The Syllabic Consonants of Zubairi Dialect1: Some Phonological Points

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> *"Syllabicity is sometimes treated as an additional articulatory quality. While this may be convenient in description, it should be noted that perception of syllabicity is shaped by the perceiver's linguistic system."*
> Clark and Yallop(1995:68)

1 . Introduction

Arabic, like any other language, is manifested by different social and geographical speech communities. Within Arabic, two general view would be proposed. First, desert (badya) dialects tend to maintain the properties of the language from which it is directly descended. Such a tendency is quite natural because speakers of these dialects live in such an environment that they reflect what is inherited. Another view gives rise to the fact that urban dialects are usually unstable because of their increasing development in all aspects.

Although desert (badya) and urban varieties have general linguistic phenomena in common, it is worth underlying that there are also several differences and the phonological differences, among them are the most striking ones in a case that the phonological 'shape' of words is somewhat affected (Zahid, 1987:65).

Zubairi Arabic has its own noticeable phonological system, which originally springs from Najdi Arabic. It is noticeable in that in spite of maintaining some features of other Najdi varieties, it is spoken with peculiar phonetic phenomena available in most of Iraqi southern dialects. One of the important aspects of Zubairi phonology is the occurrence of syllabic consonants. Zubairi Syllabic consonants are

articulated as a natural consequence of the elision of unstressed vowels. In some phonetic contexts, vowel elision is so optional that consonants may or may not have a syllabic function. The fact remains that "no satisfactory distinction is made between the elision and 'non–elision of vowels" (Mitchell, 1975:83).

The present study is an attempt to indicate phonological aspects of syllabic consonants in Zubairi Arabic. It is also to focus on the cases as to how and where these consonants are distributed on the side, and as to what consonants are obliged to be syllabic.

2. Syllabic Consonants: General Considerations

A great deal of syllable structures in all varieties of languages have a central component or nucleus: this is most commonly a vowel. One or more marginal parts, preceding and following the vowel, are said to be consonants. The number of consonants varies considerably in accordance with the types of syllables in questions (i.e. open or closed), and in accordance with the fact that these varieties differ greatly in the possible occurrence of consonants in syllables (Roach:1994, Gimson:1989, Catford:1977).

In some cases, syllables are identified as containing nothing that would be classified as a vowel. So, syllabic consonants occur to straddle the 'gap' of a weak vowel becoming lost. Roach (2000:75), in his attempt to provide a panoramic overview, maintains:

> The matter is more confusing because of the fact
> that speakers do not agree in their intuition about
> whether a consonant is syllabic or not.

As far as the chest pulse theory is concerned, a syllable is a product of the way the pulmonic air–stream mechanism works. It has three phases with which segments may coincide. If the syllable is articulated audible, there must be a central segment associated with the second phase, the passage through the vocal tract of air set in motion by the chest pulse. Nevertheless, there may or may not be marginal segments related to the first (releasing) phase and the third (arresting) phase (Abercrombie, 1967:73).

Another structural point arises in relation to polysyllables. The syllabic element, in the central places of a syllable, is usually represented by the kind of segment that has been called a vowel. It is not always the segment of this kind, however. It is always a vowel in

monosyllables, but syllables occur in polysyllabic words in which it may not be (Ibid.: 78).

When a consonant is followed by a vowel it is usually not syllabic, since the vowel has the greater inherent sonority. However, a consonant in this position is sometimes given extra prominence by increasing its length and it may become syllabic (Jones,1975,56).

Crystal (1997:375) ascribes that syllables can be specified in terms of the way the sound segments of a language function. One can, therefore, identify the various clusters of segments that may occur at syllable margins. Exceptional syllables can also be identified, such as those where certain consonants occur alone to form the syllable.

3. Syllabic Consonants of Zubairi Arabic

What distinguishes, in some cases, a dialect from another one is the frequent presence or absence of vowels. Modern Arab scholars believe that 'zero vowel' or 'sukuun' has a great function in uttering word–syllables as vowel presence or 'mutaharik' does (Bashir, 1969:228). So, there is a growing tendency, Bashir concludes, to consider 'zero vowel' or 'sukuun' a phonemic phenomenon that gives an effective hand on words' meanings. One of the most interesting features of 'zero vowel' in Arabic elision. Elision is generally viewed as "zero realization of phonemes". It occurs in certain circumstances as the gradation of phonemes that implies, for instance, the obscuration of vowels (Roach, 1994:127). To Arab linguists, elision is "the process of vowel deletion stemmed from the frequent occurrence of vowels regardless of the type of context they emerge" (Bashir,Ibid.).

By and large, vowel elision is not only constituted by the sequence of vowels, it is also carried out as a natural consequence of the kind of the syllable system in question (Zahid, 1987:70). Zubairi syllables are mostly of the closed types that play a vital role in the rapidity of word tempo: a feature that marks such a dialect. In fact, that Zubairi speakers tend to avert repeating more than one open syllable is another evidence as to how word tempo is rapidly achieved. Open syllables require careful pronunciation since they are ended with vowels, i.e. the more frequent open syllables, the more frequent vowels would be uttered. This, in turn, shows why closed syllables are overused.

Let's turn now to how Zubairi syllabic consonants behave phonologically[2]. Initially consonants in words that are irregularly pluralized and patterned morphologically as 'f9uul':

Syllabic consonants		non–syllabic consonants
hduum	'clothes'	huduum
byuut	'houses'	biyuut
sfuuf	'classes'	sufuuf

syllabic consonants are also identified in the following irregularly plural words of 'f9aal' pattern:

Syllabic consonants		non–syllabic consonants
ʧ9aab	'heels'	ʧɪ9aab
twaal	'tall'	tɪwaal
kbaar	'big'	kɪbaar
sɢaar	'small'	sɪɢaar

Another occurrence of initially syllabic consonants is represented in word of 'f9alan' pattern:

Syllabic consonants		non–syllabic consonants
dwaran	'around'	dawaran
fwaran	'boiling'	fawaran
ʃhaɢan	'whoop'	ʃahaɢan

In addition, a few words of 'f9iil' and 'f9ula' patterns may have initially syllabic consonants, for instance: sxiif 'thin', ʃ9iir 'malt', hmuda 'soar' and bruda 'cold'.

Medially and finally, syllabic consonants are pronounced a lot as a result of 'zero vowel'. They occur in various words of different patterns:

Syllabic consonants		non–syllabic consonants
?iniɢtil	'he was killed'	?inɢital
kilma	' a word'	kilima
kabʃ	'ram'	kabiʃ
kitabt	'he wrote'	kitabit
sima9t	'he heard'	sima9it

It becomes apparent that Zubairi speakers tend to reduce a number of vowels by deleting them, particularly the /u/ and /i/ones. This is, as Al–Fara' (1972:12) pointed out, attributed to the fact that the articulation of /u/ and /i/ requires some sort of 'effort' exercised by the tongue as well as the lips.

4. Syllabic consonants and the process of anaptyxis

A clear–cut exception to the generally previous statement that Zubairi speakers avoid uttering a number of vowels is provided, for examples, by such pairs as:

Group (A)	Group (B)
kitabt	kitabit
sima9t	sima9it

The final syllable vowels of the words in group (B) are labeled anaptyctic vowels symbolised as /ə/. It is noteworthy that /ə/does not function in any system of commutable vowel–terms, and it is only in syllables preceding anaptyxis that an alterance of short vowels in open syllables is permitted (Mitchell, 1975:86).

Anaptyxis is a phonological phenomenon closely associated with epenthesis. Lass (1984:184), in this respect, contends:

> new segments may appear 'from zero'
> in formerly unoccupied marginal position
> in the word or morpheme, or between
> two previously abutting segments. the
> general term for such insertion is
> epenthesis. One of its types is ana-
> ptyxis which is the insertion of a
> vowel between two consonants.

Anaptyctic vowels are admissible in Zubairi Arabic, and their use suggests that syllabic consonants are not necessarily pronounced all the time. This, of course, implies that anaptyctic vowels and syllabic consonants are interchangeable segments, i.e. the presence of ones exclude the other ones and vice versa. Anaptyxis can be recognized in two phonological environments. First, an unstressed vowel of close–mid quality is anaptyctic when it is occurred either in a syllable following a short open syllable, for instance:

la9ibta	CVCəCCV	'his toy'
faridta	CVCəCCV	'his loaf'
iniɣtilat	VCəCCVCVC	'she was killed'

Or in a final syllable following a short open stressed syllable, for example:

kitabit	CVCVCəC	'I wrote'
kabiʃ	CVCəC	'ram'
kubir	CVCəC	'size'

One irregular point that is noteworthy is that in Classical Arabic (CA), a word such as 9aʃra 'ten' is pronounced with a zero vowel in the middle. Zubairi speakers, however, utter the medial syllable /-ʃr-/ as an open one: /-ʃira/ in which the /i/ vowel is added as a peak of the syllable; the word is then pronounced 9aʃira.

In fact, this is quite surprising and debatable, because, in comparison with 9aʃira, Zubairi speakers never utter the /i/ vowel as being the peak of the second syllable of a word such as nabɠa 'lotus'; they tend to zero the vowel in question.

That a medial syllable is given a zero vowel entails some kind of stressing the last syllable, and this is strongly opposed to what Zubairi speakers tend to do. They try to stress and sometimes overstress the initial syllables of words.

5. Conclusion
No doubt, syllabic consonants contribute more to give the phonological 'shape' to Zubairi words since they occur not only in one word–position or two word–position, but also in three word–positions, i.e. initially, medially and finally. Furthermore, most of Zubairi consonants may be uttered under the influence of syllabicity in which both the /i/ and /u/ vowels are usually deleted for their phonetic 'tension'. This really recognizes Zubairi Arabic as a variety with desert (badya) roots. Desert dialects, as stated earlier, are marked with the rapidity of words' tempo by means of reducing the number of open syllables.

Notes

1.   Zubairi Arabic is a variety spoken in Zubair, a city that is sixteen kilometres to the south–west of Basrah.
2.   The examples cited in the study are based on the data collected from this variety and on my own intuition as a native speaker of the dialect.

Phonetic Symbols Used in the Study (after Ghalib, 1984)

1.   The consonants

p as in /paariis/ 'Paris'   h as in /habb/ 'seeds'

b as in /beet/ 'house'   9 as in /9aʃa/ 'supper'

t as in /tiffaah/ 'apples'   h as in /hawa/ 'air'

t as in /tamaata/ 'tomatoes'   m as in /miʃmiʃ/
'apricots'

d as in /deen/ 'debt'   n as in /naadi/ 'club'

k as in /kullijja/ 'college'   r as in /rutab/ 'fresh
dates'

ɡ as in /ɡabul/ 'before'   l as in /lulu/ 'pearls'

? as in /?aana/ 'me'   j as in /joom/ 'day/

f as in /fannaan/ 'artist'   *2. The vowels*

θ as in /θoor/ 'bull/

ð as in /ðahab/ 'gold'   i   as in /sin/ 'tooth'

ð̱ as in /ð̱ulum/ 'tyranny'   ii as in /riiʃ/ 'feathers'

s as in /safra/ 'trip'   a   as in /9amm/ 'paternal'

s̱ as in /suura/ 'picture'   aa as in /xaal/ 'uncle'

ʃ as in /ʃakar/ 'sugar'   u   as in /bunni/ 'brown'

ɡ as in /ɡurfa/ 'room'   uu as in /suuf/ 'wool'

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