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Umuchu: Exploring the Linguistic Structure of an Indigenous Dialect in Anambra State

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Abstract
This research provides a comprehensive descriptive analysis of the linguistic structure of the Umuchu dialect, an understudied Igo language spoken in Anambra State, Nigeria. The study examines the phonological, morphological, and syntactic features of the dialect, sheding light on its unique characteristics and cultural significance. The researcher employes a qualitative research approach, utilizing a combination of field observations, interviews, and linguistic surveys to collect data from native speakers. The data is analysed using a descriptive linguistic framework, with a focus on identifying patterns and trends in the dialect's linguistic structure. The findings of this work contribute to our understanding of the linguistic diversity of Nigeria, inform language documentation and preservation efforts, provide insights into the cultural heritage of the Umuchu people.
Keywords: Umuchu, dialect, culture, documentation, heritage, preservation

Introduction
The Umuchu dialect, an indigenous language spoken inAnambra State, Nigeria, is a unique and fascinating linguistic entity that has garnered increasing attention in recent years. As a vital part of the cultural heritage of its speakers, the Umuchu dialect plays a significant role in shaping their identity, worldview, and social interactions. Despite its importance, the dialect remains understudied, with limited research exploring its linguistic

structure, cultural significance, and role in the broader linguistic landscape of Nigeria.

Nigeria is a linguistically diverse country, with more than 500 languages spoken across its 36 states (Hansford et al 1976 as reported in Hassan, 2006) which Umuchu dialect is one of the many indigenous languages spoken in Anambra State that is located in the southeastern region of the country. The state's linguistic diversity is a reflection of its rich culturl heritage, with various languages and dialects spoken by different ethnic groups.
The Umuchu dialect is a member of the Igbo language family, which is one of the largest language families spoken in Nigeria. The dialect is spoken by approximately 400,000 people in Anambra State and surrounding areas. Despite its relatively small number of speakers, the Umuchu dialect is a vital part of the cultural identity of its speakers, with a unique linguistic structure, vocabulary, and cultural significance.

This work aimed to explore the linguistic structure of the Umuchu dialect, with a focus on its phonological, morphological, and syntactical features. This research is motivated by the need to document and preserve the dialect, which is facing threats from urbanization, globalization, and language shift, by examining the linguistic structure of the Umuchu dialect, this research aims to contribute to our understanding of the dialect's unique features, cultural significance, and role in shaping the identity if its speakers.
The specific objectives of this study are:

- To examine the morphological process that shapes the structure of words in the Umuchu dialect.
- To describe the phonological features of the Umuchu dialect.
- To analyse the syntactic patterns and structures of the Umuchu dialect.

The researcher employed a qualitative research design, utilizing a combination of field observations, interviews, and linguistic surveys to collect data from native speakers of the language. The data will be analysed using a descriptive linguistic framework, with a focus on identifying patterns and trends in the dialect's linguistic structure. The work is expected to contribute immencely to our understanding of the Umuchu dialect, shedding ligt on its linguistic features, cultural significance, and role in shaping the identity of iits speakers. The findings of this work have implications for language documentation, language education, and cultural preservation effects in Anambra State and beyond.

Reearch Questions

The researcher anchored this study on the following research questions:

- What are the morphological structure of the Umuchu dialect, including roots, prefixes, and suffixes?
- What are the basic syntactic structures and patterns of the Umuchu dialect, and how do they relate to the language's semantics and pragmatics?
- What are the distinctive phonological features of of the Umuchu dialect, and how do they contribute to its overall sound system?

Conceptual Framework

Overview of the Community Umuchu

Umuchu is a community in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria. It is situated in the southeastern part of Nigeria, within the tropical region. Umuchu community is bordered by several towns and communities like Amesi, Achina, Uga, Akokwa and Umunze. Umuchu community is predominantly Igbo with a rich cultural heritage. The community is known for its vibrant traditional festivals like New Yam festival, Igba mmuonwu, Igba nkwu etc. These festivals showcase the community's dance and art. The primary language spoken in

Umuchu is Igbo- Umuchu dialect though many residents also speak English, Nigerian pidgin and other Nigerian languages.

The Umuchu community is primarily agarian, with residents engaging in farming, livestock production, and trading. The community is known for its production of crops such as yam, cassava, maize and cocoyam. The community has several primary and secondary schools. Education is highly valued in the community with many pursuing higher education. Several healthcare facilities including hospitals, clinics, and traditional medicine centres are in the community.

The community has also produced many professionals like doctors, nurses, lawyer, Educators, Engniers and midwives both retired and active civil servants. It is a vibrant and culturally rich community in Anambra State, Nigeria. It faces several challenges like other communities yet has many strengths which include its strong cultural heritage, vibrant traditional festivals, and resilient residents.

Umuchu dialect and culture

The Umuchu dialect spoken by the people of Umuchu in Aguata of Anambra State exhibits a complex grammatical structure. This overview provides an in-depth examination of the language's-dialect's phonology, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary. Umuchu dialect has unique phonological features and grammatical structures with distinct vowel sounds and consonant clusters. It also exhibits complex sentence structures with conjuctions of verbs.

Umuchu dialect and culture are rich and vibrant aspect of the Igbo people in Nigeria. The Umuchu language is a dialect of the Igbo language with its own unique vocabulary and expressions. The culture of Umuchu is centred on community - community consciousness, family, and traditional values, (Amaegbu, (2013:61).

The people of Umuchu are known for their strong sence of identity and pride in their hertage. They have a deep respect for their ancestors and tradional customs, which are passed down through generations. The traditional religion of Umuchu is based on the worship of various deities and spirits, with rituals, and ceremonies playing a central role in their culture.

Language Revitalisation

The Umuchu language is a dialect of the Igbo language spoken in south eastern Nigeria, like many other indigenous languages, Umuchu is at risk of becoming endangered as a result of some factors like globalization, urbanization, and the influence of dominant languages like English, Amaegbu, (2013:19).

Language revitalisation efforts for Umuchu and other endangered languages, typically involve initiatives aimed at promoting and preserving the language within the community. This can include language classes, cultural events, and educational programs that incorporate the language into the curriculum. Furthermore, efforts may be made to document and preserve the language through written materials, recordings, and digital resources.

It is the process of reversing language decline and promoting the use of endangered languages according to Hinton and Hall, (2001:1). It requires collaborative efforts from both communities, linguistics and policy makers. Successful language revitalization can preserve cultural heritage and promote linguistic diversity.

Language Revitalisation Strategies

Effective language revitalization strategies are essential for preserving linguistic diversity and cultural heritage. Various language revitalization strategies as well as their effectiveness will be discussed thus:

- Language Documentation: This involves recording and analyzing language structures, vocabulary, and grammar as

Woodbury, (2011:156) asserts. It creates linguistic resources for language education according to Crawford, (2007:190) and help to develop language material and curricula, Hinton, (2003:78) opine.

- Language Education: This is crucial for language revitalization as aver Hinto, (2003:78). Also it include immersion programs, language classes for adults and children, language camps and cultural events in the opinion of Waner, 2001:145; Leonard, (2007:123 and Smith, (2009:167) respectively.
- Community Engagement: This is vital for language revitalization in the view of Leonard with the following:
    1. Language planning and policy development.
    2. Community-led language initiatives.
    3. Language and cultural festivals.

Indigenous Dialect

The Umuchu language is a dialect of the Igbo language spoken by the indigenous people of Umuchu, a town in Anambra stae. The Umuchu dialect is unique in its pronounciation, vocabulary and grammar compared to other dialects of the Igbo language spoken in neighboring towns and villages.

The indigenous dialect of Umuchu language is heavily influenced by the culture and traditions of the people of Umuchu. It is often used in traditional ceremonies, storytelling, and other cultural activities to preserve the heritage and identity of the community. The dialect also plyas a significance role in communication among the indigenous people of Umuchu, as it helps to foster a sense of belonging and unity among them.

Indigenous language is a language which is native to a region and spoken by indigenous people. This language is from a linguistically distinct community that originated in the area.They are not necessarily national language and national language are not

necessarily indigenous language to the community. According to IGI Global online, it has various definitions thus;

- A local means of communication between members of a people or community, it contains within it the people or community.
- A language native to a country and spoken as a mother tongue (MT) y some of its indigenes.
- The home language of an indigenous group of people. It is the language that carries a people's knowledge, culture, and identity.
- Language spoken within an ethnic group where the language is part of their identity and some traits of their identity and or customs are preserved through it.

Indigenous languages are indispensable cultural legacies without which all forms of human discourse can be carried out said Olaoye, (2009:56). It is the language in which the child first acquire to love and respect the mental heritage of his/her people and culture. Indigenous language is an indelible mark of a people's identity. Therefore, the teaching and learning of indigenous language will afford the learner an understanding of the problems of the society around him/ her.

Indigenous languages are those languages spoken by the native of the language. It possesses all the qualities of a natural language and performs all the functions of a language. In the word of Owens, (391), a language is a complex and dynamic system of conversational symbols that is used in various modes for thought and communication. In most cases the inhabitants of the language community have it as their mother tongue which is predominantly part and parcel of their culture.

Language and Culture

Language is the principal mode by which we conduct our social activities. It is the medium used by individuals to naviate a sense of self in different contexts according to Norton, (2000:20).

Language cannot be divorced from culture since it is one of the most essencial aspect of culture and culture is built up through communication over time. As observed Hall, (2012:18) "language is repository of culture and a tool by which culture is created". It is therefore a fundamental aspect of cultural identity. It is through language human transmit and express group values, beliefs, and norms which is passed from one generation to another. Through language people creats a sense of community. Little John and Foss clearly argue that:

> People are able to shift contexts, change meanings, and act in a Variety of ways because of a history of interaction with many People over time in which they learned numerous ways to interpret and act in different situations. In modern society, a person is part of many systems, each with its own set of meaning and action rules. The rules are learned through interaction in social groups. Overtime, individuals internalize many of these rules and draw on them to guide their actions, (2008:217).

Language and culture have a homologous relationship. They are interwined, evolving together and influencing each other. In this context, Guessabi, (2020:2) states that "culture, then, began when speech was present and from then on, the enrichment of either means the further development of the other". Language in the word of Adegbite is "culturally transmitted. It is an integral part of culture, a reflection of many features of a given culture" (2020:2).

The relationship between language and culture is a complex one. The two concepts are interwined. A particular language usually points out a specific group of people. When one interacts with another language, it means that you are also interacting with the culture that speakes the language. You cannot understand one's culture without accessing the language directly.

The phrase, language is culture and culture is language often mentioned when language and culture are discussed. This is

because they have a homologous although complex relationship. Language and culture carry strong relationship since the birth of communities and societies on the face of earth. Different linguists and scholars have delineated it in different ways in their theoretical delibrations in different times. Explaining culture is not an easy task. It is because of this unexplainable nature of culture that the relationship between culture and language becomes much more difficult to explain. Culture can ever be defined in the objective sense of the term. It is always study and interpret in relation to a society in which we live and cultural belief, norms, and values that we observe. We see and observe culture from our specific positionality and situatedness. Culture is something that keeps different societies different and distinct from each other because of their cultural situated norms and belief system, ways of knowing anddoing things, ways of communicating and addressing one another, ways of referring to different objects, andbeings in a culture specific context, ways of carrying propositional and procedural knowledge associated different cultural specific meaning and interpretation and much more, Duranti, (1997). It is distinction that keeps us separate and gives us identity- identity to make us recognised as an individual and a group too. " Culture is what 'others' have, what makes them and keep them different, separate from us" Duranti, (1997:23).

This links culture and language as both are cognitive entities. We describe and interpret culture with the help of language. "To know a culture is like knowing a language. Both are mental realities. Furthermore, to describe a culture is like describing a language" according to Duranti, (1997:27). Duranti further opines that, "cognitive anthropologists rely then on the knowledge of linguistic categories and their relationships to show that to be part of a culture means to share the propositional knowledge and the rules of inference necessary to understand whether certain propositions are true. To this propositional knowledge, one might add the procedural knowledge to carry out tasks" as viewed by Duranti,

(1997:28-29). Edward Hutchins is of the opnion that there is a strong relation between the human and social material resources available for interpretation and thinking. Knowledge is not always in the individual mind. It is also in the tools that a person uses, in the environment that allows for certain solutions to become possible, in the joint activity of serveral minds and bodies aiming at the same goal, in the institutions that regulate individual's functions and their interactions; Duranti, (1997:31).

It is then, not individual alone that is in charge of change but a whole system that is coherent and keeps individuals united to perform their own individual tasks under its umbrella. It is an individual and joint activity of others that make change possible and to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct the existing knowledge but from a different perspective.

Language is the most important means of communication through which we conduct our life. We communicate in different contexts and these contexts and situations are created by the speech community whose part the speakers are. These speech communities have teir own and separate ways of looking at and to live life. Communication context is connected with culture in multiple and complex ways. It seems fruitful for one, for instance, to see language in cultural context and its respective frames of reference which help to understand meaning; the way it is written, the it is communicated, and the way is is understood by an insider and by an outsider.

Language is culturally embedded and cannot be understood without the context specific to that society that bears the language. "A social group", says Gumperz, "held together by frequency of social interaction patterns and set off from the surrounding areas by weakness in the lines of communication" Hudson, (1980:26). The 'frequency of social interaction patterns' decreases at border areas and dialects to a considerable level when it enter into another

neighbouring social group which is distinct in its culture and social patterns. This distinction of culture and social patterns is reflected through their language.

Igbo Language

Igbo people predominantly live in the south-eastern region of Nigeria. The language of the Igbo people is known also as Igbo language- a language said to hav its origin traced to the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo language family, (Onwuatuegwu, 2023:2) asserts.

According to Ohiri-Aniche (2013:17):

> Igbo language is spoken homgenously in five southeastern states of the country, namely, Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. Sizeable numbers of Igbo speakers are found in Delta and Rivers States, while they are also found in one or two communities in Edo and Akwa-Ibom States.

Onwuejeogwu (1975:1) also captures the area where Igbo languge is spoken. He maintains that the area is delimited by an:

> Imaginary line running outside the satlements of Agbor, Kwale, Obiaruku Ebu (west Niger Igbo area), Ahoada, Diobu, Umuagbai (Port Harcourt area) Arochukwu, Afikpo, Ndinioafu, Isiogo (Abakaliki area) and Enugu Ezike (Nsuka area) and Nzam.

In the word of Ohiru-Aniche (2013), the people who share boundaries with the Igbo are as follows: Igala, Tiv, and Idoma to the north; the Anaang, Ibibio, Efik to the South-east. Then to the South-west, are areas with Ijaw and Ogoni. With these geographical descriptions by Ohiri-Aniche (2013) and Onwuejeoggw (1975), it becomes clear that indigenous dialects are in use and encouraged in those areas of Nigeria.

Igbo, also known and called Igbo language is a Niger-congo language spoken by the Igbo people of southeastern part of Nigeria as seen Green and Igwe, (2012:12). With appropriately thirty

million speakes, Igbo language is one of the most widely spoken languages in Africa, Ethonologue, (2022).

Igbo language has a complex phonology system ranging from:

- Tonal system: It has two tones-: high and low said Uchechukwu, (2015:45).
- Consonant and vowel sounds: The Igbo language has a total of thirty-two consonant phonemes and eight vowel phonemes said, Osuji, (2013:78).
- Verb conjugation: Igbo language verbs change according to tense aspect and mood, Uchechukwu, (2015:56) pointed out.
- Igbo language according to Emenanjo (2014) uses suffixes and prefixes to form words, (123).

Synthetically, Igbo language has subject-verb-object (SVO) word order as seen by Osuji, (2013:90). Emenajo also is of the view that Igbo language has a complex sentence structures- relative clause and serial verb construction,

Sociolinguistic Context

Sociolinguistics, according to Hudson (2001) studies language in relation to society. The study believes that there are relations between word-meaning and culture. Through it, one has to learn and understand the nature of language and the nature of society. It is through socilinguistics that social contexts in language are learned and used. Socilinguistics shows that speech is clearly a social behavior; it enables us to realise that speech has a social function, which can serve as both a means of communication and the identification of social groups. Prased (2012) in his own view said that sociolinguistics indicates that one learns language in the society and that language follows social structure and culture. Language remains a reflection of social structure. Prasad (2012) explains that sociolinguistics includes phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, vocabulary, proverbs and sayings. In all these,

language being social, is always identical from one member of a speech community to another.

In the opinion of Anozie (2007) sociolinguistics maintains that it accounts for the social backgrounds of both the speaker and the addressee, the relationship between the speaker and the addressee and also the context and manner of the discourse.
Igbo language plays an important role in Igbo culture and identity. Though threatened by language shift towards English and Nigerian pidgin (NP) Obafemi, (2018:123). It has several dialects thus;

- Central Igbo
- Owerri Igbo
- Onitsha Igbo
- Ngwa Igbo etc.

Igbo language is taught in schools, and efforts are being made to promote its use fully in:

- Education
- Media
- Government and other official contexts.

It is a rich and complex language with unique structural features and sociolinguistic significance which efforts to promote and document are essential for preservation of it, Igbo culture and identity.

Cultural Perspective

The Igbo cultural perspective is a rich and complex phenomenon that shapes individual behavior, attitudes, and values. Understanding this perspective is essential for effective communication, collaboration, and cultural exchange. It is the way individuals perceive and interpret their cultural background, values, and norms. Isichei (1976) said that "It is a unique cultural perspective shaped by their history, traditions, and values, (12). This cultural perspective influence their worldview, behaviour and interactions with others.

Igbo culture is characterized by a strong emphasis on collectivism and community orientation. This is reflected in the concept of 'bunu bunu' which emphasizes the importance of community and interconnectedness, Tutu, (1999:31) asserts. Again, in Igbo culture the need of the community are pirortised over individual interest and decisions are mostly taken through a concensus-based approach.

The Igbo people have a deep respect for elders and tradition, elders are revered for their wisdom, experience, and knowledge which are transferred through generation. This respect for tradition is reflected in the Igbo concept of 'omenala' which emphasaises the importance of maintaining traditional practices and customs, Isichei, (1976:56) clearly stated.

Hospitality is a core value in Igbo culture, and visitors are often treated with warmth and respect, Amaegbu, (2013:66). The Igbo people also place a strong importance on maintaining social harmony, which is reflected in their conflict resolution strategies. Conflicts are often resolve through mediation and compromise, instead of confrontation and aggression.

Methodology

The researcher employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing a combination of field observations, interviews, and linguistic surveys to collect data from native speakers of the Umuchu dialect. The data was analysed using a descriptive linguistic framework, with a focus on identifying patterns and trends in the dialect's linguistic structure.

Data Presentation and Discussion of Findings

What are the distinctive phonological features of of the Umuchu dialect, and how do they contribute to its overall sound system?

Phonologically: This is the study of the sound system that occurs in a particular language. Umuchu dialect exhibits unique phonological features like:

Ginidi: what?
Ekete/nkata : basket
O si di : he/she said?

- Vowel Sounds: It has distinct vowel sounds system with 5 vowel phonemes – i, e, a, o, u.

- Consonant Sounds: Umuchu dialect has a rang of consonant sounds including 'stops' like p, t, k; fricatives like f, s, h and nasals like m,n.

Tones: It also has a complex tone system with 3 level tones- high, mid and low with 2 contour tones- rising and falling. In addition to tone marks, there should be voice marks and intonation marks. The Chinese 4 tones is applicable thus;

- Falling tone(\)
- Rising tone (/)
- Fall rise tone (v)
- Level tone (-)

With these we can properly see and understand the following:

- Akwa (bed)
- Akwa (cry)
- Akwa (cloth)
- Akwa (egg)

a kwa : it is a bed.
a kwa : is to cry.
a kwa : is an egg.
a kwa : is a cloth.

To the above we need to add a tone marker to diiferentiate the last syllable in akwa (bed); akwa (cloth) and stress patern have to indicate between akwa (cry) and akwa (egg).

The data reveals that the Umuchu dialect has a unique sound system that distinct from other Igbo languages. The data shows

that the dialect has a total of 20 phonemes that are unique in application during sound production.

What are the morphological structure of the Umuchu dialect, including roots, prefixes, and suffixes?

Morphology: This is the study of the internal structure of words. Umuchu dialect also exhibits complex morphological structures, as:

I+gbaka: Perpe
I+kpo: morter
O+ kpa: leg
N+gwa: fire
U+we / a+kwa/o+godo: dress/cloth

Prefix and suffix: This is a process of word formation by which both prefix and suffix are added to the base or root.

O+vu-vu: carrying
Ji+akwu: tapioca
A+gha+a: how far

Sufix: They are bound morphemes that are added at the end of a root word.

Ka+na: here
Le+le: see

Verb conjuction: Umuchu verbs change form depends on tense, aspect and mood, using suffixes and prefixes.

Noun classification: It has nouns that are classified into several categories, including human, non-human, and abstract using prefixes and suffixes.

Pronouns: It has a range of pronouns, including personal, possessive and reflexive pronouns.

Derivational morphology such as; ‘aku’ (root word) vs “akuko’ (derived word); ‘oku’ (root word) vs ‘okuko’ (derive word.

The above data reveals that the Umuchu dialect has a complex system of morphology that is characterised by a range of prefixes, suffixes, and roots. If further shows that the dialect has a total of 15 prefixes and suffixes that are used to form a range of words and

phrases. The roots of the dialect are typically monosyllabic, and are often combined with prefixes and suffixes to form more complex words.

What are the basic syntactic structures and patterns of the Umuchu dialect, and how do they relate to the language's semantics and pragmatics?

Syntax: It is the rule that guides sentence formation. Umuchu dialect exhibits complex syntactical structures, like:

Phrases: Kedu' – keh-doo (How are you)
Imeena' (thank you).
Nkenebuya: This one is it
Chetekweye: remember it.
Ginimerere: what happened?
Ujonatu m: I am afraid

Vocabulary:

- Food: 'nri'
- House: 'uluo'
- Water: 'mmiri'
- Family: ' imeuluo'
- Rice: 'osikapa'
- Yam: 'ji'
- Corn: 'otikpa or oka'- oh-kah
- Platain: 'ogede'- oh-geh deh
- Beans: 'agwa' -ah-gwah
- Meat: 'anu'
- Father: 'nnaah'
- Mother: 'nneeh'
- Okeiburu: nnenwanyi/nwunye mmadu
- Mma oge: cutlass
- Ozuru: daily market
- Mgbaduga/utara: foo foo
- Ohia: bush
- Iyeri nti: earring

- Ekwu akwukwa: tripod stand
- Iluona: welcome
- Ngwa ngwa: fast fast
- Abubaraishi/ntutu ishi: hair
- Oche: chair
- Mmanu: oil
- Nwatakiri: child
- Enyo/ugegbe: mirrow.

Noun phrase: 'oku na-ere' (fire is burning)
Verb phrase: 'oku na-ere oku' (the fire is burning fire)
The above data reveal that the Umuchu dialect has a subject-verb-objective (SVO) word order, which is typical of many Igbo languages. The data equally show that dialect has a range of sentence structures, including simple, complex sentences. The simple sentences typically consist of a single clause while the complex sentences consists of multiple clauses that are linked together using conjuctions and subordinating conjuctions.

Conclusion

This exploratory research has unveiled the linguistic and cultural essence of Umuchu community, an indigenous dialect spoken in Anambra state, Nigeria. The findings highlight the complex grammatical structure, unique vocabulary, and cultural significance of Umuchu, understanding its importance is a vital component of the community's identity and heritage. The outcome of this research have implications for language documentation, preservation, and promotion, particularly in the context of Nigeria's linguistic diversity. Furthermore, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on Igbo linguistics and cultural studies, providing valuable insights for scholars, plicymakers, and community stakeholders.

Ultimately, this work demonstrates the need for sustained effects to document, preserve, and promote Nigeria's indigenous

languages, including Umuchu, in order to safeguard the country's rich cultural heritage and promote linguistic diversity.

The researcher therefore recommends:

- Language preservation and promotion initiatives should be implemented to support the use of Umuchu dialect in education, media, and other domains.
- Community-based language documentation and preservation projects should also be established to empower local stakeholders to take ownership of their linguistic heritage

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