

# Lexical Standardization and Documentation: The Challenges of the Igbo Lexicographer

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**ABSTRACT** – The role of a dictionary as an instrument of language standardization, documentation and pedagogy is indisputable. A survey of extant Igbo dictionaries reveals the absence of a standard Igbo dictionary, even though excellent grammars exist in the variety. A number of significant issues has made the production of a standard dictionary unrealized till date in Igbo studies even in the face of the huge benefits of computational lexicography. The Igbo lexicographer is faced with the challenges of deciding what to include as a standard lexical item and how to represent it in the dictionary. The paper investigates the linguistic factors, as well as the lexicographic principles responsible for the absence of a standard form for headwords, and the factors that impede the number, type and quality of lexicographic works in Igbo. Data for analysis were sourced from extant Igbo dictionaries of both colonial-missionary lexicographers and native speaker compilers. A close examination of the dictionaries establishes that the major challenges faced by Igbo lexicographers and which have hindered the production of a dictionary in the standard variety include: the use of competing and varying orthographies occasioned by the inaccuracy and lack of acceptance of the Onwu orthography; multiplicity of dialects, the complex morpho-semantics and verbal structures of the language, as well as the choice and arrangement of citation forms of lexical items. The paper concludes that without the collaboration of linguists, lexicographers, the Igbo standardization committee or agency, and other stakeholders, as well as an authority to impose the standard variety, the production of a standard dictionary will remain a mirage in Igbo linguistics.

**Keywords:** Lexical Standardization, Igbo Dictionaries, Documentation, Orthography, Lexicographers

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The advent of lexicography in Igbo can be traced to the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the compilation of bilingual wordlists by European missionaries, colonial administrators and non-native speakers. The earliest lexicographers include Norris (1848), Crowther (1882), Schön (1883), Dennis (1906), Thomas (1913), Welmers and Welmers (1968), Armstrong (1967), and others. Their works (mainly wordlists) reveal inadequate knowledge of the structure of the language. The wordlists do not have the features of a dictionary. They do not provide information on linguistic or extra-linguistic categories other than meaning. They merely contain direct and sometimes explanatory equivalents or periphrastic expressions of the headwords. A very good example of a wordlist publication in Igbo is Armstrong's (1967): *A Comparative Wordlist of Five Igbo Dialects*. The wordlist gives glosses of the different dialects for their English equivalents. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Igbo native speakers had begun to compile bilingual wordlists. A majority of the works done by the early native speaker compilers lack comprehensive lexical coverage and systematic arrangement of phonological, grammatical and semantic information, as well as knowledge of lexicographic principles since they were not trained in linguistics and the art of lexicography. A major revolution came into dictionary compilation in Igbo when linguists and native speaker linguists became involved in lexicography. Significant achievements in dictionary compilation were recorded in Igbo with the scholarly, fairly comprehensive and unidirectional Igbo-English dictionaries by Williamson (1972) and Igwe (1999). The works owe their great success to insights from linguistics. Igwe's dictionary is the first scholarly work done by an Igbo native speaker. Another Igbo dictionary worthy of note is Echeruo's multi-dialect approach dictionary, published two decades ago.

Igbo dictionaries are still largely bilingual, and until now are produced single-handedly without collaboration among lexicographers, linguists and stakeholders. There are hardly reviews or critiques of the existing works to encourage development of the language or lexicography. Up till date, there is no general-purpose monolingual dictionary in the standard variety. This implies that literacy in the language has been greatly hindered. The field is yet to witness the

branching into specialized dictionary-making as practised in other languages of the world. There are nospecialised works, such as Igbo dictionaries of Idioms, Synonyms, Scientific Terms, Phrasal Verbs, Inherent Complement Verbs, as well as Etymological, Pronouncing or Spelling dictionaries. No encyclopaedia or thesaurus exists in Igbo or any electronic corpus/corpora from which dictionaries can be frequently revised and updated.

A dictionary is a reference material (a book or an electronic programme) that lists the words of a language or languages and provides information about the phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, as well as pragmatic, etymological and encyclopedic information. Other reference materials compiled by lexicographers include the saurai, encyclopedias, wordlists and glossaries. Dictionaries contain headwords usually listed in alphabetical order based on the spelling convention in the language. A dictionary, though different in scope and treatment from other lexicographic materials, is the primary object of lexicography and so, the most well-established in the field. Landau (2001) Jackson and Al Kasimi (1977) believe that a dictionary is descriptive as well as prescriptive, and so, Jackson (2002:21) argues that since lawyers, teachers, preachers, lecturers and even politicians resort to the dictionary as an authoritative document, the dictionary is ‘the final arbiter in our linguistic disputes’. A dictionary therefore gives, or ought to give accurate and reliable information of the form, content and usage of words. Just like the grammar book, a dictionary occupies a unique position in language description, and so, is considered a powerful instrument of lexical standardization.

Despite the fact that lexicographers do not agree on the criteria for dictionary classification, several dictionary types have been identified. They include: bilingual, monolingual, native speakers’, learners’ dictionaries, diachronic, synchronic dictionaries, adult and children’s dictionary, abridged and non-abridged, general purpose and special dictionaries, as well as lexical versus encyclopedic dictionaries and others. As varied as there are dictionary types, only a few bilingual dictionaries are available in Igbo and most of them are out-of-print. Anagbogu (2005) and Ajunwa (2009) have reported that Igbo dictionaries are the least available in libraries and bookshops within and outside Nigeria, when compared to Yoruba and Hausa dictionaries. Apart from a few dialect dictionaries, no standard dictionary has been written for Igbo.

Extant Igbo dictionaries and wordlists from Norris (1848) to Akponye (2011) reveal the absence of any standard form in representing headwords. A search through Igbo written materials on the internet also depict the lack of standard representation of lexical items. Similarly, song writing in Igbo which has become very popular in recent times also reveals a huge gap in lexical standardization of Igbo. The Igbo lexicographer is therefore constantly challenged with the decision of choice of words to include in the dictionary as part of the standard variety. Even though by 1961 the Onwu orthography had been put in place to resolve the issue of non-uniformity in writing, significant gaps still exist in the representation of lexical units in Igbo dictionaries. In corpus language planning, dictionaries have been identified as excellent resource for lexical standardization. The non-conformity to the standard has created problem of effective communication especially in the written form. Though standardization involves regularities in spelling, vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, aspects of the standardization of grammar of Igbo are not within the scope of this study. The paper focuses on the aspects of vocabulary, spelling and pronunciation which are relevant for dictionary compilation. A research in the lexical standardization of headwords is significant in the production of the much-needed tool in the area of language pedagogy, translation and literary viability of the language. The dictionary is a potent instrument of language standardization and so, should be given adequate recognition in Igbo language studies.

## **2.1 Language Standardization**

There is extensive literature on the subject of standardization. A standard language is the accepted codified variety of a language that is generally accepted as the means of communication, usually for literary purposes in the mass media, governance, education, public examinations and publications. Holmes (2013) defines a standard variety or language as the written variety that has been subjected to codification and accepted by the community as suitable for formal functions. According to Trudgill (2000), a standard variety is that variety which has undergone the processes of selection, codification and stabilization. And Wolff (2000:332) sees the standard variety or lect (in Africa) as ‘the accepted variety for generalized and normative usage in certain domains such as literature, science, media, education, church and public sectors. He adds that a standard form is supported by a standard orthography, standard dictionaries and standard reference grammars. Sociolinguists believe that standardization relates to issues of pronunciation, orthographic representation, agreement in spelling, vocabulary, grammar and regularities in

dictionary compilation, and so, argues that language standardization is an important landmark in the development of any language.

While some sociolinguists believe that language standardization is synonymous with language planning, (specifically corpus planning since it involves planning the language itself for literacy and numeracy), others argue that standardization is rather an important aspect of language planning, and Kaplan and Baldauf (1997), see standardization as a major goal of language planning. However, language planning researches have shown that standardization involves a process that is usually classified into four components namely: Selection (Determination), Codification (graphization), Elaboration (modernization) and Acceptance (implementation or stabilization). In selecting or determining a language or variety, two major options are available to language planners – either to allow a standard dialect to evolve naturally from an existing dialect, or to consciously create it from a combination of some closely related ones. And according to Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) this choice is made from the competing languages or varieties of a language. The particular linguistic form selected becomes the norm for the community. Discussions on the strategies for selecting or determining a standard are outside the purview of this paper. Lexical codification creates uniformity in the use of words. Trudgil (2000) rightly observes that codification is ‘a process whereby a language variety acquires a publicly recognized and fixed form’. Sociolinguists have pointed out that dictionaries are instruments of language standardization since the results of codification are usually set out and preserved in dictionaries. In this regard they serve as standard reference text for what should be written. It is believed that written materials have strong effect on the development of a standard dialect. This is because, the more words are written, the more they are adopted and spread among speakers of all dialects. Language elaboration or modernization, as a component of standardization, refers to the attempt by language planners to increase the lexical inventory of a language in order that it might become a veritable instrument for discourse in science and technological advancement. Implementation refers to all activities that are done to execute the acceptance of the chosen standard across dialects. These efforts, in many languages are achieved by organized bodies such as language academies/agencies

## **2.2 Evolution of the Igbo Standard Variety**

The process of standardizing Igbo, that is, committing the language to writing, began with the British colonialist administrators and missionaries. Before the introduction of the Onwu Orthography in 1961, literacy in the Igbo language had suffered a huge setback caused by the orthography controversy which lasted between 1928 and 1961, and which prevented a uniform standard for Igbo. The reason for the establishment of the Onwu orthography to help resolve the controversy was not completely realized largely due to its inaccuracy and the negative attitude of some Igbo scholars. The orthography fails to capture all the distinctive consonants and vowels in the language as well as the features of nasalization, aspiration, palatalization, and others, which are distinctive in the Central Igbo and some other dialects. Armstrong (1975:4) in his comparative analysis of five Igbo dialects observes that the ‘official and much simplified orthography amounts in practice to writing Central Igbo in the Onitsha sound system’. His study shows that Central Igbo has as many as sixty-four consonant phonemes as opposed to the twenty-eight of Onitsha. Similarly, Monye (1989) and Williamson (1968) among others have shown that /  $\text{ɛ}$  / is distinctive in Enuani, Ika and Ukwuani varieties. Furthermore, Emenanjo (1985) rightly draws attention to the existence of up to ninety-six phonemes of Igbo. In addition, the Igbo Archival Dictionary Project team identifies ten distinctive vowels and ninety-six consonant phonemes for Igbo. Other Igbo scholars and linguists, Igwe (1999) and Echeruo (2001), Ikekeonwu (2005), Okebalama (2006), have acknowledged the inadequacies of the Onwu orthography in representing the contrastive sound segments of the language, and are of the opinion that the orthography should be modified to accommodate these distinctive sounds in the language. Anagbogu (2005) stressed the need for the graphization of the phonemes that have been identified in some other dialects. Nwachukwu (1983) and Igwe (1999) support the argument by insisting that all the phonological features of Igbo dialects must be represented in the standard orthography.

However, other linguists who foresee the danger of another orthography war in Igbo suggest that the Standard Igbo variety should be adopted despite its inadequacies. They argue that no orthography is perfect and none reflects all the phonological features of a language. Studies have shown that some of the features of palatalization, nasalization and aspiration in some dialects of Igbo as observed in the language can be disambiguated by contexts. Onwuejeogwu (1975:3) rightly observes that ‘people who speak with nasalization and aspiration can communicate with those who speak without these features, like the Onitsha and Enuani people’. Oweleke (2007) has argued that

in selecting a standard variety there must be some level of compromise, as insisting on the representation of all the phonological features of all the dialects of the language would never produce a standard variety that will be generally. This would be in violation of the principles of selecting a standard. No orthography is perfect. It has been argued that written languages are not perfect duplicates of the spoken forms. The English language orthography has been criticized for being inaccurate and inconsistent, and largely responsible for the irregularities of its spelling. In spite of the inadequacies, the variety has long been adopted as the standard and has been in use for advancing literacy in the language.

The issue of a standard variety for Igbo is still a major cause of controversy in the Igbo dictionary compilation. While some critics see the urgent need for such a variety, others argue for dialect-based Igbo dictionaries. This explains why no standard dictionary exists for Igbo. Dictionary compilers therefore use different symbols and diacritics to represent lexical items in the dictionaries. Production of practical dictionaries require a standard orthography generally accepted by the users of the language. And Al Kasimi (1977) and Landau (2001) have argued that before a dictionary can be compiled for a language, that language must have a standard or preferred variety, that is, a variety that has developed standard spellings. Igbo has standard/official orthography but it does not enjoy general acceptance as the use of varying orthographies in the literature has demonstrated.

### **2.3 Standard Igbo and Lexical Standardization**

Emenanjo (1989:222) describes Standard Igbo as ‘a-dialectal and distinct from all the live-dialects of Igbo’. Anagbogu (2005) and Ikekeonwu (2005) see Standard Igbo as a ‘melange’, ‘fusion’ of the erst-while Central Igbo and General Onitsha Igbo. Furthermore, Oweleke (2007) describes Standard Igbo as the variety that combines the morpho-syntax of Central Igbo and the sound system of Onitsha Igbo. These views suggest that, in Igbo the process of selection has been achieved. Thus, the Igbo standard variety is created from a conscious effort of combining two related dialects- the Onitsha and Central Igbo dialects. Applying Wolff’s (2002:334) principle of *Determination*, Igbo standard can be seen as an ‘idealized pan-dialectal variant which is nobody’s dialect’. Furthermore, the variety makes use of the standard Onwu orthography and so, can be argued that Standard Igbo has also been codified. As regards modernization, a lot of efforts have been made towards enriching the variety. According to Emenanjo (1989), Standard Igbo enriches itself through lexical modernization, and through planned and spontaneous language planning, about 20,000 new lexemes have entered the Igbo lexicon. However, this variety does not enjoy a general acceptance in the Igbo literary scene. This may be due to the negative attitude of the people to the standard variety; secondly, according to Williamson (1972), the absence of a single early authoritative figure to impose a standard, as was done by Ajayi Crowther for the Yoruba literary development.

The results of codification of the standard variety are yet to be documented in Igbo dictionaries. A good number of bilingual dictionaries exist in the language but none has consistently represented the standard forms of lexical items, either in spelling, pronunciation and vocabulary. In contrast, conventional synchronic English dictionaries have standard forms across dictionary-types whether monolingual, bilingual, learner or children’s dictionary. Thus, when you look-up words in two or more dictionaries in the language, you find identical forms as entries. They equally have similar citation forms. Although there may still be some irregularities for writing compound words in English, forms of simple and complex words have been long established. French too, through the efforts of their language academy has established the standard for citation forms and writing system in the language. Regrettably in Igbo, we are still far from stabilizing the gains of the standard forms of lexical items through dictionary compilation.

## **3. ISSUES OF LEXICAL STANDARDIZATION IN IGBO DICTIONARIES**

A number of reasons have been identified in this study as factors responsible for the absence of a standard form in Igbo dictionary compilation. Linguistic issues include orthographic problems, multiplicity of dialects, absence of meta language documentation in dictionaries, as well as the complex morpho-phonological and morpho- semantic issues inherent in the language. Lexicographic problems of choice and arrangement of headwords also pose great challenges for the Igbo lexicographer.

### **3.1 Divergent Orthographies in Igbo Writings**

The existence of several divergent orthographies in Igbo literary scene constitutes a huge challenge for both lexicographers and users of the dictionaries. The Igbo literary scene has witnessed the proliferation of orthographies

and nothing fewer than seven orthographies can be identified since the first written publication. The orthographies adopted include: Old and New Orthographies, Onwu/Standard Orthography, New Standard Orthography and other forms of modified Onwu Orthography. As controversial as the New and Old orthographies were, some dictionaries were produced with them by the early missionaries – Thomas (1913), Dennis (1913), Ganot (1904) and others. The Old orthography had six vowels while the new had eight. In 1961, the Eastern Region government set up an official orthography committee under the chairmanship of Dr. Onwu. The result was the approval of the Standard Onwu Orthography which consists of thirty-six letters- eight vowels and twenty-eight consonants, as given below:

1. a b ch d e f g gbgh  
 gw h i ì j k kp kw l  
 mn n̄ n̄nywo o p r  
 s (sh) t u ù v w y z

The letters are written in an order that is strictly alphabetical, digraphs follow single letters, and dotted letters follow the undotted counterparts. Standard Igbo does not have nasalization, aspiration and palatalization and so, has no symbols to represent these features. Orthography involves the letters of the alphabet as well as the writing rules of the language. Rules of word division, spelling and tone markings are all specified in the Onwu orthography (Emenanjo 1996). Igbo tonal convention is: leave all high tones unmarked; mark low tones with the grave accent [ ] and the step tones with the macron [ ]. Despite the establishment of the official Standard orthography, divergent writing systems are still being employed for representing lexical items. However, some well-established agencies have helped to popularize the Standard Igbo variety. These include: the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC) now known as the Igbo Studies Association (ISA), Igbo Standardization Committee (ISC), but are now moribund; examination bodies, the media, literary artists and writers of Igbo instructional materials and grammar books. A good number of excellent literary works also exist in Standard Igbo orthography.

### 3.2 Absence of Uniformity of Standard Codified Forms in Igbo Dictionaries

In this section, we examine the orthographies adopted in the extant Igbo dictionaries. Ogbalu (1962), Welmers and Welmers (1968) claim they used orthographies similar to the standard but not identical. Williamson (1972) and Akponye (2011) in their dictionaries used the Standard orthography; while Akponye resorted to the old form of representing ñ as ñ̄ in his dictionary, Williamson made a choice for Onitsha dialect as headwords.

#### 3.2.1 Lexical Codification in Akponye's Dictionary

Though Akponye (2011) adopts the letters of the standard alphabet, he ignores the writing rules of word-division, capitalization, spelling and tone making, giving rise to non-uniformity of representation and alphabetizing order. It is difficult to identify the form of an Igbo word in this dictionary as the rule of writing Igbo words have been severely violated. A few examples will suffice:

2. **Abaghì urùn** Uselessness, Worthlessness **Echidiime**(colloq)Uncertainty, Improbability  
**Ádìghìiken** Powerlessness, Weakness **Afọ ojujun** Contentment, Satisfaction  
**Ádìghìkwamkpà** adj Inconsequential, Unimportant **Nwèeafọjjuv** to be contented,  
**Ádìghìkwankèwan** Idissolubility, **Nweghiafọjju**adj Not contented/satisfied  
**Gbùrùgburùebe** n Environment, Surroundings **Nweghì ajo àgwàv**, adj Not having bad moral  
**Gharagharagwùrùgwùrù** Incoherence **Bja n'ogèv** To arrive or come early  
**Gbagwojuokwaanya**v To confuse, mystify, baffle **Afọimen** Pregnancy  
 Extract: Akponye (2011)

The compiler seems to have been influenced by the concept of a word in English, so he tries to force Igbo into the lexical mould of English. It has been argued that what constitutes a word is not congruent across natural languages, Welmers and Welmers (1968), Jensen (1990), Oweleke (2017) and others. From the analysis of the lexical entries in this dictionary, there is no principle guiding what constitutes a basic word, complex or compound and how they should be represented. The dictionary is replete with inflectional forms of words, phrases, and sentences without recognition of verb and noun derivatives which abound in the language. A dictionary published in 2011 with so much confusion and inconsistency of representing lexical units, as well as lack of knowledge of lexicographic principles only compounds the problems of lexical codification, standardization and stabilization. In standard

lexicographic principles, inflected word-forms are not lexemes; they do not signal meaning change and so, are not treated as headwords or main entries in conventional, general-purpose or bilingual dictionaries. They are rather used as illustrations in sentences. No Igbo speaker or learner can identify these inflected forms in the dictionary as Igbo words. The entries are also not consistent with the infinitive, basic or imperative forms of verbs. These irregularities defeat the role of the dictionary as a potent instrument of standardization of lexical forms in Igbo.

### 3.2.2 Codification of Lexical Items in Echeruo's Dictionary

Echeruo (2001) in his dictionary decided to introduce the New Standard Orthography (NSO) with new symbols – theumlauted vowels of (**i,ö,ü**) to replace the sub-dottedvowels(**ĩ, ƴ, Ƴ**) of the Standard orthography; the letter **c** to replace **ch**, and**ñ**to replace**ñ**. The reasons for these changes cannot be sustained. Representation of words in the dictionary, such as: **cüpü**, ‘drive away’, **cabiri** ‘cut off’, **cagharĩa**‘ change colour; **cöö**‘seek or want’, **carüöihu**‘frown’**ciäöci**‘laugh’, ‘mock’and **cüöösö** ‘chase after’ is in total defiance of the Standard Onwu orthography already in use before the publication of his dictionary. No Igbo speaker or learner will be able to identify these as Igbo words. They are completely at variance with the standard way of writing Igbo words. The method adopted by Echeruo does not help to stabilize the gains of the established forms of standardization already in progress.

### 3.2.3 Codification of Lexical Items in Igwe's Dictionary

Igwe (1999), in rejection of the standard orthography adopted a special orthography to capture features of nasalization, aspiration and palatalization in Central Igbo dialects. He therefore resorted to excessive use of diacritics. In contrast to the thirty-six letters of Onwu orthography, Igwe created a sixty-two-letterorthography. Headed these consonants:

b' b'ych' d'fyĩ g g' w' hñyj'  
k'kw'pyp' p'yryřt' ṽ whz

Igwe (1999:x) denies the fact that any standard exists for Igbo and so advocates for a standard which he argues, ‘should give due recognition to other Igbo dialects’. As noted in Oweleke (2007) only well-trained linguists in Igbo phonology and speakers of Central Igbo can appreciate the distinctions between these, and the plain forms. Regrettably, the sounds identified by Igwe from the entries are more of phonetic variations rather than phonemic as the limited dictionary entries show. For example, there are only four entries for the letter *by* and one for *p'y*. Majority of the entries are between three to ten main entries, mostly adverbs and idiophones, and translations usually very vague and repetitious. Anagbogu (2005:80) describes the lexical entries as ‘heavily nasalized, aspirated and obscure’. An ordinary learner or speaker/user of the dictionary will find it extremely difficult to appreciate the lexical items.

### 3.2.4 Lexical Codification in Williamson's Dictionary

Williamson (1972), while adhering strictly to the sound system of the Standard orthography, chooses Onitsha dialect for lexical inventory. The dictionary does not recognise the standard Igbo words as variations in the language. An Igbo learner therefore cannot find this dictionary a resource material for public examinations, educational instructions, or for government publications in Igbo. Apart from this problem, the dictionary has excellent interpretation of the rules of word division, capitalization, alphabetization and tonal representation and ordering of lexical items as recommended by the Standard Onwu orthography. Below are some entries in her dictionary vis-à-vis the standard forms:

**Table 3.1 Variation in lexical codification in Onitsha and Standard Igbo**

S/n	Onitsha Igbo	Standard Igbo	Gloss	S/n	Onitsha Igbo	Standard Igbo	Gloss
1.	ofia	ohja	‘bush’	6.	je	ga	‘go’
2.	mmeē	òbàrà	‘blood’	7.	ugbènè	àbùbà	‘feather’
3.	òkpòro	nwaanyì	‘woman’	8.	otosĩ	àchàrà	‘bamboo’
4.	àdù	akì ilū	‘bitter kola’	9.	òsìbaà	akwaukwù	‘wrapper’

5	ngwelè	ngwerè	'lizard'				
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The Igbo language cannot achieve standardization and stabilization from such styles of lexical entries exhibited in these dictionaries. Thus, a learner who needs the Igbo information for use in the media, education, and public domain will be severely handicapped by these dictionaries. These irregularities of representation have robbed Igbo of what can be described as a standard dictionary by current lexicographic practice. In as much as there are excellent works in grammars and literature in the Standard variety, no dictionary today exists in the standard variety. Sociolinguists believe that dictionaries complement grammar books in the standardization objective of corpus language planning and language description. The dilemma of the Igbo divergent orthographies discourages the use, as well as compiling of dictionaries. The use of varying orthographies in dictionary compilation has led to different forms of alphabetizing order that makes search for words tedious and sometimes fruitless.

### 3.3 Non-conformity of citation-form and arrangement of entries

A close examination of headwords in most Igbo dictionaries reveals the lack of uniformity of citation forms. Headwords in any dictionaries are based on the spelling conventions and orthographic rules of that language. Extracts from the dictionaries of Williamson (1972), Igwe (1999), Echeruo (2001) and Akponye (2011) are given below:

**Table 3.2 Citation-Forms in Extant Igbo Dictionaries**

Williamson (1972)	Echeruo (2000)	Igwe (1999)	Akponye (2011)
-bu l. carry, bear	buov [LH] carry, lift.	bu v. t. lift, carry	Buru Carry
-gbaoşrun	gbaaösö [HHHH] run a race	igbaoşo to run, to flee, to run away	Gbaaoşo v. To run off, run away
afọ imē pregnancy	afọ imē pregnancy	afọimē pregnancy	Afoime n Pregnancy
-bja come	bja[LH]come	bya v.t. int, come	Bja v To come
-bu onūcurse	büaönü v [LH HH]curse		Buo-onuv To curse
ofja	ofja	ohya	Ohjan Bush
öpäpapeanut/groundnut	öpapa[HHH] peanut, groundnut	ähuekeren.peanuts, groundnuts	Ahuekeren groundnuts
-chü àjàsacrifice	cüöaja[HH LL] make sacrifice	ich'ü àjà tomake, offer sacrifice	Ichü àjà n Act of sacrifice
-bjàsqueeze; compress	pja[LH]squeeze out, press	b'yà v tr. press upon heavily	Pja press. squeeze
afifjagrass, weed	ahihia[HHHH]grass, weed	ahyihyaweed, grass	Ahjhjaweed, grass, foliage

From the data, no two representations or spellings of any word are identical. This situation poses a major challenge for the lexicographer who needs to decide and select from among these varying forms for entry in the standard dictionary. Another decision bothers around the choice of citation form. The data also reveal that Echeruo (2001) uses the imperative form of the verbs as citation; Igwe (1999) uses both the basic and the infinitive - the basic to indicate verbs in isolation and the infinitive for all other verbs in the group. Akponyeadopts the infinitive, imperative as well as basic form. Williamson (1972) cites the verbs in the infinitive form but omits the prefix (i/ì), and apart from Williamson who indicates verbs by the use of a dash before the verb, no other compiler makes such distinction. Entries from Akponye (2011) seem to suggest that monosyllabic simple verbs are non-existent in Igbo. In this dictionary inflected forms, that is, negative, imperative, infinitive, past and perfect verb forms, phrases, and even sentences are entered as lexemes (See Example 2). Similarly, in flagrant violation of the standard convention, Akponye consistently enters non-proper nouns and all words in initial capital letters. This is contrary to lexicographic practice and principles. The forms adopted by the lexicographers make identification of the basic form of a lexeme as well as the standard form difficult. Generally, citation forms of words are usually determined by conventions which vary from language to language. For example, in the English language, verbs are cited in dictionaries in plain present, German and French use full infinitive (for example, in French, *manger* 'to eat', *écrire* 'to write', *standardiser* 'to standardize'). Variations of the citation forms as shown in these dictionary entries reveal the absence of a standard form or spelling for lexical entries in Igbo.

### 3.4 Issues of selection of a standard variety

The presence of a considerable number of dialects in Igbo has not encouraged the production of dictionaries in the standard variety that will promote lexical standardization and stabilization. Crowther (1882), Thomas (1913) and Williamson (1972) published in the Onitsha variety; Welmers and Welmers (1968) in Compromise Igbo, ‘the variety spoken throughout Owerri and Umuahia Provinces’, Igwe (1999) in Central Igbo, and Echeruo (2001) used a multi-dialectal approach. This approach creates a problem of varying forms of headwords for the same lexemes and the absence of a standard form. Multiplicity of dialects makes the lexicographer’s selection of the forms of lexical items difficult. The compiler is faced with the problem of handling both sound and lexical variants in the dictionary. A few of the variants attested in the language are given Table 3.3

**Table 3.3: Words showing Sound Variation in Igbo**

Words	Sound Variants							
body	àshụ	ẹhụ	ẹsụ	àrụ	àhụ	ẹshụ	ùhụ	ẹshụ
anus	atùlù	òtùnẹ	òchùlà	òtùlà	òtùlè	òtèlè		
face	ihu	ishu	iru	ifu	isu	ivu		
afternoon	ẹfifiè	ehihè	eshushùè	ehihè	eshishè”			
cow	efi	eshi	ehi	evi	eshu			
grass	afifia	ẹfifia	ahihia	avivja	ashishja			

**Table 3.4: Lexical Variation in Igbo**

Words	Lexical Variants							
bamboo	otosī	otoshī	àchàrà	ùkètè	òkòrò			
peanut	ápápa	àhùekere	isaẹwẹ	àsibokò				
dress	áfè	ùkò	ẹwùrù	ùwe	ekwà	nwei	ìwe	
prostitute	àjàdù	àkùnà	àkwùnà- kwunà	iswe- mgbotò	òkpara	àkwùlà		
ladder	ogidigbà	ìgbàkànà	àdàngo	obengā	gbambe	otofō	ùbùbè	ùbèrì
snail	ejùnà	òkpàtù	ikèkèlè	iròma	njèlè	njila	ìkò	ejì
crayfish	ìsha	ìdamafū	ize	ayiya	òbù	nfriiya	iyoro	

The facts of dialect variation in the language as shown in Tables 3.3 and 3.4 above pose these questions: First, should all sound variants of a lexeme be entered as separate headwords in their different alphabetical positions? Second: should all the lexical variants of a lexeme be entered as headwords? Third: should we continue with the dialect-based dictionary compilation, and for how long more? And finally, how relevant is dialect-based dictionary compilation to the development of a literary standard for Igbo? Al Kasimi (1977), Kiango (2000), and Landau (2001) believe that before a dictionary can be written for a language, that language must have a preferred or standard variety. Such a standard has already been identified for Igbo. However, there is no dictionary of Igbo in this variety. Oweleke (2020) has suggested strategies that could be employed by Igbo lexicographers and linguists to harness both the sound and lexical variation facts of the language to produce a dictionary in the standard variety.

### 3.5 Standardization and lexical modernization

Lexical modernization, otherwise known as metalanguage project or terminological development is an ongoing process in language standardization for increasing the capacity of a language’s vocabulary to cope with new realities of modernization and language contact. It is a common process of language change and development in natural languages. Every language is complete for its indigenous culture, but when communities come in contact with new groups of speakers occasioned by such activities as migration, war, economic and political dominance and spread,



inventions among others new concepts, new fauna/flora and new terminologies emerge to cope with these new realities.

A lot of work has been done towards Igbo lexical enrichment through the agencies of language modernization. According to Emenanjo (2005a:9) ‘these projects have brought in not fewer than 20,000 words to the modern lexicon of standard Igbo’. Apart from the elaboration of Igbo lexical inventory through the planned metalanguage projects, new words have also entered the mainstream of Igbo language spontaneously through the electronic media (Emenanjo 1985, 1989, 2005a). Dictionary and metalanguage are specially related because as new words are formed and accepted by a community of speakers, they are recorded in the dictionaries. Ironically, extant Igbo dictionaries have not included this new words. Most of the technical terms, the product of the Igbo metalanguage projects; still remain in their original publications. Ajunwa also decries the absence of specialized technical and scientific dictionaries in Igbo. We observe that Igwe’s (1999) and Echeruo’s (2001) dictionaries though published many years after the release of the technical and scientific terms to be used in Igbo, do not have a record of these words among others as:

4. m̀kp̀oah̀à ‘noun’ ǹǹo`chi`ah̀à ‘pronoun’,  
ù`d̀aume ‘vowel’ m̀gb̀akwunye ‘affix(es)’  
m̀bun`aobi ‘aim’ ah̀ir̀iokwu ‘sentence’  
ng̀h̀o`ta`okwu ‘semantics’ edem`semina ‘seminar paper’  
akom`akò ‘narration’ nsò`rò`edide ‘orthography’  
lè`zì`kò`grà`fà ‘lexicographer’ sayē`n̄`si ‘science’  
ù`l̀ò akwukwò ò`ta`akà`rà ‘nursery school’

The question is: where does a learner or translator of Igbo find such words? Among the existing Igbo dictionaries, the only dictionary that seems to have recorded Igbo metalanguage is that written by Awde et al. (1999). This dictionary has quite a substantial number of words from these projects published by SPILC – (Igbo Metalanguage: vol. 1). The major problem noticed in this compilation is the absence of tone marks and relevant diacritics, and this renders the words doubtful Igbo words.

Much as the SPILC and its Igbo Standardization Committee must be commended for the huge efforts made in the development of the Igbo language, a lot more work is needed in the area of dissemination, standardization and stabilization of these words, as well as in the documentation of more new terms, especially those entering the Igbo vocabulary through the use of computer technology. It is also sad to note that since the last publication of SPILC was in 1985 and there has not been any update. As noted by Anagbogu (2005), no further attempts have been made reactivating the Igbo Standardization Committee, whose function is the effective standardization of the language. Ajunwa has observed too, that no Igbo dictionary, either general purpose or specialized technical exists where users or translators can find such help in time of need. If we must use the Igbo language to ‘achieve a holistic education and scientific and technological advancement’, as suggested by Emenanjo (1998:51), as well as a powerful instrument of standardization and stabilization, then these terms must be documented in the Igbo dictionaries for easy accessibility.

#### **4. THE COMPLEX MORPHO-SEMANTIC STRUCTURES AND LEXICOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES**

The structure of the Igbo verb has created the problem of standard citation forms particularly for inherent complement verbs, complex verbal noun derivatives and compound words in the language among others. Agglutinating languages have been shown to constitute a major challenge to dictionary compilation, Rechenbach (1968), Bwenge (1989), Kiango (2000) and Oweleke (2007). They have shown that the morphological complexities of verbs and nouns in Bantu and Igbo languages are largely responsible for the lexicographic problems of choice and arrangement of lexical entries. In this section, I examine the implications of the highly productive word-formation processes of Igbo to standardization of lexical items and arrangement of headwords.

##### **4.1 Determining the Standard Form for Complex Noun and Verb Derivatives**

The highly productive derivational morphology of the agglutinating nature of Igbo poses a great deal of challenge to lexical standardization in dictionary compilation. Through the derivational processes of verbal extension and verbal nominalization, a great deal of new words/lexemes are formed in the language. The dominant processes are affixation, compounding and reduplication in isolation or in combination. For illustration, from the verb root -je ‘go,

walk or move’ in Igbuzo-Igbose deverbals, verb extensional derivatives and compound verbs can be derived:

- 6a. *jegide* ‘keep walking/going’ f. *jehuka* ‘move away/ distance oneself’  
 b. *jeyeli* ‘walk aimlessly’ g. *njeyeli* ‘act of walking aimlessly’  
 c. *njefu* ‘act of losing’ h. *njeshie* ‘wrong move/act of missing one’s way’  
 d. *njeko* ‘going together’ i. *ojego* ‘traveller’  
 e. *njenje* ‘uncoordinated movement’ j. *igbanje* ‘running errands’

The formation of these derivatives varies extensively across dialects and across lexical items. It should also be noted that dialects of Igbo vary greatly in the forms of affixes used for word derivations. Thus, the same root-word may yield different forms of similar meanings. A comparison of derivatives in Williamson and Igwe used for illustration here:

#### 7. Williamson Igwe Gloss

- a. *chikoluchirisa* ‘take all for oneself’  
 b. *chipuchifu* ‘throw away some things’  
 c. *chilichiri* ‘take to oneself’  
 d. *ochichechiche* ‘pondering’, ‘thought’, ‘thinking’, ‘opinion’  
 f. *ojjeogiga* ‘act of going or moving’

Similarly, synonyms with different forms derive different forms with similar meanings; from *-je* and *-ga* ‘go’, we derive *ojemba/ogamba* ‘traveller’, *ojje/ogiga* ‘act of going, moving’, *njefie/ngaghye; ijefu/igafu* ‘to stray, go astray’. The comprehensive treatment of derivatives also varies extensively. While Williamson and Igwe enter quite a substantial number of derived verbal nouns and verbal derivatives, Echeruo and Akponye have scanty treatment of derivatives in their dictionaries.

Another challenge for the lexicographer is the choice to be made of these derivatives for a standard Igbo dictionary as done in other standard dictionaries. How should these derivatives be entered in a standard Igbo dictionary? The gains of a standard Igbo dictionary at this stage of its literary development cannot be over-stressed. The standard codified forms should be favoured over the non-standard. Standard dictionaries are available in many languages.

#### 4.2 Identification of the standard form for Inherent Complement Verbs

An interesting feature of the Igbo verb is its ability to co-exist with nominals. Uwalaka (1983), Nwachukwu (1983), Emenanjo (1987, 2005b), Oweleke (1996) and Ndimele (2003) have all identified a class of Igbo verbs as Inherent Complement Verbs. Nwachukwu (1987:40) describes the Inherent Complement Verb as a verb which in its citation form consists of a CV-root followed by a free noun, and the root and its nominal complement form a semantic unit. He warns that any dictionary which excludes the complement lacks meaning, because the complement is the meaning-specifying constituent of its verb. Thus, in the lexicon, the ICV exists as a CV + Nominal. The inherent complement verb begins with a semantically empty verb root and has an appropriate complement added to it to form a lexical unit. We agree with Nwachukwu (1983) that the verb does not exist without the meaning-specifying nominal. A few examples from Igbuzo-Igbo are given below:

#### 8. *tụ* cluster *kpọ* cluster *gba* cluster

- tunga* ‘imprison’ *kpọ* *ntụ* ‘leap’ *gbambò* ‘strive’  
*tụ* *egwù* ‘be afraid’ *kpọ* *òkù* ‘call’ *gbaafà* ‘practice divination’  
*tụ* *anyā* ‘expect’ *kpọ* *igà* ‘hand-cuff’ *gbaezenè* ‘marry many wives’

The verb roots *-gba*, *-kpọ* and *-tụ* are semantically incomplete without their nominals. The two parts make one semantic unit. This group of verbs constitutes a major problem in Igbo lexicography. The wrong interpretation of this class of verbs by most lexicographers has given rise to divergent forms of the verbs as headwords in Igbo dictionaries. A survey of the dictionaries of Williamson, Igwe, Echeruo and Akponye show dual entries of these verbs: one, with CV root in isolation and the other, with the CV root and its nominal. This creates a huge challenge for the user who is unable to decide what constitutes an ICV lexeme. Furthermore, the choice of citation and

arrangement of these verbs in extant Igbo dictionaries tend to wrongly suggest that Igbo consists of hundreds of -**gba**, -**kpo**, -**tu** homonyms. I argue here that the first part of the ICV in isolation is not a full-fledged lexeme and should not be entered in the dictionary as one, and therefore stress that both parts of the ICV should be entered as a headword.

## 5. Conclusion

Both linguistic and lexicographic challenges limit the production of standard and first-rate dictionary production in Igbo. Even though some excellent grammar books and literatures exist in the Standard Igbo, no general-purpose dictionary has been published in this variety. A great deal of work has been accomplished towards the standardization of Igbo with regards to selection of a standard dialect, its codification through the Onwu Orthography, and lexical modernization, but a great deal still needs to be achieved in relation to acceptance and stabilization of the standard. The negative attitude of the Igbo dictionary compilers as exhibited in the non-conformity to the standard variety in spelling, pronunciation and vocabulary in the dictionaries under review has not encouraged the production of a standard Igbo dictionary. In addition, Igbo lexicography has been purely an individual adventure and exercise. For the Igbo dictionary to fulfil its major role as a standardizing instrument for literary viability, the production of standard dictionary is inevitable. The Igbo Standardizing Committee must be reactivated as the much-needed authority to impose the standard. It is my conviction that collaboration among lexicographers, linguists, Igbo language planners, government and non-governmental organizations, educationists and other stakeholders would go a long way in surmounting these linguistic and lexicographic challenges.

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