

A Phonological Analysis of Igbo Pet names

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Abstract

Igbo names embody a rich mine of information on the people's reflection, therefore often sentential. A pet name is a name we receive in addition to our formal names and it is usually given to us by the people close to us; Pet names may be derived through the truncation of a person's formal name; it may be an ironic pet name, profession pet name or personal feature pet name. This paper examines Igbo formal names with a view to phonologically analyse pet names which are derived from them, and does not delve into pet names which are not related to persons' formal or proper names. The study deploys primary research method (using informants of Igbo nativity whose age ranges are from 28-80 years), secondary research method and introspection, given the language competence of the researchers, to achieve its purpose. The findings show that metathesis (an unpopular phonological process) as well as vowel deletion and assimilation are phonological processes which are evident in pet naming. It was also observed that in pet name transformations, light syllables are favoured more than heavy syllables; this conforms to the syllable structure of the language.

Keywords: *Igbo formal name, pet name, phonological analysis*

Introduction

Igbo is a term used to refer to the people of south-eastern Nigeria as well as the language spoken by the people. Igbo belongs to the Kwa language sub-family of the Volta-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo language family. According to Heine and Nurse (2000), the languages currently known as Kwa are spoken along the Atlantic coast of West Africa from the south-eastern quadrant of Cote d'Ivoire to the extreme south-western corner of Nigeria. Igbo is spoken primarily in the following states in Nigeria: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. It is also spoken in the northeast of the Delta state and in the southeast of the Rivers state. There are no native speakers of Igbo who are non-Nigerians.

Igbo formal names follow the Western European naming pattern in which the family name comes after a first name. In traditional Igbo society, there is a lot in a name. Igbo names bear a message, a meaning, a history of the past, a record of notable experience of the parents or a prayer for good fortune. This is also to say that they symbolize a rich source of information on the people's reflection and considered views on life and reality. They provide a window into the Igbo world of values as well as their peculiar conceptual apparatus for dealing with life.

This study attempts to examine the phonological processes evident in the transformation of Igbo formal names to pet names; ascertain the syllable structures found in Igbo pet names and determine the favoured syllable weight of Igbo pet names. Relying

on data obtained from informants and already published Igbo names in books, journals and e-library resources as well as introspection given the language competence of the researchers as native speakers of Igbo language, Igbo names from different Igbo-speaking regions of Nigeria were covered.

Naming in Igbo Land

All over the world, names are unique and meaningful, even among people of different dialectal areas within a speech community. The uniqueness of names is evident among the Igbos as there is a lot in a name. Name is more than just a tag or a convenient emblem of distinctiveness. The linguistic features in name manifest themselves among the Igbos, according to Anyachonkeya (2014: 113) naming in Igbo land “has social, linguistic, philosophic colouring. Names children bear are a reflection of their parents’ thoughts and life’s travails. Put differently, the names given to children are the whims of their parents”.

In Igbo society, *ikuputanwa* or *igu nwa aha*, that is “child-naming ceremony”, may take place four days after a child’s birth, (but more often, the naming ceremonies take place on the eighth day after the circumcision of the child in the case of a male child, depending on the health of the mother and child). The naming convention references an observation, event surrounding the birth, a deceased ancestor, the time and/or place of birth, birthmarks, or some other remarkable characteristics — For example, *Ogbonna* means “image of his father”. Majority of names given to children are really abbreviated statements of meaning and significant interpretations of life experience or of events in the history of the family. A name may point out that the birth of the child is a welcomed breakthrough in the lives of the parents especially after a long wait for a child. For example:

Example 1: Names indicating a child’s birth as a welcomed landmark

- i. *Iheanacho* – “What we have been looking for”
- ii. *Ihentuge* – “What I have been searching for”
- iii. *Akujuobi* – “something to soothe the mind”
- iv. *Nwaeruoulo* - “A child has reached this house”
- v. *Nwagugbulam* – “May I not die of child-hunger”

Igbo also name children after the market days *eke*, *orie*, *afor* and *nkwo* on which they were born. Typical names for boys named after market days are - *Nweke*, *Okereke*, *Okeke*, *Ugweke*, *Okorie*, *Okere*, *Okoye*, *Okafor*, *Okorafor*, *Nwafor*, *Okonkwo*, and *Nwankwo* while the corresponding female names would be *Mgbeke*, *Mgborie*, *Mgborafor*, *Adafo*, *Nwanyinkwo* and *Nkwoja*. However, some of these names are endangered (especially the female names) as some people do not feel happy or proud to be known by them because they are viewed as primitive. In modern times, we have them spilled into English names of days like Sunday, Monday, Friday, irrespective of the gender of the child.

Anyachonkeya (2006) posits that when a baby is born in Omuma (a community found in Oru East L.G.A. of Imo State), the parents will enquire from a diviner (*dibia afa*), among other things, who reincarnated the baby and the person to shave the baby’s hair. These inquiries are considered germane because it is feared that the baby might come to some harm if the inquiries were not made. The inquiries are pursued ever before the baby is given a name.

Thus, naming is a delicate issue that is not trampled upon or treated with levity. It is worthy of note to point out the linguistic uniqueness of names within dialectal areas. In

other words, names suggest and reveal the regional dialects of Igbo land where the bearers come from as the example below shows:

Example 2: Some names peculiar to regional dialects of Igbo-land

- i) **Abia:** *Okwara, Ukpai, Uduma, Idika, Dimgba, Okebulu, Iroha, Nwosu, Ogenyi, Omoji, Awa*
- ii) **Anambra:** *Okpalla, Nnamani, Ifediba, Umeakuka, Nnolim, Azikiwe, Iweka, Umeugokwe*
- iii) **Delta:** *Ossai, Obiefuna, Oputa, Moghalu, Nchedo, Nkelechi, Nzimiro, Iweala, Onyeye, Ewere, Awele*
- iv) **Ebonyi:** *Osuu, Ukeni, Oko, Idam, Ibiam, Otu, Aja*
- v) **Enugu:** *Nnaji, Ene, Ono, Ede, Nebo, Odo, Ugwuanyi*
- vi) **Imo:** *Okpara, Diala, Erundu, Ejiogu, Njemanze, Izunobi, Kanu*
- vii) **Rivers (Ikwerre/Etche Axis):** *Amadi, Ozor-mekuri, Wali, Nwuche, Wobidike, Nwonodi, Ndimele*

Sentential naming is customary of the Igbo people in general, as Achebe (1982:67) aptly puts it; Igbo name “is a full-length philosophical statement.” And Essien (2004:115) observes that some of the sentential names are “positive, and negative...names,” and “declarative sentential names.” As a result of sentential naming, pet names in Igbo can be derived from truncation of the root name to ease pronunciation: for any formal name, a pet name is always possible.

What is a Pet Name?

A pet name according to Bechar-Israeli (1995), is a name given to us by the people close to us, in addition to our legal name. McDowell in Filani and Melefa (2014) asserts that pet naming practices are widely distributed, and everywhere contoured to the cultural matrices in which they operate. A pet name is a substitute for the formal name of a familiar person or an informal name given to someone by their family or friends for affection or ridicule. A pet name can be a shortened or modified variation on a person's real name. It may be contractions of longer names (e.g. Margaret to Maggie, Chukwuebuka to Ebuka). In Anglo-American culture, pet name is often based on a shortening of a person's proper name, however, in other societies, this may not necessarily be the case. Pet names in Igbo have a very wide range of forms and derivations; there are pet names which are not related to a person's formal or proper names such as role modelled names, association pet names, ironic pet names, personal feature pet names or profession pet names.

Regardless of the somewhat misleading nature of the term “pet name”, and due to its other connotative association with domestic animals, it is adopted in this study to designate a common sociolinguistic practice of shortening names without necessarily being accidental, humorous, or derisive.

Odisho (1997:321), sees pet-naming as “an onomastic device practiced by adults in a fashion similar to contractions or abbreviations. It is simply, a trend in the economical use of language to serve the function of intimacy, informality and perhaps endearment.” Pet names then are “simply cut...in two, making it more business like without...losing the general drift of its meaning” Achebe (1982:67).

Most English pet names are derived by dropping letters (e.g. one or more letters, usually R, are dropped: Fanny from Frances, Walt from Walter), or created through the phonetic spelling of a name: Len/Leo from Leonard; or from letter swapping (e.g. during the middle ages, the letter R would often be swapped for either L or D i.e. Hal from Harry; Molly from Mary; Sadie from Sarah; and Rick or Dick from Richard)

In the study by Kenstowicz (1994) a simple pattern for English nickname formation, where prominent nucleus (initial or stressed) is selected and its full syllable plus the following onset is extracted, before the diminutive suffix [-i] is added. In Igbo, one of the phonological patterns of pet name formation is through the extraction of the initial nucleus or full syllable with the following onset, before the addition of the close front unrounded vowel [i] as a diminutive suffix as seen below-

Example 3:

Osinachi -“From God” → Os → + -i → Osi → [o.si]
 Ifeatu - “Role model” → If → + -i → Ifi → [i.fi]

Bosch and de Klerk’s study (as cited in Smith, 2003:5) argue that segment, stress, and syllable structure preferences in English nicknames are influenced by nickname subject's gender and the intent of the nickname user. They attribute these correspondences to sound symbolism. Their study found a "markedly strong preference for bi-syllabic nicknames carrying stress on the first syllable," the same pattern they found for English first names, and which contrasts with the poly-syllabicity tendency of phon-aesthetic words. [b, p, k, m, n, t, s, dʒ], in descending order of frequency, accounted for a combined 71.3% of the consonants in the nicknames collected by their survey. Nasals, voiceless stops, and liquids occurred with higher frequency in female nicknames, voiced stops showing up more in male nicknames. In Igbo pet name formation, neither the syllable structure nor the segment is influenced by a subject’s gender, however, in the formation of pet names from formal names (especially unisex), which begin or end with *Chi/Chukwu*, the gender of the bearer as well as the semantic content of syllable(s) are considered. For example, from the formal name *Sochima* which means “Only God knows”, the pet names *Chima* and *Chichi* would be derived for males and females respectively.

Phonological processes evident in the transformation of Igbo formal names to pet names

Organised sounds of languages are not always static; they are conditioned by neighbouring segments. We shall examine the various phonological processes that are involved in the transformation of Igbo formal names to pet names.

Vowel Deletion

Vowel deletion is a common phonological process in African languages and by extension, this may be said to be applicable to the Kwa languages to which Igbo belongs. Vowel deletion, according to Urua (2007), occurs when a vowel melody together with its position on the skeleton is deleted. Vowel deletion is evident in Igbo pet names derived from formal names as observed in the following examples:

Example 4

- i. Onwegi + onyeka + onwo → Onyekonwu – “Who is greater than death?”
 ↓ ↓ ↓
 None who is greater death (No one is greater than death)

- ii. Anyi + adika + ibe → Adikibe - “not like others”
 ↓ ↓ ↓
 We not being like peers/others (We are not like peers/others)

- iii. K'anyi + solo + udo → Soludo – “follow peace”
 ↓ ↓ ↓
 Let us follow peace (Let us follow peace)
- iv. Obim + naeto + chukwu → Neto - “praising”
 ↓ ↓ ↓
 My heart praising God (My heart praises God)
- v. Ka+ osi + so + chukwu → Kosi - “As it (pleases/ is)”
 ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓
 As it please God (As it pleases God)

As pointed above, a necessary condition for vowel deletion to occur is the presence of at least a vowel on either side of a morpheme or at word boundary. The vowel that will be deleted is usually dependent on the height of the vowel. As seen in the data above, when a high vowel is juxtaposed with a low vowel, it is the low vowel rather than the high vowel that gets deleted.

Metathesis

Metathesis occurs when there is a change in the order of two segments. Richards and Schmidt (2002) explains that metathesis sometimes occurs in the speech of language learners but it may also occur with native speakers. Metathesis is evident in Igbo pet names derived from formal names as observed in the following examples:

Example 5

- i. Onyema + uchechukwu → Amuche – “can’t tell the intention”
 ↓ ↓
 Who knows will/ of God (Who knows the will of God?)
- ii. Onyema + oge → Amoge - “Cannot tell when”
 ↓ ↓
 Who knows when/ time (Who knows when /the time?)
- iii. Onyema + echi → Amaechi - “Cannot tell tomorrow”
 ↓ ↓
 Who knows tomorrow (Who knows tomorrow?)

Vowel Assimilation

Urua (2007) posits that vowel assimilation occurs when a vowel simply loses its identity and takes on those of a neighbouring vowel without necessarily losing its position on the skeletal slot. Vowel assimilation is evident in the transformation of Igbo formal names to pet names as observed in the following:

Example 6

- i. Nwá + òbòdò → Nwóòdò
 ↓ ↓
 Child community (Child of the community)
- ii. Nwaihenaeti → Nwiihe – “Child of light / little light”
 ↓
 Little /child of glowing light

- iii. Ndu + bu + isi → Bĩsi
 ↓ ↓ ↓
 Life Is head (Life is paramount)

The data above gives a clear picture of vowel-vowel assimilation or vowel copying where the first vowel becomes completely like the second. As pointed above, the vowel positions are retained even though there is a change in the vowel quality and the direction of assimilation is right-left (regressive).

Tonal Alteration

Tonal alteration is attested in Igbo pet naming as a result of the variation in the feature specifications between the tone of the formal name and pet name. The result of these variations or alteration leads to a change in meaning or complete meaning loss. Consider the following pet names:

Example 7

- | | | | |
|------|------------|--|----------|
| i. | Ílóéríká | “The enemies are ubiquitous/ enormous” | → Éríkà |
| ii. | Chímámándà | – “My God will never fail” | → Àmándà |
| iii. | Òzùlùón!ye | - “Who has it all?” | → Zúlú |
| iv. | Chízàràam | - “God answered me” | → Zàrà |
| v. | Jídé-òfór | – “Stand with truth/evidence” | → Jídé |
| vi. | Ébèlónwú | - “Except death (nothing else can hinder you)” | → Bèlò |

In (7 i-ii) the high tones in the formal names are altered to low tones and the low tones in (7 iii – iv) are altered to high tones; in (7vi) the low-high sequence does not only change to a high-low sequence, the vowel segment also changes from [ɔ] to [o]. Thus, the derived pet names above do not have any meaning in Igbo language. Some could even be mistaken for names in other Nigerian languages (e.g. Hausa & Yoruba), while others are Anglicised.

Syllable Structure of Igbo pet names

Syllables are supra-segmental units; they organize segments into minimal-sized utterances in a language. Syllables are generally organized around a phonological property called sonority (perceived loudness). Sonorants (vowels, liquids, nasals, glides) have greater sonority while obstruents (stops and fricatives) have less. The sonority peak forms the nucleus of the syllable.

The syllable is a significant factor in the formation of Igbo pet names. The syllable structures of the pet names are observed and a large variation was found. Almost all the syllable structures are written below. Long vowels are denoted by VV and short vowels by single V.

Table 1: Syllable Structures found in Igbo Pet Names

| S/N | Syllable | Pet Name | Formal Names |
|------|----------|----------|------------------|
| i | VC | Ij | Ijeoma |
| ii | CVC | Zik | Azikiwe |
| iii | CV-CV | Jide | Jideofor |
| iv | CV-CV-CV | Chizoba | Chizobaanyi |
| v | CV-N-CV | Somto | Somtochukwu |
| vi | CV-V-CV | Buiké | Azubuiké |
| vii | N-CV | Ndu | Ndubuisi |
| viii | N-CV-CV | Nzube | Nzubechukwugaeme |

| | | | |
|------|------------|-----------|---------------------|
| ix | N-CV-CV-CV | Nchekwube | Nchekwubechukwu |
| x | V-CV | Uru | Urunwa |
| xi | V-CV-CV | Ekene | Ekenedirichukwu |
| xii | V-CV-CVC | Ekwutos | Ekwutosinammadibegi |
| xiii | V-CV-N | Ikem | Ikemefuna |
| xiv | V-CV-N-CV | Amanda | Chimamanda |
| xv | V-CVV | Ifuu | Fumnanya |
| xvi | V-CV-VC-V | Ifeanyi | Ifeanyichukwu |

Syllable Weight of Igbo pet names

One view of representing syllable weight is by using moras. Long and short vowels as well as long and short consonants (i.e. geminate and single consonants) are differentiated by their moraic representation. It has been observed that most Igbo pet names are transformations that favour light syllables more than heavy syllables as evident in the syllable structure as shown in Table 1 above.

Another simple phonological pattern of pet name formation that has been observed is through the extraction of the initial nucleus or full syllable with the following onset, before the addition of the close front unrounded vowel [i] as a diminutive suffix. Consider the example below:

Example 8

- i. Osinachi - "From God" → Os → +i → Osi → [o.si]
- ii. Ifeatu - "role model" → If → +i → Ifi → [i.fi]
- iii. Onyekachukwu - "who is greater than God" → Ony → +i → Onyi¹ → [o.ji]
- iv. Eberechi - "God's mercy" → Eb → +i → Ebi → [e.bi]
- v. Emeka - "(He) has done so much" → Em → +i → Emi → [e.mi]

The addition of the final vowel [i] is so that the derived pet name conforms to the open syllable rule/ light syllable weight which the language favours.

As pointed out in the preceding table, the syllable is a significant factor in the formation of Igbo pet names. Poly-syllabicity is attested in Igbo formal names and the choice of syllable(s) wherein the pet name is derived is determined by the semantic content.

Example 9

- i. Aku + abia → Akuabia - "Wealth has arrived" → Aku
 ↓ ↓
 Wealth arrived
- ii. So + chima → Sochima - "Only God knows" → Chima
 ↓ ↓
 Only God Knows
- iii. Ako + bu + ndu → Wisdom is life → Ndu
 ↓ ↓ ↓
 Wisdom is life
- iv. Ilo + abuchi → Hatred/malice is not God → Abuchi
 ↓ ↓
 Enemy is not God

¹Onyi is pet name for any given name that begins with "Ony-" – Onyinye, Onyeka, Onyema

In ancient Igbo culture, a male child's name does not begin with Chi, rather it begins with Chukwu and a female child's name can only begin with Chi and also end with Chi. However, in the formation of pet names from formal names which begin or end with Chi/Chukwu, the gender of the bearer as well as the semantic content of syllable(s) are considered. For example:

Table 2: Formation of pet names based on gender

| S/N | Formal Names | Meaning | Pet name | |
|------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|----------|-----------------|
| | | | Male | Female |
| i | Sọchima | Only God knows | Chima | Chichi |
| ii | Zịnachụkwụdị | Show that God exist | Chụkwụdị | Zina |
| iii | Onyemauchechi or Onyemauchechukwu | Who knows God's intention | Onyema | Uchechi/Amuche |
| iv | Chidinma | God is good | Chidi | Chidi/Nma/Dinma |
| v | Chetachi | Remember God | Cheta | Chichi |
| vii | Ọdịnakachụkwụ | It's in God's hands | Chuks | Ody/Odinaka |
| viii | Onyekachi | Who is greater than God? | Onyeka | Kachi |
| ix | Chukwunenye/Chinenye | God gives | Chuks | Nenye |
| x | Amarachụkwụ | Grace of God | Chuks | Amara |
| xi | Chidiebere | God is merciful | Chidi | Ebere |
| xii | Chidiebube | God is glorious | Chidi | Chidi/Ebube |

Conclusion

This study has undertaken a phonological analysis of Igbo pet names derived from formal names. It has revealed that metathesis (one of the unpopular phonological processes) is attested in Igbo language. It is also noted that vowel deletion and assimilation are important phonological processes which are evident in the transformation of Igbo formal names to pet names. The study also revealed that during vowel deletion, the vowel that will be deleted is usually dependent on the height of the vowel, i.e. when a high vowel is juxtaposed with a low vowel; it is the low vowel rather than the high vowel that gets deleted. The data also showed that there are cases of vowel-to-vowel assimilation or vowel copying where the first vowel becomes completely like the second and surprisingly, we discovered that the direction of influence is right-left (regressive / anticipatory).

Furthermore, most Igbo pet names are transformations that favour light syllables. Thus, Igbo pet naming system conforms to the open syllable rule/ light syllable weight on which the language syllable structure is based. Another striking observation is that, in the formation of pet names from unisex formal names which begin or end with Chi/Chukwu, the gender of the bearer and the semantic content of the syllable(s) are considered.

In future researches, it would be interesting to examine the stress pattern of pet names as well as pet names which are not related to a person's formal name such as ironic pet names, role modelled names, association pet names and personal feature pet names.

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