

## FREE VARIATION IN AGUATA DIALECT OF IGBO

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### **Abstract**

This research is on free variation in Aguata dialect of Igbo. The researcher intends to find out the free variants in different communities in Aguata dialect, and free variants common to all the communities of Aguata dialect. It is a survey type of research. The researcher adopted variation theory as the theoretical framework for the study. The result shows that the following variants vary in some communities in Aguata dialect and do not vary in others. They are /s/ and /tʃ/, /ɲ/ and /j/, /ɣ/ and /h/, /s/ and /ʃ/, /ɪ/ and /o/. Besides, the following variants are common to all the communities of the dialect; they are /h/ and /l/, /l/ and /r/, /l/ and /n/, /f/ and /h/, and /r/ and /j/. At the end of the research, the researcher was able to accomplish the aim of embarking on the research. The study, recommends for further studies to be carried out in the following areas: The influence of geographical factors on free variation in Aguata dialect of Igbo, and free variation in Orumba dialect of Igbo.

### **Introduction**

Language is a system of systems. It is the principal system of communication used by a particular group of human beings within a particular linguistic community of which they may or may not be members. Besides, language is dialectical. The variety of a language according to the user is called dialect.

Free variation is the situation where two phones can be substituted for each other in the same environment without destroying the identity of the lexical item under consideration. There are many dialects of the Igbo language; Aguata dialect is one of them. According to Nwaozuzu (2008)'s classification of the Igbo dialects, Aguata dialect belongs to the East Niger Group of Dialects (ENGD). Free variants exist across the dialects of the Igbo language. In Aguata dialect in particular, there are a lot of variables and their corresponding free variants. Efforts had been made, in the past, by some linguists to study and write on dialects in general and free variation in particular. Some have equally researched on some dialects of the Igbo language in general, but, based on the information I gathered, no one had researched on free variation in Aguata dialect. It means there is still a gap to be filled. That is why this research is important.

In Aguata dialect there are other speech communities which differ from each other, at the same time having certain speech patterns in common. These communities include Achina, Aguluezechukwu, Akpo, Amesi, Ekwulobia, Ezinifite, Igboukwu, Ikenga, Isuofia, Nkpologwu, Oraeri, Uga, Umuchu, and Umuna. There are evidences of free variants which exist in some of these communities, but they are not noticed in others. There are equally free variants which are common to all the communities in Aguata geographical area.

The study is set out to achieve the following objectives:

1. To find out the free variants that exist in different speech communities in Aguata dialect
2. To discover the free variants common to all the communities in Aguata dialect.

The study was delimited to the free variation in Aguata dialect of the Igbo language. Aguata dialect consists of fourteen communities namely, Achina, Aguluezechukwu, Akpo, Amesi, Ekwulobija, Ezinifite, Igboukwu, Ikenga, Isuofia, Nkpologwu, Oraeri, Uga, Umuchu, and Umuna.

### **Conceptual Studies**

In order to do justice to this topic, there are basic concepts which have to be looked into. They are language, Dialect and free variation. These three concepts have to be studied as a foundation for further action.

### **Language**

Abubaka (2020) defines language as a means of communication which can be verbal or non-verbal including sign, drawings, pictures, sculpture, traffic signs, musical instrument etc. Abubaka's definition of language did not limit language to human verbal utterances. His definition of language spreads the wings of language to include any form of human communication.

Lyons (1981) defines language as the mental faculty which allows human beings to undertake linguistic behavior, to produce and understand utterances. In this definition, Lyons emphasizes the biological bases for human capacity for language as a unique development of human brain. The supporters of this view argue that language is inbuilt in human brain; that is why children who grew up in a particular environment will learn the language of that community just by daily interaction with members of the community, without formal education on that language. As such, a language can grow up in an environment where the people living together can formulate and make up a language

On the other hand, Campbell (2004) gives a definition of language as a formal system of signs governed by grammatical rules of combination of utterances to communicate meaning. This shows that language is meant to pass message. Every statement in a language is meant to communicate something. So, language is a close structural system which consists of rules relating a particular sign to a particular meaning. It means that Campbell is stressing the fact that every language differ from the other through different signs that means different things.

Furthermore, Hauser and Fitch (2003) define language as a system of communication that enables humans to exchange verbal or symbolic utterances. Their definition emphasizes the social function of language. People in society use language to interact among themselves and to express their intentions. It means that a language must have vocabularies which are signs relating to different meanings. As it concerns this study, the researcher defines language as a structured system of communication which is culturally conditioned and differs from one linguistic community to another. This definition stresses the fact that language is influenced by the culture of the environment

that speaks and owns the language; as such linguistic experiences differ according to culture.

### **Dialect**

Wolfram and Schilling (2016) define dialect as a variety of language that is distinguished from other varieties of the same language by features of phonology, grammar, and vocabulary, and by its use by a group of speakers who are set off from others geographically or socially. The definition of dialect given by Wolfram and Schilling indicates that dialect is not limited to geographical factor, it all so extended to social and other factors.

Akmajian, Demers, Farmer and Harnish (2012) define dialect based on geographical and social factors. From geographical point of view, they see dialect as the distinct form of a language spoken in a certain geographical area on the ground that the inhabitants of that area have a certain distinct features that differentiates them from other speakers of the same language. From social perspective, they define dialect as the distinct form of a language spoken by members of specific socioeconomic class, such as working class dialects.

As it concerns this work, the researcher defines dialect as a smaller linguistic community within a particular language which has many linguistic features in common and different from other parts of the same language. This definition amounts to the fact that a dialect partially separates her members from the large linguistic community and they become united with a particular phonological features.

### **Free Variation**

Asadu (2016) defines free variation as a situation when two phonemes can be used interchangeably in the same phonological environment without bringing about any change in meaning. Asadu's definition shows that the two phonemes involved must maintain the same position in the words they occur in order to stand as free variants. Anagbogu, Mbah and Emeh (2010) define free variation as when two phonemes occur in a particular word in the same environment without causing any meaning difference. This definition shows that free variation brings about substitutability of two separate phonemes of a language in the same environment.

Wardhaugh (2010) defines free variation as the existence in one locality of two or more dialects which allow a speaker or speakers to draw now on one dialect and then on the other. He further defines it as random meaningless variation of no significance. Wardhaugh's definition of free variation as the existence of two or more dialects in a locality in which the speakers are free to choose any of them at any time, gives the face meaning of free variation. However, the second definition as 'random meaningless variation of no significance' does not hold water. Free variation is not meaningless; rather it is a meaningful expression.

Furthermore, Durand (1990) defines free variation as the situation where two phones can be substituted for each other in the same environment without destroying the identity of the lexical item under consideration. Durand's definition of free variation is one of the most widely accepted definitions. It incorporates the meaning and the nature

of what occurs in every language as free variation. An example of this can be found in the Igbo language where two sounds /n/ and /l/ occur interchangeable in words such as /ili/ or /ini/ meaning ‘grave’.

Clark and Yallop (1995) define free variation in linguistics as the phenomenon of two or more sounds or forms appearing in the same environment without a change in meaning and without being considered incorrect by native speakers. Example: the word *economics* may be pronounced with /i/ or /ε/ in the first syllable; although individual speakers may prefer one or the other, and although one may be more common in some dialect than others, both forms are encountered within a single dialect and sometimes even within a single idiolect. Besides, according to Gimson (2008) free variation is a relationship between the members of a pair of phonemes, words, etc., in which either can occur in the same position without causing a change of meaning. He gave example with British speakers, where a majority are said to prefer the word *ate* to be pronounced /et/ to rhyme with *met*; but a large minority favour the pronunciation /eit/ like *eight*. The two pronunciations are therefore in free variation, as are /ekə'nɒmiks/ or /i:kə'nɒmiks/.

The above definitions of free variation by different authors are correct; but as it concerns this work, the writer defines free variation as the situation where two different phonemes can replace each other in the same linguistic setting without changing the meaning of the word they occur. This definition entails that the two differently pronounced words give the same meaning in a particular dialect.

### **Empirical Studies**

This consists of different views and works of different people on free variation and the subjects related to it. Petyt (1980) explains dialect as a variety in a language. His intention is to explain variation in language. He adopted a survey method of research and discovered that language variation is of different types; namely regional variation, which he called regional dialect, and social variation otherwise known as social dialect as he notes, “there are social dialects as well as regional ones. Whereas regional dialects are geographically based, social dialects originated from a variety of factors...”

He further states that there are regional varieties in a special language. He notes that there are variation within a language group from one geographical region to another. His findings support Heeringa and Nerbonne (2001) who say that a traveller perceives phonological distance indirectly and that there are unsharp borders between dialect areas. The findings of Petyt are of very significant in linguistic development. It resembles this research in the sense that it treats variation in language and dialect as a division of language study. Nevertheless, it differs from this study because the work hung its findings on dialect in general. It does not specify any particular dialect and the aspect of dialectical studies in question; whereas this study is geared towards finding out the free variants in Aguata dialect of Igbo. So, Petyt did not solve the problem this study intends to solve. Therefore, this study is still very important.

According to Gimson (2008), Variation is a characteristic of language. There is more than one way of saying the same thing. Speakers may vary pronunciation (accent),

word choice (lexicon), or morphology and syntax (sometimes called “grammar”). But while the diversity of variation is great, there seem to be boundaries on variation. Speakers do not generally make drastic alterations in sentence word order or use novel sounds that are completely foreign to the language being spoken. Language variation does not equate with language ungrammaticality, but speakers are still, often unconsciously, sensitive to what is and is not possible in their native tongue. Language variation is a core concept in sociolinguistics. Sociolinguists not only investigate whether this linguistic variation can be attributed to differences in the social characteristics of the speakers using the language, but also investigate whether elements of the surrounding linguistic context promote or inhibit the usage of certain structures.

Gimson’s work shows that variation does not have any negative effect on the grammatical construction of sentences in any language because variation is one of the features of language. His work differs from this study because he extended his study on language variation in sociolinguistics in general; whereas this study is limited to the study of free variation in Aguata dialect of Igbo. Clark, Yallop and Janet (2007), in their effort to explain how free variation occurs in phonemes and allophones, report that when phonemes are in free variation, speakers are sometimes strongly aware of that especially where such variation is only visible across a dialectal group. They cite example with *tomato* which is pronounced differently in British and American English, or *either* which has two pronunciations. These are fairly randomly distributed. However, only a very small proportion of English words show such variations. However, in the case of allophones, free variation is exceedingly common, and, along with differing intonation patterns, variation in allophone is the most important single feature in the characterization of regional accents.

This is a follow up to the work of Ladefoged (2006) which states that within linguistics there are differing views as to exactly what phonemes are and how a given language should be analyzed in phonemic terms. However, a phoneme is generally regarded as an abstraction of a set or equivalent class of speech sounds (phones) which are perceived as equivalent to each other in a given language. For example, in English, the “k” sounds in the words *kit* and *skill* are not identical, but they are distributional variants of a single phoneme /k/. Different speech sounds that are realizations of the same phoneme are known as allophones. Allophonic variation may be conditioned, in which case a certain phoneme is realized as a certain allophone in particular phonological environments, or it may be free, in which case it may vary randomly. In this way, phonemes are often considered to constitute an abstract underlying representation for segments of words, while speech sounds make up the corresponding phonetic realization, or surface form.

The work of Clark, Yallop and Janet is of great help in knowing how free variants operate in phonemes and allophones. It will help the researcher of this work to have a better knowledge of the area of his research. Despite this, it has not solved the problem of this research, because this work is restricted to free variation in Aguata dialect of Igbo. So there is still need for the researcher to go on with his research. Besides, Williams (1999) defines free variation and states the reasons why free variation occurs in language. According to him, in phonetics and phonology, free variation is an

alternative pronunciation of a word or of a phoneme in a word that doesn't affect the word's meaning. Free variation is "free" in the sense that it doesn't result in a different word. As he observed, "Absolutely free variation is rare. Usually there are reasons for it, perhaps the speaker's dialects, perhaps the emphasis the speaker wants to put on the word". It is a relation between the members of a pair of phones, phonemes, morphs, or other linguistic entities such that either of the two may occur in the same position with no change in the meaning of the utterance. Example: In the first syllable of "economics," "e" and "ē" are in free variation. He further states that, two sounds do not represent two separate phonemes if they are in free variation, that is, if you may use one in any position you may use the other in the same position without any semantic effect.

William's finding is of great value and his opinion on the nature of free variation is still valid till date. In the Igbo language, for example, the two sounds /l/ and /r/ occur interchangeably in words such as *mmili*] or *mmiri*] meaning 'water'. They are in free variation. However, the researcher has some reservations on his view on the reason why free variation occurs. It is not for the sake of emphasis that speakers vary sounds, as he said, but it is most often done unconsciously. That notwithstanding, his work contributed a lot to other researches in the area of free variation in language study. Although it related to this study as both are pointing at free variation as an aspect of language study, they differ greatly from each other, because this work is narrowed down to free variation in Aguata dialect of Igbo.

Chambers (1995), in his variable rule approach to language variation, says that in linguistics, variable rules analysis is a set of statistical analysis methods commonly used in sociolinguistics and historical linguistics to describe patterns of variation between alternative forms in language use. According to him, this method goes back to a theoretical approach to language variation developed by the sociolinguist William Labov in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He further states that a variable rules analysis is designed to provide a quantitative model of a situation where speakers alternate between different forms that have the same meaning and stand in free variation, but in such a way that the probability of choice of either the one or the other form is conditioned by a variety of context factors or social characteristics. A variable rules analysis computes a multivariate statistical model, on the basis of observed token counts, such that each determining factor is assigned a numerical factor weight that describes how it influences the probabilities of choice of either form. Variable rule approach is commonly employed for the analysis of data in sociolinguistic research, especially in studies that aim to investigate how reflexes of linguistic change through time appear in the shape of structured variation patterns within a speech community. Chambers approach to variation in language stands in the middle. It is true that free variation should be guided by some rules, especially the rules of grammar involved, at the same time, it should not be a water-tight rule, otherwise the aim will be defeated. It differs greatly from this work in the sense that it concerns how to give best organization to free variation in order not to lose focus; whereas this work is on free variation in Aguata dialect of Igbo. This shows that the problem of this study has not been solved. So there is need for the researcher to go on with the research.

In addition, Mbah and Mbah (2010), in their study of free variation in Igbo language note that free variation is another type of distribution that is observed across languages. It is when two speech sounds which are phonetically different occur in the same environment but do not bring about change in the meaning of the words. The words are, therefore, in free variation. Example:

/ɛfa/ - crayfish

/ifa/ - crayfish

The initial segments of these dialectal variations are phonetically different. They occupy the same phonotactic position, yet they do not bring about meaning difference. They are said to be in free variation. Mbah and Mbah's study is of great help and it serves as footstool for future researchers in free variation in Igbo language. It resembled this work because the two are looking at the same direction, which is free variation as it concerns the Igbo language. However, it differs from this study because Mbah and Mbah's work focused on free variation in Igbo language in general, but this study dwells on free variation in Aguata dialect of Igbo. It means the problem of this study has not been solved. So there is still great need for the researcher to proceed with his research.

Furthermore, Nwaozuzu (2008), in her effort to widen people's knowledge in Igbo phonology, researched on different dialects of the Igbo language. She adopted a survey method of research which made her visit different places in Igboland to find out different dialects that exist in the Igbo language. The result of her study shows that Igbo language is made up of different dialects which differ from each other, while some of them vary. Besides, within these dialects, free variation is equally noticed. Nwaozuzu's work is of great help to the study of Igbo phonology especially as it concerns Igbo dialects and free variation across the Igbo language. Nevertheless, it differs from this study because it is based on Igbo dialects in general but this study is limited to free variation in Aguata dialect of Igbo. So, it did not solve the problem of this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework adopted by the researcher for this study is Variation theory. Variation theory was pioneered by William Labov in 1972. The foundation of this theory was laid in Labov, Weinreich and Herzog (1968) where they developed a theory of language change which mostly adopted an ethnographic, dialectological, and probabilistic approach to the study of linguistic variation. Finally variation theory was propounded by Labov (1972). The central idea in variation theory is that an understanding of language requires an understanding of variables as well as categorical processes, and that the variation witnessed at all levels of language, even when it is free, is not random; rather, linguistic variation is characterized by orderly or structured heterogeneity.

The reason for choosing this theory is because the nature of the study marched with the tenets of variation theory. This is manifested in chapter four of the study. One cannot talk of language variation in general, or free variation in particular, without making reference to variation theory. Research on linguistic variation reveals the fact that the frequency at which a speaker uses variable forms depends not only on the

speaker’s demographic characteristics, but also on the linguistic environment in which the form occurs.

**Methodology**

The study adopted a survey design. The method used for the data collection is a representative sample of speakers of Aguata dialect. This research adopted a variable rules analysis as the method of data analysis.

**Data Presentation and Analysis**

Here the researcher presents the data collected from the field of study for easy analysis. Below are the data

**Variables and Variants**

VARIABLES	VARIANTS
/fi/	/f/, /x/, /f/
/l/	/r/, /n/, /fi/
/s/	/tʃ/, /ʃ/
/p/	/j/
/x/	/fi/
/f/	/fi/
/v/	/o/
/r/	/l/, /j/
/tʃ/	/s/
/n/	/l/
/j/	/p/, /r/
/ʃ/	/s/
/o/	/v/

The data below represents the distribution of the free variants among the communities in Aguata dialect. For the sake of brevity and convenience, the following abbreviations are used for the following communities. They are:

- Achịna = Ach
- Agul̄ezechukwu = Ag
- Akpo = Akp
- Amesi = Am
- Ekwul̄obia= Ekw
- Ezinifite = Ez
- Igboukwu = Igb
- Ikenga = Ik
- Isuofia= Is
- Nkpologwu = Nkp
- Ọraeri = Or
- Ụga= Ụg
- Ụm̄ochu = Ụmch
- Ụm̄ona = Ụmn



	Ach	Ag	Akp	Am	Ekw	Ez	Igb	Ik	Is	Nkp	Or	Ug	Umch	Umn
/fi/ and /l/	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
/l/ and /r/	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
/s/ and /tʃ/	-	-	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-
/l/ and /n/	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
/ɲ/ and /j/	-	-	-	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	-
/y/ and /fi/	-	+	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
/f/ and /fi/	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
/s/ and /ʃ/	+	-	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	+	+	-
/i/ and /o/	-	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	-	-	+
/r/ and /j/	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

## Findings

From the analysis of the data collected from the field, two major findings were made. First, some free variants occur in some communities in Aguata dialect; whereas they are not noticed in other communities of the same dialect. Second, some free variants are common in all the communities in Aguata dialect.

### Free variants that occur only in some communities in Aguata dialect

From the above data, it is observed that in Aguata dialect, /s/ varies with /tʃ/ as in *oča* or *osa*. Example: *Uwe ya dī oča*; *uwe ya dī osa*, (His/her cloth is neat). It is noticed in the following communities: Akpo, Amesi and Uga; and it is not noticed in the following communities: Achina, Agulzechukwu, Ekwulobija, Ezinifite, Igboukwu, Ikenga, Isuofia, Nkpologwu, Oraeri, Umuchu, and Umuna.

Equally, /ɲ/ varies with /j/ as in *nwaanyi* or *nwaayi*. Example: *Nwaanyi oča ahụ bɪara ebe a taa*; *Nwaayi oča ahụ bɪara ebe a taa*. (The fair woman came here today). It is in use in the following communities: Ekwulobija, Ezinifite, Igboukwu, Ikenga, Isuofia, and Nkpologwu. It is not in use in the following communities: Agulzechukwu, Achina, Akpo, Amesi, Oraeri, Uga, Umuchu na Umuna.

All the same, /y/ varies with /fi/ as in *aghughō* or *ahuhō*. Example: *Nwoke ahụ dī aghughō*; *nwoke ahụ dī ahuhō*, (That man is tricky). It is spoken in the following communities: Agulzechukwu and Ekwulobija. It is not spoken in Achina, Akpo, Amesi, Ezinifite, Igboukwu, Ikenga, Isuofia, Nkpologwu, Oraeri, Uga, Umuchu, and Umuna.

Moreover, /s/ varies with /ʃ/ as in *isi* or *ishi*. Example: *Nwoke ahụ si n'olulu welite isi ya elu*; *Nwoke ahụ si n'olulu welite ishi ya elu*. (The man raised his head from the pit). It is observed in Achina, Akpo, Amesi, Nkpologwu, Uga and Umuchu. It is not observed in Agulzechukwu, Ekwulobija, Ezinifite, Igboukwu, Ikenga, Isuofia, Oraeri and Umuna.

In addition, /i/ varies with /o/ as in *akī* or *aku*. Example: *Ngōzi tara akī tupu o gawa akwukwō*. *Ngōzi tara aku tupu o gawa akwukwō*. (Ngōzi ate palm kernel before going to school). It is found in the following communities: Agulzechukwu, Akpo, Ekwulobija, Ezinifite, Igboukwu, Ikenga, Isuofia, Oraeri and Umuna. It is not found

in Achina, Amesi, Nkpologwu, Uga na Umuchu. By and large, the following variants vary in some communities and do not vary in others, /s/ and /tʃ/, /p/ and /j/, /ɣ/ and /fi/, /s/ and /ʃ/, /l/ and /o/.

### **Free variants common to all the communities in Aguata dialect**

According to the data presented and analyzed, the following variants are universal in all the communities in the dialect. /fi/ varies with /l/ as in *ahụ* or *alụ*. Example: *Ikenna merurụ nnukwu ahụ n'ihe mberede okporo ụzọ; Ikenna merurụ nnukwu alụ n'ihe mberede okporo ụzọ*, (Ikenna sustained serious injury in a road accident).

Besides, /l/ varies with /r/ as in *mmiri* or *mmili*. Example: *Mmiri na-ezo n'Agulụ mana o naghị ezo na Nanka; mmili na-ezo n'Agulụ mana o naghị ezo na Nanka*, (There is rainfall in Agulu, but it is not so in Nanka).

In addition, /l/ varies with /n/ as in *elu/ala* or *enu/ana*. Example: *Elu na ala maara na aka m dī ọcha; enu na ana maara na aka m dī ọcha*. (Heaven and earth knows that my hands are clean).

All the same, /f/ varies with /fi/ as in *Ifeakandụ* or *Iheakandụ*. Example: *Aha nna ya bụ Ifeakandụ; Aha nna ya bụ Iheakandụ*. (His father's name is Ifeakandụ/Iheakandụ).

At the same time, /r/ varies with /j/ as in *arịrịọ* or *ayịyịọ*. Example: *Biko rịọbara anyị arịrịọ; Biko yịọbara anyị ayịyịọ*. (Please pray for us).

By and large, the following free variants are common to all the communities in Aguata dialect. They are /fi/ and /l/, /l/ and /r/, /l/ and /n/, /f/ and /fi/, /r/ and /j/.

### **Conclusion**

At the end of this research, termed “Free Variation in Aguata Dialect of Igbo”, the researcher was able to accomplish the aim of undergoing the study. At the end, the researcher was able to establish that free variation exists in Aguata dialect of Igbo. Some free variants exist in some communities, whereas they do not exist in other communities of the same dialect. Besides, it was discovered that there are free variants which are common to all the communities in Aguata dialect.

### **Recommendations**

At the end of the research, the researcher recommends for further studies to be carried out in the following areas: The influence of geographical factors on free variation in Aguata dialect of Igbo, and free variation in Orumba dialect of Igbo.

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