

1 **Disappearing Lexemes in the Igbo Language: An Effect** 2 **of Language Variation and Change**

3
 4 *Language variation which is a precondition for language change, results from many factors*
 5 *such as age, gender, social class, language contact, etc. Lexical variation and consequent*
 6 *change could be as a result of technological and societal changes. Igbo language does not*
 7 *have a long history of writing and many words must have disappeared in the past unrecorded.*
 8 *This paper discusses the disappearing lexemes in the everyday speech of especially younger*
 9 *speakers of different dialects of Igbo. In their present usage of the Igbo language, some words*
 10 *are fast becoming obsolete and rarely used in communication. This is probably as a result of*
 11 *modernity and sometimes because the items which such words refer to are now rare to find or*
 12 *no longer exist. The researchers used structured checklist to collect from elderly speakers of*
 13 *the Igbo language names of such objects and concepts which are gradually getting out of use.*
 14 *The paper provides ample examples of such words as collected from different Igbo dialect*
 15 *areas and expresses the obvious fear that with the passage of time, such words would*
 16 *completely disappear from the Igbo lexicon. The paper concludes on the note that there is*
 17 *urgent need to conduct multimedia documentation of these lexical items before they completely*
 18 *disappear from the Igbo lexicon. These documented lexical items could serve as a database for*
 19 *term creation for modern items, concepts and ideas in the contemporary Igbo society.*

20
 21 **Keywords:** *Disappearing Lexemes, Language Change, Igbo Language, Cultural Dynamism,*
 22 *Language Documentation*

23 24 25 **Introduction**

26
 27 Languages change over time. Language change is a universal
 28 phenomenon. Languages with long history of writing have been shown to have
 29 changed over time and many words have been lost or replaced with newer
 30 words. This change is apparent in the language use of the younger generation.
 31 When changes occur in people's language, the language owners observe that
 32 their language is changing. Sometimes, older people complain and usually put
 33 blames on social institutions, cultural imperialism by other cultures or public
 34 appearances of modern leaders.

1 It is important to take into consideration the language acquisition process
 2 in this research. A child starts speaking a language from the age of two and
 3 most likely acquires a native speaker competence at the age of five. However,
 4 the acquisition of lexical items is a continuous process throughout one's life. It
 5 is assumed that a child of six to probably fifteen years, or little more, may not
 6 have acquired so many words of the language, especially those words that are
 7 not part of everyday expressions. In fact, the number of words known to the
 8 child is determined by his level of exposure to the language. It is however
 9 assumed that, by the age of twenty, a native speaker of a language should have
 10 been exposed to at least ninety percent of the words of the language. It is
 11 equally important to note that knowledge of a word could be active or passive.
 12 Active knowledge involves knowing the meaning of the word and using it
 13 while passive knowledge involves knowing the meaning but not using it.
 14 Different words have different degree of use. There are words that are
 15 frequently used which we call everyday use but there are words that are
 16 infrequent. The frequency of a word is determined by two major factors which
 17 are: readily availability of concept/idea represented by the word, availability or
 18 non-availability of synonyms. When concepts or ideas are always there in a
 19 society, there must be words to express them in the day to day use of the
 20 language. If concepts/ideas/objects are rarely available, the words representing
 21 them may not be readily available in the mental lexicon of the speakers.
 22 Sometimes, borrowing from another language that is contact with the language
 23 in question will take place when the word for the concept is not readily
 24 available. This paper takes into consideration, the above factors in determining
 25 whether a word is still actively in use or obsolete in the Igbo language.

26 The Igbo language has witnessed a rapid decline in its lexicon since the
 27 last four decades. This is as a result of the spread of modernism. Advancement
 28 in technology has given rise to many instruments such as radio, television,
 29 computer, cell phone and play station. These modern gadgets as good as they
 30 are have negative effect on the development of our indigenous languages.
 31 Children spend a lot of time watching foreign movies and cartoons that

1 indoctrinate them into foreign cultures and values. These days, most parents
 2 hardly make out time to tell folk stories to their kids. As a result of this, many
 3 Igbo children born in the last two to three decades do not know the names of
 4 many Igbo traditional concepts and objects. It is surprising to note that many
 5 children who one can be assumed to be fluent in the Igbo language do not use
 6 such words as *ngàjì* ‘spoon’ and *ùgàṇì* ‘famine’. It is interesting to note that
 7 many children who are assumed to be fluent in Igbo prefer to use the English
 8 equivalents for such readily available words and concepts in Igbo as with the
 9 case with *ngàjì* ‘spoon’ and other such common items. In some other cases, it
 10 is simply because the concepts or objects are rarely seen or occur any more.
 11 This is the case with *ùgàṇì* ‘famine’ and many others.

12 The doctrines of Christianity have also discouraged people from using
 13 certain words relating to some Igbo traditional cultural activities. Most of these
 14 cultural activities are seen as ‘pagan’ practices especially by the members of
 15 the modern Pentecostal churches. There is a conscious effort by members of
 16 the Pentecostal movement to disassociate themselves from anything their
 17 ‘pagan’ fore bearers were known for. They even go as far as rejecting names
 18 given to them by their parents. They will hardly use words that have to do with
 19 traditional practices even though most of these words have nothing to do with
 20 religion and belief. The cohesion of the society has also been affected by
 21 formal education and the modern lifestyle such that the people no longer take
 22 part in ‘primitive’ cultural events. For these reasons, the rate of the use of
 23 traditional Igbo words has dropped drastically as most people no longer have
 24 interest in them. As these words are abandoned the society has lost most of its
 25 values. This paper sets out to find out some of these Igbo words that are
 26 becoming obsolete and the rate at which different generations of Igbo speakers
 27 use them.

28 The rest of the paper is divided as follows. Section 2 discusses the
 29 relationship between language variation and language change and their
 30 relationship with cultural change which could lead to loss of words and
 31 creation of new ones. Section 3 is on the methodology for data collection and

analysis. Section 4 presents the list of words we consider obsolete or becoming obsolete and their categorization. In section 5, we employ some statistical tools in analyzing some few selected words to show the level of familiarity and use of such words by different generations of Igbo speakers. Section 6 is the conclusions and recommendations.

On Language Variation and Change and its Relationship to Cultural Change

An interesting relationship has been observed between language variation and language change. Language variation is a precondition for language change. This presupposes that patterns of language variation are crucial for a full understanding of language change over time. Agbedo (2001:44) notes that an individual's language behavior changes in accordance with the demands of his everyday interaction as determined also by the social context. This implies that language change is an intrinsic part of the process of everyday use of language. A related term is language attrition which Köpke & Schmid, (2004:5) define as "the non-pathological decrease in a language that had previously been acquired by an individual". Language attrition occurs when there is change in the linguistic behavior of a speaker of a language. It could occur probably be as a result of the acquisition of a second language and less use of the first language. It could affect an individual or the society. When it affects the society, it is usually described as a form of language shift. In the case of disappearing words, it may not be as a result of forgetting or losing the L1 words, but that of non-transfer of the L1 words to the children. This is largely caused by cultural and technological changes in the society.

Cultural dynamism is a characteristic of every human society. Linguists have long realized the importance of the connection between language and culture. This is because the lexicon of a language tells the story of the culture of those who speak the language. Changes in material culture, in lifestyles, and in institutions have led to losses and gains in the lexicon (Johnson, 1996).

1 Globalization has in one way or the other affected many societies in the world
2 and consequently their languages. The Igbo society has changed from one that
3 was predominantly rural, with an economy based almost solely on agriculture,
4 to one with a majority of its population in urban areas with modern amenities
5 and some level of technological advancements. Meillet (1921) was one of the
6 first historical linguists to study the role of sociological factors in linguistic
7 change. His work, as interpreted in Nerlich (1992:177), explained semantic
8 change based on (1) relationships between words and other words, (2)
9 relationships between words and objects, and (3) relationships between words
10 and the differential usage of them by speakers of different social groups.
11 Johnson (1996) investigates lexical change and variation in the Southeastern
12 United States between 1930 and 1990. This book discusses words used in the
13 Southeast and how they have changed over time. It also describes how the
14 lexicon varies according to the speaker's age, race, education, sex, and place of
15 residence. The results show that region was the most important factor in
16 differentiating dialects in the 1930s but that it was the least important element
17 in the 1990s.

18 There is an insignificant amount of scholarly work on language variation
19 and change in Igbo. A notable work is Agbedo's (2001) study of linguistic
20 variation and change in the Enugwu-Ezike dialect of Igbo. Using a wide range
21 of social factors such as region, age, contact, gender and education in
22 measuring the patterns of linguistic variation in the dialect under study, the
23 research identifies region as the most significant factor for variation. Of all the
24 linguistic levels, vocabulary is the most sensitive to language change since it is
25 tied referentially to the culture. It is on this note that this present study seeks to
26 investigate lexical change in the Igbo language.

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28
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Methodology

The data for this study were collected from three dialect/subcultural areas in Igboland: Nnewi, Nkwelle Ezunaka and Issele-Uku. The choice of these dialects was not motivated by any other reason except convenience. The researchers are from these areas and/or have some relations from these areas. Coincidentally, Nnewi represents an urban settlement, Issele-Uku represents a semi urban settlement while Nkwelle Ezunaka represents a rural settlement. The words were collected from elderly speakers from these communities who are 60 years and above by listening and interacting with them. Majority of these elders are monolingual Igbo speakers. The vitality of the collected words were examined using structured questionnaire designed to find out the familiarity with the words, knowledge of their meanings and usage by the speakers. The questions were just three: (1) Have you heard the word before? (2) Do you know the meaning of the word? (3) Do you make use of the word in daily conversation or as the need arises? Our respondents were selected from three different age brackets representing different generations of Igbo speakers: 15 – 39, 40 – 59, 60 and above. There is no convenient generational index to classify the Igbo speakers but we take it that 15-39 represents those who born and bred with the period of computer evolution in Nigeria. 40-50 represents the post independence group, while 60 and above represent those born before independence. We deliberately left out those below 15 years because it is natural that their level of acquisition of the lexicon of the language will be low. A total number of 90 respondents from the three communities were used for the study (15-39= 32, 40-59= 30, 60 and above = 28). All of them are fluent native speakers of Igbo but bilingual in English and Igbo. Since we could not possibly present a statistical representation of all the words in a short paper like this, only data on few words are statistically presented to give a graphic picture of how the words are faring among different generations of the speakers. For the statistics, simple percentage was used in

obtaining the values of the words as used by different age groups. The results are presented in bar charts for better appreciation.

The Data

We present below 30 words which from our investigations are rarely used nowadays. We term these words obsolete or disappearing because many younger speakers of the language have either not heard the word or do not know their meanings. Even many of the older speakers who know the meanings of the words hardly use them nowadays.

These terms were loosely grouped together in seven categories: (1) cosmetics/fashion, (2) housing/furniture, (3) food/cooking items, (4) religion, (5) health, (6) greetings and (7) miscellaneous. We use the following abbreviations to show the source of the words: N = Nneewi, NE = Nkwelle Ezunaka, IU = Issele-Uku and C = common to the three dialects.

1. Cosmetics/fashion

égbúgbú	tattoo (C)
ùrì	make up for women (C)
òtánjélé	local eye pencil (C)
ufie	a reddish powder for beautification (C)

2. Housing/furniture

m̀kpú	room (NE)
m̀kpúkè	woman's bedroom/house (C)
òkpógā	a type of chair (C)
óché ékwū	kitchen stool (C)
ùkó	shelf/counter (C)

1 3. *Cooking items*

ékwú	kitchen (C)
ńgīgā	basket hanging (over a heath) (C)
ékú	wooden spoon (C)
òkù	clay bowl (C)
m̀kpilité	a small wooden mortar (IU)

2

3 4. *Religion/belief*

ókṗēsī	symbol of divinity (C)
òkwú álūsī	shrine (C)
ògbòdù	the uninitiated (into the masquerade cult) (N, NE)

4

5 5. *Health*

̀nhìchè	yaw disease (N,)
ákpàtà	measles (NE)
àlùbálá	measles (N)
áfùfù	measles (IU)
òtòlò	diarrhea (C)
ekpenta	leprosy (C)

6

7 6. *Greetings*

ómūū	greeting for an elderly man (N)
ómūū	greeting for an elderly woman (N)

8

9 7. *Miscellaneous*

̀ùgàṇì	famine (N)
mpanaka	lantern (C)
m̀bùrù	stick (that is aimed and thrown at a tree top) (C)
éjù	earthenware (C)
m̀kpà	scissors (C)

10

1 The words above will fall into two broad groups: extinct words and
2 disappearing words.

3

4 *Extinct Words*

5

6 Some words were observed to be obsolete because the objects/concepts
7 they denote are no longer in existence. For example, *òkù*, *éjù*. Words like
8 *ómūū* and *ómūū* in Nnewi which are greeting words are completely dead.
9 Nobody uses them any more

10

11 *Disappearing Words*

12

13 These are words which Igbo speakers showing a highly proficient lexical
14 knowledge are not always able to recall because the objects/concepts they
15 denote are disappearing or the English equivalents are more frequently used.
16 Instances are: *m̀kpúkè*, *m̀bùrù*, *ǹchìchè*.

17 The words above are rarely used nowadays. Interestingly, the question will
18 be how are such concepts expressed by the modern day speakers. Most of the
19 younger who like we said earlier are bilingual in English and Igbo resort to
20 English to express such concepts. To them, it could be analysed as borrowing
21 because such English terms have become part and parcel of their Igbo lexicon.
22 These are some of the recorded expressions among the younger speakers. We
23 were able to obtain from elder speakers the same expressions. The differences
24 are presented in Table 1 below.

25

26

1 **Table 1.** *Variation in Use between Younger and Older Speakers*

	Younger Speakers	Older Speakers	English Translation
1	Onye <i>lepa</i>	Onye ekpenta	a leper (a person afflicted with <i>lenrosy</i>)
2	<i>Mama</i> m nọ na <i>kichin</i>	Nne m nọ n' ekwu	My mother is in the kitchen'
3	O nwere <i>mizulu</i>	Alubara na-agba ya	He/She is suffering from <i>measles</i>
4	Biko nye m <i>sizos</i>	Biko nye m mkpa	'Please give me the scissors'
5	Afọ na-asa m	Otolo na-agba m	I am having diarrhea

2
3 In 1-4, the younger speakers use the English equivalents. Interestingly,
4 when confronted, we discovered that they do not even know the Igbo
5 equivalents for such words. In 5, the younger speakers refer to diarrhea as *afọ*
6 *osisa* which translates as 'running stomach'. The older people know that
7 running stomach is a disease condition which has a name 'òtòlò'. There is a
8 proverb on that: *A nyusịa nsị a kàpìghị yà ọnū, ọ bụrụ nsị òtòlò* which literary
9 translates as 'If an excreta does not have a pointed tip, then it is the excreta
10 from diarrhea'. Since the words above are rarely used by the younger people,
11 they are gradually getting out of use and being replaced by their borrowed
12 English equivalents.

13 We show in section 5 below the graphical representation of the level of
14 familiarity, knowledge of meaning and use of few selected words among
15 different generations of the Igbo speakers from the selected areas.

16

17

18 **Statistical Analysis**

19

20 We selected one word from each category in section 4 for statistical
21 analysis of the responses from our respondents. Only words that are common
22 to the three communities are subjected to this statistical analysis with the

1 exception of *ómūū* which is found only in the Nnewi dialect/subculture. This is
 2 to show in practical terms that the words are either obsolete or disappearing.

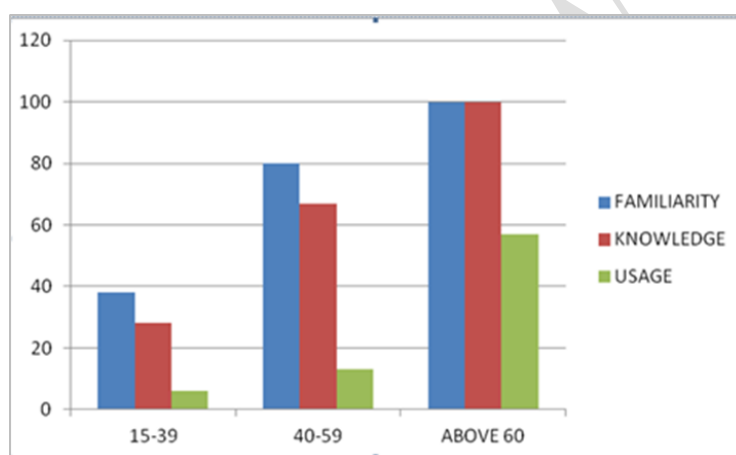
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4 **Table 2.** *Òtánjélé 'Local Eye Pencil'*

Age	Total No of Respondents	Familiarity with the Word		Knowledge of the Meaning of the Word		Usage of the s	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
15-39	32	12	38	9	28	2	6
40 - 59	30	24	80	20	67	4	13
Above 60	28	28	100	28	100	16	57

5

6 **Figure 1.** *A Bar Chart Showing the Familiarity, Knowledge and Usage of Òtánjélé*



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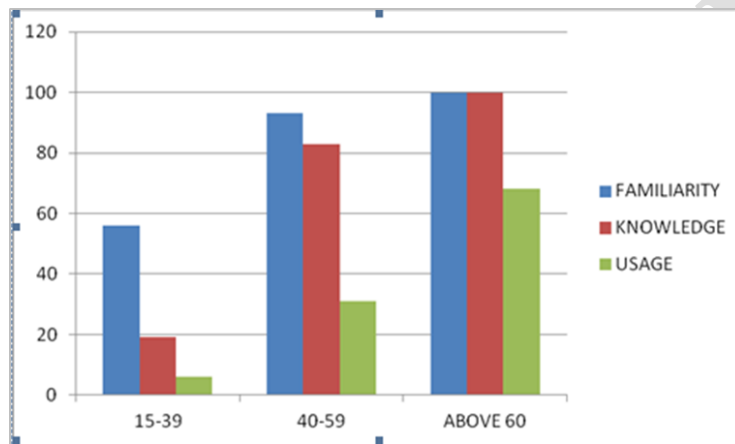
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9 The analysis in table 2 shows speakers within the 15- 39 and 40-59 age brackets
 10 are familiar or know the meaning of the word otanjele. Even the among the few that
 11 know the meaning, only an insignificant number: 6% and 13% respectively use the
 12 word. The Older speakers know the word but only very few still use it. This is
 13 because the local eye pencil has been replaced by the imported one. Some of the
 14 older speakers refer to the imported eye pencil as otanjele while the majority of the
 15 speakers refer to it as just 'eye pencil' without knowing that there is a perfect Igbo
 16 equivalent. This is an indication that the word is fast disappearing.

1 **Table 3.** *Mkpúkè 'Woman's Bedroom/ House'*

Age	Total No of Respondents	Familiarity with the Word		Knowledge of the Meaning of the Word		Usage of the Word	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
15-39	32	18	56	6	19	2	6
40 – 59	30	28	93	25	83	10	31
Above 60	28	28	100	28	100	19	68

2

3 **Figure 2.** *A Bar Chart Showing the Familiarity, Knowledge and Usage of Mkpúkè*

4

5

6 The word *mkpuke* is rarely used by the younger and middle generations
7 and a good number of them do not know the meaning. The word is familiar and
8 known by the older generations but fewer number of persons (68%) still make
9 use of the word. This is an indication that the word is endangered and may
10 disappear from the Igbo lexicon. Many people today simply use the borrowed
11 word *rum*.

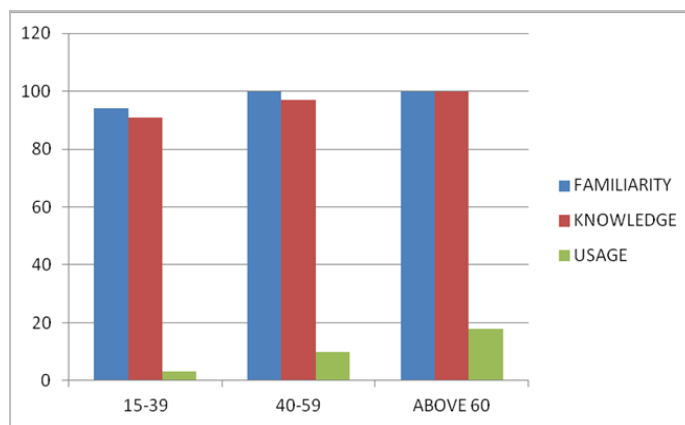
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1 **Table 4.** *Ékú 'Big Wooden Spoon'*

Age	Total No of Respondents	Familiarity with the Word		Knowledge of the Meaning of the Word		Usage of the Word	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
15-39	32	30	94	29	91	1	3
40 – 59	30	30	100	29	97	3	10
Above 60	28	28	100	28	100	5	18

2

3 **Figure 3.** *A Bar Chart Showing the Familiarity, Knowledge and Usage of Ékú*

4

5

6 The analysis above shows that *eku* scores high for familiarity and
7 knowledge for all generations, but scores low for usage for all generations.
8 This is because the wooden spoon has been replace by stainless and aluminuim
9 spoons. It is rare to find the wooden spoon in homes in Igboland. The word is
10 therefore highly endangered.

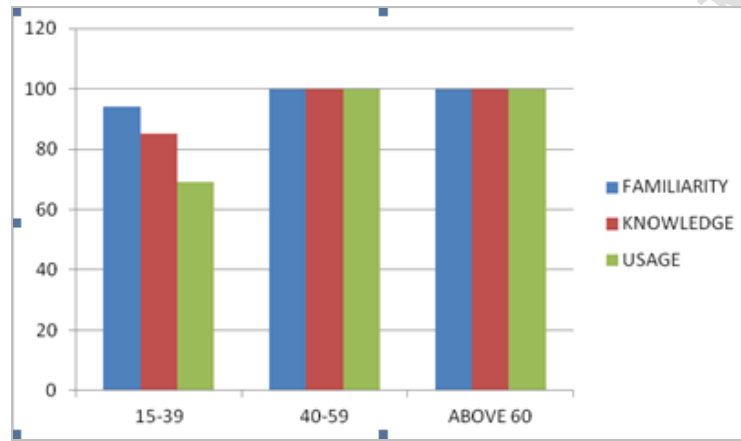
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1 **Table 5.** *Òkwú ÁlṹSī́ 'Shrine'*

Age	Total No of Respondents	Familiarity with the word		Knowledge of the meaning of the Word		Usage of the Word	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
15-39	32	30	94	28	85	22	69
40 – 59	30	30	100	30	100	30	100
Above 60	28	28	100	28	100	28	100

2

3 **Figure 4.** *A Bar Chart Showing the Familiarity, Knowledge and Usage of Òkwú ÁlṹSī́*

4

5

6 Table 5 and Fig 4 show that the word okwu alusi is still very much viable.
 7 A greater percentage of the population still make use of the word. This is
 8 because even though many of the people have turned to Christians, there are
 9 still adherents to the African traditional religion and shrines are dotted here and
 10 there. Only very few persons, especially the very young ones, do not know the
 11 meaning of the word nor use it. There is even a kind of renaissance where
 12 many of the younger people are moving back to traditional worship. We can
 13 then say that this word is not disappearing soon.

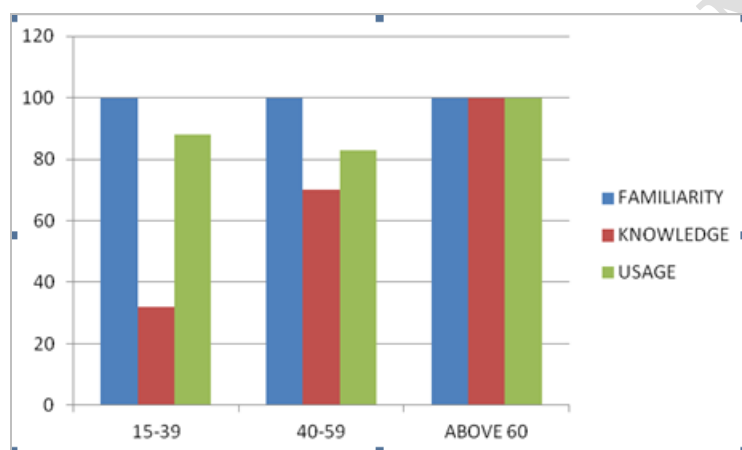
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1 **Table 6.** *Òtòlò 'Diarrhea'*

Age	Total No of Respondents	Familiarity with the Word		Knowledge of the Meaning of the Word		Usage of the Word	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
15-39	32	32	100	10	32	28	88
40 – 59	30	30	100	21	70	25	83
Above 60	28	28	100	28	100	22	79

2

3 **Figure 5.** *A Bar Chart Showing the Familiarity, Knowledge and Usage of Òtòlò*

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6 The word *otolo* is interesting because while there is high level of
 7 familiarity and usage of this word among the younger and middle age speakers,
 8 but lower level of knowledge of its meaning. Surprisingly, many younger
 9 speakers that use the word do not know its meaning. They use the word in a
 10 fixed abusive form: *Otolo gbagbue gi* 'Let diarrhea kill you', but do not know
 11 the import of the curse. The word has been replaced in normal everyday
 12 language with *afo isa* meaning 'to have a running stomach'.

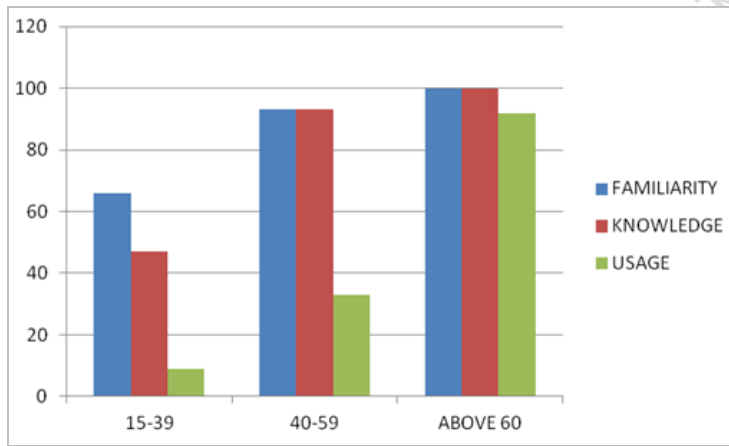
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14

1 **Table 7.** *Ùgàṇì 'Famine'*

Age	Total No of Respondents	Familiarity with the Word		Knowledge of the Meaning of the Word		Usage of the Word	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
15-39	32	21	66	15	47	3	9
40 – 59	30	28	93	28	93	10	33
Above 60	28	28	100	28	100	26	92

2

3 **Figure 6.** *A Bar Chart Showing the Familiarity, Knowledge and Usage of Ùgàṇì*

4

5

6 The level of familiarity, knowledge and usage of the word *ugani* is low
7 among the younger speakers. This may be as a result of the improvement in the
8 economic wellbeing of the people. Nobody talks about famine in modern day
9 Igboland. There is no time in recent memory after the Nigerian civil war that
10 recorded great scarcity of food that affected the whole society. The younger
11 generations who are familiar with the word picked it up from folktales.
12 Unfortunately, with the advent of western culture and civilization with
13 associated modern amenities such as television and video games, parents no
14 longer tell their children folkstories such as “Once upon a time there was a great
15 famine in the land of the animals”. These could explain why the word scores low
16 for 15-39 age bracket. Incidentally, lack of knowledge of the word is seen in

1 speakers between the ages of 15-20. They rather use the more generic term *aguu*
 2 'hunger'. The word *ugani* may soon only exist in the Igbo dictionaries.

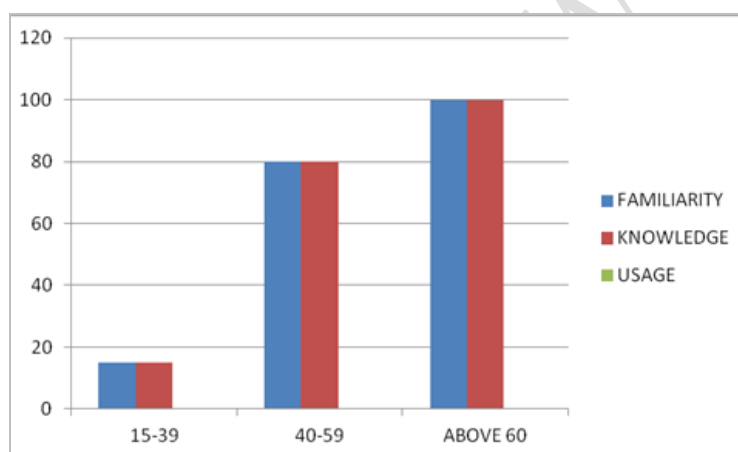
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4 **Table 8.** *ÓmūŪ* (N) 'Greeting'

Age	Total No of Respondents	Familiarity with the Word		Knowledge of the Meaning of the Word		Usage of the Word	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
15-39	13	2	15	2	15	0	0
40 – 59	10	8	80	8	80	0	0
Above 60	10	10	100	10	100	0	0

5

6 **Figure 7.** *A Bar Chart Showing the Familiarity, Knowledge and Usage of ÓmūŪ*



7

8

9 The word *ómūŪ* is a form of greeting for male elders in Nneewi dialect, it
 10 counterpart for the female elders is *ómōō*. Both words have become extinct.
 11 Nobody uses them any more. Many younger speakers are not familiar with the
 12 word; they do not have any knowledge of the word and do not use it at all. The
 13 older speakers (40 and above) who are familiar with the word and have the
 14 knowledge do not also use it at all because it has become old fashioned to greet
 15 the elders that way. Moreover, the greeting is erroneously associated with
 16 paganism. The last time, one of the author of this paper remembers the use of

these greeting words should be in the 70s. The words have been replaced with the other Igbo greeting forms including the English ‘good morning, good afternoon, good evening’.

Summary and Conclusion

The paper has attempted to present some obsolete Igbo words in the speech of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. We have shown the various categorizations of those words and the paper identified that the older speakers are more familiar with the words, more of them know the meaning of the words and more of them use them regularly. The younger generations are fast losing grasp of the words. This is a clear indication of endangerment. These Igbo words are endangered and fast disappearing. Many of the words are being replaced by their English counterparts in the mental lexicon of most Igbo younger speakers

The paper observes that the main cause of the disappearance of Igbo lexemes is westernization as a property of modernization and globalization. It then calls for urgent documentation of Igbo lexemes. These documented lexemes could serve as a repository for the creation of terms for modern concepts and new technologies that come into Igbo culture. For example, the traditional Igbo society had an earthen pot for keeping water cool know as *ùdù mmīrī* ‘water pot’. People no longer use the water pot, but it could be used to name the modern day fridge. For example, something like *ùdù oyī* which literally translates as ‘cold pot’ sounds fine for fridge in the Igbo language.

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