

UNDERSCORING THE CROSS-DIALECTAL UNIFORMITY OF TONE IN IGBO

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Abstract

A discussion of the grammar of Igbo is incomplete without the treatment of tone. Tone plays a very vital role in the semantics and grammar of the language. Over the years, several works have been carried out in Igbo dialectology, of course, with the aim of identifying similarities and differences among and between separate dialects of the language. The most notable of the existing literature include Ward (1941), Armstrong (1967), Ubahakwe (1981), Ikekeonwu (1985), Nwaozuzu (2008) and Ohiri-Aniche (2013). In all of these works, tone is given little or no mention. Consequently, this paper attempts to explain the reason behind the omission of tone in Igbo dialectal studies. Using a purely descriptive approach, the paper observes that the extraordinary stability of tone through the different dialects of the language often makes tone to be taken for granted in Igbo dialectology. Based on this, the paper trows the path of Armstrong (1967) and Emenanjo (2015) in re-emphasizing the uniformity and stability of tone in the language.

1. Introduction

The Igbo language is one of the prominent languages in modern-day Nigeria. It is one of the four largest languages of West Africa with a total of about 18-25 million people or roughly 16.6% of the Nigerian population as native speakers, especially in the eastern part of the country. The Igbo language is classified as a Kwa language of the Benue-Congo sub-family of the Volta-Congo and Atlantic Congo branches of the Niger-Congo language family (Bendor-Samuel 1989) or the West Benue-Congo subfamily of the Niger-Congo language family (Williamson and Blench 2000). There are approximately thirty Igbo dialects which vary considerably with respect to degree of intelligibility with the standard dialect.

This variation is mostly lexical and phonological. The standard form is based on the Umuahia and Owerri dialects and is still being developed. According to Agbo (2010), “the current trend in Igbo linguistics is to classify Igbo dialects based on the common features associated with the states of origin of these dialects. Hence, there exist the Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo and Rivers dialects.” He deems this classification to be more realistic and practical because speakers of Igbo dialects are associated with features common to their states.

This paper looks at the feature of tone in Igbo dialectal studies while trying to underscore its relative stability across the different dialects of the language. Consequently, the next section discusses tone in Igbo. Here, the nature of tone in the language is discussed. Section 3 gives an overview of Igbo dialectal studies. At this point, it is shown that tone is to a large extent ignored in Igbo dialectology. Subsequently, section 4 emphasizes the consistency of the tones across the various dialects of the language. Furthermore, the paper notes that the tones have also remained resistant to change from a historical perspective. Finally, section 5 summarizes and concludes the paper.

2. Igbo as a Tone Language

A large number of the languages of the world are tonal. A tone language is one that employs the use of tone for meaning distinction in the lexical level, grammatical level or both. Tone is therefore a variation in pitch that enters as a distinctive factor in the lexicon or grammatical constructions of a language. According to Pike (1948) “A tone language is one in which contrastive pitch levels do not merely form the intonation tune of a sentence but enters as a distinctive factor into the lexical elements of the language”. In other words, tone distinguishes between the meanings of words with otherwise identical phonemic composition. Comparably, Yip (2002) opines that, a language with tone is one in which an indication of pitch enters into the lexical realization of at least some morphemes. Gussenoven (2004), equally views tone as a phonological category that distinguishes the meaning of words or utterances.

Over the years, there has been a tradition of classifying tone languages into register and contour tone systems based on the nature of tone. The register tone system is largely associated with the tone systems of African languages and only loosely/minimally with contour tones while Asian languages like Chinese typically operate the contour tone system. While register tones are analysed as being level (maintaining a certain

level of stability), contour tones are analysed as gliding from one pitch level to another, hence being unstable.

Igbo operates a register tone system with two basic level tones (high, low) and a downstep (a reduced high). Level tones in Igbo function lexically in distinguishing otherwise phonemically identical words. In other words, tone is manipulated contrastively to realize minimal pairs and sets. This is shown below:

- (1) Ákwá ‘cry’
 Àkwá ‘egg’
 Àkwà ‘bed’
 Ákwà ‘cloth’
- (2) Òké ‘rat’
 Òkè ‘share’
 Ókè ‘boundary’
 Óké ‘male’

Aside from the function of lexical disambiguation, tone serves some other functions in Igbo. Tone is functional in distinguishing between interrogative and declarative constructions in Igbo. Consider the following examples:

- (3) a. Ó zùrù óhí jī ‘he stole yam’
 b. Ò zùrù òhí jī? ‘did he steal yam?’

Note that the distinction between the interrogatives and declaratives as exemplified above is signalled by a tonal change on the 3rd person singular pronoun ‘Ó’ which bears a high tone in the declarative construction but a low tone in its interrogative counterpart. At the grammatical level, tone is equally vital in differentiating relative constructions from declarative constructions. For example:

- (4) a. Àdá màrà m̐mā ‘Ada is beautiful’
 b. Àdá mārā m̐mā ‘Ada who is beautiful’ (cf. Ezenwafor 2014: 662)

Ezenwafor (2014) following Williamson (1972) notes that the relevance of tone at the grammatical level in Igbo is also evident in associative/specific constructions. The inherent tone of lexical items in Igbo often changes when moved into such constructions. The following examples are illustrative:

- (5) a. $\acute{N}n\acute{i}$ ————— $\acute{n}n\acute{i}m\grave{b}\acute{e}$ ‘tortoise’s food’
 $m\grave{b}\acute{e}$ —————
 b. $\acute{E}w\acute{u}$ ————— $\acute{e}w\acute{u}n\grave{d}\grave{u}$ ‘Ndu’s goat’
 $\acute{N}d\grave{u}$ —————

(cf. Ezenwafor 2014: 662).

Several scholars have used different theoretical frameworks to account for tone in different aspects of Igbo grammar. These include Williamson (1968b;1970a,b,d; 1972a,1986), Voorhoeve et al. (1969), Carrell (1970), Oluikpe (1979), Clark (1978, 1980), Clements (1980), Goldsmith (1983), Nwachukwu (1995), Obiamalu (2013, 2014), and Ezenwafor (2014) among others. It is obvious that the importance of tone in Igbo studies cannot be downplayed. The next section shall focus on Igbo dialectology.

3. Igbo Dialectal Studies

Nwaozuzu (2008) opines that the study of Igbo dialects received its first attention from Koelle in 1854 in his ‘Polyglotta Africana’. She also notes that the existence of several dialects contributed to the problem of serious academic study of the language. Over the years, the study of Igbo dialects has been carried out by different linguists. However, their works were not usually thorough and extensive considering the enormity of requirements involved in carrying out a dialectological survey of the language. After the settlement of the Igbo orthography controversy, some studies were carried on the dialects of Igbo.

Welmers (1970) discussed Central Igbo. He notes that Central Igbo comprises the variety of Igbo spoken in Umuahia and Owerri areas. Subsequently, “Armstrong (1967) studied a group of five Igbo dialects stretching from the west of the River Niger to its eastern end” (cf. Nwaozuzu 2008). While Meier and Bendor-Samuel (1975) examined the phonology and syntax of the Izii dialects, Armstrong (1967) focused on the consonantal and vocalic segments of the dialects. Ubahakwe (1981) cited in Nwaozuzu (2008) studies the widespread usage of a number of lexical items across some dialects of Igbo.

Building on earlier studies, Ikekeonwu (1985) studied the consonantal and vocalic phonemes of Otu Onitsha Dialect (OOD) and Enyimba Central Igbo (ECI) both of which were drawn from Onitsha Igbo and Central Igbo dialect groups respectively. Ubahakwe (2002) builds a model with the aim of finding out how many dialects there are in Igbo. This he does with the notion of ‘intelligibility and ‘acceptability’.

Nwaozuzu (2008) made a geographical classification of the Igbo dialects. Her classification resulted in eight (8) major dialect groups. The groups are as follows:

- i. West Niger Group of Dialects (WNGD) [Agbor, Asaba, Ukwuani, Isele Uku etc.]
- ii. East Niger Group of Dialects (ENGD) [Onitsha, Obosi, Awka, Amawbia, Ogidi, etc.]
- iii. East Central Group of Dialects (ECGD) [Owerri, Okpualla, Mbaise, Orlu etc.]
- iv. South Western Group of Dialects (SWGD) [Ikwerre, Ohaji, Egbema, Umuagwo, Mgbirichi etc.]
- v. Cross River Group of Dialects (CRGD) [Abiriba, Afikpo, Ohafia, Bende, Arochukwu etc.]
- vi. North Eastern Group of Dialects (NEGD) [Abakaliki, Izzi, Ezza, Ikwo, Ezzamgbo, Okposi etc.]
- vii. South Eastern Group of Dialects (SWGD) [Ngwa, Azumili, Akwete, Ohambele etc.]
- viii. Northern group of Dialects (NGD) [Nsukka, Enugu-Ezike, Udi, Obolo Afor, Ngwo, etc.]

Nwaozuzu (2008) also discusses the phonology, morphology and syntax of these different dialect groups. However, it should be noted that the dialectal differences shown in her work are mostly at the phonological level.

The most recent work on Igbo dialectology is Ohiri-Aniche (2013). Her work tries to answer questions about the extent of the area that belongs to the Igbo language. This also involved making statements about which languages are Igbo or not (in the case of Ekpeye, Ikwere and Ogba). In doing so, she provides general information on the Igbo language and its speech forms. Her work carries out detailed synchronic description of the sound systems of Standard Igbo and of some Igbo speech varieties. With the use of lexicostatistics and reconstruction rules, she analyzes how the sound systems had changed from one variety to the other. She also attempts to reconstruct what the original or ancestral Igbo language (which she referred to as ‘Proto-Igbo’) sounded like.

An observation needs to be made at this point. Almost all works in Igbo dialectology make little or no mention of tone in Igbo. This leaves one to wonder the reason behind the omission. Considering the importance of tone in Igbo studies, it would seem that tone has been downplayed in the existing literature of Igbo dialectology. The next section takes a look at

tone in the dialects of Igbo and tries to explain the apparent scarcity of literature on tone in Igbo dialectology.

4. The Stability of Tone Across Igbo Dialects

It seems quite strange that in a discussion of the dialects of Igbo, tone is either omitted or mentioned just sparingly. Emenanjo (2015: 133) notes that “one very important, significant and interesting feature of lexical and grammatical tones in Igbo is that, by and large, they are regular, systematic and, indeed, systemic across all Igbo dialects”. Furthermore, he asserts that the word lists available in Ward (1941), Ubahakwe (1981), Armstrong (1967), Emenanjo and Ogbonna (2013) contain words which show isoglossic differences in consonants, vowels, syllabic nasal and sometimes, tones. However, he affirms that typical noun phrases (like the associative and the specific), clauses (like the stative, factative, perfective and serial constructions) have identical if not same tonal patterns which cut across Igbo dialects (Emenanjo 1981, Ikekeonwu1993, Nwaozuzu 2008 cited in Emenanjo 2015).

The table below shows some selected words from the comparative Swadesh 100 word list in six different dialects of Igbo (Owere, Onicha, Ika, Udi, Izhii and Ohnụhụ). In the examples below, we shall see how tone remains uniform across the dialects of Igbo:

Dialect	I/Me	You (sg.)	We/Us	You (pl.)	Three
Owere	mí/m̀m̀m̀	Gí/ngí	Ànyí	únù/́ǹǹ	Àt́
Onicha	m̀	Gí/ngí	Ànyí	únù	ìt́
Ika	́m̀m̀	Ý	Àyí	únù	èt́
Udi	Má	Gá	Àyí	Únù	ìt́
Izhii	m̀	̀ng̀	Ànyí	Únù	èt́
Ohnụhụ	m̀/̀m̀	Gí	Ànyí	únù	Àt́

Table 1: Comparative Swadesh 100 word list of Igbo speech varieties (cf. Ohiri-Aniche 2013)

Judging from the table, it is apparent that there is a very high level of consistency and uniformity of tone in the different dialects of Igbo. This uniformity cuts across the different dialect groups of Nwaozuzu (2008). These include the East Central group (Owere and Ohnụhụ), West Niger group (Ika), East Niger group (Onicha), the North Eastern group (Izhii),

and the Northern group (Udi). It is prudent to note that from a historical view point, tone in Igbo dialects has remained stable. This is evident in all previous works such as Ward (1941), Armstrong (1967), Welmers (1970), Ubahakwe (1981, 2002), Ikekeonwu (1985), Nwaozuzu (2008) and more recently, Ohiri-Aniche (2013). As stated earlier, all but one of these works made no attempt to make any statement on tone. Armstrong (1967: 4-5) observes that

“...common vocabulary,...systematic sound shifts (and)... the extraordinary stability of tone through the whole range of dialects studied... contribute to mutual intelligibility across Igbo dialects. Igbo who speak or understand other dialects than their own are relying to a great extent on tones. Tones (are) one of the principal means to mutual intelligibility (across Igbo dialects)”.

This paper follows Emenanjo (2015) in confirming the observations of Armstrong (1967) pertaining to the stability of tone. The paper also notes that this phenomenon is taken for granted. This is seen as the basic reason for the lack of literature on tone in Igbo dialectal studies. The assumption is that there is little or no difference of tone to show in the dialects of Igbo. However, this underplays the importance of tone in Igbo studies generally. Hence, the paper argues for the inclusion of tone in the any cross-dialectal study of Igbo. This is irrespective of the fact that there might be no difference in the tones of the various dialects.

5. Summary and Conclusion

The paper started with the discussion of Igbo as a tonal language and also briefly touches on the functions of tone in the language. Subsequently, a brief overview of Igbo dialectal studies was given. At this point it was observed that the different authors on Igbo dialectology do not make any explicit mention of tone in their essays. The paper tries to explain the reason behind this phenomenon. In doing so, it drew from observations made by Armstrong (1967) and reiterated by Emenanjo (2015) that there is a high level of consistency and uniformity of tone across the various Igbo dialects. This uniformity of tone in the language is the main basis for mutual intelligibility. However, the paper notes that this feature of tone in the language is taken for granted in dialectal studies. As such, most authors make little or no comments on the apparent uniformity of tone in the language. Finally, the paper notes that only two authors have made mention of this feature of tone Igbo (Armstrong 1967 and Emenanjo 2015)

The paper supports their claim and in the same spirit, tries to underscore the importance, uniformity and stability of tone in the language.

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