

IGBIRRA NOTES AND WORD-LIST

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Igbirra is a Kwa language of the Niger-Congo group. It is spoken by about 180,000 people in Kabba Province, Nigeria, on both sides of the Niger, near the Niger-Benue confluence. The principal population centre is Okene, a town in which well over half the tribe now live. This paper is concerned mainly with presenting data on the speech of natives of the Okene area; but it also includes a word list collected by R. E. Bradbury of an Igbirra dialect spoken in Igara, a village twenty miles to the south in the midst of Afemai country. Only typographical changes have been made in this word list; I do not know how precisely it represents a phonemic notation.

'Igbirra' is the form used in most Nigerian government publications. The spelling 'Igbira' is used by Westermann and Bryan (1952) who classify it as part of the Nupe group of Kwa languages. Westermann (1927) bases his classification mainly on the word lists in Clarke (1848) and Koelle (1854), and on the Igbirra primer by Coomber (1866, not seen).

PHONOLOGY

I have described the phonology of Igbirra in a section of the 1960 Report of the Phonetics Department, University of Edinburgh, on 'The Specification of Speech Sounds by means of Acoustic Parameters'. A revised version of this material is being prepared for publication.

The major phonological contrasts in Igbirra are illustrated by the material in Table 1. This table shows the approximate English meaning of the complete set of monosyllabic verb stems (the imperative forms) arranged according to initial consonant (20 possibilities listed in column one), vowel (9 possibilities shown across the top of the table) and lexical tone (three possibilities shown as: high ' ; mid unmarked; low `). Thus the entries in column a, row n indicate that there are Igbirra words ná, na, nà having the approximate meanings 'tear', 'open', 'sell'. (This is, incidentally, the only set of three monosyllabic words distinguished solely by tone.)

Table 1 also shows the division of the words into two groups according to the rules of vowel harmony, which condition the form of pronouns and modifiers accompanying verbs. The forms used with the verbs in the left half of Table 1 are shown in the upper half of Table 2; those used with the other verbs are shown in the lower half of this table. Thus 'he sweeps' is óhí; and 'he calls' is 5hì.

The operation of the vowel harmony rules extends to polysyllabic verb stems and accompanying modifiers. In fact, all Igbirra words, whatever their grammatical category, contain vowels which are members of either the group i, e, a, o, u or the group ɪ, ɛ, a, ɔ, ɔ. The vowel a is common to both groups; but there is no uncompounded word containing both lax vowels and tense vowels (if we say that a is neither tense nor lax).

In addition to the contrasts shown in Table 1, there is also a feature of vowel length, which can be observed in pairs of words such as ááhu 'nose' – ahú 'wind'; and èèhu 'five' – ehí 'sweat'.

At the moment I have only a rough idea of the functioning of the tonal system. The lexical use of tone is exemplified in the word lists which follow. Tone is also used

