

## **PHONOLOGICAL PROCESSES IN ENUGU-EZIKE PERSONAL NAMES**

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### **Abstract**

Naming in African societies primarily functions as an identity marker, incorporating cultural histories and values. So reflected in Enugu-Ezike personal names, they reveal important insights into the study of indigenous languages, especially in their patterns and structures. This paper discusses the phonological processes reflected in Enugu-Ezike personal names, focusing on assimilation, deletion, and nasalisation, using Goldsmith's autosegmental phonology. It further provides an avenue to present the orthographical representation of these names correctly, in line with their proper pronunciation and tone mapping. Data for this study were collected through oral interviews of individuals who hail from, and are competent speakers of Enugu-Ezike, in their 50s and 60s. Fifty personal names were collected, comprising both male and female names. This paper reveals that Enugu-Ezike personal names possess a regressive assimilation pattern, vowel elision, and successive nasalisation. This study, therefore, affirms that Enugu-Ezike personal names embody both linguistic structures and cultural identities, highlighting their significance in the preservation of the indigenous language.

**Keywords:** Phonology, Enugu-Ezike, Personal names, Autosegmental

### **Background to the Study**

Every human is identified by various characteristics, and one notable characteristic is their name. Humans are named at birth primarily for identity and identification. While names serve to identify a person, they also reflect the cultural values and practices of a particular group of people. A person's name provides insight into their linguistic and cultural background. In a typical Igbo setting, names are given based on the circumstances surrounding a child's birth, special events on the day of birth, occurrences before or after birth, and other significant factors. Personal names can be seen as identity markers used to refer to an individual. Behnaz (2009) defines a personal name as a proper noun that functions to identify a person individually, typically consisting of a name given at birth or a young age. Similarly, Eyakndue and Ogar (2023) describe names as an integral part of a person's culture, serving primarily for identification. Mmadike (2014) notes that, in Igbo land, children are usually named at birth by their parents, especially the father. This implies that the responsibility of naming in Igbo culture traditionally falls on the father. Manyasa (2009), as cited in Shigini and Mapunda (2023), suggests that through naming, people recognise, differentiate, and preserve histories, cultures, and origins. These views collectively affirm that names extend beyond individual identification to reveal a person's background, linguistic ties, and cultural affiliations. Viriri (2019) also in Shigini and Mapunda, emphasises that African personal names carry significant cultural content, making them inherently culture-specific. This suggests that the African naming system reflects a deeply rooted cultural identity that shapes expressions, values, and behaviours.

This cultural significance is also evident in Enugu-Ezike, a community and dialect group in Enugu State, Nigeria. The Enugu-Ezike people reside in the northern part of Ala Igbo and make up the entire Igbo-Eze North Local Government Area of Enugu State. The community consists of approximately 36 villages, all of which trace their origins to the four sons of Ezike-Oba: Ezzodo, Itodo, Essodo, and Ozzi. According to historical accounts, Ezike-Oba, the founding father of Enugu-Ezike, followed a wounded elephant to Ugwuoka Amube, where the animal eventually fell. Encouraged by the Atama of Ugwuoka Amube, Ezike-Oba chose to settle there and lived as a farmer. Enugu-Ezike is recognised as a people, a geographic location, and a dialect. The community, which had a recorded population of 259,431 in the 2006 census, is known primarily for farming and palm wine tapping (Eze Nwa Eya, personal investigation, 2024; Apeh, 2022; Chukwuemeke, 2015). A study by Nwaozuzu (2017) on the dialects of Igbo indicates that while Standard Igbo is known to have ten vowels, the Enugu-Ezike dialect, of the Northern Group of Dialects (NGD), also consists of ten vowels: /a, e, ɛ, i, ɪ, o, ɔ, u, ʊ, ə/. However, recent observations indicate that the Enugu-Ezike dialect actually has eleven vowels, with the inclusion of /ə/ alongside the original ten. Enugu-Ezike vowels are notable for the presence of two schwas: /ə/ and /ɐ/.

Similar to other Igbo communities, the naming process in Enugu-Ezike is pragmatic. Names are given to express expectations, commemorate events, provide consolation, express gratitude, ward off evil, and more. Unlike some Igbo communities, Enugu-Ezike does not hold formal naming ceremonies. Instead, the responsibility of naming a child rests with the parents, or they may grant this privilege to a trusted relative or acquaintance. However, other post-birth rites are performed, such as "íkūpùtá nwá író" in Standard Igbo, known locally in Enugu-Ezike as "òókéàtè nwá èzò" (Victoria Odugu, personal communication, 2025).

Despite these cultural practices, it has been observed that the traditional naming practices in Enugu-Ezike are gradually fading. Investigations and observations reveal that modern naming patterns in Enugu-Ezike are increasingly influenced by trends, the perception that traditional names are outdated, and personal preferences rather than cultural or historical contexts. Key factors contributing to this shift include the influence of new religious beliefs and modern civilisation, as also noted by Nkamigbo (2019). These factors have contributed to the shortening of names; thereby losing the meaning of such names, the inclusion of sound, usually the voiceless glottal fricative /h/ at the end of some names, thereby deviating from the customary way of representing words in the Igbo language, similarly, Enugu-Ezike.

Relatedly, Agbo, Opata, and Ukwueze (2022) demonstrate that personal names among the Nsukka Igbo stem from deified entities such as the sun, earth, and rivers, reflecting spiritual realities. Their study shows that names like Ugwu are borne because of belief in the power of gods, which supports the argument that names are not arbitrary but linked to cultural cosmologies. Similarly, Onumajuru (2016) identifies Igbo names as belonging to lexical, phrasal, and sentential categories, emphasising that their meanings can only be decoded by givers or close relations, which underscores the deep socio-pragmatic contexts of naming. Eyakndue and Ogar (2023) extend this by showing that compound names in Anaang reveal phonological processes such as consonant strengthening, vowel deletion, assimilation, and lengthening, with configurations like noun-noun, verb-verb, and adjective-noun, thereby illustrating how names can be studied through phonological analysis. Collectively, these studies provide evidence that African personal names are shaped by

cultural, pragmatic, and phonological structures, affirming the value of analysing Enugu-Ezike names in this light.

Linguistically, names also embody phonological structures and processes. Phonology, according to Mohamed, Hoque, Ismail, Ibrahim, Saad and Zaidi (2020), involves understanding the functional roles of individual speech sounds within a language; what they do and act when they are combined with other speech sounds. It helps not only to identify but to show the interaction of sounds, which is evident through phonological analysis, indicating rules and patterns that guide speech sound combination, such as assimilation, deletion, etc. Gussenhoven and Jacobs (2017) say phonology is the branch of linguistics that focuses on the study of how human vocal sound is structured within languages generally, as well as individual languages. It examines structures and features, the systematic representation based on a language. It tends to unravel the underlying rules governing the production, perception, and combination of speech sounds to form words and convey meaning.

The Enugu-Ezike dialect has undergone various investigations; however, these investigations are based primarily on the traditions, cultures, and social activities the Enugu-Ezike people are known for. Some of the studies include those by Onyeka, Emeafor, & Mamah (2024), Mamah, Eze, Odeh, & Nwosu (2021), Uchenye & Nneka (2024), and Sebs-Okolo, Ibeanu, Okpoko, & Okonkwo (2023), Obi-Ani, Nweze, & Okoye-Ugwu (2018), Achebe (2009), among others. However, there remains a gap in research focusing specifically on the phonological processes of personal names. This neglect is particularly significant considering that personal names among the older generation in Enugu-Ezike embody deep cultural and contextual meaning, yet are threatened by changing naming practices in modern times.

This gap necessitates the present study, which seeks to investigate and document Enugu-Ezike personal names, particularly those borne by the older generation, and analyse their phonological properties. By doing so, the study aims to preserve and better understand this significant aspect of Enugu-Ezike's cultural heritage. Specifically, the objective of this work is to identify the phonological processes involved in Enugu-Ezike personal names, expressing the right way to write the names while stating their meaning.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts Autosegmental Phonology, a theory originally proposed by Goldsmith (1979) in his dissertation paper, to identify the various phonological processes that personal names undergo. According to Goldsmith, the autosegmental approach to phonology focuses on the rules that connect phonological and phonetic levels while providing a clear characterisation of these two levels. This theory involves segmenting a word and assigning phonological features to its sounds. As noted by Omachonu (2011), it posits the existence of two or more parallel tiers of phonological segments, meaning that the sounds within a word are classified into separate, independent tiers. This offsets as one of the tenets, including the well-formedness condition that prevents the association lines from crossing. Following its introduction, the framework has been further developed and refined by other scholars. Clements (1985) expanded the theory by proposing the feature geometry model, which illustrated the hierarchical organisation of distinctive features. Yip (1989) supports Clements and other scholars who discussed distinctive features; however, he reapplied their theories to investigate co-occurrence restrictions, concluding that Asian languages

support articulator nodes over a binary feature theory. Hyman (2006), in his work on word-prosodic phonology, applying it to tones, stress, and accent, shows that non-linear representations could be applied to tonal and non-tonal languages with diverse typologies.

Autosegmental Phonology's strength lies in its ability to analyse suprasegmental features such as tone, other phonological processes such as assimilation, deletion, and insertion found in languages, by simply representing them in a non-linear model, rather than a linear model. However, the limitation is that some non-tonal languages still find it difficult to capture suprasegmental features like stress, using an autosegmental model. This framework provides an effective method for examining the complex interactions between different phonological elements.

### **Research Methods**

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design, which is suitable for documenting and analysing the phonological characteristics of personal names in their natural linguistic and cultural context. The study was carried out in Enugu-Ezike, a dialectal group in Igbo-Eze North Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria, chosen for its unique dialectal features. Data consisted of 50 traditional personal names, both male and female, in their 50s and 60s, obtained through oral interviews with indigenes of Enugu-Ezike. During the interviews, participants were asked to pronounce the names repeatedly, allowing the researcher to capture accurate pronunciation, tone mapping, and surface changes in production. This process served as the primary instrument for data collection, while cross-checking responses with multiple participants helped to validate the reliability and consistency of the names recorded. Data were transcribed phonetically with close attention to tonal and segmental patterns, as well as phonological processes such as assimilation, deletion, and insertion. For analysis, the study employed Goldsmith's Autosegmental Phonology, which provided a non-linear framework for representing segmental and suprasegmental features and enabled a systematic account of the interaction of sounds, tone mapping, and the phonological rules underlying the production of Enugu-Ezike personal names.

### **Data Analysis**

Phonology encompasses both the segmental and suprasegmental features of a language. However, for this study, we are analysing the phonological processes observed in Enugu-Ezike personal names, which include Assimilation, Deletion, and Nasalisation.

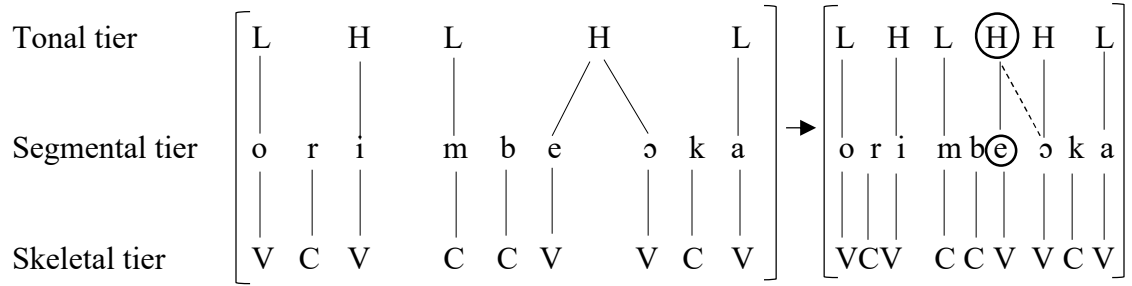
### **Assimilation**

Utulu (2019) and Chinwuba & Onwudiwe (2022) consider assimilation a common phonological process in Benue-Congo languages. Chinwuba and Onwudiwe (2022) state that assimilation is a sound change in which some phonemes, either consonants or vowels, become more similar to other nearby sounds. This is usually experienced when speaking at a fast rate, causing a speech sound to resemble a neighbouring sound. Assimilation often works hand-in-hand with deletion, as some segments may be lost in the process. Gussenhoven and Jacobs (2011), cited in Utulu (2019), describe assimilation as a phonological process where one segment adopts a feature from another. The most prominent form of assimilation observed in Enugu-Ezike traditional person names is the regressive form of assimilation, assimilating from left to right. Instances are as seen below.

1.

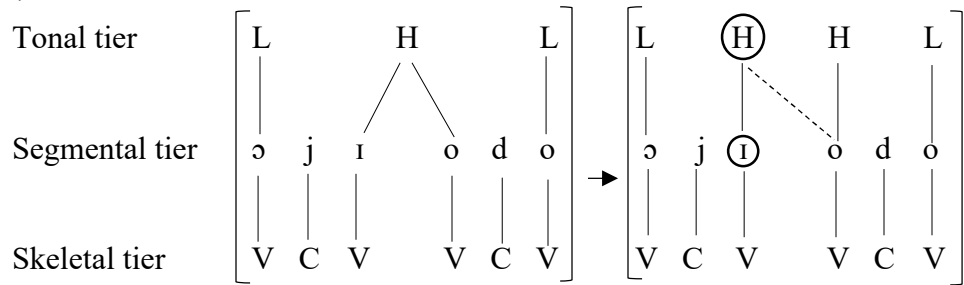
- i. Òrímbókà /òrímbókà/ – ‘One who enjoys where it is in abundance’

Òrí + m̀bé + ọ̀kà – Òrí + m̀bó + ọ̀kà = Òrímbókà



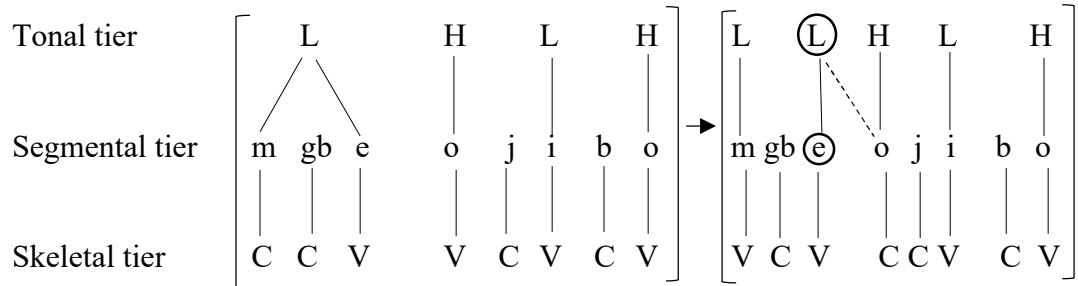
ii. Òyódò /òjódò/ - ‘Friend of the deity/spirit – Odo’

ọ̀yí + ódò – Òyó + ódò = Òyódò



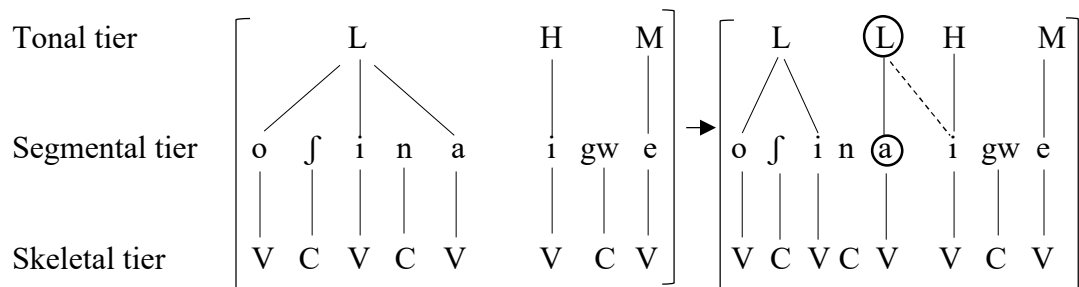
iii. M̀gbóyìbó – ‘During the time of modern civilisation’

M̀gbè + óyìbó – M̀gbò + óyìbó = M̀gbóyìbó



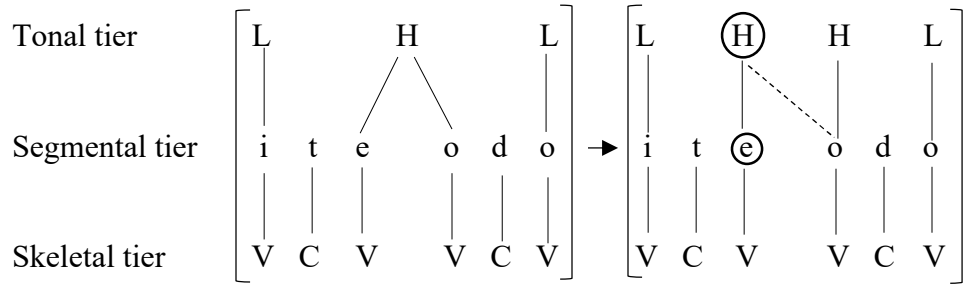
iv. Òshínígwē /òḡínígwē/ - ‘From heaven’.

Ò + shì + nè + ígwē - Ò + shì + nì + ígwē = Òshínígwē



- v. Ìtódò /ìtódò/ - ‘Odo’s pot’

Ìté + ódò – ìtè + ódò = Ìtódò



The regressive assimilation is evident in the above analysis. However, 1i reflects affluence, and 4ii spiritual connection.

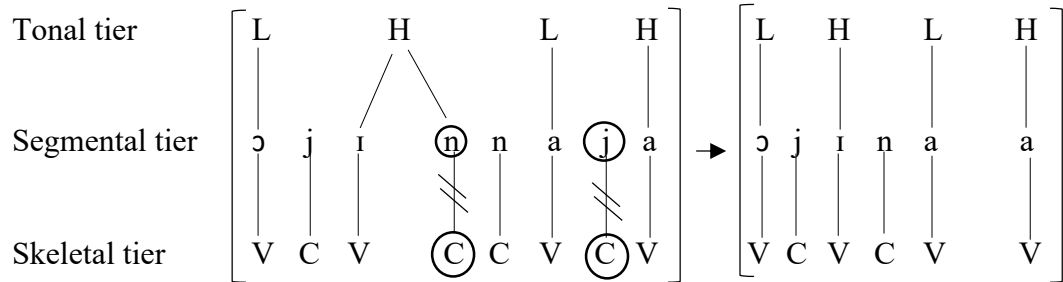
### Deletion

Deletion involves both consonants and vowels; however, the deletion of vowels is specifically termed elision. It is a phonological process that leads to a decrease in the number of syllables in a word or phrase (Samuel, 2022). Opeyemi, Jonas, & Seyi (2021) assert that it reduces the number of syllables, and, affirming Oyebade (2008), they affirm that vowel deletion is a common process involving the loss of a segment under specific conditions. Deletion, or elision, often occurs during rapid speech. It functions alongside assimilation. Deletion in Enugu Ezike traditional is as seen below.

2.

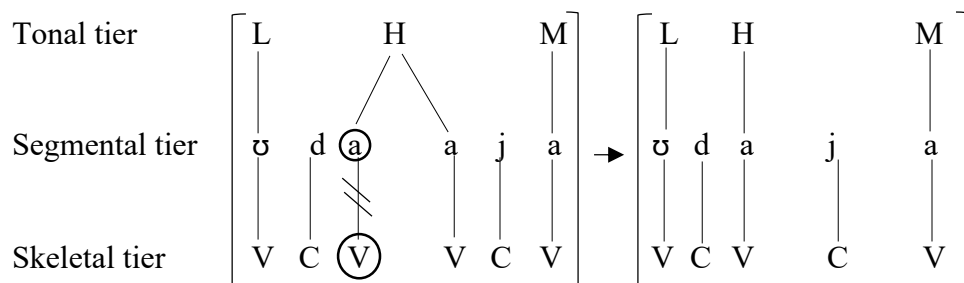
- i. Òyínàá /òjínàá/ - ‘Her father’s friend’

Òyí + ínà + yá

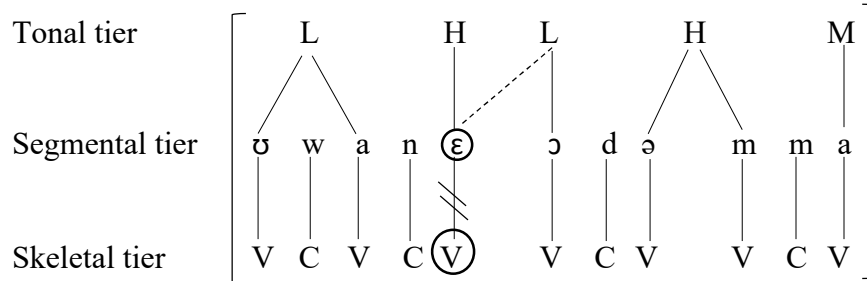


- ii. Ùdáyā /ùdájā/ - ‘The sound of war’

Ùdá + áyā



- iii. Ùwàńódəmə / ùwàńódəmə / - 'The world is a good place'
- Ùwà + né + ọ́dó + mmā



Deletions in Enugu-Ezike traditional personal names occur in its vowels. Put simply, elision.

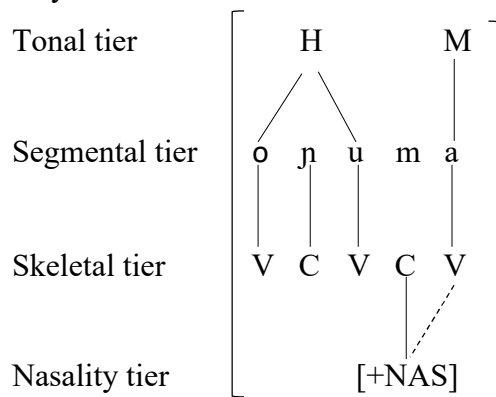
## Nasalisation

Aniekan (2022) states that nasalisation is a process whereby an oral sound becomes nasalised due to the influence of a neighbouring nasal sound. Nkamigbo (2010) describes it as a language universal, occurring when air passes through the nasal cavity during the production of oral speech sounds. He further explains that a speech sound can transfer its nasal quality to an adjacent sound, either preceding or following it. In the English language, with a closed syllable, vowels typically become nasalised when followed by nasal consonants. In contrast, in languages like Igbo, nasalisation typically affects succeeding sounds. Thus, the movement of nasalisation differs across languages, depending on the syllable structures predominant in the language. Nasalisation is represented by a tilde (~) placed over the nasalised speech sounds. Instances in Enugu-Ezike traditional personal names.

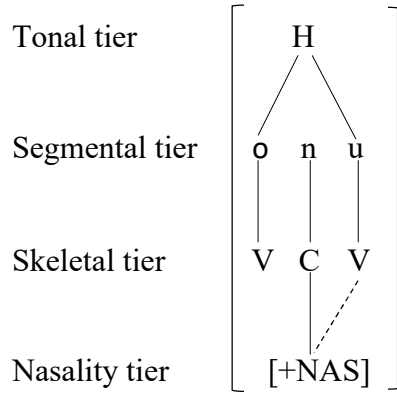
3.

- i. Ónyúmā [oɲumã] - ‘Beatiful one’

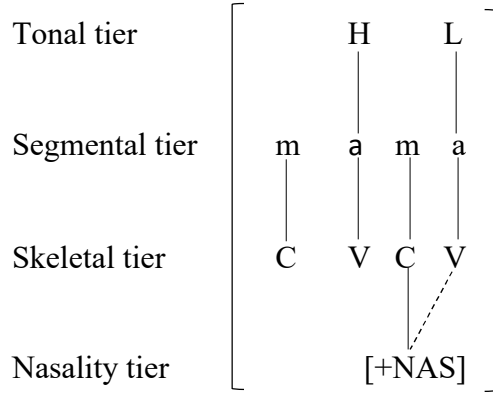
Ónyé + úmā



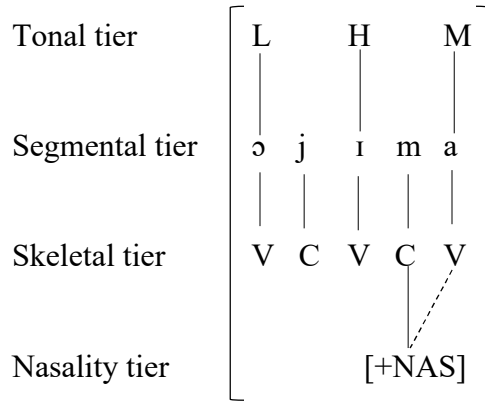
- ii. Ónú [onũ] – ‘Leader’, of Igala Origin



- iii. Mámà [mamã] – ‘Spirit/deity knows’



- iv. Òyímā /òjímā/ - Friend of a god/spirit.



The above instances show that the nasalised vowels succeed the nasal consonants in Enugu Ezike traditional personal names. 3i is the shorter form for “Ónyé ùmā mágbo ùmā né ó jè púé àlà” /óné ùmā mágbo ùmā né ɔ dzè púé àlà/ which translates to “even the beautiful one shall eventually die”. Additionally, ‘onu’ and ‘mama’ in 3ii and 3iii, respectively, show the right orthographic representation of the names, unlike how they are written today, such as ‘Onuh’ and ‘Mamah’



The findings of this study demonstrate that Enugu-Ezike traditional personal names, from a phonological perspective, establish that assimilation in Enugu-Ezike names is regressive in nature, with phonological features spreading from left to right. Deletion is particularly noticeable in vowels, otherwise known as elision, which leads to the reduction of syllables in rapid or casual speech. Nasalisation, on the other hand, occurs successively, with vowels acquiring nasal quality when they follow nasal consonants. By carefully documenting and analysing these processes, the study provides a more precise account of how the names are produced and the appropriate orthographic conventions for their representation.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

This study investigated the phonological processes embedded in the traditional personal names of the Enugu-Ezike people, situating them within their linguistic and cultural contexts. Names in this community, much like in other African societies, serve not only as tools of identification but also as carriers of history, belief systems, and cultural identity. However, the research revealed that traditional naming practices are increasingly threatened by modern civilisation, religious influences, and personal preferences, which favour shorter names, leading to a gradual loss of this cultural heritage. Using Goldsmith's Autosegmental Phonology as the analytical framework, the study examined the surface representations of names and found clear evidence of regressive assimilation, vowel deletion (elision), and successive nasalisation as recurrent processes. These processes highlight the systematic phonological rules underlying Enugu-Ezike names and point to the need for accurate orthographic representation to preserve them linguistically and culturally.

In conclusion, the study affirms that Enugu-Ezike personal names bear both phonological and socio-cultural dimensions that deserve scholarly attention and preservation. While Autosegmental Phonology provided an effective lens for capturing the segmental and suprasegmental interactions within the names, the study also underscored the urgency of safeguarding these names in the face of cultural shifts that endanger their continuity. By documenting and analysing these phonological processes, the work contributes not only to Igbo linguistics but also to the broader field of African naming systems, while serving as a resource for cultural preservation and identity.

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