

A Geolinguistic Survey of the South East Zone of Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria is a linguistically diverse nation and the different indigenous languages spoken in it reflect as much as possible and to a large extent, the different ethnic groups within it. Geographically, the country is divided into six zones (the South South, South East, South West, North East, North Central and North West) and each zone can also be characterized linguistically. This paper, following Udoh (2004), provides an update on the geolinguistic characterization of the South East Zone, highlighting the linguistic situation of the zone in terms of what linguistic form is spoken where and by which group within it. Findings from the geopolitical survey show that like in most other zones in Nigeria, the dominance of the English language in the South East is practically overwhelming in all domains of language use such as government, administration, education, the media, the judiciary, science and technology, etc. The Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) is also used as a lingua franca in semi-formal and informal situations/contexts in the zone. The Ìgbò language with its different dialects is the indigenous lingua franca across the zone. Apart from Ìgbò and its various dialects, there are other indigenous Nigerian languages spoken in the zone. These include: Itu Mbo Uso, Anaañ, Ibibio, Efik, Echie, (Abia) Igala (Anambra/Enugu), Okpoto, Ntezi, Korri, Nkomoro, Nsobo, Ofrekpe (Ebonyi), Eteh (Idoma, Enugu), Ikwere, Ogba, Echie (Imo). Thus, from the survey, it is obvious the South East, which is perceived to be ethnically, linguistically and homogenously Ìgbò, still manifests evidence of subtle linguistic diversity especially at border communities around the zone.

1. Introduction

The South East Geopolitical Zone is one of the six zones in Nigeria. The zone is made up of five (5) states: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo (see figure 1). All the states are found in the South Eastern Belt of Nigeria with a total of ninety-five Local Government Areas. The South East zone is the indigenous home of a largely homogeneous

population, the Ìgbò people who in their rural dwelling places are mostly as craftsmen, farmers and traders. The Ìgbò people are also businessmen and women (where the term “business” is used loosely to include buyers and sellers, petty traders and hawkers). In fact, in these states, almost everyone is importing or exporting, buying or selling manufacturing one thing or the other. They are one group of Nigerians that grow wealth out of nothing thus rising, usually, from ‘nothing’ to ‘something’. There are equally a good number of professionals in Education, Health, Law, politics and other spheres of public life. The Ìgbò people are very tough minded optimists, very courageous and persevering vis-à-vis life’s challenges. They are generally accommodating and welcome healthy competition in all spheres of human endeavour. Some Ìgbò indigenous cities are also highly urbanized, with some of the largest metropolitan cities and towns being Onitsha, Enugu, Aba, Owerri, Orlu, Okigwe, Asaba, Awka, Nsukka, Nnewi, Umuahia, Abakaliki, Afikpo, Agbor, Arochuku, etc. According to the 2006 Nigerian national census, the population of the South Eastern states is estimated to be more than sixteen million: Abia-2,833,999, Anambra-4,182,032, Ebonyi-2,173,501, Enugu-3,325,298 and Imo-3,920,208.

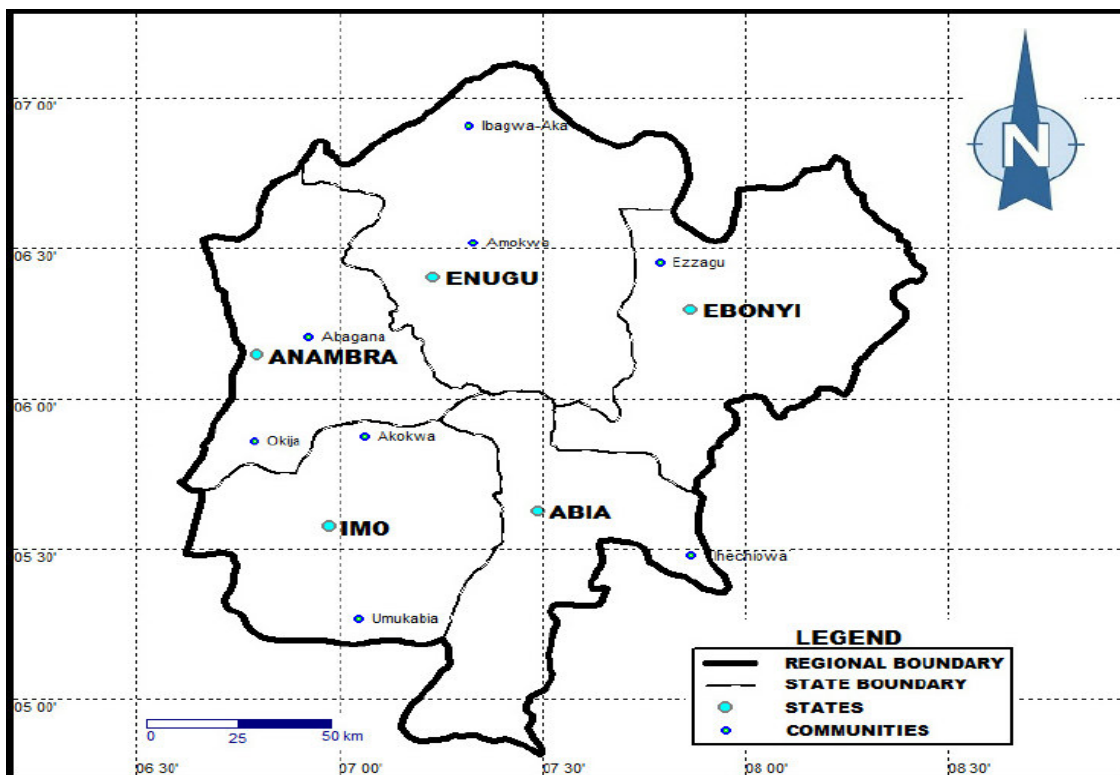


Figure1. A map showing the South East Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria

2. Linguistic Situation in the South East Zone

Just as in most parts of Nigeria, the dominance of the English language is quite overwhelming in the south east zone. English is used in practically most domains such as government and administration, education, the media, the judiciary, science and technology. English is used in government for all written communications (e.g. letters, notices, regulations, minutes, etc). It is also spoken in government offices. If the indigenous languages are used in offices, it would only indicate familiarity and informality. The more an indigenous language is used in the office, the less official the situation would be. Again, high government officials avoid using their languages in official contacts even with their own people for fear of being labeled tribal and parochial (cf. Anyanwu 2007). Just as in the other zones of Nigeria, Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) is also spoken as a kind of informal lingua franca across the South East zone. The superstrate of the NPE is English while the indigenous languages, especially the three major languages (Hausa, Ìgbò and Yorùbá) constitute the substrate languages.

Apart from the use of English which is a colonial linguistic legacy and use of the NPE, there are other indigenous languages in the South East Zone of Nigeria (Udoh (2004:17). These include: Ìgbò and some other indigenous Nigerian languages such as Ibibio, Korri, Nsobo, Ofrekpe, Okpoto, Ntezi, Eteh (Idoma), etc. In fact, it is a case of dichotomous linguistic use of Ìgbò and some other indigenous Nigerian languages in the South East zone. We shall discuss the use of Ìgbò and the other Nigerian indigenous languages one after the other.

2.1 The Use of the Ìgbò Language in the South East Zone

One of the attractions of the states in south east zone of Nigeria is their linguistic homogeneity which is as a result of the use of a common language- Ìgbò by up to eighty percent of the population of the zone (Anyanwu 2010). Ìgbò is used to refer to both the language and the people who indigenously originate in the southeastern states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo and some parts of Delta and Rivers States. It is indigenously spoken by an estimated population of about sixteen million people. Ìgbò is the dominant language of the zone and has attained the status of a lingua franca. As noted by Anyanwu (2007), a large population also speaks Ìgbò in Anioma and Aniocha divisions of the present Delta States. Also, in the neighbouring States of Rivers and Akwa Ibom, Ìgbò is spoken. Ìgbò is not known to be spoken outside Nigeria except for indigenous Ìgbò populations in the diasporas. Ìgbò has so many dialects as well as a Standard variety which is referred to as Ìgbò Ìzùgbé approved by the Standardization Committee of the language. It is the variety of official business done in Ìgbò in all the five states that make up the zone.

Also as stated by Anyanwu (2007b), Ìgbò has a good flourishing oral and written literature. Thus, books, novels, plays and newspapers are extensively written in Ìgbò and Ìgbò is studied at all levels of education (primary, secondary and tertiary). Degrees and diplomas are awarded in Ìgbò at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Abia State University,

Uturu, Imo State University, Owerri and the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN), Aba. It is also possible to study Ìgbò in various Colleges of Education in the South East of Nigeria and indeed in many Colleges of Education in the country. Ìgbò is also used in local administration: customary courts, council of chiefs' meetings and trading activities in the South East. It is equally used in adult literacy, education programs and for the purpose of enlightening the grassroots on government policies and in bill board adverts all over the South East Zone.

2.3 The Ìgbò Language and its Dialects

Within the Ìgbò speech communities, there are scores of regional dialects or variants with each holding sway in its geographical territory. Though the exact number of these dialects is not yet known, Emenanjo (1977) lists some of these dialects to include: Anịocha, Oḡwashịukwu, Asaba, Ika, Agbo, Kwale, Abo, Enuani-Ibusa (Ìgbòduzo), Enuani-Ilah (Delta State), Onitsha, Atani, Idemili, Nnewi, Oka Aguata, Agulụ, Eziowe (Anambra state) Wawa, Enugu, Udi (Enugu state), Owerri, Ugwuta, Mbaise, Okigwe, Obowo, Uboma, Mbanọ, Etiti, Orlu, Isu, Oṣu, Oru, Ideato, Mbieri (Imo state), Abakịlịkị, Iza, Izii, Afikpo, Ohaozara, Isu (Ebonyi state) Umuahia, Bende, Uturu, Ohafia, Ohuhu, Arochukwu, Ngwa, Azumini, Abiriba, and Ibeku (Abia state).

The dialects of Ìgbò share a considerable degree of lexical items, a variety of phonological, morphological and syntactic features and as well, a high degree of mutual intelligibility. The dialects also form part of the richness and fascination of Ìgbò as a language and creating a promising future, for Ìgbò studies requires adopting a positive attitude towards its dialects (Igwe 1999); hence, the dialectal variations should not be seen as an obstacle towards improved scholarship in Ìgbò studies, but as a rich and valuable asset (Anyanwu 2007a). Amidst the various dialects of Ìgbò is a 'standard' variety (Ìgbò Izugbe), which is more or less imagined than being real since it is practically impossible to locate/trace the 'standard' variety to a particular geographical setting within the Ìgbò speaking communities. There are words that are exactly the same in all respects in all the dialects (Emenanjo and Anyanwu 2013), and yet, as would be expected, the dialects also differ in certain phonological, lexical and grammatical ways. Thus, there is the existence of words that are only phonologically different and also the existence of words that are different in all respects (Emenanjo and Anyanwu 2013). The differences however, do not inhibit effective communication or mutual intelligibility but are sometimes, a matter of the frequencies with which certain features occur rather than completely different ways of saying things. The Ìgbò dialect variations are noticeable in the areas of phonology, lexicon and syntax as outlined in the following sections culled from Anyanwu (2010: 53-58).

2.3.1 Phonological Variation

The extent of the phonological variation noticed among dialects spoken by the different communities in the Ìgbò culture area depends on whether it is approached synchronically or diachronically. Synchronically, all varieties of Ìgbò do not vary in their

syllable structure and the substantial phonological differences noticeable among the dialects are in the areas of aspiration, nasalization and the use of secondary articulation (e.g. palatalization and labialization), vowel harmony, assimilation, vowel elision, consonant contraction and minor tonal variation. The major phonological variations can further be grouped under the headings: vocalic variation, consonantal variation and tonal variation.

2.3.2 Vocalic Variation

The proto-Ìgbò spoken in the Ìgbò culture area has been reconstructed to have a ten vowel system given as: i ɨ u ɥ e ɛ a o ɔ ə (Emenanjo 1977). Incidentally, none of the varieties synchronically retain the ten vowel system of the proto-Ìgbòid. While some varieties have nine vowels, others have eight vowels. Most of the dialects spoken in the central Ìgbò area (Owerri, Ngwa and Umuahia) have eight vowels just like the so called Standard Ìgbò (Ìgbò Izugbe). These variations have the vowels: i ɨ u ɥ e a o ɔ. Generally, as observed by Emenanjo (1977) the number of vowels which a dialect has affects the resultant vowel harmony pattern of that locality. Emenanjo (1977) further notes that the distribution of the vowels in the various dialects affects to some extent, the inherent vocalic components of certain lexical items. Thus, according to him based on the contractions on the original ten vowel system of the proto Ìgbò, different realizations of vowel harmony depend on whether they have eight or nine vowel system. With an eight vowel system, two harmony sets of four vowels each exist. These are as follow.

1. (a) Narrow Set: ɨ a ɔ ɥ

1. (b) Wide Set: i e o u

Vowels from each set co-occur as in *égō* ‘money’ and *àtó* ‘three’. However, in the eight vowel system, the two vowels /e/ and /a/ can occasionally be found co-occurring with vowels from the other set as in the words *áfè* ‘cloth’ and *ádu* ‘bitter nut’. These illustrations show that there can be variations in the number of vowels and in the resulting harmony patterns which varies from dialect to dialect.

2.3.3 Consonantal Variation

It is in the area of the number of consonants that Ìgbò dialects differ most considerably. Emenanjo (1977) has also confirmed this fact noting that the number of consonant ranges from sixty-four (64) distinct consonants in Orlu dialect to sixty (60) consonants in Owerri dialect and forty-six (46) in Ngwa (Anyanwu 2007)). Qhùhù, Onitsha and Izii have fifty-five (55), twenty-eight (28) and twenty-six (26) consonants respectively. Some dialects (e.g. Owerri, Ngwa, Qhùhù) with phonemic/distinctive aspirated and nasalized consonants have more consonants than those (e.g. Onitsha, Izii) that do not have. Other features which are responsible for the differences in quality and perhaps number of

consonants among the dialects include the features of palatalization and labialization. Some concrete examples can illustrate this further.

Whereas the speakers of Enuani-Ibusa say *ishé* ‘to tie’, Onicha speakers will say *ífié* while Owerri speakers will say *íhíé*. Thus, the obvious palatalization found in Onicha and Owerri is not there in Enuani (Ibusa). Similarly, while Mbaise (Ezinihite) speakers say *áh^wà* ‘name’ Owerri and Onitsha speakers say *áhà* and *áfà* respectively. Again, the main difference is the labialization of the fricative in Mbaise. While Enuani-Illah speakers say *ók^wú* ‘fire’, most other dialects say *ókú*. Whereas Enuani-Ibusa speakers say *ág^wúú* ‘hunger’ most other dialects will say *ágúú*. While most dialects have *égwú* ‘play’ Onitsha has *égú*.

2.3.4 Tonal Variation

Ìgbò dialects including the Standard form have two tonemes (High and Low) and a tonal phenomenon, the downstep normally marked with the macron (-). However differences in the lexical and grammatical tone patterns exist in the various dialects. With respect to the inherent tone patterns certain words have different lexical tone in the various dialects. For instance, the word for *lizard* in some dialects is pronounced *ngwèré* (with three inherent tones) while in some other dialects the same lexical item may be pronounced *ngwèèré* or *ngwèrí*. Also the word for afternoon in some dialects is *èhíhìè* while some have *èshishè* or *èfífè*.

However, some dialects seem to have developed other peculiar tonal features. For example, Bendor-Samuel et al (1975; 34) reports that Izii has three tonal features which are down step, up step (a higher step higher than the normal high) and a latent low together with a number of tonal rules. Some other dialects have intonation imposed on tones. In areas like Aguata, some kind of intonation exists which is higher than the ordinary grammatical tone pattern. The following examples are from Nanka/Ekwulobia/Okoko speech forms (in the present Anambra State) compared to the Standard Ìgbò.

- | | |
|--|---------------------------|
| 2a. Nanka/Ekwulobia/Okoko: Òléé étú í méré | ‘How do you do?’ |
| 2b. Standard Ìgbò: Òléé étú í mèrè | ‘How do you do?’ |
| 2c. Nanka/Ekwulobia/Okoko: Ùnù méré àgháá | ‘How do you (plural) do?’ |
| 2d. Standard Ìgbò: Ùnù mèrè àgháá | ‘How do you (plural) do?’ |

As the above examples show Nanka/Ekwulobia/Okoko speech forms have pervasive high tones unlike the Standard Ìgbò.

2.3.5 Lexical Variation

The dialects of Ìgbò share a considerable common core in the form of lexical items, sharing some words across the dialects while differing in some others; having as many words as their are dialects. For instance, the following are typical examples.

3a. Malaria: ákòm, akùm, ékòm, íbà, ìbà, etc

3b. Banana: ògèdè, únèrè, unè, àbiríkà, etc.

3c. Dress: ùwé, àfè, èfè, ùwéyí, mwéyí, etc.

3d. Breast: árá, írá, alá, etc.

3e. Corn/Maize: úkòórú, òkà, ìkàákà, ògbádù, azàmkpá

3f. Dust: ùzúzù, òzúzù, òtù, ùnírú, ètù, ùzúzù

3g. Groundnut: àkékééré, ahùékéré, òpápá, òpùpá, ùkpání, apàm pá, etc.

Also, some words in certain dialects may have specialized meanings different from their meanings in other dialects. For instance, the lexical item *nkúmè* is a generic term for ‘stone’ in most dialects, its generic term in Íbùsà is *òkwúte* while *nkúme* is a special type of ritual stone. Similarly, some other dialects have shortened or contracted forms for some words. Whereas most have the form *èhíhìè* ‘afternoon’ others such as Ika and Onitsha have the form *èfífè* or *èífìè*.

In some areas where the same lexemes are used, the meanings of such lexemes may occasionally differ from place to place. For example, the lexeme *échi* means ‘tomorrow’ in most dialects while it means ‘yesterday’ in parts of Owerri (Imo State). Whereas *òzùgbó* means ‘at once/immediately’ in most dialects, in the Owerri dialect, it means ‘all’. Again, the word *àjàdù* means a prostitute in most dialects while it is used to refer to ‘widow’ in a few other dialects.

2.3.6 Morpho-Syntactic Variation

Pronunciation and vocabulary differences are normally the differences people are most aware of among the dialects of Ìgbò though there are syntactic variations too. At the syntactic level, dialectal variations are not very pervasive but are attested as can be seen in the following short sample sentences from Echie (Rivers State), Orlu-Isunjaba (Imo), Owerri (Imo), Oba (Anambra), Abiriba (Abia State), Onitsha (Anambra) and Ngwa (Abia State). Among the syntactic variations include differences in the use of (a) perfective markers, (b) negative suffixes and negative auxiliaries and (c) the use of coordinating conjunctions in question.

(a) Perfective Markers: This normally differs from one dialect to the other.

- 4a. Echie: *le/la* as in Ó ríelē/lā íhē ‘S/he has eaten (something)’
 4b. Orlu: *la* as in Ó ríelá ‘S/he has eaten (something)’
 4c. Owerri: *le/la* as in Ó ríelē/lā ĩē ‘S/he has eaten (something)’
 4d. Oba: *me/ma* as in Ó rímé/má íhē ‘S/he has eaten (something)’
 4e. Abiriba: *hala* as in Ó rihálá ífē ‘S/he has eaten (something)’
 4f. Onitsha: *go* as in Ó lígó ífē S/he has eaten (something)
 4g. Ngwa: *la* as in Ó ríelá S/he has eaten (something)

(b) Negative Suffix/Negative Auxiliary: The negative suffix varies from one dialect to other. Whereas in some it is marked by a suffix (as in (i) below), in some others, it is marked by an auxiliary (as in 2)

- 5a. Oba: *ghi* as in Ò bíábèghì ‘S/he has not yet come’
 5b. Owerre: *hu* as in Ò bíábèhù S/he has not yet come’
 5c. Orlu: *hu* as in Ò bíábèhù ‘S/he has not yet come’
 5d. Echie: Ò dí bíábè ‘S/he has not (yet) come’
 5e. Abiriba: Ò ká`ábíághì ‘S/he has not (yet) come’
 5f. Onitsha: Òkà`ábíáró ‘S/he has not (yet) come’

Differences are also observed in use of conjunctions and interrogatives as the following examples show.

- 6a. Echie: Àdá nà Úchè [ò gàwè mbíá?] ‘Are Ada and Uche coming?’
 6b. Abiriba: Àdá yá nà Úchè [wà àbíáhú?] ‘Are Ada and Uche coming?’
 6c. Orlu: Àdá nà Úchè [à nàhù àbíá?] ‘Are Ada and Uche coming?’
 6d. Onitsha: Àdá nà Úchè [à nà hà àbíá?] ‘Are Ada and Uche coming?’
 6e. Ngwa: Àdá là Úchè [à bíàtàwò?] ‘Are Ada and Uche coming?’

It is important to stress that the different dialects or variants of Ìgbò serve their owners and any other persons that care to speak them while as said earlier, the Standard Ìgbò serves all the states for the purposes requiring the use of the language officially.

3.0 Other Indigenous Nigerian Languages Spoken in the South East Zone

Apart from the Ìgbò language and its various dialects, there are a number of other indigenous Nigerian languages spoken the south east zone and we shall provide an overview of the other indigenous languages spoken in the south east on a state- by- state basis.

3.1 Abia State

Itu Mbo Uso an Ibibiod lect is spoken in the Bende and Arochukwu Local Government Areas of Abia State, border Local Government Areas with Akwa Ibom State. Though Itu Mbo Uso is largely spoken in Akwa Ibom State, it is also spoken by the Itu Mba Uzo people in the Bende and Arochukwu Local Government Areas of Abia State, whose brothers and sisters live in Akwa Ibom in the South South Zone but are referred to as Itu Mbo Uso people within the Akwa Ibom state. The group that inhabits the Bende and Arochukwu areas of Abia state has integrated with the Ìgbò speaking communities, speaking the Ìgbò language with native speakers' proficiency while at the same time maintaining their initial mother tongue, Itu Mbo Uso. There are Anaañ speaking communities in some parts of Ukwa East and Obingwa Local Government Areas of Abia. Anaañ is spoken in Azumini in Ukwa East Local Government Area, a border community that shares boundary with Iwukem, an indigenously Anaañ speaking community in Etim Ekpo Local Government Area in Akwa Ibom State. Anaañ is also spoken in some communities in Obingwa Local Government Area which also border Etim Ekpo, Ika, Essien Udien and Obot Akara Local Government Areas of Akwa Ibom state. Ibibio is spoken in Arochukwu Local Government Area of Abia State bordering Ini/Ikono Local Government Areas in Akwa Ibom State. In Abia state, Efik (Ubaghara variety) is also spoken. It is spoken in both Arochukwu and Ohafia Local Government Areas of Abia which border Biase Local Government Area in Cross River State, where Efik is largely and indigenously spoken. Echie is also spoken in the Osisoma Local Government Area of Abia; at the border communities with Omuma and Etche Local Government Areas in Rivers state. Thus, apart from Ìgbò and its forms of variation in Abia, Itu Mbo Uso, Anaañ, Ibibio, Efik and Echie are spoken in border communities in Abia State,

3.2 Anambra State

Though Anambra is regarded as the most ethnically and linguistically homogenous with various dialects of Ìgbò in the South East zone, it also has Igala speaking communities within it. These Igala speaking communities are also indigenous Ìgbò speakers who speak Igala and inhabit the fringe parts of Anambra East and West Local Government Areas which share land border with Ofu Local Government Area of Kogi state where Igala is indigenously spoken.

3.3 Ebony State

In Ebonyi State, Okpoto and Ntezi languages are spoken. They are closely related to Leggbo, a member, of the upper-cross group of languages. The speakers are mainly the Okpoto and Ntezi in Ishielu Local Government Area of Ebonyi state. Korri is another language found in Ebonyi State and is spoken by the Amuda in Ishielu and Ohaukwu Local Government Areas of Ebonyi (Udoh, 2004:36). There is also the Nkomoro speaking communities in Ezza North Local Government Area of Ebonyi state, while Nsobo and Ofrekpe languages are spoken in Ikwo Local Government Area. All the speech communities within Ebonyi state who speak the languages mentioned above are bilingual, speaking their own native languages as well as the dialects of the Ìgbò language closest to them.

3.4 Enugu State

In Enugu State, there is an Eteh minority group in the northern part of the state (Ìgbò-Eze North Local Government Area) which border Benue state. The group speaks Eteh (Idoma) as their native language and also speaks Ìgbò very well. Igala language is also spoken by Nsukka Ìgbò speaking communities (Ogurugu community) which are located within Nsukka and Udenu Local Government Areas which border Igala speaking communities in Kogi State.

3.5 Imo State

In Imo State, apart from Ìgbò, three other languages are spoken. They are Ikwere, Ogba and Echie languages. Although these languages are Ìgbòid lects based on their genetic linguistic closeness to Ìgbò, their indigenous speakers regard them as being separate languages from Ìgbò. We respect the attitude of the speakers and thus, refer to these lects as different languages. Ikwere is spoken in Imo by some communities in Ohaji Egbema Local Government Area which share land boundaries with indigenous Ikwere speakers such as Apani and Omerelu communities in Ikwere Local Government of Rivers State. On the other hand, Ogba is spoken in Imo by some communities in Oguta Local Government Area which border indigenous Ogba speaking communities in Ogba-Egbema-Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers state. Echie is spoken in some communities with Osisioma Local Government Area which share land border with indigenous Echie speaking communities in Rivers State.

3.6 The Linguistic Situation in the Zone

From the geo-linguistic examination of the South East Zone, it is observed that the Ìgbò language with its various dialects is the indigenous lingua franca in the zone. With respect to the use non-Ìgbò or minority indigenous languages in the zone, we notice that Ebonyi State has the largest number of minority languages (six) while Abia, Imo, Enugu, and Anambra have four, three, two and one respectively. The interesting thing here though is that all those who speak the minority languages in the zone also speak Ìgbò as their first

language and therefore can be said to be more advantaged in terms of being bilinguals in two languages which they acquired as their languages. For posterity however, the languages need to be documented in line with linguistic procedures to ensure their continued existence within the committee of Nigerian Languages. A summary of the number of languages spoken in the South East Zone is shown in Table 1 below. Note that there are variations in the number of languages in some States as presented here when compared with Udoh (2004:18).

Table1: A Summary of the Geolinguistic Profile of the South East Zone of Nigeria

S/N	State	Capital	No. of LGAs	Names of Languages Spoken	No. of Indigenous Languages	Dominant Indigenous Language(s)
1	Abia	Umuahia	17	English, NPE, Ìgbò, Itu Mbo Uso, Anaañ, Ibibio, Efik, and Echie	5	Ìgbò
2	Anambra	Awka	21	English, NPE, Ìgbò and Igala	2	Ìgbò
3	Ebonyi	Abakaliki	13	English, NPE, Ìgbò, Okpoto, Ntezi, Korri, Nkomoro, Nsobo and Ofrekpe	7	Ìgbò
4	Enugu	Enugu	17	English, NPE, Ìgbò, Eteh (Idoma) and Igala	3	Ìgbò
5	Imo	Owerri	27	English, NPE, Ìgbò, Ikwerre, Ogba and Echie	4	Ìgbò

4. The Development of the Ìgbò Language So Far

The Ìgbò language has made laudable developmental strides like its counterparts - Hausa, Yorùbá in Nigeria. The developmental strides are attributable to two factors: first its status as one of Nigeria's major languages by official rating of languages in Nigeria and second, the near absence of controversies (contentions) regarding its status as either a dialect of another language or a language of its own. Both the orthography controversy, otherwise tagged a "big ferocious storm in a tea cup by Emenanjo (2001) and the bloody

and unfortunate Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) did not affect the Ìgbò language. In fact, the language has indeed made useful and steady progress till date.

Historically, the Ìgbò language has evolved steadily since 600BC. As at that time, the Ìgbò language was believed to be an off-shoot of Kwa language (Emenanjo 2001). This was the beginning of “Oral Standard Ìgbò”. From about 1700 and 1899, there were strings of linguistic researches by missionaries (a period regarded as “Ìsuama Period”). The “Union Period” covers works done on the language between 1904 and 1927 (Udoh, 2004:48). This was followed closely by some radicalisms in Ìgbò language and culture regarded as the “Controversy Period” which gave birth to Central Ìgbò. All these took place between 1929 and 1949 and finally led to the creation of a Translation Bureau in Umuahia in 1949 and later the formation of the society for the promotion of the Ìgbò language and culture (SPILC). Following the formation of SPILC, was the emergence of the Standard Ìgbò period, during which time (1966-1996) a lot of work was being done on the language to give it the commendable outlook it has today among other languages in the country.

It is pertinent to recall that “Ìsuama Ìgbò” was the first to be tested in Ìgbò literature. It later gave way to “Union Ìgbò” an artificialized form of Ìgbò which soon receded to usher in “Central Ìgbò” fashioned out of the dialects of Owerri and Umuahia Ìgbòs. Of course this was met with challenges as many found it difficult to swallow the overshadowing of their own dialects and variants of the same language. Revisions and counter revisions including the production of an Ìgbò orthography by Westernman and his team under the authority of the then Government of Eastern Nigeria could not stop the bickering until “Standard Ìgbò” emerged and is used today as literary Ìgbò. (Emenanjo, 2001:47).

5. The Successes Recorded So Far

With the fore-going, one can look positively at the Ìgbò language as one that has its tentacles in different areas of activities in the zone. This is because as a major language, it has enjoyed encouraging support from governments at both the federal and state levels. The National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN), sited in Aba (Abia State), has done a lot to ensure the development, documentation and description of the language. The Ìgbò meta- language is in place while the Ìgbò keyboard has been designed. There is an Ìgbò translation of the Holy Bible, while Ìgbò is taught and examined as a subject of study from primary through secondary to degree level in universities such as Nnamdi Azikwe Univeristy, Awka, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Abia State University, Uturu, Imo State University, Owerri, among others. Still on the successes or achievements, through the encouragement of different groups within the communities in the zone, the language has to its credit many literary works: poems, novels, plays too numerous to list here. There are bilingual dictionaries developed by Nnaji (1986), Welmers & Welmers (1968), Williamson (1972) and so many others There are equally good linguistic works from Armstrong (1967), Emenanjo (1991), 1992, 1996), Nwachukwu (1983), and many more recent ones.

In all these, one must pause and salute chief (Dr.) F. C. Ogbalu, founder of Society for the Promotion of Ìgbò Language and Culture (SPILC), late Prof. Nolue Emenanjo (Secretary), and the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC). The combined efforts of these two bodies saw to the standardization of the language especially in areas such as its description and codification.

In fact, a recent visit to National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) in Aba, Abia State while preparing this paper, reveals that truly a lot of writing has been going on in Ìgbò for decades now. There are novels, plays and poetry works dating back to the 1960s and stretching beyond. Some of the works are presented in table 2 below.

Table 2: Examples of novel, drama and poetry works in Ìgbò

S/N	Title of Work	Author	Date	Category
1	Omenuko	Pita Nwana	1963	Novel
2	Dinta	J. C. Maduekwe	1974	”
3	Aka Ji Aku	T. Nzeako	1974	”
4	Okpa-Aku Eri Eri	Ude Odilora	1974	”
5	Uwa Ntooo	Goddy Onyekaonwu	1986	Drama
6	Ome Ihe jide Ofo	G. I. Nwaozuzu	1991	“
7	Odi m n’obi	Chinedum E. Ofomata	1997	Poetry
8	Echiche m	Chinedum E. Ofomata	1999	Poetry
9	Okwu Ndu	Chinedum E. Ofomata	2001	Novel
10	Ugonnaa	Chinedum E. Ofomata	2001	“
11	Ihe Nwata Huru	Chinedum E. Ofomata	2002	Novel
12	Amanndinaeze	Okudili Njelita	2003	Poetry
13	Mkpolite Agumagu Onu Ìgbò	C.N. Okebalama	2003	Teaching Text
14	Arima	Chinedum E. Ofomata	2004	“
15	Ulari	Chinedum E. Ofomata	2006	”
16	Ibisi	Chinedum E. Ofomata	2009	“
17	Uwa Adighi ka e Chere	N. F. Kanu	2009	Novel

From the above listing in table 2 which is by no means exhaustive, it is clear that there has been great progress as far as sustaining the growth of Ìgbò language is concerned. This does not mean that there are no challenges for the language as our next lines of discussions show.

6. The Challenges

As stated in the preceding discussion, the Ìgbò Language has recorded laudable successes. However, there are challenges that must be addressed for the language to reach greater heights. Some of these challenges have been highlighted and discussed briefly as follow.

6.1 The Lack of Monolingual Dictionaries

There is the dearth of monolingual dictionaries in Ìgbò which would assist learners of the language in increasing their knowledge of words, and expressions thereby advancing the process of reading and writing in Ìgbò. Ìgbò scholars need to address this matter as quickly as possible to help improve on the successes achieved on the language.

6.2 The Standard Ìgbò Not Based on any of the Dialects of Ìgbò

While the standard Hausa is based on the Kano Variety, the standard Yorùbá is based on the Oyo Variety. However, for Ìgbò, there is no geographical setting where the so called standard Ìgbò is spoken. It is therefore a challenge to resolve the problem of which dialect is the standard variety. As earlier mentioned, several dialects have been tested at different times notably; Isuama as popularized by Crowther in 1875, union or artificialised Ìgbò, (without native speakers) but recognized and used as the Ìgbò Bible version (Denis, 1913), and Central Ìgbò which was championed by Ida Ward (1931), and spoken in the old Owerri Province. Beside these, it is well known that a lot of variants of the Ìgbò language exist in all the states and each sufficing vis-à-vis the needs of its speakers. Therefore, to convince speakers of a particular dialect that they should ignore their dialects and use other groups' dialects is surely a no-mean task. For example, how does one convince an Ngwa-Ìgbò speaker to stop saying: *Ọ bu otu a la eji eme ya* 'that is how it is done', and rather say the Onitsha-Ìgbò version: *ọ-ọ ka esi eme ya* 'that is how it is done'. Again, can one stop an Owerri-Ìgbò speaker from saying: *Imeela kpole?* 'How are you?', and say for instance any of the following?

- Ọ dṣgṣ oyi! (Nsukka, Udi)
- Kedu ka ime-e? [Onitsha and environs]
- Kee k' ime-e? [Onitsha and environs]

Also while going through Akponye's (2015:5-6) collection of Ìgbò proverbs and their meanings, we have singled out the following proverbs in table 3 given in the standard Ìgbò for comparison with Onitsha Ìgbò to still buttress the concerns on dialects.

Table 3

S/N	Standard Ìgbò	Onitsha Ìgbò	English Translation
1.	Agha eyiri eyi anaghi eri ngwọrọ	Agha akalu aka ada eli ngwulo	A scheduled war does not catch up with the crippled (Advance Information on an event gives room for adequate preparations or decisions)
2.	Agwọ otu onye huru na-agho eke	Agwo ofu onye fulu na eyi eke	A snake seen by one person resembles a python. (Drawing conclusion on one side of a narration of an event is illogical and in appropriate.
3.	Ahia onye na-azu ka omaara mgbe chi ya gbara	Afia onye na- azu ka o ma mgbe o ji aga	A trader (or buyer) of a particular market knows the starting time of the market. (A familiar terrain is non-confusing)

From the examples in Table 3, one can see remarkable differences in the way the proverbs are written in standard Igbo and Onitsha Ìgbò. Other dialects surely have their versions too. So a lot needs to be done to carry every Ìgbò speaker along in the journey to having a thriving “standard Ìgbò” for all.

6.3 The Diminishing Interest and Endangerment Threat on the Ìgbò Language

As rightly observed by Azuonye (2002), the bilingual environment in which English has established itself as the language of opportunity and upward social mobility in the zone like other parts of Nigeria, has created an increasingly large body of new homes in which parents unwittingly speak more English than Ìgbò to their children and as a matter of fact, Ìgbò is not spoken at all in such homes. For Anyaegbuna (2012:30) the new wave of hybridized Ìgbò through the integration of English and Ìgbò language which is popularly known as “EnglÌgbò” is the worst form of adulteration that is currently experienced in Ìgbò language. Anyaegbuna (2012) observes that this is more damaging because children easily pick it and turn it into a popular slang amongst the populace. The schools in the eastern part of the country where Ìgbò is spoken are also contributing in the violent linguistic attack on the Ìgbò language. Private primary and secondary schools spring up almost on daily basis in the South East zone and many parents have come to accept private schools as the places where their children's learning needs can relatively be better attended to. Most of the private schools do not have teachers who teach Ìgbò language while others who have teachers in the language ban their students from speaking the language within school hours. As noted by Ìgbòanusì (2008), though the Ìgbò language is taught, learnt and examined in

the Ìgbò language as a first language from the primary school level to the tertiary level of education with books written on different aspects of the language, (including literary works), several recent negative developments (such as dwindling interest in the language as a first language, declining population of students who apply to take degree or certificate programmes in the language, non-accreditation of the language by the National Universities Commission (NUC) in some universities, and language attitude problems) have prompted some researchers to associate the Ìgbò situation with language endangerment. These observations point to the fact that the number of active indigenous speakers of Ìgbò is thinning down. As has been noted by Ohiri-Aniche (2008), from Abia to Enugu, from Anambra to Imo and to Ebonyi, indigenous speakers of the Ìgbò language increasingly seek knowledge not in their mother tongue but another man's tongue and based on the UNESCO criteria, the signs of Ìgbò language endangerment are very obvious.

Also, in their assessment of the Ìgbò language for possible endangerment going by UNESCO predictions in 2003, Osuagwu and Anyanwu (2016:38) noted that there is considerable lack of interest in the use of Ìgbò language by the Ìgbò themselves. In fact, "parents unwittingly speak more English than Ìgbò to their children and as a matter of fact, Ìgbò is not spoken at all in such homes." Other negative tendencies (drawbacks) noted include; hybridized Ìgbò (EnglÌgbò), urban migration and acquisition of other languages for business by the Ìgbò. All these factors affect the growth of the language because as the older generations fade away, the younger generations continue to lose touch with Ìgbò language as their mother tongue. This surely does not provide enough room for the language to survive.

6.4 The Prospects of the Ìgbò Language

In the context of all that have been discussed so far, it will seem that the Ìgbò language may after all, never come out stronger than it is now. This may not be so because as earlier mentioned, the language had enjoyed, and still enjoys some government patronage at national, state and local government levels. One such piece of evidence is the gigantic *Quadrilingual Dictionary of Linguistic Terminology* project, initiated by late President Shehu Shagari's regime and has been completed too. The pilot edition was published by Spectrum Books Ltd., Ibadan (Nwachukwu, 2003:21). Descriptive works on several aspects of the language exist courtesy of scholars like Armstrong (1967), Emenanjo (1978, 1982, and 1985), Igwe & Green (1963), Nwachukwu (1983), and many more others.

It is equally encouraging that within the five states, nobody compels anybody to abandon his or her dialect for another one. The Ìgbò variety spoken in a particular area dominates that area while people from other areas outside the zone may learn and speak that variety for their own use in addition to English, NPE. As a general practice in all Ìgbò states, communication may be done mostly in Ìgbò. This practice if consistently maintained will help to keep the language strong as efforts continue to get it to a more acceptable level by linguists' standards. As in other states of Nigeria, English is normally used for official business although occasions sometimes dictate which language operates, English, Ìgbò or

a mixture of the two. The negative effects of urbanization/globalization and code switching as observed by some experts, are not very likely to ‘bury’ the language anytime soon. Among the lineup of hopes for the survival of Ìgbò language, is the Ahiajoku Lecture Series that has run for decades and seeks among other things the promotion of Ìgbò language and culture. Hosted by Imo State for all Ìgbò-speaking states, the lectures touch on aspects of Ìgbò civilization. For instance, the 2001 edition of the lecture entitled *Asusu n’agburu ndi Ìgbò* (The Language and Ìgbò Civilization) clarified issues about status of Ìgbò as a cluster of languages or just one language. The lecture was bilingual in delivery – English and Ìgbò – an indication that the language has come of age as a means of communication in academic circles.

There are publications for literacy: newspapers and magazines in Ìgbò such as *Ogene*, *Udoka*, *Anyanwu*, etc. A lot of other efforts are on especially by churches to keep hope alive for the language. To this end, church bulletins and other necessary information leaflets are routinely published in Ìgbò and English and used at masses, Sunday Service worships, and functions in all the five states of the zone. Conferences are also organised in tertiary institutions, by Departments of tertiary institutions that offer the Ìgbò language as one of their courses. Radio and television stations in all the five states mount programmes where Ìgbò language is freely used apart from time allotted for news in Ìgbò. Time allotted may not be enough though, but it does help to sustain the language. All these portend a brighter future for the Ìgbò language especially as such efforts are on-going and seem sustainable in the years ahead.

7. Suggestions for Improvement

As our discussions here show, the Ìgbò language has made some useful strides to date. But like in all things there are always, pluses and minuses that help goals to remain in course. In this case, the minuses here are the challenges which include paucity of monolingual dictionaries, issues on phonemic contrasts like nasalization, aspirations associated with dialects, lack of interest in the language by the Ìgbòs, urban migration and the recourse to other languages for business and socialization by the Ìgbò. In all of these, the Standardization Committee and experts in the language should not relent in their efforts. They need to do the following:

1. examine into the issue of dialectal differences and come up with some unifying modes of operation;
2. look critically into the issue of dwindling interest and mount sensitization programmes through State Ministries of Education, the Media and public gatherings to try reversing the trend (Ilechukwu 2016:315);
3. encourage the writing of more books especially reading and teaching texts in Ìgbò for use in schools;
4. consider the institution of awards for prolific writers as well as renowned scholars of the language to encourage and re-ignite interest in the younger generations of Ìgbò in their language;

5. as already observed by Osuagwu and Anyanwu (2016:41), only very few audio and video recordings exist for now in Ìgbò. More should be produced for teaching and learning especially in primary and secondary schools, which are the critical stages of language(s) acquisition.

8. Conclusion

In this paper, we have done a survey of the languages used in the South East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria. It been noted that the English and the NPE are pervasively used and that apart from the Ìgbò language which is a major indigenous Nigerian language in the zone, there are also other non-major indigenous Nigerian languages in the zone. We have examined some of the dialectal variations of the Ìgbò language as well as the growth and the potentials of the Ìgbò language in the contemporary Nigeria. It has been observed that the language has not done badly because of the monopoly it enjoys in all the five states of the South East zone. It has also been noted that there are challenges mainly from some of the indigenous speakers of the language who seem to have a nonchalant attitude about the survival of the language. Suggestions have been made in the belief that if they are implemented, the Ìgbò language may not really go extinct as the UNESCO indices suggest. Above all, it is left for the Ìgbò people to realize quickly that not using their language is not a very encouraging attitude, and that they need to reverse the trend for their own good and that of the Ìgbò language in the committee of languages.

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