Igbo


Tone correction: LHL tones printed on the language name "Igala" on pp. 24 (fn. 15) and 31, due to Banfield (1914, 178) and Armstrong (1965, 78), are probably an anglicism. Iléji (2009) gives the name with MHL, but that's a likely Yorùbáism, because two independent citations by speakers give initial H while mentioning the restriction that "[t]here is no noun in Igálà that begins with the mid tone" (Ètù & Mìáchî 1991, 7, cf. Omachonu 2012, 22). Loanword change HHL>MHL in Iléji's Yorùbáphonic citation is likely, given that Yorùbá prohibits H on initial onsetless syllables (Ward 1952, 37). Tonal Anglicization is common in proper names all over West Africa, e.g.

'ígbo' HLL for Igbo LL [= colonial "Ibo"]
'Ọnjìchà' LHL for Ónjìchà LLL [= colonial "Onitsha"]
'Àkàn' LH for Àkan LL

and so on. (The third of these caught me napping in this paper.) One more "Igala" confusion in public record: Worldcat's entry for Ètù & Mìáchî's school text (OCLC 38436998) mistypes the medial vowel of the language name as [i], but in fact the authors write it consistently as [a].


Omachonu, G. [2012]. Igálà language studies and development. Slides from 12th Igala Education Summit, Kogi State University, Anyigba, 28–29 December.

Language Name and Autonym: Igbo [formerly spelled “Eboe” or “Ibo”].

Location: Igbo is the second most populous indigenous language of southern Nigeria.

Family: Igbo belongs to the Niger-Congo family. Greenberg (1963) classified it in the Kwa group along with six other big clusters: Akán, Gbè, Yorùbá- Ègàlà, Nupe-Èbrà, Èdò and Èdìmà. Williamson (1989a) redrew this picture, reducing “Kwa” to Akán and Gbè, and shifting the rest including Igbo to an enlarged “Benue-Congo” group (the aggregate that includes Bantu). Williamson’s evidence does not go beyond lexicostatistics—a shortcut method rejected by orthodox comparativists.

Related Languages: The Igbo-speaking area is surrounded by dozens of closely related Niger-Congo languages, representing at least five large subgroups: Edo (to the west), Dofid (to the northwest), Idomoid (to the north), Lower Cross (to the east and south) and Igbo (to the south).

Dialects: Igbo has dozens of geographic dialects. Williamson (1989b: 92f.) holds that the oldest linguistic division stranded the southwest periphery, including Èhwará (“Ahoada” or “Ekpeye”) and Ògbakiri (“Ikwere”), but her conclusion may be an artefact of lexicostatistics that mix together innovations, archaisms and borrowing (Ènwuèjìogwú 1975). Judging by sound change and morphosyntax, the oldest division is between a contiguous northern area, and a southern area that is still self-contiguous except for the old Ágbò (“Abwor”, “Agbor” or “Iké”) Kingdom at the western end (Manfredi 1989). All northern dialects denasalized [cn] clusters—still found as such in Ágbò—while many southern dialects including Èìwèrè and Êngbá (“Ngwa”) (but not Ágbò) developed them to aspirated stops (Armstrong 1972; Ladefoged et al. 1976). Many southern dialects (including Ágbò) glottalized t and d before expanded pharynx vowels (Anyaka 1985). Northern dialects have more auxiliary verbs, and fewer verb-reflecting suffixes, than do southern dialects (Èmènànjò 1984)—indicating a shift in the north from agglutination to a more isolating morphosyntactic type. Northern dialects also developed a new perfective suffix -gea/-gu/-go/-gwo/-wo (from a verb meaning ‘finish’) vs. southern -(a)le (related to Bantu -(i)le) and a new type of wh-question (described below, cf. Goldsmith 1981). This picture is consistent with ecological and oral evidence that northern Igbo started to develop on its own in hilly terrain between Ìtú (“Orlu”), Òkà (“Awka”) and Èsùkà (“Nsukka”) after southern-Igbo speakers had dispersed to cultivate lowland forests that are today oil-palm savannah (Ènwuèjìogwú 1972; Añàñà Ègwú 1981).

Number of Speakers: Official census figures since the 1960s have been controversial but subregional trends projected from four million Igbo speakers in 1921 and five and a half million in 1953 suggest an estimate of 20 or 25 million in the year 2000. Igbo is also widely spoken as a second language in the Niger Delta and the Cross River Basin. Probably between half a million and a million Igbo speakers died after the two coups d’état of 1966 and during the civil war of 1967–1970.

Origin and History

Whichever protolanguage led to Igbo was probably spoken near the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers between two and three thousand years ago, contemporaneous with a Nok-type iron technology (Armstrong 1964; Greenberg 1972; Cooke 1980; Williamson 1989b). Proto-Igbo speakers must have reached the present Igbo-speaking area long before the artistically rich Igbo Êkwe burials, which are iconographically related to the Nri Kingdom and which are “about a thousand years old” (Shaw 1970: 262; cf. Ènwuèjìogwú 1980).

One synchronically salient gloss of the term Igbo is “community”, as in personal names like Òdènígho ‘The news has spread to the community’ and Ènwuèjìghù ‘Death reaches everyone’ (Ènwuèjìogwú 1972: 40f.). The first syllable [ì-] is an ancient prefix for the human, plural noun-class, attested in countless ethnic and place-names across Kwa and in archaic common noun plurals like the Ònjicha (“Onitsha”) forms for ‘men’ and ‘women’ (listed below; cf. Williamson 1976). Some speakers contrast Igbo with Òru (or Òlu) to distinguish inland dwellers from communities near the Niger’s banks. The noun Òru/Òlu is transparently related to the verb -rúlú ‘flood, overflow’—a predicate aptly describing riverine ecology. Dioscorea yam, the original Igbo staple crop, was probably domesticated in a floodplain setting, where still today the best yields are obtained. By the 18th century, the Òru network had developed a distinct identity as long-distance traders of foodstuffs, ivory, cloth, guns and slaves. According to a characteristic Igbo phrase structure for universal quantification, the Ònjicha phrase Òlu na Igbo ‘riverine and inland people’ means, in effect, “the entire ethnolinguistic community” (Íremésía 1979: 115) or indeed ‘the inhabited world’. If this dichotomy is old, then the

¹Throughout this article, following the first occurrence of an ethnic or place name, we cite its traditionally anglicized spelling (if any) in double quotes and within square brackets.
Oral root -gbọ may be related to the verb for 'cover, protect' as in instrument nouns like níg bóth 'veil' and níg bóth 'shield' (Williamson 1972: 150). On these grounds, I-go would etymologically mean 'people of the covered (forested/sheltered/remote) interior'—a term coined in the Niger Riverbank trade some 300 years ago.

Orthography and Basic Phonology

The current official orthography—basically just a list of 36 symbols in less than a double-spaced typed page of text—was accepted from the Onwu Committee by the Eastern Nigerian government in 1961. The main innovation is the rejection of non-Roman symbols and the adoption in their place of a subdot diacritic for vowels, a superdot diacritic for a nonsyllabic velar nasal, and digraphs for 9 consonants. (Eighteen monographic consonants were retained from previous orthographies.) Onwu's 36 symbols, listed below, obviously represent a compromise between the low end of phonological endowment in the Igbo-speaking area—Onicha with 31 segmental phonemes—and the high end—Owerri ("Owerri") with around 48. For this reason, no standard variety of the language is defined.

4 "long" vowels
i, e (formerly "e"), o, u

4 "short" vowels
i (formerly "e"), a, ọ (formerly "o"), ụ (formerly "0"")

nonsyllabic velar nasal
n (formerly "ng")

9 consonant digraphs
gb, gh, kp, sh, ch, gw, kw, nw, ny

18 consonant monographs
b, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, y, z (retained unchanged)

The Onwu report did not consider tone or word division, and avoided dialect-specific features like aspiration and nasality. One committee member later justified the exclusion of dialect-specific sounds as "a worthy sacrifice for the development of a de-dialectalised Igbo" (Ogbäbú 1975: 151). At the other extreme, some literary figures still reject the Onwu framework (Nwagbá 1990; Écheré 1998). A middle road was taken by Green & Igwé (1963), who added consonantal diacritics to the Ònwụ symbols in order to accommodate the Òmáähụ vá ([‘ómaháa’]) dialect (which is phonologically close to Òweré). Green and Igwé used the subdot plus [h] to mark the aspirated velar stop [gh]; we can extend this to the other aspirates [ph, bh, th, dh, ch, jh, kh] as well. Equally, Ònụ’s use of plain [h] in the digraph [gh] for the voiced velar fricative (found in many dialects both north and south) can be extended to other dialect-specific fricatives where needed. Ánòkah (1985) employs a plain subdot for the glottalized voiceless alveolar stop [t]. Green and Igwé write distinctively nasalized vowels with a superscript tilde [’]—not above the vowel but on the preceding consonant [cv] where it doesn’t interfere with tone marks; we prefer to write them [vn], following the lead of closely related languages like Èdó and Yorùbá so as to avoid one more diacritic. Again on the model of Èdó and Yorùbá, the subdot has wide current usage to indicate a ninth vowel [e] in dialects where this sound is distinctive, e.g., Èhùdà, Ègbòkiri, Ègbò, Nsùkà, Abànikèka ("Abakaliki" or "Izu") and Èhùgbó ("Afiàpọ").

[’] and [”] indicate low and high tone, respectively. Downstep is no tone at all but a "juncture", specifically in Igbo it is a nonautomatic pitch drop between high tones (Green & Igwé 1963: 6–7). In Igbo, downstep is part of the basic structure of infinitives, negatives, perfections and genitives, and also occurs in a few undervowed nouns as well as in countless lexicalised phrases. Following Swift, et al (1962), Welmers and Welmers (1968a,b) and Nwáchukwu (1976), we adopt the economy rule that an unmarked syllable shares the tone of the syllable to its left; in this way, any sequence of two high marks with no pause in between indicates a downstep before the second mark, e.g., the tonal melody of the phrase [áwàwàfà] 'new yam festival' (lit., 'splitting' plus 'yam.gen') is LLH'H (where [’] is the phonic downstep symbol). Williamson (1972) and Émenanjó (1978) use a different system, with no high mark at all (i.e., every unmarked syllable is high), every low marked individually, and a macron on the first syllable after a downstep; accordingly they write 'new yam festival' as [áwàwàfà]. Some scholars argue that tone-marking is unnecessary in materials destined for a purely monolingual audience "except to resolve ambiguity where context is unclear" (Úgònnà 1980: 2

5Not counting the syllabic nasal, which is homographic with the corresponding nasal stop. Slightly different numbers of segments are counted by Armstrong (1972: 4), based on slightly different assumptions.
6The subdot vowels—which the Onwu report called "short" on analogy to English lax vowels in closed syllables—are more accurately described as members of the [-atr] or expanded-pharynx set. In roots, [a] has the distribution of a subdotted or [-atr] vowel in all dialects, but in some northern dialects like Onicha [a] is neutral to [atr] harmony in a few noun prefixes.
7After the Nigerian Civil War, various nongovernmental bodies have addressed some of these points with tacit official backing (see for example Society for Promoting Igbo Language & Culture (1977)).
8[sh] contrasts with [s] in northern dialects like Igbo Jù ["Ibusa"] and Abhãgana where it corresponds to Onicha [r] as in òshà 'year', the name Nsí and the indicative negative suffix -shà, cf. Ògbàlú (1982). Eménanjó (1984). The alternative, to simply use [r] in such dialects, would be technically possible but seems overly abstract. Other dialect-specific fricatives may be allophonic. [sh] and [zh] occur only before front vowels and apparently never contrast with [s] and [z] (Green & Igwé 1963: 6). (8) occurs in Onicha and some other northern dialects as an intervocalic variant of [f]; Hzúndye and Èdéchukwu (1984) spell it [v], although [bh] would be more accurate. [ph] and [kh], reported in northern dialects like Abánikèka (Meir, et al. 1975) and Nsùkà, may be allophonic.
9Glottal stop as a syllable onset is an allophone of [j]: if necessary, it can be written with a word-internal apostrophe, as in the Òwerè verb -wê’t ‘bring’ (=Onicha -wàtá, Mbasen -wètè).
10[c] occurs, but redundantly, in some Onicha roots and affixes.
11Especially in proper names, cf. footnote 14 below. Also note that in proverbs, where some grammatical affixes are conventionally elided, downstep is the sole cue for negation, e.g., Igbo èníwé èsè literally, 'Igbo has no king'.
12We prefer the Welmers-Nwachukwu tone-marking to handle downstep in Igbo because it dispenses with the macron—a diacritic that has proven difficult to write legibly by hand and which, we observe, encourages the mistaken idea that Igbo downstep is a "mid-tone". If that were the case, then an immediately following high tone should be higher in pitch, but it is not. Syntactic antidownstep (reversal of a preceding downstep) does occur phonetically in all Igbo dialects, in a variety of contexts, but its predictability means that it need not be marked, even in Abànkaléka and Ágbọ where it is frequent (Manfredi 1992, pace Meir et al. 1975).
Table 1: Consonants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Labial</th>
<th>Alveolar</th>
<th>Palato-alveolar</th>
<th>Velar</th>
<th>Labialized velar</th>
<th>Glottal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Continuants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiceless Unaspirated</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>tʃ</td>
<td>k</td>
<td>kʷ</td>
<td>(?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiceless Aspirated</td>
<td>(pʰ)</td>
<td>(tʰ)</td>
<td>(tʃʰ)</td>
<td>(kʰ)</td>
<td>(kʰw)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiced Unaspirated</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>dʒ</td>
<td>g</td>
<td>gʷ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murmured Aspirated</td>
<td>(bʰ)</td>
<td>(dʰ)</td>
<td>(dʒʰ)</td>
<td>(gʰ)</td>
<td>(gʰw)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiceless Implosive</td>
<td>(p&lt;)</td>
<td>(t&lt;)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voiced Implosive</td>
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<td>n</td>
<td>ŋ</td>
<td>ŋ</td>
<td>ŋʷ</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nasal</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>ŋ</td>
<td>ŋ</td>
<td>ŋʷ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuants</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiceless Fricative</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>s</td>
<td>(ʃ)</td>
<td>(χ)</td>
<td>h</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiced Fricative</td>
<td>(β, ʋ)</td>
<td>(z)</td>
<td>(y)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trill</td>
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<td>r</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glide</td>
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<td>y</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Vowels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nonback</th>
<th>Back</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oral High</td>
<td>i, ɨ</td>
<td>u, ʊ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral Nonhigh</td>
<td>i, (ɛ), a</td>
<td>o, ɔ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasal</td>
<td>m</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Basic Morphosyntax

Igbo is SVO and prepositional; a noun precedes its modifiers; inflection and derivation are prefixal in nouns, suffixal in verbs. However, each of these points needs to be qualified. As to basic word order, some southern dialects like Òchê (“Etche”), Ávu and Òweré depart from VO when they place a direct object in between the future auxiliary -gà with an obligative sense and the lexical verb (Éménanjô 1984: 198).

(1a) Ọ gà e-li nní. (Ọnjcha)

3s AUX NOM-eat food.GEN

‘S/he is going to eat/have a meal.’

(1b) Ọ gà i-rl rin. (Mbàisén)

3s AUX AGR-eat food

‘S/he is going to eat, have a meal.’

(2a) Ọ gà a-tà akhù. (Ọchê)

3s AUX NOM-chew palm.kernel.GEN

‘S/he is going to chew palm kernels.’

(2b) Ọ gà akhù a-tà. (Ọchê)

3s AUX palm.kernel NOM-chew

‘S/he must (certainly) chew palm kernels.’

A 10th vowel, [ɔ], occurs in some northern dialects including Ñsuiká; research has not established whether it is a centralized variant of [ɔ] or a separate phoneme.
Example (2) shows that tone is not just a property of lexical items, but also marks some kinds of inflection (Welmers 1970b; Goldsmith 1976; Clark 1989; Déchaine 1993; Manfredi 1993). In nouns, genitive case is marked in some prosodic contexts; for purposes of this chapter it can be identified as a downstep before the rightmost syllable of a noun that bears only lexical high tone and has at most two syllables. By the tone-marking convention explained above, akhụ in (2a) has a downstep on the second syllable and is thereby genitive, while ahu in (2b) lacks the downstep and so is not. Overall, genitive occurs in the dependent noun of a complex noun phrase, the notional object of a subject-relative clause, the notional object of a nominalized verb (1a, 2a), and the notional object of a perfective verb. This pattern is expected if Igbo has a split-ergative case system (Déchaine & Manfredi 1998).

Still on basic word order, the direct object is not necessarily final in a monotransitive predicate. Most dialects allow a bound nominalization of a transitive verb to follow the direct object, adding an event presupposition as suggested by the italicized part of the gloss of (3b). Descriptively, this nominalized form is the same as the form that occurs in auxiliaries constructions like those in (1a) and (2) above. If the direct object is suppressed, the nominalized verb copy is required; the pattern is similar if the verb takes a locative complement. If the verb is intransitive, the nominalized verb copy is required; but there is no corresponding presupposition, e.g., from Mbaesin:

(3) a. Ò rí-rí ji.
   3s eat-TNS yam
   ‘S/he ate (some) yam.’

b. Ò rí-rí ji e-rí.
   3s eat-TNS eat NOM-eat
   ‘S/he ate (some) yam as expected/contra expectation’

c. Ò rí-rí e-rí.
   3s eat-TNS NOM-eat
   ‘S/he ate (something) as expected/contra expectation’

(4) a. Ò fú-rú n’úzọ.
   3s out-TNS LOC-road
   ‘S/he exited to/from the road.’

b. Ò fú-rú a-fú.
   3s out-TNS NOM-out
   ‘S/he exited from some presupposed place’

(5) Ò kú-wa-ra a-kú-wa.
   3s knock-split-TNS NOM-knock-split
   ‘It split as a result of being knocked.’

Examples (4) and (5) show lexical prepositions and adjectives (-fú, -wá) inside intransitive verbs (Welmers 1970a; Hale, et al. 1995). The only preposition-like item that does not incorporate into the verb in this way is the locative marker ná. Notice, however, that ná in (4a) is ambiguous between the meanings of ‘to’ and ‘from’—vagueness improbable in a lexical predicate.

The obligatory bound, nominalized verb in (3c) and (4b) led Emenanjo to claim that “all Igbo verbs are transitive” (1975: 166). Indeed, most English intransitive predicates translate into Igbo as full verb phrases including an obligatory, free nominal complement. The verb root may be cognate with the noun as in (6), but the examples in (7) show that this is not necessary. In the latter case, it is difficult to perceive the semantic contribution of the verb root over and above the complement, hence the label “light verb”. The following examples are from Mbaesin:

(6) a. Ò chí-ri óchí.
   3s laugh-TNS laughter
   ‘S/he laughed.’

b. Ò vù-vù fvu.
   3s fat-TNS bulk
   ‘It is big’, ‘S/he is plump.’

(7) a. Ò kú ilu.
   3s V bitterness
   ‘It is (intrinsically) bitter.’

b. Ò thí-ri ogologo.
   3s V-TNS length
   ‘It is long’, ‘S/he is tall.’

Attributive adjectives are limited to items for “big”, “black”, “good” and their opposites (Máduká-Důruźe 1990), e.g., from Mbaesin: anya ukwu (eye big) ‘greed’, lit. ‘big eyes’; ikwu ocha (oil palm white) ‘palm-wine’; áfo oma (stomach good) ‘kindness’. A few attributes are pronominal, as in (8), but most of these are nouns, as seen by the genitive case of their complement—(8a) may be the sole exception. Most attributes are postnominal nouns or relative clauses, as in (9). Examples (8)–(9) are from Mbaesin:

(8) a. ájọ(ó) hyen
   bad thing
   ‘something bad’

b. ézigbo hyén
   goodness thing
   ‘good/true thing’

c. ogologo okwu
   length talk
   ‘long discussion’

(9) a. ịshị ikhé
   head strength
   ‘stubbornness’ (lit. ‘strong head’)

b. áhwan kwéshí-ri e-kwéshí
   name fêtREL-TNS NOM-fít
   ‘a suitable name’

c. hyén wé-re anyá
   thing take.REL-TNS eye
   ‘something obvious’

Igbo has no word class corresponding to either the definite or indefinite articles of English, and there is no obligatory marking of number on count nouns. Thus, depending on discourse as well as grammatical context, a count noun like éwu ‘goat’ may be translated either as ‘a goat’, ‘some goats’, ‘goats (in general)’, ‘the specific goat in question’, or even as a proper noun ‘Mr. Goat (the personified character in a story)’. To disambiguate some of these, deictic demonstratives, option-
ally combined with the plural classifier ụnị, compel a definite interpretation: ọ́wu à ‘this goat’ or ‘Mr. Goat here’, ọ́wu nṣi à `these goats’, ọ́wu aḥụn ‘that goat’, ọ́wu nṣi aḥụn ‘those goats’. As was also the case in older stages of English, the numeral “one” compels an indefinite reading for a count noun: ọ́wu ẹ́wu means either ‘one goat’ or ‘some goat’.

All affixes on nouns are prefixes (Williamson 1972; Ọnagbọghu 1987), cf. (10). In (10), the gloss DEF.GEN indicates the “specific construction”. In verbs, by contrast, all affixes whether derivational (11) or inflectional (12) are suffixes—assuming that the items glossed as AGR in (13) are not prefixes but rather pronominal affixes marking subject agreement (Ézé 1995). Note, however, that the orthography mostly writes these affixes as part of the verb word.

(10) a. ọ́gwụ́ ú ji
   AGR-dig DEF.GEN yam
   ‘[human] digger of yams’

b. h-ọ́gwụ́ ú ji
   INST-dig DEF.GEN yam
   ‘digging tool for yams’

c. ó-bụ́ ụbu
   (Ọnịcha)
   ó-vụ́ ụvu (Mbàiṣen)
   AGR-carry load.DEF.GEN
   ‘[human] load carrier’

d. m-bụ́ ụbu
   (Ọnịcha)
   m-vụ́ ụvu (Mbàiṣen)
   INST-carry load.DEF.GEN
   ‘beast of burden’

(11) a. lá-cha
    (Ọnịcha)
    nú-cha (Mbàiṣen)
    drink-thorough
    ‘drink up’

b. -kú-pù-úlà
    (Ọnịcha)
    kú-fí-úlà (Mbàiṣen)
    scoop-out-towards
    ‘ladle out [a liquid]’

(12) a. Ọ́ bí-lí ríní.
    (Ọnịcha)
    rí-rí ríní (Mbàiṣen)
    3s eat-TNS food
    ‘S/he ate, had a meal.’

b. Òbú ná e-li níní.
    (Ọnịcha)
    3s PROG nom-eat food.DEF.GEN
    Òbú ghe ríní. (Mbàiṣen)
    3s eat-PROG food
    ‘S/he is eating.’

c. Ọ́ lí-go níní.
    (Ọnịcha)
    3s eat-PERC food.DEF.GEN
    ‘S/he has eaten.’

(13) a. Ónyị́ e- lí-rọ́ nni.
    (Ọnịcha)
    Ónyị́ e- rí-ghi ríní. (Mbàiṣen)
    1p AGR eat-NEG food
    ‘We didn’t eat.’

b. ㄧ̀ ụ́ ụ́ (Ọnịcha)
   rí ríní (Mbàiṣen)
   ‘to eat a meal’

Questions are formed by a range of strategies including movement, tone change and affixation. Yes/no questions involve either a low-toned subject clitic as in (14), or else a periphrastic strategy where the whole sentence is preceded by Ọ́ (by) kwa..., abbreviating an embedding clause ‘Is it the case that that...?’ as in (15).

(14) a. Ọ́ je-kọ́ ọ́lu?
    (Ọnịcha)
    L.2s go-PROG work
    ‘Are you en route to work?’

b. Ọ́ ọ́bụ́ ọ́ oṣun?
    (Mbàiṣen)
    L.2s go-PROG work
    ‘Are you en route to work?’

(15) a. Ọ́ kwa i jẹ-kọ́ ọ́lu?
    (Ọnịcha)
    Q 2s go-PROG work
    ‘Is it the case that you are en route to work?’

b. Ọ́ kwa i jẹ-kọ́ ọ́lu?
    (Mbàiṣen)
    Q 2s go-PROG work
    ‘Is it the case that you are en route to work?’

Content (or wh-type) questions impose the same L tone on subject AGR if basic word order is preserved (16a), but not if the question word is fronted (16b–d). If the subject is questioned, there is no fronting (17). If the question word is sentence initial and is also a complex phrase, the sentence has the tones of a relative clause; (17c) shows this for subject questions, and (18) shows it for object questions with a lexical subject, cf. (9b) above.

(16) a. Ọ́ rí-rí girí?
    (Mbàiṣen)
    L.2s eat-TNS what
    ‘What did you eat?”

b. Ọ́ ọ́bụ́ ọ́ i rí-rí?
    (Mbàiṣen)
    which thing 2s eat-TNS
    ‘What did you eat?”

c. Ọ́ ọ́bụ́ ọ́ i rí-rí?
    (Mbàiṣen)
    what that 2s eat-TNS
    ‘What did you eat?”

d. Ọ́ ọ́bụ́ ọ́ i rí-rí?
    (Mbàiṣen)
    what thing 2s eat-TNS
    ‘What did you eat?”

(17) a. Girí m-e-re Ógbu wu?
    (Mbàiṣen)
    what do-TNS Ógbu wu
    ‘What happened to Ógbu wu?”

b. Ónyé gà-ra áhiya?
    (Mbàiṣen)
    L.person go-TNS market
‘Who went to the market?’
c. Kêdú ihe mé-lú Ugwú? (Ọnjicha)
what thing do,REL-TNS Ugwú,GEM
‘What happened to Ugwú?’
(lit. ‘What is the thing that happened to Ugwú?’)

(18) a. Oléè hyen Uché ri-rí? (Mbàišén)
which thing Uché,H eat-TNS
‘What did Uché eat?’
(lit. ‘Which is the thing that Uché ate?’)
b. Kêdú ihe Uché śì-śì? (Ọnjicha)
what thing Uché,H eat-TNS
‘What did Uché eat?’
(lit. ‘What is the thing that Uché ate?’)

Contact with Other Languages

In the last 400 years, peripheral Igbo-speaking communities have borrowed words and social institutions from neighboring Êdó, Igala and Efik-Ibibio among others. Êdó loans like idumu ‘village ward’, ọsisi ‘gun’ and numerous personal names and chieftancy titles were adopted in Ágbò, which, in turn, influenced Ọnjicha and other northwestern riverine Igbo settlements through the Ìmù Èzé Chínà lineage of a 17th-century Ágbò emigrant, Nwàdèm Ênìmè (Ejìófor 1982; Êjìóma 1984; Ohàdíké 1994). In the 19th century, some of these Ònjicha and Òrù towns inflamed the Ágbò link to a more prestigious, direct descent from the Êdó (“Benin”) Kingdom, which, in Igbo, is called either Ìdùù or Òdọ. (A case of reverse adoption, from Igbo to Êdó, is the ìkèngà ‘cult’ of the right hand, cf. Bradbury 1961)
Throughout the 18th century and until the Fulani jìhàd, the Êgàla Kingdom influenced northern Igbo religion, notably in the òmàbè masked ancestral dance (Boston 1960a,b; Shelton 1971). From the Cross River Basin came politically powerful oracles and male initiation groups. Òkọnko and Èkpe male title societies, and the associated Èkpo masked ancestral dance, derive from the Èkpe (“Leopard”) Society of the Eko, Efik and Ibibio-speaking areas. These institutions spread through the eastern Igbo-speaking area via the Òríà (“Aro”) oracular and slave-trading network between the 17th and 19th centuries (Green 1958; Afagba 1987; Dikè & Èjàìjìbà 1990).

While Igbo predominates in the home, English is more widely used in commerce, mass media and formal education—even between or among Igbo speakers themselves. Rapid urbanization in Nigeria in the past half century has also brought Igbo speakers into more settings where English bilingualism is the default communication strategy. However, negative attitudes toward language mixture are common, and prescriptive views are often voiced.12 Êzè (1997) shows that Igbo-English contact phenomena take two main forms: code switching and lexical borrowing. Code switching can occur either at a sentence boundary or within one sentence:
(19) It’s an opportunity [s, PR0 ḣì-gwà gi màkà yà].
AGR-tell 2s about 3s
‘It’s an opportunity to tell you about it.’

(20) Ô bì a big disappointment to everyone.
3s be
‘He/she/it is a big disappointment to everyone.’

Most lexical loans from English are “nonce borrowings” (Poplack 1993), i.e., spontaneous uses of an unintegrated lexical item from one language in the discourse of another, as in (5), rather than stable expansions of the Igbo lexicon: Anyì jì-chà paper anyì. (1p hold-complete paper 1P) ‘We have all of our papers’.

Common Words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Northern</th>
<th>Southern (if different)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>man:</td>
<td>nwókè</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pl. ìkènye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>woman:</td>
<td>nwááyì, onyenyì</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ìkporó</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>water:</td>
<td>mñíị</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sun:</td>
<td>ánwu, ánna anwú</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>three (counting):</td>
<td>jìọ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fish:</td>
<td>ìzù</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yes:</td>
<td>(to a question) èé, èéyi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yes:</td>
<td>(to a statement) ìyà</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yes:</td>
<td>(to a command) ìòó</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no:</td>
<td>è ‘è, mbà, wàà</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bird:</td>
<td>ìmùnù</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dog:</td>
<td>ìkJtàtà/ìchìtìa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tree:</td>
<td>ìsìsi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Efforts to Preserve, Protect, and Promote the Language

To date, there is no clearly defined ‘Standard Igbo’ (Igbò Àtìgbè), despite prescriptive efforts throughout colonial times (Dennis, et al. 1923; Adams 1932; Ward 1936, 1941, cf. Àchébé 1976; Êménànjo 1995). As Schon remarked over a century ago, a project of standardizing Igbo by translating received English texts—rather than by collecting “a native literature of stories, proverbs and sayings”—is doomed to “inaccuracies, inconsistencies and contradictions” (1861: 1-3). Published oral texts from different locales include Green (1958), Êgùdù and Nwàòga (1971), Êménànjo (1977), Êgùnà (1980, 1983), Àchébé and Êdèchìkwù (1982), Àzùìôte and Êdèchìkwù (1984) and Àmáìúmù (1995). Ógbo (1994) observes two supra-dialectal varieties in spontaneous writing and cosmopolitan speech. One of these reflects forms current in the northern

11For example, Àìhùkànnà (1990: 179) quotes a radio announcer as describing the mixture of Igbo and English as “linguistic sabotage”. The term “ sabotage” was a potentially dangerous accusation during the Nigerian civil war, hence its use by language purists is particularly emotive in the Igbo context.
12For the example of ‘paper’, Igbo already has an indigenous neologism: ăkwụkwọ (literally, ‘leaf’).
cities of Ọnjicha and Ẹnugwụ ("Enugu"); the other represents especially the large rural communities of Mbaise and Ọmàlàyà in the southern area.

After two centuries of effort, continued low rates of literacy in Igbo call for historical explanation. Ẹchêbé accuses "egoistic schoolmen" (1984: 95), while Ọfaigbo (1981) blames colonial policies encouraging labor migration and English-medium schools. Mission schools turned confessional rivalry into policy conflict; most northern literacy was carried out by Catholic authorities, while southern literacy was largely in the hands of Anglicans. Since the civil war, the state sector has sponsored little Igbo publishing besides examination textbooks. At war’s end, several peripheral dialects were given idiosyncratic orthographies, hindering harmonization (Wugo 1970; Clark 1971; Meir, et al. 1975). To date there are two linguistically adequate Igbo dictionaries: Welmers and Welmers (1968)—a Peace Corps primer with 2,500 entries drawn from a variety of dialects—and Williamson (1972) with 5,000 entries from Ọnjicha. Echêrù (1998) updates and modifies the unpublished compilation whose preface was published as Abraham (1967).

In recent decades, efforts to preserve and promote Igbo have diminished in step with infrastructural collapse in state-sponsored schools and colleges, and also more generally as a result of diminished leverage by Igbo-speaking political brokers over resources from the national state. Thus in the near-to-medium term, pro-Igbo linguistic activism will depend on the economic and intellectual capital of Igbo speakers in the private sector, including the Nigerian diaspora overseas.

Select Bibliography


15Today, the two main ethnolinguistic interest groups in Nigerian politics are the Hausa-Fulani and their “middle-belt” clients on the one side (who now dominate the army), and Yorùbà speakers plus aggrieved “southern minorities” from oil producing areas on the other (Ômòray 1997). Some oil is produced from wells in Igbo-speaking areas in the present Ìmè, Delta and Àbà states, but a larger share has come from Ogoni, Èlon ("Ijaw") and other non-Igbo speaking territory—all of which has been lumped into the category of “Southern Minorities” since the Nigerian civil war.

16But privatized policy has its own risks. Échêrù (1998)—an Igbo-English dictionary compiled by a professor of English literature—suppresses tone marks, citing two erroneous grounds: (i) only words "in isolation from other syntactical processes" can constitute lexical items, and (ii) downstep is not found within lexical items. Counterexamples include lexicalized phrases like wụnną buga (h-downstep juncature-h), which is the ordinary gender-neutral kin term for ‘sibling’ (etymologically, ‘mother’s child’, with a downstep of genitive case), as well as many personal and place-names that are no longer analyzable as phrases, e.g., Nsukka (t-h-downstep juncature-h), and Nnêwë (t-h-downstep juncature-h, cf. Emènànjo (1984). Minimal pairs abound like iʃi (t-h-downstep juncature-h) ‘to boil’ versus iʃ (h-h) ‘head’. Another unilateral decision in Échêrù’s dictionary is to convert the vowel diacritic from the substratum (officially adopted in 1961, and currently used by nearly all neighboring and historically related languages in Nigeria) to an umlaut (once used in a few tiny, neighboring languages in the Cross River Basin). His explicit reason is to separate Igbo from “a script group to which, by the very nature of its sound system, it does not belong” (1998: x), but this sounds like rationalizing. Neither of these steps has been accepted by Nigerian language professionals.


