

IGBO VOWEL ELISION: A DISTINCTIVE FEATURE OF OPI NSUKKA DIALECT OF ENUGU STATE

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Abstract

This work pays attention to Vowel elision variation in standard Igbo and Opi dialect of Nsukka local Government Area of Enugu state. This was made possible through systematic participatory and non-participatory observation of the speakers' use of the language and dialect in natural situations. The specific objective was to identify the distinctiveness of Opi vowel elision. Attention was focused on the vowel deletion in Opi dialect. In Opi dialect unlike the standard Igbo, vowel elision is highly common and sometimes results to words without vowel which is strange to standard Igbo. It was research is set out to find the pattern of this elision variation. From the research, it was discovered that the Vowel elision variation of Opi dialect from that of the standard Igbo follows some patterns. It does not happen indiscriminately. Finally, the researcher made suggestion that more researches should be conducted in Opi dialect paying attention to social factors like age and status.

Keywords: *vowel, dialect, variation, Igbo, Opi.*

Introduction

1.1: Background of the Study

Igbo the mother tongue of the Igbo people is one of the three major national languages in Nigeria. The other two are Hausa and Yoruba, hence Nigeria is operating three national languages. Azuonye (2002) as cited in Egwuonwu (2016:79) states that Igbo as the native language of the Igbo people has over 20million speakers around the world. Igbo is one of the eight major languages in the Benue Congo group of African languages and has been classified as a member of the 'Kwa' subgroup of the Niger-Congo family.

Igbo has several dialects and it is spoken in all the states in Igbo land. They are Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Abia, Ebonyi and some parts of Delta and Rivers states. According to Egwuonwu (2016:79), it is also recognized as a minority language of Equatorial Guinea. It is also written in the Latin script which was introduced by the British colonialist. As we have stated earlier, Igbo has many dialects. Some put it to be up to thirty dialects, some of which are not mutually intelligible. For the most parts, however, differences are lexical and phonological (Ethnologue) (<http://www.mustgo.com>>Igbo).

As a result of these many dialects, there are various ways to spell and pronounce the same word in different dialects. It is noted that there are different grammar rules and letters in Igbo dialects (<http://ezinaulo.com>). Some Igbo dialects include Nsukka, Onitsha, Owerri, Abakaliki, Umuahia and so on. It is pertinent to note that within these major dialects mentioned and some not mentioned, there are sub dialects, for example in Nsukka there are many sub dialects as there are towns. The way an Opi person speaks is not the way Edeoballa person speaks and the same applies to other towns in Nsukka senatorial zone. For this, this research concentrates on Opi dialect and how it deviates from the standardized Igbo language both phonologically and lexically. It will go further to identify the rules leading to the phonological deviations.

This standardized Igbo dialect is not taken from one dialect of Igbo. According to Ezikeojiaku (1989), the standardized Igbo is taken from dialects like Owerri, Umuahia and other Igbo dialects. In spite of the numerous dialects, the standardized Igbo language is understood by virtually every Igbo native speaker not minding the native dialect.

According to Egwuonwu (2016:79),

Igbo displays considerable dialects variation yet without ever seriously hampering immediate mutual intelligibility. 'Igbo niilena-asun'olun'oluotu'.

According to Achebe and Nga'ang'a(2007), "Linguists recognize up to five major dialect clusters and more than fifteen main Igbo dialects in existence". They accepted that studies on Igbo dialectology are ongoing and asserted that the final number is likely to be higher. Many Igbo linguists have devoted their time to the study of their own dialects or some other popular dialects resulting in the fact that some dialects have remained largely unstudied. One of such dialects is the Opi dialect of a sub – dialect of Nsukka in Enugu state.

Nwozuzu (2008) grouped Igbo language into eight major groups. She states that "the study does not make any pretentious claim of being perfect or final (Nwozuzu 2008:132). Upon all the numerous studies going on in Igbo dialects, little or none has been done in Opi dialect.

The scientific interest in the study of Igbo language began quite early in the nineteenth century in missionary circle in Sierra Leone where knowledge of African languages were seen as a necessary tool in the bid to evangelize the continent (Afigbo 1981:355). According to Afigbo, this interest had come to take deep root by the middle of the century. Between 1852 and 1900, over ten works had been published in Igbo language mainly by missionaries and their aides. Most of the books were grammar books, word lists and collection of proverbs, while the rest were translation of the Bible into various dialects of the language.

The study of Igbo language and grammar in particular started many years ago. The early writers of the Igbo grammar books were foreigners. In 1861, Shaw published Grammatical Elements of the Igbo Language. In 1882, Crowder produced Vocabulary of the Igbo language. In 1892, Spenser produced A Small Ibo Grammar and in 1901, A first Grammar of Ibo Language. Three years later, Crowder's Original primer was enlarged into two volumes reader, Ibo Reader I and II (Emenyonu 1978:23). In spite of the early beginning in the writing of Igbo grammar, studies in Igbo grammar had a slow growth. Among the reasons for the slow growth could be attributed to the orthography controversy which existed between the missionaries and the inability of the Igbo mother-tongue speakers to accept a particular dialect as a standard Igbo. Another reason was lack of interest by the Igbo native speakers to research into their language. Igbo native speakers especially the elites embraced English language so much that they preferred speaking it to speaking Igbo. In fact an educated Igbo man was a man who could speak English fluently, a situation which obtained among other Nigerians as Fafunwa attests:

Throughout most of the colonial period 1842-1959, Nigerian formal education was fashioned after the English system of education. The preferred accent was in English and for one to be regarded educated Nigerian he or she must be one whose only African identity was in colour but English in thought and culture. Fafunwa (1990:9) stated that the hallmark of excellence was the ability to speak English fluently and if possible with Oxford accent even if the speaker was empty of thought and ideas no one cares. He further stated that an illiterate who could speak English was considered educated even though he could not read or write while a well cultured Yoruba, Hausa, Edo or Ibo etc who could read and write in his mother-tongue was considered illiterate Fafunwa (1990:9).

It was very strange some years ago to see a graduate of Igbo. Even now some still wonder why someone should go to the University to study Igbo not to talk of researching in a particular Igbo dialect. Thanks to the national policy on Education (NPE 2004) that made the study of Igbo and other major Nigerian languages compulsory in secondary school, (NPE 1989). This policy has made the graduates of Igbo language highly marketable. More people are now showing interest in Igbo language studies, though much of the interest is in the field of literature and culture.

Statement of the Problem

Opi dialect of Igbo in Nsukka local government has overtime shown deviation in aspects of speech especially in phonological and lexical forms. Prominent among this deviation is in the area of vowel

deletion. This may have contributed to the reason why attention of the researchers have not been drawn to this dialect. There is no known serious study on this distinct features of Opi dialect which is vowel deletion. Nsukka dialect and Opi in particular has overtime proved very difficult for many other Igbo speaking people to understand. This may be as a result of deviation from the standardized norm especially in the area of vowel deletion. This motivated the researcher to go into this research work.

Theoretical Framework

The grammatical theory used in this work is that popularly known as Transformational Generative Grammar (T.G). Since this theory is well known by linguists, the researcher will only give a brief summary of it. This pattern of grammatical description which goes under various names such as Transformational grammar, Transformational generative grammar or simply generative grammar was first proposed by an American linguist Noam Chomsky. T.G as an analytic technique of grammatical description was formally stated in Noam Chomsky's book named Syntactic structures of 1957.

Of all the theories of grammatical description, T.G has been described as the most influential and revolutionary because it has increased the influence of many in the field of syntax and phonology with many new results obtained in the field as well (Lester, 1973) as cited in (Eze, 2022: 28).

Generative phonology is also adopted within the framework of generative grammar. For the transformational grammarian, the basic goal of linguistics is to account to not only how speakers use their language but also what they know about their language. This work is modelled on the above mentioned grammatical theory.

Study Population

The target population for this study comprises of forty (40) OPI native speakers. Ten (10) selected from each of the four autonomous communities that make up Opi Town and twenty (20) from standard Igbo speakers. The standard Igbo speakers were selected from among Igbo teachers in primary and secondary schools in the town, ten (10) of who are not native of Opi. The four communities that make up Opi town as already mentioned in the introduction of this research are:

- Agu Opi
- Idi Opi
- Ibeku Opi
- Ogbozara Opi

Sample and Sampling Technique

Sample for this study will comprise of interview gotten from forty (40) Opi native speakers and Twenty (20) standard Igbo speakers. To obtain the adequate representation of the population, the random sample technique was used in selecting the respondents from each of the communities.

Data Collection Technique

Respondents were randomly selected and interviewed. These selected respondents represent all the combinations; ages: (older and younger speakers), region (Idi Opi, Ibeku Opi, Ogbozara Opi and Opi Agu) and language variety (standard Igbo and Opi dialect speakers).

On the basis of age, the younger are in the age range of 18-40 while the older are in the age range of 41-80 years. The speakers cover people from different types of occupation and levels of education. Their speeches were collected under different circumstances and places.

Greater percentage of texts used in this study was elicited from native speakers of Opi dialect. Setting up a research design capable of providing a data necessary to the solution of problems is the major responsibility of a researcher. A successful completion of a study depends on the adequate planning and the carrying out of the plan stated.

Again a research of this nature like any other sociolinguistic research considers that collection of text needs finding actual speakers who will be interested in participating for a long time. Direct opportunity for direct observation although of a limited sample of behavior is required in this research technique.

Validation of Data

To ensure the accuracy of data, data organization and documentation were done. All data sets were checked to avoid duplicates and errors and data were arranged in sets.

In effect, our data were taken mainly from primary and secondary sources. In drawing data from the primary sources, the researcher made use of oral interview, and personal observation. As for secondary sources the researcher made use of consultation of journals, unpublished works, books, research works, internet, conference papers, etc.

Again the researcher made use of compilation of Opi dialect word list and that of the standard Igbo. These are personal observations as trained Igbo linguist who is a native speaker of Opi dialect who also speaks standard Igbo fluently and English, as a second language.

Reliability of Data

The most common way to measure parallel forms reliability is to produce a large set of questions to evaluate the same thing and divide these randomly into two question sets. The same group of respondents answers both sets and the correlation between the results given.

In the case of this research, the same interview was thrown to different people from four different communities in Opi town and the same results were realized.

Methodology

In this study, sociolinguistic approach where the researcher interviewed and recorded the speech of the respondents in their natural conditions in order to get the sociolinguistic factors responsible for their variation in speech. This method was adopted for the following reasons:

The synchronic approach, which is an alternative to diachronic method is aided by invention of the tape recorder and this allows the collection of a permanent record of someone’s speech for study of language change. While diachronic technique approach allows the collection of data only one point in time. The data collected within the same linguistic community came from people of different ages and social groups.

We have a lot of advantages of taking this approach for the study. One, a considerable more representative sample of the speech patterns of a community will be gotten from the tape recorded language data than the manuscript data gotten from the traditional historical linguistics.

Vowel Elision in Opi Nsukka Dialect

Vowel elision is the dropping out of vowel during speech. Emenanjo (1978:26) observes, “vowel elision is limited in standard Igbo’ in Opi dialect, it is not so. It is one of the major characteristics of the dialect. While vowel elision is limited in standard Igbo, it is highly pronounced in Nsukka dialects in general and Opi dialect in particular.

Opi dialect reflects peculiar vowel elision that is not obtainable in standard Igbo as we can demonstrate below:

Vowel Final Position Deletion

S/N	Opi Dialect	Standard Igbo	Gloss
1.	Rir	Riri	Ate
2.	B	Bi	Live
3.	Nwer	Nwere	Has/have
4.	Jer	Jere	Went
5.	Gar	Gara	Went
6.	B	bụ	Is
7.	Biar	Biara	Came
8.	Chọr	Chọrọ	Want
9.	Lar	Lara	Went home

10.	Kwar	Kwara	Cried
11.	Nyer	Nyere	Gave
12.	Mer	Mere	Did
13.	Kwur	Kwuru	Said
14.	Tir	Tiri	Beat
15.	Tar	Tara	Chewed
16.	Ler	Lere	Looked
17.	Tor	Toro	Praised
18.	Der	Dere	Wrote
19.	Maar	Maara	Knew
20.	kp̄or	kp̄or̄o	Called

The data shows a distinct deletions in Igbo vowel common to Nsukka dialect of Enugu state of Igbo. This type of structure is distinct in that many writers and the belief of many before now is that Igbo words do not end in consonant. This brings a sharp difference in the choice of sounds used by the Nsukka dialect speakers and standard Igbo speakers. Whereas the standard Igbo speaker retains the final vowels of the words as seen above, the final vowel of the words are deleted by the Opi and other Nsukka dialect speakers.

This is one of major distinct features of Opi Nsukka dialect and the same goes to many other dialects in Nsukka dialect community in Enugu state of Nigeria. Vowel elision in Nsukka dialect and Opi in particular defiles some rules that were known to Igbo vowel elision. In the above examples, we have some words without a vowel as in examples 2 and 6 and we will see more examples of this as we go further. This remains a very important finding on the account of the fact that, most Igbo dialects including the standard Igbo which we take as a model here do not usually end verbs with a consonant. Opi dialect also demonstrated a strange case a lone consonant standing as a word, as in /b/ and /g/ meaning 'is' and 'you' respectively. From the observation, the elision cannot be attributed to speed of speech during interaction, but simply to the nature of the Opi dialect. The vowel elision are common in indicating past tense.

Morpheme Medial and Final Position Vowel Elision Variation

S/N	Opi Dialect	Standard Igbo	Gloss
21.	br	bur̄u	Was
22.	lr	lur̄u	Married
23.	mr	mur̄u	Learnt/born
24.	sr	Jere	Went
25.	Gar	Gara	Went
26.	B	b̄u	Is
27.	Bjar	Bjara	Came
28.	Par	Para	Carry
39.	Lar	Lara	Went home
30.	Ch̄or	Ch̄or̄o	Want
31.	Kwar	Kwara	Cried
32.	Nyer	Nyere	Gave
33.	Mer	Mere	Did
34.	Kwur	Kwuru	Said
35.	Tir	Tiri	Beat
36.	Tar	Tara	Chewed
37.	Ler	Lere	Looked
38.	Tor	Toro	Praised
39.	Der	Dere	wrote
40.	Mar	Mara	Knew
41.	kp̄or	kp̄or̄o	Called

42.	g	gi	You
43.	b	bū	is

The data shows a variation in the choice of sounds used by the Opi dialect speakers and standard Igbo speakers retain the final vowels of the words as seen above, the final vowel of the words are deleted by the Opi dialect speakers.

This makes the Opi dialect peculiar in the area of vowel elision. This remains a very important finding on the account of the fact that, most Igbo dialects including the standard Igbo which we are comparing here do not usually end verbs with a consonant.

Opi dialect also demonstrated a strange case of single consonants standing as words, as in b and g meaning ‘is’ and ‘you’ respectively. From the observation, the elision cannot be attributed to speed of speech during interaction, but simply to the nature of the dialect. In indicating past tense, vowel elision in the final position is common.

Morpheme Medial and Final Position Vowel Elision Variation

S/N	Opi Dialect	Standard Igbo	Gloss
44.	br	buru	was
45.	lr	luru	married
46.	mr	muru	learnt/born
47.	sr	siri	said
48.	br	Biri	lived/resided
49.	nwr	nwuru	died
50.	shr	Siri	cooked
51.	chr	chiri	laughed
52.	gbr	gburu	killed
53.	kpr	kpuru	carved

From the above data, Opi dialect is a classic case of consonant cluster in Igbo dialect which is strange in standard Igbo. In standard Igbo, consonant cluster is not permitted; rather, they are broken by a vowel. The Opi dialect speakers demonstrated a unique case of consonant cluster in the construction as listed in data 3.8 above.

Consonant Lengthening and Vowel Silence Variation

This is another feature of Opi dialect that is not in standard Igbo. Some words in Opi demonstrates consonant lengthening and the dropping of the following vowel as we can see in the following imperatives.

S/N	Opi Dialect	Standard Igbo	Gloss
54.	f:a	puo	Go
55.	gbaf:	gbapu	Run away
56.	par:	Para	Carry
57.	vr	Vr:	Carry
58.	mr:	muru	Learn
59.	wer:	were	Take

Vowel Final Elision Variation

While in standard Igbo, the most common elision is vowel medial. In Opi dialect, to indicate past tense, the final vowel elides from the verb. See the following verbs.

S/N	Opi Dialect	Standard Igbo	Gloss
50.	jer	jere	went
51.	rir	Riri	ate

52.	gar	gara	went
53.	mer	mere	did
54.	lar	Lara	went home
55.	shir	Siri	cooked
56.	whur	hurur	saw
57.	ler	Lere	looked
58.	as	asi	lie
59.	gbar	gbara	ran
60.	tor	toro	praised
61.	kwur	kwuru	said
62.	sar	sara	washed
63.	jur	jurur	rejected
64.	kwer	kweere	accepted
65.	piar	piara	flogged
66.	luer	Loro	swallowed
67.	chor	choro	wanted/wants
68.	par	para	carry
69.	rior	yoro	pleaded
70.	chir	chiri	laughed
71.	kwur	kwuru	said
72.	nwer	nwere	has/have
73.	tar	tara	chewed
74.	noor	nooro	stayed
75.	Keler	kelere	greeted
76.	cheer	cheere	waited
77.	goshir	gosiri	showed
78.	Ztar	zutara	bought
79.	Der	dere	wrote
80.	kpor	kporo	called
81.	Gr	guru	read

Vowel Medial and Final Elision Variation

Whereas standard Igbo has vowel medial elision as a result of fast speech, vowel medial and final variation is common in Opi dialect. In the case of Opi dialect, it is not as a result of fast speech. It is the nature of the language as they are in the following words.

S/N	Opi Dialect	Standard Igbo	Gloss
82.	ugr:	uguru	harmattan
83.	okwr:	okwuru	okro
84.	atr:	aturu	sheep
85.	nwr:	nwuru	died
86.	vr:	buru	carry
87.	mr:	nwuru	born
88.	Br	biri	lived
89.	fr:	puru	left

As we can see above, the consonant is stressed instead of inserting the vowel. The standard Igbo has no vowel final elision.

Non-Vowel Words Variation

In the Standard Igbo, the only non-vowels word is in when it serves as a pronoun, but in Opi dialect, the non-vowel words are common. At the same time, consonant cluster is common in Opi dialect unlike in

the standard Igbo. At the same time, one consonant word is also common in Opi dialect. This is not in Standard Igbo. All these variable characteristics of Opi dialect are demonstrated below:

S/N	Opi Dialect	Standard Igbo	Gloss
90.	m	M	me
91.	N	Nye	give
●23.	mr	muru	born
92.	gr	guru	read
93.	br	Biri	lived
94.	vr	Buru	carry
95.	G	gi	you
96.	gbr:	gburu	killed
97.	nwr	nwuru	died
●81.	gr	guru	sang
99.	Tr	Tiri	beat
100.	Jr	Jiri	caught
101.	kpr	kpuru	draw
102.	chr	chiri	laughed

A thorough study of the above sill shows that Opi dialect unlike the standard Igbo does not permit the vowel sound to precede /r/ sound in verb formation. Where a vowel is to come after /r/ sound, in word final the vowel will elide in Opi verb formation especially in indicating past perfect. This also affects some nouns; but it is a rule in Opi past perfect word formation. We can see some affected nouns. The only vowel that replaces /r/ is /a/.

S/N	Opi Dialect	Standard Igbo	Gloss
103.	Ugr	uguru	harmatan
104.	okwur	okwuru	okro
105.	Atr	aturu	sheep
106.	Rur	ruru	reached
107.	chor	choro	wants
108.	Par	para	carry
109.	Wer	were	take

Some Rules

In Opi dialect, unlike the standard Igbo, rv that is r + vowel final, the final vowel is always silent. This is more common in verbs.

Fv that is 'f' + vowel is not obtainable in Opi dialect. It is either the vowel remains silent or the 'f' replaced with 'h' or 'wh' as demonstrated below:

S/N	Opi Dialect	Standard Igbo	Gloss
110	Par	Para	carry
111	Wer	Were	take
112	Iwhe	Ifo	folktale
113	Awha	afo	year
114	Whaa	fofo	squeeze

None Vowel words in Opi Dialect

One notable characteristics of the Standard Igbo is non-consonant cluster except syllabic nasals 'm' 'n' that can go before labial sounds (Emenanjo, 1978: xxii). In contrary, in Opi dialect, consonant cluster is not only with syllabic nasals and the labials sounds but the sound /r/ goes with any Igbo consonant to indicate past perfect as we can see in the following:

S/N	Opi Dialect	Standard Igbo	Gloss
●23.	Mr	muru	learnt
●89.	Fr	puru	went out
●81.	Gr	guru	read
105.	Jr	Jiri	caught

All non-vowel words in Opi dialect are examples of consonant cluster.

However, one sound word in the case of 'm' for the pronoun 'me is the same in both standard Igbo and Opi dialect. Other one consonant word also exists in Opi dialect.

In Opi dialect, it is not only /r/ and syllabic nasal that can go with other consonants. See the following:

S/N	Opi Dialect	Standard Igbo	Gloss
103.	Gn	gini	what
104.	Mnyi	Mmiri	water
105.	Bg	bughi	is not
106.	Fg	enweghi ike	cannot
107.	Mdg	mughi	did not born
108.	Rig	righi	did not eat
109.	Ridg	righi	did not eat

Consonant cluster is not common in nouns and that is why we could not get many examples in noun formation. It is common in negation formation in Opi dialect. We will see that of negation variation in this research. As we have said earlier, cluster of syllabic nasals with bilabials and some other consonants is common in both standard Igbo and Opi dialect as follows.

S/N	Opi Dialect	Standard Igbo	Gloss
110.	ncha	ncha	soap
112.	nkàtà	nkàtà	basket
113.	mp:	mpi	horn
114.	mpì	mkpì	he goat
115.	Ñkàtá	ńkàtá	discussion
116.	ntakiri	ntakiri	small
117.	ngbo	ngbo	bullet
118.	ngwongwo	ngwongwo	pepper soup
119.	Nga	nga	prison

Conclusion.

From the research, it could be concluded that vowel elision variation is a distinctive feature in Opi dialect; hence this varies drastically from what is obtainable in the standard Igbo. There are differences in pronunciation of some words as a result of existence of distinctive vowel elision in Opi dialect that is not the same in the standard Igbo. Again, there are some variations rules in formation of some words as a result of vowel deletion. None vowel words are common in Opi dialect which does not exist in standard Igbo with the exception of syllabic nasal 'm'. However, despite the differences Opi dialect speakers understand the standard Igbo and at the same time the Igbo standard speakers understand Opi dialect.

The study shows that Opi dialect unlike the standard Igbo does not permit the vowel sound to precede /r/ sound in verb formation in word final. Where a vowel is to come after /r/ sound, in word final, the vowel will elide in Opi verb formation especially in indicating past perfect. We also conclude that the variations in Opi dialect do not hinder mutual intelligibility in the speakers of the forms.

Recommendations

The researcher recommends that more studies on other Igbo dialects and Opi dialect which is understudied should be made. The dialects should not be allowed to die, hence the death of a dialect like death of language is death of people's culture. Death of a dialect or language is the death of a culture

and knowledge that dialect or language expresses. The researcher also recommends that more researches should be done on Opi dialect investigating age variation and use of Opi dialect.

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