

Varieties of Igbo Dialect—A Study of Some Communities in Old Aguata Local Government Area

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The Igbo language has grown and developed to what is known as Standard Igbo (Igbo Izugbe) today. Series of efforts have gone into the modification and invention of words to ensure wider acceptability and intelligibility. While this is a welcome idea, the tendency of the loss of communal identity in terms of the original local variety of the Igbo Language spoken by each community becomes very obvious. As Igbos can easily distinguish an Anambra man from an Imo man, it is also necessary that within Anambra, one should be able to locate a particular town in the area through the spoken Igbo Language variety. This paper studies some of these local variants and advocates for a method of preserving such rich cultural heritage which are so valuable for posterity.

Keywords: Igbo, dialect, communities, Aguata

Introduction

The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines dialect as “form of a language (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) used in a part of a country or by a class of people”. The Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia traced its root to the ancient Greek word “dialektos” meaning discourse. In today’s context and in this paper, it is used to refer to a variety or model of a language that is characteristic of a particular group of the speakers of that language. In other words, the language of their daily discourse.

Among the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria, there are as many dialects as many groups of Igbos. Even social groups devise dialects for secret communication among their members. For example “Tukulu tukulu” and “Uskpaskas” (a system of interjecting /t/or/s/ sound after each syllable in a word) were speech patterns common among children in the seventies but meaningless among the parents. This is called sociolect (Ubahakwe, 2002). He also identified different dialects such as ethnolect (the variety peculiar to an ethnic group), regiolect or topolect the variety peculiar to a region. He also recognizes a variety that is socially subordinate to the regional standard language which naturally predates it. That is termed the monolithic dialect in previous studies and that is the main approach this paper wants to adopt.

Background of the Study

The Igbo language in use today in schools for academic and official purpose is known as the standard Igbo. It is the result of series of efforts by educated Igbos to devise a standard system of speaking and writing the

language that is truly ours. It is also aimed at correcting the spelling abnormalities imposed on the Igbo language by the European imperialists who interpreted and recorded Igbo names with their English phonetic system, writing Awka for Oka and Owerri for Owere, Afikpo for Ehugbe and Ihube Okigwe for Ihuo.

The standard Igbo was developed in 1972 by a standardization committee set up by the society for the promotion of Igbo language and culture (SPILC). It was a great improvement on the then Central Igbo which was in the main Owerri and Umuahia dialect with their characteristic /w/for/b/ sounds. The laudable work of the committee have continued to yield dividend. Igbo language today is alive, dynamic, flexible, accepting or borrowing new words from other languages. Worthy of note is the recent project by Prof. Nwosu and his team of medical professionals who have reduced a whole gamut of medical terms into Igbo language. The activities of Igbo studies Association led by Chima Korieh and Otu Subakwa Igbo led by Pita Ejiofor are highly commendable.

But there are still some salient issues relevant to stakeholders. First is the fear of these efforts remaining mere academic exercises. In practice, do the Igbos speak, write and read Igbo language with ease and in preference to the English Language? Can papers for conferences of this nature be written and presented in Igbo language? How is it that the missionaries had machines that printed the Igbo Bible and Hymns with all the relevant tone marks and punctuation marks but these machines are not readily available now? Second is the effort at localizing names in a foreign language context. Is it not proper that Anglicised names be retained in the context of the English language while the Igbo version be restricted to Igbo contexts? For example,

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Mahadum Nnamudi Azikiwe, Oka

However, of greater concern in this paper is the issue of identity preservation. The Igbos are happy with their children who, inspite of years of exposure to western civilization and education, still speak their people's dialect. It shows attachment to the values of ones cultural roots. It shows the oral signature stamp of a true son of the soil and such a person is highly appreciated. Unless positive steps are taken towards the preservation of the indigenous dialects, there is every possibility that they will be gradually infested and eventually terminated by stronger current of language trends like pidgin, Onitsha, slang, and English. The fact that not many Igbos can speak their language for five minutes without introducing an English word is a pointer to this dangerous trends.

Therefore it is the collective responsibility of the native speakers to preserve their mother tongue for identity and for posterity—a task to which this research is committed albeit in the minutest way as a journey of a thousand miles begins with a step.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to supply some missing link towards the proper documentation of the Igbo language. Language is an indispensable aspect of culture. Unfortunately and regrettably, the pioneer works at recording the Igbo language came with the advent of the Europeans and western education. Consequently a lot of the aesthetics of the Igbo language must have been lost through translation. It is only recently that the Igbos are beginning to correct the colonial mistakes and proper nouns like Okafor, Orji Awka, Owerri, Enugu etc. This paper is a response to Ubahakwe's timely call for regeneration. He says:

What would be totally lost... is the soul of the people conveyed through the labyrinth of their language. It is in this respect that there is general agreement that Igbo people have, almost up to date, failed their language and are just beginning (and only just beginning) to realize their folly. (Ubahakwe, 2002, p. 270)

The purpose of this study is not to list the many dialects of the Igbo language but to recover the soul of the communication.

Area of Study

This study focuses on some communities in the Old Aguata Local Government Area. It comprises 14 autonomous communities in the present Aguata and 20 autonomous communities in Orumba North and Orumba South Local Government Areas of Anambara State. The major towns include the area spanning from Igbo-ukwu through Ezinifite Uga, Umuchu, Umunze, Owerrezukala, Ogbunka, Ajalli, Ufuma, Oko Nanka Ekwulobia and the towns enclosed within these areas.

Method of Data Collection

Data is observable and will be collected first-hand from experienced native speakers. The researcher has also lived and worked in the area for over 40 years with a large repertoire of dialect variation. There will be much reference to Nanka, the mother tongue of the researcher who had the privilege of being brought up by a grand mother in whose lips, no English word was uttered except names in the Bible.

Survey of Previous Studies

The term, monolithic dialect was used in studies of dialects by Oluikpe, 1971, Igwe, 1974, Nwachukwu, 1976, Uwalaka, 1981 and Emenanjo, 1981 (cited in Ubahakwe, 2002) these studies were based on speech of one or two persons from one or two towns and this was assumed to constitute a dialect. Ubahakwe (2002) in his own studies developed "a new technique in dialectology known as Lexico-semantic Technique". With this, he was able to isolate over 24 dialects, five of which falls with the Old Aguata Local Government Area thus:

(1) Ekwulobia Dialect with constituent members as Ogbu:

Ekwulobia, Isuofia, Nanka, Ezinifite, Ndiokolo, Igbo-ukwu, Ndiokpalaaeke, Ikenga and Umuona.

(2) Ogboji Dialect with constituent members as Akpu, Ogboji, Aguluezechukwu, Oko, Mkpologwu.

(3) Achina Dialect with constituent members as Achina, Agbudu, Akpo, Amaesi, Enugu-Umuonyiba, One, Umuchu, Umuomaku.

(4) Ndiowu Dialect with constituent members as Ndiowu, Ndiokpalaeze, Omogbo.

(5) Umunze dialect with Constituent members as Ajalli, Akawa, Akpugo, Amaokpala, Awa, Eziagu, Eziana, Ezira, Ihite, Isulo, Nawfija, Ogbunka, Owerre_ ezukala, Ubaha (Isuochi) Ufuma and Umuzne (Ubahakwe, 2002, p. 255)

One major finding of his study is that of the 1,689 words used, only 12 were common to 18 dialects and only 69 words were found to occur in up to nine out of the 18 dialects. It therefore becomes obvious that what he has termed dialect in the above classification can best be seen as a dialect group because a lot of words are uncommon to the constituent members of each dialect. For example "Lekwa" is a common welcome greeting in Ajalli alone (originally Ujari). Also historically Ajalli has closer affinity with Ndiokpalaeze and Ndiowu as

Aro people and should naturally belong to the same dialect group (Ijoma, 2002). “Lekwa” is also spoken in Ndiowu.

This writer therefore finds the monolithic dialectology more appropriate in helping to consolidated the culture and history of each community as linguistics like archeology have been a great deal of resource in the recovery of Igbo history. Johnson (2006) quoting Otto (1921) rightly asserts: “The genesis of language is not to be sought in the prosaic, but in the poetic side of life, the source of speech is not gloomy seriousness, but merry play and youthful hilarity”. Igbo speakers and writers must play their part in this recovery.

Dialect Variations

Ubahakwe (2002, p. 255) discussed four language levels (sound systems, lexical, grammatical, and semantic systems) as the root causes of dialect variations in Igbo language. These, he noted, are very important in intra-language communication system.

This paper will only study the sound system and the lexical system due to time constraints.

Phonological variation. Phonology is the study of the sounds of a language. The Europeans due to their genetic make up could not produce some of the Igbo sounds correctly so they only tried to approximate to any nearer sound in their English sound system. In Nanka, and many neighbouring communities the following sounds are missing

/wh/ as in who eg whunwuo oku (make fire) whunyuo oko (extinguish fire) /ph/ as in (no english equivalent) produced as a voiceless form of /wh/ with air passing out freely through rounded closed lips, without any obstruction in the oral cavity. It appears in words like iphe (approximated to ife—something) ophe-soup, ephi-cow.

/3/ as in measure eg abozilinem—stop your narration.

In addition to tone marks, there should have been voice marks and intonation marks. The Chinese 4 tones is applicable

falling tone (\) rising tone (/)

fall rise tone (v) level tone (-)

with these we can properly differentiate between the following:

akwa (bed), akwa (cry), akwa (cloth), and akwa (egg)

thus a kwa - is it a bed?

 a kwa - it is a cry?

 a kwa - is it an egg?

 a kwa - is it a cloth?

To these we need to add a low tone (ı) to differentiate the last syllable in akwa (bed) and akwa (cloth). Also strees patterns have to be indicated. Thus:

Nanka dialect – o ha wu nna mu? (Is it only me?)

Achina dialect – o na wu nna mi? (Is it only me?)

(-) is used for stressed syllable while (.) is used for unstressed syllable.

Achina dialect – O kwam kpo shio ... (I think that)

Nanka dialect – A ka m su I think that.

One pattern is visible from the above illustrations. Even though the tunes vary, each glides through a rise and fall of stressed and unstressed syllables. This shows that these dialects have intonation which will be better appreciated if recorded. When spoken properly, the speaker needs no further introduction as to his town of origin.

Lexical variation. Lexis deals with the words of a language and it is in this respect that each community exhibits a vocabulary that is peculiar and distinct.

In Nanka and Oko, “ndoo nee”, “ndoo nna” is the general greeting to male and female adult respectively for morning, afternoon, evening and for saying thank you. Ndoonwam, iphutakwala is the usual response to such greetings in the morning.

For Exclamations

Oko says Okoo!

Nanka says Ohoyi!

Ekwulobia says heyi or Ewoo!

Nkpologwu says Iha!

Achina says inikwamni!

Ohoo!

Ndiowu says Iheyi!

Akpugo says Ishimana!

Umunze says Elelelee gunu!

The first four communities above share boundaries in one way or the other (even though they belong to somewhat the same dialect group by Ubahakwe’s classification) but each responds differently to similar stimulus. This shows that they differ in their inborn language instincts. Such an impromptu reaction and response at the spur of the moment is the speaker’s first identity and it helps to place him in his town of origin.

Other lexical items that differ significantly include

Maize is “akpakpa” in Ajalli, Ndiowu, Ndiike

“ukwuoru” in Ezira and Umuze

oka in Nanka and Oko

Cassava is Obacha in Nanka and Oko

fofo is ngbaduga in Nanka, apalapa in Ekwulobia

sliced cassava is nshisha in Ezira, ighu in Umunze

fire stick made from palm fibre is uli oku in Oko and Ekwulobia

Ogbeidinvu in Nanka, edeli ngwa in Uga

Crafish is nfuliya in Nanka and Oko but afuliya in Ndiowu

ground corn meal is igbagwu in Nanka and Oko but asurasu in Uga

The pronoun he/she is ohu in Nanka, mmo in oko

The number 20 is also ohu in Nanka

Only me is nnaa mu in Nanka

They is oo in Achina and Umuchu

Community is ebe in Nanka

Numerals are counted thus: nvu, mbo, nto, ino,ise, ishii, isaa, isato, tehete, ili.

I see (confirmatory interjection) is oshii or ikasukwa in Nanka, ohoo in Oko

oo in Mkpologwu.

dog is nwaologbo in Nanka, nwamba in Ekwulobia

nkuta in Oko

cloth is aji and ekwelike (male and female cloth) in Nanka and Oko

aku in Ndiowu

said is su in Nanka and Oko, shi in Ezira and Umunze

fence is uwho in Nanka and Ndiowu but ogige in Ajalli

pineapple is akwuoru in Nanka (meaning palmfruit from a distant land)

corn and breadfruit meal is aho in Nanka, aghu in Oko

thank you is mmee in Nanka, mmeka in Oko, imegwo in Ndiowu and ndewo in Ajalli.

Ikpo, okwa and odo are nearing extinction from electric blenders and pounders.

These words when properly used tell a lot about the origin of the speaker.

The Importance of Local Dialects

Any body who is interested in his origin must, of necessity, have some importance attached to it otherwise, it would be a useless venture. In the same vein, the renewed interest in Igbo language and culture has some very significant purposes. Basically it is to give the Igbo language a place in igbo land and in the world; the Igbos having grown to be a people to be reckoned with. Their language and culture must also be reckoned with. Language is the carrier of culture and should be recorded alongside the culture.

It has some aesthetic qualities. It conveys the spirit of the age that used it just like historical artifacts do.

Suggested Methods of Preservation

The suggested methods of preservation:

(1) The impact of science and technology should be utilized in this respect. State Governments organize expensive fares and cultural fiestas and such forums could be recorded electronically.

(2) Igbo elites can institute research grants and commission researchers in every community to organize drama, masquerades, plays, and games that will explore and expose their dialect and culture.

(3) Antiquity libraries and shops should be set up in each community for the preservation of cultural artifacts. Regrettably, a good number of these artifacts are being reduced to ashes by some religious fanatics.

(4) Borrowing from China.

China is highly developed technologically and at the same time highly localized. They have room for all. Technologically they have talking charts as teaching aid. This consists of a chart that could be hung on the wall, an electronic pen and a voice box. When any object on the chart is touched with the pen, the voice box reads the object. Of course the voice in the box is that of a professional. This can be done with the varieties of Igbo dialect. Afterall, what interests Nigerian Youths in Indian and Chinese films is not the language they do not understand but the music and actions that go with the language.

Conclusion

Even though, the new may be better than the old, the old is nevertheless older and historical. The Igbos need to know the roots and origins of their language for the same reason as the British have their Old English, King James English (Shakespeare's English of "hie thee hither" (come here)) and the current Queens English. The poetic qualities of the old remain her attraction and relevance. The same attraction lies in "Ukwe Onitsha" that is still relevant in our church services. Recall Ukwe 17

"Afulum na ufesi mili ndi n'enwuga zaa n'atu anyam"

over the rivers faces I see, fair as the morning looking for me.

Does this explain the origin of the Igbo name for overseas? (ufesi)

When we get further back to our various dialects, we will marvel with a great feeling of nostalgia. It is worth preserving for posterity for OHAKA.

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