

Igbo Dictionaries: A Showcase for an Open Country

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Abstract

Since the first recording of the Kalabari dialect of Ijo by Europeans in the 17th century, Nigerian languages have been studied and a good number of grammars, dictionaries, and readers published. Yet, in 1981, the Igbo historian Afigbo deplored the fact that languages like Hausa and Yoruba had now outdistanced Igbo as academic disciplines and living media of discussion. This study will consider the case of Igbo language, the third most important national language after Hausa and Yoruba, briefly survey its development, and review the various word lists and dictionaries published since the 1850s, with special emphasis on bilingual dictionaries, to highlight the key-role they played, as a showcase of the recurring trends and drawbacks, in the progress of Igbo studies in a country where international exposure matters most.

Introduction

In *Ropes of Sand - Studies in Igbo History and Culture*, Afigbo (1981: 355) deplored the fact that

languages like Hausa and Yoruba have now outdistanced Igbo as academic disciplines and living media of discussion, as can be seen from a survey of the teaching and research programmes of Centres of African Studies, Institutes and Departments interested in African Linguistics, not only in (Nigeria) but in Europe, America, and Russia. Hausa and Yoruba have surpassed Igbo not only in

structural growth and in the evolution of a literary dialect, but also in the machinery and mechanism for ensuring unhindered growth.

Yet, when the first missionaries landed on the banks of the Niger in the second half of the nineteenth century, Igbo language was widely spoken and commanded respect. This was still the case in 1914, according to Northcote Thomas who recalled that “*during those times it was nothing strange beyond the Nsukka frontier to find ‘a knowledge of Igbo extending fully one day’s march into Igara country but no corresponding knowledge of Igara’ on the Ibo² side of the frontier’*” (Emenanjo 2001). Father Aimé Ganot, a French national who joined the Catholic diocese on the Niger in 1894, narrated his first impression of the Igbo language in an internal memo entitled “*What is Ibo language?*”:

*No sooner have we left the Ocean and entered the Niger delta (...), that the indigenes who live on these shores welcome us warmly with a language sweeter and more harmonious than other known African idioms. This is the Ibo language, which extends its sphere of influence to these regions: it covers more than 500 km on both banks of the Niger. Leaving the riverbanks at the level of Onitsha and moving deeper inland, one can find many very large towns. Without being presumptuous, we may estimate the population of this densely populated area and likely cradle of this idiom, at several thousands.*³

¹ A neighbouring language, spoken north of Igboland. Cf. map of Igboland in annexe.

² *Ibo* was the old missionary orthography, now replaced with *Igbo*. The old orthography will be respected in all missionary quotations.

³ Ganot, *notice sur l’idiome ibo*, Spiritan archives. The Eastern Region as it appeared on maps in 1960 after the Independence included the Igbo linguistic area but also other linguistic areas (Ibibio, Efik and others) where Igbo was still spoken as a commercial lingua franca.

In a letter dated 14th January 1901 and written from Brass, Father Lichtenberger confirmed this spread of the Igbo language: “*Old Calabar houses the Central Government of the British Colony called Southern Nigeria. This town counts more than 20,000 souls. The language is Effik (sic) but people there also speak Ibo and Ijo, together with some other minor languages.*” At the time, some attempt had already been made to write and study Igbo; now, more than a century later, Nigerian linguists have taken over the study of the language and written a number of ground-breaking publications. This work will survey the development of Igbo studies and review the various word lists and dictionaries published since the 1850s, to highlight the key-role they played as a showcase of the recurring trends and drawbacks in the progress of Igbo studies in a country where international exposure matters most.

Foreigners in Onitsha

The first recording of a Nigerian language was that of the Kalabari dialect of Ijo, in the 17th century. Within a century, the study of other regional languages was underway, with foreign linguists devoting a considerable amount of time and resources to the compilation of bilingual word-lists for immediate use in the mission field. Oldendorp⁴ was the first European to note down some few Igbo words - thirteen nouns and two sentences - in 1777 (Oraka 1983: 21). But real progress only came with the 19th century: in 1828, Hannah Kilham, a Quaker mission teacher using Ajayi Crowther as an informant, published Igbo numerals and some 50 Igbo nouns.⁵ Other wordlists were later compiled by Schön – 1600 words in 1840, and McGregor Laird in 1857. The study of the three major Nigerian languages started in earnest with the expedition on the Niger in 1841⁶, offering them an equal opportunity for growth. At the time, Schön, an eminent German philologist, decided to form interpreters

⁴ A German Moravian Brother

⁵ Kilham 1828. Cf. Oraka 1983: 22 & Twells : 301-318

⁶ Cf. Norris 1841

in those languages he considered essential and chose Hausa and Igbo, while Ajayi Crowther studied his own mother-tongue, Yoruba. In their efforts to draw a linguistic map of the area they had just explored, the SMA, Holy Ghost Fathers, and CMS missionaries⁷ then embarked on a quasi simultaneous study of the three languages, which led to three publications, all in 1843: Schön’s *Vocabularies of the Hausa and Igbo Languages* and Crowder’s *Grammar and Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language* (Ajayi 1965:127). Taylor’s translations of Matthew (1860), Mark and Luke’s Gospels (1864), and Schön’s Igbo grammar (1861), were the results of these early endeavours. Yet, right from the time the first settlers berthed in Onitsha in 1857,⁸ the development of Igbo studies faced considerable difficulties related to the missionaries’ background and location.

Those men faced a major challenge: none of them had ever lived in Igboland or spoken its language fluently before, and they all had to contend with cultural differences and the language barrier. Samuel Ajayi Crowther was a Yoruba and did not live long enough in Igboland to become bilingual. Taylor, though an Igbo, was born and bred in Sierra Leone, the son of freed slaves from the Bonny district who did not even speak the same dialect.⁹ Schön’s main informant, Simon Jonas, was another Sierra Leonean Igbo. Spencer, who joined

⁷ SMA: Société des Missions africaines (African Mission Society); CMS: Church Missionary Society. The Holy Ghost Fathers are now known as Spiritans.

⁸ The Niger delta was to be the future *vicariat apostolique de la Nigéria occidentale*, entrusted to the SMA. The first missionary settlement in Asaba, Western Igboland, dates 1888. Cf. Boucher 1928: 132.

⁹ At the time, most Igbo missionaries came from Sierra Leone, where liberated slaves had been resettled, and each of Taylor’s parents spoke a different dialect of Igbo. The fact that Bonny was in the Efik linguistic area had also most probably influenced their language. See Lichtenberger ‘s letter dated 14 January 1901 and quoted above.

the Niger Mission as a missionary around 1885,¹⁰ though an Igbo, was also from Sierra Leone.

These language difficulties were compounded by the exocentric location missionaries found themselves. CMS Anglican missionaries and Catholic Spiritans, who had come on the river Niger, stayed in and around Onitsha for some thirty years before penetrating the hinterland – those in Asaba, across the Niger, were even further from the heart of Igboland. These challenges, coupled with their desire to understand the populations and present them with the Gospel, further motivated them to study Igbo, even though the English language had already made an early in-road into Igboland¹¹, and they had no choice but to start with the local dialect. On arrival, Ganot devoted himself to the study of the Igbo dialect spoken in and around Onitsha and widely considered at the time to be the “*common dialect of the Igbo*”.¹² In a letter published in the mission’s internal *Bulletin* and dated 23rd February 1900, he takes stock of his work and talks about his plans: “*I have already succeeded in printing a grammar and a little Ibo French wordlist; but this is just a beginning and I possess a handwritten dictionary of the idiom.*” The rest of the letter gives a glimpse of personal problems encountered in the study of what he feels is a complex language. At the time, he had already travelled to nearby villages, met a number of native-speakers and learnt that “*the Ibo-speaking area is vast and one of the most densely populated of the whole central Africa. Yet, strangely, this idiom both enjoys a*

¹⁰ For more details, read Ohadike 1984: 116

¹¹ *Spiritan Bulletin* n°39, March 1890 p.539 & Nwosu 1985 p. 4. The success of English as a school subject was to prove a major hindrance in the progress of Igbo studies.

¹² Report from the Geographical Society on the Niger-Benue, November 1888, kept in the Spiritan archives, Chevilly (France). The number of Igbo dialects has always divided linguists; the website of the International Linguistic Society (SIL) identifies thirty of them.

harmonic simplicity and a rich vocabulary: a French word has often three or four Igbo equivalents.”¹³

Léon-Alexandre Lejeune joined the teamwork on 23rd July 1900 as the new Apostolic Prefect and, “*with the help of his missionary team, he encouraged the study of the Igbo language and publicised it*” (Nwosu 1985:129). John Okolo, enthroned as the traditional chief of Onitsha the same year, supported the Catholic Church and encouraged the planting of schools (Nwosu 1990: 6), thereby reinforcing the missionaries’ favourable position and facilitating the progress of Igbo studies. Yet these men remained foreigners: they often worked in isolated mission outposts, moving from one village to another as need arose, and did not always get the opportunity to stay long enough to pursue their fieldwork to the end. Ganot, whose English-Igbo-French dictionary was published for missionary use in Rome in 1904, intended to follow it up with an Igbo-English-French volume, but had to return to France earlier than planned and the book never came out.¹⁴ Difficulties highlighted above notwithstanding, the number of early publications, while revealing the trend and direction given to language studies in the country, attests to the progress made so far.

Teamwork and differences

The aim of the first linguists in the field was to collect the maximum number of Igbo words in order to learn the language, while ensuring the building up of a ready-to-use bilingual database for catechistic purposes. These lists were to serve later as source material for the writing of Igbo grammars and as building blocks for ambitious bilingual dictionaries. In spite of these valuable efforts Igbo’s teething problems persisted, stemming mostly, this time, from the growing dissensions between Catholics and Protestants on the

¹³ Private letter, 23rd February 1900, Spiritan archives, Chevilly.

¹⁴ Cf. Ganot’s last letter on the subject, written to his bishop on 14th October 1904. Ganot returned to France in 1902.

subject, fuelled by global denominational competition and compounded by cultural, linguistic, and political prejudices opposing British and French nationals. If they initially explored the same Onitsha dialect, they soon moved into different dialectal areas, targeting different publics both in the mission and in their home-countries, and consequently published in different languages, which explains the uneven quality of their publications. No matter their differences, they faced similar challenges, the greater being the huge task facing them and the lack of trained interpreters, and building on each other's work could have been a great help. Instead, their correspondence reveals that they often worked separately and failed to fully appreciate the value of previous studies.

Schön, conscious of his pioneering role and shortcomings, confessed that, while considering Taylor's work as poor, "elementary" and sometimes confusing, he still borrowed some material from him for his *Grammatical elements of the Ibo language*. Crowther's *Vocabulary of the Ibo language*, a revision of Schön's work, appeared in London in 1882. Ganot read English and, while studying Igbo, consulted the earlier CMS publications on the language, reflecting years of study from 1841. Introducing his *Grammar* (1899:1-2), he then mentioned Schön's grammar to add that he did not think much of it. A personal letter to a fellow missionary, dated 24 April 1900, is even more revealing: Ganot comments on CMS linguistic endeavours and, although giving them some credit as the first publications on Igbo language, belittles them as scanty, dialectal, insignificant, or outright erroneous. He valued his fellow catholic missionaries more, and his Igbo grammar, published in 1899, shows an effort to build on his predecessors' work: it is a compilation of earlier and unpublished missionary notes left by Fathers Lutz, Lécuyer, Pawlas, and others, complemented by a personal three year-study of the language.

In a private letter to a fellow missionary, dated 4 March 1904, Ganot's suggested advert for his 306 page-long trilingual dictionary highlights what he considers to be its assets: some 17,000 entries and a brief guide to pronunciation. Yet, the work looks more like a laudable but dry attempt at recording as many Igbo words as possible, without adding any example. This could explain why the posthumous Dennis' *Dictionary of Ibo language*, published in 1923, ignores it altogether and only mentions Portman Igbo-English typescript (c.1906) and Northcote Thomas' English-Igbo/Igbo-English dictionary (1913). Missionary linguists gradually surmounted obstacles by team work, building on each other's compilations. They also, and more importantly, enlisted the help of Igbo parishioners that they trained on the job. The publication of Dennis' dictionary for example benefited from the help of "the assistant-translator, Mr.T.D.Anyaegbunam, (who) was asked to make a list of new words as they occurred."(Dennis 1923: viii)

Carlo Zappa's *Essai de dictionnaire français-ibo ou français-ika*, the best bilingual dictionary at the time, was published in Lyon in 1907. Based on the Ika dialect spoken in Western Igboland,¹⁵ it was compiled in Asaba with the help of the Igbo catechist Jacob Nwaokobia, whose name is mentioned on the front page. Zappa then took a number of Igbo catechists with him to France to learn French; back in Asaba they then helped him to compile his dictionary.¹⁶ This publication, based on ample consultations with community elders, is far more exhaustive than that of Ganot, with virtually every word supported with an example. The work also includes earlier signs of borrowings from Nigerian English and ends with a list of 91 Igbo proverbs together with their French translation.

¹⁵ On Ika, see Ohadike: 78-79. Ika Igbo is one of the borderline dialects spoken west of the Niger.

¹⁶ Cf. Ohadike : 128 and Ekwu : 218

The above survey shows the benefits of teamwork, each linguist building on his predecessors' work, albeit within denominational limits, and relying heavily on the patient and invaluable contribution of local informants. It also reveals that the bitter controversy opposing Catholics and Protestants on the subject of an Igbo standard and orthography¹⁷, one of the major initial setbacks in the development of Igbo studies, led to a fierce competition that, unexpectedly, benefited the language, leading eventually to an increase in the volume of linguistic publications. Summing up what Azuonye (1992: 701) describes as the missionary "*linguistic endeavours*", one can confirm that, in spite of shortcomings and human prejudices common at the time, it has all along been the work of a team, the fruit of years of fieldwork and interaction between foreign, dedicated linguists and hundreds of native-speakers, catechists and teachers, who acted as informants and thus paved the way for future studies of their language (Nwosu 1990: 26).

Post-Independence dictionaries will follow the same pattern, drawing their strength and credibility from the teamwork that produced them. Abraham's 1967 work for example was a compilation of material based on Alagoma's work¹⁸, initially intended to lead to the publication of an Igbo-English dictionary and deposited in Ibadan. As for Williamson's dictionary, published in 1972, it was an edition of previous work done by G.W.Pearman, previously revised and expanded by C.N.Madunagu and others.

A question of priorities

Early wordlists and dictionaries, precious tools in the development of the language, were primarily intended to support the propagation of the Gospel by facilitating communication between Igbo communities

¹⁷ The official orthography was decided in 1961 and has been known since then as "Onwu orthography", from the name of the Orthography Committee's Chair.

¹⁸ Alagoma was from Bonny, in the present Rivers State.

and foreign missionaries serving in the area, and this accounts for the resolutely bilingual stand adopted by both French and British missions. Dennis' dictionary targeted English-speaking peoples, mainly those serving in Nigeria – missionaries, merchants, and administrators - to encourage them to learn the language, considered at the time as one of the most important for communication in the region. This stand was encouraged by what Emenanjo (2001) termed Igbo people's "*romance with Western Education*", in particular their keen interest for English, seen as the gateway to the outside world - indeed, the way Igbo people embraced the English language surpassed all expectations. This trend, in turn, discouraged the compiling of Igbo monolingual dictionaries. At that time, French missionaries were in the process of being replaced by young Irish missionaries who prioritised the teaching of English (Isichei 1976: 173).¹⁹ This is confirmed by an internal Spiritan *Bulletin* dated March 1880 and by a colonial administrative note dated 6 February 1909 recommending the widespread use of English at all costs, as the colonial government wanted it to become the "*only language of West Africa*", and that, "*as soon as possible*" (Ayandele 1966: 340). English was introduced and enforced at all levels, through Educational Codes, Ordinances, and grants and through mission schools, particularly those of the Catholics. The new elite formed by missionaries – "*the Igbo kotuma (...), the interpreters, the cashiers (followed) the non-Igbo colonial administrators (and) carried out all their transactions in English*" (Emenanjo 2001). West of the Niger, things were more or less the same: at Zappa's death in 1917, the SMA turned to the use of English as an evangelization tool in what had now become a British colony, even before handing the Nigerian mission field over to Irish Fathers in 1920 (Ohadike 1984: 140). The rapid spread of English among the populations in the first decades of

¹⁹ This is revealed in a letter from Bishop Joseph Shanahan who considered his priests' knowledge of Igbo language as almost nil, a direct consequence of the time and efforts they devoted to the teaching of English.

the twentieth century certainly hindered the progress of Igbo studies, while encouraging the building of translation tools.

After years of neglect, Nigeria's Independence brought about a revival of national and regional languages. Igbo studies in particular, which by that time were lagging behind those of other major languages, saw a rapid development at all levels from the 1970s onwards. Within a decade, Igbo language and culture were included in school curricula; newspapers and magazines in Igbo – *Udoka*, *Ogene* – started circulating and creative writing in the language was boosted by a flurry of publications, with novels and plays used as readers on school programmes. The 1970s and 1980s saw the Society for the Promotion of Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC)²⁰ spearheading the language development, promoting a standard defined by Emenanjo (1978: xxi) as a contribution from the two major dialects, “*a generalized Owerri/Umuahia Igbo and a generalized Onitsha Igbo*”, and enlisting support and opening outlets for both oral and written Igbo. The Society brought about a radical change in the way Igbo media presented the news bulletins, by offering professionals a linguistic tool both enriched and standardised through the publication, and wide circulation, of approved word lists. It also contributed to the publishing of Ogbalu's 1962 dictionary, whose author paid tribute to the key role played by the SPILC in the development of the language.²¹ Considering the number of novels, plays, short stories, collections of poems, and essays now on the

²⁰ The SPILC played a key role in the development, study and promotion of the language at all levels. Its Standardization Committee has been at the forefront of vocabulary development and metalanguage production for Government and media use.

²¹ At the time, Ogbalu was teaching Igbo at the Dennis Memorial Grammar School (DMGS), Onitsha, the first grammar school opened by the CMS in Igboland to prepare students for missionary work, civil service and higher Education. Within a few years, he became the most prolific Igbo writer and publisher, and supported the SPILC until his death.

market, the efforts of local printers and publishers and the vitality of forums like the Ahiajoku public lectures, one would have believed the time was ripe for the publication of a monolingual Igbo dictionary. Yet none was compiled. Instead, the years that followed saw more bilingual dictionaries, most of them single-authored, published by Igbo scholars, linguists, and teachers, native-speakers for the vast majority, and all close to Nigerian University circles – a trend explained by political changes.

The Independence, that saw the development of federal universities and the government's takeover of mission schools in the East, brought about a more secular focus and new relationships, as the country forged links with the outside world and built an international profile. Achebe's work bore witness to that need for the Empire to 'talk back' and engage in a fruitful dialogue with its former masters. This may explain the type of dictionaries published at the time: bilingual, yet published within the country, they now targeted a local Igbo elite, keen to improve its command of English while getting used to reading its mother-tongue. Post-Independence publications could not ignore the Igbo demand for support, not only in communicating with the rest of the Anglophone world, but equally in coping with what was now a bilingual situation within the Federation. The production and publication of bilingual dictionaries, Igbo-English and English-Igbo, thus went on, with a now wider and different readership. Other Nigerian languages took the same direction, as revealed by Yoruba-English, Hausa-English, Efik-English or Edo-English dictionaries published before and after 1960 – some of them recently. Like the bulk of Nigerian literature, they follow a well-established pattern, appealing to a foreign audience and projecting their culture on the international scene, while the pragmatic people in Igboland often disregard the reading and study of their own language.

Building tools for a language in progress

With the lonely exception of Armstrong's *comparative wordlist of five Igbo dialects* (1967), the first thirty years after Independence saw the publication of several Igbo-English dictionaries, each standing as a show-case of a particular trend and answering a different need at a time when Igbo language was fast developing and taking ground in the education sector. Ogbalu, who spearheaded the development of the language in the sixties and the seventies, aimed at compiling as many words as possible, printing and circulating as many publications in Igbo as he could, in order to facilitate reading and writing in the language to readers already trained to read English; his dictionary was intended for secondary school and teacher training use. He added that he never intended this work to be a full publication – rather a “skeleton” to “guide a circle of friends whom I have made sufficiently interested in compiling a full Igbo dictionary to go ahead (...) and fill the flesh.” He further requested that people contribute to his work by adding to the words he collected, the reason being that “it is only in cooperation that a really comprehensive and all Igbo dictionary can be compiled” (Ogbalu 1962: 11), an interesting statement when we know that most of the Igbo dictionaries are now single-authored. This first post-1960 publication, whose main quality was to start the ball rolling and support the school Igbo programmes, acted as an incentive, highlighting the need for a sound dictionary that followed in the footsteps of the missionaries while bringing in new features that could attract a more learned readership.

Williamson, a British-born linguist who made her life and career in Nigeria, lecturing in several Southern universities, produced the first root dictionary, designed for use in the Higher Education sector, with the support of the Institute of African Studies and the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Ibadan, and two grants from the West African Linguistic Society. This work offers a long introduction of seventy pages, providing an historical

background, an overview of the stages involved in the making of the dictionary, and guidelines on the new orthography of the language. It also includes a detailed summary of Igbo grammar and words organized by roots. Several features distinguish Williamson's dictionary from previous publications. First, it limits itself to the Onitsha dialect, which she considered “*the only serious rival to Central as a candidate for the basis of a standard Igbo*” (Williamson 1972: xix) - by ‘Central’, she meant the Owerri dialect, nearer the original heartland of Igboland and therefore considered to be at the root of many of the Igbo dialects.²² Secondly, her dictionary, following Ogbalu's model, offers detailed cultural explanations on a number of customs²³ designed to facilitate non-igbo learners' comprehension.²⁴ This extends to many other words – tools, plants, food items, animals, and insects, cosmetics and even deities. One of the reasons behind Williamson's dictionary was that although there were good studies of Central Igbo, no modern work had been published on Onitsha Igbo since Ganot (1899) and Kelly's (1954) work. In addition, she had access to an enormous amount of material collected in Onitsha dialect and left unpublished due to the development of interest for Central Igbo: the earlier collections by Pearman, whose work was based on Dennis's one, all mostly from Onitsha. She offered her Igbo-English dictionary to the world “*as a beginning rather than an achievement, a stimulus rather than an authority*” (Williamson 1972: xviii).

Williamson experienced difficulties with plant names and used various sources to gather as much information as possible. In most instances, she included the botanical name of plants after their description, and this definitely helps, especially when no English

²² Cf. also Emenanjo 1975 on the subject of Central Igbo

²³ Cf. Williamson 1972 : 4, 34-35, 298, 404-406 and 421

²⁴ This same trend is found in Achebe's novel *Things fall apart* that offers many such cultural explanations, usually following the inserting of untranslated Igbo words in the English text.

equivalent can be offered. She followed the same practice as Ogbalu by including a number of drawings to supplement explanations, improving on the practice, in that her drawings are all very detailed and far more useful than those in previous dictionaries. Her dictionary gives a sense of historicity, as it includes old words and customs, and illustrations supporting explanations concerning waning traditions, like that of wearing circles of traditional beads around the waist, building thatched houses, or beating clothes to wash them.²⁵ Some attempt has been made to explain the Igbo perception of the body; she ventured into traditional and specialised domains; her book also includes a number of proverbs given as illustrations, and a few dialogues (p.33). She later compiled an English-Igbo dictionary, still based on the Onitsha dialect, which her death in 2005 left unpublished.

Unlike his predecessors, Nnaji²⁶ chose English as the source language for his compilation. The 9,877 entries of his English-Igbo dictionary (1985) target a different public: first, secondary schools, following “*a careful research into the needs of the pupils learning English language in Upper Primary and Lower Secondary forms in Igbo-speaking areas of Nigeria*” (p.iii). A ready help for GCE²⁷ candidates preparing for their end of secondary school Igbo examination, it targets Igbo people with a moderate knowledge of English but able to read their own language, hoping to help them understand new words they meet without having to resort to

²⁵ Cf. Williamson 1972 : 197, 187 and 328

²⁶ A former Igbo teacher at the Comprehensive Secondary School, Onitsha, Nnaji secured the help of G.C.Nnaji, from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (Premier University in the country), for his dictionary, thereby adding value to his work.

²⁷ General Certificate of Education (London), later replaced with the WASC (West African School Certificate), then with the Junior School Certificate (JSS) and the Senior School Certificate administered by the West African Examination Council (WAEC), the Examination Board for Anglophone West African countries.

monolingual English dictionaries. The author equally hoped that his dictionary would contribute to the eradication of illiteracy and encourage people to write in their language. He benefited from a number of collaborators, including a former DMGS Senior Igbo Master²⁸ and WAEC Igbo examiner. Among those who helped in the work he acknowledged F.C.Ogbalu and C.Achebe as “*some of the brains behind the SPILC*” and the proprietors of the Igbo newspapers *Udoka* and *Ogene*.

Reaching out to a new readership

After Emenanjo’s *Igbo metalanguage* (1990), a short glossary of English-Igbo and Igbo-English technical terms in language, literature, and methodology, the nineties saw the publication of three very different dictionaries, two of them published in the US and the other in Nigeria, yet equally new in their approach. Echeruo and Igwe clearly wrote for a University public while Awde and Wambu targeted a wider public but all three dictionaries offer new tools to a new readership. Echeruo’s compilation, primarily intended for the US, followed publications like that of Nwachukwu (1993) on the questioning of the accepted Igbo orthography. Igwe’s work, on the other hand, represents a novel attempt to include dialectal variants in his compilation as they affect both alphabet and vocabulary, while Awde and Wambu deliberately chose to depart from the accepted academic model to appeal to tourists instead.

Until the publication of Echeruo’s dictionary the only Igbo dictionary available in the US had been Welmert & Welmert’s *learner’s dictionary* (1968) published in California. This explains the editor’s claim announcing Echeruo’s dictionary (1998) as “*the first comprehensive and authoritative dictionary of the igbo language.*” Yet, the author considers (p.ix) that, with about 4,000 entries, his

²⁸ This constituted a major boost to the dictionary, as DMGS remains one of the two best secondary schools in Onitsha, and as old boys associations play an important part in Nigerian public life.

work is but a “*modest first step*” towards meeting the need for a sizeable dictionary in Igbo, as exists for Hausa and Yoruba. Although the introduction assesses previous dictionaries and praises Ogbalu and Nnaji for what it terms their pioneering efforts as native-speakers, and Ogbalu for his enthusiasm and commitment, Echeruo’s work is a clear departure from the tradition established by such publications, in that he says he never conceived his dictionary as a learner’s tool. Instead, he chose to record “*as many (...) word forms in the various dialects of Igbo as he can find*” (p. x) with none excluded, the aim of the dictionary being to “*record the total igbo word-stock and give writers (and speakers) the freedom to use the language as creatively and unabashedly as they wish, knowing that readers and listeners have a reference work to aid comprehension*” (p.xv). This dictionary differs from previous ones in other aspects: in particular, entries have been collected from a great variety of sources, not only oral but also literary – using texts such as the Igbo Bible, existing dictionaries and wordlists, poetry, drama, and fiction (from Pita Nwana’s *Omenuko* to Ubesie’s novels). It also borrowed from fiction in English about Igboland, from Achebe’s *Things fall apart* to Ike’s *Bottled Leopard*, and technical and periodical literature covering a great variety of fields, from agriculture to anthropology, in conjunction with interviews and consultations.

The back cover of Igwe’s work (1999) presents it as “*a comprehensive reference material that contains thousands of word entries with many of them having variants.*” For the author, dictionaries respond to the need to write the language down to preserve it, as many older words are daily falling into oblivion, while providing Igbo writers with a “*wider choice of words and expressions and thus enable them to write more expressively and interestingly by expanding their knowledge*”(p.ix). He meant his work, which tries to combine grammar and dictionary for the use of students, teachers, and examiners, to be “*a scholarly and scientific book, from which serious-minded students of Igbo as well as*

teachers can find plenty of encouragement and help” (p.lvii). This is not an unrealistic expectation when we know that it represents near thirty years of fieldwork, started in 1973 at the time Oxford University Press, attracted by Igwe’s PhD on Igbo grammar in London, contacted him about the possibility of producing an Igbo dictionary. The introduction opens with a survey of what Igwe terms “*earlier attempts*” at an Igbo dictionary and an appreciation of Williamson’s work.

One of the peculiarities of these dictionaries is that their success has, in part been pegged, as often in the Nigerian academic sector, to the amount of public recognition enjoyed by their authors as a result of their career and sometimes high profile government post or publications. Echeruo for example has been a University Professor of English for many years and his dictionary, currently used by many Igbo in the American Diaspora,²⁹ enjoyed the support of a number of fellow Nigerian academics, teachers of Igbo, and traditional rulers. As for Igwe, he is well known in Igbo circles at home and abroad for his long-standing interest and contribution to Igbo studies: back in the 1940s he had taken Igbo as one of his subjects in the Cambridge School Certificate Examination and later taught the language in London School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS) and at the University of Ibadan. He also worked as Chief Examiner in Igbo for the WAEC and as a Bible translator for the Methodist Church of Nigeria. All these biographical details matter far more than it would appear in a country where genealogies and biographies are a huge source of pride and give credence to publications.

The authors also undoubtedly share Emenanjo’s (2001) view of Igbo language as “*a link and bridge between and among the people,*” the same view embraced by Awde and Wambu whose 1999 dictionary

²⁹ It is one of the two recommended dictionaries on the Igbo course organised and managed by the *Uwa ndi Igbo* group organised to teach Igbo language and culture on-line.

and phrasebook set a new trend in putting a brand new tool in the hands of American visitors to Nigeria. This work includes some basic grammatical notions and over 5,000 entries, but what signals it as a unique contribution is its phrasebook with helpful phrases arranged in thirty-four sections. These are supplemented by useful hints on family, customary law, and other cultural details, and practical pieces of advice on clothing, public transports, electrical appliances, and weather, the like of what one finds in travel guides. The first part of the introduction briefly presents Igboland and its history, before giving a glimpse of its language development.

Bilateral cooperation and dictionaries

The latest bilingual dictionary (2004) follows a long tradition of sponsored academic endeavours, while opening new fields to the Igbo language. In the early 1990s, as part of the cultural cooperation between France and Nigeria, the French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA) in Ibadan, recently opened and supported by the French Embassy, invited and sponsored mixed research teams to bring about the publication of bilingual dictionaries in the three national languages – Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, through a publication agreement with the Paris-based Karthala publishers for the series. This new development, which brought together French and Nigerian academics, is in line with a century of bilateral linguistic projects and publications, and comforts the trend towards the production of bilingual dictionaries to support the outward look of Igbo academia.

Caron's French-Hausa dictionary and Sachnine's Yoruba-French dictionary, started earlier, were both published in 1997. The official launching of the third project, that of the Igbo-French dictionary, coincided with the formal opening of the Owerri branch of the Alliance Française in the Imo State capital in June 1996. The dictionary, a co-authored publication, came out in February 2004: it was a new venture that now took the Igbo language into French. It benefited from the multifaceted collaboration of the IFRA and its

successive directors, the Paris-based LLACAN (a CNRS research laboratory on African languages and literatures), the French Embassy in Nigeria, and the French Ministry of External Affairs, the NINLAN in the person of its Director, the Alliance Française and the Federal Universities of Nsukka and Port-Harcourt. Unlike previous bilingual dictionaries of Igbo, this work presents entries in a strict alphabetical order, based on standard Igbo as defined by Emenanjo (1978: xxi)³⁰ and ignoring dialectal variants in a bid to facilitate its use by non-Igbo students. Although limited to some four thousand entries, it also includes updated plant and animal names, medical words, and metalanguage taking into account the latest published compilations of the Igbo Standardization Committee.

This collaboration of Nigerian and European academics could well be the beginning of other fruitful projects, considering the recent European interest in Igbo studies, with a growing number of Igbo scholars now holding University posts abroad, and SOAS resuming the teaching of Igbo after some twenty years. Within Nigeria and beyond, Igbo scholars keep on adding to the number of compilations, in a relentless effort to bring their personal contribution, no matter how little, to the building of the language. Chinyei (2000) for example offers a list of numerals and common Igbo words with their English equivalents, focusing on those to do with body parts, animals, kinship terms, and food. Two language manuals have come out since then: those of Odetunde (2000) and Odiaka (2004), and before Ukaegbu (2005)'s *Igbo Word-Bank* could appear, an Igbo language method came out on CD-Rom in 2002, responding to a different need. Igbo is now on the Internet, promoted by the Igbo in Diaspora through language teaching and cultural sites. Microsoft's move to include Igbo in its Local Language Program, intended to provide desktop software and tools to its customers and to help

³⁰ The SIL website offers a different definition of Igbo standard, as "based on the dialects of Owerri and Umuahia, omitting the nasality and aspiration found in those dialects."

preserve and promote local languages, has given the language a tremendous boost that will have long term repercussions, while already challenging Igbo linguists to double their efforts towards the production of more learning tools.³¹

Future directions

While going a long way to help both Igbo speakers and learners improve their skills, the voluminous work done so far - dictionaries and other similar publications in particular - still confronts readers with some of the issues that bogged the lexicographers from the very beginning. Quoting Williamson, Emenanjo and others, Igwe (1999) outlined some of the reasons he personally considered to be behind the long neglect of Igbo, both at home and abroad. These included the importance of dialectal variations, the lack of a single central authority to impose the agreed standard, and the lack of Igbo support for their own language – all of which have been mentioned here. Looking back at the tremendous progress achieved by Igbo studies against all odds, one must acknowledge that a number of these issues remain unresolved: Igbo standard, in particular, is still under scrutiny and dialectal variations still divide scholars. Ogbalu's death in 1990 marked the end of an era and Igbo scholarship is still suffering from individualism, internal divisions, and a lack of international exposure. Much of what is studied, written, and published in Nigeria never gets beyond the borders. These issues will need to be resolved before any authoritative monolingual dictionary of the language is produced.

On the question of dictionaries, Igwe seems to be virtually the only lexicographer to clearly point his readers towards the future. Noting

³¹ The project, supported from South Africa by the Centre for Text Technology (CTeT) at the Northwest University, is currently developing data for several African Languages including Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Kinyarwanda and Wolof. The developed data will be used in proofing tools such as spelling checkers and grammar checkers.

the current trend for Igbo-English dictionaries, he warns that the time will come for the building of monolingual and dialectal Igbo dictionaries. For him, these works will have to fulfil a number of other criteria: they will have to be local, scientific, all-inclusive, and creative. While recognizing the good job done so far by non-Igbo scholars, he then highlights the fact that Nigeria now boasts a number of competent Igbo linguists and calls on native-speakers to assume a greater responsibility in the work on their language. To help this move he draws the profile of the ideal author: a native speaker and trained linguist, proficient in all aspects of the language, creative, and sensitive. He then lists some of the dictionaries needed:

- (i) More comprehensive dictionaries
- (ii) Dictionaries of fauna and flora, place and personal names.³²
- (iii) Technical and scientific dictionaries, taking new contributions into account.

To prepare for that, he calls for Igbo people to collect as much material as they can from all dialects - entries in his own dictionary are already taken from a number of areas, although he gave preference to what he calls "*central Igbo dialects*". He then concludes that "*there is a vast amount of lexicographical work yet to be done. Igbo linguists and others should accept and face the challenge*" (p.x). Meanwhile, he calls on Igbo people to take pride in their language and encourage its use in both everyday life and education, and many will no doubt heed his advice.

³² Names of plants and animals included in his dictionary were limited to "what was available at the time." (p.lvii)

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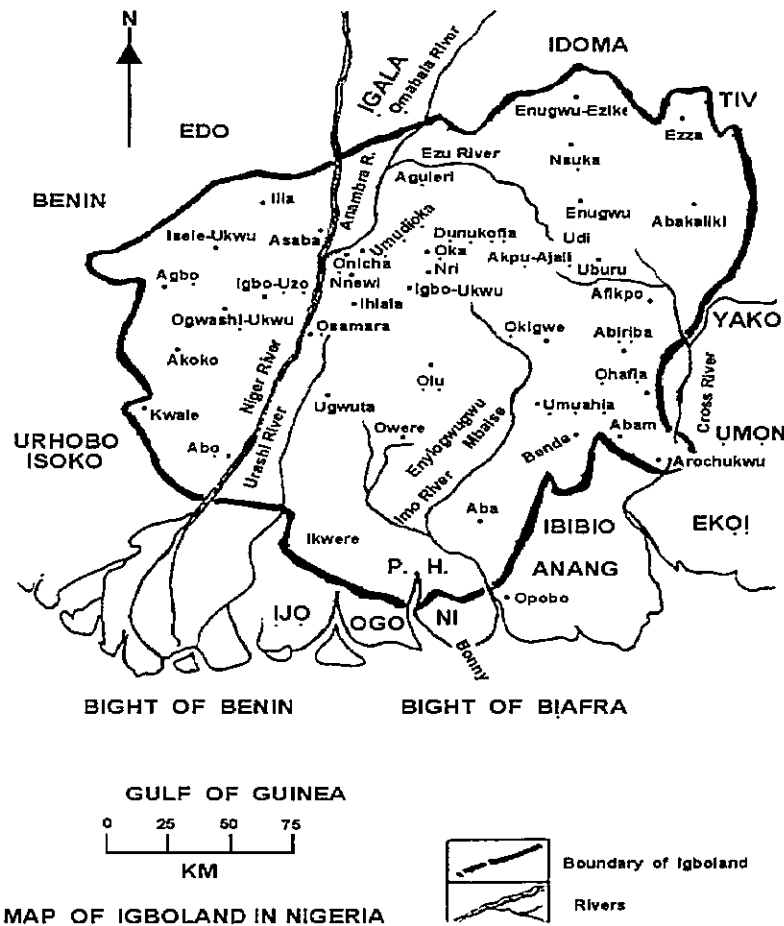
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