

Linguistic variation in Emekuku-Igbo

Opara, U. Chiaka & Mbagwu, D. Ugochukwu

Department of Linguistics

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Anambra State, Nigeria

E-mail: ursulaopara92@gmail.com

Abstract

This study demonstrates the variationist position that language varies by its relation with social factors. The Emekuku-Igbo is focused because of its historical trajectory in Igbo land, which is translates into the social structure it exhibits currently. That variation is displayed in Emekuku-Igbo is consistent with the position of micro-sociolinguistics but the extent to which the variation distinguishes varieties is the focus of this study. Four linguistic variables have been identified in Emekuku-Igbo, (k), (g), (e) & (r) through transcription of recorded interviews of selected speakers of the dialect distributed by age and gender groups. Each has two variant forms determined to manifest by interaction with the social factors, age and gender. An analysis of the occurrence of the variants with the speakers distinguish two varieties, the variety spoken by the young speakers

and the variety spoken by the older and aged speakers. The young speakers' variety is marked by the [g] & [e] variants while the other variety is marked by the [gw] & [o] variants of the same variables respectively. The social variable, gender influences variants of the same linguistic variables identified in the study but the percentage differences between the occurrences of the variants with the genders do not distinguish any varieties.

Introduction

Language is a communication tool and also a means of identity. In general, language is defined as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which human beings communicate with each other. Language does not exist in a vacuum, it is dependent on its speakers and its various use in a society. No human language is unvarying, every language exhibits internal variation, in other words each language exists in a number of varieties. These varieties could be seen in linguistic units such as sounds, lexicon, meaning, and even the use of syntactic rules. As Agbede (2008:1) puts it, variability is everywhere in language, from the unique details in each production of a sound or sign, to the auditory or visual processing of the linguistic signal. Recognition of variation implies that language is not just some kind of abstract object of study Wardhaugh (2006:3), but a phenomenon used by individuals who are members of a

speech community; there is a correlation between language and society which has birthed the term “sociolinguistics”.

The works of William Labov served as foundation for many concept and theoretical frameworks in the study of variation. Labov, known to be the founder of quantitative sociolinguistics, illustrates in his studies the relevance of social determinants of linguistic variations and their correlations with the social structure. Distinguishing what he calls indicators and markers, Labov states that an indicator is a linguistic variable with little or no social significance while markers carry social information mostly related to the social class of individuals and even their styles of speaking. Variation is a phenomenon that is associated with society. There are no mono-style speakers (people do not speak the same way). It is possible to distinguish speakers from one another, speakers of the same language in terms of choice of words, structures and so on. Many studies have been driven by the Labovian framework, resulting in more evidence of variation at different levels in language. This study advances the claims of variation in Emekuku.

Linguistic variation is often seen as a problem for linguistic theory. Theoretical linguists view variation as not relevant. Rather than incorporate social theory into formal linguistic models, they concern themselves with the structure of a language that is shared across the

speakers of that language (langue) other than its actual usage in everyday life (parole). Since parole was considered too variable to be of a scholarly interest, it became 'safe' to base linguistic theory on langue and treat language as fixed or invariant and linguistic categories as absolute. However, language is a social fact and there can be no successful linguistic theory of practice which is not social. Various studies have sprung up addressing this problem with evidences that language is not fixed and that the variation identified in language can be influenced by social factors. This work is therefore building on a foundation already set by earlier variationist sociolinguists, with the intent to study linguistic variation in the Igbo spoken within Emekuku town as influenced by the social factors (age and gender) to distinguish particular varieties.

Emekuku is a town in Owerri North L.G.A of Imo State. It is situated some eight kilometres from Owerri town, the capital of Imo State. Its entire length is about ten kilometres from the boundary of Ezeogba village with Awaka town (also in Owerri North), to the boundary of Azaraegbelu village with Enyiogugu Mbaise. In width, it is about four kilometers, being bounded on the north by Mbaise, on the west by Uratta and Uzoagba town, on the south by Awaka and Egbu town while on the east by Emii town. Emekuku has ten villages and forty-one kindreds. It is one of the towns in Imo State that experienced early civilization through the

coming of the church missionaries. The church brought not just physical development, but also contributed in socio-political and economic development of Emekuku through education. As a result of that, people from different tribes, culture, religion and language began to reside in Emekuku till date, making it a cosmopolitan area.

Language situation in Emekuku

A survey was carried out to discover the various languages spoken in Emekuku town and the domains of its usage so as to ascertain the language situation prevalent in the speech community. From the survey conducted, ten languages are spoken within the town. These languages are: Igbo, English, Ijaw, Annag, Yoruba, Hausa, French, kanuri, Itsekiri and Pidgin. Statistically, English language is the primary and most frequently spoken language of most residents of Emekuku, preferably used in the domains of work, market, among peers and also the language of religion. The Igbo language however, is spoken more at home than any other existing language within the town. In addition, Hausa, Yoruba and French are some of the languages that have high percentage of speakers. The languages spoken in Emekuku town from the study survey are grouped into majority, major-minority and minority. English and Igbo are the languages spoken in majority. Hausa, Yoruba and French could be grouped in

major-minority since the percentage of speakers is high above minority and also below majority. Other existing languages are spoken by less than 2% of the residents of Emekuku and so could be grouped into languages spoken in minority. The residents of Emekuku are mostly bi-lingual than monolingual or multi-lingual. Two main languages have different status. English is considered as the most prestigious language and is used more in formal domains whereas Igbo language is used more in informal domains.

Language Variation

There are many ways of speaking and each way of speaking is a variety. A variety may be defined as a set of linguistic items with similar social distribution Hudson (1996:21). Language variation is a phenomenon found in every language of the world because every language has its varieties. Variability is an inherent part of natural language; so rather than being modelled randomly, it should be modelled as an integral part of the linguistic system. Language variation is the existence of observable differences in the way a language is used in a speech community. It is a common place observation that a single language is not used in a very homogenous manner within a single community. Variation was long regarded by most linguists as no more than a collection of tiresome details posing as a challenge to linguistic

theory and the ideal homogenous speech community. Nevertheless, times have changed.

In the 1960s, the sociolinguist, William Labov, began to make variation a central subject of investigation and the result has been a revolution in linguistics. It is now realized that In his works, Labov opposed all those who ignored the heterogeneity of language and considered it as a set of grammatically correct sentences. He insists on tackling language use (performance) and language heterogeneity, i.e. variability. For him, linguistic theory must involve not only formal linguistic structure, but also every social function that is related to language in one way or another. Language variation interfaces with language change. Language change is the domain of historical linguistics. It has to do with change in the linguistic system of a language, a transition from state A to state B in the same language across a given period of time. Historical linguists gauge change in language by revisiting a community, say, a generation later, this is called 'real- time' method. Sociolinguists are also interested in language change, but in a manner different from historical linguists. Through the social stratification of linguistic features, coupled with age differentiation in the same features, it gives a way of understanding that change can proceed in a manner that is indirectly observable at least at the micro level of individual phonetic features.

Language variation therefore involves two variables Linguistic variables and social variable; with the position being that the linguistic variables are the dependent variables while the social variables are the independent variables. In other words, the social variables occasion the varieties that are observed in a language.

Labov (1966) suggest two approaches to the study of social variation in language. The first approach is social grouping which involves sorting speakers into various groups then averaging the values of the linguistic variable across these speakers. The second he calls linguistic grouping; here, the distribution of the linguistic variable is determined and those who speak that way are identified. According to Wolfram and Fasold (1974:75), the correlation of linguistic variables with social variables is at the foundation of the study of social dialect. Miggelstone (1995:16) defines social variation as the relation between individuals belonging to different societal groups. The concept of sociolinguistic variable is defined by Fasold (1990:223-224) as: ‘A set of alternative ways of saying same thing, although the alternatives, or variants, have social significance. More especially, a sociolinguistic variable is a linguistic element that co-varies not only with other linguistic elements, but also with a number of extra linguistic independent variables like social class, age, sex, ethnic group or contextual style’. What Fasold calls sociolinguistic variable is evidently linguistic variable,

which is emphasized in the pioneering work of Labov, alongside other studies from different sociolinguists (e.g. Shuay et al (1968), Wolfram (1969), Trudgil (1974) etc). It is the marker of varieties.

In discussing the role of the linguistic variable, Chambers et al (1988:127) states that linguistic variable is a structural unit, parallel to such units as the phoneme and noun phrase in linguistic theory. A choice between two or more distinct but linguistically equivalent variants represents the existence of a linguistic variable. Wardhaugh (2006:143) uses the term, linguistic item to refer to linguistic variable, which has identifiable variants.

Example of a linguistic variable can be seen in words like *farm* and *far*. These words are sometimes given r- less pronunciations; in this case we have the linguistic variable (r) with two variants [r] and Ø (i.e. 'zero', or null). One deductible fact from these is that linguistic variable, in whatever context or form it occurs, does not lead to a change in meaning. In line with this view, Wardhaugh (2006:137) comments that 'linguistic variable is an item in the structure of a language that has alternate realizations as one speaker realizes it one way, another speaker a different way; or the same speaker realizes it differently on different occasions'.

Studies on language variation

Labov's (1961) work on Martha's vine yard on the social motivation of a sound change is generally considered to be the starting point for studying language variation in reference to social context. He described the existence of systematic differences between the speakers in their use of certain linguistic variables. Using 69 Natives of Martha's vineyard across social factors: age, ethnicity, occupation, region etc. He focused his attention on how words like out, house, trout and while, pie, night were pronounced. He noted the occurrence of centralization (eu) and (əi) instead of the common south east New England standard (au) and (ai) and that the centralized diphthongs was more noticeable in the first set of words than in the second set. The variable in the first set of words were called (aw) variable [(au) and (eu)] and the second set of words were called (ay) variable [(ei) and (ai)]. With reference to age, it was found that the increase in centralization was most obvious within the age group of 31-45 years. He also found out that centralization was more prevalent in the speech of those who belonged to the rural upward island in Chilmark, a harbour for the dozen of fisher men than the down Island speech; mostly filled with farmers.

Trudgil's (1974) work in Norwich England is also an important work in variation studies. He investigates sixteen phonological variables in relation to social class and level of formality. His study is a classical example of

the ‘Labovian method’ using structured interview to elicit data. As a Native of Norwich, collecting data was not so much of a problem since He was aware of the social structure and accent of the people. He stratified the Norwich speech community into five social classes: Middle Middle class (MMC), Lower Middle class (LMC), Upper working class (UWC), Middle working class (MWC) and lower working class (LWC). His analysis of the variable (ng), (t) and (h) shows that the higher the social class; the more frequent the use of (ŋ), (t) and (h) variants in words like singing, butter and hammer than the corresponding (ŋ) (ʔ) and ϕ variants. Trudgil’s study proved that the variant of (ng) variable is related not only to social class but also gender, with females showing greater use of (ŋ) than males without regard to social class membership. He affirms that ‘if we are to obtain a correct picture of the relationship between language and social stratification; we must be able to measure both linguistic and social phenomena so that we can correlate the two accurately.

Methodology

Ninety subjects are determined as the sample population grouped according to age categories and the genders. The age categories are distributed into (15-30 years) for the young speakers, (31-59 years) for the older speakers and (61-90 years) for the aged speakers. The data was collected using interview. The subjects are recorded

while responding to the questions that demand them to tell a story about themselves. The recordings are transcribed for the purpose of identifying linguistic variables.

Data analysis

The linguistic variables identified in the speech of the subjects and their variants are: (k), (g), (e) & (r).

Linguistic variation in Emekuku-Igbo by age

Figure 1 below presents variation involving the variables (k), (g), (e) & (r) as affected by the social variable, age.

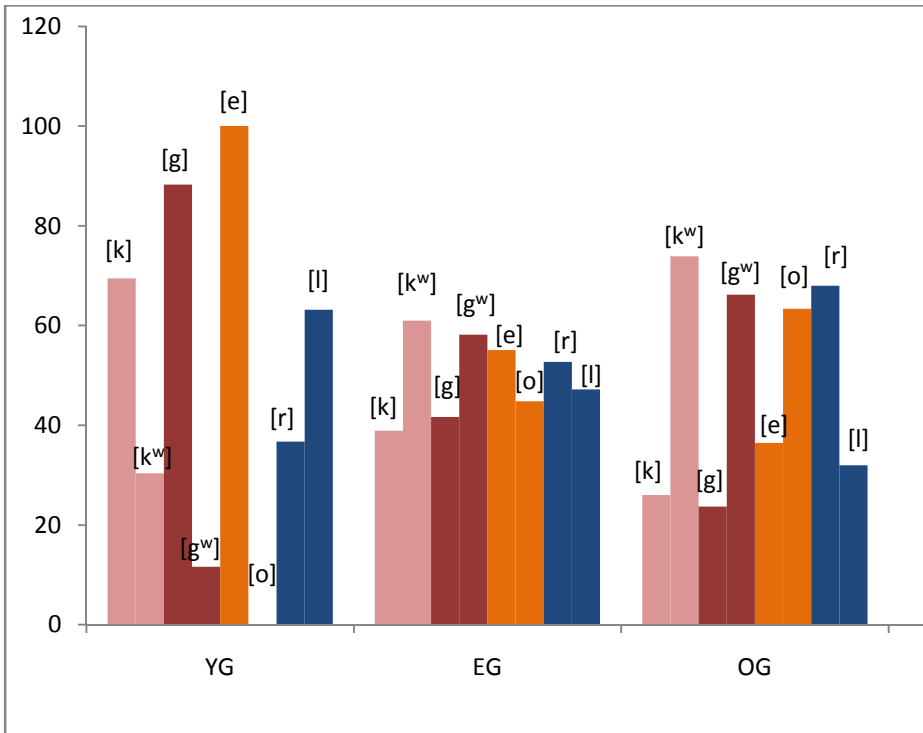


Figure 1: The Mean scores of the young, older and aged speakers, where YG stands for young speakers, EG stands for older speakers and OG stands for aged speakers.

This graph specifies as follows:

1. 69.5% of the young speakers record the variant [k] while 30.4% record the variant [k^w]. 88.3% of the young generation records the variant [g]

while 11.6% record the variant [gw]. 100% of the young generation records the variant [e], none records the variant [o]. 36.7% record the variant [r] while 63.2% record the variant [l]. This shows that the variants [k], [g], [e] and [l] are more prominent in the speech of young generation than its counterpart.

2. For the older speakers, 38.9% record the variant [k] while 61% record the variant [k^w]. 41.7% record the variant [g] while 58.2% record the variant [g^w]. 55.1% record the variant [e] while 44.8% record the variant [o]. 52.7% record the variant [r] while 47.2% record the variant [l]. In other words, the variants [k^w], [g^w] and [e] are more prominent in the speech of the elderly generation.
3. In the speech text of the aged speakers, 26.0% record the variant [k] while 73.9% record the variant [k^w]. 23.7% record the variant [g] while 66.2% record the variant [g^w]. 36.5% record the variant [e] while 63.4% record the variant [o]. 68% record the variant [r] while 32% record the variant [l]. The variants [k^w], [g^w], [o] and [r] are highly identified within the old generation speakers than other generations.

The graph displays four variables and their variants as identified in the speech of the different age groups of speakers:

(k): [k] [k^w] as in /emekuku/ /emek^wuk^wu/

(g): [g] [g^w] as in /oguzoI/ /ogwuzoI/

(e): [e] [o] as in /ekpe.ɛ/ /okpe.ɛ/

(r): [r] [l] as in /osekpu.ɪwa/ /osekpuluwa/

As evident, a variety is illustrated to exist in Emekuku-Igbo distinguished by the variants [g] & [g^w] and [e] & [o]: [g] and [e] distinguish the young speakers of Emekuku-Igbo from the older and aged speakers of the dialect.

Linguistic variation in Emekuku-Igbo by gender

Figure 2 below presents variation involving the variables (k), (g), (e) & (r) as affected by the social variable, gender.

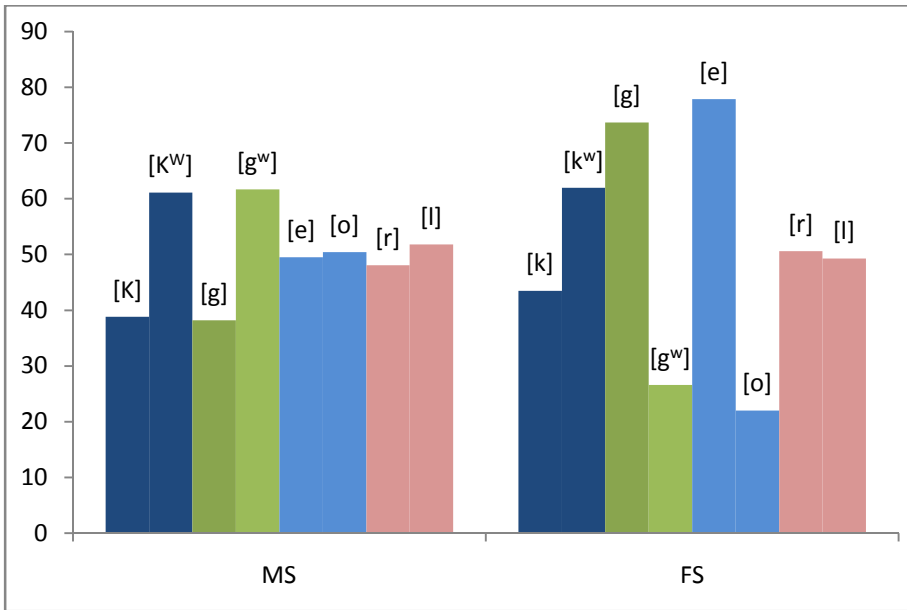


Figure 2: Mean score of the male and female subjects, where MS stands for male speakers and FS stands for female speakers.

1. 38.8% of the male subjects record the variant [k] while 61.1% record the variant [k^w]. 38.2% record the variant [g] while 61.7% record the variant [g^w]. 49.5% record the variant [e] while 50.4% record the variant [o]. 48.1% record the variant [r] while 51.8% record the variant [l].
2. 43.5% of the female subjects record the variant [k] while 62% record the variant [k^w]. 73.7% record the variant [g] while 26.6% record the

variant [g^w]. 77.9% record the variant [e] while 22% record the variant [o]. 50.6% record the variant [r] while 49.3 record the variant [l].

3. This reveals that the variant [g] is more prominent in the speech of the female while [g^w] is more prominent in the speech of the male. Also, the variant [e] scores high percentage in the speech of the female while the variant [o] scores high in the speech of the male.

Here, we see the variants of (g): [g], [g^w]. The female speakers as opposed to the male speakers use [g] more. This is also the case with [e]. It occurs more with the female speakers as opposed to its variant [o]. However, the percentage differences between the occurrences could hardly serve to distinguish a variety.

Overall, we clearly identify one variety of Emekuku-Igbo; distinguished by age. This variety is spoken by young speakers not more than 30 years. It is marked by [g] and [e] with its variants [g^w] and [o] respectively found in the older and aged speakers' speech.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that language variation exists in languages and studies in different languages to determine the patterns it takes are highly required; first, to provide evidence against ideal speaker-hearer knowledge of a language, which emphasizes fixed

patterns uttered by speakers of a language. Anything, contrary to the determined patterns is considered unacceptable. Second, to establish the basic relation between society and language; in fact, the major argument against formal linguistics, more particularly Chomskyan linguistics is its being asocial. The capacity of society to determine linguistic patterns is not given attention. And, third, to recognize that there are no mono-style speakers of a language; speakers produce different forms of items which constitute sets. Each set is alternative forms which could be described and accounted for in terms of how it has manifested by recourse to interactions between social factors and the language.

Here, four linguistic variables have been identified in Emekuku-Igbo, (k), (g), (e) & (r). Each has two variant forms determined to manifest by interaction with the social factors, age and gender. The analysis provides evidence concerning the extent to which the variants distinguish varieties of Emekuku-Igbo or not. In other words, as obvious as language variation is, its relevance is in determining varieties. And, a variety is determined when a variant or variants of a linguistic variable are in a very high display or occurrence in the speech of a group of speakers distinguished by a social description such as age, gender, social class or status, region etc.

In this study, two varieties are evident in Emekuku-Igbo, the variety spoken by the young speakers and the

variety spoken by the older and aged speakers. The young speakers variety is marked by the [g] & [e] variants while the other variety is marked by the [gw] & [o] variants of the same variables respectively. The social variable, gender influences variants of the same linguistic variables identified in the study but the percentage differences between the occurrences of the variants with the genders do not distinguish any varieties.

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Chiaka Ursula Opara is a postgraduate student of the Department of Linguistics, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Mbagwu, D. Ugochukwu is a professor of Syntax & Applied Linguistics, Department of Linguistics, Nnamdi Azikwe University, Awka