

## **The Ika community: a sociolinguistic description**

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### **1. Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to present an overview of the linguistic situation in the Ika community. The Ika language has about 240,000 speakers in Delta state, Nigeria (1991 census). They occupy a land area of 117.45 square kilometres, the boundary between the Edo and Delta State. Geographically, Ika North east and Ika south local government areas occupy the North west of Delta State. Linguistically, in the west of the Ika speakers are the Edo speakers, North are the Ishan speakers, East are the Aniocha language speakers and in the south are the Ukwuani speakers.

Today, Ika language is spoken not only in the two Ika geo-political areas known as Ika North east and Ika South local government areas but also in villages in the north in Edo State. These villages such as Igbanke, Ota and Olijie were claimed to have been founded by Ika farmers who migrated north and in some cases cohabited with Ishan speakers (Isichei 1976; 1983).

The Ika community consists of eleven clans. They speak a common language known as the Ika language, except for Ozara, Alisor and Alilehan who speak the Ozara language (an Edoid language), but they are culturally and politically considered Ika. The Ika language is regarded as a cluster of dialects (Williamson 1968). This is similar to the Igbo language which is also a cluster of dialects. There are however, no serious differences between these Ika dialects, which affects mutual intelligibility, but for slight phonological and lexical differences. The Ika group does not have any shared physical characteristics distinguishing them from other groups or tribes.

#### **1.1 Terminological clarification**

Within this sociolinguistic study the terms educated and the non-educated will

be used in reference to educational levels of members of the Ika community. Education here refers to the acquisition of western literacy skills under formal school setting. In this paper, a group is considered 'educated' if members of that group have acquired formal western education. On the other hand, a group is considered 'non-educated' if members of that group have not acquired any formal western education. This distinction is particularly important since education can also be obtained in traditional Ika way. Those who have learnt traditional skills, trade and professions such as nursing and healing are also educated but not from the perspective of western classroom education.

The term 'clan' used in this paper represents both human and geographical constituents of a clan, that is, both the members of a clan and the geographical area they occupy. A clan usually consists of several villages united by shared history of origin or common ancestry. Among the Ika people, like many other Nigerian groups, people are inseparable from their land or the physical location they occupy. A reference to land as a physical geographical location is considered a reference to the people, their identity, and language and vice versa. Among the Ika people, people are said to *su ali* which means 'speak land' or speak a language. Land, language and clan identities are regarded as one entity. To identify a person's clan affiliation, in the Ika language it is asked *onye ele ali ro?* which means 'which land is the person from?' This refers to both a clan as well as a physical geographical location to which one is affiliated. Clans and dialects will sometimes be used interchangeably in this paper.

## 2 Dialectal variation in Ika community

Although there has not been any systematic study of the Ika dialects, my survey has shown that it is possible to classify Ika dialects into at least four dialect groups. The four dialect groups are: South; South-South; North-South and North-East. The South consists of Agbor clan, South-South consists of the Abavo clan while the North-South consists of Owa, Mbiri, Ute-Okpu, Ute-Ogbeje, Otolokpo, Idumuesah and North-East consists of Akumazi, Umunede, Igbodo and clans.

This, however, is a stingy classification due to lack of detailed data for in-depth dialect classification at this time. Some Ika language experts and speakers have claimed that each clan has its own dialect therefore making a claim for eleven Ika dialects (Ogboi, pers. comm. 2001). While I share this view, it is only practical to group these dialects into four dialectal geographical groups according to their similarities based on the available data from my survey and recordings bearing in mind some possible differences between clan dialects in a particular group. It may also be necessary at some point in this paper to refer to

an individual clan dialect separate from other members of its group in order to avoid careless generalisations.

Although dialects have the possibility of spilling across geographical boundaries, in the Ika community a clan's dialect is mainly concentrated within the clan's geographical area. This is due to the fact that, like language, the identity of clans is ingrained in their dialects. In some cases, they perceive their dialects as language. It is common to hear people make statements like *o ri asu awu* which means 'He is speaking Awu' or *o ri asu owa* meaning 'He is speaking Owa' (Awu is another name for Abavo). There are negative reactions, sometimes, when a member of Owa clan is said to be speaking Agbor. These slight linguistic variations between the eleven clans that make up the Ika language community can be observed on the phonological and lexico-semantic levels.

The lexico-semantic differences between the South and South-South dialect areas are in the use of certain lexical items. For instance, in the Agbor (South) dialect the verb *pa* (carry) is used only in the context of carrying animate objects, while the verb *bu* (carry) is used with inanimates. In the Abavo dialect (South-South), the verb *pa* (carry) is used for inanimate objects and *bu* (carry) for animate objects.

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|--------|----|-----|---------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Agbor: | 1. | i.  | <i>pa</i><br>carry<br>'carry a child' | <i>nwa</i><br>child |
|        |    | ii. | <i>bu</i><br>carry<br>'carry a yam'   | <i>igi</i><br>yam   |
| Abavo: | 2. | i.  | <i>bu</i><br>carry<br>'carry a child' | <i>nwa</i><br>child |
|        |    | ii. | <i>pa</i><br>carry<br>'carry a yam'   | <i>igi</i><br>yam   |

Lexico-semantic variation is common, especially between the clans located in the border areas (between the Ika language areas and other language areas such as Aniocha, Ishan, Edo and Ukwuani language areas) and other clans, since lexical items are borrowed or exchanged across borders.

English	Akumuzi (North-East)	Owa (North South)	Agbor (South)
'cloth'	<i>akwa</i>	<i>ekwa</i>	<i>ekwa</i>
'kola nut'	<i>ɔdʒi</i>	<i>ɔdʒi</i>	<i>ɔgi</i>
'paper'	<i>akukwɔ</i>	<i>ekukwɔ</i>	<i>ehuhwo</i>
'chewing stick'	<i>atu</i>	<i>etu</i>	<i>etu</i>
'sponge'	<i>ɛlu</i>	<i>ɛru</i>	<i>ɛru</i>
'sweet'	<i>usɔ</i>	<i>usɔ</i>	<i>uswɔ</i>

*Table 1. A short phonological comparison of three Ika dialects*

Some phonological differences between clan dialects exist. This is obvious when one compares items from the Akumazi dialect (see Williamson 1968: 5) against those from Owa and Agbor dialects. These are shown in table 1. (The data comes from my own field work.)

As has been stated, such differences do not prevent mutual intelligibility between members of the various clans. As with the lexico-semantic variation discussed above, phonological differences are determined by both the geographical location of the clans and their distance from each other. In the table above, it is noticed that Owa and Akumazi dialects have more shared phonology with each other than the Akumazi and Agbor dialects. One possible explanation is that the Akumazi clan, which is located in the border between the Ika and Aniocha language groups, is geographically closer to the Owa clan than to the Agbor clan. The Akumazi dialect seems to borrow both phonologically and lexically from the Aniocha language. This is a result of its geographical location.

## **2.1 Central Ika dialect**

The Central Ika dialect is the dialect spoken in the Ika metropolis of Boji-Boji and Orogodo. Owa and Agbor clans share a common metropolis currently called Boji-Boji Owa (by the Owa clan) and Orogodo (by the Agbor clan). Boji-Boji belongs to the Owa clan (Ika North-East local government area) while Orogodo belongs to the Agbor clan (Ika South local government area). Orogodo and Boji-Boji are separated by a major road and exist as two sides of a single metropolis. In this section, I will refer to this metropolis as 'Boji-Boji' since it was known by that name before it was split between the two local government areas in the early 1990s.

Most of the businesses in the Ika community are located in Boji-Boji. It is strategically located along the Lagos-Benin-Onitsha highway, which is the only road that links the commercial western city of Lagos in the west with the industrial eastern city of Onitsha. Previously, Boji-Boji was the site of all local and state government's ministries before the creation of new local government areas: Ika South and Ika North-East. Ika South currently has its headquarter at Orogodo (across the road on the Agbor side of the metropolis), while Ika North-East, a new local government area, has its headquarter at Owa-Oyibu (a rural area). Boji-Boji has been, and is still, the residence of most Ika people involved in white-collar jobs and businesses, since it has modern infrastructures and opportunities which are lacking in most of the Ika clans, which are still rural. Boji-Boji has witnessed a large influx of immigrants from various parts of Nigeria since colonial times and was once referred to as "a stranger's settlement" (Simpson 1936).

The Ika dialect spoken in this metropolis reflects a mix of all the clan dialects, resulting in the elimination of marked lexical items unique to few clans and replaced by more unmarked lexical items common to the majority. For instance, *okpan* (plate) is unique to the Agbor clan, while *afere* (plate) is common among the other ten clans. It is then the case that *afere* (plate) is the variant adopted into the Central Ika dialect. Concerning the *bu/pa* difference between Agbor and Abavo mentioned above, *bu* (carry) is used with inanimate objects in all clans except the Abavo clan. The item used by the majority of the clans is then adopted into the Central Ika dialect. Such processes are typical in language and dialect contact situations.

### **3. Language use in the Ika community**

The linguistic situation in the Ika community is a reflection of the situation found in other Nigerian communities (see Ganni-Ikilama 1990). The Ika language is mostly used in traditional formal and informal domains in the Ika community. By 'traditional formal domains' I mean activities like ceremonies that have formal significance within Ika traditional society such as burial ceremonies, and traditional skill teaching and learning while "traditional informal domains" consists of some activities like dances and Ika oral arts such as story telling and riddles.

As a high status language, English is used in the Ika community for social elevation and prestige since it is the language of the educated members of the society. Nigerian Pidgin is also used in the Ika community. The fact that Nigerian Pidgin is spoken and understood by many (educated and most

uneducated people) in the community sometimes gives it an edge over English which is used mainly by educated people.

### **3.1 Language in official domains**

In the Ika community, the Ika, English and Nigerian Pidgin languages are often used in offices. In the Ika North-East and South local government councils' offices, workers communicate in Ika and English. Official matters are presented in the English language and deliberated in both Ika and English. The use of the Ika language in these offices is mainly due to the fact that many of the employees are Ika speakers. Nigerian Pidgin is used in personal interactions and usually among friends or in friendly conversations or in formal discussions between uneducated junior staff members and their superiors.

The same linguistic behaviours are found in most private or public offices in the community. In the general hospitals and private clinics the Ika language is used especially in communicating with elderly patients whose competence in the English language vary. Nurses and doctors who are competent in the Ika language often examine and discuss with patients in the Ika language. Where a patient or doctor is a non-Ika speaker, Nigerian Pidgin is used.

### **3.2 Language in homes**

Typically, Ika families in the Ika community use the Ika language at home. However, there are families that use either Nigerian Pidgin or English, or a combination of both, as media of communication at home. The choice of language at home is usually influenced by education.

Parents who are educated and have children who attend or have attended private nursery, primary and secondary schools, have the tendency of using English language at home. This is because most children who attend private schools, in most cases, are more competent in English than in Ika. During my visits to some of these schools, such as the Holy Infant School (a nursery, primary and secondary at Agbor), I observed that most of the pupils in these schools are usually children of the educated section of the community. Many of them that attended their nursery and primary education in these private schools are not competent in the Ika language. These children do understand when spoken to but have difficulties in speaking Ika without switching to English. Such a phenomenon is often encouraged by their parents who feel that these children have better chances in Nigerian society, and in life generally, if they master the English language. Such parents actually prefer speaking English to their children even though they use the Ika language in talking to their mates.

The language of spouses also determines the language used at home. If a spouse comes from a non-Ika language group, as inter-language group marriages are a common phenomenon in the Ika community and in Nigeria as a whole, there is a tendency for the Nigerian Pidgin to be the language of communication at home. The English language may also be used at home if the couple is very educated.

### **3.3 Language in Ika markets**

Language is very important in buying and selling in most Nigerian communities. Buying and selling in Nigerian markets involve a process of bargaining for prices and reaching compromises. Buyers' communicative skills are crucial in this process. During bargains the buyer resorts to the language or the language style that will extract the lowest possible prices from the seller.

In Delta State, the Ika community is regarded as 'the food basket' of the state due to their farming prowess.<sup>1</sup> Yams and cassava used in popular meals in Nigeria are the main produce in the Ika community. Traders travel from various parts of the country to markets in the Ika community, such as Abavo market (popular for yams), on special market days, for bargains. Since these traders speak diverse languages such as Urhobo, Itsekiri, Igbo and Aniocha, most traders communicate in Nigerian Pidgin when they cannot understand the customer's language.

Since there are also many migrants in the Ika community, especially students from all over Nigeria who attend the College of Education and the State School of Nursing, Ika traders often adapt to Nigerian Pidgin where these migrants cannot speak the Ika language. Where both parties (trader and customer) can speak Ika, they carry out their bargain in the Ika language.

Generally, buyers resort to the language of the seller when they can, in order to establish a bond usually resulting in lower prices. For this reason, the Ika language is popularly used in Ika markets. Even the visiting traders from other parts of the state or country try to communicate in the Ika language but use Nigeria Pidgin or Igbo languages, which are understood by the Ika speakers, where they cannot speak the Ika language.

The English language is also used where the buyer, who is educated, cannot speak the Ika language or Nigerian Pidgin. Since it is normal for children to help their parents in their shops after school or during holidays, some of these children usually help their parents, who cannot speak the English language, in such situations where a customer only speaks English.

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<sup>1</sup> See the Delta State web site at <[www.deltastate.gov.ng](http://www.deltastate.gov.ng)>.

### **3.4 Ika language in education**

#### **3.4.1 Language in Schools**

In Nigeria, the English language is the medium of instruction in schools. In Ika community schools, the Ika language exists officially as a subject in primary and secondary schools.

In the past, pupils have been forbidden to speak the Ika and Nigerian Pidgin languages and were usually punished when they did. Ika and Nigerian Pidgin were both classified as ‘vernacular’ which at that time was used to mean ‘bad language’. It is common to see notices on classroom doors with messages like “No vernacular allowed” or “No more vernacular”. Presently, schools are becoming liberal by allowing pupils to use the Ika language, but Nigerian Pidgin is still frowned upon in the classrooms. Pupils speak the Ika and Nigerian Pidgin languages during breaks with friends at play. Teachers, in some rural schools in the Ika community, use the Ika language in explaining difficult points to their students. In such schools the use of the Ika language is easier since most of the students are Ika language speakers.

In the primary schools, most teachers who teach the Ika language are non-specialists which results in poor teaching of the language since they are not skilled enough to teach it. In cases where a class teacher is a non-Ika speaker, the Ika language is not usually taught since teachers assigned to a class have the responsibility of teaching all the subjects, including the Ika language, to pupils in that class.

There are also very few Ika language teachers in secondary schools where pupils usually teach themselves Ika. In one of the schools which I visited, this was the case. The reason for this is that there are very few available trained Ika language teachers as the only department of the Ika language in Nigeria, at the College of Education Agbor, which could have trained teachers in that subject, was closed down by the state government due to lack of funds. Meanwhile, the department of the Igbo language is still training teachers at the College of Education Agbor, even though the Ika language department has been closed down.

In the Junior Secondary School Examination (JSS), questions are restricted to naming objects in the classroom so that it can hardly be considered a test of the students’ abilities. Textbooks in the Ika language are very few and are mainly useful for primary school level while there are no available textbooks useful to the secondary school students. However, the English language is taught in all schools by skilled teachers and with good textbooks on all levels of education.

### **3.4.2 Language Apprenticeship schemes**

In the Ika community, as well as in most Nigerian communities, apprenticeship schemes can be discussed separately from conventional school education. Apprenticeship scheme usually involves traditional oral tutoring methods of watching and learning.

Most Ika children go through the general apprenticeship education under the tutelage of their parents and/or other members of their family. This involves going to farm, fetching water, cooking and trading learnt by watching and doing. This method of training is becoming rare among educated families. Such families usually adopt a less involved approach by engaging their children in other activities after school. This is more so because of the types of jobs such parents are involved in, like teaching, nursing, etc. These are jobs the children cannot actively partake in, and they find very little time for farming or any other traditional activity, in contrast to the less or non-educated families. In any case, some of the above mentioned traditional activities are now being classified as child labour, and tend to be considered abuse by the educated group.

There is also the professional apprenticeship that involves professional oral instruction outside home and school. Pupils in this scheme start as early as the age of ten. Such pupils are usually those that have lost interest in formal school education or are deemed, by their guardians, to be poor performers in school. Others are those that cannot afford the cost of school education. Such apprenticeship schemes are usually found in professions like vehicle mechanics, bicycle repairs, trading, traditional medicine, driving, tailoring and metalwork. The language of instruction in these apprenticeship schemes in the Ika community is the Ika language. Although the Nigerian Pidgin is sometimes used, the English language is hardly used since most of the tutors and pupils are not educated.

## **3.5 Language in religious functions**

### **3.5.1 Traditional religious worship**

In traditional religious ceremonies, the Ika language is usually used. Such ceremonies include appeasing the gods, pouring of libations and other traditional religious rituals. There are, however, occasions where the English and Nigerian Pidgin languages are used. Such occasions include, for instance, when a non-Ika speaker is involved or when the performer of the ritual is not competent in the Ika language. In the Agbor clan, for instance, the Dein (King) of Agbor, who was raised and educated in England, uses the English language in performing his rituals since he is not competent in the Ika language.

### **3.5.2 Christian church worship**

In the Christian churches, the English and Ika languages are usually used. In the Ika community and in Nigeria as a whole, the Christian churches can be grouped into three groups: Catholic, Protestant and African Spiritual.

In the Catholic and Protestant churches, English is the dominant language in reading the bible and prayers, while Ika is used in interpretations. Although there are bibles translated into some major traditional domestic Nigerian languages, such as Igbo, Yoruba, Edo and Efik, there is none in the Ika language (Williamson 1990).

In the African Spiritual churches, which are numerous in the community, the Ika and Igbo languages are mostly used in sermons and prayers, while English, and sometimes Igbo, are used in reading the scripture. Songs used for praise and worship in all churches in the Ika community are mainly in the English and Igbo languages.

It should be noted that the conversion of the Ika people to Christianity was done with the assistance of Igbo priests and interpreters during colonial times. In the past, Catholic catechism and prayers were learnt in the Igbo language by children and such a tradition still persists at the present time. This accounts for why the churches are still dominated by the Igbo-speaking priests and also why the Igbo language still occupies an important position in the Ika Christian community.

### **3.6 Language use in radio and TV**

In broadcasting, English as the official language is mainly used alongside other traditional domestic languages of the state like Urhobo, Itsekiri, and others. The Ika language is used only during the Ika news broadcasts and a discussion programme on Delta Broadcasting Station (DBS), the official Delta State radio station. The lack of attention given to the Ika language could be because the Ika speakers account for only about eleven percent (11%) of the Delta State population (National Population Commission Report 1996). Most important is that the Ikas are not politically influential enough to place the language in an advantageous position in broadcasting in Delta State.

### **3.7 Language in writing**

In the Ika community, as in most Nigerian communities, the English language is the language used in writing. Since the Ika language is not standardised and pupils are not taught the Ika language properly, it is difficult for it to be used in writing. However, there is a written Ika, but this consists mostly of phrases or

sentences found on commercial buses and motorcycles as statements, or on signboards as names of places, businesses, clubs, or streets. In all of these cases, the Ika language orthography is used in non-standard forms since the spellings vary based on a person's orientation. Some people follow English spelling conventions while those with knowledge of the Igbo orthography, which is standardised, apply it to the Ika language. Generally, the written Ika language is not used in the community, neither is it used in offices nor official documents.

So far few writers have published some works in the Ika language but these are hardly used since the Ika people, the educated ones, usually do not read in the Ika language.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, in spite of being surrounded by languages such as Ishan, Edo, Ukwuani and Aniocha, the Ika linguistic situation in the Ika community has not been significantly affected by them. The English language and Nigerian Pidgin are the main languages that are competing with the Ika language in the daily lives of the Ika people, and this is largely due to the degree of prestige attached to English and Nigerian Pidgin. Although English has a higher prestige as the language of upward social mobility, Nigerian Pidgin, usually referred to as 'Brokin', is also valued as a symbol of exposure to urban influence. Those who command the Nigerian Pidgin in the Ika community often see themselves as being 'civilised'. The term 'Brokin' was derived from the impression that Nigerian Pidgin was a "broken English" of some sort (Onyeche 1995; 1996).

As has been observed in the use of the Ika language in schools, if attempt is not made to codify and standardise the language as well as teach it as a subject in schools with seriousness, the Ika language may face strangulation by English and Nigerian Pidgin. Although there is no available data at this time, there is a growing number in the younger generation that are likely to become what Dorian (1981) calls 'imperfect speakers', as they are beginning to speak a type of Ika that is mixed with English and Nigerian Pidgin.

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