

## **Syllable Splitting in Illiterate and Pre-literate Speakers of Amharic: Onset and Rimes or Bodies and Codas?**

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**Introduction:** Many Ethiopian immigrants residing in Israel speak Amharic which belongs to the Southern Semitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family (Assabie&Bigun, 2009; Fellman, 1992; Obolensky, 1964), and uses the Ge'ez (another Ethiopian Semitic language) script. While In the English-language research focusing on the interaction of large phonological units with early literacy and writing skills, much emphasis has been placed on the onset-rime units which emerge as subdivisions of the syllable. The *rhyme-cohesion hypothesis* has paved the way for much of the research aimed at clarifying the nature of the roles of the structural factors in phoneme sensitivity. This hypothesis posits that syllables consist of “phonemes structured hierarchically into two constituents: the onset; the initial consonant(s); and the rime, the nucleus vowel with the coda of any following consonant(s)” (Fudge, 1969; Goldsmith, 1990; as cited in Saiegh-Haddad, 2005). Research thus far in Semitic Languages such as Arabic (Saiegh-Hadad 2003, 2007b) and Hebrew (Share & Blum, 2005), reveal that the CV body is more accessible to children in these languages than the VC rime.

**Objectives:** The aim of the current study was to examine whether the segmentation tendencies among Ethiopian immigrants speaking Amharic in Israel support an underlying onset-rime CVC or body-coda CVC sub-syllabic structure.

**Method:** One unstructured sub-syllabic segmentation task, two structured sub-syllabic segmentation tasks, (onset-rime and body-coda), and two phonemic segmentation tasks (initial and final phoneme isolation) were used to examine the sub-syllabic structure of Amharic CVC words in Amharic. Among pre-literate children and illiterate adult native speakers of Amharic(N= 10 per cohort). It was predicted that if the underlying sub-syllabic structure in Amharic follows a body-coda structure children will find body-coda structured segmentation tasks significantly easier than onset-rime tasks, and final phoneme isolation easier than initial phonemes isolation.

**Results** There was a significant advantage for the sub-syllabic units targeting the body-coda subdivision. This is in contrast to the performance on the sub-syllabic units targeting the onset-rime subdivision. In addition, the participants produced significantly better scores on the final isolation tasks when compared with their scores on the initial isolation tasks.

**Conclusion:** The results provide evidence that the sub-syllabic structure imbedded in Amharic monosyllabic real words is of a body + coda nature. These findings point to a similarity between the phonemic structures between Amharic, Hebrew and Arabic. It reinforces the research (Saiegh-Haddad, 2007b; Share and Blum, 2005) indicating that the tier between phonemes and syllables in Semitic languages may support a body-coda structure rather than the onset-rime sub-syllabic structure.