Language Variation and Change: A Case Study of Agulu Obeleagu Umana Speech Community

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Abstract

This study examines language variation and change in the Agulu Obeleagu Umana speech community. Hinging on the social variable, age, the study aims to identify the variations in the language of the older and younger speakers of the Agulu Obeleagu dialect using the dynamic paradigm of variation theory. Analysis of the data elicited through observation and introspection reveals that the language of the old and younger speakers of Agulu vary phonologically, morphologically, syntactically and lexically. In other words, the internal structural variations occur in morphological, syntactical, lexical and phonological aspects of the Agulu dialect. The study shows that the Agulu Obeleagu dialect is undergoing a language shift, but not necessarily change. However, this shift can potentially result in language change in the future if the speakers fail to express a positive dialect attitude towards their dialect. It concludes that there is an observable change in the Agulu variety of Igbo spoken by the old and young groups of speakers in the speech community.

Keywords: Language variation, language change, speech community, variation theory, age

1. Introduction

Language is a dynamic and ever-evolving entity, susceptible to change and adaptation. As a living phenomenon, its users constantly shape and reshape it. Despite being an integral part of our daily lives, with each of us using language to communicate, our understanding of language remains limited. The concept of language is incredibly vast and complex, making it challenging to define. However, a common thread emerges amidst the various definitions proposed by scholars and linguists, suggesting that they ultimately describe the same fundamental phenomenon.

Sapir (1921) defines language as a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. Language is also a series of predictable stimuli, according to Noam Chomsky. Mbah (2010), notes that language is a tool for thinking and even for dreaming. It is observed that when somebody is thinking, he uses language. Mbah (2010) further notes that language varies exceedingly in time, space and society.

Language is a unique characteristic of man, and it is spoken by different people all over the world; therefore, different languages exist. Igbo is one of them. Igbo is a language spoken majorly in the south-eastern part of Nigeria. As the Igbo people live and communicate through language and are culturally and geographically separated from one another, their communication medium in Igbo develops into versions known as dialects. It is from here that the Agulu Obeleagu dialect of the Igbo language evolved.

Language variation and change have been observed to be a universal phenomenon. This implies that languages all over the world are entities, irrespective of the respective societies that use them. Language exists in societies, and sociolinguistics is concerned with the study of language in relation to society.

Language variation is a fundamental aspect of human language, and it plays a crucial role in modifying our social identities, relationships and communities.

Language variation refers to the ways in which language use differs among individuals and groups within a speech community. While language is often thought of as a universal communication tool, it is shaped by a range of social factors that influence how we use language in different contexts. These social factors include geographical location, speakers' social network, age, social class, gender, ethnicity, education, religion, cultural background, and social identity. The field that studies how social factors influence language is known as sociolinguistics.

This study focuses on the sociolinguistic analysis of the dialectal changes observable in the Agulu Obeleagu speech community. Agulu dialect is a version of the Igbo language spoken by the Agulu people on the Eastern side of Obeleagu town in the Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu state. Obeleagu consists of nine (9) villages: Umuagbor, Osun, Okpudo, Evazi, Amaji, Omughu, Aguoba, Ugwuakuli and Agulu. Agulu is made up of five clans: Umuozokwesi, Umuozonyia, Umuanene, Umuokowo and Agulunta. Due to war, agriculture, and security purposes, some Agulu people migrated to what we have today as Agulu Awka, where they continued their blacksmith and clay pot moulding business. As they move out of their geographical area for greener pastures, they interact and mix up with speakers of different dialects of the Igbo language and other languages. With time, there is an observable difference in the Agulu variety of Igbo spoken by the old and young speakers of the dialect. It is in the light of these observable changes or variations in the speech community that prompted this study. Therefore, this research examines the linguistic changes in the Agulu speech community to identify the changing areas and the major sociolinguistic variable responsible for the changes.

The data elicited through observation and introspection are analysed in line with the tenets of the variation theory. In Igbo, tone marking is crucial for conveying meaning and distinguishing between words. In this work, tones are marked as follows:

- High tone: (´)
- Low tone: (`)
- Downstep tone: (-)

3. Review of related studies

Adedayo (2015) studied variation and language engineering in Yoruba-English code-switching. That study dealt with identifying and characterising the variable features of code-switching as used by Yoruba-English bilinguals in Lagos, Nigeria. Against the background of the domestication of English in Nigeria and the reality of language variation across individual, social and generational perspectives, Adedayo explored the unique linguistic strategies with which the Yoruba-English speaker reinvents urban speech to meet the challenges of contemporary dynamics of communication in a fast-changing world. Adedayo made use of interviews and the non-participant observation method. The researcher observed that some of the salient sociolinguistics features of language engineering manifest in Yoruba-English bilingual at the lexical, semantics, morphological and phonological levels. Essentially, the study demonstrated that both English and Yoruba exert considerable influence over each other and that speech usage factors support the various language engineering strategies. Moreover, Yoruba English bilingual engineers find a place in explicating the unique sociolinguistic components of language change in contemporary communication. Adedayo (2015) and the current study focus on language variations, while the present study explores the area of age as a social factor influencing dialect variation in the Agulu Obeleagu speech community; the reviewed work focused on the bilingual study of interlanguage speakers.

Emilia (2015), in her study of language variation about gender as a social factor, examined language variation concerning gender as a social factor. The research, encompassing various languages, proved the existence of gender variation in language use by adopting Lakoff's (1975) theory as a framework. The researcher observed that variations could either be phonological, morphological or sociological gender variations. These differences in the speech patterns of males and females could result in miscommunication and misinterpretation in the interaction process, especially among second language learners. Emilia's study demonstrated that in many societies, male and female differences exist in the use of language. In a society where gender plays a significant role, language also has a key role in contributing to that role. Differences in the gender roles, identities of men and women, hierarchical nature of gender relations and the dominance of men constitute the factors that contribute to the differences in language use. The

reviewed work and present study use variation theory as a theoretical framework. The previous research focused on how social factors contribute to language variation, while the present study focuses on how age as a social factor influences Agulu Obeleagu dialect variation.

Uchendu (2017) worked on language variation and change in the Inyi speech community. The study aimed to ascertain the variable realisation of certain linguistic items as observed in the speech patterns of sampled speakers of Inyi Igbo and to provide information on why these variations and changes possibly occur and the effects on the speakers. In that study, a descriptive survey design was adopted. Based on the nature of the study, only a purposive sampling technique was used. Participant observation and unstructured interviews were used as data collection instruments. The study also adopted Labov's (1966) quantitative model in ascertaining the existence of linguistic variation and change in the dialect. The researcher observed that the original forms of speech in Inyi are fast disappearing due to social factors such as region, age, education, contact and social network relationships. These factors determine speakers' variables that could lead to phonological, lexical, morphological and syntactic changes. The result also showed that young speakers bring linguistic innovations to the Inyi dialect. The researcher further observed variations in the speech patterns and behaviours of Inyi people, and many factors have given rise to variations, which have led to and are still leading to profound linguistic changes in the community. The similarities between the previous and present studies lie in the theoretical frameworks used. Also, the reviewed research focused on knowing the social factors that influence language variation, while the present study sees age as a social factor that influences Agulu Obeleagu dialect variation.

3. Variation theory (VT)

Variation theory was propounded by Labov in 1966 to explain how language varies across different social contexts, geographic regions and cultural groups and how these variations are systematic and patterned. Labov's variation theory seeks to understand how social factors, such as social class, ethnicity, and age, drive language change and variation. This theory helps to investigate language use and structure as obtainable in natural contexts. It posits that languages possess various resources for producing a given linguistic expression. The spectrum of variation

exists at every level of the linguistic system, from the way we pronounce certain words to the syntactic forms chosen (Labov, 1971). Thus, Sankoff (1988) asserts that the variationist viewpoint on language may be characterised by its preoccupation with two criteria. Thus, accounting for grammatical structure in connected discourse and detailing the apparent instability of patterns of usage, which pattern to the relative frequency of occurrence. Agbedo (2015) submits that the fundamental objective of VT is the speech of individuals or members of a speech community.

The variation theory has several paradigms, including the quantitative, dynamic, and identity paradigms. The central idea of the quantitative paradigm is that an understanding of language requires an understanding of the variable and the categorical process; the variation, which we witness at all levels of language, is not random. Instead, linguistic variation is characterised by orderly or 'structural heterogeneity'; speakers' choices between variable linguistic forms are systematically constrained by multiple linguistic and social factors that reflect and partially constitute the social organisation of the communities to which language users belong. In addition, synchronic variation is often a reflection of diachronic change (Labov, 1966).

Ndukwe (1995) notes that the quantitative paradigm (often used in variation theory), which has continued to thrive with further modification and expansion, assumes the existence of community grammar in the sense that a community of speakers (for example, English speaker in New York City (Labov, 1966), Swahili speakers in Mombassa or English speakers in Belfast, share the same underlying grammar in some sense that distinguishes these speakers in their differential production of criteria or diagnostic linguistic variables (usually phonological). According to Ndukwe (1995), this differential production is amenable to quantitative analysis and sensitive to various social structures. Individuals may then be grouped into various categories by the frequency of occurrence of particular variable features in their speech as constrained by different social contexts.

According to Agbedo (2015), in the dynamic paradigm, another type of social structure is seen as solidarity-based, which is heavily on the social network

concept. In this paradigm, speakers are not necessarily distinguished by social and economic factors but by the density of interaction, shared values and beliefs.

Since the new urban dialectology movement, which has concentrated mainly on the hitherto neglected dialects of cities, many of Labov's original ideas have been seriously changed by himself and others, including Trudgill's (1974) study. This tradition differs from Labov's ideas on such issues as the range of possible forms of dialect grammar. This new dynamic paradigm observed that the scope of the variation is found in rigorously defined combinations of environments, such as the speaker in one style and the relationship between variation and change.

According to Trudgill (1974), the proponents of this framework claim against Labov's position that if all factors, both linguistics and non-linguistics are accounted for, there is no remaining variability unless change is actually in progress in the system. Therefore, Trudgill concludes that any such variability is an effect rather than a partial cause of change. The studies concluded within the dynamic paradigm were initially concerned with creoles and pidgins. This model places individuals at the centre of language behaviour, believing that language behaviour is unpredictable and could change or be easily influenced by certain factors; thus, it views an individual as an agent constantly locating and relocating himself in his linguistic domain.

The identity paradigm assumes that every linguistic behaviour is stimulated by one cortex or another (Agbedo, 2001). The individual is considered the locus of language behaviour, and the realisation of that individual behaviour at any given moment is vastly unpredictable. The individual manipulates these features to create a social identity. He creates rules to resemble as closely as possible those of the group or groups with which he occasionally identified as constrained by several factors. These theories and paradigms provide a framework for understanding language's complex and dynamic nature and its relationship with social context, culture, and identity. Therefore, by applying the dynamic paradigm of VT, the current study identifies language variations among old and young speakers of the Agulu Obeleagu dialect.

4. Areas of linguistics variation in Agulu

The study has identified lexical, syntactic, phonological and morphological variations in the Agulu Obeleagu dialect. These are examined in the following sections:

4.1 Lexical variation in Agulu

Some lexical variables have been observed in the dialect under study. They are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Lexical variables in Agulu Obeleagu

S/No.	Younger generation	Older generation	English gloss
1.	èhè	ḿwóyí	clothe
2.	bùúsú	wóbàràéyáwụ́	cat
3.	ágwọ́	íhé ógónógó ágwọ́	snake
4.	ápị̀	wílégēlē̄	scorpion
5.	átụ́	ǹká átụ́	chewing stick
6.	wánnéèchí únéèchí	échídíhú únéèchí	next tomorrow
7.	mkpúmè òkwútè	m̀kpúmè	stone
8.	màmá ńnúkwú màmá shíṅné	màmá shíṅné ó ò ó	grandmother
9.	óbélé	ǹgùgè	small
10.	ákpàtì	ìgbé ákpàtì	box
11.	òlùmá ólàǹgì	òlùmé	orange
12.	ùgègbè	èyò	mirror
13.	ǹgàjị̀	ékú	spoon
14.	riáìsì òshìkápá	òshìkápá	rice
15.	lám̀pụ̀	lám̀pụ̀	lamp

		ǹkírí	
16.	ụ̀gànị̀	ụ́wụ̀	famine
17.	úgbò	úbì	farm
18.	ọ̀bàlà	ọ̀bàlà mḿéé	blood
19.	ósè	ósè	pepper
20.	òkwútè	mk̀púmè	stone
21.	kwụ̀lụ́ ọ́tọ̄	bìyíhú	stand
22.	ụ́zọ̀	ḿgbò	door
23.	ázụ̀	ádzị̀	fish
24.	ọ́gụ̀	ọ́gụ̀	hoe
25.	ụ́mụ̀ákā	ụ́mụńtị̀	children
26.	ńsògbú	ńsègbú ésè	trouble
27.	ńnúkwū	shíríné ọkọtọ́ ágbàgúdí	many
28.	ógbèyè	ụ̀bị̀am̀	poor
29.	ńnúkwù ḿmà	ògbúàdànà	cutlass
30.	áká ódō	ọ́dụ̄	pestle
31.	máchìsù	égbú ọ́kụ̄	matches
32.	àzụ́	ụkwụtá	back
33.	ànị̀	ànụ̀	ground/land
34.	àkụ̀	ọ́mụ́	wealth
35.	ìzìzì ìbúzọ̀	ìvúzọ̀	first
36.	chèlú	ńdòkwé kàpéndékwé	wait
37.	ńdī̀ mà mọwụ́	óyé wé ànụ̀	masquerade
38.	banana	únènè	banana
39.	ụ́kwụ́	ọ́kpà	leg
40.	shùmí	pètèèrí	underwear
41.	ḿgbédè	ùhúyó	evening

Table 1 above shows lexical variation in the Agulu Obeleagu dialect. This variation is evident in what the older generation speakers call some items, which differ from those used by the younger speakers. While the older speakers still use the original Agulu lexical items, the younger ones sometimes use variants from other dialects, the Standard Igbo variant or the English equivalence of the concept being referred to. Item 4 shows a variation of what the two generations call a scorpion. For instance, item 36 shows that the two generations have different words for 'wait'. While the younger generation will say *chèlú*, the older generation will say *ńdòkwé* or *kàpéndékwé*. This also applies to item 1, where the word for 'cloth' is *èhè* by the younger generation, while the older generation refers to it as *ḿwóyí.* In item 9, the word for 'small' is *óbélē* by the younger generation, while the older generation refers to it as *ǹ̀gùgè.* Also, in item 12, the word mirror is referred to as *ùgègbè* by the younger generation, while the older generation refers to it as *èyò.* Furthermore, in item 28, the younger generation refers to the word poor as *ógbèyè*, whereas the older generation refers to it as *ụ̀bị̀àm̀.*

In item 8, it can be observed that variation, which occurred in the word for 'grandmother' by the two generations, is a modifier. Where the younger generation calls *màmà ńnúkwū,* the older generation calls *màmà shíńnē* or *ó ò ó*. In item 33, it is observed that the variation occurred in the last segment of the word for 'ground' and 'land', *ànị̀* for the younger speakers and *ànụ̀* for the older. This also applies in item 11, where the variation occurs at the last segment of the word for 'orange', *òlùmé* and *òlùmá,* respectively. We can also see that the younger generation tries to igbonise the word 'orange' to *olangi*. In the same vein, other English words like matches, banana, lamp etc, have found their way into the lexicon of the Agulu speakers. In items 19 and 24, no variation was observed. Both generations still call the same thing *ósè* and *ọ́gụ̀*, respectively.

4.2 Syntactic variation in Agulu

Some syntactic variations have been observed in the Agulu Obeleagu dialect. These are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Syntactic variations in Agulu Obeleagu

S/NO	Younger generation	Older generation	English meaning
42.	A laịku ho maa	Ọ̀ dúhọ̄ mụ̄ mīmā̄	I don't like it
43.	Ḿ jéé ḿ n'ọhịa ḿyúó ḿ mààmìrì.	Ḿtịa ḿ ọkpà n'ávụrivụ. Mb̀àá ḿ ọhịá.	I want to ease myself in the bush.
44.	Íhé nwā̄ Íhé ọ̀múhù	Íhé ọ̀múhù	This thing

From Table 2 above, we can observe that in the Agulu Obeleagu speech community, the different age groups studied have different ways of saying the same thing. In item 43, the younger generation speaker will say *Ḿ jéé m n'ọhịa myụọ m mààmìrì,* while the older generation speaker will say *M tịa m ọkpa n'ávụrivụ*, which means; 'I want to ease myself in the bush'. Also, among the younger generation speakers, mixtures are found in their speech as they would always code-switch from time to time, reflecting their contact with the English language as seen in item 42. A younger generation speaker will say *A laịku ho maa,* whereas the older generation speaker will say *Ọ̀ dúhọ̄ mụ̄ mímā̄* for 'I don't like it'.

4.1.3 Morphological variation in Agulu

The perfective markers *che* and *go* have also been discovered to have variants or other forms in the dialect. They appear in the speeches of some speakers as presented below:

45. che: ché, chékwénú, kwé
45a. méché - finished
b. méchékwé - finished
c. méchékwénú - finished

46. go: gó, gwó
46a. élīgō̄ - eaten
b. élīgwō̄- eaten

As seen in examples (45) and (46) above, the perfective markers *ché* and *gó* also vary in the Agulu dialect. While the younger speakers will say *méché*, the older

speakers will say méché*kwé* or *méchékwénú*. The same applies to item 46; the younger Agulu speakers mark perfective with *go*, while the older counterpart marks with *gwó*.

4.4 Phonological variation in Agulu

Many phonological variables were identified, but three are used in this work. They are /h/, /dʒ/ and /r/, and they occur as follows in the data collected:

47. /h/: /h, /hʷ/ and /ʃ/,

47a. [h]

i. òhú-/òhú/ -'one'
ii. ńkọ́ ọ̀hụ̀ -/ŋ̀kɔ́ɔ̀hʊ̀/- 'that place'
iii. ha- /há/- 'them'
iv. ọ̀káhā -/ɔ̀káhā/- 'will not'
v. ọ̀mụ̀hụ́ - /ɔ̀mʊ́hʊ̀/- 'that one'
vi. ọ̀họ̀kwá- /ɔ̀hɔ̀kwá/- 'not'
vii. ụ̀họ́dụ́- /ʊ̀hɔ́dʊ́/- 'some'
viii. ọ̀hụ́má- /ɔ̀hʊ́má/- 'well'
ix. ùhúyō- /ùhújō/- 'evening'

47b. /hʷ/

x. íhé /íhʷé/ - 'thing'
xi. áhịá- /áhʷɪá/ - 'market'

47c. /ʃ/

xii. àshị̀ /àʃí/- 'body'

48. /dʒ/, /dʒˈ/ and /ʒ/

48a. /dʒ/

xiii. jé /dʒé/ - 'went'
xiv. jéé /dʒéé/- 'went'
xv. éjì /édʒì/- 'will'
xvi. jìtó /dʒìtó / - 'still'

48b. /dʒˈ/
xvii. jí /dʒˈi/- 'yam'
xviii. éjì /édʒˈì/- 'holding on'
xix. jèkwé /dʒˈèkwé/- 'keep going'
xix. íjì /ídʒì/ 'take'

48c. /r/: [r] and [r']
[r]
xx. rìwé- /riwe/ 'eat'
xxi. ụ̀rà/ʊ̀rà/ 'beautifying element'

[r']
xxii. ụ́rị̀ọ̀ /ʊ́rˈɪ̀ɔ̀/ 'clay'
xxiii. kítīhū /kítīhū/ 'break'

In Agulu Obeleagu dialect, /h/, /hʷ/ and /ʃ/ can be variants in some contexts. For instance, in the dialect, 'thing' can be called /íhé/, /íhʷé/ or /íʃé/. Observation shows that while the younger generation uses more of the /h/ variant and less of the /ʃ/ variant, with the /hʷ/ variant in-between, the reverse is the case with the older generation. For example, in the audio speech of an older generation of 72 years, the variants /h/, /hʷ/ and /ʃ/ occurred 29 times, 17 times and 2, and 49, 22 and 4 times, respectively, in the same of a 23-year-old speaker. The same goes for the variants /dʒ/, /dʒˈ/ and /ʒ/, which occurred 12, 5 and 5 times and 27, 4 and 0 times, respectively, in the respective speeches of the older and younger speakers. Therefore, the younger speakers of Agulu use more of /dʒ/ than its variants, /dʒˈ/ and /ʒ/. For the /r/ variants, both speakers use more of /r'/ than /r/; hence, the/r'/ variant stands out as the most common variant of the /r/.

5. Summary

This study has examined the dialect of the Agulu Obeleagu speech community of the Igbo language as it concerns language change over the years. The analysis of collected data reveals that the Agulu dialect is inherently dynamic, with changes and variations occurring within its internal structures. These variations manifested in different aspects of the language, including lexical, syntactic,

morphological, and phonological levels. Furthermore, the study findings show that the socio-demographic variable of age significantly influenced the dialect.

Also, the Agulu Obeleagu dialect shows some instances of language variation but not necessarily language change. First, the dialect's internal structure showed morphological, syntactic, lexical and phonological variations. Secondly, age is a social variable and factor that plays a significant role in the speakers' use of the three linguistic variables, /h, dʒ, and r/, identified in the dialect, and other variations observed. So, the identified variants correlate with age as a sociolinguistic factor in influencing variation in the dialect. From the findings, Agulu Obeleagu speech community is experiencing a language shift. The probability therein is that with time, the other variants would be phased out or dropped in the dialect as the old generation dies off. This implies that the Agulu Obeleagu community will experience language change sometime in future if there is no positive attitude towards the dialect by its speakers. Summarily, this study, therefore makes the following findings:

1. The Agulu Obeleagu dialect of the Igbo language has undergone variations but not necessarily change, over the years.
2. Internal structural variations occurred in morphological, syntactic, lexical, and phonological aspects of the Agulu dialect.
3. Age is a significant social variable influencing language variation in the dialect.
4. There are correlations between age and language variation, highlighting the dynamic nature of language.

6. Conclusion

This study on language variation and change in the Agulu Obeleagu speech community shows how the areas of linguistic variables have varied over time. The study observed phonological, morphological, syntactical and lexical variations evident in the dialect. Therefore, there is an observable difference in the Agulu variety of Igbo spoken by the old and young speakers, respectively. Consequently, a social factor, precisely age, significantly influences language use in the dialect.

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