LIQUID ELISION IN WORD-FINAL SYLLABLES IN ESAN

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This article[1] focuses on the status of lax consonants in word-final syllables in Esan and some other related languages with respect to elision. In particular, the predominant loss of /l/ in Esan words is dealt with in detail. The result of elision is VV formation, since the loss of /l/ results in the juxtaposition of two (usually typologically similar) vowels. It is argued that this whole process is actually a diachronic phenomenon in progress. Evidence for this hypothesis comes from the observation that some dialects make overt vowel-sequence distinction between verbs in isolation whereas others do not. It is only when the attention of speakers is drawn to the syntax of such verbs that they agree on vowel-sequence distinction. It is concluded from this dialectal difference, buttressed by evidence from some related languages, that the diachronic process of /l/ (and other lax consonants) elision has fossilized or stabilized in some words in those languages that have elided forms while it is unstable or in 'transition' in those languages that still have CV word forms.

Cet article examine le rôle des consonnes lâches en esan ainsi qu'en d'autres langues apparentées, du point de vue de leur élision. On y note tout particulièrement la perte prédominante du /l/ en esan. Il en résulte des suites VV, car l'absence du /l/ permet la juxtaposition de deux voyelles, généralement de type similaire. Il semblerait que nous voyons ici un phénomène diachronique en évolution. Cette hypothèse se base sur le fait que dans certains dialectes les verbes en contexte isolé se distinguent clairement par leurs suites de voyelles, tandis qu'en d'autres dialectes ce n'est pas le cas. Les locuteurs n'acceptent alors l'existence de cette distinction vocalique que si on attire leur attention sur la syntaxe de tels verbes. De cette différence dialectale, appuyée par les données de certaines langues apparentées, on conclut que le processus diachronique de l'élision de /l/ et d'autres consonnes lâches s'est fossilisé ou stabilisé là où on trouve des formes élidées, tandis que dans les langues qui conservent les formes en CV ce processus est instable ou en transition.

0. INTRODUCTION

The Esan language, one of the Edo group of languages of the Kwa sub-family of Niger-Congo (Greenberg 1963), is classified as a member of the North-Central Edoid group of Benue-Kwa (Elugbe 1980). It is spoken mainly in four local government areas of Edo State, Nigeria viz. Esan West, Central, North-East, and South-East.

Elision in word-final syllables is most common with **l**. To a lesser degree, the process occurs with **w**, **r**, and **y**. In related languages like Edo (Bini), Etsako, and Owan, elision involves lax consonants like **r** ([r] and [ɾ]) and **mw** [ɱ]. The term 'lax' is used for phonetically weak consonants like [l], [ɾ], [ɾ̩], [ɱ], [j̃], and [n̥]. In this article these weak consonants will be represented by Ç.

The data for this paper was collected from a wide diversity of native speakers living in the Edo State capital Benin City as well as in Esan hometowns. The writer is a native speaker of Esan.

It is pertinent to point out that the phenomenon being discussed is seen as consonant deletion rather than consonant insertion. What is being witnessed is the gradual loss of /l/ in word-final syllables of words spoken by the young. It is not clear why this should be so. What is envisaged is that as the older generation dies out, the /l/ retained forms will die out with them. The interest of the writer is to record this process in transition before it finally disappears.

Before we examine elision in detail, we first present a phonemic chart of consonants and vowels of Esan (Ejele 1982, Okojie and Ejele 1987).

[1] An earlier version of this article was presented at the 8th Linguistic Association of Nigeria Conference, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria in 1987.

p	b			t	d				k	g	kp	gb		
	ß	f	v	s	z	ʃ			x	ɣ			h	
						tʃ	dʒ							
m					n									
					l									
					r									
w							j							

Esan has twenty-five consonant phonemes. Of interest is the fact that Esan has two consonant phonemes /**m**/ and /**n**/ but three nasal phones, the palatal nasal [**ɲ**] being in complementary distribution with the voiced palatal approximant /**j**/ [**j**]. In the orthographic convention, the sounds are represented as above except for /**ß**/ = bh, /**ʃ**/ = sh, /**x**/ = kh, /**ɣ**/ = gh, /**tʃ**/ = ch, /**dʒ**/ = j, and /**j**/ = y.

There are seven oral vowels and five nasal vowels which contrast with the oral counterparts.

i					u			ĩ					ũ	
	e					o								
		ɛ			ɔ					ɛ̃			ɔ̃	
			a								ã			

As noted in Ejele 1982:15 and Okojie and Ejele 1987:26 /**e**/ and /**o**/ have no nasal counterparts but can become nasalized in nasal environments. Nasal vowels are unspecified in the alphabet but are indicated orthographically as a sequence of vowel(s) and **n**., e.g., **ɛ̃** = **ẹn, ɛ̃ɛ̃** = **ẹẹn**. Also of interest is the observation that /**i**/ and /**u**/ are usually realized as glides when followed by vowel(s) that are typologically different, e.g., **òvuọ̀nlẹ̀n, ọ̀hiẹ̀lè**, and **íhiẹ̀nlẹ́n** in (1).

1. ELISION IN NOUNS AND PRONOUNS

In some nouns and some pronouns, the elision of **l** or **l**+V of the final syllable in Esan leads to a reduction of the number of consonants or syllables, as the examples in (1) clearly show. (An asterisk represents non-existing or unacceptable forms.)

(1)	Full word form		l reduction (consonant)	l+V reduction (syllable)
	ókpẹ̀bhòlò	important people	**ókpẹ̀bhòò**	**ókpẹ̀bhò**
	ìlòlò	thought	**ìlòò**	**ìlò**
	òvuọ̀nlẹ̀n	sun	**òvuọ̀ẹ̀n**	**òvuọ̀n**
	úlìnlìn	cold	**úlììn**	**úlìn**
	èwànlẹ̀n	sense	**èwàẹ̀n**	***èwàn**
	mànlẹ̀n	we	**màẹ̀n**	**màn**
	nànlẹ̀n	they	**nàẹ̀n**	**nàn**
	ọ̀mànlẹ̀n	old person	**ọ̀màẹ̀n**	***ọ̀màn**
	***bhale**	you (PL)	***bhae**	**bhà**
	ọ̀hiẹ̀lè	a fruit seed	**ọ̀hiẹ̀è**	**ọ̀hiẹ̀**
	íhiẹ̀nlẹ́n	beans	**íhiẹ̀ẹ́n**	**íhiẹ̌** (cf. **íhiẹ̌** 'finger')

The reduced forms of most words are more commonly used than the full forms. Many words allow either **l** elision or **l** and the following vowel (Ejele 1982:45 and Ejele 1986:22). When the syllable is reduced, the tone on the elided vowel is transferred to the preceding vowel. Although this effect is not obvious in cases of juxtaposed typologically similar tones, as in the examples in (1), it is

reflected in the resulting gliding tone associated with juxtaposed dissimilar tones, as in **íhiẹ̀nlẹ́n** compared to **ọ̀hiẹ̀lè**.

Although the process of **l** deletion is very common in Esan, not all words partake of it. Exceptions include the words in (2).

(2)	Full form		**l** reduction	**l**+V reduction
	ẹ̀lẹ́nlẹ̀n	eight	***ẹ̀lẹ́ẹ̀n**	***ẹ̀lện**
	isínlịn	nine	***isịn**	***isîn**
	ìkhínlòn	seven	***ìkhíòn**	***ìkhîn**
	linlẹn	to shiver	***liẹn**	***lin**

Unfortunately, there is as yet no a priori way of predicting which words allow or disallow elision.

2. ELISION IN VERBS

The more interesting cases of elision involve verbs, where the elision of **l** results in the juxtaposition of two (usually typologically similar) vowels as in (3).

(3)	Full form			Consonant reduction	
	sọlọ	**/sɔlɔ/**	tear	**sọọ**	**/sɔɔ/**
	khinlin	**/xĩlĩ/**	twist	**khiin**	**/xĩĩ/**
	kolo	**/kolo/**	meet	**koo**	**/koo/**
	rọlọ	**/rɔlɔ/**	pick	**rọọ**	**/rɔɔ/**
	tanlan	**/tãlã/**	loosen	**taan**	**/tãã/**
	bhulu	**/ßulu/**	break/split	**bhuu**	**/ßuu/**

The juxtaposed vowels phonemically function as double vowels (as already observed in Okojie and Ejele 1987) and is reflected in the contrast between single vowels and double vowels in the pairs in (4).

(4)	**sọ (ni érià)**	**/sɔ/**	seek (from people)	**sọọ**	**/sɔɔ/**	tear
	tan	**/tã/**	tall	**taan**	**/tãã/**	loosen
	ko (or koko)	**/ko/**	together	**koo**	**/koo/**	meet
	yẹn	**/jẽ/ [ɲẽ]**	cook	**yẹẹn**	**/jẽẽ/ [ɲẽẽ]**	apply pressure

The full word form (e.g., **tanlan /tãlã/** 'loosen') can be said to be in free variation with its **l**-reduced form (**taan /tãã/**) because they are in opposition to the single-vowel word **/tã/** 'tall'.

While the elided consonants can still be traced in the words in (3) and (4), there are many verbs in Esan that can no longer be traced to a form having **l**. Such verbs regularly contrast as a sequence of vowels, with words having a single vowel as in (5).

(5)	**họ (ékẹ̀n)**	**/hɔ/**	lay (egg)	**họọ (úkpọ̀n)**	**/hɔɔ/**	wash (cloth)
	man	**/mã/**	we	**maan**	**/mãã/**	teach/show
	ba (NP **fẹghé**)	**/ba/**	spy (on NP)	**baa**	**/baa/**	pain
	ban (úkpọ̀n)	**/bã/**	take off (cloth)	**baan**	**/bãã/**	give up bad habit
	sa	**/sa/**	fetch/shoot	**saa (étò)**	**/saa/**	weave (hair)
	da (ẹ́yọ̀n)	**/da/**	drink (drink)	**daa (àmẹ̀n)**	**/daa/**	collect (rainwater)
	gba (úkpírì)	**/gba/**	tie (rope)	**gbaa (ẹ́kẹ́ órià)**	**/gbaa/**	understand

Interestingly, the Ekpoma dialect does not make overt use of vowel sequence as a basis of distinction between these words in isolation whereas the Uromi dialect does. The speakers do, however, agree with this distinction when their attention is drawn to it.

A critical analysis of the data reveals that apart from the vowel sequence, the verb typology and its complements are also distinctive criteria whether the verb is collocative, cognate, deictic, serial, transitive, or intransitive (Ejele 1986). Ekpoma speakers seem to be more sensitive to the typology of a verb rather than the vowel sequence. Thus, for instance, **họ** 'lay' and **họọ** 'wash' are collocative verbs selecting **ékẹ̀n** 'egg' and **úkpọ̀n** 'cloth' respectively. **man** 'we' and **maan** 'teach, show measure' belong to different word classes, being pronominal and verbal, respectively. The word **ba** usually occurs in serial constructions. In the examples, **fẹ̀ghé** means 'check up' and it is itself formed from two verbs **fẹ** 'look' and **ghe** 'look'. In contrast, **baa** can occur transitively and intransitively, respectively, in (6).

(6) **òẹ̀ bàá mẹn** leg is paining me
leg pain me

ẹgbede ọ̀ bàà injection is painful
needle it pains

A relevant question at this point is, what happens when both dialects differ in their classification of words? A priori, one expects such a verb to be ambiguous or ambivalent. Indeed such an example is the verb **raa** 'steal' which is transitive in Ekpoma dialect with a serial verb transitive correlate **do** NP **mun** (or **do** NP **rie**) 'steal NP'. The verb **raa** for some Uromi dialect speakers is transitive as in (7c) and (7d). The example in (7c) in Ekpoma dialect means 'he has stolen from a hen' while (7d) is unacceptable.

(7) a. **ọ ráále**
he steal
He stole / has stolen.

b. **ọ dó ọ́khọ́khọ̀ mun**
He stole / has stolen (from) a hen.

c. **ọ ráá ọ́khọ́khọ̀**
He stole / has stolen a hen.

d. **ọ dó émìn** (something)
He stole (something).

A convincing proof that vowel length is phonemic in Esan in spite of its covert usage in Ekpoma dialect, is the behavior of the vowel in the last syllable of a verb that is followed by a vowel-initial word. Generally when two vowels are juxtaposed across a word boundary, the first deletes. That gives the formula in (8).

(8) (CV) CV # CV (CV) → (CV) $C_{ø}$ # CV (CV)[2]

Applying this general principle, the only vowel in a monosyllabic verb deletes, leaving only the consonant in the original syllable as in (9).

(9) CV → C # V C V
họ h ékẽ lay egg

In contrast, in a disyllabic verb, as presumably in a VV sequence, only the last vowel deletes, leaving a consonant and a vowel as in (10).

(10) CVV → CV # V C V
họọ họ ukpõ wash cloth

The comparative table below illustrates this. This data is attested to across Esan whether in the city or hometown.

2 # represents word boundary and Ø a deleted segment.

(11)

V			VV		
họ ékẹ̀n	**/hɔ ekẽ/**	lay egg	**họọ úkpọ̀n**	**/hɔɔ ukpɔ̃/**	wash cloth
[h ékẽ]	***[hɔ ékẽ]**		**[hɔ úkpɔ̃]**	***[h úkpɔ̃]**	
sa àmẹ̀n	**/sa amẽ/**	fetch water	**saa étò**	**/saa étò/**	weave hair
[s àmẽ]	***[sa amẽ]**		**[sa étò]**	***[s étò]**	
ban úkpọ̀n	**/bã ukpɔ̃/**	take off cloth	**bààn isì èfè**	**/baa isi ɛfe/**	stop going
[b úkpɔ̃]	***[bã úkpɔ̃]**		**[bã isì èfè]**	***[bĩsi èfè]**	to Efe's
da ẹ́yọ̀n	**/da ɛjɔ̃/**	drink (drink)	**daa àmẹ̀n**	**/daa amẽ/**	collect
[déŋɛ]	***[da ɛŋɔ̃]**		**[da amẽ]**	***[d amẽ]**	rainwater

That elision of the vowel in monosyllabic verbs is obligatory is substantiated by the unacceptability of forms under V, which are not allowed even in slow speech. Conversely, the fact that only V rather than VV in disyllabic verbs is elided, is confirmed by the unacceptability of the form marked with an asterisk under the VV column, not even in fast speech. Note that although most of the verbs in (11) have a narrow range of collocation, the same results are obtained when their nouns are replaced by other suitable nouns or pronouns. Thus the behavior of vowels in verbs when juxtaposed with a vowel-initial word serves as a crucial distinguishing criterion for vowel sequence in Esan.

Apart from **l**, other lax consonants like the liquid **r** and the glides **w** and **y** in final syllables are susceptible to elision, although it is much less common with them. Examples are given in (12) including a comparable example from the Edo (Bini) language as the last word in the list.

(12)

vare	**/vare/**	**/r/** elides → **[vàé]**	***[va]** (/r/ and /e/ elide)	come
dere	**/dere/**	**/r/** elides → **[dee]**	***[de]** (/r/ and /e/ elide)	fall
òwẹ̀	**/owɛ/**	**/w/** elides → **[òè]**	***[o]** (/w/ and /ɛ/ elide)	leg
yẹnyẹn	**/jẽjẽ/**	**/j/** elides → **[ɲẽɲẽ]**	***[ɲẽ]** (/j/ and /ẽ/ elide)	apply pressure
ùhúnmwùn	**/uhũmũ/**	**/ŋ/** elides → **[ùhúũ]**		head

As observed with **l**, not all words with these lax consonants in final syllables allow their elision, and as yet, the phenomenon is not predictable. For instance, the verb **yere** 'remember' looks like verbs that allow elision but, in fact, it does not.

3. EXPLANATIONS FOR ELISION OF LAX CONSONANTS IN WORD-FINAL SYLLABLES

A plausible explanation that accounts for the process of elision of the lax consonant in the final syllable of words is a diachronic one. There is no reason to believe that this phenomenon is a diachronic process in progress. Evidence for this hypothesis includes loss of one of the double vowels, free variation with full-word forms, use of full forms by the older generation, and evidence of the same phenomenon in related languages.

3.1 LOSS OF ONE OF DOUBLE VOWELS

The observation that some speakers seem not to make overt use of vowel sequence may actually be a reflection of the fact that some words are in the process of losing one of the double vowels in the sequence and therefore may become homophonous with words having single vowels. For instance, **íhiẹ̀nlẹ́n [íhjɛ̃lɛ̃́]** 'beans' in fast speech is **[íhjɛ̃́]**, homophonous with **[íhjɛ̃́]** 'finger'. Similarly, **[sɔɔ]** 'tear' is **[sɔ]** in fast speech, becoming homophonous with **[sɔ]** 'seek'.

(13)

sọ̀ọ	**ébè-á**	**/sɔɔ ébè-á/**	**[sɔ ébè-á]**	tear the book
tear	book			

sọ ni érià /sɔ ni érjà/ [sɔ̀ n érjà] seek from people
seek from people

3.2 FREE VARIATION WITH FULL WORD FORMS

Whether vowel sequence usage is covert or overt, all the dialects of Esan have word forms with elision in free variation with their full-word forms (cf. example (3)). The existence of these variants indicate that the diachronic process is still in progress for these words, i.e., the words are in transition, presumably on their way to being stable. In case of verbs with VV, it is plausible to treat them as reflecting a later stage in the diachronic process, such that they have long lost their lax consonants. This analysis should not be surprising, as the language has only recently been reduced to writing. Since the process was not documented, the present forms fossilized and are now stable, being no longer traceable, via oral tradition, to older forms having lax consonants.

The interesting case of pronouns buttresses this analysis. **manlẹn** 'we' and **nanlẹn** 'they' allow all forms of the stages. That is, the full-word form **manlẹn** and **nanlẹn** which are their emphatic forms, the **l**-deleted form **maẹn** and **naẹn**, and the **l**+V-deleted form **man** and **nan** respectively. In contrast, the pronoun **bha** 'you PL' is the only accepted form, now no longer traceable to **bhale** (the full form) and **bhae** (the **l**-deleted form). Presumably **bha** has undergone the full diachronic process, and is now the only accepted or used form. Consequently, it can be considered to have fossilized since it can no longer be linked to the earlier forms **bhale** and **bhae**. Incidentally, this is the case for related languages like Edo (Bini), Owan (Ora), and Etsako (Auchi), with Edo (Bini) having mainly the Ç-deleted forms which are no longer linked to the full-word forms found in the other languages. Other examples are given in the table in (14).

(14) Lax-consonant elision compared in four Edoid languages

	ESAN	EDO	ETSAKO(AUCHI)	OWAN(EME-ORA)
salt	**úmènlèn [umɛ̃lɛ̃] [úmɛ̃ɛ̃] [úmɛ̃]**	**ùmwén [ùmʊ́ɛ̀] [ùmʊ́]**	**úmhèlè [úm^{h}èlè] [úm^{h}è]**	**úmènrlẹn [úmɛ̃ɾɛ̃] [úmɛ̃]**
basket	**ókhuàlè [óxwàlè] [óxwàè] *[óxwà]**	**òkhuárè [òxwárè] [òxwàè] *[òxwâ]**	**ókp^{h}àlè [ókp^{h}àlè] [ókp^{h}àè] [ókp^{h}à]**	**ókhuàrlè [óxwàɾè] [óxwàè] *[óxwà]**
neck	**ùrùlù [ùrùlù] [ùrùù] [ùrù]**	**ùrhù [ùɾù]**	**ùrhùìlì [ùr^{h}ùìlì] [ùr^{h}ùì]**	**ùrùrlùn [ùrùɾũ] [ùrũ]**
fire	**èrànlè [èrɐ̃lè] [èrɐ̃ɛ̃] *[èrɐ̃]**	**èrhẹn [èɾɛ̃]**	**èr^{h}àlè [èr^{h}àlè] [er^{h}ae] [er^{h}a]**	**èrànrlèn [èrɐ̃ɾɛ̃] [èrɐ̃ɛ̃] *[èrɐ̃]**
leg	**òwẹ [òwɛ̀] òẹ [òè]**	**òwẹ [òwè] *òẹ *[òè]**	**òwẹ [òwè] *òẹ [òè]**	**[òẹ] [òè] *òwẹ *[òwè]**
eye	**ẹlòlò [èlòò] [èlòò] [èlò] *[èò]**	**àrò [àɾò] [àò]**	**ẹlò [ɛlo] *[ɛo]**	**èrlò [èɾò] *[ɛo]**
knife	**élóghàlè [élɔ́ɣalè] [élɔ́ɣàè] [élɔ́ɣà]**	**èrò [èrɔ̀] [èɔ̀]**	**àghálò [àɣálɔ̀] *[àɣàɔ̀]**	**ághàrlè [áɣàrè] [áɣàè]**
food	**ébàlè [ébàlè] [ébàè]?[ébà]**	**èvbàré [èvàré] [èvàé] *[èvà]**	**émàlè [émàlè] émàè *[émà]**	**ébàrlè [ébàɾè] ébàè] *[ébà]**
belly	**ékélè [ékélè] [ékéè] [ékê]**	**èkóo [ékóò] [èkô] [èkó]**	**ẹkẹ́lè [ékɛlè] [ékéè] [ékê]**	**ẹkẹ́rlè [ékéɾè] [ékéè] ékê]**
outside	**òlélè [òlélè] [òlé] [òlê] *[òê]**	**óréré [óɾéɾé] [óɾéé] [óóɾé] [óɾé] [óé]**	**átò [átò]**	**òrlérlé [òɾéɾé] [òɾéé] [òɾê] *[òê]**

A similar case is **òẹ** 'leg' which is actually derived from **òwẹ**, a much less common form. However, there is no doubt that **òẹ** in Esan is derived from **òwẹ** because

the plural form **àwè** still has **w**. Evidence from Edo (Bini) and Etsako (Auchi) allow only the full form **òwẹ̀** while Owan (Eme-Ora) allows only the deleted form **òẹ̀**.

vare 'come' is another word that shows the diachronic stages in the dialects of Esan. It is pronounced **[vare]** among the dialects around Ubiaja, whereas most other dialects like Uromi, Ekpoma, and Irrua use **[vae]**. However, no dialect uses **[va]**.

3.3 USE OF FULL FORMS BY OLDER GENERATION

Evidence from the older generation lends credence to a diachronic treatment of lax consonants in word-final syllables. It is observed that the older generation primarily in the countryside and hometowns use the full forms of the words while forms with deletion are more common with the younger generation. For instance, some of the secondary and university students interviewed did not think that **ùrù** and **ùrùlù** referred to 'neck'. The same applied to **úmẹ̀n** and **úmẹ̀nlẹ̀n** 'salt' as well as the other examples in (14). Interestingly, Esan speakers belonging to the older generation, as well as students who interact with grandparents or old relatives, were able to recognize each set of words as the same.

3.4 RELATED LANGUAGES

Evidence from related languages like Edo (Bini), Etsako (Auchi), and Owan (Eme-Ora), shows that the diachronic process is not restricted to Esan alone. The comparative examples in (14) give the forms showing different stages in the diachronic process. For instance, 'basket' in Esan, Edo, and Owan allow only the first two stages: full-word form and consonant-elided form. In contrast, Etsako allows all forms of the the three stages: full-word, consonant-elided, and C+V-elided forms, respectively. With 'neck' and 'fire', Esan, Etsako, and Owan behave alike in allowing C and C+V deletions in contrast with Edo whose only form can no longer be linked (by its native speakers) with any deleted form(s). Presumably, Edo has reached the final stage of the change. In spite of the similarity between Esan, Etsako, and Owan, Esan and Owan contrast with Etsako in the word 'fire' where it does not allow the word-final CV deletion (as shown by the asterisk). Thus, while Etsako allows the three word forms, Esan and Owan allow full and C-elided forms. Edo allows only one form, the l+V-elided form.

Similar comparison can be made with the other words. The affected final-syllable consonants are **[l]** orthographically **l** for Esan and Etsako, **[ɾ]** and **[ɽ]** orthographically **r** for Edo, and **[ɽ]** orthographically **rl** (one consonant) for Owan. Generally, most of the words in Edo seem to have stabilized while corresponding words in the other three languages are still in transition (cf. 'neck', 'fire', 'eye', and 'knife' in (14)). In all these languages the dichotomy between speech form and age generation is also observed. The older generation (especially in the hometowns and villages) tends to use the full word form while the younger generation uses the elided form.

Even in a distantly related language like Urhobo, a Delta-Edoid language (Elugbe 1980), the same process of Ç-elision is observed. The affected lax consonants are **[r]** and **[j]**. Some examples from Urhobo are given in (15).

(15)	**ùchùrù**	pet	**/ùtʃùrù/**	**[ùtʃùɾù]**	*or*	**[ùtʃùù]**
	ùrhùrù	greed	**/ùrùrù/**	**[ùrùɾù]**	*or*	**[ùrùù]**
	àkpèrè	basket	**/àkpèrè/**	**[àkpèɾè]**	*or*	**[àkpèè]**
	èrhàrè	fire	**/èràrè/**	**[èràɾè]**	*or*	**[èràè]**
	òghéyì	tortoise	**/òghéjì/**	**[òghéjì]**	*or*	**[òghéì]**

It should not be surprising that Urhobo, Edo, Esan, Owan, and Etsako allow Ç-elision in word-final positions since they are genetically related, being Edoid (Elugbe

1986). Urhobo is classified as South-West Edoid, Edo (Bini), Esan, and Ora as North-Central Edoid, and Etsako as South North-West Edoid.

In all of these languages, the general predictable environment for Ç-elision is in intervocalic position, i.e., VÇV. Such a sequence is a "weak spot" (Greenberg 1963:xxiv) in these languages in the sense that a change is more likely in this sequence than CV sequence. Consequently, these languages will tend to have more VV combinations than VÇV, as is indeed amply justified by the comparative examples from the four languages.

Before concluding, attention should be drawn to the possibility of an intermediate stage between the second and third stages. In this intermediate stage, the juxtaposition of two vowels (being a result of Ç-elision) may be argued to be realized as a diphthong. Although there is no evidence for diphthongs and triphthongs in Esan, Owan, or Etsako, these have been argued to be present in Edo in Melzian (1937:xi), Wescott (1962:29), and Amayo (1976:14). For instance, in the latter, **èguàrè** 'place' and **òkhuérè** (orthographically **eguae** and **okhuae**) are treated as triphthongs as in (16).

(16) **èguàrè** **/ɛgware/** **[èɡwàè]**
òkhuérè **/oxware/** **[òxwáè]**

This is in line with Schane's (1973) treatment of sequences of semivowels **j** and **w**, plus the following vowel(s) as diphthongs and triphthongs.

The presence of diphthongs and triphthongs in Edo (Bini) is controversial. Omozuwa (1987) argues that these do not occur in Edo. His view is buttressed by their absence in the aforementioned related languages. In the Edo language, the two examples in (16) are actually phonetically realized as **[èɡwàè]** and **[òxwáè]** respectively. Here the last vowel **[e]**, a half-closed vowel, is realized as **[ɛ]**, a half-open vowel which is a kind of vowel assimilation reflecting the influence of the preceding open vowel **[a]**. Possibly, this assimilatory behavior, an articulatory movement of the tongue towards the target vowel **[e]**, is what is interpreted as forming a diphthong/triphthong in conjunction with the preceding vowel(s). Such an analysis is radically different from the traditional treatment of a diphthong as a unit, having only one syllabic peak. For instance, **/ɔɪ/** in **/bɔɪ/** 'boy' in English is a unit, unlike the sequence in Edo.

4. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion, there is no doubt that the liquid **l** and to a lesser degree other lax consonants in word-final syllables in Esan and some other related languages are being elided. We have seen that the result of elision in this position is VV formation, which now contrasts with words having a V, with which they may be homophonous.

The phenomenon of Ç-elision though fairly common, cannot be predicted. We have tried to explain our observation as a diachronic phenomenon in progress. In addition to dialectal differences in Esan itself, we examined similar words in some related languages and the overwhelming evidence shows that indeed Ç-elision is not peculiar to Esan. In fact, of the four languages, Edo (Bini) seems to have stabilized since the words have only the elided forms which the native speakers do not link to any other forms. In contrast, Esan, Owan, and Etsako have words in various stages of transition, since the three word-forms are still possible in most of the words.

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