

## Echo Questions in the Igbo Language

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### Abstract

Echo question (EQ) refers to the type of question formed by repeating an earlier utterance, hence, the name 'echo'. Scholars have different views concerning the meaning of the concept of echo question. Some see it as the question that repeats wholly or partly a previous utterance of any sentence type while others see it as the structure that questions inferences drawn from previous utterances. Researches on echo question dwell more on the debate of whether echo questions have syntactic properties or pragmatic properties. Noted also is the fact that majority of the studies done on echo question concentrate on the echo question of the English language with little or no attention paid to the African languages in general and the Igbo language in particular. Consequently, the present study aims at examining and describing the operation(s) of echo question in the Igbo language.

***Key words: echo question, sentence type, repeating, syntactic and pragmatic.***

### Introduction

Echo question (EQ) is a form of interrogative formed by repeating an earlier utterance. The earlier utterance can be from any sentence type; declarative, imperative and interrogative. Any sentence type can be echoed. This is buttressed in Horn's (1989:381) assertion that "echo questions generally require a linguistic context in which the original utterance (be it a declarative, an imperative, or itself a question) has been previously uttered within the discourse". Often EQ is used when the echoer did not hear what was said, heard but did not understand what was said or heard but was surprised at what was said. Echo question though referred to as an interrogative structure exhibits some unique features different from the general features of interrogative forms. The unique features of echo questions have raised serious debate and concern among scholars. The debate generally bothers on whether EQ should be classified as an interrogative type or not since it lacks the basic features of interrogative sentences. The basic interrogative features lacking in echo questions are features like word-order inversion and wh-movement. In line with the above, Culicover (1976:73) expresses dissatisfaction in classifying EQ as a question type with the assertion below: "the relative unrestrictiveness of echo questions makes it unprofitable to attempt to integrate them into the analysis of the more usual type of questions". Contrary to Culicover's claim, Sabin (1978:255) observes that "questions with EQ intonation are derived in more

than one way and EQs are not less structured forms, but structures which adhere just as strictly to the rules of English syntax as other structured types do". Therefore while Culicover does not see EQ as an interrogative structure, Sabin sees it as a question type with unique form of expressing interrogation.

Also debated among scholars who have researched in this area is the issue of what is being questioned in echo question. Further arguments on echo question bothers on whether to treat echo question as a syntactic or a pragmatic phenomenon.

However, this paper sees echo question as a question type and seeks to examine this phenomenon in the light of the Igbo language. The main aim of the study is to find out the syntactic operations of the echo question in the Igbo language.

## **Literature Review**

A number of researchers have carried out research in the area of echo question(s). Some of such research works are reviewed here below. Also pointed out here are some of the basic features/tenets of echo questions. The literature review will be done under these two sub-headings.

### **Tenets of echo questions**

There are some features generally attributed to echo questions. Different scholars have presented the features of echo questions in different ways. However, the features presented below are adopted from Noh (1995:109). She notes that all these properties can easily be found in echo questions, but are not always present.

- (i) They repeat/echo what has been said.
- (ii) They relate to a previous utterance in the discourse context.
- (iii) Morphologically and syntactically, they seem to have more in common with the echoed sentence-types than with standard interrogatives.
- (iv) They are different from other questions in that they are used to question the actual words uttered, rather than the content of previous utterances.
- (v) They are interrogative in the sense defined in Relevance Theory, i.e. they represent desirable thoughts.

### **Previous studies**

The study of Parker & Pickeral (1985) is on 'Echo questions in English. They note that not much if any at all has been done in respect of the syntactic properties of EQs particularly as concerns the characteristics of stimulus-

response pairs of sentences. However, they identify with Sabin's (1978) study which argues that "questions with EQ intonation are derived in more than one way and that EQs are not less structured forms, but structures which adhere just as strictly to the rules of English syntax as other structural types do" to be the most useful treatment of EQs. The two processes of forming echo questions identified by Sabin are: (i) copying of abstract structure, derivation and subsequent optional wh-substitution and (ii) formation of a question of standard non-echo form to which the utterance being questioned would be an appropriate response. Parker and Pickeral agree with Sabin but observe a little problem with Sabin's Type 1 EQs. They then propose a Question Hierarchy which arranges structures from most to least question-like. They identify four partially independent variables which are (i) wh-substitution, (ii) intonation, (iii) subject-verb inversion and (iv) wh-movement as what determines the position of a structure on the question hierarchy.

Noh (1995) sees echo questions as repetitions in some sense. He notes that any type of sentence (declarative, interrogative imperative etc) can be repeated to ask something about it. The repetition according to him can be in the form of repeating an utterance as a whole or repeating an utterance except for a part which is replaced by a wh-word. In his view, echo questions can be used when the echoer did not hear properly, understand what was said or wants to express his incredulity at what he heard. He relates the incredulity expressed by echo questions with high-rise intonation to not only the truth-conditional meaning but also non-truth-conditional aspect of the original, e.g. presuppositions, conventional and conversational implicatures, morphology, phonology among other things which are often ignored in the literature. He likens echo questions to metalinguistic negation.

Noh (1995) sees echo questions as not been syntactically defined because they lack the interrogative syntactic properties of inverted word-order or wh-fronting. He perceives that they are called 'echo questions' simply because of their high-rise intonation or the presence of wh-words. He considers the echoicness of echo questions as their most essential property. He says what is essential in echo questions is that they are echoic in the sense defined in Relevance Theory. Considering Banfield's (1982) and Blakemore's (1994) views on echoic use of the echo questions, Noh explains that echo questions can be a verbatim repetition, language-internal synonymy or representation by resemblance as this allows echo questions which involve no prior utterance to be a subtype of echo questions.

Artstein (2002) posits that the pitch accent in echo questions is an instance of focus, and echo questions are interpreted through focus semantics. He says a focus strategy is available for echo questions precisely because they "echo" a

preceding statement – the entire echo question is given, so none of its parts needs to be marked with focus; therefore, focus can serve the purpose of indicating disputed (rather than new) material. What this means is that he does not consider it necessary to mark any part of the preceding statement to indicate focus (new information). Rather, he sees the repeated statement (disputed material) as indicating focus. That is to say because echo question is a repeat of previous statement it does not need to bring any part of the sentence to the focus position to show focus because the entire statement is already given. Therefore focus in echo questions according to him is not an object of locality.

Furthermore, he classifies echo utterances into two based on the parameters of (i) whether they contain a *wh*-phrase, (ii) whether they have the syntax typical of direct questions. He notes that the echo questions that have *wh*-phrase but do not display the familiar syntax of questions are the most prominent in the linguistic literature. He avers that both question types serve the same function of questioning or objecting to part of the interlocutor's utterance and are pretty much interchangeable. He concludes that both the *wh* and non-*wh* echo questions have the same kind of denotation, a set of alternatives arrived at by focus semantics.

Reis (2017) investigates the echo *wh*-questions in German. In view of this, he tried to establish a relationship between the normal *wh*-questions and the echo *wh*-questions. He notes that they are both constituent questions because the *wh*-words mark position in the question proposition. But the difference between the two is the 'echo effect' which enables hearers of the echo question to infer that the participants are in a conversation. This pragmatic effect according to him brings about difference in the sentence forms. He points out some of the differences as follows: the normal *wh*-questions must have a *wh*-phrase in clause initial position, the nuclear accent is positionally free and the final contour typically a fall. While in echo *wh*-question, the *wh*-expression is positionally variable, bears the nuclear accent and with the final contour typically a rise. With this comparison, Reis establishes that certain differences exist between the normal *wh*-question and the echo *wh*-question.

In view of the above, Reis probes into the problematic issues about the echo *wh*-questions (EwhQs) by posing these three questions:

- (i) What is the clause type status of EwhQs, i.e. are they
  - (a) a subtype of *wh*-interrogatives,
  - (b) an interrogative clause type of its own, or
  - (c) just instances of the clause type they formally 'echo?'
- (ii) How does the echo effect come about?

(iii) How does their question interpretation come about? For details see Reis (2017:5-21)

On the method of analysis of echo wh-questions, Reis opines that the structure of EwhQs should be analysed as being capable of yielding original echoed utterance (EU) as to content and not to take the echoed utterance (EU) as the bases for analysing echo questions.

The studies reviewed above are all related to the present study because each of them studies one aspect of echo question(s) or the other. However, they differ from this study in that this study analyses the Igbo language which was not considered by any of the reviewed studies. Again, this study as opposed to the other studies that question the interrogative nature of echo questions sees echo question as a form of interrogative and therefore, analyses its operation in the Igbo language.

## Methodology

This research is a descriptive study of echo questions in Igbo. Data for analysis were gathered through primary and secondary sources. The secondary sources include internet materials and books. The primary source basically lies on the researcher's intuitive knowledge as a competent native speaker. The data gathered were confirmed and validated by other language experts and competent speakers of the language in the Department of Linguistics, African and Asian Studies, University of Lagos. The standard variety of the Igbo language was used in the study. Direct glossing system was used in the data presentation.

## Data presentation and analysis

### Echo questions in Igbo

The data for the analysis of echo questions in Igbo will be presented under four sub-sections: declarative sentences, imperative sentences, wh-questions and yes-no questions.

### Declarative sentences

1. IheNgozina-amasịKalu.  
Thing Ngozi AUX-please Kalu  
Kalu is pleased with Ngozi
- A. Na iheNgozina-amasịKalu?  
That thing Ngozi AUX-please kalu?  
That Kalu is pleased with Ngozi?

- B. Na iheNgọzina-amasionye?  
That thing Ngozi AUX-please who?  
That Kalu is pleased with who?
- C. IheNgọzina-amasionye?  
Thing Ngozi AUX-please who?  
That Kalu is pleased with who?
2. Ndị Igbo bụndị e jieziagwamara.  
People Igbo be people PRN hold good character know FACT  
The Igbo are known for their good character
- A. Na ndị Igbo bụndị e jieziagwamara?  
That people Igbo be people PRN hold good character know FACT?  
That the Igbo are known for their good character?
- B. Na ndị Igbo bụndị e jiginimara?  
That people Igbo be people PRN hold what know FACT?  
That the Igbo are known for what?
- C. Ndị Igbo bụndị e jiginimara.  
People Igbo be people PRN hold what know FACT?  
The Igbo are known for their what?
3. Buhariga-ekwuokwun'abalị a.  
Buhari AUX-PREF talk talk PREP night this  
Buhari will be making a speech tonight
- A. Na Buhariga-ekwuokwun'abalị a?  
That Buhari AUX-PREF talk talk PREP night this?  
That Buhari will be making a speech tonight?
- B. Na onyega-ekwuokwun'abalị a?  
That who AUX-PREF talk talk PREP night this?  
That who will be making a speech tonight?
- C. Onyega-ekwuokwun'abalị a?  
Who AUX-PREF talk talk PREP night this?  
Who will be making a speech tonight?
4. Umụakwukwọjighiogeuleegwuegwu.  
Student PLU PREF hold NEG time examination play  
Students do not play with examination period.
- A. Na umụakwukwọjighiogeuleegwuegwu?  
That student PLU PREF hold NEG time examination play?  
That students do not play with examination period?
- B. Na umụakwukwọjighiginiegwuegwu?  
That student PLU PREF hold NEG what play?  
That students do not play with what?
- C. Umụakwukwọjighiginiegwuegwu?  
Student PLU PREF hold NEG what play?

- Students do not play with what?
5. NnaNngozìbùakajiakụ.  
 Father Ngozi be hand hold wealth  
 Ngozi's father is wealthy.
  - A. Na nnaNngozìbùakajiakụ?  
 That father Ngozi be hand hold wealth?  
 That Ngozi's father is wealthy?
  - B. Na nnaNngozìbugini?  
 That father Ngozi be what?  
 That Ngozi's father is what?
  - C. NnaNngozìbugini?  
 Father Ngozi be what?  
 Ngozi's father is what?

The sentences above are instances of declarative sentences and their subsequent echo questions. For each of the declarative utterances above, we have three different echo sets (A-C). In the first echo set (set A), the utterances are echoed verbatim with a “na” clause prefixed before repeating the utterance. This ‘na’ that is affixed is the short form of the clause “ì sịna” (do you say that). Also, the tone of the ‘na’ affixed at the sentence initial position indicates a change in the form of the sentence from declarative to interrogative. In the second echo set (set B), ‘na’ is affixed to each of the sentence with a wh-word to form the echo. However, the set C echo questions repeat the declarative utterances except for the part which is replaced by wh-words. In this set, the ‘na’ which was prefixed in the previous sets (A&B) is not included here but only the wh-word inserted differentiates the echoed utterance from the echo question.

All the echo question sets above are considered acceptable. This is because as Sabin (2010) observes, only an echo question with a declarative character is appropriate for echoing a declarative. The same applies to other sentence forms as shall be seen later in the study.

It can be said that in the examples above, the (A) echoes echo the utterances they echo because the echoer wants to confirm what was said. That is to say the echoer possibly did not hear what was said very well and had to repeat the utterance for confirmation. Apart from the (A) echoes, the (B&C) echoes the primary utterance with negative attitude. This attitude can be that of unbelief or sarcasm.

The above examples exhibit some distinction between the way echo questions are formed in Igbo and how they are formed in other languages like English and German which Reis studied. In such languages, nothing is added as it is done in

Igbo. Instead, the stimulus utterances are repeated verbatim. And the difference between the two utterances is seen in the change in the intonation of the two utterances. Therefore, the idea of adding ‘na’ is peculiar to the Igbo language.

### Imperative sentences

6. Gaaụlọọgwuka ị hụdọkita.  
Go hospital so 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG see doctor  
Go to the hospital and see the doctor.
- A. M gaaụlọọgwuka m hụdọkita?  
1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG go hospital so 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG see doctor?  
I should go to the hospital and see the doctor?
- B. M gaaụlọọgwuka m hụonye?  
1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG go hospital so 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG see who?  
I should go to the hospital and see who?
- C. Gaaụlọọgwuka m hụonye?  
Go hospital so 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG see who  
Go to the hospital and see the who?
7. Na-agụakwukwọgimakaọdida.  
AUX-read book you because failing  
Be reading your books to avoid failing.
- A. M na-agụakwukwọ m makaọdida?  
  
1<sup>ST</sup> PER SGAUX-read book 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG because failing  
  
I should be reading my books to avoid failing?
- B. M na-agụakwukwọ m makagịni?  
1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG AUX-read book 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG because what  
I should be reading my books to avoid what?
- C. Na-agụakwukwọ m makagịni?  
AUX-read book 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG because what  
Be reading my books to avoid what?
8. Were nchasaahuka ị dọcha.  
Take soap wash body so 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG be white  
Bath with soap so that you will be clean.
- A. M were nchasaahuka m dọcha?  
1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG take soap wash body so 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG be white?  
I should bath with soap so that I will be clean?
- B. M meegịnika m dọcha ?  
1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG do what so 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG be white?  
I should do what so that I will be clean?
- C. Were nchameegịnika m dọcha ?



- Take soap do what so 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG be white  
Bath with soap so that I will be clean?
9. Kwusjiiñummanyaokumakaahugi.  
Stop drink wine hot because body 2<sup>ND</sup> PER SG PRN  
Stop taking hot drinks because of your health
- A. M kwusjiiñummanyaokumakaahū m?  
1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG stop drink wine hot because body 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG  
I should stop taking hot drinks because of my health
- B. M kwusjimeginimakaahū m?  
1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG stop do what because body 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG  
I should stop doing what because of my health?
- C. Kwusjimeginimakaahū m?  
Stop do what because body 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG  
Stop doing what because of my health?
10. Gaazutara m akwa.  
Go CUNJ buy FACT 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG egg.  
Go and buy me eggs.
- A. M gaazutaragiakwa?  
1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG go buy 2<sup>ND</sup>PER SG egg?  
I should go and buy you eggs?
- B. M gaazutaragigini?  
1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG go buy FACT 2<sup>ND</sup> PER SG PRN what  
I should go and buy you what?
- C. Gaazutaragigini?  
Go buy FACT 2<sup>ND</sup> PER SG PRN what  
Go and buy you what?

In this section, we have imperative sentences with their echo questions. All the utterances in this section have three echoes. Here also, an affix ‘m’ precedes the A&B echo questions. The prefix which is the first person singular pronoun is used in place of ‘na’ used to echo the declarative utterances. This also is another peculiarity of the Igbo language when it comes to forming echo questions. Also observed here is the discrepancy that exists between the subject element in the primary utterance and the subject element in the echoed question utterances. While the subject element in the primary utterances in this section except for number 10 is the second person singular pronoun, the subject elements in the echo question sets is the first person singular pronoun. For number 10, the subject element in the primary utterance is the first person singular pronoun; the subject of the echo questions is the second person singular pronoun. The ‘m’ that begins the echo questions in this section is a short form of ‘isi m’. Here, therefore, instead of ‘na’ that was used to echo the declarative, ‘m’ is used to echo the imperative.

**Yes/no questions**

11. I kpereekperetaa?  
1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG pray FACT prayer today  
Did you pray today?
- A. Ma m kpereekperetaa?  
Whether 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG pray FACT prayer today?  
Whether I prayed today?
- B. Ma m mere giniṭaa?  
Whether 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG do PST what today?  
Whether I did what today?
- C. M mere giniṭaa?  
1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG do PST what today?  
Did I do what today?
12. I jeziriahjaunyaahu?  
1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG go ASPT Market yesterday?  
Did you later go to the market yesterday?
- A. Ma m jeziriahjaunyaahu?  
Whether 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG go ASPT Market yesterday?  
Whether I later went to the market yesterday?
- B. Ma m meziriginiṭunyaahu?  
Whether 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG do ASPT what yesterday?  
Whether I later did what yesterday?
13. Ụmunnegị ha bjaaraebe a?  
Children mother 2<sup>ND</sup> PER SG 3<sup>RD</sup> PER PLU come PST here?  
Did your siblings come here?
- A. Ma ụmunnne m ha bjaaraebe a?  
Whether childred mother 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG 3<sup>RD</sup> PER PLU come PST place this?  
Whether my siblings came here?
- B. Ma ndi ole ha bjaaraebe a?  
Whether people which 3<sup>RD</sup> PER PLU come PST place this?  
Whether which people came here?
- C. Ụmunnne m ha bjaaraebe a?  
Children mother 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG 3<sup>RD</sup> PER PLU come PST place this  
Did my siblings come here?
14. Izuṭalaakwukwọahu?  
2<sup>ND</sup> PER SG buy PERF book that?  
Have you bought the book?
- A. Ma m a zuṭalaakwukwọahu?  
Whether 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG PRN buy PERF book that?  
Whether I have bought the book?

- B. Ma m a zūtalagīnī?  
Whether 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG PRN buy PERF what?  
Whether I have bought what?
- C. M zūtalagīnī?  
1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG buy PERF what?  
Have I bought what?
15. IkwūruNḡoziūḡwōōrū o ruurūḡi?  
1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG pay PST Nḡozi pay work 3<sup>RD</sup> PER SG work PST you?  
Did you pay Ngozi for the job she did for you?
- A. Ma m kwūruNḡoziūḡwōōrū o ruurū m?  
Whether 1<sup>ST</sup> pay PST Nḡozi pay work 3<sup>RD</sup> PER SG work PST 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG?  
Whether I paid Ngozi for the job she did for me?
- B. Ma m kwūruNḡoziūḡwōḡinī?  
Whether 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG pay PST Nḡozi pay what?  
Whether I paid Ngozi for what?
- C. M kwūruNḡoziūḡwōḡinī?  
1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG pay PST Nḡozi pay what?  
Did I pay Ngozi for what?

Here, the yes/no questions are presented with their echoes. The yes/no questions are echoed by adding ‘ma’ to the primary utterance. The ‘ma’ here just like noted earlier is the short form of “i si ma”. Another important observation is the change in subject elements from second person pronoun to first person pronoun. The (A) set repeats the primary utterance and also adds “ma”. The (B) set repeats the utterance except for the part which is replaced by a wh-word and also adds ‘ma’. Then the (C) set repeats the utterance except the part which is replaced by a wh-word and changes the second person pronoun to first person pronoun. Therefore, yes/no echo questions in Igbo are formed by prefixing ‘ma’ to the primary utterance. This makes the yes/no echo question form different from the declarative and the imperative echo question forms.

### wh-questions

16. Gīnībū aha nnagī?  
What be name father 2<sup>ND</sup> PER SG?  
What is your father’s name?
- A. Gīnībū aha nna m?  
What be name father 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG?  
What is my father’s name?
- B. Gīnībū aha onye?  
What be name who?

- What is whose name?
17. Onyegwaragina m lotara?  
Who tell PST 2<sup>ND</sup> PER SG that 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG come back PST?  
Who told you I came back?
- A. Onyegwara m na i lotara?  
Who tell PST 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG that 2<sup>ND</sup> PER SG come back PST?  
Who told me you came back?
- B. Onyegwara m ginii?  
Who tell PST 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG what?  
Who told me what?
18. Ebeeka i na-eje?  
Where be 2<sup>ND</sup> PER SG AUX-PREF go?  
Where are you going?
- A. Ebeeka m na-eje?  
Where be 1<sup>ST</sup> AUX-PREF go?  
Where am I going?
- B. Ebeeka m mere ginii?  
Where be 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG do FACT what?  
Where am I doing what?
19. Onyezunyeregijugbala?  
Who buy give PST 2<sup>ND</sup> PER SG car?  
Who bought you a car?
- A. Onyezunyere m ugboala?  
Who buy give PST 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG car?  
Who bought me a car?
- B. Onyezunyere m ginii?  
Who buy give PST 1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG what?  
Who bought me what?
20. KedumgbeKaluga-aga Aba?  
Which time Kalu AUX-PREF go Aba?  
When is Kalu going to Aba?
- A. M kedumgbeKaluga-aga Aba?  
1<sup>ST</sup> PER SG which time Kalu AUX-PREF go Aba?  
I, when is Kalu going to Aba?
- B. Kedumgbeonyega-aga Aba?  
Which time who AUX-PREF go Aba?  
When is who going to Aba?

This section presents wh-questions and their echoes. A look at the echo questions in this section reveals another unique feature of the Igbo language as regards echo questions. What we have here looks more like the English echo questions. Normally the English language echoes most of its utterances by

repeating the utterances verbatim with a final upward intonation. Hence the difference between most English normal utterance and echo question lies in the intonation of the two utterances. In the Igbo examples above the wh-questions are echoed by repeating the utterance wholly as in the (A) set or partially as in the (B) set. Here, the only difference between the echoed utterance and the wh-question is the change of the pronoun element from second person to first person pronoun. Hence, what differentiates wh-question from wh-echo question is that while the wh-question bears second person pronoun, the wh-echo question bears first person pronoun.

### Summary and conclusion

This study which is a descriptive study has examined the operation of echo question in Igbo. Some peculiarities were discovered in the echo question operation in Igbo. It was discovered that every sentence type in Igbo has its own feature for marking echo question. While the declarative used 'na' to mark echo question, the imperative used 'm', the yes/no questions used 'ma' and the wh-questions repeated the echoed utterance to mark their echoic question. These features make the Igbo echo question forms unique on their own. The information provided by this study has added to the available information on the operation of echo question. However, the study does not claim to have explored all that needs to be done in echo question in Igbo. Further studies therefore can focus on theoretical study of the concept of echo question in Igbo. Another study can look at echo question from the pragmatic perspective. All these will help to expose researchers more on this area of study and also help researchers to understand more about the Igbo language and its peculiarities.

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