An analysis of the phonological structure of homograph sets in Ekegusii

Research Article

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Alloys Otete Maobe, Benard Angatia Mudogo & David Barasa
Department of Language and Literature Education, Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya
Correspondence: oteteallloys@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5501-8422

Abstract
The aim of this paper is to analyze the phonological structure of homograph sets in Ekegusii. The paper is based on the premise that homograph sets in Ekegusii exhibit an array of phonological distinctiveness. Thus, using the distinctive features theory by Jakobson (1968), the paper describes respective sound features that are responsible for the variations that exist between different sets of homographs in Ekegusii. Multistage sampling which involved both purposive sampling and systematic sampling were used to identify the respondents and in selecting the homographs for analysis, respectively. A combined data elicitation method from Ekegusii native speakers and the researcher's native speaker intuition was used to collect homographs for analysis. The results describe certain strategies that aid in distinguishing peculiar sets of homographs from each other. Accordingly, this paper is on lexical distinctions, thus it not only implicit on the vocabulary of Ekegusii but it also aids in improving the formal grammatical description of the language. It is hoped to be a resource for improvement of materials which aid in teaching and learning of Ekegusii and extend the knowledge of Ekegusii corpus.

Keywords: homographs, phonemes, vowel length, vowel type

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Public Interest Statement

The paper seeks to fill the existing knowledge gaps on Ekegusii multiple meaning words and with specific focus on homographs. This is with regards to the phonological structure which is responsible for the variations in pronunciation of homograph sets in Ekegusii. Therefore, clarifying the distinctive features in phonemes that distinguish different sets of homographs in the language aids in providing the patterns of sound that can aid in predicting how a specific set of homographs can be pronounced.

1.0 Introduction

According to Maho (2008) Ekegusii is classified as JE42. Lewis, Garry and Charles (2016) classify Ekegusii as a Niger- Congo, Narrow Bantu language. The term Ekegusii is composed of a prefix Eke- which means "belonging to" and Gusii which refers to the land or the people (Otieno, 2020). Therefore, Ekegusii is translated as 'that which belongs to Gusii' or 'language of the Gusii'. Omoke, Barasa and Basweti (2018) indicate that, Ekegusii language has two dialects, that is, the Rogoro dialect and the Maate dialect. The differences between these dialects are manifested through their varied vocabulary and pronunciation as well. For instance, the Maate dialect or Ekemaate has revealed some effects due to assimilation and as a result, it has adopted some Dholuo pronunciations (Cammenga, 2002). Ekerogoro dialect is the standard dialect which is used in Ekegusii news broadcast, in authored works like for instance Ekegusii Bible, story books and texts used in teaching of Ekegusii in primary schools' pupils of standard 1-3, otherwise referred to as grade 1-3 (Omoke, 2012). This paper centers on Ekerogoro dialect because it is not only the standard variety but because it has myriad domains of formal usage.

A homograph is a word which is pronounced differently so as to convey different meanings. Richards and Schmidt (2002), define homographs as sets of words that are written in the same way, but their pronunciation and meaning are different. In other words, sets of words are homographs when they are spelled the same way but have varied pronunciations which denote different concepts. Homographs in Ekegusii language are written or spelt in the same way, but despite these similarities, speakers are required to pronounce the single character differently so that it brings about different intended meanings. Therefore, writers are expected to ensure that a specific phonemic form of a particular homograph set is considered. This is because, lack of appropriate interpretation of homographs can lead to ineffective communication (Gee & Harris, 2010). Hence, pragmatics aids in stipulating the context under which particular homographs are occurring, thus meaning for either sets becomes comprehensible.

This paper focuses on vowel phonemes in Ekegusii and how they are responsible for the variations that are revealed between sets of homographs in the language. Hence, the phonological structure of Ekegusii as established in the previous studies (Osinde, 1988; Ongarora, 1996; and Cammenga, 2002) will aid in presenting different linguistic aspects that warrant this paper. The linguistic units are analyzed so as to establish

variations not only in meaning but also in the manner of pronunciation as manifested by different homograph sets in Ekegusii.

Research Designs and Methods

The paper used a descriptive research design. This is because data used for the study is qualitative in nature (Seliger & Shohamy, 2013). Data was collected from nine respondents who are Ekegusii native speakers in Mwaisata village found in Kisii County. Multistage sampling was used whereby in stage one, the researcher used purposive sampling to identify the respondents. This was in convention with Barasa (2017) who asserts that, the choice of respondents is supplemented by the researcher gauging the respondents' proficiency based on ability to articulate expressions, ability to provide clear and consistent tonal distinctions and the ability to produce speech that is free from impediments. In stage two, the researcher used systematic sampling with an interval of three (an equivalent of 30%) to generate the corpus for the analysis. This is in line with Mudogo (2017), who pointed out that a minimum sample of 30% of the study population is considered sufficient in generalizing the population of the linguistic elements of the investigation. Accordingly, data was analyzed qualitatively based on content analysis and presented in the form of text and tables.

2.0 Results and discussions

According to Nyakundi (2010), Ekegusii language orthography has five vowel sounds; a, e, i, o, u. These vowels can be presented as phonemes which take the form of /a/, /ɛ/, /e/, /i/, /ɔ/, /o/ and /u/. Some of the distinct features of the aforementioned vowel phonemes can be observed in the vowel trapezium presented as Figure 1.

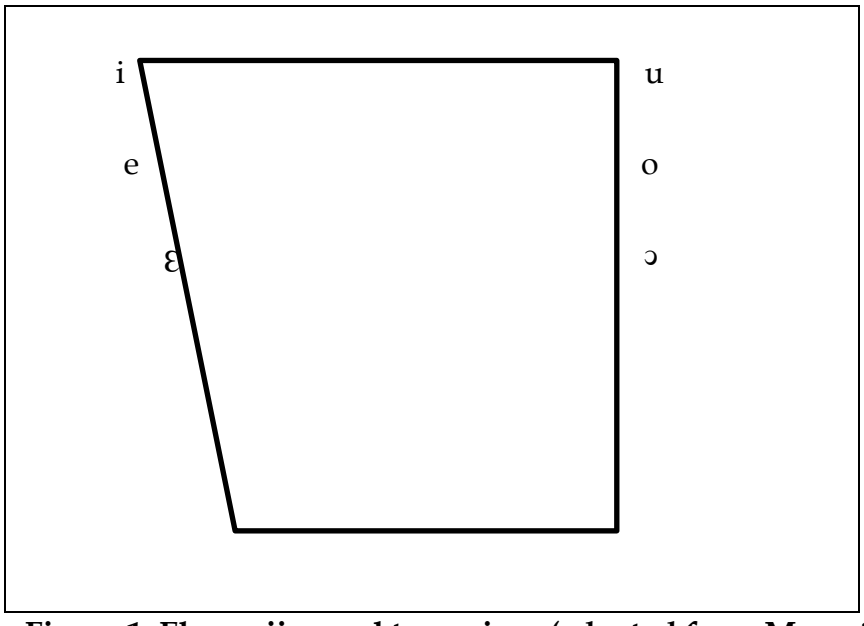

Figure 1: Ekegusii vowel trapezium (adapted from Mose, 2020:17)

Vowel type distinctions in Ekegusii are depicted by the mid-vowel phonemes in the language. Their positions with regards to the vertical and horizontal positions of the tongue are as shown in Figure 1. Previous studies on Ekegusii phonology by (e.g. Osinde, 1988; Komenda, 2011; Komenda, 2015; Anyona, 2017; Otieno, 2020) affirm that the language has seven vowel phonemes. The mid vowels as shown in the vowel trapezium are; /ɛ/, /e/, /ɔ/ and /o/. These phonemes are distinguished based on the horizontal and vertical position of the tongue as the main articulator. For instance, except the phoneme /a/ which is a low central vowel, the other three phonemes on the left side of the trapezium presented as; /i/, /e/ and /ɛ/ are the front vowels while those to the right including /u/, /o/ and /ɔ/ are the back-vowel phonemes (Otieno, 2020). On the other hand, the vowels on the topmost and bottom are referred to as high and low vowels, respectively. The high and low vowels can also be referred to as close and open vowels respectively. This is informed by the above trapezium which indicates that, as the tongue moves to the high position, it gets to close by blocking air while in the lowest position it is open hence allowing free flow of air. Accordingly, the seven vowels in Ekegusii can be presented in summary form based on their distinctive features as shown in Table 1 as adapted from Anyona (2017).

	i	e	ɛ	a	ɔ	o	u
High	+	+	-	-	-	+	+
Mid	-	+	+	-	+	+	-
Back	-	-	-	-	+	+	+
ATR	+	-	-	+	-	-	+

Table 1: Ekegusii vowel chart (adapted from Anyona, 2017:44)

The distinctive features observed between the mid-vowels presented in Table 1, aid in making illustrations with regards to vowel type and length distinctions that exist between sets of homographs in Ekegusii. However, even though the features of vowel length do not appear on the Figure, the long vowels will be illustrated as +long while the short vowels will be presented as -long. Otherwise, as opposed to vowel type distinctions which occur only between the mid-vowels, vowel length distinctions can be observed to occur between all the seven vowel phonemes in Ekegusii (Komenda, Maroko & Ndung'u, 2013).

Therefore, vowel length and vowel type distinctions are essential in establishing distinctions that exist between various sets of homographs in Ekegusii. However, a prerequisite to comprehending these distinctions is having knowledge vowels in Ekegusii which is the language that forms the focal point in this paper. Hence, the main parameters of distinctions between Ekegusii homograph sets can be presented using different homographs that have been selected systematically for analysis.

In essence, variations manifested between the homograph sets were found to be as a result of vowel length, vowel type and tonal features. For instance, vowel length in Ekegusii is can either be phonemic or phonetic and phonemic vowel length makes lexical contrasts (Komenda, 2015). An example of lexical contrast can be demonstrated by sets of homographs in the language. This implies that, a single character can have varied manifestations in pronunciation and meaning hence it brings about lexical contrast.

2.1 Vowel type distinct homograph sets

Ladefoged and Johnson (2003) assert that, vowel type is also referred to as vowel quality. Otieno (2020) posits that, the description of vowels specifically in Ekegusii is based on the height of the body of the tongue, the part that rises above the normal rest position and the condition of the lips. Therefore, in the present study, vowel type distinction was based on accurately establishing the variations between the four different types of vowel phonemes that aided in establishing variations between Ekegusii language homographs. These are the phonemes /ɛ/, /e/, /ɔ/ and /o/ which appear in pairs distinguishable based on height of the tongue body. Hence, a chart showing distinctive features for the Ekegusii mid-vowels can be extracted from table 1 above and presented as shown below;

	e	ɛ	ɔ	o
High	+	-	-	+
Mid	+	+	+	+
Back	-	-	+	+
ATR	-	-	-	-

Table 2: Ekegusii vowel chart (extracted from Table 1)

Table 2, presents the distinctive features of the mid-vowel phonemes in Ekegusii. The chart reveals that despite the similarities that the four phonemes /ɛ/, /e/, /ɔ/ and /o/ portray, they are still distinct from each other. This is either through the horizontal or vertical position of the tongue during their articulation. Therefore, the above mid-vowels were taken into account because they are responsible for the variations that are depicted by the phonological structure of Ekegusii homograph sets. For instance, on the basis of the vertical position of the tongue, the pair /e/ and /o/ are regarded to as +high since the tongue is almost touching the roof of the mouth. Whereas their pendants /ɛ/ and /ɔ/ are -high because the tongue is lowered slightly below the position of /e/ and /o/. On the other hand, variations based on the horizontal position of the tongue are propelled by the features marked for back as shown in table 2 above. Thus, it can be observed that the phoneme pair /ɛ/ and /e/ are -back while the other pair /ɔ/ and /o/ are marked as

+back. This is because the articulation of phonemes /ɛ/ and /e/ occurs in the front position of the tongue while the articulation of the phonemes /ɔ/ and /o/ occurs in the back position of the tongue as illustrated by the Ekegusii vowel trapezium in Figure 1.

While analyzing Ekegusii vowel phonemes, Osinde (1988) asserted that, one characteristic that is unique to the language is the pairing of mid vowels, both the front and back vowels, into tense and lax vowels. From the list of vowels above it can be noticed that the front mid vowel /e/ which is tense has its lax counterpart /ɛ/. Likewise, for the back mid vowel /o/ has its lax counterpart /ɔ/. These vowels are unit Phonemes as is illustrated in table 1. The table presents some examples of homographic sets that were distinguished based on the vowel type feature.

Table 3: Ekegusii homographic nouns showing vowel type

Homograph	Phonemic form	Meaning
Engoro	/eŋgoɾo/ /ɛŋgɔɾɔ/	Hole God
Esese	/ɛsɛsɛ/ /esese/	Tuberculosis Dog
Amatobe	/amatɔβɛ/ /amatoβe/	Freshly harvested beans Mud
Egekone	/ɛɣɛkɔnɛ/ /eɣekone/	A plant in the family of baobab which has fairly wide leaves A mystery

Source (Fieldwork, 2021)

Table 3 presents the nouns that are showing distinctions for vowel type. The four nouns reveal distinctions between the phonemes /e, ɛ, o, ɔ/ which are phonemic manifestations of vowels e and o, respectively. Therefore, Table 3 shows the homographic set distinctions for +high vowel phonemes e and o as observed in the sets; /eŋgoɾo/, /esese/, /amatoβe/ and /eɣekone/ respectively. On the contrary, sets which reveal the other feature of -high include the counterparts; /ɛŋgɔɾɔ/, /ɛsɛsɛ/, /amatɔβɛ/ and /ɛɣɛkɔnɛ/, respectively. Furthermore, Table 3 represents an aspect of vowel height harmony in the phonological structure of peculiar sets above. For instance, take the sets of the word '*Egekone*' which are /eɣekone/ and /ɛɣɛkɔnɛ/, it is easier to predict the phonemic form of the sets which constitute the vowels e and o because words in Ekegusii are characterized by vowel height harmony (Anyona, 2017). Therefore, vowel height can aid in predicting the phonemic form of Ekegusii homograph sets which are distinguished based on vowel type or vowel height of which Otieno (2020) refers to as vowel quality.

Table 4: Sample Ekegusii homographic verbs showing vowel type distinction

Homograph	Phonemic form	Meaning
Tomera	/tomeɾa/ /tɔmɛɾa/	Send to Don't swallow me
Koera	/kɔɛɾa/ /koeɾa/	To flow with a lot of force To get finished or consumed
Goekora	/ɣɔɛkɔɾa/ /ɣoekoɾa/	Acting with pride Committing suicide
Tengera	/teŋgeɾa/ /tɛŋgɛɾa/	Dance to the rhythms of a song Watch
Konora	/kɔnɔɾa/ /konoɾa/	Dismantle something or pluck out To grow fat

Source (Fieldwork, 2021)

Table 4 above shows the verbs that revealed vowel type as a feature of distinction. Similar to the above nouns, the phonemic form of the verbs reveals variations between the four vowel phonemes /ɛ/, /e/, /ɔ/ and /o/. It can also be observed that the front vowel phonemes /ɛ/ and /e/ were substituted for each other between the sets. Likewise, the back vowels /ɔ/ and /o/ were substituted for each other so as to reveal variations for each set. The substitution was based on the position of the tongue which determined whether the phonemes which were responsible for the variations between sets are + high as in the verb set /tomeɾa/ (send to) or -high as in its counterpart /tɔmɛɾa/ (don't swallow) which orthographically consist of the verbs e and o in its structure.

Table 5: Varying class homographs showing vowel type distinction

Homograph	Phonemic form	Category	Meaning
Igoro	/iɣoɾo/ /iɣɔɾɔ	Prep Adv	Up or above Yesterday
Korera	/kɔɾɛɾa/ /koɾeɾa/	N V	kinship name between parents whose children are a married couple Crying
Egeka	/eɣeka/ /ɛɣɛka/	N V	Duration Park
Omotache	/omotaʧɛ/ /omotaʧe/	N V	A child who is past breastfeeding age Step on him or her
Kerage	/kɛɾaɣɛ/ /keɾaɣe/	Adv V	Incredibly / tremendously Point at it

Source (Fieldwork, 2021)

Table 5 presents a sample of homographs with varying classes. The sets under this category exhibited variations based on their lexical and grammatical categories hence the phrase varying classes of homographs. Similar to table 3 and table 4 above, table 5 reveals a binary distinction based on homograph sets which show variations in the forms of the vowels e and o. Take for example the word '*korera'*, its resultant sets; /koɾeɾa/ consists of +high /e/ and /o/ while the other set /kɔɾɛɾa/ reveals the phonemes /ɛ/ and /ɔ/ which are -high. Therefore, because vowel height harmony is a salient aspect in Ekegusii morphemes, it is easier to establish rules that aid in predicting the phonological structure of Ekegusii sets of homographs.

2.2 Vowel length distinct homograph sets

According to Komenda (2011), vowel length in Ekegusii aids in making lexical distinctions. In Ekegusii homograph sets, two lexemes can be distinguished from each other on account of the above assertion. For instance, two lexemes which have the same orthography can be distinguished from each other based on their phonemic forms and this is with regards to short and long vowels. Therefore, the results of the paper reveal sets of homographs whose meaning variations are established as a result of vowel length distinctions. Homograph sets distinguished based on vowel length can be clearly observed in tables 6, 7 and 8 below.

Table 6: Homographic nouns distinguished by vowel length

Omogaka	/omoɣaka/ /omoɣa:ka/	Aloe vera An old/elderly male person
Omorero	/omoɾeɾo/ /omoɾe:ɾo/	Fire One who is used to modern lifestyle
Ekebago	/ekeβaɣɔ/ /ekeβa:ɣɔ/	Handle for hoe/jembe Thug
Riboba	/ɾiβɔβa/ /ɾiβɔ:βa/	A ground that is yet to be dug after staying dormant for a while A big mushroom
Omogati	/omoɣa:ti/ /omoɣati/	Bread A child who is in the middle either between first born and third born or somewhere in the middle position
Ebisabo	/eβisaβo/ /eβisa:βo/	Vegetable seedlings awaiting to be transplanted Peels that are small in size or quantity
Egesima	/eɣesima/ /eɣesi:ma/	A fork- ended stick (mostly v-shaped) used to hold grass or thorns that are being cut Borehole
Amasabo	/amasaβo/	Prayers

	/amasa:βo/	Outer coats of a fruit, tree or snake that can peel off
Amaiga	/amaiɣa/ /amai:ɣa	Great desire to meet and greet someone Cooking stones
Obotuki	/oβotuki/ /oβotu:ki/	An investigation Hair particles on the body or other surfaces especially after one has shaved.
Egetamero	/eɣetameɾo/ /eɣeta:meɾo/	A refuge; a place or someone where a victim can run to seek help from An excuse; what one can use to defend themselves from any possible repercussion

Source (Fieldwork, 2021)

Table 6 shows the nouns that reveal distinctions of their sets on the basis of vowel length. This Data exhibits equilibrium for nouns when subjected to vowel type and vowel length distinctions because eleven nouns out of twenty-six were found distinct by vowel length. This presented 42.3% which is almost half the total number of nouns presented for analysis. Notwithstanding this, there are other noun forms that were distinguished through both vowel type and length. Therefore table 6 indicates that when comparing vowel type and length distinctions for noun homographs, it reveals that most of the nouns are distinguished by vowel length. The rationale for having most nouns distinguished by vowel length is because all the seven vowel phonemes in Ekegusii undergo lengthening (Komenda, 2011). For instance, length variations for five vowel phonemes /a, e, i, ɔ and u/ out of the seven vowel phonemes in Ekegusii can be observed to occur in the phonemic form's column of the words; '*omogaka, omorero, egesima, riboba* and *obotuki,* respectively. This is a substantive percentage; however, the other two phonemes /ɛ/ and /o/ do undergo lengthening to distinguish between words even though they do not occur in the above words that were systematically sampled for analysis. Therefore, the colon marks in the phonemic form column of the either above sets occur as diacritic. Hence, sets in which a colon mark is preceded by a vowel reveal the feature of +long, while the other set without a colon mark is - long for the respective vowel phoneme in the same syllable of the other homograph set.

Table 7: Homographic verbs distinguished by vowel length

Gotera	/ɣoteɾa/ /ɣote:ɾa/	Sing Being left after others are gone or bought
Gotacha	/ɣotaʧa/ /ɣota:ʧa/	To step on someone or something To Gather some flowing liquid like water from a channel
Kogesa	/koɣesa/	To harvest something

	/koɣe:sa/	To add something
kobora	/koβoɾa/ /koβo:ɾa/	Go missing or into hiding To give own opinion
Choria	/ʧɔɾia/ /ʧɔ:ɾia/	Insult someone by using certain facts to make them hurt To guide someone in selecting or picking something
Korema	/koɾema/ /koɾe:ma/	To dig To run out of something
Tebania	/teβania/ /te:βania	To delay something To share information by exchanging ideas
Gosika	/ɣosika/ /ɣosi:ka/	To have respect for someone or something To ferment ingredients for something like alcohol
Sabora	/saβoɾa/ /sa:βoɾa/	To pull out a small branch from a tree To peel off fruits or vegetables
Manora	/manoɾa/ /ma:noɾa/	To begin a journey Make an opening to reveal the inside content of something
Gosiba	/ɣosiβa/ /ɣosi:βa/	To tie somebody or something To sip a liquid
Bara	/βaɾa/ /βa:ɾa/	To count Operate someone or something for medical or experimental purposes
Gosira	/ɣosiɾa/ /ɣosi:ɾa/	To get lost or disappear To offer support
Bosa	/βosa/ /βo:sa/	To save or keep something for future use To dig thoroughly
Etania	/etania/ /eta:nia/	Causing conflict between people or parties To go beyond a set limit
Gira	/ɣiɾa/ /ɣi:ɾa/	Refuse to abide by what was intended To get choked by food
Gosa	/ɣosa/ /ɣo:sa/	To frighten someone or something To mess up
Koratera	/koɾateɾa/ /koɾate:ɾa/	Inspecting for Remain stuck or fixed for long
Rina	/ɾina/ /ɾi:na/	To deny or decline giving or lending out something To ascend or climb on something
Tonera	/toneɾa/ /to:neɾa/	Decorate To crave or have strong desire for something
Tamia	/tamia/	Run or hide away with something

	/ta:mia/	Become difficult to handle or control
Torera	/toɾera/ /to:ɾera/	Breaking bigger pieces of food like bread or ugali into smaller ones that can be consumed or utilized in some way Lean on or against something
Naria	/naɾia/ /na:ɾia/	Cause someone or something to adapt Encircle something with a rope or thread
Koreria	/koɾeɾia/ /koɾe:ɾia/	Cause to cry To handle or raise children in soft manner
Gosomeka	/ɣosomeka/ /ɣoso:meka/	To insert Readable
Bwakire	/βwakiɾe/ /βwa:kiɾe/	It has dawned He or she has called
Akerania	/akeɾania/ /ake:ɾania/	To hit by fixing a structure using nails He or she appeared unusually small or younger as well
Akana	/akana/ /aka:na/	Pay He or she refused

Source (Fieldwork, 2021)

Table 7 presents homographic verbs that were distinguished through vowel length. Similar to nouns distinguished by vowel length, there were many verbs distinguished through vowel length as well. For instance, out of forty verbs that were subjected to analysis, it was established that twenty-eight verbs were distinguishable through vowel length. This is an equivalent of 70% which is quite substantive. This was the highest number that was recorded by indicating that most verbal homographs in Ekegusii are distinguished by vowel length as opposed to vowel type or a combination of both. By observation, the sets obtained from the words; 'naria, korema, gira, gosa, and choria' reveal length variations of the phonemes /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/and /ɔ/, respectively. Otherwise, all the seven vowel phonemes in Ekegusii reveal the feature of +long and the -long to show variations between respective sets of verbal homographs as shown in Table 7.

Table 8: Varying class homographs distinguished by vowel length

Omenta	/ome:nta/ /omenta/	N V	Type of weed that is fed on rabbits S/he added or became extreme

Source (Fieldwork, 2021)

Table 8 reveals that out of ten varying class homographs distinguished by vowel length,

only one set revealed the feature of homograph set distinction. This indicates that there are not so many homographs of this nature in Ekegusii that are distinguishable by vowel length. This is driven by the fact that; the above set represents 10% of the total sets of homographs with varying class that were presented for analysis.

Generally, the Tables 6, 7 and 8 reveals that most verbal and nominal homographs were distinguished through vowel length while the varying categories of homographs which are distinct by vowel length were very few. It is also observed that, vowel length is a feature which is responsible for variations between sets of homographs in Ekegusii. In any case, the set in which either of its vowels in a syllable is pronounced by prolonging conforms to the feature of +long. On the other hand, the set which is pronounced by not prolonging either of its vowels is attributed to -long feature.

5.0 Conclusion

This paper established that, out of different classes of homographs presented, the verbal sets were numerous compared to nominals and those sets with varying classes or lexical categories. In the same regard, homograph sets distinguished through vowel length were more than those distinguished by vowel type. This is informed by the fact that, all the seven vowel phonemes in Ekegusii undergo lengthening. This is opposed to vowel type or vowel height distinctions which was depicted by few sets of homographs. The four mid- vowels /e, ɛ, o/ and /ɔ/ were responsible for variations between sets of homographs and this is with regards to their phonemic form. Therefore, Ekegusii vowel phonemes are pertinent in establishing distinctions between sets of homographs in the language.

Author Biography

Alloys Otete Maobe is currently a Master's student of Applied Linguistics at Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology. He trained as a teacher of English language and Literature Education from the University of Eldoret Kenya. He is interested in enhancing his research skills by actively participating in conducting field research activities, attending to research-oriented web conferences, seminars and workshops. Additionally, he also interacts with research troupes at the physical and online platforms by interacting with scholars whose main agenda is on sharing knowledge, ideas and resources on academic research.

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