IDEOPHONIC PAIRING AS A PAN-IGBO PHENOMENON

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Abstract

The phenomenon of ideophonic pairing in Igbo, first identified in Uchechukwu (2007), is a form of doubling or reduplication of linguistic structures that involves the forming of an ideophonic pair, IDEO₁IDEO₂, either from an existing high tone ideophone or from a lexical item with a mixture of high and low tones. The output is IDEO₁[HIGH]IDEO₂[LOW] whereby the first component has entirely high tones while the second component has entirely low tones. Also, the second component does not exist as an independent lexical item in the language; instead, the resultant pair is always systematically used together to express a contrastive, rhythmic schema that is meaningful in the language. This paper points to the possibility of this phenomenon being a pan-Igbo phenomenon.

1. Introduction

Ideophonic pairing refers to a system of forming a “high tone-low tone” ideophonic pair, IDEO₁IDEO₂ (also: IDEO₁[HIGH]IDEO₂[LOW]), either from an existing high tone ideophone IDEO₁, or from an ideophone or a word with a mixture of various tonal combinations. In both instances the resultant low tone IDEO₂ does not exist as an independent lexical item in the language. Instead, the pair is always used together to express a contrastive, rhythmic schema that is meaningful in the language. In addition, the output could also either be a bound ideophonic pair, IDEO₁IDEO₂, or a separable ideophonic pair IDEO₁…DEO₂ with other linguistic elements occurring in between. The explanations in this section are based on Uchechukwu (2007).

The phenomenon of ideophonic pairing need not be confused with reduplication and other apparently similar repetition-cum-modification of sound segments. This conclusion is drawn from the widely accepted definition of reduplication as the “systematic repetition of phonological
material within a word for semantic or grammatical purposes” (Rubino, 2005, p. 11), whereby the reduplicated form retains the tone of the base, as in the reduplication of the Igbo ideophone kójí! as kójí! kójí! ‘the sound of a hard, sharp object (like a high heeled shoe) on a hard ground’. In this example there is a repeat or multiplication of exactly the same sound segments, because the reduplicant retains the initial high tone of the base. Another Igbo structure that could be confused with both an Ideophonic pair and a reduplication is féréféré ‘light, easy’.

This is not a reduplicated form because one segment of the structure, féré, does not occur alone in the language. Instead, it always occurs as féréféré and hence also reduplicated as a whole: féréféré féréféré. There are some Igbo sound ideophones that have this peculiarity of being “reduplicated invariably with identical vowels and hardly modified phonically” (Maduka-Durunze, 1998, p. 212). They are similar to nyanyaanya ‘trembling’ in Ewe, which according to Ameka, is an inherently repetitive ideophonic word, but with no corresponding monosyllabic form like nya (Ameka, 1999, p. 31). These examples differ from the phonetic modification within an ideophonic pair which involves high tones on the base, IDEO₁, and low tones on the reduplicant, IDEO₂, as in: [kójí!][HIGH] [kójí!][LOW] also IDEO₁[HIGH] IDEO₂[LOW]. Note, for example, the simple reduplication of féréféré as féréféré féréféré in contrast to forming an ideophonic pair with it, féréféré féréféré, whose existence is yet to be confirmed. In other words, if one were to form an ideophonic pair with féréféré, the second segment or component of the pair must have mainly low tones.

There is also some correlative semantic effect of this phonetic change within an ideophonic pair. For example, when an ideophonic pair is formed, the pair is construed as balancing each other out in that the second, low tone segment is construed as balancing the first, high tone segment. Another aspect of the ideophonic pair is that the two segments can also occur in such a manner that no linguistic structure can come in between them. In other words, one can speak of two forms of the ideophonic pair as Bound Ideophonic Pair and Separable Ideophonic Pair. Both are illustrated below with the pair kójí kójí:

(1) Bound Ideophonic Pair

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nwáanyì áhù nà-ágà</th>
<th>kójíkójí!</th>
<th>kójí! kójí!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

‘That woman walks with the gait of a model.’
(2) **Separable Ideophonic Pair**

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ókè-rè} & \quad \text{m ók pó kòjí,} \quad \text{m ké-é} \quad \text{yá kòjí.}\\
\text{he knock–rV-Past} & \quad \text{me knock IDEO}\text{[HIGH]} \quad \text{knocked-oV-Past} \quad \text{him IDEO}\text{[LOW]} \\
\end{align*}
\]

‘He knocked me kòjí! and I knocked him kòjí!’

Sentence (1) would refer to the balanced gait of a cat-walking model which is iconically expressed through the repetition of the ideophonic pair: *kòjí! kòjí!* The iconicity also seems to reflect the non-intervention of any other linguistic structure, neither between the bound pair nor between its reduplicated forms. Example (2) involves the same ideophonic pair, but as a separable pair that permits the occurrence of other linguistic structures between the components/segments of the pair. The scenario in example (2) would involve a situation where for example in a classroom, Child₁ secretly gives a knock to Child₂. In his effort to retaliate, Child₂ is caught. Sentence (2) would be the response of Child₂ to why he gave a knock to the other child. In this answer, Child₂ justifies his action as a way of ‘balancing out’ what was earlier secretly meted out to him by Child₁. One can see here that his assailant’s knock is given as the high tone *kòjí!,* which contrasts with, and is balanced out by, his low tone *kòjí!*. It is this contrastive phonic and semantic balance that holds the Ideophonic pair together.

The rest of this paper goes into the phenomenon as follows. The next section describes some examples of Ideophonic pairs, while section 3 discusses a few examples from three Igbo dialects. Section 4 summarizes and concludes the paper.

## 2. Other Examples of Ideophonic Pairs

Ideophonic pairing as a word formation process could be confirmed for some nouns, like the plural marking noun *ńdị* ‘people’. One could confirm the meaning of the word in such expressions as *ńdị Ìgbò* ‘the Igbo people’, *ńdị Yoruba* ‘the Yoruba people’, *ńdị Awusa* ‘the Hausa people’, *ńdị ocha* ‘the white people’ *ńdị ọjịjị* ‘the black people’, and so on. The word could also mean ‘those’ as in *ńdị à* ‘those ones’. Note that in all these examples the word retains its inherent double high tones when it co-occurs with other lexical items. That is its regular form in the language.

The ideophonic pair formed with *ńdị* is best illustrated with the title of an Igbo song of the 90s by the Igbo singer Oliver de Coque:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(3) òsó} & \quad \text{ńdị} \quad \text{òwé} \quad \text{ńdị} \\
\end{align*}
\]
that which pleases some, that which annoys others

The above example needs some additional explanation because of the combination of the noun ńdị with two nominalised verbal complexes: (1) -sọ ụsọ ‘be sweet, enjoyable/a pleasure (to someone)’, and (2) -wé ịwé ‘be angry’. These two verbal complexes are nominalized through the addition of the harmonizing noun-forming prefixes ọ/ọ to the verb roots -wé and -sọ respectively. The formation is illustrated in the table below (derived from Anagbogu 1990):

Table 1. The Nominalization of the Verbal Complexes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUFFIX</th>
<th>VERBAL COMPLEX</th>
<th>NOMINAL COMPOUND</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ọ</td>
<td>-sọ ụsọ ‘be sweet, enjoyable’</td>
<td>ọsọ ụsọ ‘that which is sweet, enjoyable’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-wé ịwé ‘be angry’</td>
<td>ọwé ịwé ‘an angry person’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ńdị ‘that which pleases people’</td>
<td>ńdị ‘that which annoys people’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The expression ọsọ ńdị ọwé ńdị literally means ‘that which makes people happy, that which makes people sad’. It refers to an object and its two effects on people: it makes some people happy, and makes others sad. The expression usually refers to any object or event that awakens joy and envy, that is, joy in some people and envy in others simultaneously. The affected two groups are tonally marked; the happy group is indicated with the high tone ńdị ‘some people’, and the sad group with the low tone ńdị ‘other people’. Hence, the two meanings of ‘some people’ and ‘other people’ correlate with the tonal contrast of the ideophonic pair ńdị ... ńdị, regardless of the lexical items between them. Also note the contrast in the tones in the following examples:

(4) a. *ọsọ ńdị ọwé ńdị
b. *ọsọ ńdị ọwé ńdị ọzọ
c. ọsọ ńdị ọwé ńdị

Example (4a) is not an acceptable Igbo Ideophonic pair because the necessary tonal contrast expected in the second segment of an Ideophonic pair is missing. Instead of ńdị... ńdị we have ńdị ... ńdị, which is a simple
reduplication and therefore wrong. Also note another point that the expression ńdí ọzọ, is the regular structure for expressing ‘the others/other people’ in the language, but it is not used as an Ideophonic pair. These examples buttress the fact that the typical ideophonic pair has mainly high tones in the first segment and low tones in the second segment, whether as a separable or a non-separable Ideophonic pair.

Another example is the greeting Déémé ‘Thanks!’ , which has a combination of high and low tones as its inherent tones, but changes its tones as an Ideophonic pair:

(5) **Source Lexical item**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Lexical item</th>
<th>Derived Ideophonic Pair</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>déèmé ‘thanks’</td>
<td>Déémé! Déémé! ‘thanks a lot’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In example (5) the inherent tones of the source lexical item is High-Low-High; but in the ideophonic realisation, the first segment of the derived Ideophonic pair is High-High-High, while the second segment is Low-Low-Low. Both the first and the second segments of this Ideophonic pair do not occur as independent lexical items in the language.

### 3. Cross-Dialectal Examples

The initial work that discovered the phenomenon of ideophonic pairing (Uchechukwu, 2007) did not focus on dialect specific realisations of the phenomenon. Instead, it simply focused on identifying and characterising the phenomenon. The next step is to examine to what extent the process of Ideophonic pairing can be confirmed for other dialects of the Igbo language. In other words, can the Ideophonic pairing phenomenon be seen as a pan-Igbo phenomenon that can be confirmed or established in all the dialects of the Igbo language? This question needs a broad research base to be adequately addressed. However, the few sentences presented in this section are meant to draw attention to the potentials of Ideophonic pairing as a new area of research that is yet to be explored in Igbo dialectology.

(6) *Umuahia*

á sá-wá ụkwà, yọlọlọm ọyọlọm; è ọhẹ-wé

yà, kpáí kpàj.

one wash-INCH breadfruit IDEO₁IDEO₂ one fry-INCH it IDEO₁IDEO₂

‘When one begins to wash bread fruit, it flows; but when one begins to fry it, it bursts.’
The Ideophonic pairs involved here are *yọ́lọ́lọ́m yọ́lọ́lọ́m* and *kpá́i kpá́i*. The first pair indicates the balance in the activity of washing the breadfruit preparatory to its being fried or cooked. The second pair refers to the tiny explosions of the breadfruit seeds when being fried. The whole sentence is actually a proverb and is used to underline the fact that there are some activities whose beginnings are smooth and well balanced (*yọ́lọ́lọ́m yọ́lọ́lọ́m*), but whose repercussions could be highly explosive and damaging to both the big (*kpá́i*) and the small (*kpá́i*) individuals within the society, hence *kpá́i kpá́i*.

(7) **Enugu Ezike**

a. Ó dọnù anyị́ ẹ́kpénémé nà ẹ́kpénémé
   He kept us IDEO¹ (varieties) and IDEO² (varieties)
   ‘He kept varieties of food for us.’

b. Mgbè kwénékwéné dí háníyà, kwénékwéné gà bù ọ̀gáà?
   When IDEO¹ be as this IDEO² AUX be how
   ‘If this is a minor event, what would a big event look like?’

In the first Enugu-Ezike example the ‘varieties of food’ is expressed through the Ideophonic pair ẹ́kpénémé nà ẹ́kpénémé which has no literal translation but could be said to express a well balanced variety (ẹ́kpénémé ẹ́kpénémé) of food. In example (7b), ‘a minor event’ or ‘first event’ is expressed with the high-toned kwénékwéné, while the second or major event is expressed through the low-toned kwénékwéné.

(8) **Nibo**

Kà fúnéfúné dí etuu, kèé kà fúnéfúné yá-adi?
if IDEO¹ be like this how that IDEO² AUX be
‘If this is a minor event, what would a big event look like?’
The Nibo example above is similar to example (7b), but with a difference in the dialect-specific structure.

Finally, one can see in the similarity that runs through the structure of the ideophonic pairs in the three different dialects that the phonic harmony and the semantic balance between the pairs are maintained. Particularly remarkable is also the fact that the examples are from three different dialects that are located far away from each other, with other intervening dialects between them. Going by Nwaozuzu’s (2008) classification, Umuahia belongs to the East Central Dialect Group (ECDG), Enugu Ezike to the Northern Group of Dialects (NGD), and Nibo to the East Niger Group of Dialects (ENGD) all of which are dialect groups that are not particularly geographically contiguous. Nevertheless, they still evince the same tonal and semantic harmony. This occurrence of Ideophonic pairs in the three dialects points to the potentials of using the phenomenon of ideophonic pairing for comparing Igbo dialects. In fact, its use could further buttress Armstrong’s (1967) confirmation of the extraordinary stability of tone through the whole range of Igbo dialects and his conclusion that “Igbos who speak or understand other dialects than their own are relying to a very great extent on tone. Tones (are) one of the principal means to mutual intelligibility of dialects”.

4. Conclusion

Ideophonic pairing is a recurrent pattern in the Igbo language. It has not gained much attention in research, maybe because it has not yet been identified as a major issue. It therefore remains an unexplored area in comparative Igbo dialectology. In drawing attention to its occurrence in at least three different dialects, this paper is deliberately raising the issue of the potentials of Ideophonic pairing as a criterion for examining Igbo dialects. The paper has deliberately left the following issues open, with the intention of inviting reactions from other Igbo scholars:

- whether the few examples given here suffice to generalise and describe the phenomenon as ‘pan-Igbo’
- whether these few examples would lead to more efforts by other Igbo scholars to go deeper into the three dialects presented or
- Whether the issues raised here would lead to the examination of other dialects so as to establish the extent to which Ideophonic pairing could be confirmed to be a characteristic of the Igbo language
References


