A PRELIMINARY PHONOLOGY OF THE AYELE DIALECT OF ESAKỌ

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INTRODUCTION

Esakọ is an Ẹdo language spoken as a mother tongue by more than 120,000 people in and near Afenmai Division in Mid-Western Nigeria. Greenberg classifies it, under the name of Kukuruku, as one of the Kwa sub-family of his Niger-Congo grouping. This paper is a brief account of the phonology of one of the Esakọ dialects,[1] ayele (usually spelled Avicle in the orthography), spoken by some 9,000 speakers around the town of Agbẹdẹ.[2]

One of the most interesting features in this dialect, for general phonetic and linguistic theory, is that differences of muscular tension of the vocal organs, during the articulation of syllables, are used as the basis for a phonological opposition. A number of different phonological solutions are possible, but in this preliminary[3] article an interim phonemic solution is adopted which gives a convenient reading transcription, and in which the tension opposition is focussed on the consonants.[4] In this solution, the consonants are distributed in three sets, a tense set, a neutral set, and a lax set. Consonant harmony operates, in that in any morpheme consonants from either the tense set or the lax set can occur, but no co-occurrence (with a very small number of exceptions), is possible. Consonants from the neutral set can occur in any morpheme with the consonants from either the tense set or the lax set.

In the following inventory of consonant phonemes, h after a consonant symbol[5] will be used to denote a lax phoneme.

CONSONANT PHONEMES

Tense:	w	m	v	z	r	ñ	k	g				
Lax:	wh	mh	vh	zh	rh	ñh	kh	gh				
Neutral:	p	b	f	t	d	s	l	n	j	ɥ	kp	gb

[1] The very small amount of previous work on Esakọ has been largely on other dialects, and on demography and sociology. The only modern linguistic work on this dialect is Wolff (1959). Wolff, however, collapses what seem to this writer to be two distinct dialects, the Auchi and the Agbẹdẹ forms, into one, which he calls the 'Auchi-Agbede' dialect. Tentatively, and based partly on the sociolinguistic comments of a small number of informants, the dialects of Esakọ, and the 1963 Census figures for the numbers of speakers, are as follows: Auchi (14,261); Avianwu (11,994); Aviele (9,275); Anwai (3,602); Ekperi (8,243); Jaghe (2,639); South Ibie (5,786); South Uneme (3,605); Uzairue (25,175); Weppa Wano (20,425); – all in Afenmai Division. A further Esakọ dialect, outside Afenmai Division, in Ivbiosakon Division, is the Ivbiadaobi dialect (7,585). Orthographically written clan-names are used as labels for the dialects.

[2] The chief informants for the study were Mr A. M. Mọmọdu and Mr A. Sule; a grant in aid of the research from the Institute of African Studies of the University of Ibadan is very gratefully acknowledged.

[3] Publication of a full Greenberg 1,000-word list, and a spectrographic study, is planned for the near future.

[4] The orthography recognises the opposition, albeit inconsistently, and also marks it as a consonantal feature.

[5] There is no h in this dialect.

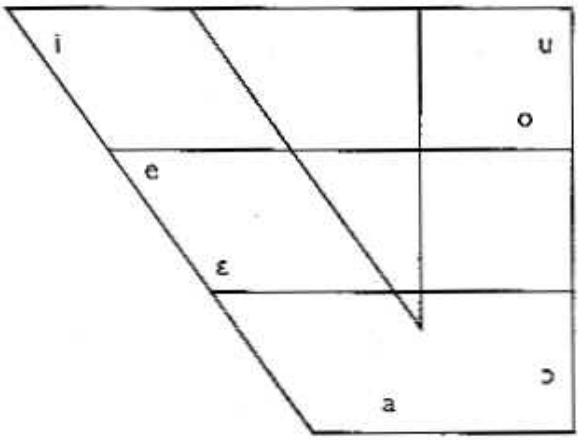
Exponents of tense consonants tend to be of greater duration than those of lax consonants, as well as of tenser articulation. The consonant phonemes have the following phonetic exponents[6]:

w	= [w^{T}]	a tense voiced labialised labial-velar approximant
wh	= [β^{L}]	a lax voiced bilabial approximant
m	= [m^{T}]	a tense voiced bilabial nasal
mh	= [m^{L}]	a lax voiced bilabial nasal
v	= [v^{T}]	a tense voiced labio-dental fricative
vh	= [v^{L}]	a lax voiced labio-dental fricative
z	= [z^{T}]	a tense voiced alveolar fricative
zh	= [z^{L}]	a lax voiced alveolar fricative. zh+j = a lax voiced palatalized palato-alveolar fricative, or occasionally the sequence [zj], in free variation
r	= [ɾ^{T}]	a tense voiceless alveolar flap, which may be occasionally voiced, in free variation. Before back vowels and a, r tends to be expounded by a tense voiceless fricative flap
rh	= [ɾ^{L}]	a lax voiced alveolar flap, and occasionally [ɹ^{L}], a lax voiced post-alveolar approximant, in free variation
ñ	= [ɲ^{T}]	a tense voiced palatal nasal
ñh	= [ŋ^{L}]	a lax voiced velar nasal. ñh is always succeeded by w
k	= [k^{T}]	a tense voiceless velar plosive
kh	= [x^{L}]	a lax voiceless velar fricative, and [k^{L}], a lax voiceless velar plosive, in free variation
g	= [g^{T}]	a tense voiced velar plosive
gh	= [ɣ^{L}]	a lax voiced velar fricative, or [g$_{\downarrow}^{L}$], a lax voiced velar plosive, in free variation
p	= [p]	a voiceless bilabial plosive
b	= [b]	a voiced bilabial plosive
f	= [f]	a voiceless labiodental fricative
t	= [t]	a voiceless alveolar plosive. t+j is expounded by either a voiceless palatalized palato-alveolar affricate, or occasionally by the sequence [tj], in free variation
d	= [d]	a voiced alveolar plosive. d+j is expounded by either a voiced palatalised palato-alveolar affricate, or occasionally by the sequence [dj], in free variation
s	= [s]	a voiceless alveolar fricative. s+j is expounded by either a voiceless palatalised palato-alveolar fricative, or occasionally by the sequence [sj], in free variation. (The orthographic 'ts', as in 'Etsakọ', perhaps reflects a former tense-lax pairing now collapsed).
l	= [l]	a voiced alveolar lateral approximant
n	= [n]	a voiced alveolar nasal
j	= [j]	a voiced palatal approximant
ɥ	= [ɥ]	a voiced labialised labial-palatal approximant
kp	= [k͡p]	a voiceless labial-velar plosive
gb	= [g͡b]	a voiced labial-velar plosive

[6] A small superscript capital ^{T} will be used as a diacritic to indicate phonetic tenseness of articulation, and a similar capital ^{L} for phonetic laxness of articulation.

Vowel Phonemes

There are seven vowel phonemes: i e ɛ a ɔ o u. Representative phonetic exponents are shown on the following vowel chart.



The allophones of i e o u tend to be slightly closer and more peripheral when they occur in tense morphemes, and slightly more open and more central when they occur in lax morphemes. Inter-consonantal allophones of all vowels are of longer duration after tense consonants than after lax consonants. Utterance-final allophones tend to be glottalised after tense consonants, and pronounced with breathy voice after lax consonants; utterance-initial allophones before a tense consonant are shorter than before a lax consonant.

For convenience of tonal analysis, long vowels are treated phonologically as sequences of vowel phonemes, and sequences of up to three such phonemes are found. Sequences of two vowel phonemes of identical quality are much more frequent than sequences of three. Phonetic diphthongs are also treated as sequences of vowel phonemes; such sequences very often signal junctures in compound words. All vowel phonemes can occur as the first or second of a sequence of two different vowel phonemes, except u, which does not occur as the first of a sequence.

In connected speech, word-final vowels are generally elided before word-initial vowels, unless the word-final vowel is i or u, in which case it is replaced by j or w respectively.

Each vowel phoneme acts as the nucleus of a phonological syllable, and carries one of the four tones given below.

Nasality in vowels is not a distinctive feature in this dialect.

Tone

ayele Esako has four tones in this analysis: high, low, high fall, and downstep, marked on the vowel as ´, `, ˆ and ' respectively. Downstep only occurs in connected speech or in compound words.

On a sequence of two vowels of the same or different quality, a phonologically high tone followed by a phonologically low tone is expounded phonetically by a fall from high to low, and a phonogical low followed by a phonological high by a rise, from low to high.

When a sequence of tones of different types occurs in the same breath-group, there is downdrift towards the end of the group.

Syllable Structure

Phonological syllable structure is very simple; only three types can occur:

$$V, \qquad C_1V, \qquad C_1C_2V$$

Only j and w can occur in C_2 position. When either of these consonants follows a lax or a tense consonant, it takes on the tension characteristics of that consonant.

Phonetic and phonological syllables are not necessarily in a one-to-one correspondence. As stated above, phonetically long vowels and diphthongs are treated as sequences of vowel phonemes. A sequence of two vowel phonemes, for instance, constitutes two phonological syllables, and these are together expounded by a single phonetic syllable.

WORD LIST

	WORD	MEANING		WORD	MEANING
w	úwâ	to lose	k	ɔ́kà	maize
	ùwàà	tail		èkɔ̀ɔ̀	tooth
wh	ówhà	house	kh	ɔ́khà	porcupine
	úwháà	to plait		èkhɔ̀ɔ̀	shame
m	ùmê	camwood, ochre	g	àgógô	bell
	òmì	pond		ògû	blacksmith
mh	úmhè	salt	gh	àghòghò	brains
	òòmhì	soup		úghû	to die
v	èvá	two	p	ùdàpéé́	lightness
	ìvì	kernels	b	óbɔ̀	hand
vh	évhàà	guts	f	ófè	mouse
	ívhìlì	boundaries	t	ɔ̀tɔ̀	ground
z	úzò	antelope	d	ùdù	chest
	ìzê	axes	s	úsô	to cry
zh	ùzhò	animal trap	l	úlû	to do
	ízhè	five	n	únɔ̀ɔ̀	to ask
r	árù	hat	j	újálê	to go
	àróró	shadow	ɥ	úɥâ	to give birth
rh	àrhù	louse	kp	ɔ̀kpà	one
	òrhìrhì	electric fish	gb	ùgbò	forehead
ñ	ùñìkpò	to boil stains out of cloth	t+j	útjéè	to call
	éñè	snakes	d+j	édjè	four
ñh	ùñhwìkpò	to fold cloth	s+j	ásjê	pepper
	èñhwèè	ashes	zh+j	òjèzhjè	breath

Examples of words with mixed tense and lax consonants are:

ùkòkòrhê, 'to gather' < úkókô, 'to collect', + -rhê, 'away from original position'

ùrèkháà, 'to accompany', < úrê, 'to use', + -kháà, 'together', 'jointly'

ígwóghò, 'dried stems of elephant grass' (for thatching), < ígwà, 'bones', + òghò, 'elephant grass'

An example of the use of downstep in a compound word is:

ádéséésè, 'between', 'in the middle of', < àdê, 'one has reached', + ésè, 'circle', + ésè, 'circle', i.e. 'one has reached the very middle'.

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