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**SOCIAL FACTOR IN THE SPEECH OF THE OPI SPEAKERS OF NSUKKA DIALECT OF IGBO**

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**Abstract**

Many factors determine the choice of linguistic items employed by speakers of a particular language or dialect. Such factors may be age, geographical location, social status, sex and roles. The mentioned linguistic items could be sound or grammar of the particular language or dialect. Since among the Igbo, dialect of Igbo spoken at Nsukka senatorial zone is referred to as Nsukka dialect of Igbo. We will refer to the Igbo spoken in Opi as sub-Nsukka dialect in this paper. The researcher analyses the variation patterns in the speech of two different social classes of the Opi sub-dialect of Nsukka dialect of Igbo. Among the alternations identified are /ɛ/ and /a/, /ny/ and /y/, /r/ and /ny/ /s/ and /ʃ/ but /w/ /b/ to mention but a few. While opi make use of eight standard Igbo vowel, it also has extra vowel, it also as extra vowel sound /ɛ/ which in most cases alternate with /a/. At the same time while Opi makes use of standard Igbo consonant sounds, it does not accept /gh/ /n/ but the sound /wh/ which does not exist in standard Igbo.

**Key words:** social variables, language choice, dialect

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**Introduction**

Opi sub-dialect of Nsukka is one of the numerous sub-dialects of Nsukka. Opi is in Nsukka East of Enugu State Nigeria. Opi comprises four autonomous communities such as Idiopi, Ogbozara Opi, Ibeku Opi and Agụ Opi.

The Opi sub-dialect is among the sub-dialects of Nsukka that records nine phonemic vowels and twenty seven consonants. These two characteristic difference the Opi sub-dialect from other sub-dialects of Nsukka.

In most cases, we just say Nsukka dialect but within Nsukka dialect there are differences. Here, we are not treating Nsukka as a whole, rather we concentrate in Opi in Nsukka local government area.

The oral vowels occur in all environments (word initial, medial and final positions) in the dialect. The dialect unlike the standard Igbo that has eight vowels has nine vowels and they are /a ị ụ ọ e i u o ɛ/. The vowel sound /ɛ/ only appear at word initial and alternates with /a/. This will be explained later in this paper. Conversely, there are twenty seven phonemic consonants which mainly occur in word initial, medial and final position. We will see this as we go further. The dialect accepts all the standard Igbo consonants excluding gh and n but has a consonant /wh/ which does not exist in standard Igbo consonant sounds. We observe in this research that some of these sounds currently alternate with each othr in certain environments in the sub-dialect depending on the social status of the speaker.

The foregoing observation implies that even within a given age group. Geographical location or sex in Op, noticeable pattern of variation may be identified. This establishes Wolff (2000:311) statement that geographical location of a speaker is not the only determinant for differences in speech habits and pattern. He added that age, sex, occupation or any social factor can bring a difference in the linguistic behaviour of speakers. Similar sources of variations have also been identified by Yule (1996: 227 – 228), Hudson (1980:43), Chambers and Trudgil (1980:57), Wardhaugh (2002:133), Fromkin et al (2003:445) and Alerechi and George (2013: 226 – 236).

This research has attempted to provide further evidence that variation is certain and a natural phenomenon in human language considering that human being is a social animal. As identified by Alerechi and George (2013: 227). “Even in a society with a relatively homogenous linguistic form, noticeable differences exist to mark out one speaker from the other. In Opi Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State, it is observed that certain linguistic items help to identify the social status of the speakers. Identification of the differences in speech in different social classes is the main focus of this paper. It attempted a descriptive analysis of the variation pattern recorded in the speech of the educated and illiterates speakers of Opi sub dialect of Nsukka. Identify the differences in sound of Opi sub-dialect and that of standard Igbo with a view to ease the understanding Nsukka dialects by people from other geographical areas of Igbo land. At the same time identify the phonological processes in operation with a view to exposing the gradual way language changes over-time as a result of social class shift.

**Dialect and Language**

Language is popularly described as a means of communication. Looking at dialect and language, both are means of communication however they are not exactly the same. Jamal stated that language is afforded more prestige because they are given a title, a nation and a cannon and literature that give its status. Linguists define language as the standardized code used in spoken and written form while dialects are spoken vernacular codes without standardized written system. We can define dialects as a varieties of a language that been spoken overtime and in different geographical locations.

Nsukka is a dialect of Igbo. In Nsukka dialect, we have sub- dialects which Opi is one. Listening very to Nsukka dialect, one will discover that virtually every town in Nsukka speak differently. This study is focused on the study of Opi sub dialect and the difference between the speech of the educated who have travelled and the illiterates who never lived outside the town

**Location of Opi Town**

Opi is a town in the present Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu state, Nigeria. According Eze (1985:1), it has a population of about twenty million people. Opi has a large land area and is the most extensive area in Igbo- Ishii which is made up of Opi, Ede – Oballa, Ekwegbe, Leja, Ozalla and Ohodo. It comes next in population after Aku and Enugu- Ezike in the present Nsukka zone. Opi was made up of three major quarters. The quarters are Idi, Ibeku and Ọgbọzara. Presently, the three quarters have become four autonomous communities. They are Idi, Ọgbọzara, Ibeku and Opi – Agụ. In describing this part of the Northern Igbo land, Eze(1985:2) classified fourteen communities of Nsukka zone as Enugu sub – cultural group of the Northern Igbo. This sub – cultural group of which is one, may be regarded as forming the arrow head of Igbo drive Northwards into the wooded savanna of the middle Belt.

**Data Collection**

The people from whom the data for this study were collected comprises two groups. These are: the literates and the illiterates. The literates here range from those with at least secondary school education to university education. Professionally, office clerks, primary and secondary school teacher, college of education and university lecturers, senior and junior staff of state and local government offices. On the other hand, the illiterates are made up of those who have never received any formal education and primary school drop outs. They are professionally the local farmers, artisans, garage boys, commercial motorcycle riders and housewives. The age range of both first and second groups is within 18 – 70 years. A total of sixty words were collected for this study.

Analysing the items collected, twenty of them manifested some pattern of variation, fifteen of which are phonological while seven are lexical. If we convert these items into simple percentage, we can say that those with variation is 36.67% while those common to the two groups of speakers of Opi sub-dialect of Nsukka is 63.33. The focus of this research is on the existing pattern affecting the phonological features (vowels and consonants) and lexical items in the speech of both literate and illiterate speakers of Opi sub-dialect of Nsukka. This no doubt, this study will serve as a contribution to the study of Nsukka dialect and Opi in particular. It is additional evidence to the study of variation and will be useful to the comparative linguist for further studies in Nsukka dialect and dialects of other languages.

**Igbo Vowels**

As we noted earlier, the standard Igbo vowels are eight as follows

e i u o a ị ụ o

while that of Opi and Nsukka dialects in general are nine as follows

e i u o a ị u o ɛ.

Looking at the first four of the standard Igbo vowels, they are heavy vowels while the second four are light vowels. Igbo is a language that obey the rules of vowel harmony. This is no other thing except that in formation of most of the Igbo words heavy vowels go together while light vowels go together.

For example: aka (hand) anyụ (axe)

ụkwụ (leg) ọnụ (mouth)

abụ (poem) ọgwụ (drug)

àkwà (bed)

The above listed words are formed with light vowels. Let us see the following ugwu (hill), obi (chest), isi (head), eke (market), oche (chair), ute (mat), imi (nose), ubi (farm), ude (cream)

The above listed words have vowels selected from heavy vowels.

Looking at the Nsukka vowels, the ɛ vowel which is not found in the standard Igbo is grouped with the light vowels making the light vowels in Opi and at the same time Nsukka dialect five. This is because it goes together with light vowels in word formation. Its activities will be explained further below.

**/ɛ/ vowel sound in Opi**

The sound /ɛ/ in the place á (high tone) is the initial vowel and the next vowel is the same high tone. It is more common in two syllable words but not restricted to it. See the following:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Standard Igbo** | **Opi Sub-dialect of Nsukka** |
| (i) | Áká (hand) | Éká (hand) |
| (ii) | Ányá (eye) | Enyá (eye) |
| (iii) | Ányụ ( ) | Ényụ ( ) |
| (iv) | Ákwú (palm fruit) | Ékwú (palm fruit) |
| (v) | Ánwú (bee) | Énwụ (bee) |
| (vi) | Àkwá (egg) | Èkwá (egg) |

We can see where /ɛ/ vowel sound appear where it stands in place of á. We can also see exception in the case of àkwù where the two vowel sounds /à/ are low tone. This could be because the word àkwà (bed) is borrowed from other dialects. The original name for bed in Opi dialect is ógòdó (bed). As we mentioned earlier, the /ɛ/ vowel sound is not restricted to two syllable words as we can see from the following words.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Standard Igbo** | **Opi Sub-dialect of Nsukka** |
| (vii) | ákwụkwọ (book) | Ékwúkwó (book) |
| (viii) | Ányánwụ (sun) | ényánwụ (sun) |
| (ix) | Ákwárà (muscle) | Ékwárà (muscle) |
| (x) | Ákụkwù (epilepsy) | Ékwúkwù (epilepsy) |
| (xi) | Ányási (evening) | Ényási (evening) |

In examples i – v /ɛ/ vowel sound appeared where á (high tone) is word initial followed by high tone vowel. However, we observe deviation in vi àkwà which we attributed to borrowing. In the case of x and xi àkwúkwù (epilepsy) and ànyási (evening), we absolute deviation with no known reason. The word initials are not high tone sound unlike many others. However, this can be subjected to further research. We have seen a little insight on how the /ɛ/ vowel sound work in Opi and Nsukka dialect in general.

**Vowel Variation**

The vowel of Opi alternate with each other in the speech of illiterates and the literate speakers. The vowel alternations in the dialect show variation in the morpheme initial, medial and final positions of words in the language. Here, we present alternations based on their positions in the following:

**Variation of Vowel in Morpheme Initial Position**

The Opi sub-Nsukka dialect, vowel variation in morpheme initial position reflects the alternation between open front unrounded vowel /a/ and half close front unrounded vowel /ɛ/ as demonstrated in the data below:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Literates** | **Illiterates** | **Gloss** |
| (i) | Ákwà | Ékwá | Cloth |
| (ii) | Ányá | Ényá | Eye |
| (iii) | Ákwá | Ékwá | Cry |
| (iv) | Áká | Éká | Hand |
| (v) | Átú | Étú | Chewing stick |
| (vi) | ákwụkwọ | ékwụkwó | Book |
| (vii) | Anyasi | Enyas | Evening |
| (viii) | Ájá | Éjá | Sand |

In the examples above, while the educated tend to move towards the standard Igbo by making the choice of /a/ in the words the uneducated tend to stick to the /ɛ/ sound in the morpheme initials. Vowel variation in morpheme media position reflects in form of elision. This will be discussed.

**Variation of Vowel in Morpheme Final Position**

In addition to variation of vowel in morpheme initial position, vowel variation in morpheme final position is also observed in the speech of literates and illiterates. The variation comes between /e/ and /a/ as follows:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Literates** | **Illiterates** | **Gloss** |
| (i) | Rie | Ria | Eat |
| (ii) | áfọ | Áwà | Year |

**Vowel Elision Variation**

As Emenanjo (1978:26) observed, “vowel elision implies disappearance of vowel”; while vowel elision is limited in standard Igbo, it is highly pronounced in Nsukka dialect in general and Opi sub-dialect of Nsukka in particular.

In the case of the two groups examined here, while vowel elision is recorded in the morpheme medial and final position among illiterates that of the literates are opposite as we demonstrate in the following:

**Morpheme Final Position Elision Variation**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Literates** | **Illiterates** | **Gloss** |
| (i) | Riri | Rir | Ate |
| (ii) | Biara | Bar | Came |
| (iii) | Jere | Jer | Went |
| (iv) | Para | Par | Carry |
| (v) | Lara | Lar | Went home |
| (vi) | Nwere | Nwer | Have/has |
| (vii) | chọrọ | chọr | Want |
| (viii) | Nyere | Nyer | Gave |
| (ix) | Mere | Mer | Did |

The data shows a variation in the choice of sounds used by literate Opi and Nsuka speakers and illiterate speakers. Whereas the literate speakers retain the final vowel of the words as seen in rthe standard Igbo variety, the initial vowels are deleted by illiterate speakers. This is an important finding on account of the fact that, most Igbo dialects including the standard variety do not end verbs wit a consonant. The elision cannnot be attributed to speed of speech during interaction, but simply to the nature of the dialect.

**Morpheme Medial and Final Position Elision Variation**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Literates** | **Illiterates** | **Gloss** |
| (i) | bụrụ | Br | Be |
| (ii) | lụrụ | Lr | Marry |
| (iii) | mụrụ | Mr | Learnt/born |
| (iv) | Siri | Sr | Said |
| (v) | gị | G | You |
| (vi) | Ala | Al | Land |

From the above, while we have words without vowels spoken by illiterates who have not so much travelled or mixed with people from other dialects, the educated probably as a result of mixture with other dialects and reading tend to shift towards the standard Igbo. Tis is a classic case of consonant cluster in an Igbo dialect. In standard Igbo, consonant clusters are not allowed; rather, they are broken by a vowel. The illiterarte Opi and Nsuka speakers demonstrated a unique case of consonant cluster in the following constructions: /br/, /lr/, /mr/, /sr/, and a strange case of a lone consonant standing as a word /g/ durin articulation.0

**Consonant Variation**

While we observed from the above data that most of the two syllable verbs end with a consonant morpheme, initial and medial position are also recorded as follows:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Literates** | **Illiterates** | **Gloss** |
| (i) | Áfò | Awha | Year |
| (ii) | Mmiri | Munyi | Water |
| (iii) | Ezi | Eshi | Pig |
| (iv) | Isii | Ishii | Size |
| (v) | Ehi | Eshu | Cow |
| (vi) | Isi | Ishi | Head |
| (vii) | nụọ | nwụọ | Drink |
| (viii) | Ághá | Áyá | War |

The data shows a variation in consonant use between illiterate and literate Opi and Nsuka speakers. It is evident that the literate speakers’ choice of consonants in the examples above reflects the standard Igbo variety. It could be posited that, while literate Opi and Nsuka speakers have shifted to the standard Igbo variety, the illiterate speakers have retained their regional variety in their speech. However, there are phonological symmetry observed in the two varieties; apart from /*afo*/-/*awha*/, and /*mmiri*/-/*munyi*/, the rest of the examples show phonological similarity between the two consonant varieties.

**Lexical Variation**

Apart from phonological variation treated, we also recorded variation involving lexical items as follows:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Literates** | **Illiterates** | **Gloss** |
| (i) | Unere | Omu | Banana |
| (ii) | Ogede | Jaara | Plantain |
| (iii) | Akwa | Ogodo | Bed |
| (iv) | mmuọ | Maa | Spirit |

Not much can be recorded in the aspect of lexical variation hence most of the variation are phonological. In this instance also, the lexical choice of literate Opi and Nsuka speakers is the standard Igbo variety unlike their illiterate counterparts. It could be seen that the regional variety used by the illiterate sopeakers is in stark contrast compared to the standard form used by literate speakers. Aside *Maa* which is somewhat similar is sound with *mmuo*, the rest of the sample bear no phonological similarity with the standard variety used by literate speakers.

**Initial Nasal Elision**

Initial bilabial nasal elision is also recorded as follows:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Literates** | **Illiterates** | **Gloss** |
| (i) | Mmanya | Manya | Wine |
| (ii) | mmadụ | Madu | Human |
| (iii) | mmanụ | manụ | Oil |

In these examples, the initial nasal consonants or semi vowels are elided for the same word in the Opi and Nsuka varieties. Again, whereas the literate speakers make use of the standard variety, the illiterate speakers make use of their regional forms. However, this phonological alteration represents just a slight asymmetry in sound, as the difference may not be observed by a second language user of Igbo.

**Interpretation**

The phonological processes seen in this paper actually exist to connect the linguistic choices of the literate and the illiterates. A critical observation of the speakers of this Opi sub-dialect shows that the literates are speaking a mixture of standard Igbo and Opi sub-dialect of Nsukka. The findings support the fact that language generally shows patterns of change. This is in line with the observation of Alerechi and George (2013:235) who state that languages exhibit patterns of change that are not random but rule governed. Yul-Ifode, (2001:98) also states that “changes in languages are not optional tendencies but often defined and stable”.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we have identified some of the variation patterns affecting the vowels, consonants and some lexical items of the Opi sub-dialect of Nsukka. We observed that the language is changing towards that of the literates hence the population of the illiterates are reducing drastically. If not checked, this type of change will result in the production of different types of not just dialects but sub- dialects. A study on variation based on literate and illiterate speakers of Opi sub-dialect could serve as one of the typical ways language changes over time. One can as well say that Opi dialect is undergoing modernization. In years to come, we will have old and modern Opi sub-dialect of Nsukka. The speed with which more linguistic items merge with other dialects over time could stymie the use of Opi dialect and it’s transmission to the next generation.

This research is useful to comparative linguists and other linguists interested in variation study for further studies in Nsukka dialect, other dialects of Igbo and languages in general.

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