IGBO TONGUE-TWISTERS: A LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The cloud of humour that enshrouds the expression of Igbo tongue twisters in general, overtly gives it out, not just as the oral literary genre that it really is, but also as a linguistic phenomenon which dragnet of influence bears much on the psychosocial issues of our linguistic enterprise, as well as it does on the competence paradigm-across the first language (Li) and second language (L_2) learning dichotomies. Ehugbo is an. Igbo dialect subsumed under the New Benue-Congo sub-classification of the Niger-Congo phylum (Williamson, 1989:105). Its home is to the North of Afikpo town in Ebonyi State of Eastern Nigeria. With data from Ehugbo, we here examine the many relevances of this 'peculiar' oral tradition. The quantitative nature of our linguistic account and the inferences there from, are aimed at highlighting the riches of the novelty of the language system and its analytical paraphernalia - Linguistics.

Introduction

If there is any veritable instrument of perpetuating a people's socio-cultural mementos, their worldview and their collective spirit, then the oral tradition is it. For the Igbo, as in general African society, it has carved a niche for itself as one of the good old reliable vessels that have been resilient in safely "ferrying" our ethos through the vistas of time (as embedded in the language). Tongue twisters happen to be one of the dynamic siblings of the said oral tradition that has ever been accessible to performers who manipulate them in words on specific occasions (Finnegan, 1970:2). Accordingly, just like other aspects of oral literary genre reckoned with by Finnegan such as oratory, formalized prayer, idioms, folktales, etc., tongue- twisters are characterized by performance, transmission and social contexts.

A genre, according to Robinson (1999:557), is a type or kind of (oral) literature, music or other artistic work. Two broad classifications of the concept have been highlighted - major and minor (Emenanjo, 1984:1). Here, Emenanjo locates tongue-twisters within the minor domain of literary genres; a domain which he believes is in conformity with:

> Patterns of living speech 'okwu' basically unaccompanied by singing, chanting or acting. They are rather derived directly from 'okwu'.

It seems safe to construe the 'livingness' of the said 'okwu' (as typified by tongue-twisters) from the perspective of their power of continuity through the generations; a virtue that is bold in the aesthetics of their expression. Of interest to us also is the remark by Finnegan that;

> Tongue-twisters represent one type of awareness of the potentialities of language for more than just conveying information. (1970:466).

Now the fundamental frequency (f_0) of their rendition is one that lends its linguistic relevance beyond the echelons of Crystal's (1998:65) word games view; especially so in emerging studies of developmental linguistics (Radford et al, 1999:7). Whereas it has been deemed fit to prescribe oral motor exercises for certain categories of speech impaired subjects (Nwafor, 1999:67; Onwugbufor2000:72) we also know that growing children, at least in the African environment, have been shown to involve themselves in various kinds of oral exercises that, some way or the other, impact on the neuromuscular configuration of their speech organs. This eventually reinforces their bid en route competence (Ojukwu, 2002). We think Finnegan's view (1970:305) tacitly aligns with this. She had noted that tongue-twisters are forms of children literature which help them train— on words. Moreover, if Emenanjo's proposition, earlier mentioned, is anything to go by, then the place of tongue-twisters in developmental linguistics might have been played down on; especially now that we claim to be "civilized". There are serious indications that the genre is already an "endangered specie" in this part of the world.

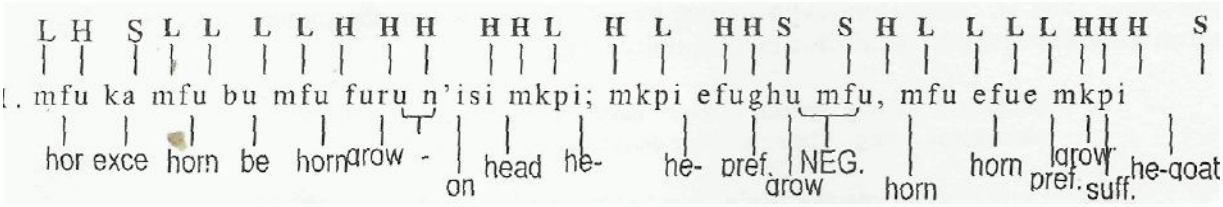
The modus operandi of the tongue-twisters has been shown to conform to certain principles of second

language (L_2) learning. An Hausa informant disclosed in the course of this study that one learning Hausa as an L_2 has to learn a lot of tongue-twisters in the language. He will also be exposed to the articulation of the range of plosives in the language; all aimed at hitting the target, if possible. This system is almost in tandem with the aural-oral approach of L_2 teaching (Crystal, 1994:378), This L_2 teaching pattern was devised by linguists for the military in the U.S.A. at a time. In its original design, a native speaker served as model from whom the learners "imitated" the production of basic words and/or sentences in the target language. There are also similarities between this and the popular imitation theory of first language (L,) acquisition (Fromkin and Rodman, 1998:328), though the variables involved are divergent.

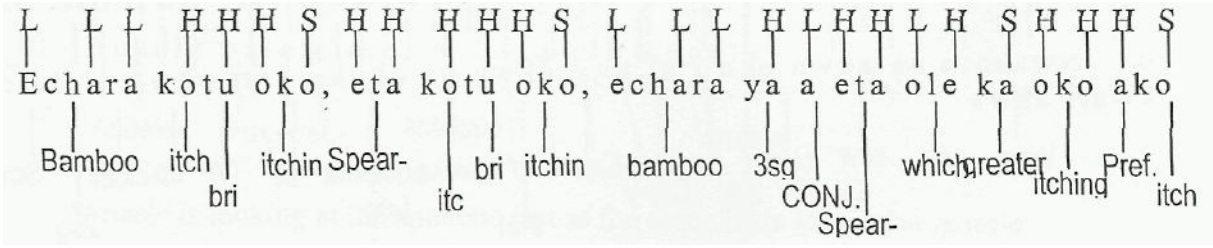
Data Analysis

Our approach here also has some autosegmental undertone (Goldsmith, 1977). We are isolating, as it were, the respective tiers for ease of analysis. To this end, we have chosen to suspend the letter designates of the tones - high (H), low (L), and downstep (S) above the syllabic elements. This therefore rules out the conventional tonal strokes since the letter designates of the tones are here related to the supposed tone-bearing units (TBU) by association lines. This way it is easier to take inventory of the tones for analysis. We have also chosen to link with association lines, the segmentals with their morpheme-by-morpheme correlates for a good understanding of the breakdown. Thereafter, we have structured some quantitative schemata in tables and bar charts for further deductions.

'Bamboo itches briefly, spear-grass itches briefly, between bamboo and spear-grass which

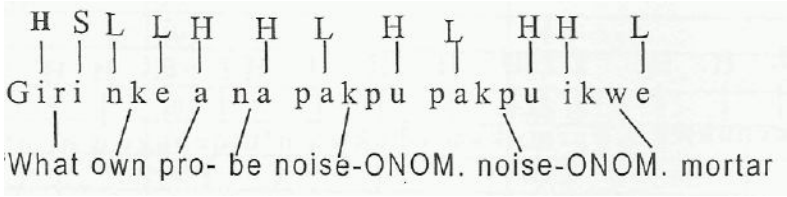


'Great horn was what grew on he-goat's head; if he-goat does not grow **horn,** horn will grow he-goat'



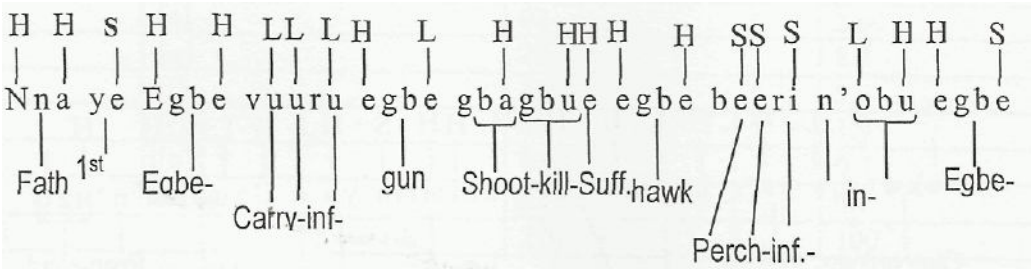
itches more?'

2.



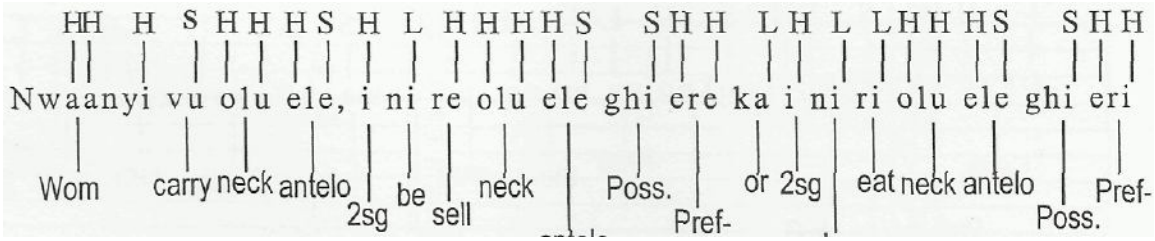
3.

Why the praise making **with** mortar?



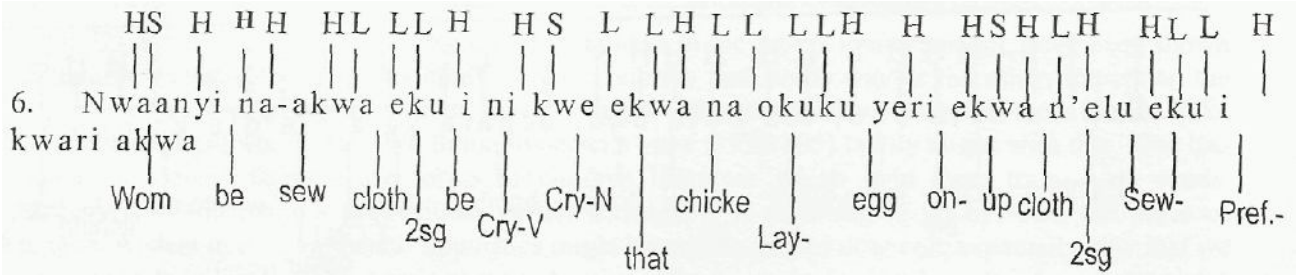
4.

'Elder Egbe picked a gun and shot dead a kite that perched over Egbe's parlour'



5.

'Woman bearing antelope's neck, is the antelope's neck (meat) for sale or is that your antelope's neck

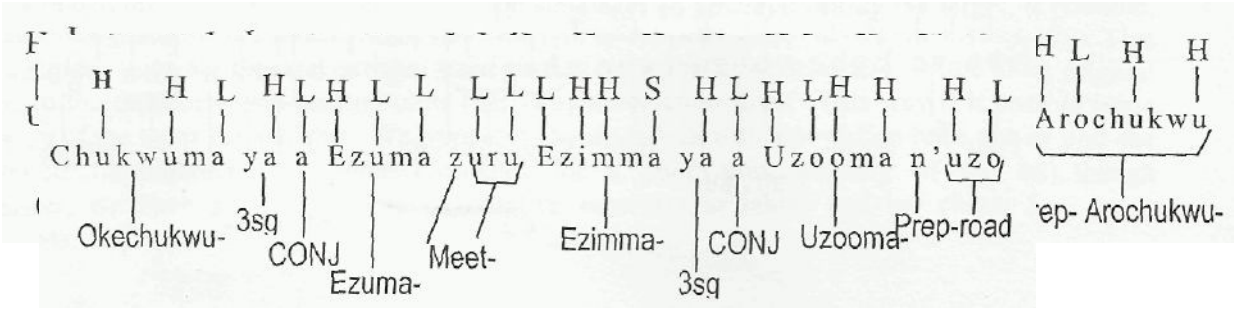


(meat) for your own consumption?

'Woman-tailor, are you crying that some chicken laid eggs on the clothe you sewed?

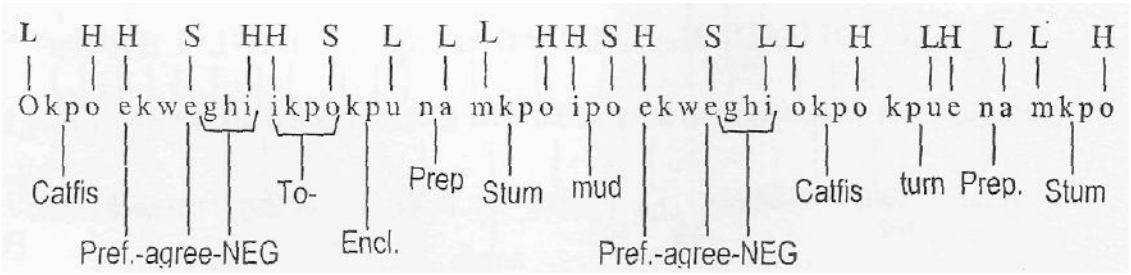
7.

'The Reverend Okechukwu preached a sermon in the Church at Arochukwu town'



8.

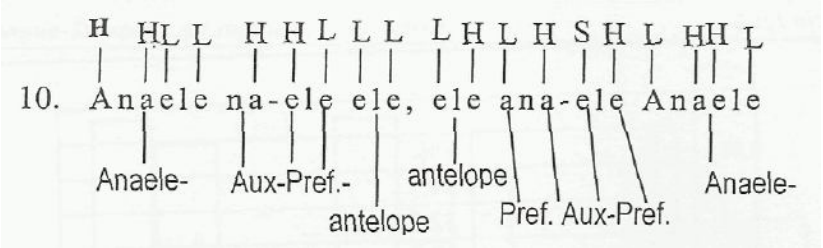
'Chukwuma and Ezuma met Ezimma and Uzooma along the road'



9.

'Catfish could not turn near the stump because the mud could not allow it turn at the stump'

10.



'Anaele is looking at the antelope just as the antelope is looking at Aiiaele

Table 1

SONORANTS			
SOUND		Fo	F%
ORTH.	PHON.		
U	[u]	44	16.3
	[o]	07	2.6

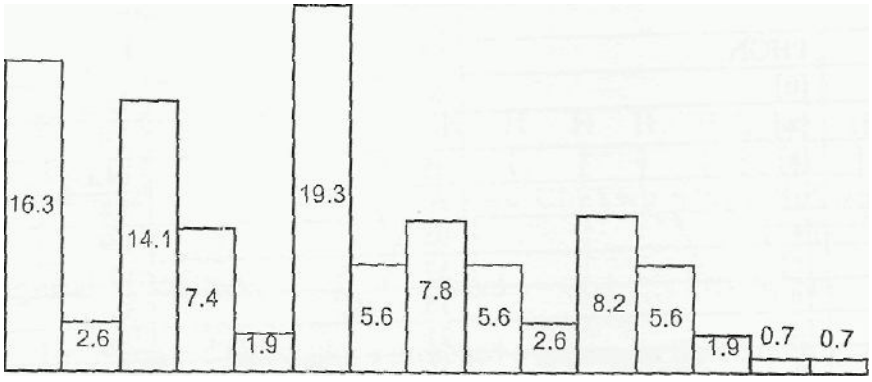
a	[a]	38	14.1
i	[fl	20	7.4
	[•]	05	1.9
c	[e]	52	19.3
m	[m]	15	5.6
n	[n]	21	7.8
r	[•]	15	5.6
o	[o]	07	2.6
	M	22	8.2
/	[j]	15	5.6
v		05	1.9
nw	[n^{w}]	02	0.7
ny	[•]	02	0.7
Total		270	100

Table 2

OBSTRUENTS			
SOUND		Fo	F%
ORTH.	PHON.		
F	JQ	08	93
k	[k]	10	11.6
b		03	3.5
S	[s]	01	1.2
kp	[]		12.8
gh		05	5.8
cli	[	08	9.3
T	[	04	4.7
E		01	1.2
P	[	03	3.5
kw	G3	18	20.9
§b	k]	06	7.0
v	EV]	02	2.3
d	[d]	01	1.2
z	M	05	5.8
TOTAL		86	100

Table 3

TONES		
	F_0	F%
H	128	54.5
L	76	32.3
S	31	13.2
Total	235	100



u a i I e m n r o D 1 j n^{w} *

Fig. **I;** ***<r~ Sonorants —>***

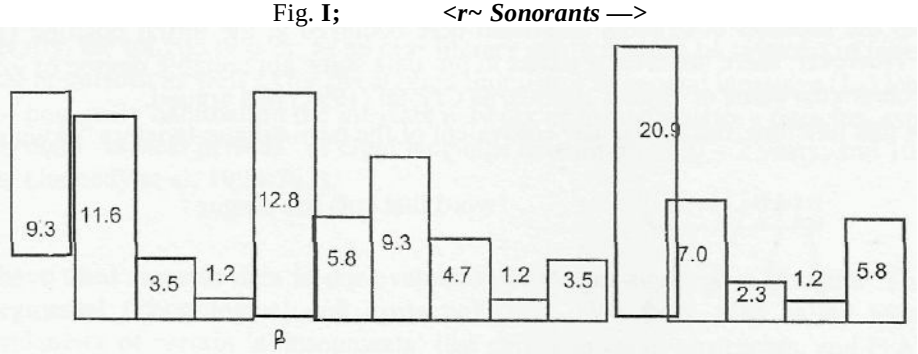


Fig. 2: ← *Obstruents* →

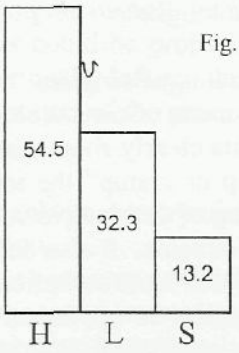


Fig. 3: *Tones*

f k b s • tʃ t g p k^{w} ✓ v d z

Discussion

Language is essentially a super ordinate dimension of the consonant - vowel sequencer. But linguists, in their obsession with pattern congruency of linguistic phenomena, relish the "free (de-militarized) zone" in the duel of the segmental dichotomies; a "zone" where stark consonants can mingle unabashedly with vowels and, ipso facto, be construed as 'behaving' like them (as nasals, liquids, and glides; in sonorants). That is why Chomsky and Halle's (1968) concepts: sonorants -obstruents suffice for our analytical posture here. Like you may well know, sonorants are sounds produced with a vocal tract configuration in which spontaneous voicing is possible; as against obstruents (Chomsky and Halle,1968:302).

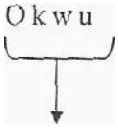
Now, we observe from our analysis that the forms [e u a] respectively, shoot their bars above every other (see Fig. 1); while the forms [n*«] and [j $_{T}$] sprawl the bars at the base of the chart.

What implications do these results hold for us in this discourse? And also how do we account for the percentage frequencies (F%) of the forms [k^{w}p k] that dwarf every other; and the forms [s g d] as the least?

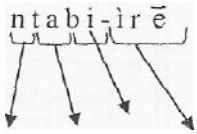
In the first place the creative ingenuity in the very systematic manipulative alternation of the leading units is quite attractive - both for the sonorants [e u a] and the obstruent [k^{w} pk]. But Trask's view (1996) seems to have been scuttled by our data. That is, that tongue twisters are characterized by

> ... the repeated use of the same initial consonant sound in a string of words in a connected text.

None of the topmost obstruents identified here occurred at the initial position (IP) of their environments. However, there apparently exists in our data some appreciable degree of juxtaposition of words that contain the same or similar sounds, as Crystal (1997) had argued. Let us recall, at this juncture, the vernacular equivalent of the term tongue-twisters "okwu ntabi-ir e ":



'word that cuts the tongue



Word OR

pref chew end tongue ' word that makes one chew his tongue'

Crystal (1995) alludes to the frequency norms of consonants in tongue-twisters. Sure enough, as our data show, it is the frequency of, not just consonants, but consonants of certain characteristics, that must inform the "ntabiness" of the tongue. In this instance, our data clearly show that the plosive obstruents with their inherent plosion idiosyncrasy, will te; -1 to "trip or cramp" the tongue as the passive articulators are put "on the defensive" with the recum-dl lashing of their active counterparts -in line with the stricture of closure associated with this category of obstruents. It also does seem that doubly articulated plosive obstruents will make a stretch of ton^-'-twisters more complicated. Indeed Ojukwu (2000) had shown that this class of sounds are am-- •; the last to appear in the speech inventory of the growing child (in first language (L,) acquisition. This he attributed to neurophysiological factors which impact on the motor reflexes of the child's articulator mechanism. It should also be noted that the HF% peak of the sonorants (19.3%) is less than the obstruents' (20.9%). This spells certain noteworthy implications. Studies have proved beyond reasonable doubts that, not only are sonorants more marked in world languages, they also appear earlier and faster in the child's repertoire (Ajah, 1992; Epelle, 1992; Oguniyi, 1993). If now, as our analysis here shows, sonoranl peak tends to 'cower' before the obstruent's, then we interprete it that in this genre, the obstruent is the obvious dictator of the timbre. This situation will also seem to suggest that for the second language (L_2) learner of Igbo, the mastery of the stop obstruents, among others, is the "beginning of wisdom" - a "wisdom" in this instance which could be found in such domain as tongue-twisters.

Another look at the sonorants' profile in this discourse reveals that the "peaking points" in our schemata (see Fig. 1) correspond to [+ATR] vowel sonorants while on the opposite, the deepest "valleys" are largely [-ATRJ.

Hogg and McCully (1987:34) had in their sonority sequencing generalisation (SSG), calibrated sounds in a scale. They assigned values (one to ten) to these sounds corresponding to their individual sonority propensity. The sounds in the "peaking points" of our sketch above (sonorants) -[u a e] clearly fall within the highest values (eight to ten) in Hogg and McCully's sonority scale, far higher than others.

We again feel comfortable to posit, therefore, that the formant frequencies (FF) of [+ATR] vowel sonorants favour the operation of tongue-twisters in Ehugbo and, indeed, in the Igbo language. It does seem apparent that the muscular activation that exerts tension for pharyngeal constriction will be quite unfriendly to resonance in the supragloftal cavities hence the high percentage frequency (HF%) recorded in [+ATR] segments. In addition, the high sonority formation of these segments also seem galvanized by the high tones (sec Fig. 3) which arc shown to dominate the spectrum. They give real pitch prominence to the [+ATR] segments that bear them.

Generally, the tongue-twister, as an oral literary genre, should be relevant in investigations of developmental linguistics as well as for the applied linguistics of second language (L_2) learning. They are capable of positively habituating the intricate network of the articulatory muscles, especially so in the first and second "critical periods" of child language development (0-2 years; and 10 - 16 years); among others (Jannedy et al, 1994:262).

Conclusion

We have used sizeable data in our evaluation of tongue-twisters in Ehugbo. This cut across the tonal, segmental (Phonological and syntactic) tiers. We have also called attention to the dorminant tendencies of certain 'autosegments' like certain plosive obstruents, and [+ATR] units as bearing much on the overall configuration of Ehugbo tongue-twisters. We did argue, in addition, that tongue-twisters could be profitable in first (Lj) and second (L_2) language acquisition and learning. We have intentionally left out the semantic import of our structures since they are rather "tangential" to the subject-matter of the genre.

Notes

1. Many thanks to Annestacia who provided the data for this study and showed keen interest in its publication.
2. High tones are conventionally left unmarked - where tonal strokes are employed
3. F_0: Fundamental frequency
4. F%: Percentage frequency
5. ORTH. Orthographic
6. PHON. Phonetic
7. FACT. Factative
8. Pref. Prefix
9. NEG. Negative
10. Suff. Suffix
11. 3sg: Third person singular
12. CONJ. Conjunction
13. Pro. Pronoun
14. ONOM. Onomatopoeic
15. 1^{sl} pi. First Person plural
16. Pers. Person
17. Inf. Infinitive
18. 2sg. Second person singular
19. Poss. Possessive
20. -v: verb
21. -N:Noun
22. Prep. Preposition
23. Encl. Enclitic
24. Aux. Auxiliary
25. ATR: Advanced tongue root

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