

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 ʒhì.

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, ɒ. 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 àáhu '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

TABLE I
MONOSYLLABIC VERB STEMS IN IGBIRRA

	i	e	o	u	ɪ	ε	a	ɔ	ə
p	/' - \'						compress		
b	/' - \'		be old				bring up dig		
t	/' - \'		arrange	beat		disgrace	tie	pick	send
d	/' - \'			reach		hide	finish		
c	/' - \'			spoil		loose	cut	bring	
j	/' - \'	bite					agree	chase	
k	/' - \'	collapse			germinate				
g	/' - \'				be glad				
m	/' - \'			cut	wait				
n	/' - \'						get out say		salute
	/' - \'			be late					war
	/' - \'						praise		
	/' - \'			shut		sow			complete
	/' - \'	extinguish							
	/' - \'				make		be born	measure	
	/' - \'	throw sharpen					tear open sell		attend
	/' - \'			clean					

ny	/			have		hit	
	\					quarter	
ɲw	/						enter
	\					untie	
v	/	be ripe		lose	heal	come	remain
	\						return
s	/			die	give, take		tie
	\	want				come true	sleep
z	/	expect	be well		pain		catch
	\	filter			walk	agree	teach
hw	/						boil
	\			excell			grow
w	/			fall down			hear
	\		promise	swell			kill
r	/	see			eat		
	\		think		win	be agile	
y	/	steal				know	
	\	refuse	understand				
h	/	weave	excrete	drink	call	open	drive
	\	sweep	find		buy	be stunted	wake up

(Note: the list of consonants is not complete as the rare items ɲ, sw, zw occur in only a few words, none of which is a monosyllabic verb.)

TABLE 2

VOWEL HARMONY IN IGBIRRA VERBAL PREFIXES

	I	you	we	he	they	used with
indefinite	mé	wé	yé	ó	é	verb stems
continuing	mée	wée	yée	ée	éye	containing
completed	mesyó	wesyó	yesyó	osyó	esyó	vowels:
intended	mívé	úvé	yívé	óvé	évé	i, e, o, u
indefinite	má	wá	yá	ó	é	used with
continuing	máa	wáa	yáa	áa	éya	verb stems
completed	masyó	wasyó	yasyó	ɔsyó	esyó	containing
intended	mɪvá	ɔvá	yɪvá	ɔvá	ɛvá	ɪ, ɛ, ɔ, ɔ

(Note: the compound sy = [ʃ].)

grammatically. Questions are formed by an extra high tone (marked ') on the pronoun: mánaá 'I tear it' – mánáa 'Am I to tear it?'. Negative forms also have an extra high tone on the pronoun; but there is in addition a change in the vowel: mǎénáa 'I did not tear it'. Negative questions have a high fall-rise (or a rise-fall-rise) on the pronoun: mááánaani 'Am I not tearing it?'.

I must stress that these few notes on the grammatical function of tone are offered as tentative explanations only. As the examples quoted show, I cannot account for many points, such as the apparent change in the tone of the verb stem. The whole problem of systematising the grammatical use of tone requires much further investigation.

The complexity of the tonal data is illustrated by Figure 1, which shows the actual pitches in a number of recorded phrases. The analyses were made on the sound spectrograph at University College, Ibadan. The twelve phrases all involve the pronoun *ma* 'I', the verb stem *na* in its three meanings 'tear, open, sell', and the indirect object a 'it'. (Forms involving the stem *na* in its meaning 'go' were not considered since in this case there can be no direct object.) The segmental phonemes in each of the first nine phrases are *mana*. The last three phrases, which are included because they provide additional evidence concerning the conjugation of these three verbs, differ from the first nine phrases in that the first vowel is long, and there is a final particle *ni*, which this informant pronounces as [n]. The boundaries between the segmental phonemes in each phrase are marked by short vertical lines. The frequency scale is shown on the right of the figure.

It is quite clear that all these utterances have different meanings. The informant was able to identify each phrase correctly without the aid of any context. This was checked by replaying the recording with the phrases in a different order. Furthermore he used almost exactly the same pattern of pitch changes when he repeated all the phrases except two on a separate occasion. The curves showing the analyses of this second lot of phrases are marked by dotted lines on the figure.

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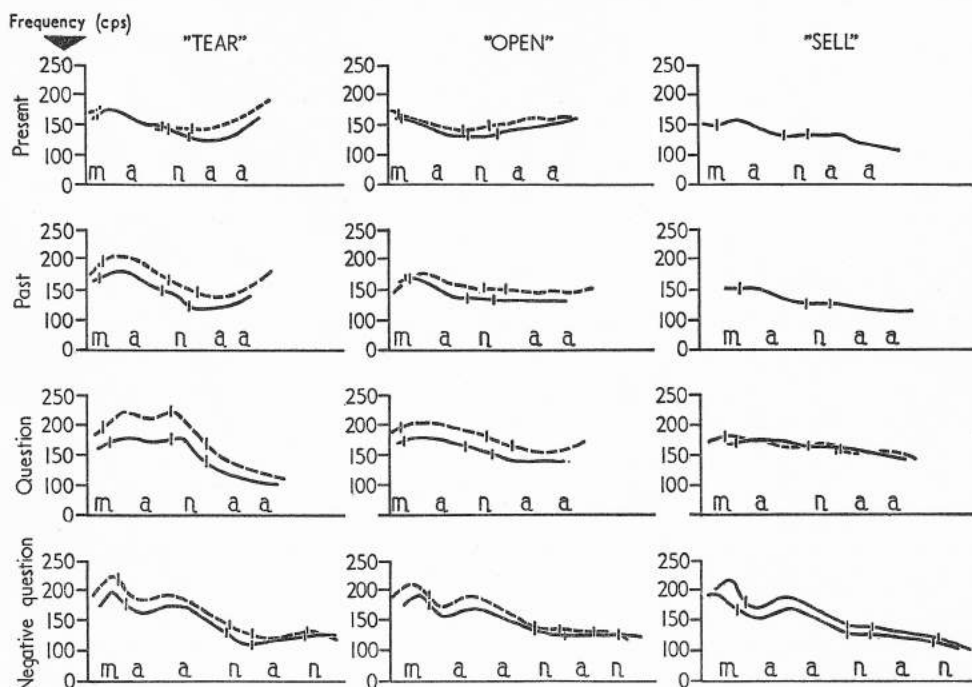


FIGURE 1. The fundamental frequency during 12 Igbirra phrases (solid curves), and during repetitions of ten of these phrases on a separate occasion (dashed curves). The short vertical lines on each curve mark the boundaries between the segmental phonemes. The data were obtained from spectrographic analyses made in the Phonetics Laboratory at the University of Ibadan.

WORD-LISTS

The Swadesh 100 word-list (see Hymes, 1960), together with the same 100 words of the Igara dialect is as follows. The Igara material was collected by R. E. Bradbury, of the Benin Historical Research Scheme, who has kindly allowed me to use it.

English	Igbirra (Okene)	Igara
1. I	èml	èml
2. thou	èwò	èò
3. we	èyì	èì
4. this	ɔ́nɔ́nɔ́	ɔ́nɔ́nɔ́
5. that	ònò	ɔ́nɔ́
6. who	éne OR áná (depending on vowel harmony rules)	enɔ́vì
7. what	s-vowel (vowel depends on the vowel in the verb)	sɛ́nɔ́vì (sɛ́nɛ́v'ònɔ́nɔ́ = 'What is this?')
8. not	à'à (as an interjection; otherwise by intonation)	zé
9. all	ab-vowel (vowel depends on the vowel in the noun)	èì

10. many	óróró	rùró
11. one	ònyí	ònyá
12. two	εεά	εά
13. big	óbányí	óbání
14. long	ógòdò	gòdò
15. small	ówèyí	ówéì
16. woman	ονεέ	ònyènè
17. man	ονορώ	ònórú
18. person	òzà	òzà
19. fish	ìvòvò	isényi
20. bird	ínómí	ùnómí
21. dog	irezí	irèzí
22. louse	ihíámá	ishámá
23. tree	òcì	ócí
24. seed	ihú	ifine
25. leaf	àvì	àvé
26. root	èpà (èpòcì = root of tree)	èpà (èpòcì)
27. bark	ìgùha (ìguhòcì)	èkàrà mócì
28. skin	òp(a)éηwá (= hide of body)	òpéηó
29. flesh	uye	ùyè (not animal)
30. blood	anyá	ányá
31. bone	écókò	òcókó
32. palm oil	àηwè	àn wè
33. egg	àjé	àjè
34. horn	étópà	ópánè
35. tail	oomù	oómù
36. feather	asísé	àsísé
37. hair	εεγí	èyè
38. head	uresó	èrésú
39. ear	òtós	òtós
40. eye	èyí	ìrí
41. nose	àáhi	àshéshè
42. mouth	irenu	ìrénú
43. tooth	anyí	aínyé
44. tongue	urará	érará
45. claw	igegè	àpàrigègè
46. foot	ahò	ùfù
47. knee	ìdùjku	ùdùkú
48. hand	òvós	oónvò
49. belly	ìné	èné
50. neck	ορωκó	óbé
51. breast	urevá	èrévá
52. heart	—	òtótórómá
53. liver	ayí	ài
54. drink	hú	fú
55. eat	rí	ré
56. bite	cé	dà

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57. see	ré	rè
58. hear	wó	wú
59. know	ye	yé
60. sleep	sò	swárá
61. die	sú	sú
62. kill	wò	wù
63. swim	hényí	fényì
64. fly	hirà	shírà
65. walk	zòsè	zúsè
66. come	vé	vé
67. lie	títé	sùtété
68. sit	yáatò	yátó
69. stand	kòeté	dìné
70. give	sí	sé
71. say	kà	kà
72. sun	oyì	óyé
73. moon	ohwé	oòfé
74. star	ozòmì	oòzòmì
75. water	ényí	ényí
76. rain	óríhí	òrìshí
77. stone	irétá	irétá
78. sand	ezi	ézi
79. earth	eté	été
80. cloud	èguhí	oòvùrùkútù
81. smoke	àréyí	àréyí
82. fire	irá	érá
83. ash	átító	átétó
84. burn	ríra	ré
85. path	ozè	ózè
86. mountain	atába	èrésófá
87. red	ónívì	ónívì
88. green }	érééré	—
89. yellow }		
90. white	ónvónvó	ónvónvú
91. black	ójoji	ódjódjì
92. night	ìrahó	èráfóo
93. hot	ḡwórá	ḡwórá
94. cold	hónenè	ófuófòo
95. full	hí	òòshí
96. new	ówòwà	ówòwà
97. good	ózóza	ózózà
98. round	—	yóròtò
99. dry	wò	wénwání
100. name	iréha	èreshá

On the basis of the evidence of these two lists it would appear that the Igara dialect is much the same as the main form of Igbirra; except that Igara has f or sh in place of h. It may also have fewer vowels; although most of the differences here suggest that the

transcription of Igara may not be phonemic. Thus, in the Okene form of Igbirra, word initial *ɪ* often sounds very like [e]. This may account for Igara transcriptions such as *éràrè* 'tongue', where Okene Igbirra has *ɪrɪrè*. (This same confusion certainly accounts for a local spelling of the name of the tribe as 'ebirra'. Many of the literate Igbirra, like the author of a recently published book of Igbirra sayings 'Anebirra Ka', are obviously influenced by the seven vowel system of Yoruba. They do not recognise the possible necessity of the two extra vowels *ɪ* and *ɔ*. This is hardly surprising, since these vowels rarely contrast with *i*, *e* and *o*, *u* owing to the rules of vowel harmony. The matter of the number of vowels in Igbirra is discussed at length in my forthcoming article on Igbirra phonology.)

I have collected a number of other word lists for Igbirra. The following are part of a word list originally devised by W. E. Welmers. All the items are (roughly) nouns in an indefinite form.

animal (bush)	uuyè	thorn	ikéyi
animal (domestic)	ɔsɔpà	tortoise	ɔpaká
arrow	ɔpà	town (whole)	ékòrà
axe	írágà	town (section of)	ubóró
bag	acúcù	vine OR rope	obó
basket	ùji	wild hog	ihéhere
bee	ehó	woman	ɔne
bow	ókítà	worm	ukukúrími
canoe	epa	year	irayí
cat	ɔvancákò	cassava	ecákà
chicken	ozúðhwè	clay	ómópà
chief	òhínsyí	cloth	aci
child	ozíówèyí	cloud OR fog	eguhí
cow (bush)	ɔno	dirt	idɔtí
cow (Fulani)	ímárù	firewood	ɔkò
crocodile	agógò	food	isá
crowd	írágò	gourd	okokó
cutlass	ohwóò	hill	atábà
day	ékóhì	hole (into)	asì
elephant	ódóbà	house	irehí
farm	aré	knife (any kind)	ohwóò
fly	íisì	knife (small)	aberí
goat	evó	leopard	ɔdómí
sheep	evó	lizard	ávòtá
slave	ɔríhì	load	enyá
snake	ewò	mat	owenè
spear	ɔhá	matter	íréyí
spider	ahíhi	monkey (large)	ɔvagò
spindle	ɔyibene	monkey (small)	òncérè
spirit (good)	òzú	month	ohwé
spirit (evil)	arujénò	mortar	íne
story	itópá	palm tree	ɔɔcì
thing	isá	pestle	òcínè

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piece	ejíjì	rice	izinkáhà
place	aha	salt	anòano
pot	ónókò	thatch	avírehì
raft or bridge	ígádà	trouble	ureyì
rat	usú	wind	ahì
scorpion	ukù	work	ókórò
forest	urukú	yams	enò
God	ohómóríhì	back	urema
grass	aví	body	egwó
honey	éhó	face	eyí
iron	ényóse	father	àdà
light	írà	faeces	therè
meat	úye	mother	ònyí
medicine	ahòò	saliva	até
money	ékèhì	urine	ehényí
mud	òvò	voice	ògwe

TEXT

One of the Igbirra folk tales which I have recorded on a number of occasions is the story of the Hare and the Elephant. The version which follows is in a systematic phonemic transcription, except for the tone marks, which show the pitch changes in a particular tape recording. I suspect that many of the variations in pitch are conditioned by the phonetic context, and so should not have been marked in this way. The spacing of the text has been arranged so as to enable items to be identified in the translation below. The blank spaces between groups of symbols have no phonetic (and probably no phonemic) significance; the text should be read so that pauses occur only at places marked by | (short pause) and by || (long pause).

I have not yet been able to understand many points in the grammar. Consequently the interpretation of the text should be regarded with caution. Some of the most dubious items are marked by a following question mark; but I am also uncertain of several other points. Further help in the understanding of the elided forms (any group ending in a consonant) may be obtained from the table of monosyllabic verb stems and from the word lists.

ir ádéjì ònr òdóbá||

THE HARE AND THE ELEPHANT

ekóh ònyará| adéjì ɔ k ódóbá nà| d ɔ kà|
(day a certain hare he to elephant went and he said

ONCE UPON A TIME THE HARE WENT TO THE ELEPHANT AND SAID

ó ny ékèhì| o si rér ò ni||
he has money he (aux.) lend him (sentence marker)

THAT HE HAD MONEY AND HE SHOULD LEND HIM SOME.

d ódóbá kà| ɔ na ohwé d ɔ vâ vé n||
and elephant said he go tomorrow and he return will (sentence marker)

THE ELEPHANT SAID HE SHOULD GO AND COME BACK TOMORROW.

d ádéjì va réma nù|| ɔ́jón ɔ nw éhi| d ɔ́ nētu|
and hare return back (sentence marker) when he enter home and he found
THE HARE WENT AWAY. WHEN HE GOT HOME HE FOUND THAT

enw ázy òny áni nù|| d ɔ́ny áni kà|
body paining mother his (sentence marker) and mother his said
HIS MOTHER WAS ILL. AND HIS MOTHER SAID

ɔ na d ékèhì va yò nù|| d ɔ́ k ɔ́ni ka|
he go bring money return her (sentence marker) and she to him said
HE MUST GO AND BRING SOME MONEY BACK FOR HER. SHE TOLD HIM

ɔ ɪ r ékèhì| òmá n óhwó|
she not see money before that tomorrow
THAT IF HE DID NOT GET MONEY FOR HER BEFORE THAT TIME TOMORROW,

ɔní zí nín íkut ànì|| d ádéjì va réma
herself expect they grave her and hare return back
THEY COULD EXPECT HER TO BE IN HER GRAVE. THE HARE WENT BACK

k ɔ́dɔ́bàn nù|| d ɔ́dɔ́bá kà|
to elephant (sentence marker) and elephant said
TO THE ELEPHANT. THE ELEPHANT ASKED

ɔmé rési zi ɔ| ay ɔ́ si kw ɔ́dɔ́ba|
what again (?) expect he liver he make salute elephant
WHAT DID HE WANT AGAIN. THE ELEPHANT WAS ANNOYED,

d ɔ́ c étòpà rì ò nù|| d ádéjì va rémán
and he bite hoof (?) him (sentence marker) and hare return back
AND HE KICKED HIM. THE HARE WENT BACK

ehí| né tu k ɔ́ny án ɔ wù sù nù||
home (aux.) reach to mother his she fall down die (sentence marker)
TO FIND HIS MOTHER DEAD.

d ádéjì kà| áyiv ɔ́ny áni| òne nyára
and hare said not only (?) mother his but also (?) a certain
THE HARE SAID THAT NOT ONLY HIS MOTHER BUT ALSO SOMEONE ELSE

o ve i sú| d ó zùni d ɔ́kákara| d ɔ́ ka| e wé
he (aux.) (?) die and he ran to crab and he said if you (?)
WOULD DIE. HE RAN TO THE CRAB AND SAID "IF YOU

sɔ́ ékèhì| ewání d ɔ́dɔ́bà|| ay ɔ́ si kw ɔ́dɔ́ba|
want money you go (?) elephant liver he make salute elephant
WANT MONEY YOU GO TO THE ELEPHANT." THE ELEPHANT WAS ANNOYED

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d ́ c ́t̀p̀r̀ ò ǹ || d ́k̀k̀r̀
and he bite hoof (?) him (sentence marker) and crab
AND HE KICKED HIM. THE CRAB

cakah̀ ǹ || d ́d̀j̀ k̀k̀ẁ aj̀ ǹ |
crush (sentence marker) and hare then happy (sentence marker))
WAS CRUSHED. THEN THE HARE WAS HAPPY.

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