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# How do I address you? Forms of address in Oko

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**This paper is an ethno-linguistic and pragmatic documentation of the forms of address in Oko, a dialect of Igbo. Such a study is necessary considering the gradual yet steady death of many languages in Nigeria or aspects of these languages as in the case with Igbo. Data for analysis are collected mainly through native-speaker introspection and personal observation. However, I crosschecked the data with older native-speakers for verification and validation. Apart from documenting these forms for posterity, this study has also illuminated aspects of the Oko culture as revealed in their address forms. It further foregrounds the place of address forms as a major part of the linguistic etiquette of the society and understanding this is necessary for a peaceful coexistence in the society.**

**Key words:** Oko, address forms, titles, names, ethno-linguistics.

## INTRODUCTION

Studying the language of a people is a very significant way to understanding their culture and norms. The language reveals the people's values and worldview. It is tied to their culture. According to Hudson (2001:91), 'the semantic system of a language is linked to the culture of its speakers'. Thus the meaning that a language can express is tied to the culture of its speakers.

Language is essentially a means of communication. Williamson (1984: 1) sees it as 'the chief means by which human beings communicate'. And, in the words of Aliakbari and Toni (2008: 3), establishing social relationship between individuals is perhaps the first step to every communicative event. This makes the form of address a very important factor in every communicative event: they are apparently the very first step to establishing social relationship.

Unfortunately, most studies of languages in Nigeria have focused on the phonology, syntax, lexis and morphology of the languages. Akindele (2007) observes that the basic discourse rules or conversational routines of languages are highly essential. These routines, in Akindele's words, include 'among others how greetings, compliments, invitations, and the like are given, interpreted and responded to' (p.1). I add terms of address to this group because of their roles in the communicative event.

In this paper, I attempt a documentation of the various forms of address of the Oko people and an ethnographic study of these terms of address. Akinlabi and Connell (2008) have emphasized the need for the documentation

of languages. They observe that even in cases where development or stabilization [of languages] is no longer feasible, for example due to reduced number of speakers, documentation of such languages is still nonetheless desirable, as means of preserving both the unique linguistics (sic) structures that might exist in these languages, as well as the cultural and other forms of knowledge embodied in them (p. 571).

Unfortunately, the structure of many Nigerian languages has been grossly mutilated by the towering influence of English in the country. Many speakers of these languages find it extremely difficult to sustain a conversation in these Nigerian languages without resorting to English. It then becomes necessary that these languages be documented to preserve the wisdom, histories and cultures behind them. As Olaoye (2008:1) puts it, 'the documentation of Nigerian languages and their dialects is therefore indispensable to achieving a deeper understanding of Nigerian languages, cultures, histories and societies'. Moreover, since 'a language documentation aims at a record of the linguistic practices and traditions of a speech community' (ibid), the forms of address of a people may be seen as an indispensable linguistic behavior of the people as they give some insight into the cultural practices of the people.

At this juncture, it is necessary that I justify my choice of Oko for analysis. Oko is an ancient city that lies a few kilometers south of Asaba in Oshimili South Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. It is one of the riverain Igbo communities generally referred to as Olu or

Ogbaru/Ogbahu. Oko has six villages - Amakom, Obiokpu, Anala, Ogbele, Umuoko and Odifulu. The first three communities are collectively called Oseede while the latter collectively are referred to as Ekeanya. The Oko people share a lot of cultural practices with the Enuani<sup>a</sup> and indeed other Anioma people of Delta State. These practices include the existence of indigenous monarchies or kingdoms and the people's conservative and tradition-conscious nature as against what is found among the East Niger Igbo (Onwueme and Emenanjo 1996:25). Opene (1974: 5) has earlier observed that the Oko people are indeed conservative as far as customs are concerned. This cultural awareness is recognized throughout Ogbaru land where it is not uncommon to hear elders and high priests pray to the spirits of their ancestors to pardon them for any inadvertent omissions or adulterations during ritual ceremonies by simply saying 'Nso dili Oko'. This deeply translates into 'May whatever is to be rightly done or forbidden be left for Oko to do or forbid'.

It then follows that the norms of Oko speech forms will retain much of the cultural practices of the Olu as well as the Anioma more than the other communities around. Besides, Oko has not bent to the influence of English like the dialects of the surrounding communities.

Secondly, the choice of Oko – dialect of Igbo – in the title might give the impression of a distinct language. However, it points at the practice in Igboland of using the same term for a people, their language and the geographical area they occupy (Emenanjo 2003: 91; Onyeche 2002: 43). Brann (2006: 98) refers to the situation in these words:

The plethora of language identities [in Nigeria] frequently comes from persons giving the place of their birth, as the name of the language that they speak, that is, in their minds, the *towns mouth, lip, or tongue* = their dialect, is identified by them as their speech form.

However, in purely linguistic terms, Oko is a dialect of Igbo.

## METHODOLOGY AND CLASSIFICATION SCHEME

Data for analysis are collected mainly through native-speaker introspection and personal observation. Being a native-speaker of Oko, I got most of the data presented here first-hand. However, I also crosschecked the data with older native-speakers for verification and better analysis. I adopt an ethnographic approach in this study because of its potential to, in the words of Baxter (2003: 85), 'emphasize the localized, microscopic, particular, context-bound features of given settings and cultures' (quoted in Afful, 2007: 2). This approach will foreground the complexity and subtlety of address terms in Oko and their cultural significance.

For a community with such a high level of culture-sensitivity and complexity, it is normal to expect a wide-range of address terms. Scholars around the world have adopted different classification schemes. While analyzing address terms in Hindi, Mehroter (1981) categorizes them as names, honorifics, titles, situation factors, multiple uses of address forms, greetings, invocation, addressing pets

and avoidance of address as possible. Fitch (1998) identifies five categories – second-person pronoun, proper names, kinship terms, titles, nicknames and adjectival terms – while studying the varieties of relationship among participants in Columbia. In his study of Sesotho address terms, Akindede (2008) identifies seven forms namely titles, title with first name, title with last name, first names, nicknames, multiple names and teknonyms. Aliakbari and Toni (2008) classify Persian address terms into ten categories – personal names, title terms, religious address terms, occupation-bound terms, kinship or family/relative terms, honorifics or terms of formality, terms of intimacy, personal pronouns, descriptive terms, and zero address terms.

These divergent classification schemes reflect partly the cultures of the studied groups - some communities favor certain forms of address more than others – and partly the biases of the individual scholars. In this study, address forms will be studied under the following headings: personal names, titles, nicknames, kinship or family/ relative terms, occupational terms, teknonyms and descriptive terms.

## DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Generally, choice of address forms depends largely on the age, sex, status and location of the interactants, though the influence of age appears to be overriding. These will be analyzed in relation to the classification scheme adopted.

### Personal names

Personal names are about the most common form of address in Oko. The use of first names is more common among peers or from an older person to a younger one. A younger person might address an older one by his first name especially if the age difference between them is not much, though this is not strictly followed. Older people are usually addressed by their titles or greeting names (discussed below).

One noticeable feature of Oko names is the people's resort to clips instead of calling the full name: Emeka for Chukwuemeka, Edu for Chinedu or Chukwunedum, Ify for Ifeyinwa, Ekwy for Ekwutosi, Anugo for Mbanugo. These clips may be seen as adherence to the principle of least effort whereby people go for a less strenuous activity if it will adequately take care of the more strenuous albeit original or standard one. Secondly, these clips are more endearing than the full forms which are often used to show anger or formality. Children that are used to the clipped forms of their names always sense some form of danger whenever their parents address them by the full forms.

Interestingly, though children do not usually address their parents by their first names, the reverse is the case in some Oko families. These are usually families where children live together with their parents and grandparents. The children grow up to know their grandparents as *nne* (mother) and *nnna* (father); their direct parents they address by their first names because that is what they hear every other (older) person call them. The problem is that the address terms meant for the parents have been

transferred to the grandparents and the children do not have other expressions to use other than their parents' first names. In some cases, it takes the children a long time to discover that *nne* is their grandmother and not their 'direct' mother and that their mother is not an elder sister.

Oko people hardly address one another by their last names. This is apparently a general feature of Igbo where the idea of surnames was a recent development. Speaking through his heroin in to my husband from Iowa, Chukwuemeka Ike observes that traditionally, Igboland had no surnames. Your own name given to you at birth by your family was all that mattered, plus your title or praise name if and when you earned any. It was only in polygamous families that it became necessary once in a while to tag on a child's mother's name to his, to distinguish between children with identical names. (p. 22).

Such tags usually go with expressions like 'the child of' like 'Uche the son of Ekwutosi.' But such tags are still very rare. Children with identical names from the same household are usually identified with the adjectives *ukwu* (big) and *nta* (small) to distinguish the older from the younger:

Chinedu ukwu = big Chinedu = older Chinedu  
Chinedu nta = small Chinedu = younger Chinedu

### Titles

Emphasis here is on chieftaincy titles which are given to people who have distinguished themselves or who hold certain positions in the society. In Oko, every title has an appellation that goes with it. Below are some Oko titles and the appellations that go with them:

Eze (king) – Akor;  
Iyasele – Onowu  
Olodi – Akpe  
Isama – Akwue  
Odogwu – Abi  
Alibo – Azeh

Speakers choose one of the following forms in addressing a man with a title:

Title alone – Odogwu, Iyasele  
Appellation alone – Abi, Onowu  
Title plus first name – Iyasele Oyali, Odogwu Nnonyeli  
Appellation plus first name – Akor Olise, Abi Nwamanna  
Title plus appellation – Odogwu Abi, Isama Akwue

The first form is relatively rare in Oko since most people use the appellation instead. The use of appellations is the most common form of address among titled men. The combination of title and appellation is mainly used to hail the person, to boost his ego. On the other hand, the combination of titles with first names or appellations with

first names is to single out the particular person being addressed or to mark formality.

Indeed Oko people are so fond of their titles that they appear (or feign to be) hurt when addressed without the titles. Some younger people in love with certain titles adopt these titles pending when they grow up and officially take them, yet they are addressed in those terms as though they had taken the titles. Many people get so known by their titles or appellations that these displace their first names. It took me a long time to recognize that my uncle whom I grew up to know as *Uwolo* has another 'real' personal name, that *Uwolo* is a title he adopted as a child. In some cases, some children supply their parents' titles or appellations when asked for their parents' names or their surnames. This is how many families in Oko today have come to bear titles and/or their appellations as surnames.

It should be noted that unlike in English where a person is addressed by his title plus his last name or surname, in Oko it is title plus first name. This emphasizes the non-existence of surnames in Igboland before the coming of the white man.

### Nicknames

Nicknames are given to people by their friends or family and are often connected with what they look like or what they have done. These nicknames are meant to boost the bearers' ego. Some of the nicknames in Oko are animal names like *agwu* (lion) for a very brave person, *ullili* (squirrel) for a good athlete, *aja* and *okpo* (names for fishes that are swift) for good wrestlers. Some women are given nicknames like *asa* (a fish) or *ugo* (eagle) because of their beauty or royal descent.

There is this practice in Oko for people to take or be given *afa ekene* (greeting names or praise names). These names usually show the bearers' experience, philosophy or aspiration and at times, like titles, tend to displace the bearers' personal names. Such terms include *ife e ji eme eze* (what a king is made of, invariably referring to money), *onye ego bu eze* (the rich man is king) usually shortened as *onye ego*, *uso bu na ndu* (relationships are enjoyed while alive, not when dead). Such greeting names appear to take the place of titles for people without titles.

However, some greeting names are not complimentary. These are given especially by elders to younger ones who refuse to change for the better. A child with very dirty teeth may be addressed as *eze ataka* (dirty or ugly teeth) while one with bushy hairs may be called *isi cheli* (let the hair wait). According to Egejuru (2002:192);

Naming among the Igbo people is a quasi-sacred undertaking, because a name is often considered a spirit that inhabits it (sic) bearer. A person's name is believed to play itself out in the life of the named. Therefore, it is crucial to choose a good and fitting name.

This underscores the seriousness with which people react to uncomplimentary names. The child given such an uncomplimentary name is forced to change for the better as this means a corresponding positive change in name.

### Kinship or family/relative terms

Oko people are also fond of addressing their relative by terms that indicate the nature of the relationship that exists between the interactants. The following are some of the kinship terms found in Oko:

- *Nne m* (my mother) and *nna m* (my father). But these are also used to address any elderly woman or man in the community, especially those from the same *ime uno* or kindred. Some older women address younger men as *nna m* (my father) apparently for courtesy, and some men call younger girls *nne* to show endearment or where it is believed that the girl is the incarnate of the man's dead mother.

- *Ada* (first daughter) and *okpala* (first son). These terms are used for first daughters and sons of nucleus families of for the oldest woman or man in the kindred. However, they are also extended to any member of the family or kindred irrespective of their positions.

- *Nwadiani* (child of a daughter of the family). The *nwadiani* is recognized in a family as long as the lineage can be traced, even if the child is a grand- or great-grand child of a daughter. Thus it is common in Oko to find children embarrassed when addressed as *nwadiani* in families they (the children) cannot trace their lineage to, but where the addresser (elder) remembers as the child maternal grandmother's family.

- *Oṣṣgoṣṣ* (in-law). Oko does not make such distinctions as father-in-law, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, and sister-in-law. At times a distinction is made between a male in-law (*oṣṣgoṣṣ nwoke*) and a female one (*oṣṣgoṣṣ nwanji*). Besides an *ogo* must not be from the nucleus family of the other marriage partner. Anybody from the other partner's kindred or even town is addressed as *ogo*.

- *Nwunye m* (my wife). This term is used not only by the husband of the woman but also by anybody from the man's kindred, whether male or female, older or younger than the addressee. However, the reverse is not the case for the man. He is not addressed as *di* (husband) by anybody from the woman's family.

- *Di* (husband). A woman usually calls her husband *di m* (my husband), at times preceded by the man's first name, nickname, title or its appellation. As a child, I was always amused whenever my aunty addressed her husband as *Uwolo di m* (Uwolo my husband, Uwolo being my uncle's adopted title). I grew to know that the practice shows how close a woman is to her husband, or how much she is fond of him. However, a woman may also call anybody from her husband's kindred *di* irrespective of the person's age or sex. This point up the chauvinistic nature of the

Oko society. The woman is 'wife' to any member of the man's family but the man is not 'husband' to every member of the woman's family

Though not kinship terms per se, there are other terms of address in Oko that show some relationship between the addresser and addressee or the attitude of the addresser towards the addressee. People with identical names address themselves as *oṣṣgoṣṣ* while age mates call each other *iyọ*. Using these terms of address shows the addresser's eagerness to identify with the addressee as a namesake or age mate. At times, age mates address each other simply as *wee*. This has no English translation. When a man has earned the respect of his father or an elder probably because of his elevated status or the responsibilities he carries, the father or elder might call him *nwoke m* (my man), *nna m* (my father) or *di anyi* (our husband, literally). For a woman, the address term is *ada m* (my daughter). One notices the possessive nature of these terms, which reflects the people's eagerness to identify with or recognize success. One also notices the chauvinistic nature of the terms. A successful man is made to appear almost equal with the father or elder but the woman remains a daughter.

### Occupational terms

Being riverine with large expanse of fertile farmlands, Oko people are mainly fishers and farmers. So it will not be distinctive to address one as *onye olu ugbo* (farmer) or *onye oku azu* (fisher), though people that have distinguished themselves in farming usually take the *Eze ji* (king of yams) title. However, people that have delved into other occupations are sometimes addressed by their occupational terms, either by combining these with their first names – *Onye nkuzi Nwogo* (Teacher Nwogo); *Emeka dibia* (Emeka the (native) doctor) – or by using the occupational term alone – *Di nta* (hunter); *Di ochi* = palm-wine tapper. The choice of addressing a person by either of these two groups largely depends on the age of the addressee. A younger person is not supposed to address an older one by his first name. Such use of occupational terms for address is rare anyway.

### Teknonyms

Teknonyms are forms of address derived from a combination of the name of a child and its father or mother (Akindede 2008: 9). It is given to people once they attain the status of father or mother like *Nne lfeanyi* (lfeanyi's mother) and *Nna Amaka* (Amaka's father). There is the tendency for parents to be addressed by their first child's name, though this often changes if the first child is a girl followed by a boy. The boy's name then replaces the girl's. However, if the addresser knows only, or is closer to, a person's younger child, the teknonym features the younger child's name. Sometimes, either to create humor,

or as naïve kids, some children address their parents with teknonyms featuring their older sibling's names, giving the impression that their parents are different.

That notwithstanding, teknonyms mark some elevation in status especially among women. Indeed, they are used mainly by and for women as the men are happier with their titles or greeting names. What is more, having a child, especially a male one, is some form of marital insurance for the woman as the husband is not likely to get married to a second wife.

### Descriptive terms

Descriptive terms as address forms are mainly used to create humor or to reprimand the addressee. A pregnant woman, especially one close to being delivered of the baby, is addressed as *agadi nwanyi* literally meaning old woman. This is in mock recognition of her weak and slow movements.

Sometimes, the descriptive term appears derogatory but is not intended to be taken at face value, as when a person addresses his peer as *onye ala* (mad person) or *onye ujo* (fearful person). Yet at other times, the derogatory term is a way of reprimanding an erring person, usually a younger one, as when a woman calls her child *anu* (animal) or *okogbo* (antelope) if the child behaves stupidly. The antelope is seen as a stupid animal in Oko worldview. Oko folklore has it that it rained heavily on a certain day for which the animals had scheduled a general meeting. All the other animals were wise enough to squeeze out the water in their clothes at the entrance to the meeting venue. But the antelope galloped into the venue in his drenched wears and this elicited the hollers 'Ah okogbo!' from the other animals. And *okogbo* became the antelope's name till date. So addressing an individual as *okogbo* means calling the person stupid.

Another form of descriptive terms in Oko links the addressee with his kindred. It is common to witness an exchange like this between two Oko people from different kindred:

A: *Onye Igbulie, nye m opia m.*  
 B: *O di efe i bu Igbulie? Weli na-eje*  
 A: Igbulie man, give me my cutlass  
 B: Is it easy to be Igbulie? Take and go

Such situations usually spark off exchanges of praise and vituperations of kindred groups, but these are done with no ill feelings.

### Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the various forms of address that exist in Oko. But more importantly, it has revealed the intrinsic relationship between these forms and the norms, values and attitudes of the Oko people. Like many other communities in Africa, Oko people cherish kinship

so long as there is a basis for establishing one as is seen in their attitude of extending the original referents of some address terms to include other people like *ogo* (in-law) and *di* (husband). The people also use address terms to create humor as well as to reprimand erring youths. In conclusion, it is suggested that such non-formal properties of Nigerian languages be studied as such studies will foreground aspects of the Nigerian culture hitherto overlooked. These terms go beyond being mere 'attention-getters' but are one of the most interaction-oriented utterances among a people. They show the social relationship between interactants thereby foregrounding the ethnography of power and solidarity in the society. Understanding the linguistic etiquette of a group is a giant step towards coexisting peacefully with the people. Using the right form of address endears one to the people of the society.

### Note

Onwueme and Emenanjo (1996:25) erroneously group Oko as part of Enuani. Enuani literally means 'upland' and is used to refer to the Igbo people that occupy the hinterland west of the Niger. Oko belongs to the Olu or Ogbaru/ Ogbahu group which literally points at their living very close to the Niger.

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