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Nasal Consonants in Gbagyi

Dalhatu Abigail Musa

Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the nasal consonants in Gbagyi. And following the assumption that sounds share different features when they are in each other's company based on diverse criteria, this study extends to investigate assimilatory processes associated with nasals in the language. This paper, through a detailed descriptive method, aims to investigate the homorganic nasals, syllabic nasals and non-syllabic nasals, while attempting to ascertain the phonemic status of all the nasal categories in Gbagyi. The study presents new evidence to show that there are five (5) nasal consonants in Gbagyi, where In/ is syllabic and homorganic and l m,)l, l), l)wl are non- syllabic. Also, data in this study reveal that while the nasals In, m,)l, l)wl are phonemic,

l)l is phonetic in Gbagyi, because it is not a meaning distinguishing sound in the language, but a mere phonetic form of the phonemic nasal In/, particularly in a velar consonant environment. Of equal interest is the evidence which shows that dual patterns of assimilation exists in the language: progressive and regressive as well as contiguous and long distant (proximities) assimilation. Findings in this study are a pointer to a new direction of study, for instance, to explore how nasals affect vowels and perhaps other consonants, such as the harmonic relations between nasals and other consonants and or vowels in Gbagyi.

Keywords: Nasal consonants; phonemic nasals; assimilation, syllabic and non-syllabic nasals

Introduction

NASAL SOUNDS ARE GENERALLY DESCRIBED AS SUCH SOUNDS PRODUCED with lowered velum with the articulators forming an obstruction at some point in the oral cavity such that, the air stream goes out through the nasal cavity. This idea is echoed in Gleason's (1968) opinion that in the production of nasals, the passage through the mouth is completely closed

at some point while the nose is open. In Katamba's (1989) thought, nasals (along with lateral /l/ and semi-vowels /r, j, w/) are sonorants. Sonorant sounds are produced at the glottis with a relatively wide articulatory channel such that no audible articulatory friction is produced. Katamba further explains that it is the perfect synchronization of velic closure along with other articulatory parameters like phonation, place and manner of articulation that ensures an absolute distinction of the nasal from the oral consonants. Nasals are conventionally classified with reference to particular points of their articulation. For instance, nasals may be bilabial /m/, alveolar /n/, velaric /ŋ/ or palatal /ɲ/, etc. as dependent on the greatest point of obstruction in their production.

Assimilation is one of the most occurring phonological processes associated with features of sounds, and like other sounds, nasal consonants are also affected by assimilatory process. For instance, the assimilation of /n/ to the point of articulation of a following obstruent results from the early adjustment of the articulators in anticipation of the production of the obstruent. Such adjustments which have the effect of harmonizing the point of articulation of the nasal consonant and the following obstruent lead to "articulatory simplification" (Antilla, 1972: 74). This is what Abercrombie (1976: 136) reiterated when he asserted that the harmonicity of the two segments succeeds in "producing some economy of efforts in the utterance." However, Ohala & Ohala (1993:242) argues that this ideology lacks reliability on the account that the N + stop assimilation can come about due to the listener's misapprehension and not only from shortcuts taken by the speaker. The present researcher refutes the latter position on the basis that speaker's speech does not always follow what he/she hears from another speaker. Hence, rather than "misapprehension", the "adjustment" of the articulators to the point of the following sound's articulation is motivated by the speaker's quest for efforts economy in speech. It is noteworthy that assimilation process may also affect segments that do not necessarily follow each other in a phonetic context; such a situation is referred to as long distance assimilation. In fact, scholars such as Lenis (1936), Menn (1971), Smith (1973), Berg (1992), etc. testify that long distance assimilatory processes are very frequent and well attested in various languages, e.g., nasal consonants harmony.

Overview on Gbagyi (Socio)Linguistic Background

Gbagyi belongs to the Nupoid sub-group of Niger-Congo family (Blench, 2013). It is a minority and consequently under-researched language whose speakers are

found in Nasarawa, Kaduna, Kogi, Niger States and the Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria. The population of Gbagyi native speakers has been estimated to be 8, 000, 000 (Filaba, 2012). Gbagyi is characterized by two major dialects: the Gbagyi-Nkwa and the Gbagyi-Nge. The researcher focuses on the Gbagyi-Nge variety, particularly spoken in Municipal Area Council of the FCT- Abuja.

Studies on Nasals across Languages

Nasals and nasal assimilation is a cluster study area that has received appreciable scholarly attention over the past years. A few of such studies would be explicated below.

In his study, Mberia (2002) identifies four underlying nasal consonants (n, m, IJ, J1) in Kitharaka (a Bantu language spoken in Kenya). He explains that there are, however, eleven phonetic nasal consonants in the language (m, m, m, n, n, J1, J1, IJ, IJ, J1, I)). According to Mberia (2002:157), the various realizations of the phonetic variants of the four (4) underlying nasal consonants in the language is motivated or triggered by some homorganic nasal assimilation process which is demonstrated in the context of the verbs and nouns of classes 9 and 10, where the nasal /n/ begins the nouns.

- 1) n - pandi _____. mpandi 'grasshoppers'
- n - Baka _____. mbaka 'cats'
- n - co.a _____. IJCO,a 'hoof/ hooves'
- n - ri,i _____. ndi-i 'threads'
- n - joke _____. J1joke 'bees'
- n- king:, _____. I)king:, 'neck/necks'
- n- orwr _____. I)gorwr 'pig/pigs'

In data (1), the underlying *In!* assimilates to the place of articulation of the following obstruent thereby becoming identical in place with it, resulting from early adjustment of the articulators in anticipation of the production of the obstruent. Unfortunately, the author focused on illustrating the phonetic variation of only the nasal *In!*, leaving us to imagine how that of the three other nasal consonants are phonetically distributed in words.

Uguru (2005) made a review of nasal consonants across some languages including English and standard Igbo below in which he reported that nasals in Standard English are: *Im*, n, IJ/ as in words like beam, mob; bin, knob; bank, jingle.

On the other hand, standard Igbo has the following nasals: /m, n, ɲl, ɲj, ɲw/ as in the words below:

- | | | |
|----------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| 2) /m/ mu 'me' | /Tj/ nlci 'firewood' | /TjW/ nwunye 'wife' |
| mere 'did' | nka 'old age' | nwata 'child' |
| /n/ ntu 'ash' | /pl/ nye 'give' | |
| ntu 'nail' | nyo6 'peep' | |

In his study, identifying the syllable final N in Oko, Yoruba was one aspect that Atoyebe (2009) was pre-occupied with. He reveals that the syllable final nasal is not realized in isolated words, but that it gets a surface form when morphemes occur in connected speech, e.g., in compounds or phrases; as the N-coda creates a liaison effect between the morphemes.

- 3) 6bI + utu _____. 6binutu
king abode palace
f5 + igila _____. ffimigila
pound yam pounded yam
utfi + ayE _____. utfimayE
workDEF.SG thejob

The syllable final N is realized as [n] and [m] across morpheme/word boundaries under two conditions: i) the first word ends with a nasalized vowel ii) the second word begins with an oral vowel. By implication, the final-N occurs only in an environment of nasalization and not in their own morphemes by themselves. Atoyebe (2009:135) identifies some phonological elements which determine the realization of the [n] and [m] as coda. The realization of [n] is triggered by [-back] nasalized vowels [i, e], while that of [m] is triggered by [+back]. However, he further explains that in some cases, [n] occurs in [+back] nasalized vowels environment and [m] in [-back] environment as in:

- 4) umu + abɛ _____. umUnabE
cap DEF.PL the caps
umU + tbt _____. umUntbt
goat INDF.PL some goats

Atoyebe explains that the onset of the syllable plays a determining role, in that where it is bilabial, the N occurs as [n] rather than [m]. So, a bilabial onset + [+back] trigger [n] not [m]. The explanation for this as provided by Atoyebe is that Oko language activates automatically the OCP which constraints identical features to occur adjacently.

Similarly, data from Akpes language as provided by Agoni cited in Opeyemi (2021: 41) shows that Akpes attests four (4) nasal consonant: /m, n, ɲ, ɲl/ where *ln*, *ɲl*/ occur in word initial and medial position and /m, ɲ/ occur in all environments including word finally. For example:

- | | | |
|-----------------------|---------------|----------------|
| 5) n - nu 'was there' | onu 'mouth' | |
| ɲl - ɲli 'water' | eɲlo 'female' | |
| IJ- IJ:, 'drink' | ElJa 'new' | rteIJ 'fish' |
| m-mo 'say' | imu 'name' | tam 'remember' |

Interestingly, Opeyemi explains that the nasal consonants which occur word finally occur with some underlying vowels following them. Unfortunately, no explanation or illustration was given to justify his claim. Furthermore, Opeyemi (2021:48) asserts that the nasal sound *ln/* is syllabic in Akpes as in *nje* 'I see/saw', *nao* 'I want'. However, he reveals that the syllabic nasal assimilates the features of the initial consonant of the verbal lexical item as in *[mba]* 'I come/came', *[ɟɟaj imuti]* 'I sell/sold', *[jko ohumJ]* 'I sing/sang'. The issue of whether or not the non-syllabic nasals exhibit phonetic variations remains unclear and the available data in Opeyemi's work does not provide any hint whatsoever in that regard.

Methodology

In order to meet the research need of this study, data were primarily collected from ten (10) resource persons who were selected by the researcher through the sampling technique. They fall within the age range of 40 to 61 years, where five were female and five, male - all indigenes of and resident in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. The researcher considered this set of language consultants a suitable sample population for this study because of their sociolinguistic status as well as their educational background, being Gbagyi-English bilinguals as well as holding at least a first degree in various fields. Therefore, using their intuition, the informants provided the most reliable data for this study. A total of a hundred (100) Gbagyi lexical items were recorded during series of oral interview using the English forms for which the respondents provided their Gbagyi equivalents as the researcher recorded their responses with a digital audio recorder. These pieces of information were helpful to the researcher in the identification and description of nasal sounds attested in the Gbagyi language. Precisely, all nasal sounds observed from the data were elicited while the researcher observed their contexts and patterns of occurrence. This enabled the researcher to determine the articulatory features they exhibit in order to ascertain their articulatory relations (assimilation) with their neighboring segments: how they affect and are affected by them. This was chiefly to identify phonemic nasals in Gbagyi as well as determine their possible phonetic variants.

Gbagyi Consonant Inventory

In her research, Dalhatu (2018), using acoustic instrumental tool of Praat, found that there are twenty-five (25) consonants in Gbagyi. They are: /p, b, t, d, k, g, ɓ, kp, gb, f, v, h, s, z, ʃ, ʒ, lɸ, cl:ʒ, m, n, ɲl, ɲj, l, j, w/ (alongside six (6) vowels: /a, e, u, i,

o, a/).

According to Dalhatu (2019), the syllable structure typology of Gbagyi is characterized by the following syllable structure types: V, CV, N, CGV (consonant-glide vowel), CNV (consonant-nasal vowel) and CNYV/CNWW (consonant-nasal-glide vowel).

Data Analysis

Present literature holds that there are four (4) nasal consonants (n, m, ɲ, ɳ) in Gbagyi (Dalhatu, 2018). However, further investigation reveals in this study that one more nasal consonant exists in Gbagyi: the bilabial velar nasal /ɲw/ orthographically represented as 'nw' as in *nwa* 'to catch', *ɲnunwa* 'crocodile'. Therefore, it suffices to say that there are five (5) nasal consonants in Gbagyi. The question of whether they are phonemic or phonetic will be addressed in the course of the discussion in this section.

6) Bilabial nasal /m/

Word initial	Word medial
mapwi 'sister'	amula 'wedding'
mama 'a fool'	omi 'inside'
mulaɔa 'groom'	amunu 'mushroom'
miznu 'bee'	ami 'blood'

7) Alveolar nasal /n/

Word initial	Word medial
m.i'nwa 'water'	ona 'goat'
nanyf 'body'	anufɪ.f 'beniseed'
nakwɛf 'cow'	ɔmi 'husband'
miɔayi 'enemy'	ana 'oath'

8) Palatal nasal /ɲ/

Word initial

nyakrnɸ 'room'

nyitala 'tongue'

nyagyi 'food'

nyigɲu 'daughter'

nyasɲni 'ailment'

Word medial

anyɪ 'world'

ɲnyɪ 'thing'

anyikɲa 'teeth'

anyɪ 'song'

anyigye 'suffering'

9) Labio-velar nasal /fJw/

Word initial	Word medial
nwu 'to quench'	nunwuyi 'enemy'
nwagye 'to sleep'	minwada 'water owner'
nwasnu 'to maltreat'	dnunwakwo 'crocodile'

10) Velar nasal /fJ/

Word initial	Word medial
ijge' 'that'	zaf)kwochi 'human being'
rjgena 'that what?'	vnidafJkuhi 'dumping site'
l)kwusnu 'really'	nyikutuf)kwo 'knee'

In the examples above, nasal consonants are illustrated in Gbagyi. They occur in word initial and medial positions. Furthermore, from the data above, it is observed that apart from the occurrence of the nasal /n/ in the above identified environments, it also constitutes a rare coda attested in Gbagyi as seen particularly in *da'hda* 'excitement' and *tantasni* 'middle'. Also, the analysis above (5-10) is evident that the nasals /n, m, J/, fJw/ are phonemic in Gbagyi while /fJ/ is phonetic. This is because, while the former set of sounds contributes to meaning distinction in Gbagyi, the occurrence of the latter sound is predictably determined by its environment. In what follows, we shall examine the contexts and distributional patterns of the identified nasals to ascertain their syllabic status.

The Syllabic Status of Nasal Consonants in Gbagyi

Present investigation provides evidence to show that nasal consonants in Gbagyi fall under two categories: the syllabic and non-syllabic. There is only one syllabic nasal in Gbagyi while all other nasal consonants are non-syllabic. Note, however, that the non-syllabic nasals appear in the same positions as the syllabic nasal, they do so as phonetic forms of the one (phonemic) syllabic nasal /n/. This is illustrated below.

i. Syllabic nasals: /n/

Intriguing evidence shows that the alveolar nasal /n/ is syllabic in Gbagyi. Data are provided below for illustration:

11) nta 'three'

ntatayi"slippery'
ritna 'last year'
nnyi 'four'
ndu 'beyond, over, above'
ri'ya" 'here'

Observe in data (11) that the initial (alveolar) nasal consonant does not occur in the capacity of a syllable onset as is the case in data (7), but it occurs as an initial syllable of the word. This is validated by the tonal values they bear. However, the occurrence of the syllabic alveolar nasal is not restricted to only the environments of alveolar and palatal consonants. The explanation for that will be suspended for later.

ii. Non-syllabic nasals: /m, ɲ, ɲl, ɲw/

The nasal consonants listed above form the category of non-syllabic nasals.

They are individually analyzed below:

/m/: this is one of the phonemic, non-syllabic nasals in Gbagyi. It contributes to the meaning of words in the language as it constitutes the onset of a syllable. By distribution, the bilabial nasal occurs both in the initial and medial positions of the Gbagyi words. Example:

12) mama 'a fool' ama 'sour soup'
 ma'na'.yi"good' amunu 'mushroom'
 machegja 'gum' amula 'wedding'
 miznu 'bee' anf'blood'

We observe from data (23) that the bilabial nasal is phonemic in Gbagyi because it is able to constitute a syllable onset as well as occur word medially thereby contributing to meaning in the language. However, it is non-syllabic since it is not capable of constituting a syllable in the language.

/ɲl/: this is another member of non-syllabic nasal category in Gbagyi. It is distributed in the following pattern in the language:

13) nyakpa 'animal'	onya 'dance'
nyagyi 'food'	anyi 'song'
nyignu 'daughter'	anyigye 'suffering'
nyukmi 'music instrument'	onyada 'owner'
nyikna 'tooth'	anyi 'earth'

Like the case of the bilabial nasal, /m/, the palatal nasal occurs both word initially and medially in Gbagyi without any obvious prior motivation whatsoever. This implies that the palatal nasal occurs in high consistency in form in all its contexts of occurrence. It does not take on any phonetic form at any point in contexts where it occurs. Nevertheless, it is non-syllabic as it does not form a syllable nuclei in the language.

/rJv/: also non-syllabic, this labial-velar nasal occurs in word initial and medial positions of words in Gbagyi without changing in form. Observe data below:

- 14) nwagye 'to sleep' gyenwa 'sleep'
nwuya 'to wipe' mi'nwaaa 'water owner'
nwu 'to quench' dnunwakwo 'crocodile'
nyagyi 'food' nunwuyi 'enemy'

The labial-velar nasal is evident in the data above (14) to be phonemic. However, it is interesting to note that this nasal appears to be in harmony with some back vowels, /a, u/, such that it does not occur with any other vowel except these two. A possible explanation for this may lie in the fact that the nasal sound is primarily a back segment, i.e. articulated at the velum, therefore, it chooses back vowels to occur with it for articulatory convenience. Non-syllabic for the obvious reason that it does not form the peak of a syllable in the language.

/rJ/: this velar nasal is observed to occur as a phonetic variant of *Inf* both in a syllabic environment and as a coda in Gbagyi. This is justifiable by the fact that it only occurs in the environment of a velar consonant /k/ or /g/ as shown in data (15) below.

15) rjge "that"

rjgena 'that what?' IJkwusnu 'truly'

Observe that in data (15) above, the velar nasal */ŋ/* occurs in the predictable environment of */k,g/* and nowhere else. This implies that it occurs only as a phonetic variant of */n/* in the velar motivated environment.

It is instructive at this point to mention that the nasals */m, fJ, n/* also represent different phonetic realizations of the syllabic nasal */n/* in the environments of bilabial, velar and alveolar consonants. Take a look at the following examples:

16) Before a bilabial consonant

mba 'two'

m6616 'I'm coming'

m66 'there'

17) Before a velar consonant

ijge 'that'

l)gn\ 'standing'

l)kniisnu 'together'

What is obvious in the data (16 & 17) is that the underlying form of the syllabic nasals above is alveolar. However, it phonetically assimilates the place feature of the consonants that follow it thereby acquiring the different surface or phonetic forms - a process generally termed homorganic nasal assimilation. Therefore, it is safe to state that while the nasals */n, m, fJ, fJw/* all appear to meet the condition for a syllabic nasal, only */n/* is truly and phonemically syllabic. All others are its phonetic realizations, whose contexts of occurrence are highly predictably motivated by the consonants in whose company they occur in the language.

The process of homorganic assimilation is bidirectional in Gbagyi: data show that it does not only occur in a progressive order (as in the above examples), but also in a regressive direction. This is well demonstrated in the context of Gbagyi negation such that, although the negation suffix *{-n}* is underlyingly */n/*, it is phonetically realized as *[m, fJ, n]* in different contexts, i.e., it appears as *[m]* in the environment of a bilabial, *[fJ]* in the environment of a velar and *[n]* with an alveolar or palatal consonant. Consider the following examples:

18) *-{n}* suffix with alveolar and palatal sounds

ya 'bend' ya-n 'bend not'

da 'tell' da-n 'tell not'

shna 'gossip' shna-n 'gossip not'

nya 'pursue' nya'-n 'pursue not'
yi 'call' yi-n 'call not'

- 19) -{n} suffix with bilabial sounds
ba 'count' ba-m 'count not' ma
'bear' ma-m 'bear not'
pa 'remember' pa-m 'remember not'
fni 'pierce' fni'-m 'pierce not'
vni 'shiver' vni'-m 'shiver not'

- 20) -{n} suffix with velar sounds
ka 'plug' ka-rj 'plug not'
gwo 'collect' gwo-IJ 'collect not'
ga 'give' ga-IJ 'give not'
kna 'fry' kna-IJ 'fry not'
kwu 'pack' kwii-rj 'pack not'

It is observable in data (18, 19, 20) that the abstract form of Gbagyi negation suffix is the alveolar nasal /n/, but exhibits some phonetic variations in different environments through the process of regressive (non-contiguous) homorganic nasal assimilation, forming an allomorphic relation of [m, IJ, n] dependent on the place feature of the host initial consonant of the verb. The abstract segment /N/ is determined by the fact that it possesses the widest scope of distribution (with alveolar and palatal sounds).

Discussion

Therefore, the researcher concludes based on the evidence in this study that there are five (5) nasal consonants in Gbagyi, in which four (4) of them are phonemic except /IJ/. The nasal consonants form two basic groups of syllabic (In/) and non-syllabic (/m, IJ, JI, Iw/); although some of the sounds in the latter may appear in the same position as the syllabic one, they do so only to phonetically represent the former according to the different contexts where they occur as a result of homorganic nasal assimilation (see data 16 to 17). Investigation into the distributional patterns of these nasals reveals that all the nasal consonants (except /IJ/) occur in word initial and medial positions, as only the syllabic alveolar nasal In/ occurs in the word final position. This is showcased particularly in the context of negation of the language. Also of interest is the revelation that the alveolar nasal /n/ also occurs as the coda of a closed syllable rarely attested in Gbagyi. In this

case, it does not occur as syllabic but non-syllabic (see data 10), which is realized in different phonetic forms of [m and IJ] as conditioned by its environment. In the same way, the syllabic nasal at the end of a word and as a suffix is also observed to exhibit some phonetic variations, such that, the archiphoneme /NI/ regressively assimilates the place feature of consonant it co-occurs with thereby changing to [m] in bilabial environment, [IJ] in velar environment and [n] in alveolar and palatal environments.

Conclusion

Therefore, the researcher concludes based on the findings of this study that there are four (4) phonemic nasal consonants in Gbagyi, where one is syllabic and the others are non-syllabic, even though they appear to be syllabic at the phonetic level as a result of progressive and regressive homorganic nasal assimilation processes. Also, it is concluded in this study that the rare closed syllable type attested in Gbagyi is constituted by the particular (alveolar) nasal consonant, /n/; like in the case of its syllabic counterpart, it also exhibits different phonetic realizations of [m, n, IJ] in the environments of bilabial, velar and alveolar, respectively. Therefore, the researcher concludes based on the findings in this study that there are five (5) nasal consonants in Gbagyi, where four (4) are phonemic and one is phonetic. Also, one of the nasals is syllabic and the other four are non-syllabic, except at the phonetic level which results from both progressive and regressive homorganic nasal assimilation.

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