

TONES, DIALECTS AND MUTUAL INTELLIGIBILITY IN IGBO

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Abstract

The paper is in five parts. Part 1 briefly discusses tone as a language typology and its place in grammar, while part 2 is on the role of tone in the different Igbo dialects and the relationship between tone and intonation. Part 3 examines tone in Igbo poetics and musicology, in contrast to part 4 which is on tone in Igbo written texts. Finally, we conclude the paper by recalling the perennial question of what constitutes a language or a dialect, in the light of Armstrong's findings.

1. Tone as a Language Typology

Igbo is not an intonational language like English and Hausa. Nor is it a pitch-accent language like Nembe, Swedish or Ika. Igbo is a quintessential tone language.

- To call Igbo a tone language is to make a very simple but very profound statement about the essence of the typology of the Igbo language.

¹ This is an unpublished manuscript of the paper presented by the late Prof. (Em.) E. Nolue Emenanjo at the 2014 *Igbo Language Symposium* at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The intention was to rework this manuscript and a second manuscript for the two volumes of the journal that was to come out in 2016. Our Dear Prof. Emenanjo passed on early 2016. I do not know how he would have completely addressed some of the issues he raised in his manuscripts; neither would I attempt to address them by completing the manuscripts and co-authoring them with him. The first manuscript is therefore published here as presented by Prof. Emenanjo in 2014. Through this approach, I hope that the nascent hints or thoughts in the work shall serve as sources of inspiration to future generation of Igbo language scholars.

- Tone and the tonal system constitute the all-pervasive, omnipresent, omnipotent, cross-cutting, trans-lingual and intra-lingual supra structure and feature in Igbo, as in all tone languages.
- Indeed, tones and the tonal system hold together all the other sub-systems in a tone language in the nature of a backbone and the central nervous system. Put very simply and most economically, tone is the governor of everything in a tone language like Igbo in the areas of:
 - phonetics to pragmatics
 - phonology to lexicology
 - poetics to ethnomusicology

Tones (and tone patterns) are crucial, critical and central to

- semantics and intelligibility at the levels of the syllable, word, syntactic structure, within and beyond the dialects in the Igbo Culture Area (ICA).
- the three types of morphology identified in Igbo: derivational, extensional and inflectional.
- the identification and (sub) classification of elements in the sub-categories of the two major primary categories or form classes in Igbo: verbals and nominals.
 - verbs among verbals into simple and complex with the simple verbs into HTVs, LTVs, HLTVs.
 - Nouns among nominals into simple and complex nouns as different from numerals and adjectives.
- the identification of various types of NPs and especially the Associative NP and the Specific NP as strategic diagnostic testing frames for
 - Noun modification (N+QnN; N + Adj, N +RC)
 - Relativization (N +RC)
 - Adverbialization (N+P+Red.)
 - Adjectivization (N+ QnN)
 - More-than- oneness (pluralization?) (N+N+Red)
 - Quantities of all sorts
 - Qualities.
- The different types of basic affirmative and negative sentence structures in the language.

- | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| • Stative | (Zero Suffix) |
| • Factitive | (rV Assertive) |
| • Perfective | (la 1) |
| • Imperfective | |
| • Habitual | (na [Aux] + Participle) |
| • Progressive | (gE) |
| • Past | (rV Tense) |
| • Future | (ga [Aux] + Nomino-verbal) |
| • Unfulfilled (past in-the-future) | (gaara +Participle) |
| • Imperative | (a/e) Suffix |
| • Prohibitive | (la2) |

The interesting things about the above include:

- Certain tonal patterns / configurations are unique to verb forms or constructions.
- Past: / Stative / Factative: LL on verb stem
- Perfective (Affirmative): S/L on tone class
- Interrogative: L between NP and VP
- Relativization of the free RC
- More uniformity than diversity in the inflectional markers used across the dialects Auxiliaries + Nomino – verbals inflectional affixes especially suffixes.
- Extraordinary stability of tones across the different dialectal structures

2. Igbo Dialects

Today one can find tens of full blown and limited, published and unpublished, word lists and dictionaries that are dialect-based, one – dialect or comparative dialect- based long essays, theses and dissertations in our universities at virtually all levels of the Igbo language studies. Add to these the materials from the ten different dialectal renditions of Tony Ubesie's *Juọ Obinna* p.11 .

Inyi: Oji River ,Enugu State	Ohuhu: Ikwuano/ Umuahia, Abia State
Ehugbo: Afikpo, Ebonyi State	Mkporo: Abia State
Enyiogugu: Imo State	Ovim: Isiukwuato, Abia State
Arochukwu: Abia State	Igbouzo: Ibusa, Delta State
EnuOnicha: Onitsha Inland Town, Anambra State	

Add to the above, the following:

- Markers of nomino-verbals in some Igbo dialects (Igbouzo, Onicha, Nneewi, Owere, EzinaiHITE, Ohuhu).
- Negation markers in some dialects. (Igbouzo, Onicha, Nneewi, Achi, Ohuhu, and EzinaiHITE).
- Tense and aspect markers in some Igbo dialects (Igbouzo...EzinaiHITE).

Note also:

- On the basis of lexical items alone, the 1050 sampled by Armstrong, the 1500 by Emenanjo and Anyanwu (2014) 100 by Williamson (1973), and 150 Ohiri-Aniche (2011) the 44 phonological isoglosses i.e. dialectal variations, the 155 in the Ikwere comparative list, there is a considerable common vocabulary between the dialects. The issue of percentages of correspondences that lead to the emergence of new languages, is relative not scientific, for a methodology like lexicostatistics which claims to be scientific.
- With vowels at the phonetic and phonological levels, and consonants, there is a great diversity brought about by a multiplicity of factors: phonation types, secondary articulation, innovation, archaisms. The overall big picture that emerges is confounding: Igbouzo and Ekpeye, 26, Onicha 28, Enugu – Ezike 27 Iheakpu Awka and Agbani 29, Ikwere, Ukwani and Ika 30, Izi and Ezaa 32 Nsuka 33, Ohuhu 55, Owere 60, Olu 65. Ohiri-Aniche confirms this but also notes the unifying factor, in spite of the confounding diversity:

The phonological systems differ widely in terms of numbers and types of vowels and consonants... and the prosodic or suprasegmental features that operate in them. At the same time, too, the varieties have a lot of common features in vowels, consonants and suprasegmentals (tones, aspiration, nasalization and breathy voice)

(Ohiri- Aniche 2013: 102)

Consonants are irrelevant to intelligibility, while syllables and tones are more relevant than phonological minimal pairs. Hence, with markers in derivational morphology (nomino- verbals) and markers of negation, tense and aspect in inflectional morphology, there is a lot more uniformity than diversity.

In addition to the above points, tone and intonation also play some roles in helping to distinguish dialect-specific peculiarities. In the first instance,

- Even though tone and intonation are used for classifying the sound systems of human language typologically in terms of variations in pitch in words in isolation and in connected speech,
- Tone and intonation are not mutually exclusive. If, intonation
 - involves the rise and fall or variation of the voice in connected speech,
 - is linguistically meaningful i.e. signals differences in meaning.
 - is syntactic i.e. involves the use of specific numbers of pitch patterns that tunes to carry largely predictable meaning, that is language specific
 - is perceptible to both users and hearers
- has emotive functions that are essentially related to modality and pragmatics as it can be used to express fine meaning differences reflecting the speaker's feelings or attitudes.
- expresses social or emotional rather than referential meaning as tone does
- expresses only grammatical information, changing a statement into a question or an exclamation, as in English.

However, tone and intonation cannot be mutually exclusive in Igbo. Apart from the use of loudness, higher than high tones, lower than low tones and rising tone, for emotive and pragmatic purpose, patently intonation tunes have been recorded in connected speech, in some Igbo dialects. These have been identified and discussed in Izi (Meier, et al.) and Ika (Uguru). In fact, according to Uguru, in Ika, tones and intonation are so mutually used and related that she proposes that Ika qualifies to be a pitch-accent language or dialect of Igbo.

3. Tone in Igbo Poetics and Musicology

Tones also play significant roles of marking euphony, emphasis and differentiation in Igbo oral poetry, its aesthetics and musicology through tonal distortion, tonal rhyme and tonal counterpoint among others. For

- Tonal rhyme, hear:

Ụkwụnọchibemmili	SH
Kammilina-eli	LH

Ọnụliaifeoni di-eli	LH
Okwuaife o ni di-ekwu	LH

Wafụonụ	HS
Waafụ okwu	HS

- Tonal counterpoint, hear

Aka nọchibentị	LL
Ọ ma a ụla	HH

Anụgbaaajọsọ	HH
Waagba a ajọegbe	HL

Ife na-akpọwuluwulu	(HH) HH
Ọga-emesikpọwuluwulu	(LL) LL

Listen also with discernment to any extended vocal musical performance in Igbo.

4. Tone in Witten Texts

Tones constitute the entire structure (indeed architecture) of a tone languages(sub- infra-,super-, and supra-). This explains why in an intonation language, communication is still possible even with the wrong placement of stresses and intonation tunes).In a tone language like Igbo the wrong, or ineffective placement of the pitches) results in either ambiguity (at best) or in meaninglessness and non-communication, most times.

1. Ọgaraachịzụtaakwa
2. akwa
3. akwa
4. akwa
5. Akwa
6. ỤkọchukwuBekeeahụsịnaChinekenwerennukwuike.

From competence to performance, in language and in parole, at all levels of linguistics and in all domains of language use, tone is the **governor** of **everything** in Igbo. In view of all of the foregoing, therefore, tones should be fully but economically marked on all Igbo texts in cases of ambiguity but more so in poems and songs. For, tone marks do no more than capture in writing the sounds produced and pronounced in speech or in spoken forms (or performance). As long as we shy away from marking tones because English does not do so, and because tone marks deface texts or make them unsightly and unaesthetic, for so long will we continue to have

- simple juvenile verses as Igbo written poetry
- simplistic literary appreciation especially of Igbo songs, poems and verses
- uninspiring word lists instead of sophisticated dictionaries of even Igbo personal names. Here are what Okafor, R.C at al. (2008: ix) have to say in their commendable work on Igbo personal names;

Igbo is a tone language but we decided not to do any tone markings on the names because of the **nuances** in the various Igbo dialects and also to avoid **making the exercise sound pedantic**.

The above explains why in their work, with ugwu ‘hill’, ugwu ‘half’ and ugwu ‘respect’ there is neither rhyme nor reason for the entries of these under ‘U’!

5. Conclusion

Tones are the essential elements that encode and decode syllables, lexical items, verb phrases, noun phrases and construction types. Tones help to define and classify nouns and their sub-classes and

verbs and their subclasses. Tones co-exist with and obligatorily complement syllables, lexical items nominal and verbal phrases.

Most studies of Igbo tones have been with understanding two things: the nature of down-step, and the relationship between tones and their segments. Is this linear or non-linear? Among the segmentals and suprasegmentals tones are fewest in number, only three, unlike vowels and consonants which are eight or nine and sixty-five respectively in synchronic phonology. The fewness of tones clearly explains why they are extraordinarily stable within dialects and across dialects in the periphery as well as in the centre of the Igbo Culture Area. This stability of tones in the pan-Igbo context is clearly the bedrock of mutual intelligibility in the Igbo language, as has been noted by Armstrong some years ago:

If one asks how Igbos manage to communicate across dialect boundaries, the answer is that they may speak English, they may actually learn more widely used or more prestigious dialect, they may use some form of pidgin Igbo, or they may take advantage of the considerable common vocabulary and of the systematic sound-shifts which these wordlists show to exist. There is one other striking unifying factor which is obvious from these lists. This is extraordinary stability of tone through the whole range of the dialects studied. Igbos who speak or understand other dialects than their own are relying to a very great extent on tone. Tones (are) one of the principal means to mutual intelligibility of dialects.

(Armstrong, 1967)

Finally, given all considerations, a comprehensive study of Igbo tones will require combined efforts of philologists, syntacticians, semanticists, pragmatists, acousticians and linguistic stylisticians and ethnomusicologists.

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