

## **A phonological analysis of documented traditional Igbo children games songs\*\***

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### ***Abstract***

*Igbo children engage in traditional games that often have song accompaniments. However, many of the traditional Igbo games are threatened by several factors, more particularly modernity. This threat is the basis for the documentation of the games alongside the accompanying songs. The documentation involves five-level annotation, phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and philosophical. This paper presents an analysis of the songs at the phonological level, with focus on variation. The purpose is to provide the phonological information required to support the revitalization of traditional Igbo children game songs, and the material support for pedagogical issues pertaining to phonological variation, which characterize the Igbo language. The data are representative of the documented traditional Igbo children game songs from four primary schools in Mgbakwu community of Awka North Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria, Central School, Abogu Primary School, Unity Primary School, and Community Primary School (Eme, Mbagwu, Asadu & Nkamigbo, 2023). The analysis shows that there are some*

*sounds which vary in the songs from one group of children to another as well as the standard Igbo. Evidently, this qualifies phonological findings in the Igbo language studies.*

**Keywords:** *Igbo children, traditional games, games songs, documentation, annotation, variation*

## **Introduction**

Children are vibrant beings. They hardly stay at a place for a long time. They enjoy playing around by themselves, with their companions or with play objects. This explains why the school curricula for children do not provide for long straight hours of lessons, instead the lessons are made to last for few minutes with intermittent breaks between lessons. School authorities, therefore, include periods for pupils to play around. At such play periods, children exercise themselves by running around and playing different kinds of games of their choice. As determined by (Eme, Mbagwu, Asadu & Nkamigbo, 2022), there is a worrisome absence of traditional children playgroups in most Igbo communities as a result of modern ways of living, driven by religion, electronic and social media operations, and worse than these, insecurity, etc. Many Igbo oral traditions are therefore stifled to the point of extinction. Children games that flourished in the serene communal settings in the traditional Igbo areas are worse hit. And, being that the strength of the life of a language is accounted for by the child speakers, the need to attend to such oral tradition that fosters learning of the language by children is most pressing. This motivates the documentation project of children Igbo games by (Eme, Mbagwu, Asadu & Nkamigbo, 2022).

Most of the Igbo traditional games often have songs accompaniment. With the reality of the picture already painted, the

children only have a secure school environment during school time to play traditional games and children who are conversant with these games really enjoy them and keep themselves busy with them throughout the break period.

As has been discovered, more Igbo children lack access to this opportunity because they are in private schools where such freedom does not pertain or schools where their energy is directed to other activities. By this development, the children are no longer conversant with the games and so can hardly play them. More unfortunately, substitutes with different interesting packages abound such as football, relay, hip-hop and dances challenges and others.

Knowing the enormous implication of the loss the Igbo in particular, and the world at large, would incur if the traditional children games are lost to modernity and other compelling circumstances, (Eme, Mbagwu, Asadu & Nkamigbo, 2022) have undertaken the documentation of the game songs. The games songs are annotated at different levels, phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and philosophical. The results of the documentation are intended to be archived for preservation, revitalization and research activities. This paper utilizes the phonological annotation to account for variation in Igbo as represented in the songs. It therefore provides the phonological information relevant for the revitalization of the game songs and the material support for promoting the linguistic aesthetics that variation encodes especially in the rendering of oral traditions such as the ones involved here.

### **Earlier works on variation and documentation in Igbo**

Eme and Uwaezuke (2015) is a comparative study of sound variation in Umuolom Igbo variety and standard Igbo. Their study

describes the implications of the Ụmuolum Igbo variety on the students in their efforts towards the learning of standard I`gbo. They point out that the existence of some speech sounds in standard Igbo and their absence in the Ụmuolum Igbo variety and vice versa have some pedagogical implications. This is because standard Igbo is the variety taught in schools and set for examinations by the examination bodies. Accordingly, such sounds, especially the unfamiliar ones, cause the students to experience difficulties in learning the standard Igbo. Teachers should, therefore, lay emphasis on such sounds for a better understanding of the standard Igbo by the Ụmuolum students.

A research carried out by Chikeluba (2015) studies the variable ‘r’ in Eziowelle Igbo variety. She observes that the ‘r’ variant [r] is common among the older generation and rural folks while the younger generation use [r]. Codeswitching is predominant among the younger generation, who also use such other variants of ‘r’ as {h}, {f} and {d}. For her, the disappearance of [r] in the speech of the younger generation is an indication of an impending language change.

Enemuo (2016) is a comparative linguistic study of two Igbo language speaking communities- Ndiowu Orumba and Ndiowu Arọchukwu. He points out that although both communities were one community in the olden days, there is currently a lot of observable variation in their speech as a result of their having separated over a long period of time- Ndiowu Orumba being a community in Orumba Local Government Area of Anambra State, and Ndiowu Arọchukwu being a community in Abia State.

According to Nkamigbo and Agu (2015), whose work is on the documentation of the Igbo dirge songs of the Amokwe Orji community, “Language documentation is an important tool for preserving languages, especially endangered languages or

endangered aspects of languages.” They point out that dirge songs, which form an important cultural aspect of the people, are the exclusive reserve of women; they are rendered by women during the funeral of a woman or a teenage girl. Unfortunately, only a handful of old women can render the dirge songs because the younger generation is no longer interested as a result of the influence of Christianity and modernity. Thus, the dirge songs are threatened and may soon go into extinction; hence the need for their documentation.

Uba (2015) documents the Erigwara Mbaise, a cultural festival of the Mbaise Igbo community. She is of the view that documentation should go beyond capturing “the unique linguistic structures of languages but also the cultural and other forms of knowledge embodied in those languages” to forestall their extinction.

Chiemezie and Eme (2022) is a documentation of some lost and endangered Igbo words and expressions collected from Igbo male and female speakers of 60 years and above. The paper shows that whereas some of the words/expressions are no longer in use or recognized as Igbo words/expressions by speakers below age 30 years, people from 40 years and above recognize such words and acknowledge their rare usage or outright loss. According to the authors, the loss or endangerment of the words/expressions shows the need for their documentation, which “will help to preserve the nuances of meaning in the endangered words/expressions and also the richness of the Igbo language.”

Even though the documentation instances referred to here are not multimodal and are not designed for digital archiving, they display results for at least preservation. The documentation that has provided the data for this phonological analysis complements previous documentation projects and studies.

## Data presentation and analysis

Excerpt from documented game songs from each of the groups of children from Mgbakwu, represented in the public primary schools the children attend has been selected. Groups A and B are from the schools in Amaezike Village of the community while Groups C and D are from Achalaumana Village. The basic phonological principles have been applied to the analysis.

### Group A: Central School, Amaezike Village, Mgbakwu

1a. Eḡwu' ògòdò ògòdò	éé èhéè èhé èhé
/éḡwú ògòdò ògòdò/	/éé èhéè èhé èhé/
dance wrapper wrapper	Dance with uniform

Ónyé nā-énwēlō	ògòdò	éé èhéè èhé èhé
/ònyé nḗɛ̃wēlō	ògòdò/	/éé èhéè èhé èhé/
Who AUX-VP-own-NEG wrapper		
If you don't have the uniform		

Yá jèé gòtáògòdò	éé èhéè èhé èhé
/já dzèé gòtáògòdò/	/éé èhéè èhé èhé/
2P go-OVS buy.for wrapper	
Let the person go and get the uniform	

ògòdò dọkaa	Ànyị̀ àkwáchí é 3x
/ògòdò dókáá/	/ànyị̀ àkwáʃí é/
wrapper draw.be-torn-OVS	we VP-stitch it
If the uniformtears	We stitch it

b. Zògbúó	Chíàmáká
/zògbúó	ʃíàmáká/
march.kill-OVS Chiamaka	
Destroy Chiamaka	

Àzògbùkwàrà                      mú ò!  
 /ázògbùkwàrà                      mú ò/  
 VP-march.kill-ES(entreaty)-NEG me EXCL  
 Don't destroy me o!

Ényímbà      ényí  
 /ényímbà      éní/  
 elephant.nation elephant

2a. Ònyé      énēnā                      ányá n'ázú  
      /òjé      énēnā                      ájá nàázó/  
      somebody VP-look-NEG eye in back  
      Nobody should look behind

Ìmáńwú      ānyī gá-àpíá                      yī      ìtálì  
 /máńwó      ājī gààpíá                      jī      ìtálì/  
 masquerade our FUT-VP-flog you cane  
 Our masquerade will flog you

b. É      kúté                      m̄mīlī  
      /é      kúté                      m̄mīlī/  
      ImpPr fetch.for(oneself) water  
      Someone will bring water

À      kwóó      ákā  
 /à      kwóó'      ákā/  
 ImpPr wash-OVS hand  
 Someone will wash hands

É      wèté                      ñgàjì;      è      ríé      ñlī (yé)  
 /é      wèté'                      ñgàd̄jì/      /è      ríé      ñlī (jé)/  
 ImpPrbring.for(oneself) spoon      ImpPr eat-OVS food (Rhythm)  
 Someone will bring spoon                      Someone will eat

**Group B:** Abogu Primary School, Amaezike Village, Mgbakwu

**3a.** Ónyé nā-énwēlō                      ògòdò    Ééé èhéè èhé èhé  
 /òpé nēénwēlō                      ògòdò/    /ééé èhéè èhé èhé/  
 who AUX-VP-have-NEG dress  
 Whoever does not have uniform

Nyá        jèé        gòté                      ògòdò        Ééé èhéè èhé èhé  
 /pá        dʒèé        gòté                      ògòdò/        /ééé èhéè èhé èhé/  
 Him/her go-OVS buy.for(oneself) dress        Rhythm  
 Let the person go and buy the uniform

ògòdò dọkǎǎ                      Ànyị̀ àkwáchíé 4x  
 /ògòdò dókáá/                      /àpì àkwáfíé/  
 dress draw.be-torn-OVS        we VP-sew.cover-OVS  
 We stitch it (if the uniform tears)

**3b.** Ònyé    énēnā        ányá n'ázú  
 /òpé    énēnā        ápá nàázó/  
 somebody VP-look-NEG eye    in back  
 Nobody should look behind

Ìm̀m̀ónwú    ānyī̀ yà-àpíā                      y' ùt̀l̀ì  
 /m̀m̀ónwó    āpī̀ jààpíá                      j' ùt̀l̀ì/  
 Masquerade our    FUT-VP-flog-OVS you cane  
 our masquerade will flog him/her

Ónyé                      néé                      ányā n'ázú  
 /òpé                      néé                      ápá nàázó/  
 somebody(COND) look-OVS eye    in back  
 If anyone looks behind

M̀m̀m̀onwú ānyī yà-àpíā y' ùt̀àlì  
 /m̀m̀ónwó ānī jààpíá j' òt̀àlì/  
 Masquerade our FUT-VP-flog-OVS you cane  
 our masquerade will flog him/her

**3c.** É kúté m̀m̀m̀īrī à kwóó ákā.  
 /é kúté m̀m̀m̀īrī à kwóóákā/  
 ImpPrfetch.for(oneself) ImpPr wash-OVS hand  
 Someone will bring water to wash our hands

É wèté ñgàjì è ríé ñrī  
 /é wèté ñgàd̀zì è ríé ñrī/  
 ImpPr bring.for(oneself) spoon ImpPr eat-OVS food  
 Someone will bring spoons someone will eat

### Group C: Unity Primary School, Achalaumana Village ,Mgbakwu

**4a.** Égwú ògòdò ògòdò éé èhéè èhé èhé  
 /égwú ògòdò ògòdò/ /éé èhéè èhé èhé/  
 dance wrapper wrapper  
 Dance with uniform

Ónyé nā-énwēlō ògòdò éé èhéè èhé èhé  
 /óné nḗéṅwēlō ògòdò/ /éé èhéè èhé èhé/  
 Who AUX-VP-own-NEG wrapper Rhythm  
 If you don't have the uniform

Yá jèé gòtá ògòdò éé èhéè èhé èhé  
 /já d̀zèé gòtá ògòdò/ /éé èhéè èhé èhé/  
 2P-OBJ go-OVS buy.for wrapper Rhythm  
 Let the person go and get the uniform

ògòdò dọkǎá                      Ànyị àkwáchíé 4x  
 /ògòdò dókáá/                      /ànyì àkwáfíé/  
 wrapper draw.be-torn-OVS      we VP-sew.cover-OVS  
 We stitch it (if the uniform tears)

**b.** ọ gbàjíé              m̄ áká ọ gbàjíé              m̄ úkwú  
 /ó gbàdǎjíé              m̄ áká ọ gbàdǎjíé              m̄ úkwú/  
 S/he break.deform me hand it break.deform me leg  
 Someone has broken my hand and leg

ọ gǎ-àrí              élū; rí'              élū; ọ gǎ-àrí              élū  
 /ó gǎàrí              élū rí'              élū ọ gǎàrí              élū/  
 S/he FUT-VP-climb up; climb up; S/he FUT-VP-climb up  
 S/he should be thrown up; thrown up; S/he should be thrown up

óbéré nwā                      ọ gǎ-àrí                      élū  
 /óbéré ñṅwā/                      /ó gǎàrí                      élū/  
 Small child                      it FUT-VP-climb up  
 It should be thrown up

**Group D:** Community Primary School, Achalaumana Village,  
 Mgbakwu

**5a.** Ụnō ānyī è pèrì                      òpé?  
 /únō ānyī è pèrì                      òpé/  
 house our it be(small)-APP smallness?  
 Is our house small?

Éēē, ọ pèrì                      òpé  
 /éēē ọ pèrì                      òpé/  
 yes it be(small)-APP smallness  
 Yes, it is small

Mèé yā kà ó vùò ívù

/mèé jā kà ó vùò ívù/

Do-OVS it let it be(small)-OVS bigness

Make it big

Sáwàì sáwàì sáwàì sáwàì

/sáwàì sáwàì sáwàì sáwàì/

rhythm (wider, wider, wider)

**b.** Sí m̄ éjēnā àbà̀nì isé

/sí m̄ éđžēnā àbà̀nì isé/

say me VP-go-NEG night five

I shouldn't engage in a five-day journey

Nà íhé nà-èmé n'ábà̀nì isé

/nà íhé nà-èmé nàábà̀nì isé/

that something AUX-VP-do in night five

Because evil happens at the fifth day

Úzò énú ígwē ò ò̀dikwà ò̀sò?

/úzò énú ígwē ò ò̀dikwà ò̀sò/

road up sky it be-ES(really) near

Is the road to heaven near?

As evident in the phonemic transcription, there are examples of sounds in some words that are not consistent in the rendering of the songs by each of the groups and by implication the sounds vary from one area of Mgbakwu to another. For instance, 'the same' song in Groups A, B and C (Égwú ò̀gò̀dò ò̀gò̀dò), we find /j/ in groups A and C [Yá jèé gò̀táò̀gò̀dò /já dzèé gò̀tá ò̀gò̀dò/] 'Let the person go and get the uniform' but in Group B, the phoneme /ɲ/ substitutes /j/ in [Nyá jèé gò̀tè ò̀gò̀dò /ɲá dzèé gò̀tá ò̀gò̀dò].

Moreover, we see the form ‘gota’ in Groups A and C while Group B realizes it as ‘gote’ ‘buy’. It is therefore the case that /j/ and /ɲ/, as well as /a/ and /e/ are in free variation in Mgbakwu.

We observe the glaring sameness in the use of the negative imperative suffix *-na* in Groups A, B and D, which varies from the standard Igbo *-la*, [Ázògbùkwàrà/ázògbùkwàrà] ‘Don’t destroy’, [énēnā /énēnā] ‘Don’t look’, éjēnā /édžēnā/ ‘Don’t go’. The standard Igbo forms are *Ázògbùkwàrà*, *élēlā* and *éjēlā*, respectively.

Furthermore, we see the use of the future marker *-ga* by Group A which is consistent with the standard Igbo but Group B uses the form *-ya*: Group A - [Mmánwú ānyī gā-àpíá /m̀m̀ánwóá̃nīgáàpíá/], and Group B – [M̀m̀ónwú ānyī yà-àpíá /m̀m̀ónwó á̃nī j̀à̀píá/ ‘Our masquerade will flog’. In this example also, we two forms of *m̀m̀ánwú* ‘masquerade’: Group A has *m̀m̀ánwú /m̀m̀ánwó/* while Group B has *m̀m̀ónwú /m̀m̀ónwó/*. Thus, /a/ and /ɔ/ are free variants in /m̀m̀ánwó/ and /m̀m̀ónwó/.

On other aspects of variation, we observe the voiced labiodental fricative [v], which is found only in names of towns in the standard Igbo, appears in Group D words: [Mèé yā kà ó vùò ívù /mèé jā kà ó vùò ívù/] ‘Make it big’, which would have been the voiced bilabial plosive [b], to yield [Mèé yā kà ó bùò íbu /mèé jā kà ó bùò íbù/] ‘Make it big’. Beyond this, we find variation in a few words across the groups; for instance, ‘n’ is used to substitute ‘l’ in the words. For example, the standard Igbo /léé/ ‘Look’, /élēlā/ ‘Don’t look’ are realized as /néé/ and /énēnā/ respectively in Group B. This is also the case in Group A. In Group D, there are also instances of such variation. For instance, the standard Igbo *úlō /ólō/* ‘House’, *àbàlì /àbàlì/* ‘Night’, *élú /élú/* ‘up’ have the ‘l’ substituted with ‘n’ in the words in the songs, hence, /ónō/, /àbànì/ and /énú/. However, Group C, retains ‘l’ in *élú /élú/* ‘up’. The forms, *m̀m̀lī*

/ńmĩĩ/ ‘water’ and ńlĩ /ńlĩ/ ‘food’ are found in the songs in Group A, which vary from the standard Igbo forms, /ńmĩĩ/ and /ńlĩ/ found in Group B.

### Findings and discussion

The sameness in the use of the negative imperative suffix ‘-na’ across the four groups is a clear indication that the community is just one Igbo variety. Ordinarily, one expects the phonemes of Groups A and B on one hand, and Groups C and D on the other hand, to be closer in resemblance because of their proximity and the fact of their belonging to the same village- the former being in Amaezike Village and the later in Achalaumana Village. However, we see that in Groups A, B and C [Egwu’ ọ̀gòdò ọ̀gòdò], whereas Groups A and C that belong to different villages have /j/ in [yá jèè gòtá ọ̀gòdò /já ḍzèè gòtá ọ̀gòdò/], Group B, which is of the same village with Group A, has the phoneme /p/ in [nyá jèè gòtè ọ̀gòdò /já ḍzèè gòtá ọ̀gòdò/]. Again, Groups A and C have used ‘gota’ while Group B uses ‘gote’. These variants could be as a result of dialectal contact between Mgbakwu people and sojourners to the land or the contact between some of them who have sojourned to other areas of Igbo land.

Some studies have faulted the inclusion of [v] in the official Igbo orthography (see Ikekeonwu, 1999). For them, since its sound is not found in any standard Igbo words, it has no business appearing in the official orthography. However, its profuse use in many Igbo varieties as well as constituting a significant sound in the names of some communities or places (like Avụla, Ivo, Avomimì) justifies the inclusion of the sound as a phoneme in the official Igbo orthography. And, here in the songs, there have found a few words in which the sound is represented to further strengthen its inclusion in the Igbo orthography.

We have observed that some of the identification marks of Main Dialect 2 (MD 2), Oka Inland West Igbo, of the Inland West Igbo (IWI) dialect cluster, to which Mgbakwu variety belongs (Ikekeonwu, 1987), are the use of the *-na* imperative and perfective markers, as opposed to the standard Igbo *-la* and the use of ‘n’ to substitute the standard Igbo ‘l’ in some words as ànà/àl à è n ū / é l ū, á b à n ì / á b à l ì, as we already exemplified. A few cases of deviation could be as a result of the influence of the standard Igbo or contact with other Igbo dialect speakers.

It is interesting to observe that in all the instances of variation in the children game songs, there is no evidence of variation in tone. This provides more evidence to studies that conclude to tone as crucial to Igbo grammar (Nwachukwu, 1995); hence, even though there are variant forms, there are no tonal substitution in the occurring forms.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis presented here confirms there is no homogenous dialectal variety even in a dialectal area. This has an implication for teaching and learning the Igbo language and the development of resource materials for the teaching and learning of the language. For instance, in any engagement of the documented songs for revitalization, the game songs could be presented in the standard Igbo forms to promote the variety and other varieties to provide for diverse rendering of the songs to reinforce aesthetic qualities the songs could express from one dialect to the other.

Overall, the results here call for an urgent documentation of different oral traditions of the Igbo people which are now stifled by such factors as modernization, religion, technological advancements, etc. With the actualization of this, a longevity security would have been accomplished for the Igbo language. Of

course, younger speakers within the Igbo area and the diaspora could by different technological media especially the social media gain access to the documented traditions to intensify opportunities for them to unite with the traditions that qualify their demographic and cultural identity. Of course, we recommend sophisticated dimensions of the presentations of the songs in the standard Igbo and as many dialects of the Igbo language as are possible. In this, the accomplishment of revitalization is achievable.

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