

## IDEOPHONIC PAIRING AS A PAN-IGBO PHENOMENON

Chinedu Uchechukwu

Department of Linguistics

NnamdiAzikiwe University, Awka

[c.uchechukwu@unizik.edu.ng](mailto:c.uchechukwu@unizik.edu.ng); [neduchi@gmail.com](mailto:neduchi@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*The phenomenon of ideophonic pairing in Igbo, first identified in Uchechukwu (2007), is a form of doubling or reduplication of linguistic structures that involves the forming of an ideophonic pair, IDEO<sub>1</sub>IDEO<sub>2</sub>, either from an existing high tone ideophone or from a lexical item with a mixture of high and low tones. The output is IDEO<sup>[HIGH]</sup>IDEO<sup>[LOW]</sup> whereby the first component has entirely high tones while the second component has entirely low tones. Also, the second component does not exist as an independent lexical item in the language; instead, the resultant pair is always systematically used together to express a contrastive, rhythmic schema that is meaningful in the language. This paper points to the possibility of this phenomenon being a pan-Igbo phenomenon.*

### 1. Introduction

Ideophonic pairing refers to a system of forming a “high tone-low tone” ideophonic pair, IDEO<sub>1</sub>IDEO<sub>2</sub> (also: IDEO<sup>[HIGH]</sup>IDEO<sup>[LOW]</sup>), either from an existing high tone ideophone IDEO<sub>1</sub>, or from an ideophone or a word with a mixture of various tonal combinations. In both instances the resultant low tone IDEO<sub>2</sub> does not exist as an independent lexical item in the language. Instead, the pair is always used together to express a contrastive, rhythmic schema that is meaningful in the language. In addition, the output could also either be a *bound ideophonic pair*, IDEO<sub>1</sub>IDEO<sub>2</sub>, or a *separable ideophonic pair* IDEO<sub>1</sub>...DEO<sub>2</sub> with other linguistic elements occurring in between. The explanations in this section are based on Uchechukwu (2007).

The phenomenon of ideophonic pairing need not be confused with *reduplication* and other apparently similar repetition-cum-modification of sound segments. This conclusion is drawn from the widely accepted definition of reduplication as the “systematic repetition of phonological

material within a word for semantic or grammatical purposes” (Rubino, 2005, p. 11), whereby the reduplicated form retains the tone of the base, as in the reduplication of the Igbo ideophone *kòí!* as *kòí! kòí!* ‘the sound of a hard, sharp object (like a high heeled shoe) on a hard ground’. In this example there is a repeat or multiplication of exactly the same sound segments, because the reduplicant retains the initial high tone of the base. Another Igbo structure that could be confused with both an Ideophonic pair and a reduplication is *féréféré* ‘light, easy’.

This is not a reduplicated form because one segment of the structure, *féré*, does not occur alone in the language. Instead, it always occurs as *féréféré* and hence also reduplicated as a whole: *féréféré féréféré*. There are some Igbo sound ideophones that have this peculiarity of being “reduplicated invariably with identical vowels and hardly modified phonically” (Maduka-Durunze, 1998, p. 212). They are similar to **nyanyaanya** ‘trembling’ in Ewe, which according to Ameka, is an inherently repetitive ideophonic word, but with no corresponding monosyllabic form like **nya** (Ameka, 1999, p. 31). These examples differ from the phonic modification within an *ideophonic pair* which involves high tones on the base, IDEO<sub>1</sub>, and low tones on the reduplicant, IDEO<sub>2</sub>, as in.: [*kòí!*]<sub>1</sub><sup>HIGH</sup> [*kòì!*]<sub>2</sub><sup>LOW</sup> also IDEO<sup>[HIGH]</sup> IDEO<sup>[LOW]</sup>. Note, for example, the simple reduplication of *féréféré* as *féréféré féréféré* in contrast to forming an ideophonic pair with it, *féréféré fèrèfèrè*, whose existence is yet to be confirmed. In other words, if one were to form an ideophonic pair with *féréféré*, the second segment or component of the pair must have mainly low tones.

There is also some correlative semantic effect of this phonic change within an ideophonic pair. For example, when an ideophonic pair is formed, the pair is construed as balancing each other out in that the second, low tone segment is construed as balancing the first, high tone segment. Another aspect of the ideophonic pair is that the two segments can also occur in such a manner that no linguistic structure can come in between them. In other words, one can speak of two forms of the ideophonic pair as *Bound Ideophonic Pair* and *Separable Ideophonic Pair*. Both are illustrated below with the pair *kòí! kòì!*:

(1) *Bound Ideophonic Pair*

|         |     |        |                                              |                                              |
|---------|-----|--------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Nwáànyì | áhù | nà-àgá | <b>kòí!kòì!</b>                              | <b>kòí!kòì!</b>                              |
| Woman   | DET | AUX-go | IDEO <sup>[HIGH]</sup> IDEO <sup>[LOW]</sup> | IDEO <sup>[HIGH]</sup> IDEO <sup>[LOW]</sup> |

‘That woman walks with the gait of a model.’

(2) *Separable Ideophonic Pair*

ókè-rè                      m̀ òkpó kójí,                      m̀ ké-é                      yā      kòì.  
 he knock-rV-Past      me knock IDEO<sup>[HIGH]</sup> knocked-oV-Past      him      IDEO<sup>[LOW]</sup>  
 ‘He knocked me **kójí!** and I knocked him **kòì!**’

Sentence (1) would refer to the balanced gait of a cat-walking model which is iconically expressed through the repetition of the ideophonic pair: **kójí! kòì!** The iconicity also seems to reflect the non-intervention of any other linguistic structure, neither between the bound pair nor between its reduplicated forms. Example (2) involves the same ideophonic pair, but as a separable pair that permits the occurrence of other linguistic structures between the components/segments of the pair. The scenario in example (2) would involve a situation where for example in a classroom, Child<sub>1</sub> secretly gives a knock to Child<sub>2</sub>. In his effort to retaliate, Child<sub>2</sub> is caught. Sentence (2) would be the response of Child<sub>2</sub> to why he gave a knock to the other child. In this answer, Child<sub>2</sub> justifies his action as a way of ‘balancing out’ what was earlier secretly meted out to him by Child<sub>1</sub>. One can see here that his assailant’s knock is given as the high tone **kójí!**, which contrasts with, and is balanced out by, his low tone **kòì!**. It is this contrastive phonic and semantic balance that holds the Ideophonic pair together.

The rest of this paper goes into the phenomenon as follows. The next section describes some examples of Ideophonic pairs, while section 3 discusses a few examples from three Igbo dialects. Section 4 summarizes and concludes the paper.

## 2. Other Examples of Ideophonic Pairs

Ideophonic pairing as a word formation process could be confirmed for some nouns, like the plural marking noun *ndí* ‘people’. One could confirm the meaning of the word in such expressions as *ndí Ìgbò* ‘the Igbo people’, *ndí Yoruba* ‘the Yoruba people’, *ndí Awusa* ‘the Hausa people’, *ndí ọcha* ‘the white people’ *ndí ojii* ‘the black people’, and so on. The word could also mean ‘those’ as in *ndí à* ‘those ones’. Note that in all these examples the word retains its inherent double high tones when it co-occurs with other lexical items. That is its regular form in the language.

The ideophonic pair formed with *ndí* is best illustrated with the title of an Igbo song of the 90s by the Igbo singer Oliver de Coque:

(3) ọsọ                      ndí      ọwé                      ndí

that which pleases      some, that which annoys      others

The above example needs some additional explanation because of the combination of the noun *ndí* with two nominalised verbal complexes: (1) -*só ùsọ* ‘be sweet, enjoyable/a pleasure (to someone)’, and (2) -*wé íwé* ‘be angry’. These two verbal complexes are nominalized through the addition of the harmonizing noun-forming prefixes *ọ/o* to the verb roots -*wé* and -*sọ* respectively. The formation is illustrated in the table below (derived from Anagbogu 1990):

Table 1. The Nominalization of the Verbal Complexes

| SUFFIX +VERBAL COMPLEX = NOMINAL |                                      |                                                 | NOMINAL COMPOUND                           |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| ọ                                | - <i>sọ ùsọ</i> ‘be sweet, enjoyable | <i>ọsọ ùsọ</i> ‘that which is sweet, enjoyable’ | <i>ọsọ ndí</i> ‘that which pleases people’ |
| o                                | - <i>wé íwé</i> ‘be angry’           | <i>òwé íwé</i> ‘an angry person’                | <i>òwé ndí</i> ‘that which annoys people’  |

The expression *ọsọ ndí òwé ndí* literally means ‘that which makes people happy, that which makes people sad’. It refers to an object and its two effects on people: it makes some people happy, and makes others sad. The expression usually refers to any object or event that awakens joy and envy, that is, joy in some people and envy in others simultaneously. The affected two groups are tonally marked; the happy group is indicated with the high tone *ndí* ‘some people’, and the sad group with the low tone *ndí* ‘other people’. Hence, the two meanings of ‘some people’ and ‘other people’ correlate with the tonal contrast of the ideophonic pair *ndí* ... *ndí*, regardless of the lexical items between them. Also note the contrast in the tones in the following examples

- (4) a.      \**ọsọ ndí òwé ndí*  
          b.      \**ọsọ ndí òwé ndí ọzọ*  
          c.      *ọsọ ndí òwé ndí*

Example (4a) is not an acceptable Igbo Ideophonic pair because the necessary tonal contrast expected in the second segment of an Ideophonic pair is missing. Instead of *ndí*... *ndí* we have *ndí* ... *ndí*, which is a simple

reduplication and therefore wrong. Also note another point that the expression **ńdí ọ́zọ́**, is the regular structure for expressing ‘the others/other people’ in the language, but it is not used as an Ideophonic pair. These examples buttress the fact that the typical ideophonic pair has mainly high tones in the first segment and low tones in the second segment, whether as a separable or a non-separable Ideophonic pair.

Another example is the greeting *Déémé* ‘Thanks!’, which has a combination of high and low tones as its inherent tones, but changes its tones as an Ideophonic pair:

(5) **Source Lexical item**

*déémé* ‘thanks

**Derived Ideophonic Pair**

*Déémé! Dèèmè!* ‘thanks a lot’

In example (5) the inherent tones of the source lexical item is High-Low-High; but in the ideophonic realisation, the first segment of the derived Ideophonic pair is High-High-High, while the second segment is Low-Low-Low. Both the first and the second segments of this Ideophonic pair do not occur as independent lexical items in the language.

### 3. Cross-Dialectal Examples

The initial work that discovered the phenomenon of ideophonic pairing (Uchechukwu, 2007) did not focus on dialect specific realisations of the phenomenon. Instead, it simply focused on identifying and characterising the phenomenon. The next step is to examine to what extent the process of Ideophonic pairing can be confirmed for other dialects of the Igbo language. In other words, can the Ideophonic pairing phenomenon be seen as a pan-Igbo phenomenon that can be confirmed or established in all the dialects of the Igbo language? This question needs a broad research base to be adequately addressed. However, the few sentences presented in this section are meant to draw attention to the potentials of Ideophonic pairing as a new area of research that is yet to be explored in Igbo dialectology.

(6) **Umuahia**

á sá-wá úkwà, yólólóm yòlòlòm; é ghé-wé  
yā, kpáí kpàì.

one wash-INCH breadfruit IDEO<sub>1</sub>IDEO<sub>2</sub> one fry-INCH it  
IDEO<sub>1</sub>IDEO<sub>2</sub>

‘When one begins to wash bread fruit, it flows; but when one begins to fry it, it bursts.’

The Ideophonic pairs involved here are *yólólórh yòlòlòrh* and *kpáí kpàì*. The first pair indicates the balance in the activity of washing the breadfruit preparatory to its being fried or cooked. The second pair refers to the tiny explosions of the breadfruit seeds when being fried. The whole sentence is actually a proverb and is used to underline the fact that there are some activities whose beginnings are smooth and well balanced (*yólólórh yòlòlòrh*), but whose repercussions could be highly explosive and damaging to both the big (*kpáí*) and the small (*kpàì*) individuals within the society, hence *kpáí kpàì*.

(7) *Enugu Ezike*

- a. Ó      dònù   anyị   ékpénémé                      nà  
                 ékpènèmè  
He   kept   us   IDEO<sup>1</sup> (varieties)           and  
         IDEO<sup>2</sup>(varieties)  
‘He kept varieties of food for us.’
- b. Mgbè   kwénékwéné   dì                      hánìyà, kwènèkwènè   gà  
                 bù           àgáa?  
When   IDEO<sup>1</sup>                      be                      as this   IDEO<sup>2</sup>                      AUX  
                 be                      how  
‘If this is a minor event, what would a big event look like?’

In the first Enugu-Ezike example the ‘varieties of food’ is expressed through the Ideophonic pair *ékpénémé nà ékpènèmè* which has no literal translation but could be said to express a well balanced variety (*ékpénémé ékpènèmè*) of food. In example (7b), ‘a minor event’ or ‘first event’ is expressed with the high-toned *kwénékwéné*, while the second or major event is expressed through the low-toned *kwènèkwènè*.

(8) *Nibo*

- Kà   fúnéfúné                      dì                      etuu,                      kèé                      kà  
                 fùnèfùnè                      ya-adi?  
if   IDEO<sup>1</sup>                      be                      like this                      how                      that  
                 IDEO<sup>2</sup>                      AUX-be  
‘If this is a minor event, what would a big event look like?’

The Nibo example above is similar to example (7b), but with a difference in the dialect-specific structure.

Finally, one can see in the similarity that runs through the structure of the ideophonic pairs in the three different dialects that the phonic harmony and the semantic balance between the pairs are maintained. Particularly remarkable is also the fact that the examples are from three different dialects that are located far away from each other, with other intervening dialects between them. Going by Nwaozuzu's (2008) classification, Umuahia belongs to the East Central Dialect Group (ECDG), Enugu Ezike to the Northern Group of Dialects (NGD), and Nibo to the East Niger Group of Dialects (ENGD) all of which are dialect groups that are not particularly geographically contiguous. Nevertheless, they still evince the same tonal and semantic harmony. This occurrence of Ideophonic pairs in the three dialects points to the potentials of using the phenomenon of ideophonic pairing for comparing Igbo dialects. In fact, its use could further buttress Armstrong's (1967) confirmation of the extraordinary stability of tone through the whole range of Igbo dialects and his conclusion that "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".

#### **4. Conclusion**

Ideophonic pairing is a recurrent pattern in the Igbo language. It has not gained much attention in research, maybe because it has not yet been identified as a major issue. It therefore remains an unexplored area in comparative Igbo dialectology. In drawing attention to its occurrence in at least three different dialects, this paper is deliberately raising the issue of the potentials of Ideophonic pairing as a criterion for examining Igbo dialects. The paper has deliberately left the following issues open, with the intention of inviting reactions from other Igbo scholars:

- whether the few examples given here suffice to generalise and describe the phenomenon as 'pan-Igbo'
- whether these few examples would lead to more efforts by other Igbo scholars to go deeper into the three dialects presented or
- Whether the issues raised here would lead to the examination of other dialects so as to establish the extent to which Ideophonic pairing could be confirmed to be a characteristic of the Igbo language

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