

PHONOLOGICAL AND MORPHOLOGICAL FEATURES OF IGBO FUNERAL POETRY

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Abstract

This study undertakes the phonological and morphological features of Igbo funeral poetry. Its main objective is to find out why these features are employed in Igbo funeral poetry. It adopts generative phonology and lexical morphology as theoretical frameworks, along with two sampling techniques: random and purposive. The methods used for data collection were oral interviews and participant observation. The findings show that Igbo funeral poetry makes copious use of phonological and morphological features, such as dialectism, loanwords, repetition, ideophones, onomatopoeia, and vowel lengthening. The reasons for their employment in the rendition of funeral poetry are memorability, rhythm, heightened emotion, and phonoaesthetic purposes. The study concludes that the phonological features of Igbo funeral poetry are the most productive source of its pleasure, and they are central to its poetic quality. It therefore recommends that creative writers draw heavily on poetic literature to produce high-pitched works.

Keywords: Phonology, Morphology, Igbo, Funeral poetry

Introduction

Poetry, as a genre of literature, is often described as a terse, emotional, and rhythmic form. Based on the above assertion, literary artists portray the following characteristics of poetry: emotions, feelings, expressiveness, beauty and specialised language in their performances. Oral poetry is therefore performed in different contexts, such as nuptial poetry, performed during marriage ceremonies; birth songs, performed whenever a birth occurs; and funeral poetry, the focus of this study, performed during burial and funeral ceremonies.

The Igbo celebrate the dead so much because they believe that if the required funeral rites are not accorded the dead, s/he will not rest in peace. During the funeral celebration, they sing many songs for various purposes, such as consoling the bereaved family, praising the departed soul, and offering advice to the living. The funeral songs are rendered orally, and during their performance, some stylistic elements come into play. This paper is undertaken to study phonological and morphological features in such funeral songs. In linguistics, phonology is the study of how sounds are organised and used in a language to create meaning. At the same time, morphology is the study of words, including the principles by which they are formed and how they relate to one another within a language. These phonological and morphological features in Igbo death poetry include neologisms, dialect words, word-repetition patterns, and other phonological patterning. These elements are structured to yield pleasurable sounds. We are set to find out why these features are employed in funeral poetry.

Sound has been identified as the main characteristic of poetry. Egudu (1975:203) rightly observed;

In poetry proper, it is such elements as rhyme, alliteration, consonance, assonance, onomatopoeia and the various forms of repetition like anaphora and refrain that make up the sound, which is one of its significant elements and which enhances the music. It is because of the emphasis on the music of poetry that a poem is hardly a poem until it is read aloud and heard.

Oral poetry provides a tremendous legacy upon which modern Igbo poetry can draw. This is because one of the main characteristics of oral poetry is the exuberant use of phonics. These phonics elements constitute the skilled sound patterns that are the bedrock of beauty in poetry. This is why Egudu (1975) equates oral poetry with an art of sound and stresses that a good poem must constantly aspire to the condition of music.

Theoretical studies

In this sub-section, some theories that are related to the study will be reviewed. It discusses the theories of phonology, morphology, and related issues surrounding the topic under study.

The primary concern of generative phonology is the development of the rules that will deal with the pronounceability of segments. Phonological rules are the rules, whether written or spoken, that control how sounds change during oral communication. Hayes (2009) describes them as (generalisations) the different ways a sound can be pronounced in various environments. This implies that phonological rules define how a speaker maps the abstract representation stored in their brain to the sounds they articulate. In general, phonological rules start with the underlying representation of a sound (the phoneme that is stored in the speaker's mind) and yield the final surface form, or what the speaker actually pronounces. Thus, phonology becomes concerned with answering the questions: (a) What are the general principles underlying the pronunciation of words? (b) How far do these principles reflect the general principles underlying natural language?

A famous account of the phonological model is given in Chomsky and Halle's 1968 book, *The Sound Pattern of English (SPE)*, within the framework of generative phonology. One major highlight of this model is the idea that phonemes are composed of distinctive features. Chomsky and Halle (1968) criticised the view that the segment is the smallest unit of phonological analysis, not further decomposed into anything smaller. They argued that segments ought to differ randomly from one another, yet this is not the case. They noted that, for instance, in English, the phoneme [k] alternates with [s] in specific environments: electric — electricity. They therefore concluded that it is advantageous to view segments as composed of a set of properties rather than indivisible entities. According to Katamba (1989:17), the central preoccupation of the SPE model is to modify feature specifications in various ways, with the extent to which underlying representations may differ from surface representations. The SPE framework is unarguably one of the most essential and comprehensive frameworks in phonology.

Autosegmental phonology was initially developed to address the challenge of providing an adequate theory of tone. The theory was introduced by John Goldsmith in 1976. He stated that

autosegmental phonology aims to deal with the consequences for generative phonology of multi-linear phonological analysis and representation. The significant contribution of the theory is the formalisation of the notion, earlier presented by scholars such as Leben (1973), that suprasegments, such as tone, should be analysed at a separate level from the segmental. Goldsmith (1990) proposes that the sound flow be analysed so that the segmental and suprasegmental levels are separated and treated autonomously. He illustrates that certain phonological phenomena cannot be effectively accounted for linearly. Clements (1981) adopts the autosegmental model to analyse vowel harmony in Akan.

On the other hand, some major morphological theories in linguistics include morpheme-based, lexeme-based and word-based morphology. Morpheme-based morphology analyses words as arrangements of discrete morphemes (the smallest unit of meaning). Lexeme-based morphology views word forms as the result of rules that alter roots or stems.

Word-based morphology uses a word-and-paradigm approach, treating words as the basic units. Other important frameworks are distributed morphology, which views words and sentence formation as a single syntactic process, and morphology, which analyses the interaction between morphology and phonology. The above theories have been reviewed because they have been found relevant, in one way or another, to our study of the phonological and morphological features of Igbo funeral poetry.

Empirical Studies

Okebalama (2004) studies the phonological features of *Eke-une*, an Igbo epic. His primary objective is to find out how the phonological features yield pleasurable sounds in the poem. His findings show that the sound pattern in *Eke-une* not only serves as euphony or contributes to the memorability of certain parts of the epic, but also strikes a deep chord across the entire range of human emotions. This study is similar to Okebalama (2004) in that both examine phonological features, but differ in that Okebalama (2004) studies phonological features in *Eke-une*, a written poetry. In contrast, the present study examines the phonological features of Igbo funeral poetry, a genre of oral poetry.

Mbah and Okeke (2013) study phonological change in the Nkpor dialect. They explore the phonological change of vowel raising and elision in the dialect. The significant findings of their research are on the social factors responsible for a peculiar phonological phenomenon in the Nkpor dialect of Igbo known as vowel raising, which involves the deletion of the voiced palatal nasal /ʃ/, and the raising of the mid vowel /e/ to /i/ or /ī/ in obedience to the vowel harmony rule. They suggest that both mid-front vowel raising and voiced palatal nasal elision are being lost in the Nkpor-Agu region of Nkpor, plausibly due to contact with the commercial city of Onitsha. The paper is related to this work in that both study phonology, but they differ in that this paper examines the phonological features of funeral poetry, whereas Mbah and Okeke (2013) study phonological change in Nkpor.

Oludare (2013) studies phonological differences in the Akoid language family. He examines how phonological differences are produced by mechanical, systematic sound changes that affect the original sounds of the language, and how these sound changes affect the language across different sectors of the speech community in various ways. The significant finding of his research is the fact that the speech forms in question have undergone systematic changes over the

years, which have occasioned phonological processes within the group. He claims that Arigidi has twenty phonemic consonants, whereas Owon has twenty-two. He adds that the difference in the number of consonant phonemes, coupled with different phonological processes such as nasalisation, palatalisation, spiritisation, simplification of complex segments, vowel raising, and changes in tonal patterns, has resulted in phonological changes across the speech forms. The similarity between Oludare (2013) and the present study is that both study phonology; the difference is that Oludare (2013) examines phonological differences in the Akoid language, whereas the present study examines phonological features in Igbo funeral poetry.

Ikekeonwu and Ire (2015) conduct a study of a constraint-based account of reduplication in Achalla. The paper finds that most reduplication processes in the Achalla dialect are grouped according to their 'marked' meanings or characteristics. The study also shows, among other things, that the surface-based reduplicant identity (a faithfulness constraint) in some cases of reduplication is outranked by phonologically based (markedness) constraints, accounting for partial identity between the base and the reduplicant. In addition, the ranking of constraints in some cases of reduplication in this paper is dialect-specific. Ikekeonwu and Ire's (2015) study used a phonological framework to analyse reduplication, but the current study adopts a morphological framework to examine morphological processes in Urhobo.

Onwukwe (2018) investigates the percolation principle perspective of the verb-suffix distinction in Igbo compounds. The paper adopts a descriptive survey design with the percolation convention as the theoretical framework. The findings reveal that, in Igbo, when a verb compound obeys the percolation principle, the second element is a verb; otherwise, it is a suffix. The paper also finds that Igbo verb compounds are left-headed. The study concludes that the percolation convention provides a more apparent distinction of verb-suffix in Igbo verb compounds. The paper recommends further studies in this direction, such as testing the percolation principle in Igbo. Onwukwe's study is similar to the current research because it adopts feature-percolation theory to account for headedness in morphological processes in Urhobo. While Onwukwe (2018) studied the percolation principle in Verb-compounds in Igbo, the current study examines morphological processes in Urhobo.

Theoretical Framework

The two theoretical frameworks adopted for analysis are generative phonology and lexical morphology. Generative phonology is a component of a generative grammar that assigns the correct phonetic representations to utterances in such a way as to reflect a native speaker's internalised grammar. (SIL Glossary of Linguistic Terms). The theory of generative phonology uses a set of rules to derive phonetic representations from abstract underlying terms. N Chomsky and M. Halle founded it in the late 1950s. It is built on N.S. Trubetzkoy's idea of phonemic opposition and R Jakobson's work on distinctive features. It drew on the general aspiration of generative grammar to stipulate a set of rules capable of producing all and only the surface forms of a natural language, focusing on its speech sounds. Generative phonology comprises components such as levels of phonological representation, derivation, linearity, and phonological rules.

Though this theory is criticised for its applicability, it is too powerful, as it attempts to describe all imaginable types of language systems and explains none of them. It is best suited for our study, as it will help us identify the phonological features in Igbo birth songs.

The other theoretical framework adopted for the study is lexical morphology. It is proposed by Paul Kiparsky (1979) and holds that word formation, particularly through processes such as derivation and compounding, occurs within the lexicon (the mental dictionary of language). It posits that morphological and phonological (sound) rules are interwoven in a cyclic, level-based structure within the lexicon rather than being governed by separate syntactic rules.

This theory was elaborated by Kiparsky (1982). This approach explains how the rules for forming new words differ from those for grammatical change, such as adding a plural (-s). Core concepts of lexical morphology include: lexicon as the central component, levels of application and intertwined rules. It studies the process of forming new words, i.e., new lexemes.

This theory has been criticised for its difficulty in accounting for exocentric compounds and prefixes, issues with the "feature percolation" mechanism, and the claim that it inadequately handles post-lexical phonological rules. Despite these criticisms, this theory best suits our study, as it is not related to the areas they address.

Methodology

The research design adopted in this study is the survey design. The study area is the core Igbo-speaking states that are found in the South-east geo-political zone, where only Igbo language is spoken. The target population for the study is the women's groups selected from the five Igbo cultural areas of the South-east. Two women from each state, purposively sampled, were interviewed. The sampling technique used is a multistage sampling approach involving proportionate stratification and cluster sampling.

Oral interviews and participant observation were used to collect data. The data collected were transcribed from the tape in the dialect of rendition and translated into English. The poems were then analysed to identify the phonological and morphological features in the Igbo birth poetry.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Vernacular

The exuberant use of dialect words characterises Igbo funeral poetry. There is no syntactic reason for adopting these words, nor are the poets against neo-standard Igbo, which, according to Emenanjo (1984:91), is "the goal of every Igbo writer who wants his work to permeate into all parts of Igbo". The reason why these poems are filled with vernacular is to make for originality, as the variety of dialect used in funeral poetry offers an aura of enjoyment and increases not only the sense of reality for those who use the dialect represented, but also offers an opportunity for others to appreciate and understand the different dialects of the women's group. Let us exemplify the above assertion with the following song.

Song 1a

Ọnwụ mbụ onye oshi oo ya
Ọnwụ mbụ onye oshi

Death is a thief oo ya
Death is a thief

O zuru o gbalaga

Who steals and disappears

Song 4a

Ọnwụ e e, ana m aju
Mụ na onye ga-ebi e e?
Ọnwụ e e, ana m aju
Mụ na onye ga-ebi e e?

Death, e e I ask
Whom do I live with?
Death, e e I ask
Whom do I live with?

In the few examples above, the peculiar sounds, sometimes used in specific contexts, may have no English equivalent, so they are reproduced as they are in translation. This is seen more in oral poetry than in written poetry because the performers of oral poetry express themselves the way they feel at that particular time. The meaningless phrases that are injected into oral poetry are usually used to make the tone catchy and entertaining. Finnegan (1970) observes that songs in Africa are frequently in antiphonal form, with a response of some kind between soloist and chorus, and that the song depends on the alternation between the two parties. She further observes that the frequent occurrence of meaningless words and onomatopoeic sounds, which fill in the lines, adds length to the song as actually performed and are used primarily in chorus responses. This is evident in the following song.

Song 4b

Diwe diwe diwe ndidi ka mma
Onye o mere ya diwe nooo na ndidi ka mma a a

Endure, endure, endure, endurance is better
Whoever has been affected should endure
because endurance is better

In Song 4b above, we see that the vowels /o/ and /a/ are lengthened because of rhythm and for aesthetic purposes.

Repetition

Repetition is often employed in Igbo funeral poetry. It is a process whereby a word, phrase, sentence or stanza is sung or reproduced more than two times. The shortness or repetitive nature of oral poetry endeavours to make it possible for the audience to “catch up” with the song and so join in the song. According to Onuekwesi (2001), repetition enhances the memorability of a poetic piece. It provides music, a feature that is integral to a song, which, according to him, conveys the central content and refrains that emphasise the theme.

Okpewho (1990) adds that repetition is more than a device for maintaining stability, emphasis, structural balance, ease of learning, and a corrective code. According to Okoh (2014), repetition is used when an item or expression occurs more than once in a write-up. He adds that it is employed in poetry to enhance musical quality. The funeral poetry studied is full of word and phrase repetition. An example is seen in the following song,

Song 5a

Ugegbe etiwana o Tiwana
Nnukwu ugegbe etiwana o tiwana
O tiwara n'ike

A mirror has broken.
A big mirror has broken.
It broke suddenly

Song 5b

Ọ nana, ọ nana, ọ nana	She has gone, she has gone, she has gone
Nwanne anyi nwaanyi	Our sister
Ọ nana	She has gone
Ọ nana	She has gone

In Song 5a, we have *etiwana* repeated three times, while in Song 5b, we have *ọ nana* repeated five times. Some phrases in funeral poetry can be repeated at regular intervals to enhance their musical quality, as seen in the repetition of *ka m gaa* in the following song.

Song 5c

Onwu nke a eyi m egwu	This death has scared me
Ka m gaa	Let me go
Ọnwu nke a eyi m egwu	This death has worried me
Ka m gaa	Let me go
Ọnwu mama anyi e yi m egwu	Our mother's death scared me
Ka m gaa	Let me go

In Song 5c, the repetition of *ka m gaa*, 'let me go', is for musical quality. Repetition can also be used to emphasise the message embedded in the song. It has been identified as one of the criteria that separates poetry from prose.

Consonantal Repetition

Alliteration and consonance as literary terms are subsumed as consonantal repetition in this study. Leech (1969:91), as cited in Akaeze (2005), defines alliteration as "the parallelism which consists in keeping the initial consonant or consonant cluster constant". Alliteration occurs in most of the funeral poetry. An example is seen below.

Song 6

Og: M megheriwe	When I misbehave
Mụ na ụmụ ụwa adi mma	I will be friends with the world
Mụ chọwa nke m	When I make an effort to progress
Mụ na ha adi n'iro	Then we become enemies
Chorus repeat as solo	
Mụnugheriwe mii	When I am a drunkard
Mụ na ụmụ ụwa adi na mma	I will be friends with the world
Mụ mara onwe m	When I know myself
Mụ na ha adi n'iro	Then we become enemies
Ọnwu kuọ aka n'uzo	When death knocks
Mụ a zaa oku m	And I answer the call
Mụ na ụmụ ụwa ekewaa	I will be separated from the world

In the song above (6), there is a repetition of the voiced bilabial nasal sound /m/ in almost all the lines. Alliteration, as the repetition of the given sounds, enriches the poem as it engenders musicality and adds to its rhythmic quality.

Another type of consonantal repetition apart from alliteration is consonance. Consonance is the repetition of the consonant sound in any place other than the initial position. Many literary scholars treat both consonance and alliteration as one under consonantal repetition. Okebalama (1985) observes that both alliteration and consonance could be regarded as the same thing. An example of consonance is seen in song 7.

Song 7

Onye ihoriho were ihe mara ihe	Foolish person, learn your lessons from events
Okw: Ogba nnenne	Ogba nnenne
Og: Onye ihoriho jere oru na mbubo	A foolish person who went to work on the farm
Okw: Ogba nnenne	Ogba nnenne
Og: Oje aru aru, o ruo ya otu ututu	She works and finishes in one morning
Okw: Ogba nnenne...	Ogba nnenne
Og: Onwu bia o gbuo ya otu ututu	When death comes, he dies in one morning
Okw: Ogba nnenne	Ogba nnenne

From the excerpt of the song above, we see that the following consonants are repeated: /h/, /r/, and /t/.

Assonance

Assonance is the constant repetition of the same vowel sounds in individual lines. Okebalama (1993) asserts that all vowels in Igbo are syllabic. He goes on to state that Igbo consonants can hardly be articulated without attaching vocalic elements to them and that whenever a vowel is repeated two or more times, in a line of poetry, it becomes sonorous. Assonance is a pervasive feature of phonological cohesion in funeral poetry, as seen in the following song.

Song 8

Og: Naara m oda	Get permission from me
Na m enweghi efe	I don't have a chance
Okw: Enweghi m efe	I don't have a chance
O kwa onye onwu erubeghi ahụ	Only applies when one is not directly affected by death
Og: Naara m oda	Get permission from me
Na m na-aga oru	I'm going to work
Okw: Enweghi m efe	I don't have a chance
O kwa onye onwu erubeghi ahụ	Only applies when one is not directly affected by death
Og: O ruzie ya n'ahụ	When she gets involved
O gbawa kwarakwara	She would look left and right
Okw: Enweghi m efe	I don't have a chance
O kwa onye onwu erubeghi ahụ	Only applies when one is not directly affected by death

In Song 8 above, we have the repetition of the open front vowel /a/ and the half-open front vowel /e/.

Ideophone

This figure of speech is related to onomatopoeia. Still, the difference lies in the fact that onomatopoeic words mimic real situations. In contrast, ideophones are just “ideas in sounds,” in that the sound of the word gives one an idea of the nature of the event or the object referred to. These sounds on their own may be meaningless, but they are employed for aesthetic purposes in funeral poetry as seen in the following song.

Song 9

Og: O ji ọbara akpa ego	One who uses blood for money
Okw: A a ye ye	A a ye yei
Og: O ji ọbara akpa akụ	One who uses blood for wealth
Okw: A a ye yei	A a ye yei
Og: Na-akpara ya ụmụ Nnadi	Gets it for his wicked relatives
Okw: A a ye yei	A a ye yei
Og: Gidi gidi ngi, a na-achụ ego	Gidigidi ngi in search of money
Okw: A a ye yei	A a ye yei
Og: Gwodo gwo ngwodo ngwo	Gwodo gwo ngwodo ngwo
Okw: A a ye yei...	A a ye yei...
Mgbe ọnwụ bịara	When death strikes
Ike agwụ	All comes to a halt
Mgbe ọnwụ bịara	When death strikes
Ụmụ Nnadi eripịa ego ahụ	Ụmụ Nnadi enjoys the money

In Song 9 above, *gidigidi ngi* and *gwodo gwo ngwodo ngwo* are words that depict and mimic the way traders hustle for money in the market without rest. The song reminds such people that death awaits everybody and therefore cautions them to take the quest for money very seriously. Ideophones help to create humour and create a musical effect of some sort.

Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia is the literary device that relies on words to imitate the sound that they name. They can be referred to as sound-effect words or noise words. In other words, it is the direct verbal imitation of natural sounds. (Ihedigbo, 2017). Some Igbo funeral poetry features onomatopoeia, as in the following song:

Song 10

Og: Ọ bata nga ajuo oyi	Once it enters, everywhere will be quiet
I na-eme ka anurị laa	You chase away happiness
Obi aburū so akwa akwa	Hearts in full grief
Anyan mmiri eju anya	Eyes full of tears
Ụkwụ a na-ama kpalị kpalị	Legs shaking
Eze a na-ada chikiri chikiri	Teeth gnashing
Ndo, ndo a na-ada	It is a pity, it is a pity everywhere

In the above excerpt, *kpalị kpalị* and *chikiri chikiri* in lines 5 and 6 are onomatopoeic because they show the movement of legs and teeth, respectively, which is the characteristic of the older

men when they are in pain, especially the pain of the loss of a dear relative. Onomatopoeia helps describe or paint situations without using additional words. It can also be used to add humour or other emotions to the poem.

Summary of Findings

The findings of this study show that Igbo funeral poetry is rich in phonological features. Some of the morphological features the study has identified are the exuberant use of dialect words, which are not employed for any syntactic reason, nor do they portray poets as neo-standard Igbo, but are used to create originality and to help others appreciate and understand other dialects. Another deviation is loanwords, which this study suggests are sometimes more effective than indigenous words in achieving aesthetic effects and heightened emotions. Vowel lengthening, according to our findings, creates space for rhythm and makes the tune of the song catchy and entertaining. Repetition, which is another form of phonological deviation seen in funeral poetry, was looked at in different ways, such as lexical repetition, phrasal repetition, consonance and assonance. All these types are usually employed for aesthetic purposes. They aid memorability and distinguish oral from written poetry.

Ideophone and onomatopoeia are also identified as phonological features of Igbo funeral poetry. They are used to realise the poets' innate creative ability, thereby giving this genre of poetry much of its beauty. The literary qualities of funeral poetry embody the richness of oral songs.

Conclusion

From our study of the phonological and morphological features of Igbo funeral poetry, we conclude that since the primary role of all dirges is first of all to provide a medium for mourning the deceased and to enable the living to express themselves emotionally, the poets richly employ phonological and morphological features of deviation to make their expressions phonoesthetic, which in turn move the audience emotionally sometimes. This is why some people cry when such songs are performed. The phonological features of Igbo funeral poetry are the most productive source of its listening pleasure and are central to its poetic quality. Morphological features are essential for understanding the intrinsic structure of words in Igbo death poetry. We advise that creative writers can draw heavily from oral literature to produce works that are high-pitched.

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