

A Comparative Analysis of the Numerals and Counting Systems of Igbo and Igala

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Abstract

This paper carries out a comparative study of the numbering systems of the Igbo language and the Igala language. The paper analyzes the counting systems of both languages to find out their similarities and differences. Besides, the paper studies both the cardinal and ordinals of the Igbo language and the Igala language. Again, the paper makes a foray into the counting of days, weeks and months in both Igbo and Igala. Furthermore, the paper looks at how both Igbo and Igala express days ahead of time. The paper adopts the descriptive approach of analysis whereby relevant literatures are consulted for data and analyzed. The paper finds that though there are some areas of differences, there are some striking similarities in the numerals and counting systems of the Igbo language and the Igala language. Worthy of note is the vestiges of vigesimal counting system noticeable in some Nigerian languages. This feature, however, is being eroded to some extent by language planning efforts that tend to embrace the British decimal system. Moreover, both languages have some interesting similarities in their use of concepts for the expression of ordinals. Again, the similar four market days calls for more research into Igbo and Igala to find out where the two languages crossed paths in history.

1.0 Introduction

Languages the world over have their unique ways of numbering and counting. There are traditional vigesimal systems of numbering in both Igala and Igbo but the British decimal system of numbering has almost overthrown the traditional system as a result of language planning to meet international standard. That is why Ndukwe (1995:53) says:

A fairly radical restructuring of Igbo numerals has been carried out. The traditional vigesimal system was considered by the planning agent as being too cumbersome, and riddled with ambiguities, for effective use in the ongoing modernization of Igbo society. An alternative decimal system was substituted and claimed to render the Igbo counting system more amenable to technological use, especially as it relates to mathematics.

Igala has also undergone such restructuring of numerals from the traditional vigesimal to the alternative decimal system for the same purposes as Ndukwe (1995) notes above.

However, Sanusi (1995:13) argues that “the traditional system of counting, in any given speech community, constitutes one of the sociolinguistic factors that make up the distinctness and individuality of that speech community as against other speech communities”. It follows, therefore, that the traditional way of numbering or counting is one of the sociolinguistic factors that reveal a particular people’s identity. Hence, the traditional vigesimal system cut across dialects of a language, and even to a larger extent across many languages of the world.

The subscription to the decimal system is a threat to the traditional vigesimal system, and this endangers numbering and counting aspects of our indigenous languages. The new generations may in the nearest future lose contact with the traditional numbering system as a result of the fast growing western influence of decimal numbering system. Oyebade (2010:2) observes that: “...African counting system is gradually being eroded by the more dominant decimal system of what are known as world languages”.

Igala and Igbo belong to the same language family known as new Benue Congo family of languages. The two languages share a good number of linguistic similarities including their numbering/counting systems which this paper is set to examine comparatively. The paper examines numerals of some Nigerian languages; simultaneously features cardinal and ordinal numbering in the Igala and the Igbo languages; counting of days of the weeks and months of the year in the languages are also examined. Discussion of findings, where the similarities and differences between Igala and Igbo numerals and counting systems, follows. The final segment features conclusion and recommendation.

2.0 Numerals in some Nigerian Languages

Arabic	Bukpe	Tiv	Hausa	Yoruba
1.	Obong	mom	daya	meni
2.	iffe	uhwa	biyu	meji
3.	itie	utaa	uku	meta
4.	ene	unyii	hudu	merin
5.	iza	utaan	biyar	marun
6.	etietie(3,3)	aterata	shida	mefa
7.	izarifie (5 and 2)	utankaauhwa	bakwaii	meje
8.	binebine (4,4)	anieni	takwas	mejo
9.	izaribine (5and 4)	utankwunyi	tara	mesan
10.	rikwe	pue	goma	mewaa
20.	risi	kundu	ashirin	ogun
40.	asiafie	akunduhaa	arbain	ogoji
100.	asiazan	deri mom	dari	ogorun
400.	asirisi	deri unyiin	darihudu	irinwo

(Adapted from Ahamefula, 2011:6)

3.0 Igala and Igbo Numerals (Cardinals)

Arabic	Igala	Igbo
1	oka	otu
2	eji	abuṛ
3	eta	ato
4	ele	ane
5	elu	ise
6	efa	isii
7	ebie	asaa
8	ejo	asato
9	ela	itoolu
10	egwa	iri
11	egwa oka	iri na otu
18	egwa ejo	iri na asato
20	ogwu	iri abuṛ
21	ogwu nyi oka	iri abuṛ na otu
28	ogwu nyi ejo	iri abuṛ na asato
29	ogwu nyi ela	iri abuṛ na itoolu
30	ogwu nyi egwa	iri ato
40	ogwu meji	iri ano
50	oje	iri ise
60	oje nyi egwa	iri isi
70	oje nyi ogwu	iri asaa
80	oje nyi ogwu egwa	iri asato
90	oje nyi ogwu meji	iri itoolu
100	ogwo melu	nari
400	ogwu melu mele	nari ano
800	ogwu melu mejo	nari asato
1200	chami nyi ogwoko nyi ogwu melu meji	otu puku na nari abuṛ
2000	chami nyi ogwoko meji	puku abuṛ
4000	chami nyi ogwoko mele	puku ano
1,000,000	chami nyi ogwoko ado	nde
1,000,000,000	_____	ijeri

3.1 Igala and Igbo Numerals (Ordinals)

Igala	Igbo	Gloss
ejuodudu	nke mbu	1 st
keji	nke abuo	2 nd
eketa	nke ato	3 rd
ekete	nke ano	4 th
ekelu	nke ise	5 th
ekefa	nke isii	6 th
ekemie	nke asaa	7 th
eketo	nke asato	8 th
ekela	nke itoolu	9 th
ekogwa	nke iri	10 th
ekogwu	nke iri abuo	20 th
ekoje	nke iri ise	50 th
ekogwu melu	nke nari	100 th etc.

3.2 Igala and Igbo Counting of Days of the Week and Months of the Year

Counting of days of the week and months of the year in both Igala and Igbo differ, in a great measure, from those of English. There are four (4) market days which traditionally represent a four-day week in Igala and Igbo respectively. 'Aladi' (Sunday) and 'izu uka' (week Sunday) are used to refer to week in Igala and Igbo. 'Ochu' (moon) and 'Onwa' (moon) are used for months of the year traditionally in these languages.

3.2.0 Counting of Days of the Week

Igala	Igbo	Gloss
Eke	Eke	first market day
Ede	Orie	second market day
Afo	Afo	third market day
Ukwọ	Nkwọ	fourth market day

Since counting of days of the week are done using market days in these two languages, the days do not correspond with those of English such as: Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday. While Igala and Igbo have four (4) cyclic market days representing a four-day traditional week, English has seven (7) cyclic days for a week. It is, therefore, impossible to correspond the Igala and Igbo traditional days to those of English as we have seen from the above.

Other concepts worthy of note here are the traditional ways of referring to 'yesterday' 'tomorrow' etc. Below are such concepts:

Igala	Igbo	Gloss
onale	unyau	yesterday
engini	taa	today
ona	echi	tomorrow

oto + ona → otona	nwa + nne+echi → nwannechi	the day
branch tomorrow "branch of tomorrow"	child mother tomorrow	after tomorrow
ele+engini → elengini	tontoro + nwa + nne echi →	
four today "four days to come"	tontoro nwannechi	four days to come
	senior child mother tomorrow	
	"The day that seniors the day after tomorrow"	

The concepts used for 'the day after tomorrow' as in 'otona' (branch of tomorrow) in Igala and 'nwannechi' (child of tomorrow's mother) in Igbo are those of extension and relationship. Also, the concepts for 'four days to come' as in 'elengini' (four days from today) in Igala and 'tontoro nwannechi' in Igbo are those of extension and seniority respectively. The tontoro notion is got from the idea of seniority - ito (to senior) in Igbo. With this tontoro concept, we can keep on counting days till infinity in Igbo (Ahamefula: 2011). Also, with 'engini' (today) concept, counting of days in Igala can keep on extending.

We have earlier established that 'Aladi' (Sunday) in Igala and 'Izu Uka' (Week Sunday) in Igbo are used in the two languages to refer to the English 'Week'. Let us see how they are used:

Igala	Igbo	Gloss
Aladi ka	otu izu	one week
Aladi ejuodudu	izu uka mbu	first week
Aladi mele	izu uka anọ	four weeks
Aladi ekele	izu uka nke anọ	fourth week
Aladi mejo	izu uka asato	eight weeks
Aladi ekejo	izu uka nke asato	eighth week
Aladi yi	izu uka a	this week
Aladi ojele	izu uka ikpeazu	last week
Aladi omune	izu uka ozo	next week

3.2.1 Counting of Months of the Year

Both Igala and Igbo traditionally count moon in place of months of the year. A traditional year of the two languages comprises twelve (12) moons. And one moon has a life cycle of twenty – eight (28) days ‘moon is called ‘ochu’ in Igala, while it is called ‘onwa’ in Igbo:

Igala	Igbo	Gloss	Equivalent
Ochu inye	Onwa mbu	first moon	“January”
Ochu ekeji	Onwa nke abuo	second moon	“February”
Ochu ekeata	Onwa nke ato	third moon	“March”
Ochu ekele	Onwa nke anọ	fourth moon	“April”
Ochu ekele	Onwa nke ise	fifth moon	“May”
Ochu ekefa	Onwa nke isii	sixth moon	“June”
Ochu ekebie	Onwa nke asaa	seventh moon	“July”
Ochu ekejo	Onwa nke asato	eighth moon	“August”
Ochu ekele	Onwa nke itoolu	ninth moon	“September”
Ochu ekegwaa	Onwa nke iri	tenth moon	“October”
Ochu ekegwaa oka	Onwa nke iri na otu	eleventh moon	“November”
Ochu ekegwaa eji	Onwa nke iri na abuo	twelfth moon	“December”

4.0 Discussion of Findings

This section discusses the similarities and differences between Igala and Igbo numerals and counting systems.

4.1 Similarities

The two languages (Igala and Igbo) have areas of similarities in their numerals. They both, for instance, have same pattern of numbering from numerals 1-10, where one word is used to represent a numeral in the languages (refer to 3.0).

On counting of days of the week, both languages have four cyclic market days representing a four-day week traditionally. Note also that ‘Eke’ (first market day) and ‘Afo’ (third market day) have same spelling, pronunciation and meaning in Igala and Igbo. The languages have the same ‘one word’ pattern of referring to ‘yesterday’, ‘today’ and ‘tomorrow’ (see 3.2.0). Furthermore, the concept of counting of moon to representing months of the year is adopted by both languages. A traditional year in Igala and Igbo comprises twelve (12) moons, where each moon has a twenty-eight (28) day life cycle.

4.2 Differences

The similarities between Igala and Igbo numerals and counting systems notwithstanding, there are a good number of differences between them.

This study finds out that the numbering patterns of the two languages starting from numeral ‘11’ (eleven) take different directions entirely. Igala uses two words to describe 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19 (e.g. ‘egwa oka’ 10, 1 meaning 11). But Igbo uses three words for them (e.g. ‘iri na otu’ 10 and 1 meaning 11). Again, while Igala has one word for 20 ‘ogwu’, Igbo has two words for it ‘iri abuo’. However, in the old Igbo counting system we have ‘ogu’ for 20. Igala also has one word for 50 ‘oje’, but Igbo does not. But while Igbo has one word for 100 ‘nari’, 1,000 ‘puku’, 1,000,000 ‘nde’ and 1,000,000,000 ‘ijeri’, Igala uses more than one word to describe them. More so, Igala does not have any native name or numeral representing 1,000,000,000 but Igbo does have as we can see above.

There is a concept of ‘nyi’ meaning ‘to wear’ in the numerals: 21 ‘ogwu nyi oka’, 28 ‘ogwu nyi ejo etc. in Igala. That is to say, for instance, that ‘20 wears 1’ meaning 21. In Igbo, on the other hand, the concept of ‘na’ meaning ‘and’ is used. This can be observed in the numerals: 18 ‘iri na asato’, 21 ‘iri abuo na otu’ etc. meaning (10 and 8), (10 in 2 places and 1).

Again, there are differences in the spelling and pronunciation of second market day ‘Ede’ (Igala), ‘Orie’

(Igbo); but they have same meaning: the second market day. The fourth market day ‘Ukwọ’ (Igala) ‘Nkwọ’ (Igbo) have different spellings, similar pronunciation, but same meaning.

Other different concepts which the two languages adopt are those of ‘extension’ and ‘relationship’ for ‘the day after tomorrow’: ‘otọ ọna’ – branch of tomorrow (Igala) and ‘nwa nne echi’ – tomorrow’s brother or sister (Igbo). Igbo also uses the concept of seniority - itọ (to senior) in referring to days ahead, such as ‘tontoro nwannechi’ meaning ‘four days to come (see 3.2.0).

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

The British decimal system of numbering has, today, overshadowed the Igala and Igbo traditional vigesimal systems; speakers (especially the younger ones) of these languages rarely make use of the traditional numbering and counting systems of these languages. Some speakers of Igala and Igbo in the present time do not have a full-fledged knowledge of the numerals, counting of the traditional market days of the week and moons of the year in the two languages; they have been totally influenced by the modern ways of doing these.

The danger of the foregoing is language endangerment and /or extinction; if the young generations and speakers of these languages are not encouraged to embrace the traditional system of numbering and counting in the languages, we will have a different story to tell in the nearest future. It is on this ground that the following recommendations are made:

- i. Parents and relevant stakeholders should always encourage children and/or students to embrace the culture of speaking their native languages both at home and in the school. Today, children of most educated people in our society do not speak their native language(s); and their parents especially contribute a lot to this ‘deficiency’.
- ii. Government should set up a body that will be monitoring teaching and learning of Nigerian indigenous languages in schools and colleges to ensure that every Nigerian child picks interest in learning his/her native language. For this to be properly executed, government should first of all make sure that all Nigerian indigenous languages are standardized, elevating them to acquire a status in which they can be taught and learnt formally.
- iii. Finally, and more importantly, children should be obliged to learn the traditional numbering and counting systems of their indigenous languages even as they continue to use the decimal system for pedagogical purposes.

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