djẹ
 (b) SF: Èràvwè r’ ò.ó m’ úfi chọ, ọ dà mr’ ùrhè r’ ò.ó Animal that 3sg._{RES P} carry trap fail, 3sg if see wood that 3sg._{STATE} gùnù rù k’ ọọ djẹbend PST then it.asp run “ The animal that escapes a trap runs away whenever it sees a crooked wood”
- 17.(a) UF: Èsì vé émọ rọyè gbà và ìbì
 (b) SF: Èsì v’ émọ rọyè gbà v’ ìbì Pig with Plchild her together crack nut “The pig cracks nut with her children”

Vowel deletion is triggered by the ease of pronunciation where vowels cluster in small phrases, and for the sake of economy in speech. Thus vowel deletion occurs at word boundaries where two vowels occur in sequence as we can see from a comparison of the underlying form with the surface forms of the proverbs. In the written forms, represented here by the SFs-surface forms, the deletion is signaled by an apostrophe. A closer look, however, at the proverbs show that there are cases of vowels occurring in sequence which do not get deleted. The reasons that do come up can be found in the function of these repeated vowels, taking a cue from the glosses that follow. In the case of the repeated vowels in sentences 4, 5, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, and 16, one observes that the vowels mark aspect. In sentence 1, 3 and 16, one observes that the repeated vowel functioning as the subject of the sentence doubles as pseudo passive marker and aspect marker. In the other case of vowel occurring in sequence at word boundary in sentences 3, 10, and 15, V₁ in the surface form maintains its phonetic form as a glide. Thus

3. UF: vuε orhuεro [v ^w ε or ^w εro]	—————>	SF: vu' orhuεro [v ^w or ^w εro]
10. UF: rie unuso [r ⁱ e unuso]	—————>	SF: ri' unuso [r ⁱ unuso]
15. UF: muε ovie [m ^w ε ovie]	—————>	SF: mu' ovie [m ^w ovie]

Note also that vowels also co-occur in stative constructions (example is sentence 16) and negation in the various sentences.

B - Discourse from vocations (Ajiboye, 2018: 181-184)

1. Iroba εsuo (Rubber tapping) – Odjegba (2018 – Agbon dialect)

(a) UF: A kaa **gbε** εghwa **rε** iroba. Woo **bru** omoka phiyo.

SF: A ka.a **gb'** εghwa iroba. Wo.o **br'** o.moka phiyo.

3sg first.asp clear bush rubber. You.asp cut dim.mark on it.

“One first clears the rubber plantation. You cut a little mark on it.”

(b)UF: E e **she** ekpo, **ke** a a karε okpo na ...

SF: E.e **sh'** ekpo, **k'** a.a kar' okpo
na 3sg.asp/pseudo pass fell **P**lbamboo, then 3sg.pseudo pass
carve bamboo the

“One fells bamboos, then you carve it”

(c) UF: ku wo kee **kuo** iroba **na** ijobi

SF: ku wo ke.e **ku'** iroba **n'** ijobi. Then you then.asp pour
rubber the all “ then you pour in all the rubber latex.”

2. Ọdẹrotọ (Security guard) – Akusu (2018 –Ughelli dialect)

(a) UF: Kidie yẹ iruo rẹ i i vie ọdẹrotọ? ... emu vuọvo vwo je e
ghwro SF: Kidie iruo rẹ i.i vie ọdẹrotọ ? emu vuọvo vwo je e
ghwro What work of that.asp term security guard? something
one not loose it.“What are the terms of engagement? ... so
that nothing will get lost”

(b) UF: yẹrẹ emu vuọvo o vwọ jee ghwo....SF: yẹrẹ emu vuọvo o
vwọ jee ghwo.... Or something one RESP not die “or nothing
will die ...”

(c)UF: Wọ sa cha ta nẹ wẹ ọdẹrotọ rẹ asa SF: Wọ sa cha ta nẹ wẹ
ọdẹrotọ rẹ asa You can will say that you security of place “you cannot
claim to watch over a place”

(d) UF: jẹ asa wọ dẹrẹ na, kẹdi kẹdẹ kọye a che tiyin ... SF: jẹ asa wọ
dẹrẹ na, kẹdi kẹdẹ kọye a che tiyin ...Yet place you watch the,
everyday that 3sg pseudo pass come there “yet where you are
keeping guard, people come there ...”

(e) UF: ee cho kemu kemu. O dje phia nẹ SF: ee chi kemu kemu. O dje
phia nẹ 3sg pseudo pass steal anything. It show out that “ to steal
anything. It shows that...”

(h) UF: Ayen vwọ cha ku woo rie ogba kẹ ayen, ... SF: Ayen vwọ cha ku
wo.o ri'ogba k'ayen, ...They when come then you.asp open gate for
them.“When they were coming you opened the gate for them ...”

These data on Urhobo vocations show the manifestation of vowel
deletion in prose as opposed to poetic presentation in proverbs (Data
A). Data B: 1 is informal while Data B: 2 is semi-formal. The latter was
retrieved as news broadcast. Note that there are more elisions in Data
B: 1 than B: 2. Segments emboldened in the discourses above show
the environments around which deletion of vowels occur. Italicized
segments depict points at which glide formation occurs. Just as was

observed in the collection of proverbs, the same principles can be observed in the occurrence of vowels in prose. Most times vowels are deleted, at other times vowels occur in sequence. This is irrespective of the dialect of Urhobo spoken.

4.1 ANALYSIS OF DATA

The deletion of vowels alters the structure of constructions and it results in a variety of fusional outputs of compound words such as that (relative) phrases, phrasal verbs, anaphoric phrases and compound prepositional phrases. The words underlined in the following sentences are individual words that become members of the same constituents and so are pronounced as single words in the spoken form.

(i) That (relative) phrases

- (a) UF: òhwò rè ò.ó guòṅò úmióvwò
SF: òhwò r' ò.ó guòṅ' úmióvwò person that 3sg.asp find
destruction
- (b) UF: À á vué òrhuèrò nè èkì fà á rè èé SF: À á vu' òrhuèrò
n' èkì fà.á rè èé 3sg asp/pseudo pass tell
blind that market scatter.asp PST NEG "One does not
tell the blind that trading is over"
- (c) UF: Èràvwè rè ò.ó mù úfi chò, ò dà mr' ùrhè rè ò.ó gùnù rù
kè ò.ó djè SF: Èràvwè r' ò.ó mù úfi chò, ò dà mr' ùrhè r' ò.ó
gùnù rù k' ò.ó djè Animal that 3sg. RESP carry trap fail, 3sg if
see wood that 3sg.STATE bend PST then it.asp run "The animal
that escapes a trap runs away whenever it sees a crooked
wood"

(ii) Phrasal verbs

- (a) UF: Òkpàghà dà.á và kè ò.ó hèrié ábò
- (b) SF: Òkpàghà dà.á và k' ò.ó hèri' ábò Oil bean when.asp
explode then 3sg.asp open hand. "When the oil bean pod
explodes it opens the fingers"
- (c) UF: Èsì vé émọ rọyè gbà và ìbì
SF: Èsì v' émọ rọyè gbà v' ìbì Pig with Pchild her
together crack nut "The pig cracks nuts with her children"

(iii) Anaphoric phrases

- (a) UF: Ùwèvwìn (rè) è.é jì òmà óyè.én vùwèrè
SF: Ùwèvwìn è.é j'òmà óyè.én
vùwèrè Message (that) 3sg. asp/pseudo pass send body that.
asp fast "The task performed by oneself is faster"

(iv) Compound prepositional phrases

- (a) UF: Èsì vé émó rọyè gbà và ìbì
SF: Èsì v'émó rọyè gbà v' ìbì Pig with Plchild
her together crack nut "The pig cracks nut with her
children"
- (b) UF: Èyà rẹ ì.í mùdiá kẹ émó ráyè
SF: Èyà r'ì í mùdiá k'émó ráyè Women that RES.P.asp
stand for children their "Women that stand from their
children" "Supportive women"

2.1 Discussion of findings

Generally speaking, vowels do not occur in sequence in this language. Where they occur, they are either deleted or elided. In the spoken form, open vowels in the language tend to move towards close-mid because in production, they tend to slur into each other as though they are one word. The categories of vowels that undergo glide formation are high back and close front vowels /u/, /i/, respectively, occurring before back vowels. Although vowel deletion is very productive in the language, there is, however, a category of vowels that do not delete when they occur in sequence. These vowels are reduplicants and they carry out specific grammatical functions in the sentence. This concern is beyond our present scope of study.

Conclusion

The outcome of the study provides useful information with which to teach and learn how to communicate orally in Urhobo language. We observed above that in the spoken form of the language, open vowels tend to slur into each other as though they are one word. In the teaching of oral communication in Urhobo, learners should be made to practice slurring vowels from back towards front using practical words formed by this process, taking a cue from section 4.1 above. To be proficient in South African languages learners are required to learn

how to produce clicks. For instance, at the various Swahili Startalk programmes and in the NALRC summer school organized annually at the Indiana University in the US where Swahili is one of the major languages featured, participants are drilled on how to pronounce these clicks during the Swahili language learning sessions. The learners of Urhobo language should be drilled on to how produce these vowels that slur into each other. Furthermore, the fusional outputs tend to confuse the writing of the words as a non-literate writer of the language would not be able to identify the boundaries between the individual words. Hence there is an insistence in representing individual words fully in writing Urhobo as have been pointed out earlier. This potential area of difficulty should be a major teaching point in the writing of Urhobo language. In addition to the above, having observed a seeming inconsistency in the deletion of vowels that occur in sequence, there is a need to investigate the syntactic status of the vowels that are retained in sequence and how this phenomenon can affect the written form of the language since it occurs in the spoken form.

Abbreviations used

AM	associative marker
asp	aspect
dim	diminutive
NEG	negation
pseudo pass	pseudo passive
PST	past
PI	plural
SF	surface form
RESP	resumptive pronoun
STATE	stative verb
UF	underlying form
3sg	third person singular

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