

THE REALISATION OF THE ENGLISH VOICED PALATAL SEMI-VOWEL /j/ BY IDOMA SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

The research is a descriptive analysis of the realisation of the English voiced palatal semi-vowel /j/ by Idoma speakers of English. Data were gathered from live utterances of 30 Idoma speakers of English, 15 of whom are male and 15 female. To elicit the data for the research, a questionnaire containing 30 words (such as, computer, student, human, etc.), with the /j/ sound was administered to the respondents to pronounce. The data was analysed through the perception method to determine the realisation of the /j/ sound by the Idoma speakers of English. The data shows that Idoma speakers of English either omit or replace the /j/ sound with other vowels like /ɪ/ and /ʊ/, and this omission is largely due to the phonological process known as 'elision'. The /j/ sound is therefore, not a problematic phoneme for Idoma speakers of English, even though many omissions were observed from the data.

Keywords: Realisation, Voiced, Palatal Semi-Vowel, Idoma Speakers, English

Introduction

Generally speaking, language can be seen as a collection of sign systems. The sign system is simply a communication system with varying forms ranging from verbal (by means of distinctive phonemes), to words and non-verbal communication which involves paralinguistic features such as smiling, miming, frowning, or any facial or bodily sensational movement that catches attention and signals a meaning. There is also semiotics which involves the use of signs, symbols, icons and indexes for communication. It is important to note also that the term 'language' has no single definition; different scholars define it differently, based on how they understand it. One thing is however, common with the various definitions: the fact that language is a system of communication. For example, Murthy (2012, p. 2), defines language as "the medium of communication through which we express our emotions, ideas, feelings and thoughts to our fellow people". Husain posits that "language does not mean a collection of words strung together in sentences but each word having a separate identity and meaning" (<https://www.freshersnow.com/>). Similarly, Allen (in Husain) sees language as "a means of communicating thoughts", while Jespersen (also in Husain) notes that "language is a set of human habits, the purpose of which is to give expression to thoughts and feelings" (<https://www.freshersnow.com/>). Language is simply a system of communication.

The English Language has gained a global status with a number of both native and non-native speakers. Like the other languages of the world, English is studied under the discipline of linguistics. Odden (2005, p. 2) defines linguistics as "the scientific study of language structure". These structures or branches of language study include phonetics and phonology which are both concerned with the study of the sound systems of a language; morphology and syntax which are both concerned with the study of form or structure; and semantics and pragmatics which are concerned with the study of meaning. We also have historical linguistics which deals with the study of the change of language over time. It is important to note at this point that there is a clear difference between the way the native

speakers of the English Language use these structures and the way the non-native speakers use them. The focus of this study is on phonology.

Phonology is a branch of language study which is concerned with the study of how the sounds of a language are patterned or arranged to form meaningful utterances in a language. Onoja (2016, p. 2) sees phonology as the branch of language study which “deals with the description of the sound systems and patterns of a language”. He further explains that, “phonology is the study of how the meaningful sounds of a language combine in actual utterances for communication of meaning”. It is against this background that this research focuses on analysing the realisation of the English voiced palatal semi-vowel /j/ by Idoma speakers of English. The Idoma speaking people are a heterogeneous group of people found predominantly in the southern part of Benue State, Nigeria, with a population of about one million people (National Population Census, 1991). They occupy nine out of the twenty three (23) local government areas of the state. They are also found in other states such as Nassarawa, Cross River, Kogi and Enugu. The Idoma people speak the Idoma language which according to Armstrong, as quoted by Amali, et al. (2012, p. 345), “belongs to the *Kwa* group of languages”.

Statement of the Problem

Many studies have been carried out on the analysis of the various linguistic features of a language, especially the English Language, in comparison with other languages of the world. These researches centre on the various branches or structures of language such as phonology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, etc. But they are not exhaustive in terms of the peculiar usage of English Language among non-native speakers. The aspect of phonology for example, does not cover areas like the realisation of the English voiced palatal semi-vowel /j/ specifically by Idoma speakers of English Language. Generally, not much has been done on the phonology of Idoma language. In the realisation of the /j/ sound in words by most Nigerians and specifically Idoma speakers of English Language, it is either omitted or replaced with another sound. This research is therefore an attempt to investigate the realisation of this sound in contributing to the existing knowledge especially in the context of Idoma speakers of English Language.

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated within the contrastive analysis (CA) theory of language learning. Contrastive analysis is the systematic comparison of two languages to identify their structural differences and similarities. It was propounded by Robert Lado (1957) in his book *Linguistics across Cultures*, to explain the systematic way in which the structures of two languages are compared in order to bring out their similarities and differences. In his book, Lado posited that:

Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meaning of their language and culture to the foreign language and culture both productively and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and culture as practiced by the natives. (Ogundepo as cited in Onoja, 2015, p. 2).

From the above, it is obvious that Lado provided a comprehensive theoretical base by which the structures of two languages can be compared in order to establish their differences and similarities, which will in turn facilitate effective teaching and learning.

Purpose of the Study

In the pronunciation of some English Language words by non-native speakers of English Language, many tend to omit or replace some phonemes with others and this impedes effective communication. The purpose of this research is therefore to analyse how the English voiced palatal semi-vowel /j/ is realised by Idoma speakers of English Language.

Specifically, the research is aimed at:

1. Analysing how Idoma speakers of English Language realise the English voiced palatal semi-vowel /j/;
2. Ascertaining why Idoma speakers of English Language realise the voiced palatal semi-vowel /j/, the way they do;
3. Establishing the phonological effects of the realisation of the English voiced palatal semi-vowel /j/ by Idoma speakers of English Language.

Research Questions

In order to analyse the realisation of the English voiced palatal semi-vowel /j/ by Idoma speakers of English Language, the following research questions are posed:

1. How is the English Language voiced palatal semi-vowel /j/ realised by Idoma speakers of English Language?
2. Why do Idoma speakers of English Language realise the English voiced palatal semi-vowel /j/, the way they do?
3. What are the phonological effects of the realisation of the English voiced palatal semi-vowel /j/ by Idoma speakers of English Language?

Significance of the Study

The Idoma language, like the English Language and other languages of the world, has morphological, phonological and syntactic features. However, not much studies have been carried out on these features, especially the phonological aspect. This study will therefore contribute to the existing knowledge of the sound systems of Idoma language and further serve as a guide and reference material to subsequent researchers, especially in the field of linguistics and particularly, phonology.

Empirical Review

Many studies have been carried out on the analysis of the various linguistic features of language, especially the English Language, in comparison with other languages of the world. These researches centre on the various aspects of language such as phonology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, etc. But they are not exhaustive in terms of the peculiar usage of English among non-native speakers. The aspect of phonology for example, does not usually cover areas like the realisation of the English voiced palatal approximant /j/ specifically by Idoma speakers of English Language. In this section, the existing studies on some linguistic aspects of English Language in relation to other languages are reviewed.

Onoja carried out a research titled "A contrastive analysis of English sounds and some Nigerian languages: implications for language teaching." In this study, Onoja uses five Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Idoma and Berom) and the RP accent of English to analyse the phonemic inventories of English and these Nigerian languages to ascertain their similarities and differences and to draw inferences for language teaching and learning. In this study, Onoja (2015, p. 1) argues that:

Teaching the sounds of English in a second language (L2) setting like Nigeria will be more effective if teachers identify the English sounds with which learners are familiar, especially those similar to the learners' mother tongues and those which are unfamiliar (the sounds which are lacking in the learners' mother tongues).

Another related study is that of Apeh on the morpho-phonemic hindrances to standard Idoma orthography. The study analysed both the morphological and phonological features of Idoma; highlighting the reasons for advocating the disjunctive method of orthography against the conjunctive approach and the role of elision in the negative influence of conjunctive writing (Apeh, 2015, p. 30). In this study, Apeh concludes thus:

The understanding that writing is different from speech in orthography will help a lot as we have other languages like English exhibiting such differences as well. It is safe to conclude that speech and writing are two different approaches in orthography as well. The disjunctive approach of Idoma orthography appears more grammatical and is highly projected for use in the Idoma language. (2015, p. 33).

Related to the above is a study on “Mother tongue influence in the teaching and learning of the English segmental phonemes in secondary schools in Otukpo LGA” carried out by Anyebe. In this research, the quasi-experimental research design was used to assess the effect of mother tongue in the teaching and learning of the English segmental phonemes. The research covered Otukpo town with a population of 650 respondents made up of SS2 students of Jesus College and Government Day Secondary School. The findings of the research show that “the very nature of phonemic divergence between the English and Idoma languages tend to pose pronunciation difficulties for Idoma learners of English”. Also, “the similarities between some phonemes in L1 and L2 may facilitate rather than hinder the realisation of correct pronunciation” (Anyebe, 2010, p. 57).

Also, Odugbo’s comparative phonology of Idoma dialects is relevant to this study. In his research, Odugbo describes “the varieties of Idoma spoken in Otukpo, Agatu, Edumoga and Igumale (Idoma language dialect clusters) focusing on their synchronic comparative phonology” (Unpublished, p. 15). The study describes the segmental (vowels and consonants) and the suprasegmental (tone and intonation) features of the different dialects of Idoma (that is, the northern dialect spoken in Agatu and Ochekwu; the central dialect which is spoken in Adoka, Oglewu, Onyagede, Otukpo and Ugboju; the western dialect spoken in Edumoga, Okpokwu, Ichama, Owukpa and Orokam; and the southern dialect which is spoken in Agila, Igumale, Ijigbam and Ulayi), which are assumed to be responsible for the various differences that exist among the different dialects of the language. To elicit data for this study, Odugbo employed the use of three basic instruments.

- i. Use of Roger Blench’s wordlist consisting of about 1017 words translated into the four Idoma dialects. One competent native speaker of each dialect translated the words verbally while the investigator carefully wrote and tone-marked them.
- ii. Discussions with native speakers of the four dialects to clarify certain translation blemishes.
- i. Self-intuition of the investigator being a native speaker to check the validity and reliability of the data. (Unpublished, p. 46)

Among other things, the findings of the research show that all the verbs of Idoma begin with a consonant and all the nouns begin with a vowel or sometimes with the nasal consonants. Also, all the dialects of Idoma have seven vowel sounds and twenty five to thirty one consonants, with vowels occurring in syllables as either the onset or coda (Odugbo, Unpublished, p. 47).

From the above, it is obvious that studies have been carried out on the orthography and sound systems of Idoma language. But these researches are not exhaustive in terms of the peculiar use of English sounds among non-native speakers. This current study is therefore important because it is aimed at filling this research gap.

Research Methodology

The research is a descriptive analysis of the realisation of the English voiced palatal semi-vowel /j/ by Idoma speakers of English. The descriptive qualitative method was therefore applied to answer the research questions. This method involves the collection of data through the use of questionnaires and interviews to answer the research questions. The data was gathered using a recording device to record live utterances of 30 Idoma speakers of English comprising 15 males and 15 females, within the age range of 14-60 years. Their educational statuses range from secondary school to post-graduate level, one of them being a PhD holder in the field of Education and a professor of Food Nutrition. To elicit the data for the research, a questionnaire containing 30 words (such as, computer, fuel, communion, student, human, etc.) with the English voiced palatal semi-vowel /j/ was administered to the respondents to pronounce. This exercise was carried out in Otukpo town where the respondents were found. The data was further analysed through the perception method to determine the realisation of the English voiced palatal semi-vowel /j/, by the Idoma speakers of English.

Discussion

The findings of the study are grouped into two: '**GROUP A**' and '**GROUP B**' which are made up of the male and female respondents respectively.

Group A: Male Respondents

The data elicited from the male respondents show a total number of 450 expected responses out of which 203 representing 45.1%, are wrong realisations of the English Language words (that is, they are without the English voiced palatal approximant /j/). The remaining 247 representing 54.9% are correct because of the realisation of the English voiced palatal approximant /j/ in the words given to them to pronounce (see appendix for the words).

Group B: Female Respondents

The data from the female respondents show a total number of 450 expected realisations, out of which 153 representing 34% are the realisations in which the sound /j/ is omitted while the remaining 297 representing 66% are the correct responses with the realisation of the /j/ sound.

The above findings are discussed using the research questions below.

Research Question One:

How is the English Language voiced palatal semi-vowel /j/ realised by Idoma speakers of English Language?

Generally speaking, Idoma speakers of English Language realise the English voiced palatal approximant approximately the same way the native speakers of English do. This is largely because the /j/ sound occurs in Idoma as it is in the English language. The realisation of the /j/ sound by both the Idoma speakers who are non-native speakers and the native speakers of English is described using three parameters: the state of the glottis, manner of articulation and place of articulation.

But in the pronunciation of some words like computer, human, communion, mute, humid, stupid, etc., that have the English voiced palatal approximant /j/, the Idoma speakers of English tend to omit or replace the sound /j/ with either the vowel /ɪ/ or /ʊ/.

Research Question Two:

Why do Idoma speakers of English Language realise the English voiced palatal semi-vowel /j/ the way they do?

From the research, it is observed that one of the noticeable reasons why Idoma speakers of English drop the voiced palatal approximant /j/ in the pronunciation of some words with the sound is due to the phonological process called 'elision'. Elision is one of the phonological processes where sounds are omitted in a given phonological environment. For example, in the pronunciation of the word computer /kəmˈpjʊ:tə/, Idoma speakers of English tend to elide or drop the /j/ sound to have a realisation like /kɒmpʊtə/.

Research Question Three:

What are the phonological effects of the realisation of the English voiced palatal semi-vowel /j/ by Idoma speakers of English Language?

The major phonological effect of the realisation of the sound by Idoma speakers is the mispronunciation of some English words by the Idoma speakers of English Language. This in turn brings about the misunderstanding of the meanings of words. Also, for a native speaker of English Language and other speakers of the English Language who are not conversant with this kind of realisation (total omission or replacement of the /j/ sound with a vowel), effective communication will be impeded as they will find it difficult to comprehend these realisations.

Conclusion

This study analysed the realisation of the English /j/ sound by Idoma speakers using data collected from thirty respondents. The data show that Idoma speakers of English tend to either omit or replace the /j/ sound with other vowels like /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ in the pronunciation of words such as computer, human, stew, tune, humid, etc., which have the /j/ sound. Also, this omission is largely due to the phonological process known as 'elision'. The knowledge of this will therefore help teachers of English who teach the sounds of English to non-native speakers at all levels of learning to effectively teach these sounds by concentrating on such sounds as /j/ which tend to be problematic to non-native speakers like the Idomas. On the other hand, the findings of this study will help learners to focus more on mastering the /j/ sound and other sounds which tend to be problematic in realisation. This will facilitate effective teaching and learning of the /j/ sound and other sounds of English which tend to be difficult to non-native speakers of English.

From the findings, we can therefore conclude that the /j/ sound is not a problematic phoneme for Idoma speakers of English even though pockets of omission were observed from the data.

Recommendations

As the researcher searched for useful materials for this study, it was discovered that not many studies have been carried out on Idoma language, especially on the linguistic aspects of the language. The researcher therefore, recommends that subsequent researches be carried out not only on the culture and tradition of Idoma people, but also on the sound system (phonetics/phonology), grammar, semantics and pragmatics, which are some of the branches of language study. This will go a long way in adding to the existing knowledge in the field of linguistics.

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APPENDIX

List of words with the English voiced palatal semi-vowel /j/

- | | | |
|-------------|-----------|---------|
| ▪ human | music | stupid |
| ▪ communion | tune | consume |
| ▪ stew | new | fuse |
| ▪ few | muse | feud |
| ▪ fuel | Europe | argue |
| ▪ student | pew | perfume |
| ▪ cue | computer | queue |
| ▪ nephew | beautiful | cute |
| ▪ mute | view | knew |
| ▪ huge | humid | skew |