

Ethnolinguistic Analysis of Greetings Among the Issele-Uku People: A Reflection of Oral Traditions and Linguistic Memory

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Abstract

This study examines the greeting practices of the Issele-Uku people of Delta State, Nigeria. While highlighting the significance of the greetings as expressions of oral tradition, cultural identity, and collective linguistic memory, it hinges the study on ethnolinguistic approach. The Issele-Uku people, an Aniocha subgroup of the Anioma Igbo community, preserve their history, values, and worldview through distinctive greeting forms. The study aims to identify and categorize these greetings, analyze their linguistic and cultural features, examine their role in preserving oral traditions and linguistic memory, and assess the effects of modernization on their continuity. Drawing on oral history interviews and secondary sources, the study explores how language reflects and shapes the social, cultural, and historical identity of the Issele-Uku people. The analysis focuses on the structural, semantic, and performative dimensions of greetings, revealing how they communicate respect, social hierarchy, kinship relations, spiritual beliefs, and communal values. Findings show that greetings function as living texts that preserve historical consciousness, migratory narratives, and collective identity. The study further demonstrates that the vitality of the Enuani dialect depends largely on the continued use of such oral expressions. By documenting traditional greeting forms, the research contributes to African language preservation, provides educational resources on oral traditions, and supports policies aimed at safeguarding indigenous languages and cultural heritage.

Keywords: Ethnolinguistic, Greetings, Issele-Uku, Oral Traditions, Linguistic Memory

Introduction

The Issele-Uku people of Delta State, Nigeria, have a unique way of expressing their rich oral traditions through their greetings which transcend mere formalities. The people of Issele-Uku are grouped among the Aniocha people, an Igbo subgroup in Delta State, Nigeria. The Issele-Uku people otherwise called the Isseles, have been described as the descendants of Oligbo the son of Ovbi IKhime also known as Eze Chima. History says Eze Chima left the ancient Bini kingdom and settled west of the River Niger. This place became the homestead of the Issele-Uku people and from there, Issele-Mkpitime and Issele Azagba left to develop other towns.

Their original name was Isi-Ile-Uku Kingdom and this was later anglicized to Issele-Uku by the British for easy pronunciation. It is also narrated by historians that Issele-Uku was an outpost founded by Oba Eweka 1 of Benin in about 1230 AD for the Benin Empire. This move was said to be made to prevent the massive migration of the Nri descendants from the modern southeastern region, the Isu and the

Igala people. This outpost was also meant to be a large farmland to cater for the people of Benin and a war camp that would defensively provide security for the Benin Empire against external aggression. Prince Uwadiaie, Oba Eweka 1's second son was crowned as "Ogie" (King). Subsequent monarchs who ruled bore the title "Ogie" which is traceable to Prince Uwadiaie, until the era that "Obi" became a title for traditional rulers within the region (probably an influence of the eastern region). Oba Eweka 1 sent groups of warriors, royal princes, administrators, chiefs, local geographers and slaves to accompany his son to assist in administration and perhaps for the safety of his son and the Benin royal family group settled in Ehaekpen area of Issele-Uku. The Issele-Uku royal family is described as one of the oldest in the Anioma nation and till later centuries, the Oba of Benin continued to approve the crowning of the Obis till Issele-Uku became reasonably independent of the Benin Kingdom.

Today, Issele-Uku is the capital of Aniocha North Local Government Area of Delta State. Igbo is the native language in Issele-Uku

and its neighbouring towns, despite its history with Benin Kingdom because of the Igbo neighboring towns which influenced its language use. The Ika-Ibo variety of Igbo prevalent in Issele-Uku today is called Enuani by ethnographers who describe it as a mixture of Igbo with Ika and Edo or rather an Igbo with influence from Edoid and Ika culture particularly in terms of some words and names still heard today. This study is an ethnolinguistic analysis of the greeting practices within the Issele-Uku community, exploring how these practices reflect their oral traditions and contribute to the preservation of linguistic heritage.

Objectives

This study focuses on an ethnolinguistic analysis of greetings among the Issele-Uku people while trying to reflect oral traditions and linguistic memory. The study aims at fulfilling the following objectives which are:

- To identify and categorize the various forms of greetings used by the Issele-Uku people.
- To analyze the linguistic structures and cultural elements embedded in these greetings.
- To examine how greetings function as vehicles of oral traditions and linguistic memory.
- To assess the impact of modernization on the preservation of these greeting practices.

Literature Review

Not many studies have been carried out on the culture of the Issele-Uku people until recently. There are however, some existing studies that highlight the importance of greetings in African societies. Greetings in African cultures, particularly in Nigeria, transcend mere formalities or exchange of pleasantries. Greetings are deeply rooted in the social fabric of Africans, and they reflect respect, social hierarchy, and communal values.

Greetings as a Reflection of Respect and Social Hierarchy

Greetings in Nigeria though tied to religious and ethical practices, exhibit

significant cultural diversity which varies across different ethnic groups. Some ethnic groups have different greetings for various times of the day, seasons, and even occupations such as the Yorubas. Igboin (2012) opines that greetings are not merely linguistic expressions but are laden with cultural meanings and serve as indicators of one's upbringing and social awareness. Hence, the cultural and metaphysical reality of a community is often embedded in their greetings. A study on the Enugwu Ezike dialect of the Igbo language reveals that greetings refers to daily salutations, seasonal greetings, and expressions of respect, and each of these greetings serve specific social functions (Mamah et al., 2021). Ochei (2022) also carried out a similar study greetings in other African communities where it is emphasized that greeting rituals are learned over time and they signify one's competence and status within the society.

Greetings as a Medium for Social Interaction and Community Bonding

Greetings reflect respect and social hierarchy among the African people. Similarly, Communal values are reinforced and sustained through greeting. Wójtowicz (2021) describes greetings as a type of expressive speech acts which are commonly used in our daily life. Greetings are generally used on a daily basis and it is one of a few language-related behaviours actively taught to the children. Greetings are examples of Speech Acts that are uttered in certain situations for specific reasons. The Igbos for example greet as a form of showing gratitude after every meal and this is a communal values that has been passed from generation to generation.

Greetings serve as a medium through which individuals express concern for each other's well-being and family bonds are sustained through this medium too. Through greetings, inquiries about one's health and activities are made and this fosters a sense of community and mutual care (Wójtowicz, 2015). Among the Yorubas, greetings are considered as an integral part of their daily interactions and the

absence of an appropriate greeting can signify disrespect. Social hierarchy is also reflected in their greetings as they greet with respect particularly in terms of the age of the person being greeted or social status.

Greetings are an important norm in maintaining social harmony and reinforcing societal norms (Yahya-Othman, 2015). The Igbo also make use of greetings to cement interpersonal relationships. Greetings could come as expressions of goodwill and they are often tied to the community's collective identity.

Udeagha (2020), raised concern over the attitude of the younger generation which has been observed not to fully integrate traditional greetings and this calls for concern as it could lead to the erosion of cultural values. Traditional greeting practices, despite their significance are facing challenges due to globalization and the influence of foreign cultures. In order to preserve cultural values particularly in the younger generations, efforts to preserve and promote traditional greeting practices are essential. These efforts will help maintain cultural identity and social cohesion.

Cultural Significance and Variations in Greeting Practices

Greetings are one of the cherished core values that facilitate interpersonal relationships and cooperative reality in Igbo traditional culture (Udeagha, 2020). Greetings are an integral part of the culture of a people. Through it they express their wishes, felicitate with one another, enquire about their wellbeing and carry on oral culture. The Issele-Uku people have variations in their greeting as people are giving specific greetings that are assigned to the quarters they belong to. The Issele-Uku community or kingdom is made up of ten (10) quarters and each quarter is headed by the eldest titled man (Diokpa) who acts as the spokesman for the quarters and presides over meetings (Projectlist.com.ng). The Diokpa is a very important person in the quarters as he is the chief that heads the quarters. The Obi on the other hand is the traditional custodian of the

land. He is the king and he represents the ancestral fathers. He is a divine ruler of the kingdom and his authority must not be challenged. The royal lineage belongs to some quarters as this study will reveal and they are given a specific greeting while the Diokpas will be greeted according to the greeting associated with their quarter.

Considering the paucity of scholarly work focusing specifically on the Issele-Uku community's greeting practices, this study aims to fill this gap by providing an in-depth ethnolinguistic analysis of their greetings, thereby contributing to the broader understanding of African greeting rituals and their role in cultural preservation.

Methodology

As highlighted in the abstract, this research employs a qualitative ethnographic approach, making use of primary data that are gotten from fieldwork and archival research.

The fieldwork includes conducting participant observation during community events, interviews and informal conversations with community elders, linguists, and local historians to gather firsthand accounts of greeting practices. Archival Research on the other hand includes reviewing historical records, oral literature, and previous studies related to the Issele-Uku people to contextualize the findings.

Data Analysis makes use of ethnolinguistic analysis which is an interdisciplinary method that examines in details how language reflects and shapes the cultural, social, and historical identity of a particular ethnic group. It investigates the relationship between linguistic forms (such as greetings, expressions, titles, and idioms) and the cultural meanings, beliefs, social structures, and worldviews embedded within them. This study carries an ethnolinguistic analysis on the greeting in Issele-Uku and focus will be the linguistics structure, semantic content, performative function and cultural context of these greeting.

Data Presentation and Discussion**Greeting Forms Used by the Issele-Uku People**

Issele-uku can be divided into ten (10) quarters namely: Ogbe-Ofu, Idumu-inei, Ogbedibo, Ogbolie, Ogbe-Owelle, Ogbe-nti,

Ogbe-utu, Ishiekpe, Idumu-Ahaba and Ukpai. These quarters have unique greetings though some share same greetings. Below is a table showing the different greetings used by the Issele-Uku people:

Table 1: Showing Greetings used by the Various Issele-Uku Quarters

S/N	GREETING	QUARTERS	HISTORY
1	Oliwe (Olie-uwe)	Ishiekpe	Enjoying Life- Greeting for the King's Lineage
2	Oliwe	Ogbe-nti	King's Lineage
3	Oliwe	Ogbedibo	King's Lineage
4	Ojogwu	Idumu-inei	They were known for blacksmithing in the formatory Idumu-inei years as they produced guns, cutlass, hoes, and farm implements and his informed their greeting.
5	Onowu	Ogbe-Owele	Custodian of the shrine for the enthronement of the Obi. Owele is an item required for the enthronement of the Obi.
6	Ogene	Ogbolie	They are connected with Kingship ordination
7	Ogene	Ukpai	They are connected with Kingship ordination
8	Abi	Ogbe- Utu	This is the quarter where the chief warrior (Odogwu-Minister of War) comes from. The greeting "Odogwu Abi" is a way of reverence and honour to the Chief warrior.
9	Ahudinma	Idumu Ahaba	Greeting designated to the quarter
10	Onowu (general greeting). There are some other greetings they are used in Ogbe-ofu sub - quarters such as: Onya, Onowu, Oliwe, Ojubi and Ede. These special greetings will be discussed below	Ogbe-Ofu This is a large quarter that has sub-quarters that have their own greetings too. In the columns below are sub - quarters of Ogbe - ofu.	When a new king is being coronated, he comes to stay in Ogbe-Ofu to perform some rites. He is made to sleep in a boot for seven (7) days to observe some rites. These coronation rites makes them have the general greeting "Onowu" which is the same greeting with Ogbe-Owelle.
11	Onya	Idumu-Ozoma	Greeting for Idumu-Ozoma - a sub-quarter in Ogbe-Ofu
12	Onowu	Umu-Onini	Greeting for Umu -Onini - a sub -quarter in Ogbe - Ofu
13	Oliwe	Agwachime	Greeting for Agwachime - a sub -quarter in Ogbe - Ofu
14	Ojubi	Idumu-Onihe	Greeting for Idumu -Onihe - a sub-quarter in Ogbe - Ofu
15	Ede	Idumu-Omo	Greeting for Idumu -Omo - a sub -quarter in Ogbe - Ofu

The king (Obi) is greeted Igwe (means exalted/revered) or Agu (means Lion)

The Prime Minister (Iyase chieftancy title) is greeted Onowu

Linguistic Structures and Cultural Elements Embedded in the Iselle-Uku Greetings

Age and Gender are important factors that influence greeting practices among the Iselle-Uku people. It is expected that the younger individuals greets their elders first, and this act reflects importance of social hierarchy. A younger person for example, may courtesy or bow when greeting an elder, while a handshake may be reserved for peers. This practice helps maintain social order. The form of greeting also varies depending on the family lineage of the individuals involved. Iselle-Uku is divided into quarters and each family lineage can be traced to a particular quarters.

Social hierarchy can also be revealed through greeting. As shown in table 1 above, the king's lineage are found in three quarters: Ishiekpe, Ogbe-nti Obi and Ogbedibo. Their greeting connotes enjoyment "Oliwe" (literally

meaning "eater of life"). They are referred to as "Umu Eze Issei" which means: children of Iselle-Uku king and they thus belong to a class that enjoys royal status. History has it that when a Prince becomes a king, all his brothers and sisters vacate the palace and they go to form new homes in any of these three quarters and they continue to leave there. They are these three quarters linked to the royal lineage are greeted 'Oliwe'.

Structural Analysis of Iselle-Uku Greetings

At the level of morphology many of the Iselle-Uku greetings are single or compound words and they are often noun phrases or title-bearing expressions. Some greetings encode actions or states of being, while others denote titles or roles. Below is a table that shows the analysis

Table 2: Showing Morphological Structure of Isseke-Uku Greetings

Greeting	Morphological Structure	Interpretation
Oliwe	Compound: Olie (enjoy) + uwe (life)	Lexical phrase meaning "enjoying life"
Ojogwu	Possibly derived from "Ogun" (the god of iron). They were blacksmiths and they worked with iron to make tools.	Nominal form with spiritual/occupational connotation
Onowu	Proper noun/title (prime minister/kingmaker)	Institutional role
Ogene	Single noun (metal gong, used ritually)	Instrument/metaphor for authority
Abi	Proper noun, part of "Odogwu Abi"	Honorific for warrior lineage
Ahudinma	Compound: Ahu (life/body) + di nma (is good)	"Life is good"; well-being greeting
Onya	Single noun	Unique Anioma identity that is used to honour the status or an Honorific for warrior lineage and respected council members
Ojubi	Single noun	"May your days long"
Ede	Single noun	When used as greeting means "someone whose presence shakes the sky". It is used to acknowledge status or nobility

Considering the distribution of Greetings, some greetings are shared by multiple quarters, suggesting shared ancestry or status. For example, Oliwe is a greeting shared among all king's lineage quarters, while Onowu is a greeting shared among Ogbe-Ofu and Ogbe-Owelle who are quarters that are connected with the ordination or enthronement of the king (Obi).

Other greetings are exclusive to particular quarters, signifying specialization. For example, Ojogwu is a greeting for those in Idumu-Inei with a history of blacksmithing.

Semantic Analysis of Issele-Uku Greetings

Issele-Uku greetings are rich in semantic meaning, reflecting social roles, historical functions, and cosmological concepts. Below is some semantic meaning that the greetings portray which are capable of revealing cosmological and historical concepts.

Royalty and Divine Order: "Oliwe" (meaning "Enjoying life") is used among the Obi's lineage (Ishiekpe, Ogbe-nti, Ogbedibo). This phrase connotes divine favor, prosperity, and nobility which are core traits associated with royalty. Similarly, "Onowu" which is the title of the kingmaker in many Igbo communities, is used as a greeting in Issele-Uku, and this greeting also affirms a custodial and priestly function, especially in Ogbe-Owele and Ogbe-Ofu, both of which are involved in coronation rites. "Onowu" is also greeting for the Prime Minister (Iyase). "Igwe" or "Agu" is also a greeting reserved for the Obi himself. While "Agu" means "Lion", "Igwe" means "exalted or revered".

Spiritual and Ritual Authority: "Ogene" is a greeting for Ogbolie, Ukpai quarters. It could literally mean "metal gong", which is symbolically used to announce important events. It is performative in itself, suggesting sound, proclamation, and ritual activation which is a metaphoric call to kingship.

"Ojogwu" is a greeting for Idumu-Inei quarters. This greeting has a connection with "ogun" the god of iron. It can also be derived from the root "ogwu", meaning "medicine" or "spiritual force." The blacksmiths, who made guns and

farm tools, are associated with mystical and transformative power. This greeting recognizes technical and spiritual craftsmanship.

Military and Social Defense: "Abi" is a greeting for Ogbe-Utu quarters. This greeting, especially in the phrase "Odogwu Abi," signifies military prowess. Odogwu is a warrior title and this salutation honors the minister of war as well as acknowledges the protective role of the quarter.

Well-being and Quarter Identity: "Ahudinma" a greeting for Idumu-Ahaba. A phrase possibly meaning "It is well with the body/life." Such greetings promote collective health and harmony, signaling the quarter's emphasis on peace and prosperity.

"Ojubi", "Ede", "Onya" are greetings used in Ogbe-Ofu sub-quarters. These are sub-greetings from the Ugbe-ofu quarter and they each connote nobility and honour for leadership as they reflect respect for ancestral or foundational identities.

Performative Analysis of Issele-Uku Greetings

Greetings in Issele-Uku can be described as performative speech acts because they do more than exchange pleasantries. They can be used to invoke respect, signal allegiance, acknowledge spiritual authority, and activate ritual roles.

Greeting can be used to reveal social hierarchy. Greeting someone from a royal quarter with "Oliwe" is an act of verbal deference, affirming their hereditary status.

Using "Onowu" in Ogbe-Owele or Ogbe-Ofu performs recognition of ritual authority. This is a speech act that positions the speaker in a socially aware and deferential relationship.

Greeting can be used to marking kinship and clanship relationships. Greetings like "Ahudinma", "Ojogwu", and "Abi" mark belonging and identification. They allow for quick ethnolinguistic recognition of one's origin, and this is particularly useful in diaspora or ceremonial contexts. A particular greeting makes it easy to trace the origin of the person

greeted and this could also help indigenes link up or connect with each other as someone who shares greeting with you may likely be a member of your extended family or from same quarters. When you are greeted, you are expected to return the appropriate greeting based on the quarter the person belongs to.

Greetings can enable the engagement of cosmological beliefs. Coronation rites that include sleeping in a boot for seven days (Ogbe-Ofu) symbolize a liminal phase—death and rebirth into kingship. Greeting such a person with Onowu is both ritual affirmation and cosmic acknowledgment. Similarly, “Ogene” as a greeting metaphorically echoes the spiritual bell—the invocation of ancestral spirits and activation of kingship rites.

Measures and Activities that Sustain or Reinforce Greetings as Vehicles of Oral Traditions and Linguistic Memory.

There are several activities that help sustain or reinforce greetings among the Issele-Uku people and these activities ensure linguistic memory. Some of the activities are discussed below:

Celebrations: Greetings play a huge role in the transmission of linguistic memory and oral traditions. The Issele-Uku community is known to celebrate age-long festivals through which it has preserved its culture through the years. One of such notable festivals is the “Ine festival” celebrated annually by indigenes. The Ine festival is gestured with the sound of gunshots that signals the end of the 7-day Iba Nzu observation and thus opens all roads that lead to the palace of the Obi, for the commencement of the Ine festival. Each traditional chief is also expected to fire his own gun which is usually followed by jubilation from the people. The atmosphere becomes further charged up with the emergence of the King's mother and wives who all come out in a single file with hairdo styled in Ancient Benin manner. The celebration begins with the King performing the royal dance which is followed by the traditional chiefs who are expected to dance to the King and also pay their

royal homage.

There is the “Ina-Aka” ceremony which is performed by titled chiefs lastly, as they pay respect to the Obi who in turn appreciates the homage paid to him. The “Ine festival” has gained much popularity and is attended by indigenes from far and near. It is a platform for educating the people on their rich culture, the indigenous music and other forms of cultural heritage and history of the Issele-Uku people. At such a gathering, it seems like a duty to know people's greetings and greet them accordingly by the greeting of the quarter they belong to.

Relationship with in-laws: The Issele-uke people have close ties with in-laws. When the in-laws have ceremonies like burials or weddings, the family pays the in-laws a visit, taking along drinks such as alcohol or palmwine and other items to support the ceremony. This communal relationship makes it easy to know people and thus people get to learn how they are greeted through observation. Hence the oral traditions are continually reinforced through these celebrations and occasions. When someone hears another person greeted by the greeting associated with his/her family, the person can easily conclude that such a person may be related to him. These traditional greetings are socializing mediums through which people show respect, honour and closeness. More familiarity is created when someone uses the traditional Issele-Uku greetings than when a non-traditional greeting such as “good Morning” is used. The constant use of these greetings helps the oral tradition to be sustained.

Constant Socialization: The market place is seen as an ancient place for socialization. It is a place where people meet regularly on market days and exchange pleasantries as they go about buying and selling. Though more women and children may be found here, it is a platform to learn informally the various greetings as people are greeted with their family greeting.

Other places where people get to meet to socialize may be occasions like naming ceremonies, religious functions, marriages, etc.

It is often a normal occurrence to see an adult correcting someone who has greeted him/her mistakenly using another greeting at such functions.

When people visit others, the culture expected them or those who they visit to greet using the correct greeting of their quarter. This practice though demanding makes people to make effort to know people by the quarter they came from so as to know the right greeting to give them. Over the years, this practice has encouraged linguistic memory and enshrined oral tradition..

The Impact of Modernization on the Preservation of Greeting Practices

The continuous migration from the traditional community to urban areas has brought along a gradual decline in the use of traditional greeting particularly among the younger generation. Some of them who are born in cities far away from their native communities and who do not maintain a constant relationship with those in the traditional communities find it challenging to remember the various greetings when they visit. Their children who may not even understand the indigenous language may also not be grounded in the greetings despite the significance of these traditional greeting practices. This influence of modernization and foreign cultures therefore makes younger generations in urban areas to increasingly adopt westernized forms of greeting, such as casual handshakes or nods, which lack the depth and cultural meaning of traditional practices. This attitude has raised concerns about the erosion of cultural identity and the weakening of social bonds within the community. While efforts are being made to preserve the various traditional greetings books or educational materials that contain details of the various family greetings could be produced and this study is one of such efforts aimed at the preservation of culture. The younger generation can be engaged through interesting educational puzzles that can enhance memorizing the various greetings. Families too can be of assistance by teaching their children how greet using their traditional greeting. The

findings reveal that the Issele-Uku traditional greetings are highly priced in social settings and its importance has sustained its use as it ensures the preservation of the culture.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this research have several implications as shown below:

- This study has come up with comprehensive catalog of traditional greeting forms and their contextual uses within the Issele-Uku community and this greatly assists in preserving the Issele-Uku community's cultural heritage.
- The study contributes to the documentation of the Enuani dialect by enriching the linguistic resources available for future generations.
- The research serves as an educational tool for teaching African oral traditions.
- The study's recommendations can inform cultural policies aimed at preserving indigenous languages and traditions.

Conclusion

This study is an attempt to document and analyse greeting practices as it aims to contribute to the broader discourse on African oral traditions and their role in cultural preservation. Though greetings may be considered as mere exchange of pleasantries and niceties by some other cultures, among the Issele-Uku people, greetings are profound expressions of identity, history, and culture. Hence, the relationship between culture and language is explored through ethnolinguistic analysis in this research. This study recommends the proactive steps that could be taken to ensure the continuous use of traditional greetings as this makes oral traditions to be sustained. Educational puzzles can be designed to encourage linguistic memory of these traditional greetings, books and other educative channels can also be of help in this task of maintaining, preserving and revitalizing traditional greeting practices to prevent cultural erosion and language shift in the face of modernization.

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