

Morphophonemic Realization in Indigenous Languages: The Plural Formation in Tiv Language

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Abstract

There has been increased interest in the study of indigenous languages; one of such languages is Tiv which is a language and name of the Tiv tribe of Benue State in Nigeria. These studies concentrate on the aspects of morphology, syntax, semantics and phonology. This paper is concerned with the alternations that take place at two levels of language study, namely; phonology and morphology. The work is focused on the different and various shapes that morphemes and phonemes assume as a result of morphological and phonological conditioning, particularly in Tiv language where; morphemes can either be morphologically or phonologically conditioned as it is also obtained in English language. To show how this works, the paper has discussed some selected Tiv words based on these two aspects. The selected words are discussed to particularly show how plural is formed in Tiv language and also to show that allomorphic variation in Tiv is not possible, because English language mostly makes use of inflectional suffixes, while Tiv in most cases makes use of inflectional prefixes and these can either be morphologically or phonologically influenced as the case may be. The paper also detailed the rules governing plural formation in Tiv language, showing the complex nature of how some of the words achieve plural shape. The paper therefore concludes that it is possible to carry out a morphophonemic study of indigenous languages with the Tiv language example. It also established that the dynamics of morphophonemic operation in Tiv is unique to the language. The study then recommends that learners of the Tiv language should make themselves conversant with this aspect of the language, which is intriguing and overly complex, but could enhance the understanding of the language.

Keywords: *Morphophonemic, Indigenous Language, Morphology and Phonology*

Introduction

There has been increased interest in the study of languages around the world, contextualizing them within the purview of linguistic investigation so as to bring them to limelight. This interest is increasingly manifest in the study of some indigenous Nigerian languages. This study has focused particularly on Tiv language of Benue State - Nigeria. Tiv is a Central Nigerian language of (the east-Benue Congo sub-group of Niger-Congo phylum spoken broadly in Benue State, and in neighbouring states like Cross River, Nasarawa, Plateau and Taraba. Tiv language is said to be of Bantu origin and belongs to the semi-Bantu group of languages. It is a homogeneous language that is diverse but to a very large extent, maintains a great deal of mutual intelligibility. However, Tiv is one of those Nigerian languages that can be said to be understudied. In view of the above and the inadequacy of documented materials on Tiv language, this study is a significant contribution to previously conducted studies to cushion this problem. Sokpo, (2016, p.60) asserts that for quite some time autography was the contending issue but this problem has been resolved. It has become necessary to research on other aspects of the language like its morphology, syntax and phonology. It is believed that such efforts will enhance the effective teaching/learning of the Tiv language.

Language is commonly viewed as a means of communication. Fromkin and Rodman (1978, p.2) posit that knowing a language has to do with the system which relates sounds and meaning [as well as its word formation system]. No two given languages have exactly the same systems; whether in their phonological, syntactic, morphological or semantic systems. Languages thus vary in their systemic operations; Tiv language inclusive. Tiv has a unique word formation and sound system, very different from that of the English language. According to Yina (2009, p.56)

Language as a rule-governed behaviour actually makes linguisticity an organized interplay of complex grammatical processes and components in communication. The grammatical categories and the regularity with which these fall into patterned relationships are however language dependent and as such vary from language to language.

Thus, every human language has internal rules by which it operates and it rests on the native speaker's intuition for an individual to decipher the rules which defines a speaker's knowledge about his language, what Chomsky refers to as linguistic competence. For Chomsky "... a grammar is a model (systemic

description) of those linguistic abilities of native speakers of a language which enable them to speak and understand their language fluently” (Radford, (1988,p.2)

Theoretical Framework

Noam Chomsky's theory of Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG) is the premise for this work. A generative grammar in the sense which Chomsky uses it, is a rule system formalized with mathematical precision that generates, (without need of any information that is not represented explicitly in the system), the grammatical sentences of the language that it describes, or characterizes, then assigns to each sentence a structural description, or grammatical analysis.

Transformational Grammar was initiated by ZelligSabbetai Harris in the course of work on what he called discourse analysis (the formal analysis of the structure of continuous text). It was further developed and given a somewhat different theoretical basis by Chomsky as outlined in *Syntactic Structures* (1957). It comprised three sections or components: the phrase structure component, the transformational component and the morphophonemic component. Each of these components consisted of a set of rules operating upon a certain "input" to yield a certain "output."

Chomsky (1965, p.63) articulated what has come to be known as the Standard Theory. Here, Chomsky introduced the idea, contrary to the structuralist view, that the mind (that is, knowledge of language) was not only a reasonable object of study in linguistics, but really the most interesting object of study. In particular, Chomsky drew the distinction between linguistic competence- the unconscious knowledge that underlies a speaker's ability to produce sentences and linguistic performance- the actual production of these sentences in given communication situations.

This study is therefore, hinged on the two distinctions of linguistic competence and linguistic performance. It is a speaker's innate or intuitive knowledge about the morphological and phonological workings of his language that enables him to produce correctly the morphemes (prefixes and suffixes) that are combined in various contexts with root words. For instance, every competent speaker of Tiv language knows that the plural of 'wan-kwase' 'a girl' is 'mbayevkasev' 'girls' and never 'mbakwase' or 'Mba-ukase'. By way of performance, any Tiv speaker intuitively has this knowledge and knows that the latter options are ungrammatical and as such, unacceptable in the language. This indicates that Tiv native speakers have the linguistic competence and performance in the realization of morphophonemic shapes (plural formation) in Tiv language.

Indigenous Language

An indigenous language is a language that is native to a region and spoken by indigenous people, often reduced to the status of a minority language; this language would be from a linguistically distinct community that has been settled in the area for many generations. Indigenous languages are not necessarily national languages, and the reverse is also true. Many indigenous languages have become endangered because of language deaths or linguicide caused by colonization, in which the original language is replaced by that of the colonists.

Adeniyi and Bello (2006, p.256) state that indigenous languages are the tribal, native or local languages spoken. The language would be from a linguistically distinct community that has been settled in the area for many generations. Tiv language is one of the over 400 indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria, these comprise both the minority and majority languages as well as some few non-Nigeria languages such as English, Arabic and French (Grimmes, 2000, p).

The Tiv language fits the definition of indigenous languages given above; it is classified as one of the minority languages in Nigeria. It is a regional language located in the middle belt region of Nigeria, and is spoken by the Tiv people who are indigenous to this region. History has it that the Tiv people have been settled in this region for over two centuries. In recent times, English language which is the language of the colonizer has had great influence on the Tiv speakers, particularly on the younger people; an influence that negatively impacts on the future survival of the language. This sort of influence if not checked could lead to a gradual death of the Tiv language in the distant future. This study is therefore justified as one of the several attempts being made by some Tiv scholars and researchers to ensure the survival of the language in the future. The concepts of Phonology and Morphology

Phonology is a sub-field of linguistics which is concerned with the way sounds are used systemically in various languages to form words and utterances. It also studies the function and organization of speech sounds in a given language. Yule (1996, p.54) defines phonology as; "the description of the systems and

patterns of speech sounds in a language ..." Phonology is related to phonetics, which is the study of the inventory of all speech sounds which humans are capable of producing. Morphology on the other hand, is another sub-field of linguistics that examines the internal structure of words, as well as processes of word-formation (Radford et al, 2009, p.140). The preoccupation of this sub-field of linguistics is with the rules that govern the formation of words in a language.

The study of both phonetics and phonology border on the concept of the phoneme. It is the basic form of a sound that is sensed in the speaker's mind rather than what is spoken or heard. In the view of Agbedo (2003, p.35), "A phoneme is a speech sound that has the effect of distinguishing between words in a language." To Varshney (1978, p.80), a phoneme can be defined as "a unit, a rubric, a bundle of sound-features", or "the smallest contrastive linguistic unit which may bring about a change of meaning." "It is a minimum distinct functional unit."

Morphophonemics: An Interface Study

Morpho-phonemics is an interface study between two fields of linguistics: morphology and phonology. It is a branch of linguistics which studies the interaction between morphological and phonological processes. Its chief focus is with the sound changes that take place in morphemes when they combine to form words. That is, the various ways in which the morphemes of a given language are represented by phonemic shapes in given contexts.

Prasad (2009, p.61) states that, "The way of representation of morphemes in different phonological shapes in language is called morpho-phonemics." Similarly, Varshney (1978, p.123) asserts that the study of different shapes of allomorphs is half-way between phonology and morphology, and is sometimes referred to as morpho-phonology". In America where phonology is considered as part of descriptive linguistics, synchronic linguists have relied on phonemic analysis, the term morpho-phonemics is used for this aspect of grammar.

▲ In English, a particular morpheme ending with a voiceless stop consonant like /t/ requires a voiceless plural morpheme or phonemic shape to become plural. Consider for example, the pronunciation of plural suffix {-s} in the following words 'dog' /dɔgz/, 'cats' /kæts/ and 'glasses' /glæsɪz/ (-s → /s/, /z/, /ɪz/). On the contrary however, the situation is not the same as different prefix/suffix come in when marking plurals in Tiv language. This explains why allomorphic variation in Tiv is not possible; it is a different phenomenon that accounts for the variations attested to in the formation of plurals in the language or the various shapes that morphemes assume in given environments, as a result of morphological and phonological conditioning.

Morphemes and Allomorphs

An allomorph is the variant form of a morpheme or the different representations of a morpheme. An allomorph is also defined as the alternative phonetic form of a morpheme. Haspelmath and Sims (2011, p.22) assert that:

... One of the most common complications is that morphemes may have different phonological shapes under different circumstances. For instance, the plural morpheme in English is sometimes pronounced /s/ (as in cats /kæts/), sometimes /z/ (as in dogs /dɔgz/, and sometimes /ɪz/ (as in faces /feɪzɪz/). When a single affix has more than one shape, linguists use the term allomorph.

Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2007, p.258) opines that, "Apparently, the distribution of allomorphs in English is conditioned by the final segment of the singular form ..." Thus, in the formation and pronunciation of the plural morpheme {-s}, the following rules apply:

- a. When the preceding sound is a sibilant (a hissing sound), the [ɪz] allomorph occurs as in the words 'horses, roses, bushes, churches and judges.
- b. Otherwise, when the preceding sound is voiceless, the [s] allomorph is used as the words 'cats, rocks, cups or cliffs.'
- c. Otherwise, after a vowel or a voiced consonant, the [z] allomorph occurs as in the words 'dogs and days.'

Udofot (1995, p.5) states that, "if different morphs represent the same morpheme, they are referred to as allomorphs of that morpheme." Similarly, Varshney (1978, p.23) states that, "it frequently happens that a morpheme is not represented everywhere by the same morph, but by different morphs in different environments". The alternative phonological manifestations or representations of such a morpheme are called allomorphs or 'morpheme variants'.

On the other hand, the past tense morpheme {-ed} could be represented by three different allomorphs: /t/, /d/ and /ɪd/. These are realized as follows:

- a. If a verb ends in /d/ or /t/ as in fend /fend/ or want /wɒnt/, the past tense morpheme is realized as /ɪd/:

- i. fended /fendid/ ii. wanted /wɒntid/
- b. If a verb ends in a voiced sound except /d/ as in clean /kli:n/ and beg /beg/, the past tense morpheme is realized as /d/:
 - i. cleaned /kli:nd/ ii. begged/begd/
- c. If a verb ends in any voiceless consonant other than /t/, the past tense morpheme is realized as /t/:
 - i. parked /pa:kt/ ii. missed /mi:st/

Thus, /id/, /d/ and /t/ are English morphs which can be grouped as allomorphs of the past tense morpheme /-ed/.

Allomorphic Variation

As mentioned earlier, an allomorph is a variant of a morpheme and this depends to a large extent on the environment where it occurs. For example, the plural morpheme {-s} in English can change its nature, depending on the phonological environment where it occurs. In such contexts, it can be realised as /s/, /z/, /iz/ or /ə/. This is illustrated both above and below:

- a. The allomorph /s/ occurs with words that end in voiceless sounds except /s/, /ʃ/, and /tʃ/ as in:
 - i. Mats /mæts/ ii. Cooks /kuks/ iii. Mops /mɒps/
- b. The allomorph here occurs with words ending in voiced sounds, including all vowels and voiced consonants as in:
 - i. Mangoes /mæŋgəuz/ ii. Toys /tɔiz/ iii. Tags /tægz/
- c. The allomorph /iz/ occurs with words that end in alveolar or alveo-palatal sibilants /s, z, ʒ, ʒ, dʒ/ as in
 - i. Fishes /fɪʃiz/ ii. Bushes /bʊʃiz/ iii. churches /tʃɜ:dʒiz/
- d. The zero allomorph /ə/ occurs with words which normally do not have plurals reflected in their morphological shapes as in
 - i. Sheep /ʃi:p/ ii. Deer /diə(r)/ iii. Fish /fɪʃ/

Does Allomorphic Variation exist in Tiv Language?

Do allomorphic variations exist in Tiv language the same way as in English language? The answer is obviously no, allomorphic variation exists in the English language, but not in Tiv language. In English, allomorphic variation is largely as a result of inflection of the plural-suffix {-s} which usually appears after the root morpheme as in {pen} + {-s} = pens. In Tiv however, the inflectional morpheme often appears before the root word and takes various forms. Sometimes, it comes before the root morpheme. At other times, it changes completely the morphemic shape of single morphemes and in some context, tone plays a role while other morphemes are fixed in nature; zero /ə/ realization. The table below shows the various ways in which these manifest:

S/N	Realization of the plural marker in Tiv	Singular words	Gloss	Plural words	Gloss
1	Addition of prefix {-mba} before singular morphemes	Agbo Atsator Agba Akya Atsaka	Water-yam Sparrow Bangle Flute Potato	Mbaagbo Mbaatsator Mbaagba Mbaakya Mbaatska	Water-yams. Sparrows Bangles Flutes Potatoes
2	Addition of the prefix {-i} before singular Morphemes	Gbela Angev Kon Gbenda Nyam	Vein disease Tree Road Animal	Igbila Iangev Ikyon Igbinda Inyam	Veins diseases Trees Roads Animals
3	Addition of the prefix {-u} before the root morphemes	Tsuwe Daar Ter Dubu Kungwa	Hook Platform Father Thousand Stream	Utsuwe Udaar Uter Udubu Ukungwa	Hooks Platforms Fathers Thousands Streams/Ponds
4	Addition of the prefix {-a} before singular morphemes	Tsuwa Gbaa Buter/batur Gbande Hinga	Pot Branch Whiteman Plate Nose	Atsuwa Agbaa Abuter/abatur Agbande Ahenga	Pots Branches Whitemen Plates Noses
5	Changing completely the morphemic shape of single morphemes in their plural forms; these assume shapes like: {-m}, {-ô}, {-v} and {-a}	Ichii Wan Kwase Ikyausu	Medicine Child Woman Charcoal	Mchimbim Ônov Kasev Akaausu	Medicines Children Women Charcoals

6	Rising (high) tone in the pronunciation of low-tone singular morphemes	Ikyegh Ivyo Igyó Iwya Bagu	Chicken Goat Pig Dog Monkey	Ikyégh Ivyó Igyó Iwyá ibýágu	Chickens Goats Pigs Dogs Monkeys
7	Some morphemes are fixed in nature (whether in their singular or plural forms) i.e. /ə/ morpheme	Icheegh Ishwa Atuur Msorum Mngerem	Melon Sesame seed Okro Alcohol water	Icheegh Ishwa Atuur Msorum Mngerem	Melon Sesame seed Okro Alcohol Water

Rules governing plural formation in Tiv

The following rules guide the formation of plural in Tiv language:

- i. Most nouns begin with the vowel ‘a’ and the consonant ‘v’ take the prefix {-mba} to form their plurals as shown in serial one (1) of the table.
- ii. Words that begin with the consonants ‘g’, ‘k’, ‘w’ and the vowel ‘a’ take the prefix {-i} to form their plurals as shown in serial two (2) of the table.
- iii. Morphemes which begin with the consonants ‘d’, ‘n’, ‘t’ and ‘y’ take the prefix {-u} to form their plurals as shown in serial three (3) of the table.
- iv. Morphemes which begin with the consonants ‘b’, ‘g’, ‘h’ and ‘t’ take the prefix {-a} to form their plurals as shown in serial four (4) of the table.
- v. Morphemes which begin with the vowel ‘i’ and the consonants ‘w’ change completely their morphemic shapes especially in the initial syllables of the words as in ‘mcimbin’, ‘akaausu’, ‘ônov’, while ‘kwase’ becomes ‘kasev’. That is, it appears in the suffix position as in serial five (5) of the table.
- vi. Morphemes in their singular forms can assume the plural shape without the addition of any prefix. The change from low [.] tone in the singular form to high ['] tone in the plural form leads to this realization as shown in serial six (6) of the table. This occurs especially with names of animals.
- vii. Some morphemes are fixed in nature, whether in their plural or singular forms as shown in serial seven (7) of the table above.

Looking at the rules above, it is interesting to note that the dynamics of realizing plurals in Tiv assume various forms and shapes, and there are seven approaches to this realization. It is also indicated that both the English and Tiv languages, share a similarity in the realization of plural morphemes through the use of affixation. Though to some varying degree, both languages make use of either prefixes or suffixes to realize their plurals. Nevertheless, both languages share a consistent and inconsistent system in the morphological and phonological conditioning of their plural morphemes.

Unlike the English language, Tiv is a tonal language and as such employs the use of tone in given contexts to realize her plurals. Though the change in the pitch of the voice does not change or lead to any semantic or lexical distinction in Tiv words, it however makes use of high tone ['] on some lexical items, which ordinarily are uttered with a low tone [.] to make them plural morphemes. A detailed study of Tiv morphophonemic structure shows that the apparent difficulties encountered by learners and sometimes by Tiv native speakers themselves in the realization of these plurals is as a result of the inconsistency in the formation of Tiv plural words.

Conclusion

This paper looked at the application of morphophonemic study to Tiv language, particularly in regards to plural formation. The discourse indicates that whereas English language realizes plural formation through suffix inflection, Tiv language realizes plural through a complex prefix inflection.

The paper therefore concludes that, all plural variations in Tiv language can be learnt by studying words in isolation and also from constant use and practice. It has been stated that Tiv has a unique and interesting morphophonemic structure which has varied forms. This makes the interaction of the morphological and phonological levels of language study (morpho-phonemics) of Tiv unique, interesting, intriguing and distinct from that of any other language. Language is believed to be modifiable and not a static entity. However, this aspect of linguistic study as far as Tiv language is concerned cannot be modified. Once modified in any given context, it leads to the formation of a non-acceptable utterance.

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