

Investigating Lexical Contrast In The Varieties Of Alago Dialect

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ABSTRACT

Dialectal variation is a common phenomenon among language groups. Dialect variation among Alago speakers of Doma, Keana and Obi. This paper seeks to shed more light on differences among Alago speakers of Doma, Keana and Obi ranging from the comparative analysis of the lexical items elicited from the native speakers as well as oral interview. The study is also aimed at making these dialects meet the challenges posed by Nigeria's of 1999 constitution National Language Policy on Education with regard to Mother Tongue Education. The descriptive research methodology was used in carrying out this research. This method is adopted to provide adequate information on the linguistic events that led to the variation. At the end of the investigation, the results showed that the similarities that exist between the dialects are clear evidence of genetic relationship. The evaluation of the results also indicates that migration, location and influence of other neighbouring languages are the major factors that precipitate the breed of dialects in Alago. The study proffered solutions aimed at harnessing the fabrics of Alago for social interaction and oneness in the language. This research shall be of great importance to dialectologists, researcher on comparative study of language and language policy makers.

Keywords: Dialects, Lexical Contrast & Alago



1.0 Introduction

The word 'Alago' refers to both the people and the language spoken by the same ethnic group Joseph (2005:1). The language, Alago according to Crozier and Blench (1992) belongs to the Idomoid group 'B' of Benue-Congo Subgroup of Niger-Congo. Alago is among the nineteen (19) Nasarawa State, Benue-Congo family sub-group and are said to be of Kwararafa Origin.

The demise of this famous empire in the 13th century saw the dispersing of its components nationalities which include Idoma, Alago, Jukum among others (Elijah 2007:39). The sojourn of Alago took them from south of Wukari to Idah where they assisted Attah of Igala in his many wars against the Benin Kingdom. However, dispute erupted between Alago and the Idah ruling class on the establishment of Alago dynasty that will pave way for their ascension on the throne of Idah. Consequent upon this, the Alago left Idah again and moved northward across River Benue to Ogede (Obasidoma) in present Keana Local Government under the leadership of Osabonya, Akyana, Osoho, Ibi,

Osheshi and Owena. Others were Osuko, Asakio and Agaza who followed later. Ogede, Akyana discovered the economic potentials of the area and stayed to find the present day Keana. In the course of time, other Alago leaders relocated to settle in Doma, Ososoho, Ibi, Alosi, Owena, Obi, Assakio and Agaza respectively, Keana perspective (2005). According to Campbell-Irono et al., (1965), the time of migration saw the movement of the various Alago leaders together, spreading the same form of language. These leaders, on account of time, found the various settlements of Alago speakers. However, research has it that Alago obviously witnessed a horizontal variation between the respective speakers of the various founders through the time. These variations range from pronunciation (phonology), vocabulary (morphology), structure (syntax) and meaning (semantics). These differences, however, often hamper mutual intelligibility which gives birth to what is technically referred to as 'dialect cluster' Whereas in some cycle, there seems to be mutual intelligibility despite the differences among the speakers.

Language variation is an observed phenomenon found in every language of the world. Variation is far from being a defect of a language. Although it is true that human language is a governed system in which huge amount of creativity is one of the important characteristics of language. Variation is a neutral operation, and linguists have not been able to prove that non-standard language (dialect) is 'less enough' by means of communication than what is called standard language. Variation therefore does not make a dialect less in quality or rank. The problem is in the speech community's attitude of the speakers of these dialects. The speech community is responsible to give a social rank to the different forms of language. The matter of stigmatizing and elevating some speakers depends largely on the background of the speakers and the abilities which is based on the selecting and pronouncing of some words.

Every language has its varieties or dialects thus when a certain variety of a language is used according to the users, then, it is called a dialect. Dialects are normally determined by speaker's geographical background. Chambers (1998) defines dialect as "a regional or social variety of a language characterized by its own phonological, syntactical, and lexical properties". If we take English as an example in Britain, there are quite a number of dialects which differ from each other according to the geographical area for instance the Scottish dialect, Yorkshire dialect and Lancashire dialect among others. Dialect is also a distinctive form of a language which is associated with some social regional, group and ethnic factors but differs from other varieties of a language by its own linguistic features such as vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. Dialect in classical form is a different way of saying the same thing where it reflects the social structure as gender, or class origin. Languages are used in different forms, different situations and for different purposes. This use of language has given birth to various forms known as dialect.

According to Ladeford (1965:84), a language variety is "a subset of formal and or substantial features which correlate regularly with a particular type of socio-institutional feature". A language can, thus be defined as a body of words and system used for communication among people of a particular nation or area. This definition only scratches the surface of language as a whole, but it is essential in the understanding of the afore-mentioned term.

A dialect then, is a variety of language that is

distinguished, from other varieties of the same language by features of phonology, grammar and vocabulary and based on its use by a group of speakers who are set off from others geographically or socially. However, there has been some 'controversies as to the relatedness or otherwise between these two varieties. This paper also sets out to examine these varieties and establish the linguistic status of the varieties that exist in Obi, Keana and Doma Local Government Areas of Nasarawa State. The work tends to investigate the dialectal variations in and the variable that exist in Obi, Keana and Doma as case study. The aim of this paper is to assess the levels of intelligibility among them with their distinctive features.

2.0 Conceptual Review

2.1 Dialectology

Dialectology is a sub-field of linguistics that emerged in the 19th Century with the development in Western Europe. Labov (1972:35) sees dialectology "as the study of dialects, that is, their history, differences of form and meaning, interrelationship, distributions and broadly, their spoken form as distinct from their literary forms". He added that the discipline recognises all variations within the bound of a given language. Webster English Dictionary (1995:263) defines dialectology as a scientific study of linguistic dialects or the variations in a language; it further states that "a set of systematic methods of gathering evidence of dialect differences is referred to as dialectology". Chambers and Trudgill (1998) are of the opinion that "dialectology is the study of the way language, dialect and accent vary from place to place, social group to social group and time to time". This means that the linguistic aspect that looks upon the differences that set one community of speakers apart from another is known as dialectology. Haugen (1966:924) says a "dialect is a form of language or those used by illiterates which is 'sub-standard', 'incorrect' or 'corrupt' form of a language". This has a support from Chambers and Trudgill (1980) who also argue that "dialect is a sub-standard low status and often rustic form of a language generally associated with the peasantry or the middle". Hudson (1980) also has it that "a dialect is what one speaks habitually within a larger language group. It is regionally identified by particular set of words and grammatical structures". "He also maintains that dialects are varieties of language which are not used in formal speech, that is, whether a variety is called a language or a dialect it depends on the prestige one thinks it has..." As against this, Fromkin (1974:8) holds a view that, "dialect refers to the various kinds of language which may vary in vocabulary, grammar as

well as pronunciation". Richard (2004:276) supports Fromkin as having no linguistic valid judgment and further asserts that it is simple, 'a form a language'. It is therefore necessary for one to have native intuition of a language or dialect to be able to express his world view, ideas, interest and most importantly to be understood by other users of the language or dialect.

From the foregoing, it is pertinent to say that dialect is a common phenomenon to all languages as noted in Omachonu (2000:16). He argues that "all human languages have dialects and every speaker of a language is a speaker of a dialect of that language". He further states that the linguistic experience of an individual which makes one speaker slightly different from the other, as in case of Alago speakers in, Doma, Keana and Obi, is called *Idiolect*; the unique individual speech pattern. A group of similar *idiolects* which differs from others in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary is called *dialects*. This suggests that a dialect is inherent in language and survives in language with the capacity to 'metamorphose' into a language when the degree of mutual intelligibility with other varieties agrees.

Bamgbose (2002) says whenever people from different regions come together, conversation frequently turn on language differences. People care about different words for familiar things or different meanings for familiar words and also differing pronunciation give rise to curiosity. Dialect in the words of Richard (2004) indicates that "speakers -manifest some variations in the way they use elements of language".

Some people think of dialect as sub-standard varieties of a language spoken only by low status groups-illustrated by such comments as "He speaks correct English, without a trace of dialect". Comment of this kind fails to recognise that Standard English is as much a dialect as any other variety- though it is one to which the society has given more prestige. Everyone speaks a dialect whether urban or rural, standard or nonstandard, upper class or lower class (Crystal 2006). These variations can come about due to some status that dialect might have acquired along the way or geographical barriers. This is what gives rise to social, regional, occupational and geographical dialects which were discussed below.

I) Social Dialect

Social dialect is based on one's social status. It is a dialect that is peculiar to social class and depends on the social standing and status of the speakers and

sometimes ethnic background (Brook 1973). A clear case of this in the United Kingdom is the Queen's English. The Queen's English is spoken by the elites, that is, the upper class (nobles) who can be said to have attained certain position in the society. The dialect sets them apart from the "cream of the society". Two most easily distinguished social dialects put by Labov (1972) are: the educated dialect which is the variety used by most well-educated people who fill positions of influence and responsibility, whereas uneducated dialect is a variety used by people whose schooling is limited and who perform the unskilled labour in the community. Since educated dialect is the standard variety, it tends to be given prestige and regard of the government agencies, the political parties, the press, law, etc.

ii) Occupational Dialect

Language peculiar to the members of a group, especially in an occupation; obviously, Jargon is often specific to occupation- engineers, architects and lawyers will have completely different lexicons at their disposal. This variety of a language that signals the profession a person comes from what Encyclopedia Britannica (2014) termed occupational dialect. This also has some application in relation to a person is social background (class dialect) or occupational dialect.

iii) Geographical Dialect

This is simply a dialect that rises as a result of barriers caused by borders distinguishing one village from the other in a particular direction, and if we observe the dialects spoken by these people, we will discover the variety which is phonetically different from other previous varieties observed. The speakers of Alago in Assakio, Doma, Keana, Obi, etc have an accent that is distinctive to them, just as speakers of Hausa from Kano, Katsina, Sokoto, etc. have accent that are distinctive to them, and this is due to geographical location.

iv) Regional Dialect

This comes about due to the movement of a group of people from their original environment to a new place base on political, cultural or socio-economic reasons. This group of speakers may show differences in pronunciation, choice of words for objects and things around them even the structure of their speech pattern (Brook 1973) which seems to be the obvious case with Alago speakers in various settlements. Regional dialects according to Encyclopedia (1996), normally result from the use of a language by

geographically separated communities who differ in natural and, perhaps social environment and who have little or no opportunity to communicate with one another. Differences between regional dialects are most noticeable in pronunciation. Hence, one might recognise Doma accent distinct from Obi accent. It, therefore, means that divergence has brought about spatial differentiation between native speakers of a language.

v) Accent

Accent usually refers to phonetic or phonological distinctions. Accent is characterised by speech that convey information about a speaker's dialect. It may reveal the part or region the speaker grew up or to which sociolinguistic group the speaker belongs. For instance, a speaker of any variety of Alago will recognise or be able to place any speakers of Alago by their accents to their respective speech communities. However, this identification is not only limited to the speakers of the same language rather across linguistic. For example, a Mada or Migili speaker can through their accent trace the place they grew or place them in particular sociolinguistic group.

vi) Variation

Variation according to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of current English (7th edition) Edition is said to be a thing that is different from other things in the same general group depending on the region or time of the year. So, a language differs or varies from one geographical location, regional, social status and/or occupation to the other depending on the influence of the neighbouring language. A language variation is what is termed "dialectal variation" in sociolinguistics.

Green and Igwe (1967) did a research in Igbo language on the same titled "dialectal variation in Igbo language", with the collection of lexical items of the dialects and their comparison as their methodology. They finally established that there were five dialects in Igbo and further established the corresponding forms in the dialects showing that there is no absolute intelligibility in the dialects. It cannot be far from the truth that Green and Igwe's work on dialectal variation is highly related to the present study only that, there is no absolute intelligibility in the dialects as that of the present work and this can be said that his five dialects are different languages due to lack of absolute intelligibility.

Dunstan (1969) carried out a "comparative analysis of Efik, Ibibio and Annang", spoken in Cross River State by collecting lexical items of the said languages. She reports that all dialects of Ibibio are mutually

intelligible with Efik. Annang, according to her, is closely related to Efik and both form a cluster of at least partially intelligible dialects.

Another research by Adetugbo (1982) was carried out in Yoruba. The researcher employed the lexical 'collection from regions, in fact, from individual status even. The result revealed that 'more than twenty-six varieties or dialects were found in Yoruba. However dialects in his study are seen as a result of individual social status as supported by Oyelaran (1987). In view of this, one can infer that the examples given above are more of accents than dialects making the example much different from the case of Alago.

In addition, Embugushiki (2005) also investigated the "dialectal variation in Eggon language". His analysis was based on the lexical items collected from the dialects for his research. The result revealed that about four dialects exist in Eggon and further asserts that the dialects emerged as a result of geographical and regional barriers, separating the speakers from each other. He maintained 'that mutual intelligibility exists among the dialects except for Mada-tara which is not mutually intelligible to other dialects. The study is also absolutely related to the present study.

3.0 Research Methodology

This research is a descriptive research where the researcher tried to describe the dialects of Alago. Alago according to NPC 2006, has a population of about 702,000 in Nasarawa, which as at today will be far more than that.. The lexical items for this comparative study were collected from Doma, Keana and Obi which are considered to have obvious variations, while other settlements of Alago are subsumed under the three major settlements. The use of oral interview (primary source), the choice of place for interview was left for respondents to decide, and a set of word-list was written in English language for translation into various dialects of the language by the helpers from each dialects for the purpose of comparative studies. The library-based evidence, referred to as secondary source involves the use of text-books, research works, related publications and other works which are also considered indispensable for the success of this study.

To get sample of the dialects, a set of word-list (which were culture-free words) was written in English language for translation in various dialects of Alago. The language helpers from each settlement were employed in the translation work. It is expedient to note that all the translations were considered typical of their respective dialects.

4.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

The basic concept of analysing variation among dialects is by illustrating on its more elaborate form. The data gathered for this study comprises of lexical forms elicited from native speakers from various dialects under consideration for comparative analysis, and a brief linguistic analysis of the processes inherent in the forms, where variation occurs. This will be shown for purpose of verifying the difference that exists between or within a language(s) depends on the dissimilarities of the linguistic items those languages or among the varieties of the language being examined. These

differences are determined at the level of pronunciation (phonology), the structure (syntax) and vocabulary (morphology). But for the purpose of this study, only morphological variation will be analysed.

4.1 Analogical Approach: Morphological Perspective

The study is narrowed down to the lexical items selected from a number of different word classes which paid more attention to words referring to numerals, parts of the body, environmental features and physical activities. These lexical elements are basic features common to all dialects and are void of words prone to cross-cultural, borrowing and adoption.

4.2 Analysis of Data showing Points of Similarities

Table 1: Similarities in the Obi, Doma and Keana Dialects of Alago

English words	Transcription	Obi dialect	Doma dialect	Keana dialect	Transcription
Rat	[ræt]	ìyu	ìyu	ìyu	[ìyu]
Food	[fu:d]	Òná	òná	òná	[òná]
Meat	[mi:t]	Èbé	èbé	èbé	[èbé]
You	[ju]	Àwò	àwò	àwò	[àwò]
Yam	[jæm]	ìshì	ìshì	ìshì	[ìshì]
Axe	[æks]	Ágá	ágá	ágá	[ágá]
Hot	[hɒt]	Kwàlá	kwàlá	kwàlá	[kwàlá]
Sun	[sʌn]	Ènò	ènò	ènò	[ènò]
See	[si:]	Má	má	má	[má]
Hand	[hænd]	Àbo	àbo	àbo	[àbo]

The above data show a pure case of lexical similarities and sounds correspondences in all the varieties under study which implies that the dialects are from the same language. When these words are used during conversation there is mutual intelligibility between one dialect and another. As could be observed, the lexical categories show mutual intelligibility with little or no

phonological and morphological differences.

4.3 Analysis of Data showing Points of Dissimilarities

In spite of the above similarities of lexical items and sounds correspondences displayed by the dialects, there are cases of obvious dissimilarities inherent in the dialects that show clear divergence from one another.

Table 2: The differences in the lexical items of the dialects of Alago with transcription

Obi dialect	Keana dialect	Doma dialect	Gloss
ónàsè [ʔnʔse]	ónàsè [ʔnʔse]	énògonse [énʔgʔnse]	Evening
gbá [gbá]	gbá [gbá]	gblá [gblá]	Imitation
ngá [ʔá]	miá [miá]	blé [blê]	Carry
mè [mè]	mè [mè]	mlè [mlè]	Swallow
ré [ré]	ré [ré]	lé [lé]	Eat

In the two tables above, a careful observation of the similarities exhibited by dialects provided a clear

instance of correspondences in the lexical items for concepts, especially between Obi and Keana speakers.

Table 3: The relationship in the lexical items between Obi and Keana speakers of Alago

Obi Dialect	Keana Dialect	Gloss
èyè [éjé]	èyè [éjé]	Down
ré [ré]	ré [ré]	Eat
òpà [òpà]	òpà [òpà]	Slippery
àhànu [àhànu]	àhànu [àhànu]	Teeth
ègba [ègba]	ègba [ègba]	Cry
èyi [èji]	èyi [èji]	Bee
zè [ze]	zè [zè]	Take

Despite the noticeable partial divergence attested the speakers of Obi and Keana dialects at certain point in

time speak the same dialect of the Alago. There are also cases of total divergence as shown in table below.

Table 4: Doma Dialect Words difference from Obi and Keana Dialects

Obi Dialect	Keana Dialect	Doma Dialect	English Word
okinà [ʔkinà]	okinà [akinà]	onosé [ʔnʔsé]	Younger
ikpiyase [ikpijásè]	ikpiyase [ikpijásè]	àwèpá [àwèpá]	Twenty
mio [miʔ]	rniomio [mio mia]	zeze [zeze]	Slowly
ègbá [égbá]	ègbá [ʔgbá]	jiku [dziku]	Cry
ngá [ʔá]	miã [mià]	blè [blè]	Carry
èyá [èjá]	ogúnu [ʔgúnu]	ogúnu [ʔdúnu]	Toilet

In table 4, words in Doma dialect are totally different from that of Obi and Keana dialects except item like [ogunu] toilet, that Keana dialect has the same as that of Doma dialect and this is due to Keana and Obi's proximity to each other. A general related dialects to show the degree of dissimilarities as exhibited above calls for a question. Historical facts attest to the divergence in lexical innovation and changes in these dialects are from time and also as a result of interference from languages within and outside the domain of Alago speakers.

4.4 Data Analysis of Oral Interview

Of the 70 people interviewed, 40 have "very perfect" knowledge of the language. 20 representing 28.57% had "fairly perfect" knowledge, while only 10 representing 14.28% have "not perfect" knowledge. It was observed that the category with "quite perfect" knowledge mostly comprises speakers whose age range from 51-60, while those who have "fairly perfect" knowledge were mostly those whose age range from 41-50 and those within 30-40 have "not perfect" knowledge. The criteria used to determine these were proverbs, interpretation of folk tales and fluency. 25 respondents out of the total of 70 which represent 35.71% belong to the category of 40-80 years. The majority of the respondents are in the category of 50-60. This is because of the facts that they are either native speakers of Alago or they acquired the language as mother tongue by being in the environment where Alago is being spoken right from birth. It was discovered from the study that 54.28% of the respondent do not understand all the dialects of Alago very well. The diversity and distinctions in Alago is not much as earlier shown in lexical items between Obi and Keana except for Doma dialect which has high degree of divergence. This may be due to the fact that the settlements of Doma are quite distant from Obi and Keana, hence the influence of Agatu on Doma dialect. Whereas 10% of the respondents attested that they do not understand other Alago from different settlements which could be as a result of lack of interaction between them.

The total number of respondents who agreed that their dialect is distinct from other dialects of Alago was 33 (47.14%), while 25(35.17%) said their dialect is not quite distinct from other dialects of Alago, whereas 12 (17.14%) of the respondents said their dialect is not distinct.

A careful observation of the positive responses revealed that those groups of respondents which say

"yes" come from Doma whose dialect is in variant compared to that which is spoken in Obi and Keana which under strict dialectal classification can be seen as almost one dialect. 25 respondents claimed that the difference is not quite sure. This could be associated to accent which is easily intelligible to any Alago speaker (besides Doma).

The study discovered from interview that 57.14% of the respondents ascribed the difference between the Alago speakers to migration seeing that Obasidoma was where the various Alago founders dispatched to find the various settlements. These respondents are not aware that borrowing, adoption or influences of other languages could cause changes in a language through time though unnoticeable. Hence, only 10 respondents are of the view that borrowing from other languages was the cause of the variations. They believed that a language cannot change except the speakers migrate to a different speech community. Finally, 20 respondents (28.57%) believed that variation in Alago is as a result of interference from other languages found in Alago community and their surroundings.

The findings from this study show that the contributory factors of the differences were as a result of migration, borrowing as well as the influence of other languages on Alago. It is to be noted that these factors exerted effects on the language which brought about variations in the language. Despite the multidialectal nature identified in this study, it was yet discovered that the speakers have a sense of belonging to a common language. This can be affirmed on the basis of her genetic origin hence, the sameness, similarities and sound correspondents in the lexical items.

From the observations made in analysis, it is evident that majority of the respondents proved that intelligibility among the dialects is mutual except in some cases where intelligibility is impeded when lexical items which are peculiar to a particular dialect is used in the process of interaction between the various dialects. The variation however, affects the repertoire of individual communication competence; this means that in some occasions, inter-dialectal communication has some constraint. In such a situations code-mixing takes charge of interaction.

The research further revealed that among the dialects identified in Alago language, no speech form has been reduced to standard form of the varieties. The inability

to do this by the language speakers is associated with conflict of interest, political differences, fear of domination from a dialect or quest for dialectal supremacy. But the factors in deciding on which dialect should be codified are obvious.

5.0 Conclusion

This study succeeded in researching into the variation inherent in the Doma, Obi and Keana dialects of Alago. It gives the geographical and historical background of the people and the linguistic situation among them, thus probing into the scenario that led to the variation in the language among many things. Based on the findings on the linguistic, social and cultural similarities among the speakers of the various dialects examined, it may be safe to conclude that dialects are "sisters" of the same parent language.

This study tried to find out whether variations exist in Alago, a language spoken in Doma, Obi and Keana which is one of the linguistic problems in Alago intensified in this study. The study also tried in identifying the reasons for the development of these dialects and their unique features with the aim of harmonizing the dialects for common goals to meet the challenges of the Nigerian's 1999 constitution on National Language policy on Education with regard to mother tongue education as cited by Ikeonsu and Nwadike (2005:6).

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