

The Place of Ika, Ikwere, and Izii-Ezaa-Ikwo-Mgbo Dialects of Igbo in the Reconstruction of Proto-Igbo: Data from the IADP Corpus

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Abstract

The multi-dialectal nature of the Igbo language led early researchers to view the Igbo dialect situation as somewhat chaotic (Ward, 1941). In recent times, however, a more rigorous investigation of the dialect issue has been undertaken by linguists, leading to the identification of some dialect areas as ‘main’ dialects and others as ‘satellite’ dialects subsumed under them. This approach has reduced the seeming confusion in Igbo dialect studies and produced more linguistically sound classifications (Ikekeonwu, 1987; Nwaozuzu, 2008). Although all Igbo dialects are mutually intelligible, the degree of intelligibility varies across physical and natural boundaries. As would be expected, dialects closer in geographical location are also closer in mutual intelligibility; and intelligibility decreases as the dialects are further separated spatially (Wardhaugh, 2000:41).

Lower levels of intelligibility at the geographical extremities, combined with a number of political factors, led some investigators of Igbo (Williamson, 1989; Agara, 2001; Ndimele 2003) to list or classify other Igbo varieties as distinct languages. Those listed as separate languages are often from the fringes of the Igbo-speaking territory. They include Ika, Ikwere, Etche (Echie), Izii, Ezaa, Ikwo, Mgbo.

Drawing upon new data from the recently-constituted IADP Corpus of over one million words of spoken Igbo varieties, this paper undertakes a comparative analysis of Ika, Ikwere, Etche, Izii, Ezaa, Ikwo and Mgbo alongside the Standard Igbo, using such linguistic criteria as phonology, morphology, vocabulary, syntax and semantics and argues for a reassessment of earlier classifications. Our analysis also indicates that Proto-Igbo reconstruction should proceed from an examination of a wide dataset and incorporate material from as many dialects as possible. The IADP Corpus has been built by collecting data from just such a wide range of ‘knowledge domains’. Our paper demonstrates how studying the dialects of Igbo can elucidate issues in migration history and language change that are important in Proto-Igbo reconstruction.

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