

THE HAUSA SPEAKER AND THE ENGLISH SYLLABLE: ISSUES AT STAKE

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ABSTRACT

One particular phonological area that without any doubt creates a seemingly insurmountable hurdle for the average Hausa learner of English is how to unravel the complexity of the English syllable. The intention of this paper therefore is to explain why the syllable poses a great learning challenge to the average Hausa speaker of English. The paper examines the conceptualization of the syllable as a phonological construct which led to a comparison of Hausa and English syllable structures with a view to explaining some of the empirical issues that impede the speaker's smooth realization of English syllable especially where consonant clusters are concerned. The paper concludes with some suggestions on how best to find solutions to the teaching and learning problems.

KEYWORDS: Hausa Speaker, English Syllable, Issues at Stake

INTRODUCTION

From the points of view of phonetics and phonology, many theories have attempted to define the term syllable yet hardly any of them can be said to be precise or satisfactory.

The first and perhaps the most popular definition of a syllable is a phonetic one which is put forward by Stetson (1958). According to this definition, a syllable correlates with a burst of activity of the inter-costal muscles (chest-pulses), where the speaker emits a syllable as an independent muscular gesture. However subsequent experimental research shows no simple correlation and this indicates that a syllable is by no means a SIMPLE motor unit. With this definition, therefore, it can be argued that we are still far from a satisfactory phonetic definition of a syllable and this is perhaps why Catford (1977) suggests that speech is produced in measured bursts of initiator power, or feet which are the basic rhythmic units of a language. (The initiator is normally the pulmonic egressive machinery.) In English for example, each initiator burst corresponds to a stressed syllable and the intervals between stressed syllables are (all things being equal) roughly the same and this makes the language a stress-timed one. Catford's definition may be quite helpful in the sense that it allows us in principle to locate the peaks of syllables, but it does not seem to tell us clearly where the boundaries between one syllable and the next are placed. For example, how does this approach account for a word such as 'spa' which has only one syllable but which contains two peaks of sonority? Abercrombie (1967) Tench (1981), Catford (1988) and Wells (2006), appear to want know how to draw a clear cut boundary between adjacent syllables which fall in a word like 'busker'. Is the word to be split as 'bus-ker', 'bu-sker' or 'busk-er'? The problem seems to linger on and this is why in this discussion we shall approach the definition of a syllable from the phonological angle as put forward by Lass (1988:250). Thus, "the phonological syllable might be a kind of minimal phonotactic unit normally with a vowel as a nucleus, flanked by consonantal segments, legal clusterings or the domain for stating the rules of accent, tone, quantity and the like". This view is further amplified by Katamba (1989:153) who sees a syllable as the heart of phonological representations which cannot

CVV	====→	bai	back
CVV-CVV	====→	koosai	beans cake
CV-CVV-CVV	====→	makaamai	weapons

Close Syllables

CVC	====→	nan	here
CVC-CV	====→	ganye	leaf
CV-CVC	====→	batar	spend
CVC-CVCV	====→	gangamii	public announcement

Perhaps it will not be entirely out of place to restate here that nucleus in a closed syllable is always a short vowel in Hausa language.

That a diphthong or vowel nucleus of the open syllable affixed to -n/-r is reduced to a short vowel. For example, daa (son) + -n suffix ====→ dan (the son) not daan*. Yaa (daughter) + -r suffix ====→ ‘yar (daughter) not ‘yaar.*

SYLLABLES IN ENGLISH

In the English language, as stated by Gimson (1980), Yul-Ifode (1995), Adetugbo (1997) and Bdliya (2015), a syllable may consist of nothing but the nucleus and the nucleus which is almost always a vowel may be preceded by up to three consonants and followed by up to four consonants abbreviated in the formula (C⁰⁻³ V C⁰⁻⁴).

Below is an illustration of the English syllable structure:

V	====→	awe, ah, oh, I, pronoun
CV	====→	pie, spy, so, go
CVC	====→	cat, and, lad, bat, cease
CCV	====→	play, stay, sky, proxy
VCC	====→	apt, end
CVCC	====→	moths, depth, range, month
CCVC	====→	stop, brought, snake
CCVCC	====→	stopped, plant, snacked
CCCV	====→	splash, spume, stew, screw
CVCCC	====→	months, sixths, twelfth
VCCC	====→	asked, elks
CCCVCC	====→	strand, squared, screamed
(C(C) VCCCC	====→	waltzed, glimpsed

Having very briefly discussed the syllable structures of Hausa and English languages, let us now examine some of the common characteristics shared by those structures.

HAUSA AND ENGLISH SYLLABLES EXAMINED

- Both Hausa and English languages, in the words of Sani (ibid), allow for open syllable and closed syllable structures. In other words, a consonant – vowel (CV) sequence is a pattern found in both languages.
- English allows for a (CVC) structure as in ‘cat’ and ‘mad’ so also Hausa permits the same structure as in ‘nan’ (here) and ‘can’ (there).
- On the other hand, in addition to the open syllable and closed syllable structures found in both English and Hausa, the latter has third structure known as ‘CN’, the ‘C’ stands for a glottal stop while ‘N’ stands for a nasal consonant. For example,

(a) ? ina rubuutuu ===→ I am writing

(b) ? nna rubuutuu ===→ I am writing

First word in both (a) and (b) above is composed of two syllables ‘?ina’ and ‘nna’ in that order. However, whereas the initial syllable in the first word is an open ‘CV’ the initial one in the second word is an CN.

- Another distinction between the two languages is that whereas English allows for a syllable structure composed of only a vowel: Hausa does nothing to allow for that.
- Consonant cluster is a syllable structure commonly found in English while such a cluster is virtually non-existent in the Hausa language.
- Hausa is a syllable-timed language whereby syllables rather than only stressed syllables, tend to recur at regular intervals of time while English is called a stressed-timed language in which stresses recur at regular intervals. In other words, Hausa has a fixed strict stress pattern while English has a variable stress pattern.

ISSUES AT STAKE

Since the consonant cluster phenomenon does not exist in the Hausa language there is a tendency that the Hausa language learner may introduce a vowel in the sequence of consonants thereby splitting them into separate syllables. In the initial consonant cluster the following pronunciations could be heard from a typical Hausa speaker of English.

Table 1

Sequence	tr	dr	pl	br	Ør	st	sk	fr	fl	gl	gr
English	tribe	drink	pride	bring	three	stay	school	from	fly	glue	grass
Hausa	tiribe	dirink	piride	biring	three	sitay	suchool	furom	fily	gulue	girass
alternatively	turibe	durink	puride	-----	-----	-----	-----	firom	fuly	gilue	gurass

In situations where clusters of three consonants occur at the beginning of word which must have a /s/ as the first member of the group, the following renditions could be detected from a Hausa speaker:

Table 2

Sequence	str	skr	spl	spr
English	strike	scratch	splash	spray
Hausa	sitirike	siciratch	sipilash	sipiray
Alternative	sitrike	sicratch	siplash	sipray

In the English language cluster of consonants can also be found in the middle of words and when this happens, the following pronunciations are easily detectable among the Hausa speakers of English.

Table 3

Sequence	kskl	kspl	kstr	nkl	skr	skl	nsp	str
English	exclude	explain	extra	include	describe	disclose	inspire	destroy
Hausa	ekskilud	ekspilain	ekstira	inkilude	diskiribe	diskilose	inspire	distiroy
Sub-variant	ekskulude	ekspulain	ekstura	inkulude	diskuribe	diskulose	insupire	disturoy

For example, to many pronounce /ju:sife1/ for 'useful'; or /kulouz/ for 'cloth' /sukul/ for 'school' or /puromopt/ for 'prompts'.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Having highlighted the above pronunciation difficulties, what then can we do as English language teachers to help the learner to overcome such difficulties?

- To start with, the learner himself should be encouraged to learn how to form speech sounds of English in a matter of length, stress and pitch.
- The teacher must give his pupils adequate practice in pronouncing the above mentioned English clusters, ensuring that they do not insert a vowel between them. He should also ask them to put the words into their own sentences and to make a list of similar words themselves.
- The old adage: 'he who thinks has a problem is half-way to solving it' should be applied under this circumstance. This is to say, the learners should be made aware of the differences and similarities that exist between the pronunciation systems of their first language and that of English as a second language. This awareness should cover both the segmental and the non-segmental features of the languages under review.
- Where possible, the language learners should be encouraged to interact with the native speakers if available, otherwise, with the non-speakers who have acquired a reasonable degree of good pronunciation pattern of the language.
- In addition, the learners should be encouraged to listen to BBC or any other medium where native-speaker variety of English is used.
- Ear training exercise should be used by dictating sample words of more than one syllable. The learners indicate which syllable is accented' etc. alternatively they can underline the letters of the accented syllable. For example, elephant, giraffe. If a learner makes a mistake the teacher can draw attention to the pattern of accented and unaccented syllable of a word or phrase by a kind of a hum or a whistle.
- Furthermore, learners drilled in the correct sounds through the use of tongue twisters, poems, and songs containing the sounds being taught as in the following example.

- *Father Francis fried five fresh fishes for five Fathers from France.*
- In addition, appropriate teaching materials such as books, fairly equipped language laboratories and competent hands to man them should be provided right from the early level of the learners' elementary education.
- Above all, the language learner should develop confidence in his pronunciation to that of the active speaker. This he can achieve by disregarding what others may say about lion trying to age the white man.

CONCLUSIONS

Finally, in spite of the differences that exist between the Hausa syllable and the English syllable structure, pronunciation problems can be greatly reduced if appropriate teaching materials, friendly and stimulating learning atmosphere are allied with the learners' positive attitude to learning.

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