

Unclear boundaries between dialect and language within the Igboid cluster: a focus on the syntax of tense, aspect, and modality in Delta Igboid

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Abstract

This study argues and draws attention to the tense aspects and modality (TAM) comparison of the three Delta Igboid varieties with the Standard Igbo. A study like this that accounts for the TAM systems in these languages can help establish a position in the literature on the verbal operating system in the languages. At the end of this study, there will be a more objective account of the features of TAM in the Delta Igboid varieties of Ika, Ukwuani, and Enuani. It is expected that this can further help settle the arguments about whether these Igboid varieties are distinct languages of their own or are offspring of the Igbo language. This work significantly contributes to the documentation of Delta Igboid variations by providing a comprehensive examination of the Tense, Aspect, and Modality (TAM) systems in Ika, Ukwuani, and Enuani. The research offers an objective basis for comprehending the structural features and linguistic categorisation of these types by analysing their verbal operational systems. The findings contribute to continuing discussions about whether these variants should be categorised as separate languages or as subvarieties within the overarching Igbo language.

1 Introduction

This study is a call for linguistic attention from concerned linguists on Ika, Enuani and Ukwuani, three Igbo dialects in Delta State, Nigeria. It is a request to linguists interested in dialectology and language variation to have a look at the inherent nearness and “distanceness” between the Central Igbo variety and Ika, Enuani and Ukwuani Igboid languages. The outcome of such an investigation may help settle the long existing controversy and arguments of whether there are Igbo speakers in Delta State and where they are located and by extension, it can settle the linguistic or genealogical ancestry of Igbo speakers in Delta State, if they do exist. Hence, this study carries not just an academic relevance, but a sociopolitical one as similar problems and questions can be found for many languages in Nigeria. For example, in Bayelsa State, there are different languages or dialects of the Ijaw language – as drawing the lines on where to call them languages or dialects is always a problematic one. Such a confusing situation may not propel a comprehensive language policy and deliberate efforts by government and NGOs at preserving and developing these languages or dialects.

While the current study does not address all areas of language and dialectological studies, it does make a case for a core aspect of the grammar and morphology by focusing on the tense, aspect and modality (TAM, henceforth) of the Delta Igboid in comparison to the Central Igbo language. Bybee/Perkins/Pagliuca (1994) assert that TAM systems are fundamental to the structuring of meaning in human languages. They illustrate how speakers perceive time, reality, and intention, which are essential cognitive categories. An analysis of the TAM systems in Delta Igboid and Central Igbo may uncover significant grammatical correlations or discrepancies. Heine/Kuteva (2005) note that TAM markers are frequently language-specific and more resistant to borrowing than vocabulary, therefore serving as credible indications of genealogical ties. If the TAM systems of Ika, Enuani, or Ukwuani correspond with Central Igbo, this substantiates their categorisation as dialects rather than distinct languages. Comprehending the expression of TAM among Igboid variants is crucial for language harmonisation, literacy advancement, and the creation of educational materials. Substantial diversity may warrant distinct educational or orthographic methodologies (cf. Ameka/Kropp 2008; Heine/Kuteva 2005).

1.1 Typological information about Delta Igboid

Linguists have emphasized the need of carrying out a comprehensive syntactic investigation into dialectics of Igbo. According to Oha (2004), this need is primarily based on two fundamental reasons. The two reasons are highlighted below. Currently, the linguistic system known as Standard Igbo is deemed insufficient in terms of lexical and grammatical capacity to effectively meet the expressive requirements of Igbo speakers and writers. In addition, Ndimele (2009) argues that to establish the parameters of a language, it is important to thoroughly examine each dialect to identify their potential distinct characteristics and features within the broader linguistic framework. The use of language is a circumstance that consequently incites the current state. This research examines the tense aspect and modal (TAM) systems of Delta Igboid varieties within the minimalist framework.

Ikekeonwu (1986) posits that the Igbo language has around 20 distinct dialects, such as Enuani, Nkwerre, Ngwa, Orlu, Mbaise, Ikwere, Owerri, Ika, and Ukwuani, among others. In the past, there have been studies aimed at unravelling the syntactic differences between Central Igbo and the other Igboid varieties. For example, Blench (2019) attempted a description of the phonetics of the proto-Igboid languages and examined the vowel and consonant distribution in many of the varieties and concluded that there are widespread differences in the number of distinctive sounds in the Nkwerre and Orlu varieties and that, by extension, this spreads across other varieties in the Igboid group.

The current study makes a case for a focus by linguists on three such varieties, all located within the Delta Region. These groups of languages are also referred to as Anioma groups of Igboid languages (cf. Opone 2022). The Anioma region has three distinct sub-ethnic groups: the Enuani, Ika, and Ukwuani situated in the Western Niger Delta. The subgroups in question exhibit tight interrelationships and are referred to as “Ika Igbo” in European literature (cf. Forde/Jones 1950; Talbot 1969: 39).

It may not be very correct to refer to all three as such, though they share some affinities with the Central Igbo (cf. Nwaozuzu 2008). There are three main varieties within the Delta Igboid

language group: Ika, Ukwuani, and Enuani. Ika is a variant of the Igbo language that is mostly spoken in the Ika South and Ika Northeast Local Government Areas of Delta State, as well as the Igbanke region of Edo State, Nigeria. The dialects in question are classified as part of the Niger Igbo cluster, as described by Ikekeonwu (1986), and are mostly spoken in regions adjacent to the western bank of the River Niger.

Nwaozuzu (2008) further categorises these dialects as belonging to the West Niger Group of Dialects. Williamson's (1968) publication encompasses a lexicon of Ika, which stands as an early scholarly contribution to the field; highlights the linguistic distinctiveness of Ika (and Ukwuani) from Igbo, despite their classification as dialects within the Igbo language family. The syntax used in the construction of tenses and modality in Ika varies from that of Standard Igbo and other Igbo dialects. As a result, the study of Ika has garnered significant attention among Igbo linguists in recent years (cf. Uguru 2015).

The second Igboid language that this call is focused on is Enuani. Enuani is a variant of the Igbo language mostly spoken in Nigeria, by the Anioma community in Delta State. The dialect underserves as the primary means of communication among the native inhabitants residing in the communities located within the Aniocha South, Aniocha North, Oshimili South, and Oshimili North Local Government Areas of Delta State. It can be distinguished from certain Igboid varieties, such as Ika and Ukwuani, while exhibiting notable similarities to the central Igbo dialect (cf. Mordi/Opone 2009). These societies exhibit parallel practices and traditions, shared ideals, and interconnected interactions among different groups. The individuals in question see themselves as sharing a common origin and ancestral heritage, leading them to have the conviction that they are akin to one another as brothers and sisters. According to Opone (2022), these groups exhibit shared borders and engage in economic activity.

Finally, attention is directed at the Ukwuani language. The Ukwuani language has linguistic affiliations with other languages spoken in the Niger Delta area. The Ndokwa people communicate in the Ukwuani language, which exhibits dialectal variations between several groups residing in the Ndosumili region, including the contemporary Ndokwa West, Ndokwa East, and Ukwuani Local Government Areas (cf. Ejiorfor 2015). Blench/Dendo (2004) acknowledge the inclusion of Ukwuani within the Niger-Congo language family and categorise it accordingly. The connection between Ukwuani and the Niger-Congo phylum is established via the use of Williamson's (1989) and Williamson/Blench's (2000) classifications. Ukwuani is classified as a language belonging to the Igboid group within the Benue-Congo language family.

In all, these three Igboid varieties (Ika, Enuani and Ukwuani) make up the Delta Igboid variety. One notable characteristic seen in the description of the Delta Igboid variants, is the varying classifications proposed by various researchers or organisations in their own publications. These classifications often categorise these varieties either as distinct languages or as dialects of the Igbo language. The phenomenon undoubtedly aligns with the assertion made by Fromkin/Rodman/Hyams 2007: 431) regarding the inherent difficulty in determining the distinction between a language and a dialect, as well as the potential influence of societal perceptions in such categorizations. However, the present study argues and proposes that one will need to apply a level of linguistic objectivity to these classifications and find linguistic reasons to either call the

Delta Igboid varieties languages or dialects of Igbo. That is where the present study becomes important, as a study such as this can further clarify the situation at hand.

2 Review of literature

There are isolated studies on the Delta Igboid languages. However, what seems to be missing is a concrete scholarly investigation of any aspect of Enuani in comparison to its Ika and Ukwuani counterparts. Also, there seems to be no study of the three languages together. These are evident from the preliminary investigation and literature search of the languages. Hence, what is presented here are some studies in Ika and Ukwuani that show elements of prior studies. However, there could be studies not represented online and probably in hard copies in local libraries which a deeper study could reveal.

Uguru (2015) examined the low rise and high-rise intonation patterns in English and Ika languages, using the PRAAT technique for acoustic analysis. The research included the recording of monosyllabic, disyllabic, and short utterances in English and Ika languages. These utterances were produced by two male native speakers of Ika and one native speaker of English. Two rising intonation patterns, namely low rise and high rise were examined in this study. The data underwent analysis using the PRAAT system. The analysis was conducted in a bifurcated manner. Initially, a comparison was conducted between the curves of Ika utterances produced in rising melodies and those produced in identical tunes in English. Furthermore, an examination was conducted of the variations in the curves of distinct intonation patterns within a given language. In essence, a comparison is being made between the Ika Low Rise and Ika High Rise and the English Low Rise and English High Rise, respectively (cf. Uguru 2015).

Uguru (2015) revealed that the melodic patterns of the two melodies in Ika, a language mostly characterised by tonal features, and English, a language primarily characterised by intonation, exhibit overall similarities. This finding provides evidence that Ika has intonation, demonstrating that a tone language may exhibit characteristics often associated with intonation languages to a significant extent.

In their study, Ogum/Idegbekwe (2019) conducted an analysis of the English and Ika languages, focusing on aspects of reference coherence. They used Chesterman's (1998) contrastive functional analysis as the theoretical framework to examine the similarities and contrasts between the two languages. The research examined the different forms of reference coherence in both languages, using a comparative approach. The research revealed that the dissimilarities in the pronoun systems of the two languages are likely to provide challenges for individuals who are native speakers of Ika and are learning English as a second language, particularly in relation to gender and case marking. The research suggests that educators teaching English in regions where Ika is the primary language should try to comprehend the linguistic structure of Ika. This understanding would enable them to anticipate and address any challenges that learners may encounter.

Imu/Cookey (2022) research examined the phenomenon of *interfixation* within the context of the Ika language. The theoretical framework used in the research was based on segmental concepts. The theory of segmental analysis posits that morphological distinctions are formed by identifiable units that correspond directly to meaningful distinctions. The research findings

indicate that the *interfix* takes the form of a monosegmental element consisting of consonant sounds and a syllabic nasal (s). This *interfix* is placed between the root words and undergoes duplication. The vowel components in the Ika language demonstrate adherence to the vowel harmony concept, specifically the grouping of -AIR and +AIR sets. This principle allows for the formation of new words by infixing a morpheme in the centre.

According to Imu/Cookey (2022), the insertion of the *interfix* occurs between two similar words, hence functioning as a connecting element. This implies that the *interfix* remains in a stable location, namely in the middle position, and is unable to occur at the beginning or end of a word. This research primarily examines the process of word production in Ika via morphological modifications. However, the present study aims to investigate the formation of new words influenced by tense and modality and its potential impact on the translation of texts between Ika and English.

In his study, Ejiofor (2015) examined the categorization of Ukwuani emphasising its significance in the preservation of the language from the threat of endangerment. This study aimed to examine the various factors supporting the classification of Ukwuani as a distinct language. The findings of Ejiofor (2015) align with the perspectives of Blench/Dendo (2004), and other linguists who assert that the presence of significant cognates in both Ukwuani and the Igbo language supports the notion that Ikwere, Ika, Igbo, Ukwuani, Izii, Ogba, and Ekpeye languages can be grouped together as a single language family. Ejiofor (2015) advocates for more study in Ukwuani to facilitate its continued growth and emphasises the need to promote the inclusion of Ukwuani among the Nigerian languages. This inclusion would enable the language to be recognised as one of the focal languages in Nigeria.

In an investigation by Oghiator (2022), the primary objective was to provide a scholarly analysis of the morphological structures found in English and the Ukwuani language. The primary aim of this research was to discern the disparities, particularly in terms of derivational processes, between the two languages. The research highlights the notable distinctions in the morphological structures of the English language and the Ukwuani language by closely examining their derivations. For example, Ukwuani nominals lack inflections, unlike English nominals. As a result, the process of forming additive morphemes in Ukwuani differs from that in English. There are differences in the affixation procedures between the two languages. In the English language, the presence of prefixes is seen, but in the Ukwuani language, the presence of suffixes is observed.

In all, while some studies have explored different facets of the Ika, Ukwuani, and Enuani Igboid dialects, these enquiries have predominantly been separated, concentrating on each dialect in isolation. Significantly, there has been no comparative research of the three Delta Igboid dialects, nor has there been a detailed examination of the syntactic representation of Tense, Aspect, and Mood (TAM) in these languages.

3 Theoretical framework: minimalist syntax of TAM

The discipline of generative grammar has shown significant development since the early 1990s, with minimalism emerging as a prominent area of study. The Minimalist Program represents a significant advancement in the realm of generative linguistics, with a primary focus on the

objective of formulating language-related assertions that are both concise and universally applicable (cf. Gahutu 2018). The theory posits that a verbal phrase achieves proper representation alone at the interface level, including both the phonological form (PF) and the logical form (LF). When transferring lexical or morphological information from the lexicon to the interface. The transportation of lexical or morphological information from the lexicon to the interface involves numerous procedures and guiding principles. These include the numeration process, the function of morphology, and the pro-drop parameter, among others (cf. Gahutu 2018). In relation to the significance of morphology, Chomsky (1993) asserts that morphology assumes a crucial function within the framework of the new theory. The processes inside the computational system are motivated by morphological requirement. There is also a contention that, under the overarching framework, both articulation and perception are included by the same interface representation.

According to Chomsky (1993), the language faculty has many components, including a cognitive system responsible for knowledge storage, as well as performance systems that retrieve and use this information in diverse manners. According to the Minimalist framework, the computational system incrementally constructs phrase structures from lexical resources via two distinct operations known as Merge and Move. The phonological information is removed and thereafter subjected to a series of processes in accordance with certain phonological principles, including those pertaining to intonation contour and the impacts caused by words. Additionally, there are hidden motions that occur to non-phonological components subsequent to the Spell-Out process. The Minimalist Program imposes constraints of economy on both the derivations and representations of the language faculty. The computing system, as well as the interface level, adheres to a fundamental concept of efficiency. The interface level is clearly included by the economy principle of representation, which necessitates the use of a minimal number of symbols (cf. Adgar 2009). In relation to the essence of derivation, a fundamental premise posits that it operates on the principle of “minimizing effort”. It is often considered that the shortest movement is the simplest and hence the most instinctive. The term *shortest move* may refer to both the movement across the shortest distance and the fewest number of steps required. Furthermore, it is essential that a movement does not occur unless there exists a genuine “necessity”.

3.1 Merge in Delta Igboid

The process of merging is a fundamental operation within the framework of the Minimalist Program, which is a prominent approach in the field of Generative Syntax. It involves the combination of two syntactic parts that are near to each other, resulting in the formation of a new syntactic unit. In essence, it can be understood as an embodiment of recursion, a quality that numerous scholars argue to be an intrinsic attribute of language and cognition. As Chomsky (1998: 2) articulates, Merge represents “an essential operation of a recursive system that combines two syntactic entities, A and B, to generate the novel entity $G=\{A, B\}$ ”. The process of merging involves the construction of structures using lexical components, as well as the formation of bigger structures by combining smaller ones. This attribute pertains to the act of combining two syntactic entities. The rationale for this procedure stems from the observation

that words inside sentences tend to form constituents. The process of merge may be seen as a fundamental activity for constructing constituents.

As stated by Adgar (2009), the customary notation for representing this process involves assigning labels to the items being united. Typically, the designation used pertains to a subset of characteristics pertaining to the entity, with the main category attribute being the most often utilized, but other attributes may also have significance. Subsequently, the amalgamated entities are conjoined with an elevated point on the page, resulting in the formation of a novel entity, denoted by a label inscribed on the elevated point. This is represented below through the changes from A, B and C:

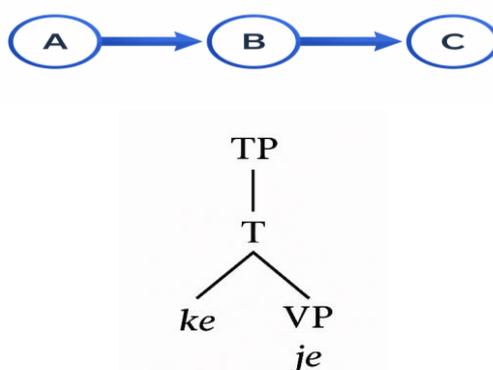


Figure 1: X-Bar Representation of TP in Delta Igboid

In the illustration above, the designations assigned to the two entities being combined are denoted as A and B; the result of their combination produces the C. So the main verb in Delta Igboid like *je* (go) merges/combines with the bound morpheme *ke/ge/ne* as B to form the C, which is *ke je/ge je/ne je*, which is- will go. Without such a merger in the language, it is not possible to form future tenses in the language. There are some lexical terms that lack the ability to function independently as syntactic objects. Unless they undergo fusion with another entity, the arrangement in which they manifest will be considered structurally flawed. When examining a word such as the Delta Igboid *ke/ge/ne* in isolation, it is evident that it does not convey a comprehensive notion until it is used in conjunction with verbs to denote future tense. These kinds of words are often referred to as *predicates*.

According to Adgar (2009), a *predicate* is defined as a linguistic element that may be used to describe or characterize a particular circumstance or event in the real world. The *predicates* often need additional linguistic information to fully convey the intended meaning (cf. Adgar 2009).

3.2 Feature Checking and Derivation in Delta Igboid

The concept of feature-checking pertains to a categorical feature associated with a lexical item. This feature does not directly influence the distribution of the lexical item but rather specifies the category of components that may be merged with it (cf. Chomsky 1998).

Within the framework of the Delta Igboid language, it is necessary to subject sentences generated through the application of language operations related to tense, aspect, and mood (TAM) to the feature checking principles of the language. This process is crucial in determining the

grammatical correctness and semantic coherence of these sentences as viable units of communication. Consequently, after each merging operation that entails the manipulation or generation of distinct forms, the outcomes are assessed for their coherence and applicability within the given context. The Move operation in Delta Igboid involves the manipulation of a structure that is created by the application of the Merge operation. This operation allows for the relocation of one of the parts inside the structure to a different place in the tree. The outcomes of using such applications within the framework of the present investigation would manifest as linguistic expressions in which tense, aspect, and mood (TAM) are conveyed either optionally or obligatorily using prefixes, suffixes, or other morphological mechanisms that further examination would uncover.

4 Methodology

This study is designed in a descriptive form. A descriptive study refers to a research approach whereby data is gathered without any alteration to the existing environment (cf. Nworgu 2006). Descriptive research can yield valuable insights into the inherent features of a certain group. The rationale for deploying the design stems from the primary objective of descriptive investigations, which is to illustrate correlations or interactions between two or more elements.

The methodology used in this research is based on a theoretical construct ~~often~~ referred to as a derivation. According to Chomsky (1998) and Adgar (2009), the concept of derivation may be seen as the outcome of using movement operations on syntactic entities to construct more complex ones. This analysis will primarily examine the derivation of Delta Igboid expressions, namely those that have undergone merge, movement, and feature checking procedures via the process of tense, aspect and mood (TAM).

The study relies exclusively on secondary data sourced from existing literature, encompassing empirical investigations on Delta Igboid variations, Igbo grammar books, and other pertinent linguistic materials. The initially anticipated field data collection, which included direct recordings and validation by native speakers, was not conducted in the present investigation. The analysis utilises recorded data to examine the grammatical characteristics of tense, aspect, and modality (TAM) in the Ika, Ukwuani, and Enuani variants of Delta Igboid.

5 TAM in Delta Igboid languages

The concept of TAM is a comprehensive construct that combines three separate elements of syntax and semantics: tense, aspect, and modality (cf. Gil 2021). Tense is characterized by the interplay between an occurrence and a temporally specified reference point, which is contextually established. Commonly recognized values for tense include past, present, and future. Aspect refers to the inherent temporal organization of an event, including several categories like perfective, progressive, iterative, durative, and others. Mood often signifies the speaker's disposition towards an event and encompasses several values, including but not limited to indicative, optative, and interrogative. Gill (2021) asserts that tense, aspect, and mood are often classified together because to the challenges, both practical and intellectual, that arise when attempting to differentiate these three categories in a systematic manner. To assess the intricacy of TAM marking in various languages worldwide, a basic categorization is used, distinguishing

between two categories of languages: those that exhibit optional TAM markings and those that need mandatory TAM markings (cf. Gill 2021), as seen in the figure below:

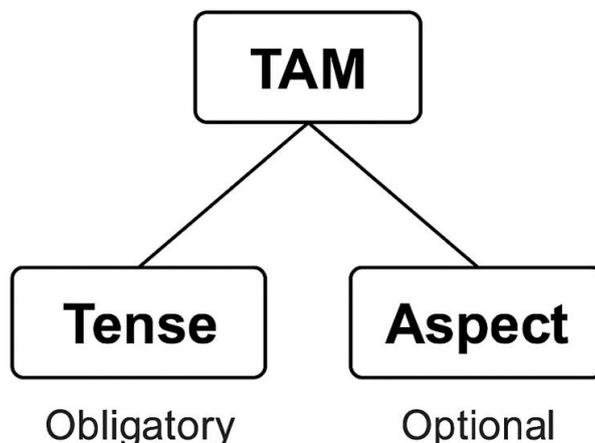


Figure 2: The binary nature of TAM according to Gill 2021 classification

The Delta Igboid languages exhibit evidence of the presence of mandatory tense-aspect-mood (TAM) marking, like that seen in the Igbo language from whence they originated. Nevertheless, based on initial inquiries, there are potential indications of discretionary notations inside the Delta Igboid linguistic system.

According to Uwalaka (1997), there are four tenses in Igbo, including the present, future, past, and pluperfect. The identification of these tenses entails recognizing the structural composition of the verb that conveys various tenses. Uwalaka (1997) posits that the present tense form *only* encompasses the class of simple verbs, with only a limited number of verbs falling inside this category. The future tense in English is formed by the grammatical combination of an auxiliary verb with the main verb in a phrase (cf. Uwalaka 1997: 80). The formation of the past tense may be achieved with the addition of the suffix *-rV* to the verb. Uwalaka (1997: 82) posits that it is possible for any verb in the language to be conjugated with a *-rV* past suffix. The pluperfect tense is distinguished by the duplication of the *-Rv*-suffix. To put it otherwise, the pluperfect tense in Igbo has a similar structure to that of the simple past tense. Based on initial observations and investigations, it has been determined that the Delta Igboid language does not exhibit the doubling of tense markers for the pluperfect tense. Consequently, the focus will remain on the three tenses that are indicated for time: present, past, and future. Uwalaka (1997) seminal work may be *is* the only scholarly book that attempts to provide a definitive classification of tense in the Igbo language.

I would now consider each type of tenses in Delta Igboid

1. a. Ika: *Ngozi óbu ebu olór* (present tense: *Ngozi bu ebu olór*)
- b. Enuani: *Ngozi eti bu ebu nu unor* (present tense: *Ngozi bu abu nu olor*)
- c. Ukwuani: *Ngozi eti ebu nunor* (present tense: *Ngozi ti ebu nu unor*)
- d. *Ngozi sang at home* (tresent tense: ‘*Ngozi sings at home*’)

From the data above, 1a uses the prefix *ó* to make past in Ika and in 1b the insertion of the auxiliary *eti* used to mark the past tense; same applies to Ukwuani language in using *eti* as the auxiliary marker of past tense in the language. On this note, the Ika language seems different

from the other two Delta Igboid in indicating past tense. For the present tense, each of the Delta Igboi varieties uses the lexical verbs: *bu*, *bu* and *ebu* for the present third person singular *sings*.

2. a. Ika: *Ndi àkwóji ànwòn ndi ohin ime afia oya hùn* (present tense: *Ndi àkwóji nwòn ndi ohin*)
- b. Enuani: *Ndi àkwóju te nwodu ndi oshi na asha ohàn* (present tense: *Ndi àkwóju nwodu ndi oshi*)
- c. Ukwuani: *Ndi àkwójòn nwuni ndi oshin na ahia oya hùn* (present tense: *Ndi àkwójòn nwu ndi oshin*)
- d. ‘The police caught thieves in the market yesterday’ (present tense: ‘The police catch thieves’)

Just as seen in 1 a-c above, there is not much of a radical difference in the use of the present forms in *nwun*, *nwodu* and *nwu* for the three varieties. The difference is in the past form markings. In 2 above, a variation is seen in the marking of the past tense. In 2a, Ika sticks to the use of prefixes but this time, it changes to the use of *à* as against *ó* in 1a. In 2b, Enuani uses the *te* as the auxiliary for marking tense which is somewhat like *eti* as used in 1b. However, there is much difference in Ukwuani as shown in 2c where the suffix *ni* is used to mark the past tense, which is more of a departure from the regular use of suffixations or changes that appear before verbs that are usually more common as seen in the table below:

Tense	English	Igbo	Ika	Ukwuani	Enuani
Present	<i>do</i>	<i>mę</i>	<i>mę</i>	<i>Orun</i>	<i>olu</i>
Past	<i>did</i>	<i>męre</i>	<i>nmę</i>	<i>Ruorun</i>	<i>gaolu</i>
Present	<i>eat</i>	<i>ri</i>	<i>ri</i>	<i>ri</i>	<i>ri</i>
Past	<i>ate</i>	<i>rire</i>	<i>ori</i>	<i>nri</i>	<i>eri</i>
Present	<i>write</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>de</i>
Past	<i>wrote</i>	<i>dera</i>	<i>ode</i>	<i>ede</i>	<i>ede</i>
Present	<i>cook</i>	<i>si</i>	<i>shi</i>	<i>shi</i>	<i>si</i>
Negation	‘does not cook’	<i>na ghesi</i>	<i>oshini</i>	<i>eshine</i>	<i>nsi</i>

Table 1: Showing some differences between Central Igbo and Delta Igboid varieties of Ika, Ukwuani and Enuani

One discernible feature of the past tense form in the Delta Igboid varieties is the use of the prefixation patterns for tenses and negation while the Standard or Central Igbo uses suffixes. However, from the examples given, they are all the present tense as the same words or related words. More research is needed to establish more typological features and differences within the grammatical framework of the Igboid system. That is a possible justification for the present proposed study.

5.1 Possibility of optional marking?

While generating and translating data for the current proposal, it is found out that some sentences may not show obvious language manifestation of past tense but understood as an action that has happened in the past by the users. Examples 3a–c to demonstrate this below.

3. a. Ika: *we jẹ afia*
- b. Enuani: *wà je asha*
- c. Ukwuani: *wẹ je ahia*
- d. English: ‘They went to the market’

In the above, 3a–c are in the past with the same verb *jẹ* but there is no obvious marker of past tense with either prefixation or suffixation as seen in 1a–c and 2a–c. However, when contrasted with the future form, there seems to be differences as seen in 4 a–c.

4. a. Ika: *we ke jẹ afia*
- b. Enuani *we teni jẹ asha*
- c. Ukwuani: *we kune jẹ ahia*
- d. English: ‘They will go to the market’

In the above, *ke* is used as an auxiliary very to indicate future for Ika, *teni* is used in Enuani and *kune* is used in Ukwuani. These all point to the possibilities of a difference in the future tenses but same present tense forms in the three varieties. The three varieties have different past participle forms as different from their past. For example, in Ika, the completed form for the sentence is: *we jẹ gwo afia* (they have gone to the market), which is an indication of finality and completion of the action.

5.2 Contrast with the past rV suffixation in Igbo

When these are contrasted with the standard Igbo language, there are differences as Igbo uses rV suffixation system only to indicate past actions such that *je* in Delta Igbo (went) is *jere* in Igbo for past tense. What this indicates is that while Igbo uses suffixation, Delta Igbo uses prefixation, suffixation and optional markings depending on the sentence or verb clause type. Other examples as shown in table one above also attest to this difference between the Igbo language and Delta Igbo varieties. When one considers a verb like cook and cooked.

Language	English	Igbo	Ika	Enuani	Ukwuani
Past	cook/cooked	si/siri	shi/oshi	shi/eshi	si/esi

The rV suffixation for tense for Igbo verbs follows the vowel in the main verb such that it can be *ri*, *re*, *ra*, *ro* and *ru* according to the five verbs.

5.3 Future tense in Delta Igbo

On marking future tense, Delta Igbo uses a single bound morpheme. However, for each of these varieties in Delta Igbo, there is a distinct expression for it as seen in 5a–c and 6a–c below:

5. a. Ika: *Emeka ke je afia*
- b. Enuani: *Emeka ge je asha*
- c. Ukwuani: *Emeka ne je ahia*
- English: ‘Emeka will go to the market’

From the above, the expression of future in Ika uses the bound morpheme *ke* which comes before the main verb *je*, which we have earlier been identified as a lexical verb (come). Unlike Ika, 5b and c show a different system where the bound morpheme expressions are *ge* and *ne*

are used before the main verbs in Enuani and Ukwuani respectively. Same pattern is repeated in sentences below but with Ukwuani showing a different pattern still:

6. a. Ika: *We ke ghón ihieori ahun*
- b. Enuani: *Nwa ge gon nia ahun*
- c. Ukwuani: *Wa gen ego ini keni*
 English: 'They will buy the food'

In the above, 6a uses *ke* and 6b uses *ge*, which is the same as 5a and b however, in 6c unlike 5c, the future marker is *gen* for future action marking different from *ne* that was earlier used.

5.4 Contrast with the *ga* future tense marker in Igbo

In the Igbo language, the future tense is constructed by prefixing the term *ga*" to the base form of the verb (cf. Eze/Nweze 2021). Hence, like the Delta Igbo, the future tense marker comes before the verb but different words. While *ke* and *ge* are consistent in Ika and Enuani just like *ga* is in Igbo, same cannot be said of Ukwuani, which from the few examples sampled can have at least two types of bound morpheme for the future tense. However, for the Delta Igbo, the future tense marker is not hyphenated to the verb as it is in the Igbo language as shown below:

7. *Ga-anọ*
 English: 'will go'
8. *Ga-eji*
 English: 'will eat'

In Ika, the equivalent of these are *ke je* and *ke ri*; Enuani will be *ge je* and *ge nri* and in Ukwuani, it will be *ne je* and *gen nri*.

From the above, it will be difficult to conclude straight up that Delta Igbo is either optional or obligatorily marked for tenses because we have seen evidence of both. So, one may need to go for another type of classification. For instance, in their study, Táíwò/Angisto (2013) categorize the languages spoken worldwide according to their respective methods of expressing the tense category. Scholars argue that the grammaticalization of time has been seen in several languages around the globe, indicating its presence as a component of universal grammar (UG). However, the prevalence of this marking may be seen in language. According to their perspective, languages may be categorized into categories according on how they indicate the tense as shown in the table below:

Group One	Group Two	Group Three	Group Four	Group Five
Languages that mark tense via the use of free morphemes as tense markers.	Languages that make use of inflection (the use of affixes) to mark tense	Languages that make use of both free morphemes and inflection to mark tense	Languages that make use of null markers.	Languages that make use of null markers and may use either both free morpheme and inflection.

Table 2: Showing the grouping of languages according to Táíwò/Angisto (2013)

From the above and from the brief description that has been carried out on the Delta Igbo, the varieties can be placed within group five in the table above; that is, languages that use both null markers and use both free and bound morphemes.

5.5 Modality in Delta Igbo

Now that we have briefly discussed how tense and aspect operate generally in the Delta Igbo and the Igbo language generally through mostly suffixation affixation, we now turn our attention to modal system in the language. The concept of mood is used to express or transmit our disposition while using language. There are three fundamental moods: the indicative, the imperative, and the subjunctive moods. According to Idegbekwe (2021), the indicative mood is used to convey factual assertions, declarations, and interrogative sentences.

Modality is a linguistic feature that is present in every language. Modality encompasses the linguistic means through which a speaker might convey their subjective stance or attitude towards a given circumstance within the context of interpersonal communication (cf. Hartmann/Stock 1972). Additionally, it enables speakers to indicate varying degrees of commitment to the factual accuracy of a statement (cf. Saeed 2003). According to Igwe (2007), the term is used to delineate the connotations often linked to the mood.

While Uchechukwu (2011) characterises the examination of modality in Igbo as a recent advancement, several academics have already made significant contributions to the understanding of modality in the Igbo language. Uchechukwu (2011) and Winston (1993) highlight the significant significance that extensional suffixes have in expressing modality in the Igbo language. Uchechukwu conducts an analysis of the grammatical use of these extensional suffixes in the language, as documented by various academics, and proposes their reclassification as modal suffixes. In his research on modality in the Achi dialect, Igwe (2007) discovers additional methods for expressing modality within the Igbo language. This research examines additional linguistic forms existent in the Ogbunike dialect, namely *sie ike*, *ma*, and *ka*. The investigation is conducted within the framework of the two meanings proposed by Saeed (2003) and reiterated by Uchechukwu (2011), which pertain to the expression of modality, namely deontic and epistemic meanings. The first step in this study is doing a comprehensive examination of previous scholarly works to present the many previously recognised forms and their utilisation in expressing deontic and epistemic meanings. Subsequently, an analysis and discourse on the presumed forms will be undertaken.

According to Saeed (2003) and Uchechukwu (2011), modality serves as a linguistic tool for conveying deontic and epistemic meanings. The epistemic meaning pertains to statements in which the speaker demonstrates a certain level of familiarity or understanding of the context or circumstances. On the other hand, the deontic meaning pertains to assertions that convey notions of duty, responsibility, permission, and capacity.

Previous research has examined the concept of modality in the Igbo language and has successfully discovered many linguistic forms used to convey modal expressions within this linguistic system. The previous research is examined in the following section, as documented by Uwaezuoke (2019: 134). First, (cf. Welmers/William 1968; Igwe 2007) present the use of *fu/pu*

‘be equal to/be able/can’ to express modality in Igbo. These are two dialect variants that express the same meaning ‘go out’, as in:

9. *Obi furu/puru n’ama obodo*
 Obi go rV stative/PAST PREP square town
 ‘Obi went to the village square’

These two words *fu* and *pu* serve as the main verb ‘go’ in (1). They can be as they are or be inflected by suffixing rV. They are also modal verbs and can be used to express both deontic and epistemic modalities in Igbo (cf. Emenanjo 2015). In this case, the main verbs are usually in their infinitive form. This is illustrated below:

- 10a *Obi fū/pū -rū igū egō*
 Obi be.able STAT to.count money
 ‘Obi can count money.’
- 10b. *Òbi fū/pū -rù inò n’ ama òbòdò ùgbuà*
 Obi be.able STAT to.be PREP square town/village now
 ‘Obi may likely be at the village square right now.’

The *fu/pu* in 10(a) expresses the deontic meaning of ability, while in 10(b), it expresses epistemic meaning of speculative possibility and prediction.

Uwaezuoke (2023) conducted recent research aimed at investigating the potential of *sie ikē*, *ma*, and *ka* as modal expressions in the Igbo language. Additionally, the presentation included statistics that demonstrated the use of *sie ikē*, *ma*, and *ka*. The data were subjected to analysis to elucidate the deontic and epistemic implications inherent within them. The findings indicate that the morphemes *sie ikē*, *ma*, and *ka* possess the ability to convey modality in Igbo, in addition to their basic linguistic purposes. This research categorises the methods of expressing modality in Igbo into four distinct groups: the peripheral forms, shown by *elēghị anya/ike kwe*; the modal auxiliary verbs, represented by *nwe ike*; the hyphenated modal auxiliary verbs, including *ga-*, *ka-*, and *ma-*; and the modal suffixes, such as *-nwu* and *sie ike*. Based on the findings presented in this study, it is evident that the first issue has been addressed.

Furthermore, it has been determined that in addition to the previously recognised modal forms in Igbo, namely *sie ikē*, *ma*, and *ka*, these forms may also be used to indicate modality in the Igbo language. The modality in the Igbo language may be categorised into two main groups: the core modality and the peripheral modality. The core modal verbs have two distinct meanings – deontic and epistemic – and are grammatically situated inside the inflectional category. On the other hand, peripheral modal verbs only convey one of these modal meanings.

In contrast to the above, the *fu/pu* ‘be equal to/be able/can’ in central Igbo for denoting modality does not apply to the Ika variety, which I have used in similar sentences below for exemplification purposes:

11. *Obi ma gūn egho*
 ‘Obi can count money’
12. *Obi wiken jen ime obodo*
 ‘Obi may go to the town centre’

The Ika variety in the Igboid system does not rely on the *fu/pu* for ‘can’ modality neither does it does it apply in Ukwuani which is: *Obi mani gula ego*. Though these are all from preliminary observations or investigations, they do raise concerns and quest for more deeper studies to unravel how these Delta Igboid varieties operate as different from the Central Igbo.

6 Conclusion

This study contributes significantly to the documentation of Delta Igboid varieties by providing a detailed account of the Tense, Aspect, and Modality (TAM) systems in Ika, Ukwuani, and Enuani. By analysing the verbal operating system of these varieties, the study offers a more objective basis for understanding their structural features and classification. The findings have implications for ongoing debates on whether these varieties should be considered distinct languages or subvarieties of the Igbo language. It is expected that this can further help settle the arguments about whether these Igboid varieties are distinct languages of their own or are offspring of the Igbo language.

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