

# A Look into the Concept of Diphthongisation in Bantu: A Case of Shona

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## Abstract

This is a qualitative analysis of the traditional position in theoretical linguistics that Bantu languages have only monophthong vowels. It assesses the pronunciation of some of the typical Shona syllables involving vowels that do not qualify to be treated as monophthongs by some Shona speakers in Harare and Masvingo provinces where Zezuru and Karanga varieties of the language are traditionally spoken. It argues that vowels used in such environments are similar to their counterparts that are treated as diphthongs in certain English environments. The overall position is that the general resolution that has been made long ago (that Bantu languages do not have diphthongs and triphthongs) qualifies to be treated as one of the implicational universals that have been made on the languages which need to be dismissed right away. The paper observes that in the beginning such vowels might have been pronounced as chains of vowels but not anymore probably due to the language's constant contact with Romance languages like English. The research recommends the carrying out of more researches to determine the position of such implicational universal resolutions on Bantu languages

**Keywords:** Diphthongs, Monophthongs, triphthongs, Bantu language

## Introduction

Crystal (1997) describes vowels or vocoids as speech sounds made without closure of the vocal tract or audible friction. In other words, during their production, the fixed part of the tongue and the roof of the mouth are positioned in such a way that air passes through without any disturbance. Air moves out freely unlike with consonants or contoids where the space in between articulators is constricted such that air may be temporarily stopped, redirected or made to pass through but producing some hissing sound. Vowels are, therefore, produced by comparatively open configuration of the vocal tract. Hence, Kangira and Mudzingwa's (2003) assertion that vowels are made with an open approximation of the articulators involved. This makes them less tangible than consonants (Abercrombie, 1967) as one can hardly locate the actions of the articulators involved.

During speech production, a vowel functions as the centre of a syllable. Examples are [e], [i], [a], [u] and [o]. A syllable is an element of speech that acts as a unit of rhythm. It may also be explained using the chest-pulse theory as the biggest fraction of speech that a person may produce during the time between two heart beats (Kangira and Mudzingwa, 2003). In a syllable, the vowel plays the role of a nucleus. Nucleus is the most sonorous sound unit, that is, the one that produces the most noise and it is the only compulsory element in a syllable. Thus, vowels must always be present in all syllables in every language though there are few instances in some languages where semi-vowels like [j] and [w] may assume the role of nucleus as well. The other components of a syllable are onsets and codas and these roles are always assumed by consonants in all languages. Onsets come before the nucleus whilst codas come after the nucleus. Languages differ on these with some taking only an onset and nucleus. Such are called open syllables as they have no coda or surrounding consonants. This is the situation in Bantu languages. Others take closed syllables or both and English is a good example. However, all languages could have syllables with the nucleus only at some point. This demonstrates how important vowels are in speech as far as all natural languages are concerned.

As demonstrated below, depending on the language, vowels may be of three types, that is, monophthongs, diphthongs and triphthongs.

## Monophthongs

Monophthongs are vowels of constant quality and are sometimes called pure vowels (Kangira and Mudzingwa, 2011). Crystal (1997) further describes a monophthong as a vowel with no detectable change in quality during a syllable, for example, the vowel in 'car'. In this case, during the production of the vowel, the back part of the tongue would maintain the low position through out. This ensures the same vowel quality throughout the syllable.

There are many of these monophthongs, for instance:

- [i] as in beat, peel, dean, seem
- [e] as in pale, dane, same
- [ɛ] as in bet, den]
- [u] as in boot, pool
- [o] as in boat, pole, both
- [a] as in car, bath

There is constant unchanging quality in all of these vowels. Bantu languages like Shona are generally believed to have a total of five monophthongs, that is, [a],[e],[i],[o],[u] whilst others like English have up to around sixteen of them. Whether such universal claims still stand for all Bantu languages still needs to be found out by other researches as this one focuses solely on diphthongisation in Shona.

### **Diphthongs**

Unlike monophthongs, diphthongs are vowels in which there is perceptible change in quality during a syllable. They are vowels of changing quality (Kangira and Mudzingwa, 2011) and Crystal (1991) calls them gliding vowels. This is because during their production, the active articulator (back or front parts of the tongue) moves from one vowel position to another. This is the reason they are represented on the vowel trapezium in the form of arrows joining two vowel points. As such two vowel sounds are perceived during the production of a single syllable. There are a number of such vowels in English some of whose examples are presented below:

[ai] from unrounded low front vowel position to unrounded high front vowel position e.g. bite, like, dine, time, pile

[au] from unrounded low front vowel position to rounded high back vowel position e.g. out, down, cow, foul

[ie] from unrounded high front vowel position to unrounded mid low front position e.g. beard, fierce, weird

[ei] unrounded mid high front position to unrounded high front vowel position  
e.g. table, bake, fail

[oi] from rounded mid high back vowel position to an unrounded high front vowel position e.g. toy, boy, boil

During pronunciation of the involved syllables, a close track of the movement of the involved active articulator would make one feel its movement from one vowel position to another. This generates the perceived change in vowel quality. The current research focuses on finding out if such changes in vowel quality are really absent in Bantu languages as initially claimed.

### **Diphthongisation in Shona**

The general claim in texts like Abercrombie (1967) and Katamba (1994) is that diphthongisation is typical of language families like Romance and unheard of in families like Bantu. After listening closely to the Shona language in its typical use, the researcher identified the examples presented above in use in the following words:

[ai] e.g. 'tainda' (we went), 'aidya' (she ate it), 'faira' (file), 'aiba (she stole it)'

[au] e.g. 'taura' (talk), 'auya' (she came), 'audzwa' (she was told).

[ie] e.g. 'tiende' (can we go), 'aiedza' (she was trying),

[ei] e.g. 'veino imba' (of this house), 'tipei' (give us),

[oi] e.g. 'toinda' (we are going), 'oida' (she now want it)

A close attention would demonstrate the absence of any difference between the pronunciation of these vowels and their English counterparts presented earlier. For instance, no fluent Shona speaker would pronounce all the above examples as consisting of three syllables. They are rather made up of two syllables. Shona speakers do not pronounce the vowel in question as two separate ones.

### **Discussion**

The writer made an attempt at pronouncing each of the vowels above as two separate ones to Shona speakers at the same time watching their responses carefully during his field work. The results demonstrated that it sounded so marked to almost every one of the speakers involved yet they were never made aware of the research that was being carried out. This demonstrated that in typical concrete Shona conversations, there are only two syllables in all of the Shona examples presented above. It is not being claimed that there has never been the production of the vowel in question as two separate ones. However, maintaining the position that such situations still involve two vowels when in typical concrete situations they come out as a single vowel would not be a correct description of the language. The paper argues that the generally accepted traditional resolution that there is no diphthongisation in Shona and other Bantu languages must be treated as no longer holding water. This supports Cook's (1988) and Tarugarira's (1996) observation that so far the majority of the conclusions in the literature have been largely based upon implicational universals. Implicational universals are generalised conclusions based upon the information from a fraction of the languages and can at any moment be discredited by the discovery of some contradictory information (Mhute, 2011). The researcher is not claiming that there was never such a position as it might have been there but vanished over time due to adoption and adaptation resulting from years of constant contact between the languages. The researcher has also observed the potential of further researches uncovering evidence of triphthongs in the language in the way words like 'aienda' (she was going) are now pronounced in Shona. <http://www.morewords.com/word/triphthong> describes a triphthong as a combination of three vowel

sounds in a single syllable, forming a simple or compound sound. It is, thus a union of three vowel characters, representing together a single sound.

### **Conclusion**

It has been found out that diphthongisation is a process that does not spare some of the Bantu languages like Shona as traditionally believed. It is as pronounced as it is in Romance languages like English. The general conclusion that used to hold water must, therefore, be treated as an implicational universal that must now be dismissed following the coming up of such contradictory evidence from Shona. It is argued that this might have been the position at some point but it has now become a part of the languages due to the languages' constant contact with English.

### **Recommendations**

The research recommends the carrying out of more researches to determine the position of such implicational universal resolutions on Bantu languages in the light of a lot of adoption and adaptation characterising the many years that Bantu languages have spent in contact with the Romance languages like English.

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