Assimilation in Úwù Language

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ABSTRACT
Many scholarly works have been published on the phonology of the Nigerian languages. We discovered that of all the publications, little have been published on the phonology of Úwù especially, the assimilatory process in the language. This paper aims at investigating the phonological process of assimilation in the language as it examines the structures where assimilation occurs in the language. In the Niger-Congo languages, assimilation mostly applies to noun-noun structures. However, it is a different case in Úwù language as an associative morpheme usually prevents assimilation from applying. This paper therefore unravels the phenomenon of assimilation in Úwù language.

Keywords: full assimilation, partial assimilation, non-linear phonology, associative morpheme

INTRODUCTION
Úwù is a language under the Ahanoid language family as grouped by Akanbi (2014). The language is spoken by the Àyèré people of Àyèré community in Kogi State precisely in Ìjùmù Local Government Area. Assimilation, a phonological process in the language is not robust and the process of assimilation is often prevented by Associative Morpheme in the language. Abiodun (2007:61) describes assimilation as the process whereby a segment takes on the features of a neighboring segment thereby becoming alike, sometimes totally, sometimes partially. Oyebade (2008:62) says assimilation takes place when two contiguous sounds which have different modes of production becomes identical in some or all of the features of their production. If we think of the physical production of speech, we realize that this regular process happens simply because it is quicker, easier and more efficient for our articulators as they do their job. Assimilation can be total (when a segment copies all the features of a neighboring segment) and it can be partial (when a segment copies some of the features of a neighboring segment; though they are not totally alike, but they have some features in common than when the process has not taken place). Assimilation may be anticipatory, that is the first segment changes to become like the second. It can also be perseverative, when the second changes to become like the first.

Purpose of the study
This paper contributes to the ongoing research on dialectology. It is not strange that languages have similarities and differences at all levels of grammar. Be it, phonology, morphology, syntax etc. It is not a gain-saying that scholars have published little works on the areas of grammar so identified in Úwù language. However, no work has been published on assimilatory process in Úwù language. This paper therefore intends to fill the academic gap and to further document assimilation in the language for posterity.
Theoretical Framework
The analysis of the data used for this paper is carried out with the autosegmental phonology theory. The assumption in autosegmental phonology is that the features that represent each sound in an utterance are situated on different or autonomous tiers. The theory agrees with the general orientation in generative phonology. The theory believes that sounds are made up of features. Sounds normally undergo changes known as phonological processes and these processes are the result of the internalized rules that form part of the competence of a native speaker. It follows therefore that the autosegmental theory is an extension of generative phonology. It does not call for a total abandonment rather; it seeks to make efforts towards solving inherent problems within generative theory. Part of the evidence of autosegmental phonology is what Goldsmith (1976) termed ‘stability’. In tone languages, when vowel is deleted by some phonological rule, the tone it was bearing does not disappear; rather, it shows up on some other vowel (Goldsmith 1976:30).

Another bit of evidence as motivation for autosegmental phonology is its problem solving efficiency in issues related to tone, nasality and vowel harmony. Within the autosegmental framework, tone is represented on a separate level different from segmental level. The skeletal phonological representation involving tone and segment is illustrated below:

Tonal Tier:

\[ T \quad T \quad T \]

Segmental Tier:

\[ \text{CV} \quad \text{CV} \quad \text{CV} \]

The autonomous tiers are associated together by a universal convention that Goldsmith called Well-Formedness condition (WFC). The association convention which links the two tiers can be stated thus:

(a) MAPPING: Associate vowels with tone in a one-to-one fashion from left to right until we run out of tones or vowels.

(b) DUMPING: If after applying (mapping) some tones are still free (that is, unassociated), link them to the last vowel to the right.

(c) SPREADING: If after applying (mapping) some vowels are still free, link them to the last tone on the right.

(d) Association lines are not allowed to cross. (Durand 1990:249)

Assimilation in Úwù
Assimilation is not very robust in Úwù language, it is also worthy of note that only anticipatory assimilation is observed. That is, the first segment changes to be like the second. This can be formalized with the rule: \( V_1 + V_2 \rightarrow V_2 V_2 \). We must also stress that assimilation is not very productive in the language. When a verb collocates with vowel initial noun, assimilation does not take place; rather, deletion of the \( V_1 \) always takes place. Also, in a noun-noun, there is always a mediating morpheme which is referred to as an associative morpheme in Allison (2015). This associative morpheme usually prevents assimilation from taking place in such construction. Consider the data below:

a. \( ůŋgu + ni + ũná \rightarrow ůŋgunũná \) ‘firewood’

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{tree} \quad \text{AM} \quad \text{fire}
\end{array}
\]

b. \( adʒɔ + ni + âdʒá \rightarrow adʒonadʒá \) ‘housework’

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{work} \quad \text{AM} \quad \text{house}
\end{array}
\]

c. \( âkpoti + ni + âkí \rightarrow âkopotinâkí \) ‘box (of cloth)’

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{box} \quad \text{AM} \quad \text{cloth}
\end{array}
\]
From the data presented above, it is obvious that the associative morpheme “ni” prevented assimilation from taking place between a noun and vowel initial noun construction. It is also observed that the high front vowel [i] of the associative morpheme is deleted when it collocates with the vowel initial noun.

(i) Full Assimilation

Full assimilation occurs when all the features of a sound is copied by the adjacent segment. Full assimilation is not robust in the Úwù language due to the occurrence of the associative morpheme discussed above. However, assimilation is observed when a noun whose initial and final vowels are non-identical. Simply said, that assimilation usually applies when a noun is fully reduplicated. Examples of this are presented below:

i. \[ \text{igwà} + \text{igwà} \rightarrow \text{igwàigwà} \] ‘ten each’

ten

ii. \[ \text{ita} + \text{ita} \rightarrow \text{itiita} \] ‘three each’

three

iii. \[ \text{otu} + \text{otu} \rightarrow \text{ootootu} \] ‘every night’

night

iv. \[ \text{élá} + \text{élá} \rightarrow \text{éélélá} \] ‘big ones’

big

From the data above, we observed that the nouns are fully reduplicated thereby causing two non-identical vowels to occur contiguously. However, the \( V_1 \) totally assimilated the features of the \( V_2 \) thereby becoming totally identical. The derivation of the above examples is presented autosegmentally below:

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{+low} & \text{+high} & \text{+high} \\
\text{+back} & \text{-back} & \text{-back} \\
\text{igwa} & \text{igwa} & \text{igwà} & \text{igwà} \\
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{+low} & \text{+high} & \text{+high} \\
\text{+back} & \text{-back} & \text{-back} \\
\text{ita} & \text{ita} & \text{iti} & \text{ita} \\
\end{array}
\]
It is observed in the above that the final vowels of the first morphemes take the feature of the first vowels of the second morphemes i.e. Vowel-Vowel Assimilation. This type of assimilation can only occur as anticipatory but not perseverative in Úwù language.

(ii) **Partial Assimilation**
This process applies to the homorganic nasals in Úwù language. The nasal consonants copy the place of articulation feature of the consonant succeeding them. This process is not strange in languages as the nasal consonants mostly copy the place of articulation feature of the consonant after them. Consider the pieces of data below in Úwù:

1. ſńká → ſńká ‘one’
2. ongu → ongu ‘tree’
3. ſńfá → ſńfá ‘rope’
4. ñṅgbá → ſńmgbá ‘chin’
5. npáki → mpáki ‘to take off cloth’
The above data are analyzed autosegmentally below. Observe that the assimilation spreads from right to left.

1. ŋká → ŋká ‘one’

2. ongu → ongu ‘tree’

3. ŋfá → ŋfá ‘rope’

4. āngbá → āŋ’gbá ‘chin’

5. nphantsi → mpáki ‘to take off cloth’
In the above examples, we discovered that the homorganic nasals copy the place of articulation of the adjacent consonants. This process is formally called Homorganic Nasal Assimilation.

CONCLUSION
It is observed that assimilation is not a robust phonological process in Úwù language unlike assimilatory process in other Benue-Congo languages as this paper has established. It is also crucial to note that assimilation in Úwù is anticipatory; the first segment changes to become like the second segment. Associative morpheme –ni- in the language prevents assimilation from applying in noun-noun construction.

REFERENCES