

A sociolinguistic study of Osa-Ahia syndrome, linguistic nuances and honorifics in Igbo business interactions in selected markets in Calabar

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Abstract: The Igbo tribe constitutes one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, and they are mostly businessmen. Nigerians jokingly say that anywhere Igbos are not found, is not habitable. The Igbos conduct their businesses seamlessly, such that people wonder how they integrate easily with the locals. Their vendors use peculiar linguistic choices and honorifics to convince customers. In this study, we examine those peculiar linguistic choices adopted by the Osa-ahia. Data was elicited from interactions in three markets in Calabar: Marina Beach, Watt, and Marian. Twenty-one data points were generated from the three markets and analysed accordingly. The study is rooted in sociolinguistics due to its closeness to societal activities from a language perspective. The study reveals that linguistic creativity is a marketing tool and a form of advertisement for the survival of any business in an evolving world, using the Osa-ahia syndrome as a paradigm.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, Osa-Ahia, linguistic nuances, sales, Igbos, business interactions, Calabar

Background to the study

The market environment is highly competitive, and for well-established businessmen, advertisements are a key tool to attract higher

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sales. In contrast, petty traders who cannot afford advertisements rely on other strategies to ensure the sustainability of their businesses; even those who use advertisements in either the English language or Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) prefer to adopt the English language which is the nation's lingua-franca, due to the multiplicity of languages in the country. In Nigeria, the markets are predominantly occupied by the Igbo people, who are known for their business-oriented nature. The Igbo tribe is spread throughout the world, and they are predominantly traders who engage in either petty trading or large-scale marketing, depending on their financial resources (Anyanwu 2019). They conduct their businesses seamlessly, so that one begins to wonder how they integrate so easily with the locals. This situation is similar to the research conducted by Ebim, Ene and Abioye (2021), where they opined that: "The garage boys offer services to travellers/passengers in Calabar, the capital of Cross River State. The financial reward of such people is based on commission, charges from passengers' loads and tips from well-wishers. Their businesses are privately owned, and there is a high level of competition and collaboration among the entrepreneurs. It is this competition that gives rise to toutism or garage boys who collaborate and compete to outsmart each other to give prominence to their benefactors". The ability of Osa-ahia, just like the Agberos in the above example, to strongly convince the customer to buy such goods by adding a particular amount to the real value of the price gives them an advantage because they are not paid for their services. Their money comes by means of an additional income to the original price to the market value and for them to convince their customers, they make use of expressions that often convey nuanced meanings that facilitate smooth transactions and build relationships. According to some scholars, such transactionary methods become a part of the business enterprise (see Inyang 2008; Madichie & Nkamnebe 2010; Imhonopi & Iruonagbe 2013; Oluwabamide 2015). The Igbos generally engage in trade activities as a way of life, which has been a long-time practice. The former boss checks up on him regularly to ensure that the business is going well. According to Alike (2019), Iwara, Amaechi, and Netshandama (2019), the aim is to lead the former apprentice in the right direction. The new "Oga" capitalises on his newfound position and grows the business to an enviable position. Agozino (2007), Orugun & Nafiu (2014), Iwara et al. (2019), and Ugoani (2014) view this process as a generational transfer of wealth in the Igbo heritage. The resilience and courage put into such a

business ensure that the Igbo lineage is preserved and the values are transferred to the next generation of businessmen. According to Ola (2016):

Igbo people have a reputation in Nigeria and probably throughout Africa, as resilient, dogged traders who build viable small-to-medium enterprises which are completely independent of government. There are plenty of people from other ethnic groups who have just as much business savvy and resilience as an Igbo business person. But other areas of Nigeria have not imbibed the spirit of entrepreneurship into the fibre of their culture in the same way the Igbos have. We have little choice but to look to the East for inspiration. I have looked at just two lessons; we can all learn from the archetypal Igbo trader.

In spite of the resilience, some need a platform to stand and develop to a point where they can establish their businesses. This is a result of their lack of finances. Such a category of people falls within the Osa-ahia class. They go to business environments owned by their Igbo brothers and negotiate with them for permission to “assist” them in the marketing of their goods. Knowing fully well that the owner of such goods has already placed market values on such goods, the Osa-ahia first poses as though he is the owner of the business and, through that means, negotiates the price of the goods with the prospective buyer. At the end, whatever he can add to the initial price becomes his earnings for the day. The negotiated price is what appears on the receipt given to the customer, whereas the shop owner gives the marketer the additional amount of money.

A review of research works on domains of language use and theory

Different scholars have carried out studies on diverse domains of language use. Anam et al. (2025), carried out a sociolinguistic analysis of the linguistic choices in political discourse, and their finding reveals that communicative strategies and the deployment of appropriate linguistic choices can lead to a peaceful resolution of political logjams, especially in a politically tense environment. Also, Fatuase and Matthew (2022) revealed that the creative use of proverbs sustains the linguistic heritage of a people. This is because proverbial sayings help to pass the cultural beliefs of a people from one generation to another and also help to sustain the language of a people. Matthew (2021) focused on the sociolinguistic use of language in songs of musicians as a means of advocating the need for the sustainability of the environment. In Matthew (2017) examined a literary text by Chinua

Achebe from the perspective of ecolinguistics. He opines that the general belief that the major character in the novel, Okonkwo, was a successful man depended on his constant destruction of the ecosystem, which is injurious to the people of the universe. Finally, Matthew's (2016) paper focused on the effect of environmental despoliation on the Nier Delta environment as a result of the oil exploration by multinational corporations.

Theoretically, the study adopts a pragmatic approach to the analysis. The focus is on contextual use of language. Pragmatics determines how the communicative strategies of humans are carried out within a linguistic context and how such a context contributes to the realisation of meaning in language use. It helps to oscillate the relationship that exists between the interlocutors in a communicative event. The proponent of pragmatics is H. P. Grice (1967), who, in his lecture on the theory, opines in that conversation involving speakers and hearers is governed by certain conversant principles and maxims such as being truthful, relevant, brief, and clear to the point. J. L. Austin and H. P. Grice contributed to the concept of implicature. Through their efforts, pragmatics became recognised as a subfield of linguistics. Meaning is negotiated through conversations/interactions between the interactants. Through pragmatics, meaning is negotiated to understand the implication of speakers' utterances. As regards the linguistic negotiation, which is captured using deixis and honorifics, Levinson (1983) divided honorifics into a classification, according with which: for the referential column, the addressee is directly indexed in the interlocutors' relationship, not without recourse to the referenced (Brown and Levinson 1987, 276). These kinds of forms are used in addressing by referring to either person or thing referred to (see Brown and Levinson 1978; Levinson 1983, 90). In other words, form conveys respect for the person that is referred to (Sifianou 1992, 57). At the family level, according to Levinson (1983, 91) and Horn and Ward (2006, 120), family honorifics refer to the relationship between the speaker and possibly other participants, as well as the contextual placement of the setting, taking into consideration the social activities involved. The bystander, as observed by Levinson (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1978), is a type of honorific which means interactants and onlookers. In the words of Ward (2006, 120), this form of honorifics is used to show respect to a non-addressed but present party. Absolute, on the other hand, is divided into authorised speakers and authorised recipients.

Methodology

Altogether, twenty-one data were elicited from interactions with Osa-ahia in three different markets in the study area, which is Calabar. The markets are: Watt market, Marian market and Marina beach market. The data were categorised into three segments: general linguistic usages, social networking and power relations. The interlocutors negotiated power by means of discursive practice to gain access to their intended customers. The analytical framework followed Gracian's (1975) implicature principles and Levinson's (1987) politeness approach to understanding communication.

Data analysis

Table 1: Data, translations and contextual meanings

S/No	Osa-Ahia Expression	Translation
1	Biázutá m' áhiá (persuasive)	Come and buy goods from me
2	À gámérésigiofuma (persuasive)	I will sell well for you
3	Onyéwuonyéńkém (persuasive)	This person is my person
4	You na my man, I go do you well (persuasive)	You are my favourite; I will sell well for you
5	Nwunye di ya, Ji á dikwa nu mman'onuáhia m nyérégi, were yaotu ahu (persuasive)	Her husband's wife, this yam is good at that price I gave to you, take it like that.
6	Onyéńáeréahíá, otuámbiákwulérégi, ágághimébéọzọ (sweet talk)	Mr. Seller, I came to you without going elsewhere like this
7	Nwanyioma, n'eziokwu, oweghiebeọzọiga-ahu udi ji a n'onuahia m résirigin'ahianiilé a n'otutuoma a (persuasive)	Beautiful lady, sincerely, there is no other place that you will see this kind of yams at this price I just gave you in this whole market this early morning
8	Aga agbakwagiosoáhiá o (persuasive)	Dem go run you street o!
9	Ogbálá AA (persuasive)	It is so cheap now o!
10	Ahiáománéréonwéya, ahiáomaányin'érékájimáráányi (persuasive)	A good market sells itself; the quality goods we sell is what we are known for

Politeness strategies employed in Osa-ahia marketing strategies

Positive politeness strategies: Notice, Attend to Hearer (His interests, wants, needs, goods). This strategy suggests that the speaker should

notice all aspects of the condition of the hearer including remarkable possessions, noticeable changes and anything else that looks as though the hearer would want noticed by the speaker and approve of it (Brown and Levinson 1978). Text 1, which in Igbo expression is *Biázutá m' óhiá* is a persuasive strategy which means "Come and buy goods from me". In this expression, this phrase is used by vendors when they want the buyer's patronage by calling their attention whether they had the intention of buying such goods or not.

Include both speaker and hearer in the activity: This strategy involves the speaker using an inclusive 'we' or 'let's' forms when he means 'me' or 'you' thus involving him and the hearer in the activity and as a result redressing face threatening acts of imposition to the hearer. (Brown and Levinson 1978). In text 2, the expression "*À gámérésigiofuma*" is also a persuasive strategy of marketing, which means "I will sell well for you". Here, the Vendor tells the buyer that he or she will treat the buyer well when selling the goods to him or her by giving the goods at an affordable price".

Give or ask for reasons: This is another strategy of including the hearer in the activity by the speaker giving reasons as to why he wants whatever he wants. By the speaker including the hearer in his reasoning, the hearer is led to see how reasonable the speaker's FTA is. The speaker explains why the addressee needs to do or not to do a certain action (Brown and Levinson 1978). This strategy is mostly used by interlocutors when they want the intending buyers of wares to behave in a certain way or to do or not to do a certain thing which they may not be comfortable with or when the interreactant wants them to buy his/ her ideas. Text3 "*Onyéwuonyénkém*" falls within the ambit of persuasion, translating to mean "This person is my person". At this point, the Vendor tries to make the buyer feel good and welcome through persuasion.

Intensify interest to hearer: Brown and Levinson (1978) aver that this strategy involves the speaker communicating to the hearer that he does share some of his wants by intensifying the interest of his (speaker's) contributions to the conversation to the hearer through 'making a good story'. This pulls the addressee into the middle of what is being talked about thus increasing the addressee's interest to it. By so doing, the threat that would have been caused by the act is warded off because the hearer will become interested in the story. Text 4 is a typical

sociolinguistic expression in Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE): “You na my man, I go do you well”. It is a persuasive utterance meaning “You are my favourite; I will sell to you at a reduced amount”. At this point, the seller uses this sentence to make the buyer feel special and make him or her buy more than what was planned.

Table 2: Data on social networking

S/No	Osa-Ahia Expression	Translation
1	Mummy leenu m, ano m ya.	Mummy see me, I am here.
2	Nwanyioma, I naagafezim? Okwaonyeahiagi o	Fine woman, are you passing me by? It is your favourite customer, oh!
3	Anu n’ējuonu ka m n’eren’ahia.	Meat that fills the mouth is what I’m selling in this market
4	Nnem, bia nu tunyere m, ahia m ono naakwukwogi?	My dear, come and buy from me. Is my name in your list?
5	Ah ányágikwá, bátá odiya	Ah, it’s been long, come inside, I have it.

Negative politeness strategies

Hedges/ Questions: Brown and Levinson (1978) argue that in this strategy, a speaker uses noncommittal statements which make the hearer feel that he/she is not being coerced to do a certain thing. Speakers use words and phrases such as such as ‘I think’, ‘perhaps’, ‘it seems’, ‘could you’, ‘I wonder, ‘may be’ to show that he/she is not imposing on the hearer but giving an opinion. Speakers therefore use hedges to reduce the weight of an FTA in an utterance. In text 1 “Mummy leenu m, ano m ya. Mummy see me, I am here”, codes witching plays a prominent role in the conversation. Here, a seller is either talking to a frequent customer or a random lady, calling her attention to his shop. Male vendors who sell clothing normally use this phrase to pass information to ladies by pretending to be familiar with the prospective buyer.

Be indirect: According to Brown and Levinson (1978), this strategy involves use of phrases and sentences that have contextually unambiguous meanings which are different from their literal meanings. The speaker avoids impinging on the addressee’s negative face by speaking in a way that avoids direct commands or requests thus making the hearer to feel not imposed on. Text 2, labelled as “Nwanyioma, I naagafezim? Okwaonyeahiagi o” portrays the seller calling the prospective buyer a “Fine woman” and rhetorically asking

her whether she is “passing me by him” and going further to say that the clothes are the buyer’s “favourite customer oh!”. The seller is trying to use emotional blackmail to bring the buyer to his or her shop in order to buy something from them.

Give deference: In this strategy, the speaker humbles and abases himself or raises the hearer. In both cases therefore, the hearer is of a higher social status than the speaker. Brown and Levinson (1978) claim that the speaker indicates that the hearer is respected and valued and is taken to be superior. The speaker reduces their importance by making the hearer look more important by praising or complimenting them. The marketer ‘down scales’ his importance by praising the friends of the deceased saying that they loved him so much that they will not fail to visit the family after the burial ceremony. Through this praise, the friends of the deceased feel good and thus satisfying their positive face wants of notice and attend to the hearer’s wants. By so doing, they will feel valued and therefore will continue visiting the family without feeling that they are being coerced to do so. In text 3, “Anu n’ējuonu ka m n’eren’ahia” is a proverbial saying that “Meat that fills the mouth is what I’m selling in this market” meaning that the seller announces to the market by shouting this phrase so that people will come buy from him and pay less attention to others.

The use of general rule: Brown and Levinson (1978) aver that another way of disassociating the speaker and the hearer from a certain imposition in the FTA and thus communicating that the speaker does not wish to impinge on the hearer is by stating the FTA as a general rule, obligation or regulation. By so doing, the speaker avoids mentioning the hearer and so is not seen to be imposing on the hearer but rather drawing the hearer’s attention to existence of a certain general rule that applies to everyone. In text 4 “Nnem, bia nu tunyere m, ahia m ono naakwukwogi?” the seller refers to the buyer as “My dear come and buy from me, is my name in your list?” The seller is talking to a buyer who is passing by his or her shop with a list in her hand, looking around, asking the customer if the name of what she sells is in the customer’s list.

Table 3: Data on power dynamics

S/No	Osa-Ahia Expression	Translation
1	Zurunkéá, yákáchásimmáná-áhiá	Buy this one, it is the best in the market

	(convincing)	
2	Tinyérémméméinná, owurunáitinyéré m agaghi m abiaqzo (compelling)	Put bonus for me daddy, if you don't put, I won't come again.
3	Ówuna I gaghetinyéré m mmezi? (compelling)	Won't you put bonus for me?
4	Nwoke m, a mam na I n'erezigboahia, mana nye m mmezi (compelling).	My man, I know you sell quality goods but give me bonus.
5	Nwanyoma, n'ezikwu, oweghiebozoga-ahu udi ji a n'onuahia m résirigin'ahianiilé a n'otutuoma a. (persuasive)	Beautiful lady, sincerely, there is no other place that you will see this kind of yam at this price I just gave you in this whole market this early morning
6	M gáwufurugionuáhiá.	I will reduce market price for you.

Bald-on record politeness strategies

The use of advice: In this strategy, the speaker gives advice to the hearer directly with no minimization of the FTA for it is for the benefit of the hearer (Brown and Levinson 1978). This utterance, in text 1, labelled “Zurunkéá, yákáchásimmáná-áhiá” is an imposition of linguistic power through a convincing means to ensure that the buyer purchases an item by all means. The expression means “Buy this one, it is the best in the market” The vendor tells the buyer to buy a particular ware, convincing him or her that the goods is the best in the market.

Maximum efficiency (being efficient): This strategy is used when the speaker wants to achieve maximum efficiency in stating the FTA. The speaker states the FTA directly and concisely with no attempt to lessen its threat to the addressee (Brown and Levinson 1978). In text 2 of table 3, the expression “Tinyérémméméinná, owurunáitinyéré m agaghi m abiaqzo” is more of a compelling approach by the buyer who is negotiating a larger quantity for the goods at a lesser amount. He says, “Put a bonus for me, daddy, if you don't put, I won't come again”. Here, the buyer says this so that the seller will put enough of what he is buying (rice/garri) from the seller. This expression is used to compel the seller to do more than he is supposed to, just so that the buyer will come again and this can create a healthy relationship between them.

Metaphorical expressions for emphasis: This strategy is used when there is urgency for emphasis (Brown and Levinson 1978). The

speaker does the face threatening act directly and concisely with the intention of achieving maximum effectiveness. The hearer therefore cannot interpret the message in any other way. In text 3 of table 3 “*Òwuna I gaghietinyéré m mmezi?*” the buyer rhetorically and compellingly enquires whether the seller will not add more for a lesser amount “*Won’t you put bonus for me?*” This is a question asked by the buyer to remind the seller that he or she needs to be treated well so that the buyer will come back.

The use of honorifics as a marketing strategy by the Osa-ahia

Honorifics have become a marketable tool for the Osa-ahia in a bit to persuade, convince and redirect their intended customers to patronize their wares. Instances of such honorifics are replete in the analysis below. The term “*Nwunye di ya*” can be translated to mean “Her husband’s wife”. The aim of giving such a title to a total stranger in a market setting is just to make the person feel comfortable, responsible and accommodated in such an environment. Another form of honorific is “*Nwanyima*”, which translates to “beautiful lady”, whether the person is beautiful or ugly, it becomes immaterial where she has been addressed in such honorific terms, the tendency to purchase from the buyer is very high. Here the seller of the goods gives positive attributes the buyer with such a beautiful title. Another honorific used by the Osa-ahia is “*Mama*” or *Nne*”. This means my mother. In African setting, the term *Mama* is symbolic. By calling the buyer “*Nne*” my mother, it touches on respect, cordiality and motherly affection. The seller uses such a motherly term to draw affection and by extension sympathy from the customer. The expression also carries emotional blackmail to bring the buyer to his or her shop for patronage. The next honorific form is “*Nnem*” meaning my dear. This again comes with affection but the language is mainly for business without any form of cordiality. The masculine version of that is “*Nwoke m*”, and in the Nigerian parlance, it means “my man”, which is a reference to one’s close pal or pally but it is used here honorifically to cause affection, bring about close-ties and subsequently lead to a business transaction. The expression “*Okwulu Ora*” can be translated as “the one who speaks for the public”, or “a public speaker” and it is intended as a praise for one’s oratory skills. That is, one who speaks impeccably and with wisdom. “*Aka egbuchionwa*” could be translated as “Hands cannot shroud the moon”. My father’s younger brother was given the appellation because he became financially successful at a young age.

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The praise name made his actual name, “Donatus”, less known. “Ana agba agumgba” is a praise name in the form of a question: could a tiger be wrestled with? Being a rhetorical question, it leaves the bearer with the pride of being menacing to rivals and cannot be challenged without unwanted consequences.

Discussion of findings

This study is a sociolinguistic study of a market discourse that centres on the Osa-ahia communicative strategies adopted by the Igbo businessmen. We adopted three sociolinguistic concepts: Speech community, social networking, and power dynamics, to carry out the analysis in the speech community. In the analysis, we grouped the data into three segments: speech community, social networking, and power dynamics. We classify the data in the table below as falling within the sociolinguistic domain of the speech community. This is because the data describes the specific Igbo group’s communicative strategies that they use in conducting their daily business activities. There is a mixture of slang, jargon that are peculiar to the Osa-ahia speech community. Their specialty in the slang and jargon they have developed helps to serve their marketing purpose. In this paper, examine the relationship that exists in their socialisation and identity construction in the marketing discourse of this group of people. There are linguistic choices adopted by the Osa-ahia group of marketers that fall within a sociolinguistic milieu such as persuasive discourses which play a dominant role in the speech community data constituting a major element in the discourse pattern of the interactions that control the business of marketing used by the Osa-ahia marketers.

Conclusion

This study falls within the sociolinguistic ambit of domains of language use, with a specific focus on the marketplace interaction or market discourse. This approach to language exposes how the use of language varies depending on the available social factors. By domains of language, we mean the specificity of linguistic choices that are adopted in a speech community depending on the social context, setting or the relationship between the interlocutors depending on their linguistic choices. The study was carried out within a speech community of Igbo market traders and their linguistic adaptations to attract customers to their wares. This was done by describing the choice of the language of the middlemen known as Osa-ahia, a group

of Igbos who have no businesses of their own but who play active roles in the marketing of goods in the marketing place. We anchored the study on sociolinguistics due to its closeness to societal activities from a language perspective. The study reveals that linguistic creativity is a marketing tool and a form of advertisement for the survival of any business in an evolving world, using the Osa-ahia syndrome as a paradigm. The study reveals that the ability of the Osa-ahia to convince the customer to buy such goods by adding a particular amount to the real value of the price gives them an advantage because they are not paid for their services. Their money comes by means of an infusion of a price to the market value. In a bid to convince their customers, they make use of expressions that often convey nuanced meanings that facilitate smooth transactions and build relationships.

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