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An Exploration of Gender System in Igbo Language

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Abstract

Igbo language belongs to the Igbo sub-group within Benue-kwa in the new west Benue Congo (Williamson & Blench, 2000). It is chiefly spoken in the South-Eastern geo-political zone of Nigeria. In the natural languages, the notion of gender is expressed, but there exist various ways by which each language expresses it in its particular grammar. In linguistics, grammatical gender systems as well as natural gender system exist. This paper explores gender system in Igbo Language and strategies the Language employs in expressing it in the syntactic constructions. The study employs the random sampling technique to select the population used in this study. The data were obtained through the oral interviews and also through recording of the speech of the Igbo native speakers. The paper adopts a descriptive method in the analysis of the data. The findings of the work show that Igbo language lacks grammatical gender system but there exist natural gender system which is based on the biological sex. The language does not have any overt morphological marker for expressing the notion of gender. In the language, some nouns have defined names which indicate their gender while those that do not have defined names for their gender, certain qualifying words are employed to indicate their gender. These qualifying words are free morphemes such as *óké* (male), *nwunye* (female), *nwoke* (male) and *nwanyị* (woman/female). The word *óké* is always in a high tone. These words have their specific positions in the syntactic structures respectively. *Óké* and *nwunye* always precede the nouns immediately while *nwoke* and *nwaanyị* can occur before or after the noun. The language also expresses gender notion using traditional proper names such as *Okafọ, Mgbafọ, Okeke* and *Mgbeke*. Igbo pronouns, adjectives and determiners do not indicate gender in any form as in French, German and Latin.

1. Introduction

Igbo language belongs to the West-Benue Congo language family of the Niger Congo phylum according to the classification of African language by Williamson and Blench (2000: p. 31). It is among the kwa group of languages in Nigeria. Igbo language is spoken by tens of millions of people in the south-Eastern geo political zone of Nigeria (Emenanjo, 2015: p. 4). Language is a tool for human communication either spoken or written, consisting of words in a structured and conventional way. A language is not only a means of communication but carries along, its vocabulary, its structure and its context much that it shapes our perception of reality and predetermines what we see in the world around us. It enables human beings to achieve effective and meaningful communication and provides avenue for the provision of additional information for describing clearly the words or other parts of grammatical constructions in languages.

In many human languages, the phenomenon gender system exists. In some languages, it exists as a grammatical category while in some others it does not exist as a grammatical category; rather, as a natural gender which is based on biological sex. In some languages, gender may refer to distinctions other than masculine and feminine. Many languages assign gender according to the categories animate and inanimate. Even languages of Caucasian family often have four genders: feminine, masculine, animate and inanimate. More unusual systems of grammatical gender can be found around the world. For instance, Dyirbal, an Australian Aboriginal language, notoriously includes a gender category for *women*, *fire and dangerous things*. Some languages have genders based on the physical shapes of objects, and some languages have over ten noun classes. There are languages which semantic division is only partially valid and many nouns may belong to a gender category that contrast with their meaning (example; manliness could be feminine). In these languages, gender assignation can be influential by the morphology or phonology of nouns.

Obviously, in Igbo language, nouns do not inflect at all for gender, and agreement or concord. This implies that agreement does not exist in noun's gender. Gender in Igbo is based on natural gender (that is maleness and femaleness) rather than grammar (that is, morphology).

This paper has seven sections. Section One is the introduction. Section Two is the methodology. Section Three explains the concept of gender. Section Four discusses theoretical review. Section Five is the data analysis. Section Six is the conclusion while Section Seven is the recommendations.

2. Methodology

The data used for this study come from both the primary and secondary sources. The primary source constituted the data drawn from the Igbo native speakers through recording of their speeches during casual conversations and discusses. The data collected were carefully analyzed. The researcher also added her intui-

tive knowledge for some data as a native speaker. For the secondary source, insights were gained from journal materials, online materials and textbooks. The paper adopts a descriptive method in the analysis of the data. This approach is preferred because its outstanding feature depends on how the native speakers, who are not necessarily literate, actually use the language without recourse to any standard rules of the grammar.

3. Concept of Gender

Obviously, some languages divide nouns into classes on the basis of broad semantic distinction (Blake, 2008: p. 72). The word "gender" was borrowed from French in the middle age and it is ultimately from Latin *genus* which means race, kind or sort. It is because of the prominence of the masculine and feminine distinction that the word gender came to refer to as sex, not only with reference to a language but to all languages. Therefore, all nouns are either masculine or feminine, including inanimate and abstract nouns in some languages like French and so on. Even languages like Latin has neuter in their gender system. Gender classes of nouns reflect in the behaviour of the associated words.

The term gender can be said to be complicated category of language in the sense that there are types of gender system namely: grammatical gender system and natural gender system. Gender as a grammatical category is used for the analysis of word classes displaying such contrasts as masculine, feminine and neuter. According to Radford (2004: p. 339), gender is a "grammatical property whereby words are divided into grammatical classes, which play a role in agreement concord relationships". Grammatical gender system uses inflections to indicate whether a referent's gender is masculine, feminine or neuter. These inflectional affixes are attached to words, and involve a more complex system of declensions for nouns, pronouns, adjectives and determiners, which must agree with the noun's gender. It, therefore, implies that a language which is based on grammatical gender can show the gender of an unsexed noun with inflections.

On the other hand, the term natural gender system means the distinction that is based on sex. It indicates gender according to its referent's biological sex that is, masculine or feminine. It is a specific form of noun class system in which the division of noun classes has correspondence with their natural gender. In this case, gender assignation is solely determined by their meanings or attributes, like biological sex, humanness and animacy. Classen quoted in Archibald-Barber (2001: p. 2) argues that in "*a natural gender system, gender is hardly even a category because nouns and pronouns reveal the referent's gender themselves and determiners and adjectives take the same form, whether modifying a masculine, feminine or neuter referents, hence, the happy woman, the happy man, the happy cat, that is, she, he, it is happy*". It is interesting to note that a language which is based on grammatical gender can show the gender of an unsexed noun with inflections. The English natural gender system must add the words *male* or *female* to make the referents sex clear.

4. Theoretical Review

There are languages which mark gender elaborately in the syntactic structures. In those languages, gender performs certain syntactic functions. It is the inflectional endings that distinguish the feminine from the masculine. In such languages, grammatical gender is often more morphological related to the sound of the words. For instance, German has three grammatical gender; Swedish has two which is neither being feminine or masculine, but rather neuter. Bisque has two gender-based on animacy, Oluganda of Uganda uses grammatical noun classes.

In English, gender is not elaborately marked as in some languages like Latin, French, Italian, German and Greek. In English, the morpheme marker that distinguishes the gender this time in the natural gender is the suffix *-ess* as in

		Masculine	Feminine
1.	a.	Prince	Princess
	b.	Mister	Mistress

In English, it is only personal pronouns like *he/she/it* can carry gender properties. This is why Blake (2008: p. 72) points out that "the distinction between *he/she/it* in English is based on natural gender (sex) except for a certain propensity for some speakers to refer to certain inanimates as *she*". Carnie (2007) argues that reflexives in English must agree in gender with the noun it refers to that is, its antecedent. He illustrates with the following sentences:

2. a. Bill kissed himself.

  b. Sally kissed herself.

In the above examples, the reflexive pronouns agree in gender with the nouns they refer to that is, its antecedents. The anaphor in (2a) takes the masculine form *himself* in order to agree with *Bill* whereas that of (2b) takes *herself* so that it agrees with *Sally*. Blake (2008: p. 111) argues that in many languages, there is no gender distinction in the third person pronouns, but there are other strategies such as using the equivalent of *this one* for the last-mentioned and the equivalent of *that one* for the earlier-mentioned.

In French, gender is elaborately marked. This implies that French extensively inflect for gender in nouns, adjectives and determines. For instance in French, nouns are intrinsically masculine or feminine in gender as in:

3. a. pommier "apple tree" (masculine)

  b. pomme "apple" (feminine)

Determiners in French also inflect for gender (as well as number) so that *un* (an/an) is the masculine form of the indefinite article, and *une* is its feminine form.

Furthermore, *le* is the masculine form whereas *la* (the) is the feminine form. Determiners in French agree with gender (and number) with the nouns they modify as in:

4. a. un prommier "an apple tree"

  b. une pomme "an apple"

In French, adjectives inflect for gender. The language attaches the inflectional

suffix -*e* to form feminine, examples:

		Masculine	Feminine
5.	a.	blanch	branche "white"
	b.	petit	pelite "small"
	c.	lourd	lourde "heavy"
	d.	bavard	barvarde "talkertive"
	e.	grand	grande "big/tall"

Patterson (1960) quoted in Ikegwuonu (2008: p. 53) contends that "there is no neuter gender in French, every word is either masculine or feminine, and their adjectives agree with them".

In Latin, three forms of gender are indicated that is, Latin can inflect for masculine, feminine and neuter in their adjectives as in:

		Masculine	Feminine	Neuter	
6.	a.	acer	acris	acre	sharp
	b.	facilis	facilis	facile	easy
	c.	vigil	vigil	vigil	alert

The nominative singular forms for "good"; are:

		Masculine	Feminine	Neuter
7.	a.	bon-us	non-a	bon-um

In Italian, Blake (2008: p. 72) posits that "gender marking and number marking are combined or fused that is, there are portmanteau forms for number and gender and there are three patterns of marking". He illustrates his contention in table I below:

		Variation	Singular	Plural
8.	a.	Masculine	-a	-e
	b.	Feminine	-o	-i
	c.	Either	-e	-i

Almost all nouns in - are feminine (exceptions include *il dentia* (the dentist) and *il fonema*, which are masculine) and almost all nouns in -*o* are masculine (exceptions include *la mano* (the hard) which is feminine. In Italian, determiners and adjectives show gender agreement with the noun they modify. It is observed that in the last row in the table above, although gender is apparent in those nouns that follow the -*e*/-*i* pattern, it shows up in the determiner and in a larger class of adjectives that the -*a*/-*e* marking for feminine and -*o*/-*i* pattern for masculine. Consider the examples below:

9.	a.	il cappali rosso (masc)	"the red hat"
		i capali rossi	"the red hats"
	b.	la màcchina rossa (fem)	"the red car"
		le màchine rosse	"the red cars"
	c.	il legume fresco (masc)	"the fresh vegetable"
		i legume freschi	"the fresh vegetables"
	d.	la chiave nuova (fem)	"the new key"
		le chiavi nuove	"the new keys"

From the foregoing, it is observed that French, Latin, Italian mark gender morphologically in their syntactic structures and the markers are overtly represented.

In Spanish, words ending in "-*o*" are typically masculine and words ending in "-*a*" are typically feminine.

5. Data Analysis

5.1. Expression of Gender in Igbo Language

The Igbo language does not inflect for gender. In other words, Igbo language is described as lacking grammatical gender. This implies that Igbo does not have grammatical gender system; rather, the language has natural gender system which is associated with natural distinction of sex. The natural gender system indicates gender according to its referent's biological sex. In Igbo, certain objects or entities have defined names which indicate their gender while others do not have. This is why Okonkwo (1974: p. 81) points out that "certain objects in Igbo have fixed names which denote their genders". However, the notion of gender is expressed in Igbo in various ways using free words. It is important to note that Igbo gender is limited in number to compare with French, Latin and where gender is extensively marked.

5.1.1. Entities or Objects that Denote Their Gender Respectively in Relation to Their Referent's Biological Sex

In Igbo, many species of animals and birds, particularly those domesticated have specific names for males, females and they are few in number, examples:

	Masculine	Feminine
10. a.	Mbeku/mbe "male tortoise"	anịm "female tortoise"
b.	Ebunu/ebulu/ebule "ram"	atụlụ "ewe"
c.	Oketikpo "male"	ịpọ "female lizard"
d.	Mbụba/oke ehi "male cow"	nwunye ehi "female cow"
e.	Egbene/okeọkpa "cock"	nnekwu "hen"

Furthermore, for human beings, Igbo language has the following gender for males and females.

	Masculine	Feminine
11. a.	Di "husband"	Nwunye "wife"
b.	Nna "father"	Nne "mother"
c.	Okoro/okorobịa "youth"	Agbọghọ/agbọghọbịa "female youth"
d.	Nwoke "man"	Nwaanyị "woman"
e.	Maazị "Mr."	Oriakụ "Mrs."
f.	Diọkpara "son"	Ada "daughter"
g.	Eze "king"	Anasi "king"s wife"
h.	Ikom/ndịikom	Inyom/ndị inyom
i.	Nze "titled man"	Ịyọm "titled woman"
j.	Oke "male"	Nwunye "female"

    k. Nnaochie "grandfather"   Nneochie "grandmother"

    l. Ọzọ "title for men"   Lọlọ "title for women"

    m. Dee/dede "a term of respect" Daa/dada "a term of respect for an el-
derly"   "for an elderly man" (It is dialectal) "woman" (It is dialectal)

5.1.2. Entities or Objects that Require Addition of Qualifying Words *Óké* (Male) *Nwunye* (Female) to Make the Referent's Sex Clear

Consider the following examples:

    12. a. Oke anyịnya "male horse"   Nwunye anyịnya "female horse"

    b. Oke ezi "male pig"   Nwunye ezi "female pig"

    c. Oke ehi "male cow"   Nwunye ehi "female cow"

    d. Oke ọbọgwụ "male duck"   Nwunye ọbọgwụ "female duck"

    e. Oke azụ "male fish"   Nwunye azụ "female fish"

    f. Oke ọkụkọ "male cock"   Nwunye ọkụkọ "hen"

    g. Oke nnụnụ "male bird"   Nwunye nnụnụ "female bird"

    h. Oke agụ "male lion"   Nwunye agụ "lioness"

From the above, it is observed that *óké* and *nwunye* precede the nouns in order to indicate gender.

5.1.3. Entities or Objects That Require Addition of Qualifying Words *Nwoke* (Male) and N*waanyị* (Female) to Make the Referent's Sex Clear

    13. a. Enyi nwoke "male friend"   Enyi nwaanyị "female friend"

    b. Dọkịta nwoke "male doctor"   Dọkịta nwaanyị "female doctor"

    c. Nwanne nwoke "brother"   Nwanne nwaanyị "sister"

    d. Onyenkuzi nwoke "male teacher" Onyenkuzi nwaanyị "female
      teacher"

    e. Ọgọ nwoke "father-in-law"   Ọgọ nwaanyị "mother-in-law"

    f. Nwa nwoke "baby boy"   Nwa nwaanyị "baby girl"

    g. Nwata nwoke "boy"   Nwata nwaanyị "girl"

    h. Nwoke uwe ojii "policeman"   Nwaanyị uwe ojii "policewoman"

    i. Ụmụ nwoke "men"   Ụmụ nwaanyị "women"

    j. Ọka mgba nwoke "wrestler"   Ọka mgba nwaanyị
      "female wrestler"

    k. Ọka iwu nwoke "male lawyer"   Ọka iwu nwaanyị "female lawyer"

From the above data, *nwoke* and *nwaanyị* follow the nouns immediately to indicate gender. Furthermore, Igbo language does not have neuter as it is in languages such as Latin and so on. Igbo language restricts its gender to only animate objects or entities while excluding inanimate.

Unlike English where singular pronouns *he*, *she*, *it* indicate gender, Igbo singular pronouns *o/ọ ya* do not indicate any gender at all. The pronouns are used for both animate and inanimate objects and entities. Consider these sentences:

    14. a. Okeke gbara ọsọ   →   Ọ gbara ọsọ   "Okeke ran a race"

    b. Ijeọma bere akwa   →   O bere akwa   "Ijeọma cried"

  c. Ite tiwara   → O tiwara "The pot broke"

From the above examples, it is observed that Igbo has no pronoun designated for common gender in third person singular pronoun. Therefore, there is no gender distinction in Igbo pronouns. Sometimes, in Igbo, gender is expressed through traditional proper names as in:

15. a. Okeke/Nweke "male's name" Mgbeke "female's name"

  b. Okafọ "male's name"   Mgbafọ "female's name"

  c. Nwoye "male's name"   Mgboye "female's name"

  d. Okonkwọ "male's name"   Mgbakwọ "female's name"

The pronouns *o/ọ/ya* can be used to refer to male or female persons, animals or things as in:

16. a. Gwa ya okwu "Talk to him/her"

  b. Tinye ya n"akpa "Put it inside the bag"

In the above illustration, it is observed that in (16a), the pronoun *ya* refers to male or female while in (16b), it refers to a thing.

6. Conclusion

This paper investigates gender system in Igbo language. The study shows that Igbo language does not express gender as a grammatical category; rather, the language expresses natural gender which is based on biological sex, that is, maleness or femaleness. The language does not have any overt morphological marker for expressing gender. In Igbo, some nouns have defined names which indicate their gender while those that do not have defined names for their gender referents, certain qualifying words such as *óké* (male) and *nwunye*, *nwoke* (man) and *nwaanyị* (woman/female) are used to indicate their gender. The word óké is always in a high tone. These words are free morphemes. They have their specific positions respectively. *Óké* and *nwunye* always precede the nouns immediately while *nwoke* and *nwaanyị* can be positioned either before or after the noun which they indicate their gender referents.

Furthermore, traditional personnel names such as *Okafọ*, *Mgbafọ*, *Okeke*, *Mgbeke* are also employed to express gender. Igbo pronouns, adjectives and determiners do not indicate gender as in French, German and Latin.

7. Recommendations

Igbo language is a mother-tongue of large groups of people in the south-East part of Nigeria. We, therefore, recommend that more in-depth researches be done in other areas of the grammar of Igbo language such as verb and other lexical categories to enhance its continuous development. We also recommend this work to all students who wish to understand the tenets of Igbo grammar as well as other researches in linguistics.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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