

PHONOLOGICAL VARIATION IN EZZA DIALECT OF IGBO: EXPLORING THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC VARIABLES

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Abstract

This study investigates the patterns of phonological variation in Ezaa., a dialect of the Igbo language predominantly spoken in Ezza North and Ezza South Local Government Areas of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Anchored on Labov's (1961) Variationist Theory, the research adopts a descriptive survey design to examine how social variables including age, social class, and geographical location, shape phonological differences among speakers. Data were elicited through structured oral interviews, intuitive introspection, and retrospective observation. Analysis reveals that Ezaa exhibits systematic variation in pronunciation that correlates with sociolinguistic variables. Younger speakers tend to substitute or delete certain phonemes in an attempt to approximate Standard Igbo pronunciation, while older speakers retain conservative phonological patterns that reflect traditional norms. Similarly, members of the educated and urban classes display innovative pronunciations influenced by contact with English, Nigerian Pidgin and Standard Igbo, unlike rural speakers who preserve the dialect's conservative features. Geographical proximity to other dialect areas also contributes to diffusion effects at the phonological level. The study concludes that phonological variation in Ezaa reflects both linguistic change and social differentiation, underscoring the dynamic relationship between language, identity and social structure. These findings have implications for Igbo dialectology, socio-phonetics and language preservation in multilingual Nigeria.

Keywords: Phonological variation; Ezaa dialect; Igbo language; sociolinguistics; age variation; Labovian theory.

1. Introduction

Language is not a static system but a living, evolving social phenomenon that reflects the identities, attitudes and interactions of its speakers. Across the world, linguistic variation occurs as a natural consequence of human diversity and social differentiation. Within multilingual nations such as Nigeria, where hundreds of indigenous languages and dialects coexist, variation is especially pronounced and serves as a key marker of ethnic and cultural identity (Opara & Mbagwu, 2021). The Igbo language, spoken predominantly in southeastern Nigeria, is one of the most multidialectal of the country's most spoken languages. Its numerous dialects, though mutually intelligible to varying degrees, exhibit noticeable distinctions in phonology, lexicon, and syntax.

One of the dialects of the Igbo language, Ezaa, spoken mainly in Ezza North and Ezza South Local Government Areas of Ebonyi State, represents a significant linguistic variety within the Abakaliki cluster of Igbo dialects. Over the years, Ezaa has undergone observable phonological shifts, particularly among younger speakers who are increasingly influenced by Standard Igbo, English, and Nigerian Pidgin. The

result is a gradual departure from traditional phonological forms toward more generalized or hybrid pronunciations. Understanding these changes is crucial for documenting the linguistic evolution of Ezaa as well as for appreciating the broader sociolinguistic processes that shape language use in southeastern Nigeria.

Language variation is caused by several sociolinguistic variables such as age, social class, gender, education, and geography, which interact with linguistic systems to produce identifiable patterns (Labov, 1966; Fasold, 1990). This study adopts Labov's Variationist framework to explore how these social variables influence phonological variation in the Ezaa dialect. By examining the relationship between age, social class and geographical location, this study uncovers systematic differences in pronunciation across Ezaa-speaking communities and to explain the social motivations behind such variations.

Scholars have long recognized that language variation is universal and inherent in all speech communities (Hudson, 1996; Labov, 1966). Within Igbo linguistics, studies have shown extensive dialectal diversity, where each dialect reflects the unique social and cultural realities of its speakers (Nwike, Nwagalaku, & Obiora, 2021). The Ezaa dialect, in particular, is noteworthy for its distinctive phonological structure characterized by consonantal clusters such as /dz/, /kf/, and /gv/, as well as diphthongs that distinguish it from Standard Igbo.

However, due to the spread of Standard Igbo through formal education, media and urbanization, younger speakers increasingly replace traditional Ezaa sounds with Standard Igbo or hybrid variants. For instance, older speakers may pronounce *madzu* (human being), while younger speakers tend to say *madu*, aligning with the Standard Igbo form. Such phonological substitutions point to ongoing linguistic change that is socially motivated. The current study thus provides a socio-phonological account of these developments within the Ezaa speech community.

The primary aim of this research is to analyze the phonological variations in the Ezaa dialect of Igbo and determine how sociolinguistic factors contribute to these differences. Specifically, the study examines the phonological variations in Ezaa in relation to age; investigates the influence of social class and geographical location on phonological variation in Ezaa; and identifies the social motivations and implications of phonological variation among Ezaa speakers. Consequently, the study is guided by the outlined research questions:

- i. What phonological variations exist between younger and older speakers of the Ezaa dialect?
- ii. How do social class and geographical location influence the phonological realization of Ezaa sounds?
- iii. What sociolinguistic factors account for the observed differences in pronunciation among Ezaa speakers?

More so, despite the rich linguistic diversity of the Igbo language, relatively few empirical studies have been conducted on the internal variation of its dialects, particularly those of the Abakaliki cluster. The Ezaa dialect, though widely spoken, is gradually losing some of its phonological distinctiveness due to social mobility, education and increased exposure to other dialects and languages. This shift has created an

intergenerational gap in pronunciation patterns, leading to mutual misunderstanding among Ezaa speakers of different age groups. Furthermore, linguistic diffusion resulting from contact with other dialects has blurred dialectal boundaries. Yet, there is little systematic research addressing how social variables shape these phonological variations. Without such documentation, key aspects of the dialect's identity may be lost over time. This study, therefore, addresses this gap by analyzing the sociolinguistic factors responsible for phonological variation in the Ezaa dialect.

2. Review of Related Literature

The study of language variation has long been central to sociolinguistic inquiry, particularly in understanding how social factors interact with linguistic systems. This review presents the theoretical and empirical foundations of phonological variation within the context of Igbo dialectology, with special emphasis on the *Ezaa* dialect. It is organized under the following subheadings: theoretical framework, concepts of language variation, sociolinguistic variables and empirical studies on phonological variation in Igbo and related dialects.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Variationist Sociolinguistics, a theoretical model pioneered by William Labov (1966, 1972). Labov's theory postulates that linguistic variation is both systematic and socially motivated. Rather than viewing language differences as random deviations from a standard form, the variationist perspective explains them as patterned reflections of social structures such as age, class, gender and community networks (Chambers, 2009).

Labov's early studies demonstrates that phonological variation correlates with social stratification and identity negotiation. This framework is particularly relevant to the present study because it enables an empirical exploration of how Ezaa speakers use phonological features to index social belonging and distinction. The model assumes that phonological forms are subject to both linguistic constraints and extralinguistic pressures - a duality that aptly describes the dynamics of Ezaa speech in contact with Standard Igbo and English.

In addition, the study draws insights from Socio-phonetics, which combines acoustic phonetic analysis with sociolinguistic interpretation. According to Foulkes and Docherty (2006), socio-phonetic approaches reveal how fine-grained phonetic differences convey social meaning. In the Ezaa context, such subtle variations may reflect age, exposure, or education level. This dual theoretical grounding ensures a comprehensive understanding of variation as both a linguistic and social phenomenon.

2.2 Conceptual Review: Language Variation and Change

Language variation refers to the existence of different forms of a language used by speakers within a community (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). It encompasses differences in pronunciation (phonological variation), word choice (lexical variation), and sentence structure (syntactic variation). Linguists agree that no language community is homogeneous; rather, variation is an intrinsic characteristic of human communication (Hudson, 1996; Ogwudile, 2016).

Phonological variation specifically deals with differences in speech sounds across speakers or contexts. Sommerstein (1977) observes that such variation may arise from natural linguistic evolution or social interaction patterns. For instance, speakers may simplify complex clusters, assimilate adjacent sounds, or adopt alternative pronunciations to align with socially prestigious norms. Over time, these micro-level changes contribute to broader processes of language change (Trudgill, 2000).

In Igbo, phonological variation often results from dialect contact, migration, and formal education, which expose speakers to multiple speech norms. Consequently, younger speakers tend to align with Standard Igbo or urbanized forms, while older speakers retain more conservative pronunciations. This phenomenon mirrors broader global patterns of linguistic convergence under modernization and mass communication (Milroy & Milroy, 1999).

2.3 Sociolinguistic Variables and Their Influence on Phonology

Sociolinguistic variables such as age, social class and geographical location play significant roles in shaping language variation. According to Chambers and Trudgill (1998), age is one of the strongest predictors of phonological change, as younger speakers often serve as agents of linguistic innovation. Similarly, social class influences linguistic behavior through differing access to education, prestige norms, and exposure to other dialects (Labov, 1972).

Geographical factors also affect speech patterns due to limited interaction between isolated communities, resulting in localized pronunciation norms (Tagliamonte, 2012). In the Ezaa dialect, speakers in rural areas tend to maintain conservative phonological forms, whereas those in urban centers display more hybridized pronunciations influenced by Standard Igbo and English. This internal diversity underscores the role of social mobility and regional exposure in shaping phonological outcomes.

2.4 Empirical Studies on Phonological Variation in Igbo Dialects

A number of scholars have examined variation across Igbo dialects. Obiorah (1990) analyzed dialectal phonological contrasts in Nsukka and Onitsha varieties, identifying systematic differences in vowel harmony and consonant cluster simplification. Eze (1998) extended this analysis by showing that sociolinguistic factors such as urbanization contribute to phonological convergence toward Standard Igbo. Onyeocha (2006) studied dialect leveling in the Nnewi dialect and found that younger speakers increasingly substitute dialectal sounds with standard equivalents, illustrating generational phonological shift. Similarly, Melefa (2017) observed that the spread of education and mass media in southeastern Nigeria accelerates dialect homogenization, particularly in younger populations.

In Ebonyi State, Nwike, Nwagalaku and Obiora (2021) document the dialectal diversity of the Abakaliki cluster, noting that Ezaa retains unique phonetic features distinct from neighboring dialects such as Ikwo and Izzi. However, they also highlighted the lack of systematic socio-phonological studies focusing specifically on Ezaa. This gap forms the rationale for the present research, which investigates how social variables interact with Ezaa phonology in everyday communication.

2.5 Summary of Literature Review

The reviewed literature establishes that phonological variation is both universal and socially patterned. While existing studies on Igbo dialectology have contributed valuable descriptive insights, few have examined the Ezaa dialect from a sociolinguistic perspective. Theoretical works by Labov (1966, 1972) and subsequent variationist scholars provide a robust framework for analyzing the relationship between linguistic form and social context. Empirical studies further confirm that social variables such as age, class and geography significantly influence phonological patterns. The current study therefore fills a critical research gap by offering an in-depth socio-phonological analysis of the Ezaa dialect. It combines theoretical insights with field-based observations to explain how social dynamics drive phonological variation within this unique speech community.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive sociolinguistic research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The descriptive design is appropriate because it seeks to observe, record, and analyze existing linguistic behavior among Ezaa speakers without manipulating any variables. The qualitative aspect captures natural speech data and phonological patterns in context, while the quantitative aspect enables statistical interpretation of how frequently specific phonological variants occur across social groups.

The study was conducted in the Ezaa-speaking areas of Ebonyi State, Nigeria, specifically Ezza North and Ezza South Local Government Areas. These areas represent the core of the Ezaa dialect region within the Abakaliki dialect cluster of Igbo. These localities were selected because they exhibit rich phonological diversity and varying degrees of contact with Standard Igbo and English. Urban communities, such as Onueke, tend to reflect contact-induced phonological change, while rural settlements such as Umuezeoka and Oriuzor preserve more traditional Ezaa pronunciations. This geographic spread allows for meaningful comparison across contexts.

The population of this study consists of native speakers of the Ezaa dialect residing within Ezza North and Ezza South LGAs. The total population is estimated at several hundred thousand speakers; however, for research feasibility, a smaller representative sample was selected. Participants were chosen from different age categories (youths, middle-aged, and elderly) and social classes (students, traders, farmers, and civil servants) to ensure diverse linguistic data. This stratification aligns with the sociolinguistic principle that language variation correlates with social structure (Labov, 1972). By including speakers from varying backgrounds, the study captures the full spectrum of phonological usage in the Ezaa community.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who are native speakers of Ezaa and capable of providing natural speech data. This technique ensures that the selected individuals authentically represent the speech norms of their respective communities. A total of 30 participants were selected (15 from Ezza North and 15 from Ezza South). Within each group, the sample was evenly distributed by age (young: 18–30 years; middle-aged: 31–50 years; elderly: 51 and above) and social class. This distribution facilitates comparative analysis of phonological patterns across demographic variables.

The main instruments for data collection are structured oral interview guide (used to elicit specific lexical and phonological items from respondents); observation and participant recording (concentual recording of naturally occurring conversations to capture spontaneous speech and pronunciation patterns); and researcher's linguistic intuition. Due to his position as a native speaker of the dialect, the researcher's intuitive knowledge served as a supplementary source for validating observed data.

Data were collected through direct interaction and field observation. The researcher conducted one-on-one and small-group interviews in relaxed social settings such as homes, marketplaces, and community centers to ensure natural speech flow. Each session lasted between 20 and 40 minutes and was audio-recorded using a mobile digital recorder. Respondents were asked to pronounce selected words and respond to brief conversational prompts. Efforts were made to maintain linguistic authenticity by minimizing the use of Standard Igbo or English during interactions. Ethical procedures such as obtaining verbal consent and ensuring confidentiality were strictly observed.

The recorded data were transcribed using IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) symbols to ensure phonetic precision. The transcriptions were then classified and compared according to age, social class and geographical location. Statistical tallies were used to identify frequency patterns of phonological variants, while qualitative interpretation was employed to explain the sociolinguistic motivations behind these patterns. The analysis followed Labov's (1972) variationist model, which examines the correlation between linguistic variables and social categories. In this context, specific phonological variables such as the substitution of /dz/ with /d/ or the elision of vowels in connected speech - were treated as dependent variables influenced by the independent social variables of age, class, and geography. Findings from this analysis provided the empirical foundation for interpreting phonological change within the Ezaa dialect as a reflection of broader social dynamics.

To ensure the reliability of the findings, data were cross-checked through multiple elicitation sessions with the same participants at different times. Transcriptions were verified by two independent Ezaa speakers familiar with phonological research. In terms of validity, the study relied on triangulation (combining recorded speech, interview data and the researcher's native competence) to guarantee that interpretations accurately represent real usage patterns.

4. Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Data Presentation

Tables 1 and 2 present the phonological variations in the Ezaa dialect across age groups, social classes and geographical locations. Table 1 shows pronunciation differences between younger speakers (12–40 years) and older speakers (40–70 years). Table 2 highlights differences between rural/central Ezaa and urban/borderline Ezaa. This allows for a detailed examination of the phonological processes and their social correlates.

Table 1: Phonological variation in Ezaa dialect by age group

s/n	Ages 12–40 (Younger Speakers)	Ages 40–70 (Older Speakers)	Igbo Equivalent	English Translation
1	Madzu /madú/	Madzu /madzú/	Mmadu	Human
2	Ndzu /ndú/	Ndzu /ndzú/	Ndu	Life
3	Nworie /wɔrie/	Nworie /ɲwɔrie/	Nworie	Name of a child born on Orié market day
4	Okfu /ofu/	Okfu /okfu/	Okwu	Word
5	Egvu /evu/	Egvu /egvu/	Egwu	Dance
6	Nwafor /wawho/	Nwafor /ɲwawho/	Nwafor	Name of a child born on Afo market day
7	Okerekfu /okerefu/	Okerekfu	Oke	Rat / Mouse
8	Nkakfu /ɲkakfu/	Nkakfu /ɲkakfu/	Nkakwu	Shrew
9	Ekfu /efu/	Ekfu /ekfu/	Akwu	Ripe palm fruit
10	Nkfu /ɲfu/	Nkfu /ɲkfu/	Nkwu	Palm tree
11	Edugvu /eduvu/	Edugvu /edugvu/	Ede	Cocoyam

Table 2: Phonological variation in Ezaa dialect by geographical location

s/n	English	Rural/Central Ezaa	Urban/Borderline Ezaa	Igbo Translation
1	Truth	Ezikfu	Ezeofu	Eziokwu
2	Music	Egvu	Evu	Egwu
3	Mouse	Okerekfu	Okerefu	Oke
4	Palm tree	ɲkfu	ɲfu	Nkwu
5	Shrew	ɲkakfu	ɲkafu	Nkakwu
6	Market name	ɲwɔrie	Worie	Nworie

4.2 Analysis of Data

4.2.1 Research Question 1:

What phonological variations exist between younger and older speakers of the Ezaa dialect?

Table 1 shows that **younger speakers** systematically engage indiphthong simplifications and phonemic reductions, E.g.

Diphthong simplification and phoneme reduction

/dz/ → /d/ (*madzú* → *madú*; *ndzú* → *ndú*)

/ɲw/ → /w/ (*ɲwɔrie* → *wɔrie*; *ɲwawho* → *wawho*)

/egvu/ → /evu/; /ekfu/ → /efu/

In contrast, older speakers maintain the full consonantal and vowel structures typical of Ezaa. This shows that age is a key factor influencing phonological realization, with younger speakers favoring forms closer to Standard Igbo or simplified articulation.

4.2.2 Research Question 2:

How do social class and geographical location influence the phonological realization of Ezaa sounds?

Social class:

- Lower/rural class (older, uneducated, and mainly farmers) preserves traditional phonology: full clusters, affricates, and diphthongs.
- Upper/educated class (younger, urban, and professional) shows innovative forms: segment substitutions, vowel elision and simplification.
- This demonstrates socio-phonetic stratification, where pronunciation reflects education, exposure, and social mobility (Trudgill, 2000).

Geographical location:

Table 2 shows rural/central Ezaa preserves conservative forms (e.g., *Ezikfu*, *Egvu*, *Iɲkfu*), while urban/borderline Ezaa exhibits phonological diffusion due to contact with other dialects or languages (*Ezeofu*, *Evu*, *Iɲfu*).

- Rural communities maintain unadulterated Ezaa phonology, while urban-borderline communities modify sounds due to language contact and social interaction, leading to micro-dialectal variation.

4.2.3 Research Question 3:

What sociolinguistic factors account for the observed differences in pronunciation among Ezaa speakers?

Three main factors emerge:

1. Age: Younger speakers simplify traditional forms, while older speakers preserve them.
2. Social class: Education, exposure to urban centers, and prestige-seeking influence pronunciation. Educated youth favor refined or standardized forms.
3. Geographical location: Central Ezaa speakers retain authentic pronunciations; urban/borderline speakers modify them due to dialect contact.

These findings confirm Fasold's (1990) sociolinguistic variable theory: linguistic elements co-vary with social factors (age, class, location), producing systematic phonological variation.

4.3 Discussion

The Ezaa dialect exhibits structured phonological variation:

- Younger speakers are influenced by Standard Igbo and English, leading to simplified, convergent forms.
- Older speakers and rural populations act as custodians of traditional phonology, retaining affricates, clusters, and diphthongs.
- Urban-borderline Ezaa shows linguistic diffusion, adapting sounds due to contact with other dialects.

This demonstrates the interaction of social, geographical and age-related factors in shaping phonological variation, consistent with Labov's (1966, 1972) variationist framework and Milroy's network theory (1992).

4.4 Summary

The data show that:

1. Age determines phonological change, with younger speakers favoring simplified variants.
2. Social class and education influence pronunciation, with the upper class introducing innovative forms.
3. Geographical location contributes to micro-dialectal differences between rural and urban Ezaa communities.

Thus, Ezaa phonology is dynamic, socially conditioned and age-dependent, reflecting broader processes of linguistic change and variation within Igbo dialects.

5. Conclusion

The study investigated phonological variation in the Ezaa dialect of Igbo, focusing on the influence of age, social class, and geographical location. Findings reveal that, age is a major determinant of phonological variation; social class influences phonological realization; and geographical location shapes dialectal micro-variation. Further, Ezaa dialect exhibits systematic and socially conditioned phonological variation, reflecting broader processes of language change, diffusion and identity construction within Igbo speech communities. Younger speakers, urban dwellers, and the educated class tend to innovate or standardize, whereas older, rural speakers act as custodians of traditional phonology.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends:

1. Linguists and educators should document the traditional phonological forms of Ezaa to preserve cultural and linguistic heritage.
2. Educational curricula should recognize micro-dialectal differences and incorporate them into Igbo language teaching materials. This will enhance learners' understanding of linguistic diversity and reduce stigmatization of regional accents.
3. Future studies should explore lexical, morphological and syntactic variation within Ezaa and other Igbo dialects. Comparative studies between Ezaa and other Abankaleke cluster dialects will provide insights into language evolution and standardization.
4. Nigerian media and governmental language bodies should acknowledge dialectal variation when producing standard Igbo content. Efforts should be made to balance standardization with preservation of dialectal identity, particularly in radio, television and educational broadcasts.

The findings have implications for sociolinguistic theory, language policy and education: for instance, it confirms Labov's variationist perspective, showing systematic phonological variation linked to age, social class and geography; highlights the need for policies that accommodate dialectal diversity in Nigeria; and provides a foundation for curriculum designers, linguists and language planners to integrate dialectal studies into Igbo language programs.

In conclusion, this study underscores that Ezaa dialect is not homogeneous. Its phonological variation is socially and geographically conditioned, demonstrating the dynamic interplay between language, society and identity. Preservation, documentation, and informed language policy are critical to safeguarding this dialect while accommodating ongoing linguistic change.

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