

# THE STATUS OF /e/ IN ONITSHA IGBO

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The standard descriptions of the Igbo vowel system<sup>1</sup> have been based on Southern ('Owerri' or 'Central') dialects. In these dialects there is a vowel harmony system whereby eight vowels fall into two sets of four, the sets being mutually exclusive within the word 'except in the case of compound verbs or of verbs with certain suffixes, or of borrowed words'.<sup>2</sup> They are commonly represented in the following arrangement, where the odd-numbered vowels form one set (here referred to as ODD) and the even-numbered vowels form another set (here referred to as EVEN).<sup>3</sup>

FRONT	BACK
1. i	u 5.
2. j	ɥ 6.
3. e	o 7.
4. a	ɔ 8.

Thus, with odd vowels occur: *ikpe* 'case', *igbò* 'Igbo', *ilu* 'proverb', *ucè* 'thought', *ofe* 'soup', *òkpu* 'hat'. With even vowels occur: *àsì* 'bead', *urì* 'wandering', *ọjì* 'kola', *uta* 'bow', *ọma* 'good', *ùdò* 'rope'. The inseparable pronouns, conventionally written as separate words, harmonize with the verb root that follows:

o mèrè he did                      ọ mààrà he knew

Ida Ward suggested that Onitsha Igbo did not have the same system, but that it possibly had 'an additional *ɛ* sound'.<sup>4</sup> Obviously, setting up an additional vowel phoneme would cause a rearrangement of the vowel harmony system. This paper will review the evidence and suggest that, if the rules for the system are rearranged, it is unnecessary to set up an extra phoneme for Onitsha.

A set of data that did not accord with the standard description was provided by Mr. E. O. Izukanne, of Atani, who pointed out a number of nouns with the vowels a-e, which, according to the standard description, should not co-occur: *áfè* 'garment', *agbè* 'gourd', *àgwè* 'island', *àkè* 'hunch-back',<sup>5</sup> *àlè* 'type of grass'. All these forms have been found to occur with other Onitsha speakers or in the ONITSHA IGBO VOCABULARY of G. W. Pearman.<sup>6</sup>

It was next observed that in the speech of Mr. W. C. Mbonu, of Umuoji, /e/ has two allophones, [e] and [ɛ], which are distributed as follows:<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> R. F. G. ADAMS, *A MODERN IBO GRAMMAR*, O.U.P. (1932); I. C. WARD, *AN INTRODUCTION TO THE IBO LANGUAGE*, Heffer (1936); J. CARNOCHAN, 'Vowel harmony in Igbo', *AFRICAN LANGUAGE STUDIES* 1 (1960); L. B. SWIFT, A. Aghghorù, E. Ugorji, *IGBO BASIC COURSE*, F.S.I. (1962); M. M. GREEN and G. E. IGWE, *A DESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR OF IGBO*, Akademik-Verlag, Berlin, and O.U.P. (1963).

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<sup>2</sup> Green and Igwe, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> The orthography used is that of Green and Igwe.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Occurring in *Ọhụhụ* as *àkà*. The other words have not been traced in Southern dialects.

<sup>6</sup> MS. kindly loaned by Miss M. Munro.

<sup>7</sup> Rev. G. E. Igwe points out that /e/ also has two allophones in *Ọhụhụ*; their distribution is however, different from either of those described here.

[e] occurs initially before /l o u/:

enyi	[éɲi]	elephant
egó	[égó]	money
ewu	[éwú]	goat

[ɛ] occurs elsewhere:

(a) finally:

ife	[ífɛ]	thing
*áfè	[áfɛ]	garment
ònye	[òɲɛ]	who?
ùbe	[ùbé]	pear

(b) before /l e u/:

*pen] <sup>6</sup>	[pénl]	penny
edè	[édè]	cocoyam
ògenè	[ògɛnɛ]	gong
*kèdɥ	[kédó]	how?

Apart from the starred items, the standard harmony system is not affected.

In the speech of Mr. E. Okwuosah of Onitsha Town, it is still possible to treat [e] and [ɛ] as allophones, but their distribution is governed by different rules:

[e] occurs

(a) initially before /l o u/:

enyi	[éɲi]	elephant
egó	[égó]	money
ewu	[éwú]	goat

(b) finally after /l u/:

ltè	[lɛ]	cooking pot
ùbe	[ùbé]	pear

[ɛ] occurs elsewhere:

(a) before /l e a u/:

pen]	[pénl]	penny
jèe	[jɛ:]	go!
letà	[lɛtà]	letter
kèdɥ	[kédó]	how?

(b) finally after /l e a u/:

ife	[ífɛ]	thing
ezè	[ézɛ]	tooth
áfè	[áfɛ]	garment
àsè	[àsɛ]	enquiry
ɔ̀fè	[ɔ̀fɛ]	soup
ɔ̀fè	[ɔ̀fɛ]	excess
ɔ̀kè	[ɔ̀kɛ]	boundary
òke	[òkɛ]	rat

It is apparent that /e/ co-occurs with all the other seven vowels, although not with equal frequency. Sequences e-ɔ, o-e, and u-e have not yet been found, and there are few cases

<sup>6</sup> Swift writes p'enl, with regular harmony.

of /e/ with /i/ or /ɔ/. It is not possible, however, to treat the sequences which do not fit the standard system as exceptions because of the |-e and ɔ-e sequences, which are |-e and o-e both in Southern dialects and in Umuoji. It rather appears that certainly in Onitsha Town and to a limited extent in other parts of the Onitsha area /e/ is neutral to the vowel harmony system.<sup>9</sup>

The question then arises whether a root containing /e/ will take odd or even vowels in grammatical elements that harmonize with it. The Umuoji speaker agrees with the standard system in having odd vowels:

i-mé	[imɛ̃]	to do
o mèlù <sup>10</sup>	[ómèlò]	he did

But the Onitsha Town speaker differs by having even vowels in harmonizing elements:

-mé	[imɛ̃]	to do
ɔ mèlù	[ómèlò]	he did

This holds where the choice is /i/ or /ɔ/, as in the above examples. But where the choice is e/a, e is selected to harmonize with /e/:

ejélɥ m	[éjélòṁ]	I went
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The rule in this dialect is therefore that /e/ selects preferably the neutral vowel /e/ and otherwise an even vowel in harmonizing elements.

There are certain interesting consequences of this rule. Firstly, there is a contrast between

	imé	[imɛ̃]	inside
and	-mé	[imɛ̃]	to do,

which for the Umuoji speaker are both [imɛ̃]. The harmony lost at the phonemic level is thus preserved, for the Onitsha Town speaker, at the allophonic level, the closer allophone occurring with the closer vowel.

Secondly, there are different allophones in cognate nouns and verbs:

-cè	[lɛ̀]	to think
ucè	[úcè]	thought

It is apparent that in the first case the root -cè selects the prefix vowel according to the rule given above. But in the second case, although -cè is still the root, it appears to be the derivational prefix u- which governs the harmony. It is unsatisfactory to describe the selection thus, however, both on general grounds and because in other cases it is obviously the root vowel which has determined the vowel of the prefix (e.g. ɥmù 'children', related to |-mù 'give birth'). It rather appears that the rule governing the selection of derivational noun prefixes is that of the standard harmony system, and that derived nouns are now regarded as fixed units, not to be re-formed by the rules which apply to harmonizing grammatical elements.

As the rule governing older, fixed units is in accordance with the standard harmony system, it is likely that the system of selection observed in the Onitsha Town speaker is an innovation.

<sup>9</sup> It is possible that /ə/ is also, to some extent, neutral. Rev. G. Pearman has brought to my attention words with a-ɔ; e.g. alò 'thought'.

<sup>10</sup> The -lù suffix (corresponding to the Southern -ra suffix) does not harmonize in Mr. Mbomu's speech.