

Consonant Elision in English Word Pronunciation of Obolo Speakers of English in Nigeria

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Abstract

This research investigates consonant elision in the spoken words of Obolo speakers of English (OSE). There is an assumption that the Obolo speakers of English exhibit features of inaccurate pronunciation especially, the elision of the voiceless alveolar and velar consonant sounds /t/ and /k/ in their English speech as it impedes mutual intelligibility during conversation. This assumption forms the background of this study. Sixty (60) university graduates from different field of study were randomly drawn from six communities of Obolo: Ekede, Ayama Ekede, Ebukuma, Ngo, Agana and Egwede. The Optimality theory was used as a theoretical thrust for this study, and a prepared single and connected word were arranged on a questionnaire for the subjects to read, while their productions were recorded using MP3 digital recording device. For the analysis, the study employed perceptual and quantitative approach focusing on the phonotactic order and the structure of English sounds as realized by the Obolo speakers of English. The findings revealed that majority of Obolo speakers of English delete the consonant sounds /t/ and /k/ in their English pronunciations at the medial and coda positions of consonant cluster. Phonotactically, it was discovered that the output violates the faithful constraints. The statistics also shows that subjects exhibit consonant elision in their pronunciation. For instance, 65%, 70% and 64% were unable to realized /k/ and /t/ correctly. This problem is not peculiar to only Obolo Speakers of English. The researcher suggests more research of this kind in other languages using a different approach.

Keywords: Elision, Velar, Alveolar, Consonant Cluster, Coda, Optimality, Obolo, Nigerian English.

Introduction

Linguists have made countless efforts to identify and describe unique areas that characterized the version of spoken English language in Nigeria (see Essien, 2011; Josiah & Ngor, 2022; Kinye & Ngor, 2024a). These efforts were as a result of the fact that Nigeria is a multilingual society as such, languages in contact breed new language carrying into one another elements of each of the languages. Nigeria as a multilingual society falls into this situation as some elements of Nigerian indigenous languages influence the version of English spoken by Nigerians. Several scholars have established that English in Nigerian depicts its environment since it has imbibed some prosodic features of Nigerian languages (Jowitt, 2012; Josiah, 2014; Josiah & Ekpeyong, 2020). In support of this notion, Udofot (2007) posits that Nigerian speakers of English have peculiar manner of pronouncing words

which is Nigerian in nature. Udofot cited examples using Annang speakers of English in Akwa Ibom state, they pronounced "Provost" as 'plofost', "reduce" as "leduce" substituting /r/ for /l/. In the same vein, the Urohbo ethnic in Warri realized "share" instead of "chair", taking the voiceless palate-alveolar affricate /tʃ/ as voiceless palate-alveolar fricative /ʃ/.

Mbah and Waya (2014) attempt to explain the phonotactics of English used by Tiv learners of English, they observed that Tiv learners of English experienced difficulties realizing English syllables with consonant clusters as they insert vowel in some English clusters hence, transferring features from their L1 to L2. Usually, very many speakers of Nigerian English insert vowel sound in their consonant clusters either at the initial, medial or at the coda positions which shows the influence of Nigerian indigenous languages in their English pronunciations. The above explanations explicate the phonetic differences between English language and Nigerian indigenous languages. For instance, Olaniyi (2011) explains that linguistic background and ethnic affiliations are the root cause of variations in languages among language users.

The Obolo are a particular group of people who occupy the coastal area of the Southern part of the Niger Delta of Nigeria. At present, Obolo speakers are in Andoni Local Government Area of Rivers State and the Eastern Obolo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. According to Ejit-uwu (1991), Obolo means the language and the people, and so it represents both the language and the people. Obolo is one of the lower cross families of languages under the Niger Kordofanian, Benue-Congo phylum (Luke, 2015). Obolo is one of Nigeria's indigenous languages spoken in the South-South Zone of Nigeria. It is a tonal language with three tonemes: extra high, high, and low tones respectively.

The Obolo speakers of English exhibit some kind of incompetency in their spoken English. They violate English phonotactics rules by realizing vowel epenthesis, assimilation and vowel harmonization in their English speech. The assumption is that the Obolo speakers of English exhibit features of inaccurate pronunciation by deleting the voiceless alveolar and velar consonant sounds /t/ and /k/ from their English words which impedes mutual intelligibility during conversation with other speakers of English. This informs the essence of the present study.

Nature of Elision

Crystal (2008) notes that elision is the complete disappearance of one or more sounds in a word or phrase in an attempt to make pronunciation easier. It is a process that occurs when speakers want to fasten and get rid of difficulties while speaking. Anggi, Lia and Sutiono (2001) established that elision happens in both consonant and vowel sounds. Sometimes elision occurs before sonorant consonants, and this elevates the consonant to a syllabic status that creates room for it to occupy the peak of the syllable (Giegerich, 1992). On the other hand, consonant elision is a phonological phenomenon where a consonant sound in a word is deleted or omitted. Consonant elision occurs in word initial, for instance, "knight" /naɪt/, word medial such as "butter" /bʌtə/, and at the word final position, "lamb" /læm/ respectively.

Cruttenden (2014) establishes that elision serves multiple purposes but, primarily it simplifies articulation and facilitates smooth flow of speech. According to Roach (2009), elision reduces the number of sounds to alleviate the cognitive load on speakers by enabling them to focus on conveying meaning. Elision is a phenomenon that plays a vital role in shaping the sound of language. Its functions and implications underscore its significance during communication. Soneye and Oladunjoye (2015) confirm that L2 speakers of English in Nigeria simplify pronunciation by consonant cluster reduction as they elide, insert and substitute phonemes. As a result, different cluster reductions are created at the initial, medial and coda position of words. The process of consonant cluster elision varies across different varieties of English, for instance, in Standard British English; the grapheme /k/ is elided in the word "knight" /naɪt/ while the word "hand" is realized in most cases as /hæn/ in Nigerian English (Oyebade, 2014).

Literature Review

Akamo (2022) establishes that Nigerian languages have the potential to phonetically influence another language by deletion, substitution or by insertion of its elements into a second language. Akamo, (2022) says it is a normal phenomenon for the phonetics and phonology of a speaker's mother tongue to interfere in their second language (L2) pronunciation. Also, Flege and Davidian (1984) opine that the phonotactic constraints of the L2 learner have a way of creating problems in the target language. This situation is a typical of Nigerian second language speakers as prosodic elements of their first acquired language has roles in their English utterances (see Josiah & Ngor, 2022; Josiah, Bodunde and Robert, 2012; Nkereke, 2018; 2011; Taiwo and Faleye, 2015; Mbah & Waya 2014).

Abdulmalik and Aisha (2021) examine the patterns of English consonant cluster articulation of Nigerian news broadcasters at the onset and at the coda positions against the Received Pronunciation. The findings revealed that the participants used epenthetic vowels to break-up consonants clusters at the onset and consonant deletion to simplify clusters at the coda positions. The analyses also show the systematic patterns of consonant cluster pronunciation both at the onset and coda positions in the speech of Hausa news broadcasters. It was also discovered that participants frequently use epenthetic vowels to break up the cluster and pave way to ease pronunciation in a two consonant cluster at the initial position. The study majorly focused on epenthesis in the cluster of Nigerian English. Soneye and Oladunjoye (2015) consider the various reduction modes whether by insertion, substitution or elision and the phonetic environments in which these phenomena thrive in Educated Nigerian Spoken English. The study identified the phonological environments with which consonant cluster deletions enhances its potentials. It was revealed that Yoruba news broadcasters often delete one consonant in a two consonant cluster in the coda position to declusterize the consonant cluster. Furthermore, the study established that if there is a three consonant cluster at the coda position, one of the consonant sounds is usually deleted to reduce the weight of the cluster, [lts] is realized as [ts], [lpt] as [pd] and [kts] as [ts] respectively. The study concludes that coda cluster patterns in Educated

Nigerian Spoken English contribute significantly to the distinctiveness of English within the purview of Englishes.

Theoretical Issues

The Optimality Theory is a linguistic phenomenon that describes grammatical system. Mbah (2006; as cited in Agbedo 2015) establishes that Optimality theory was propounded by Alan Prince and Paul Smolensky in 1993 in their manuscript entitled “Optimality theory: Constraint interaction in Generative Grammar”. Optimality theory (henceforth OT) discusses the underlying and the surface representation of the grammar known as the input and output. In this theory, both underlying and surface form are related formerly. According to Essien (2023), Optimality is a theory of constraints and constraint ranking used within the field of linguistics specifically, within phonology.

A constraint is a structural condition which can either be satisfied by an output-form or violated. According to McCarthy (2008), there are two types of constraints: Faithfulness Constraints and Markedness Constraints. Agbedo (2015) notes that faithfulness constraints show how easy it is for the listener to reconstruct the string from the pronunciation. Faithfulness constraints ensure that segments are represented in the output the way they are presented in the input. This simply means that when a segment is changed, deleted or inserted where it is not meant to be, faithfulness constraint is violated. The output that violates the least constraints is the winner or the optimal output. The winner is indicated with a pointing finger (☞). The information about constraint violations is given by the asterisks *. For instance, the asterisk in cell beneath the constraint means that candidate (A) incurs one violation mark from this constraint while the double asterisk in cell (B) incurs two asterisks, which simply means two violations. The exclamation mark (!) only appears in loser’s cell. This shows the constraint that actively knocked out a loser from the competition for optimality or fatal violation. A candidate that incurs a fatal violation cannot be optimal.

Table 1: Constraints and Candidates

Candidates	Constraint A
☞ Candidate A	**
Candidate B	***!

Optimality theory has three level of operation: GEN, CON and EVAL. The Generator (GEN) takes an input, and generates the list of possible candidates. Constraints (CON) provide the criteria in the form of strictly ranked violable constraints used to decide between candidates. Evaluator (EVAL) chooses the optimal candidate based on the constraints while the candidate is the output.

Methodology

Data for this study was gathered from sixty (60) Obolo speakers of English randomly selected for this study. The subjects are graduates of different universities in Nigeria, and they fall under Udofof (2004) variety 11 classification of English. This paper made use of survey research method, and sixty (60) subjects were randomly drawn from six communities of Obolo: Ekede, Ayama Ekede, Ebukuma, Ngo, Agana and Egwede. The theoretical framework for this study is Optimality theory. An already prepared single and connected word were arranged by the researcher on a questionnaire for the subjects to read while, their productions were recorded using digital recording device. The questionnaire was divided into two sections, with section A having single words while section B has connected words. For the analysis, the study employed perceptual and quantitative approach focusing on the phonotactic structure of sounds of the words used for this research. During the perceptual analysis, the researcher played back and also listens to the audio corded utterances of the subjects, and he meticulously transcribed the words and the connected words using the Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary of Daniel Jones' 17th edition as a yardstick for transcription, this was instrumental in identifying consonant elision. For the quantitative data of analysis, the total number of elided consonant sounds, percentage able and not able were calculated, analyzed and conclusions were drawn base on the findings.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The speech sounds of the words used were thoroughly transcribed. Optimality theory has a unique way of analyzing words of a language used by speakers. It uses constraints to study and analyzed differences that exist in pronunciation of words. Constraints in OT affects pronunciation of words as the violation of a constraint is signal by using the asterisk (*). The multiple asterisks signify several violations, while the violation that shows fatal is shown with an exclamation mark (!), and any candidate that was kicked out is the optimal candidate. Elision is the omission of a letter in words during pronunciation. The pronunciation by the subjects showed that the consonant /k/ was elided. Table 2 below shows the single words used for this study and their transcriptions. For the purpose of clarity, the researcher bases his analysis and findings on the single words.

Table 2: Elision of the Velar Consonant /k/ at the Medial Position

Gloss	RP	OS	NA	%A	NNA	%NA	ES
Excess	/ek'ses/	/eses/	30	5%	30	5%	60
Textbook	/t'ekstbuk/	/testbuk/	18	3%	42	7%	60
Accent	/t'æksənt/	/æəsənt/	18	3%	42	7%	60
Exchange	/eks'tʃeɪndʒ/	/es'tʃeɪndʒ/	12	2%	48	8%	60
Actress	/t'æktrəs/	/t'ætrəs/	30	5%	30	5%	60
Expression	/ek'spreʃən/	/e'spreʃən/	12	2%	48	8%	60
Access	/t'ækses/	/t'æses/	24	4%	36	6%	60
Texture	/t'ekstʃə/	/t'estʃə/	18	3%	42	7%	60
Exceed	/t'ɪk'si:d/	/t'ɪsi:d/	12	2%	48	8%	60
External	/t'ɪk'stɜ:nəl/	/t'ɪstɜ:nəl/	36	6%	24	4%	60
TOTAL				35%		65%	600

Key:

RP - Receive Pronunciation

OS - Obolo Speaker

ES - Expected Score

Table 2 shows elision in the pronunciation of the velar consonant sound /k/ at the medial position of the words. The table illustrates that the word "Exchange" /eks'tʃeɪndʒ/, "Expression" /ek'spreʃən/, and "Exceed" /t'ɪk'si:d/ were realized by the subjects as /es'tʃeɪndʒ/, /e'spreʃən/, /t'ɪsi:d/ respectively. Each of these three items has 8% highest number not able while, the word "Excess" /ek'ses/ and "Actress" /t'æktrəs/ were realized as /e'ses/ and /t'ætrəs/ by percentage able at 5% each.

Table 3: Elision of the Velar Consonant /k/ at the Coda Position

Gloss	RP	OS	NA	%A	NNA	%NA	ES
Elect	/t'ɪlekt/	/t'ɪlet/	12	2%	48	8%	60
Duplex	/dʊpleks/	/dʊples/	12	2%	48	8%	60
Next	/nekst/	/nest/	18	3%	42	7%	60
Mix	/mɪks/	/mɪs/	18	3%	42	7%	60
Aspect	/æspekt/	/æspet/	24	4%	36	6%	60
Ask	/ɑ:sk/	/ɑ:s/	30	5%	30	5%	60
Dialect	/t'daɪəlekt/	/t'daɪəlet/	12	2%	48	8%	60
Six	/sɪks/	/sɪs/	24	4%	36	6%	60
Contractor	/kən'træktə/	/kən'trætə/	12	2%	48	8%	60
Reflect	/rɪ'flekt/	/rɪ'flet/	18	3%	42	7%	60
TOTAL				30%		70%	600

Key:

RP - Receive Pronunciation

OS - Obolo Speaker

ES - Expected Score

Table 3 displays velar consonant /k/ elision at the coda position in the pronunciation of the subjects used for this study. It was observed that 8% of the subjects dropped the consonant /k/ in the words "Elect" /ɪˈlekt/ as /ɪˈlet/, "Duplex" /dʌpleks/ as /dʌples/, "Dialect" /ˈdaɪəlekt/ as /ˈdaɪəlet/, "Contractor" /kənˈtræktə/ as /kənˈtrætə/. Also, the analysis revealed that the word "Ask" /aːsk/ was realized correctly by thirty (30) subjects who constitute 5% of the total number of subjects as /æs/.

Table 4: Elision of the Alveolar Consonant /t/ at the Medial and Coda Positions

Gloss	RP	OS	NA	%A	NNA	%NA	ES
Postpaid	/pəʊstpeɪd/	/pəʊsˈpeɪd/	12	2%	48	8%	60
Postbag	/ˈpəʊstbæg/	/ˈpəʊsbæg/	24	4%	36	6%	60
Construct	/ˈkɒnstrʌkt/	/ˈkɒnsrʌt/	18	3%	42	7%	60
Postpone	/pəʊstˈpəʊn/	/pəʊsˈpəʊn/	24	4%	36	6%	60
indecent	/ɪnˈdiːsəntsɪ/	/ɪnˈdiːsənsɪ/	30	5%	30	5%	60
Forest	/ˈfɒrɪst/	/ˈfɒrɪs/	12	2%	48	8%	60
Against	/əˈgeɪntst/	/əˈgeɪns/	18	3%	42	7%	60
Prince	/prɪnts/	/prɪns/	36	6%	24	4%	60
Pizza	/ˈpiːtsə/	/ˈpiːsə/	30	5%	30	5%	60
License	/ˈlaɪsənts/	/ˈlaɪsəns/	12	2%	48	8%	60
TOTAL				36 %		64%	600

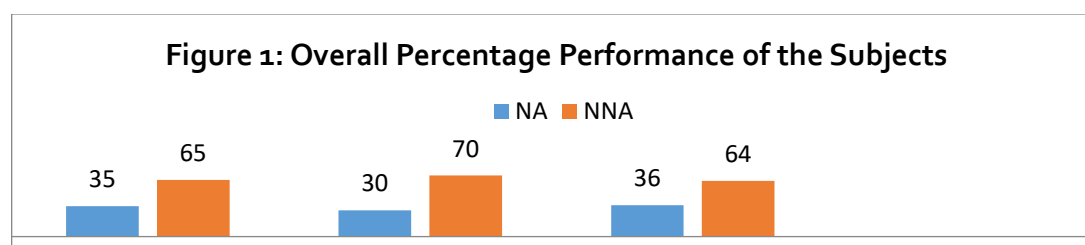
Key:

RP - Receive Pronunciation

OS - Obolo Speaker

ES - Expected Score

Table 4 illustrates deletion of the alveolar consonant sound /t/ at the medial and coda position in the production of the items used for this research. A total number of 8% of the subjects produced the words "Construct" /ˈkɒnstrʌkt/, "license" /ˈlaɪsənts/ and "postpaid" /pəʊstpeɪd/ as /ˈkɒnsrʌkt/, /ˈlaɪsəns/ and /pəʊspeɪd/ respectively. In a bid to simplify and for easy pronunciation of word by Obolo speakers of English, the alveolar sound /t/ was dropped making it for the speakers.



Summary of Findings

From the analysis, it was discovered that the velar consonant /k/ was deleted in the pronunciation of the Obolo speakers of English at the medial position posing possible

problem of mutual intelligibility to the listener during conversation. The words "Excess" /ek'ses/ was realized as a double grapheme [s, s], the word "Accent" /'æksənt/ became "Assent" /ə'sent/. The manner of pronunciation by the subjects has changed the meaning of the words from its original meaning to something else. In the same vein, the velar sound /k/ was dropped in the word "Access" /'ækses/, and it was realized as "Assess" /ə'ses/, shifting the meaning from "a pathway" to "the value of". The statistics shows that 65% of the subjects used for this study dropped the velar consonant sound /k/ at the medial position during pronunciation of English words therefore, making it impossible for mutual intelligibility.

On Table 3, the investigation also revealed that the production of the words "Next" /nekst/, "Mix" /mɪks/ and "Ask" /a:sk/ shows consonant /k/ elision at the coda position. The words were pronounced as "Nest" /nest/, "Mis" /mis/, and "As" /æs/ respectively. A total of 70% of Obolo speakers of English deleted /k/ from their English pronunciation. This singular act sent different meaning of the words to the hearer(s) which also impedes understanding during conversation.

Table 4 above displays elision of the alveolar consonant /t/ both at the medial and coda positions of words examined for this study. It was shown that consonant elision was a prominent feature among the majority of the subjects used for this work. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that the consonant cluster [t] is not permissible at the medial position in Obolo which entails the reason for the elision. Sixty-four 64% percent of the subjects realized the words showing elision both at the medial and at the coda positions.

Figure 1 presents different percentage performance of the subjects on number able and number not able of the items used by this research. The analysis shows that 35% of the subjects performed very well on velar consonant elision /k/ at the medial position of words as against the 65% of number not able. In the same manner, at the coda position, 30% subjects realized the /k/ perfectly while 70% fall under not able.

Conclusion

This study investigates consonant sound elision in the pronunciation of the Obolo Speakers of English. The paper focuses on elision at the medial and coda positions using the consonant sounds /k/ and /t/ as a yardstick. It was discovered that consonant elision was a major problem to the Obolo speakers of English as meaning of words were changed in course of pronunciations. The study proved that consonant elision is one of the characteristics of Obolo spoken English in particular and Nigerian English in general but that elision in this case shows peculiar features as it changes the meaning of one word to another. It was concluded that both medial and coda elision in Obolo Spoken English contribute significantly to identifying the version of English language spoken in Nigeria by L2 speakers.

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