

## TONAL NUANCE AND RHYTHMIC SPEECH PATTERN AS IDENTITY MARKERS IN EKWULOBIA IGBO

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### Abstract

*This study examines tonal nuances and rhythmic speech patterns as sociolinguistic identity markers in Ekwulobia Igbo, a variety within the Aguata dialect cluster of the Igbo language. While Standard Igbo is predominantly characterized by level tones, certain dialects, including the Ekwulobia dialect, exhibit both level and contour (gliding) tonal patterns. Studies that address contour tones in Igbo have often concentrated on their phonological origins, grammatical function or distribution, without fully exploring their role in discourse and identity construction. This creates a gap that the present study seeks to fill by examining how tonal nuances and rhythmic speech patterns function together as identity markers in a specific dialect. This research focuses specifically on the rising tonal glide and its interaction with rhythmic speech patterns in natural discourse, as well as the role of level tone tonemic substitution in shaping prosodic structure. Data for the study were derived from spontaneous speech produced by native speakers within the Ekwulobia community, supplemented by participant observation and the researchers' intuitive linguistic competence. A descriptive analytical approach was employed in examining tonal and rhythmic features in the data. Findings reveal that Ekwulobia Igbo is marked by a prominent rising tonal contour, particularly in sentence-final positions in interrogative constructions, where it contrasts systematically with the low level tone of declarative sentences. The study further shows that demonstrative constructions exhibit vowel harmony and consonantal insertion, contributing to phonological smoothness and rhythmic balance in speech. Importantly, the analysis also identifies **level tone tonemic substitution** as a significant feature of the dialect. In many grammatical environments, level tones may substitute for one another without altering lexical meaning, indicating that such tonal variations are often non-distinctive and function at a phonetic or stylistic level. This tonal flexibility reduces the functional load of tone and enhances rhythmic flow through subtle pitch variation in connected speech. The study argues that these prosodic features function not merely as phonological phenomena but as salient markers of group identity. The characteristic interaction of rising tonal glide, level tone substitution, and vowel harmony produces a distinctive rhythmic pattern in Ekwulobia Igbo, making it recognizable to other Igbo speakers and frequently reproduced in mimicry. This reinforces the role of tonal and rhythmic structures in sociolinguistic identification and supports the view that rhythm in Ekwulobia Igbo emerges from the interaction of tonal and segmental processes.*

**Keywords:** tone, level tone substitution, glides, tonal nuances, rhythmic features

### 1.0 Introduction

Language is a fundamental marker of human identity, serving not only as a medium of communication but also as a repository of cultural, social, and group affiliations. Within speech communities, subtle phonological and prosodic features such as tone, rhythm, and intonation often function as powerful indicators of belonging. Speakers are frequently identified not merely by the language they speak, but by how they speak it. In tone languages especially, variations in pitch and rhythmic patterning play a crucial role in encoding meaning as well as signalling social identity. This study explores such phenomena in Igbo, with particular focus on the Ekwulobia variety.

Igbo, a major Niger-Congo language spoken predominantly in Southeastern Nigeria, is characteristically a tone language in which pitch differences distinguish lexical and grammatical meanings. Traditionally, Standard Igbo has been described as operating primarily with level tones, namely high and low tones with downstep and contextual modifications. However, dialectal variation across Igbo-speaking communities

reveals a more complex tonal landscape. Several Igbo dialects exhibit contour tones, including rising and falling glides, which contribute to both semantic interpretation and discourse functions. These tonal variations are not random; rather, they are systematic features that differentiate one lect from another and, in many cases, index the identity of the speaker.

Among the various Igbo dialect clusters, the Aguata group has attracted attention for its distinctive tonal behaviour. Ekwulobia Igbo, a prominent variety within this cluster, demonstrates a notable use of tonal glides alongside level tones. Of particular interest is the recurrent rising tonal contour observed in interrogative constructions, especially in sentence-final positions. This feature stands in contrast to the more stable level tones found in declarative sentences. Beyond its grammatical function, this tonal pattern contributes to a recognizable rhythmic speech form that distinguishes Ekwulobia speakers from other Igbo speakers.

Rhythm in speech, often shaped by the interaction of tone, syllable structure, and vowel harmony, is an equally significant but less frequently examined aspect of linguistic identity in Igbo studies. In Ekwulobia Igbo, the interplay between tonal glides and vowel harmony in demonstrative constructions (such as forms equivalent to ‘this’ and ‘that’) produces a patterned alternation of pitch and syllabic timing. This results in a characteristic “musicality” or rhythmic undertone in everyday speech. Such rhythmic patterning is not merely aesthetic; it enhances the perceptual salience of the dialect and contributes to its social recognizability.

The notion of language as an identity marker has been widely discussed in sociolinguistics. Variations in accent, intonation, and speech rhythm often index regional origin, social class, ethnicity, and group membership. In multilingual and multidialectal settings like Igboland, these features become especially salient. Speakers are often able to identify the dialectal background of others based on brief utterances, relying heavily on prosodic cues. In the case of Ekwulobia Igbo, its tonal and rhythmic distinctiveness has become so marked that it is sometimes subject to mimicry or stylized reproduction by speakers of other Igbo varieties. Such mimicry, while occasionally humorous, underscores the strong association between speech patterns and social identity.

Despite the importance of tone in Igbo linguistics, much of the existing literature has focused on segmental phonology, tone marking, and grammatical structures, with comparatively less attention paid to the interaction between tone and rhythm as a combined sociophonetic phenomenon. Studies that do address contour tones in Igbo have often concentrated on their phonological origins or distribution, without fully exploring their role in discourse and identity construction. This creates a gap that the present study seeks to fill by examining how tonal nuances and rhythmic speech patterns function together as identity markers in a specific dialect.

This study therefore focuses on the gliding tones and rhythmic speech patterns that characterize Ekwulobia Igbo, with the aim of demonstrating how these features operate both linguistically and socially. By analysing naturally occurring speech data from native speakers, the study highlights the structural properties of rising tonal contours in interrogative constructions and their contrast with declarative patterns. It further examines how these tonal features interact with vowel harmony to produce a distinct rhythmic profile.

Ultimately, the paper argues that the tonal and rhythmic features of Ekwulobia Igbo extend beyond their grammatical roles to serve as salient sociolinguistic markers. They not only encode meaning but also index identity, enabling speakers to be recognized and categorized within the broader Igbo speech community. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing discussions in African linguistics, sociophonetics, and dialectology by foregrounding the role of prosody in identity construction and by providing empirical insight into an under-documented aspect of Igbo variation.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and outlines the conceptual framework for the study. Section 3 presents the methodology adopted. Section 4 provides an analysis and discussion of the Ekwulobia Igbo language data, along with the key findings. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper and highlights possible areas for further research on tonal nuance and rhythm in Igbo.

## **2.0 Literature Review and Conceptual Background**

The study of tone and rhythm in African languages has long attracted scholarly attention, particularly within the broader field of phonology and sociolinguistics. As a tone language, Igbo presents a rich body of data for examining how pitch variations function not only in distinguishing lexical and grammatical meaning but also in indexing social identity. While considerable work has been done on Igbo phonology, especially on level tones and tonal processes, relatively less attention has been given to tonal nuances, particularly contour tones and their interaction with rhythmic speech patterns. This section reviews relevant literature on tone, tonal nuances, rhythmic patterns, and the sociolinguistic role of prosodic features, with particular reference to Igbo and related African languages.

Tone is a suprasegmental feature that involves variations in pitch across syllables, contributing significantly to meaning differentiation in many African languages. Pike (1948) provides one of the earliest foundational discussions of tone languages, defining tone as the use of pitch to distinguish lexical or grammatical meaning. In tone languages, unlike intonation languages, pitch variation is not merely expressive but contrastive. African languages, particularly those within the Niger-Congo family, are well known for their complex tonal systems. According to Lojenga (2012), tones in African languages may be level (such as high, mid, and low) or contour (such as rising and falling), with contour tones often arising from historical processes such as tone spreading, contraction, or the loss of syllables. These tonal distinctions are crucial in both lexical identification and syntactic structuring.

In Igbo, tone plays a central role in meaning differentiation. Emenanjo (2015) describes Igbo as primarily operating a two-tone system high and low, with downstep as a significant feature. However, he acknowledges that tonal realization in connected speech may involve more complex patterns than the basic level tone system suggests. This opens the door for examining tonal nuances beyond the standard description.

### **2.1 Tonal Nuances, Contour Tones and Rhythm**

Tonal nuances refer to the subtle variations and patterns in tone that go beyond basic level distinctions. These include contour tones, tonal glides, and context-dependent tonal modifications that contribute to the phonetic and phonological richness of a language. In many African languages, contour tones are not always phonemic but may arise from phonological processes or specific syntactic environments. Ezenwafor (2014) examines contour tones in Igbo and argues that they are often derived rather than underlying, emerging from processes such as vowel coalescence, tone assimilation, and tonal spreading. Similarly, Ezenwafor (2013) highlights the role of tonemic substitution in Ekwulobia Igbo, noting that such substitutions are often non-distinctive but contribute significantly to the rhythmic quality of speech.

The presence of rising tonal contours in interrogative constructions, as observed in Ekwulobia Igbo, aligns with cross-linguistic tendencies where pitch movement signals pragmatic functions such as questioning. However, in tone languages, such contours may also interact with lexical tones, creating layered meanings. The distinction between contour tones used for grammatical purposes and those arising from phonological processes remains an important area of inquiry.

Rhythm in speech refers to the patterned timing and flow of syllables, often influenced by stress, tone, and syllable structure. While rhythm has been extensively studied in stress-timed and syllable-timed languages, its role in tone languages has received comparatively less attention. In tone languages like Igbo, rhythm is closely tied to tonal distribution and vowel harmony. The interaction between tone and rhythm creates what

may be described as a “melodic” quality of speech. In Ekwulobia Igbo, the alternation between rising contours and level tones, combined with vowel harmony in demonstrative constructions, produce a distinctive rhythmic undertone. This aligns with observations by Ezenwafor (2013), who notes that tonemic variations contribute to the overall speech rhythm of the dialect.

Furthermore, rhythmic patterns are often shaped by morphological and syntactic structures. For instance, the harmonization of vowels in demonstratives such as ‘this’ and ‘that’ in Ekwulobia Igbo contributes not only to phonological coherence but also to rhythmic regularity. Such features underscore the need to examine rhythm as an integral component of prosody rather than as a secondary or peripheral phenomenon.

## **2.2 Language, Identity, and Sociolinguistic Marking**

Language is a key marker of identity, reflecting not only individual expression but also group membership and social affiliation. Sociolinguistic studies have shown that phonological and prosodic features such as accent, intonation, and rhythm are often used to index identity. Speakers can often identify the regional or social background of others based on subtle speech cues. In the context of Igbo, dialectal variation plays a significant role in identity construction. Nwaozuzu (2008) documents the diversity of Igbo dialects and notes that differences in phonology, lexicon, and syntax contribute to the distinctiveness of each variety. Among these features, prosodic elements such as tone and rhythm are particularly salient. The Ekwulobia variety of Igbo provides a compelling example of how prosodic features function as identity markers. Its distinctive use of rising tonal contours and rhythmic speech patterns makes it easily recognizable to other Igbo speakers. This recognizability is further reinforced through mimicry, where speakers of other dialects imitate the tonal and rhythmic patterns of Ekwulobia speech, often in playful or stylized contexts. Such practices highlight the social significance of prosody. They also underscore the role of language in constructing and maintaining group identity. In this sense, tonal nuances and rhythmic patterns are not merely linguistic features but social symbols.

Despite the rich body of work on Igbo phonology, there remains a relative paucity of studies that integrate tone, rhythm, and sociolinguistic identity. Much of the existing literature has focused on segmental phonology, tone marking, and grammatical structures, often treating tone as an isolated feature. Studies that do address contour tones tend to focus on their phonological origins rather than their functional and social implications.

Moreover, the interaction between tonal nuances and rhythmic speech patterns has not been sufficiently explored, particularly in specific dialects such as Ekwulobia Igbo. This gap limits our understanding of how prosodic features operate in natural discourse and how they contribute to identity construction. By focusing on tonal glide and rhythmic speech patterns in Ekwulobia Igbo, the present study contributes to filling this gap. It builds on existing scholarship while extending the analysis to include the role of prosody in sociolinguistic identity, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of language variation in Igbo.

## **3.0 Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive research design to investigate tonal nuances and rhythmic speech patterns in Ekwulobia Igbo. The data are derived primarily from spontaneous speech produced by two purposively selected native speakers, a male and a female who are elderly, born, and resident in the Ekwulobia community. Their selection ensures high linguistic competence and minimal interference from other dialects or Standard Igbo. Additional data were obtained through naturalistic observation of everyday communicative events within the community, while the researchers’ intuitive knowledge as native speakers of Igbo provided supplementary insights for interpreting subtle tonal distinctions.

Data collection involved spontaneous speech sampling, participant observation, and introspective evidence. Informants were engaged in informal conversations to elicit natural utterances, particularly those involving demonstrative and interrogative constructions. Observations focused on recurring tonal patterns, especially

sentence-final contours and rhythmic features in discourse. The analysis is descriptive, examining the occurrence and distribution of rising tonal glides, their contrast with level tones in declarative structures, and their interaction with vowel harmony. The data are systematically organized to highlight tonal contrasts across grammatical environments and to demonstrate how these features contribute to rhythmic patterning in speech.

To ensure reliability and validity, data were obtained across multiple sources, informants' speech, observational evidence, and intuitive competence. The study is limited to the Ekwulobia variety within the Aguata dialect cluster and focuses specifically on tonal glide and rhythmic patterns in selected constructions. While the findings provide insight into the sociolinguistic significance of these features, they are not intended to be generalized to all Igbo dialects.

#### 4.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

The data presented reveal systematic tonal and rhythmic patterns in Ekwulobia Igbo, particularly in the interaction between tone, grammatical function, and vowel harmony. These patterns are not random; they are rule-governed and contribute to meaning differentiation as well as sociolinguistic identity.

##### 4.1 Tonal Glide as a Marker of Interrogativity

The data in (1)-(4) demonstrate that interrogative constructions in Ekwulobia Igbo could be marked by a rising tonal glide (contour tone), especially on the proximal demonstrative elements *ně* and *nǎ* 'this'. Consider the following examples:

- 1) Ò yá lùlù únō **ně**  
Pro 3SG build house this  
Did she build this house?
- 2) Ònyé gòrò àkpá **nǎ**  
Who bought bag this  
'Who bought this bag?'
- 3) Ò ínwá **nǎ**  
Pro child this  
'Is it this child?'

The above data reveal that interrogative constructions in Ekwulobia Igbo could be marked by a rising tonal glide, especially on the demonstrative elements *ně* and *nǎ* 'this' in conjunction with other question elements like *onye* 'who' in (see 2). The rising contour typically occurs in sentence-final position, functioning as a prosodic boundary marker that signals a question. Furthermore, the alternation between *ně* and *nǎ* reflects vowel harmony with the preceding noun, showing that tonal marking operates alongside segmental agreement. This indicates that tone in Ekwulobia Igbo is not merely lexical but plays a crucial grammatical role in encoding sentence type.

In contrast, examples 4-6 establishes a phonemic and functional distinction between rising contour tones and level tones on the proximal demonstrative *ne/na* 'this'. A clear tonal contrast is seen between interrogative and declarative constructions with respect to the tonal features of *na/ne*. While interrogatives are marked by the rising contour seen in *ně* and *nǎ*, declarative sentences employ the low-toned variants *nè* and *nà* as shown in (4)-(6). For instance, *Únō ně?* contrasts directly with *Únō nè*, where the only difference lies in the tonal realization of the demonstrative. This establishes a minimal pair in which tonal variation alone encodes the distinction between questioning and assertion. The following examples are illustrative

- 4) Únō nè àmáká  
House this be beautiful  
'This house is beautiful'
- 5) Chíómá gòrò àkpá nà n' áphía  
PN bought bag this in market  
'Chioma bought this bag from the market'
- 6) Nnwá nà nà-èbé ákwā  
Child this crying cry  
'This child is crying'

From the foregoing, it is seen that tone in Ekwulobia Igbo is not merely lexical but morphosyntactic, contributing directly to sentence type distinction. This supports the claim that tone operates at multiple linguistic levels: lexical, grammatical, and discourse.

#### 4.2 Vowel Harmony and the Distal Demonstrative Formation

This section shifts focus from tone to segmental phonology, specifically the formation of the distal demonstrative VhV 'that'.

Examples:

- 7) Únō òhó 'that house'  
8) Ázụ ùhú 'that fish'  
9) Àkpá àhá 'that bag'  
10) íní ihí 'that food'

The above data points to declarative constructions involving the distal demonstrative 'that' revealing a systematic morphophonological process governed by vowel harmony and consonant insertion. Forms such as *Únō òhó* 'that house', *Égò òhó* 'that money', and *Àkpá àhá* 'that bag' show that the demonstrative is derived through the duplication of the final vowel of the noun, followed by the insertion of an intervocalic /h/. This results in a harmonious vowel sequence that aligns closely with the phonological structure of the noun. The process is highly regular, indicating an underlying rule that ensures phonological cohesion within the noun phrase. Beyond its structural role, this pattern contributes to the rhythmic quality of the dialect, as the repetition and smooth transition between vowels create a flowing speech pattern. Consequently, the interaction of vowel harmony and consonant insertion not only fulfills a grammatical function but also enhances the distinctive phonetic and rhythmic character of Ekwulobia Igbo.

#### 4.3 Level Tone Tonemic Substitution as a Motivation for Rhythmic Pattern

Another important feature that helps to explain the rhythmic speech pattern of Ekwulobia Igbo is the phenomenon of level tone tonemic substitution. As observed in Ezenwafor (2013), tones in this dialect do not always function in a strictly contrastive way. In many cases, one level tone may replace another without changing the meaning of the word. This shows that some tonal variations in Ekwulobia Igbo are non-distinctive and operate more at the phonetic or stylistic level than at the lexical level. Consider the following examples:

- 11a) Ó bì n' Ùlā  
3SG live in PN  
'He lives in Ùlā'
- 11b) Ùmùnnà dù ùbá n' Ùlā  
Kinsmen are many in PN  
'There are many kinsmen in Ùlā'

- 12a) **Òkwùrù** dù ùkó  
Okro COP scarce  
'Okro is scarce'
- 12b) Ó gòtèrè **òkwúrú**  
3SG bought Okro  
'She bought Okro'
- 13a) Jí hī nè **vùrù** ívù  
Yam your this be big/fat fatness  
'This yam of yours is big/fat'
- 13b) Kwàrà íphé jí hī nè **vúró**  
Look thing yam your this be big/fat  
'Look how big your yam is'

In examples (11)-(13), a tonal contrast on lexical item is illustrated in the highlighted and boldened texts. In 13 for instance, there is a tonal contrast between the LL toned *Úlá* and HH toned *Úlá* 'name of a village'. This type of tonal substitution occurs regularly in natural speech, especially within grammatical constructions. Native speakers apply these tonal adjustments unconsciously, guided by their internalized knowledge of the language. Because these substitutions do not affect meaning, they allow for a degree of flexibility in tonal realization. This flexibility reduces the strict functional load of tone as a meaning-bearing feature and allows it to contribute more freely to the overall sound pattern of speech.

The effect of this tonal flexibility is seen in the rhythmic quality of Ekwulobia Igbo. As tones shift within an utterance without altering meaning, they create subtle pitch variations that enhance the flow of speech. When combined with other features such as rising tonal glides in interrogatives and vowel harmony in demonstrative constructions, these tonal alternations contribute to a smooth and patterned rhythm. In this way, level tone tonemic substitution serves as an important phonological resource for rhythm formation in the dialect.

Therefore, level tone tonemic substitution can be regarded as one of the key motivations for the rhythmic undertone observed in Ekwulobia Igbo. It shows that tonal nuances, even when they are not meaning-changing, play a significant role in shaping the prosodic structure of the dialect. This further supports the argument that rhythm in Ekwulobia Igbo emerges from the interaction of tonal and segmental features, and that these features together contribute to its distinct identity within the wider Igbo language.

#### 4.4 Discussion of Findings

The analysis shows that tone in Ekwulobia Igbo is not only used to distinguish lexical meaning but also plays a crucial grammatical and prosodic role. One major finding is the use of a rising tonal glide on proximal demonstratives in interrogative sentences. This rising tone typically appears at the end of the utterance and signals interrogativity in conjunction with other question elements. Closely related to this is the clear tonal opposition between interrogative and declarative constructions. While interrogatives are marked by rising tone, declaratives are realized with a low level tone. This tonal contrast alone is sufficient to distinguish meaning, demonstrating the high grammatical load carried by tone in the dialect. As a result, speakers depend significantly on tonal cues for interpretation in discourse.

Another important finding is the role of demonstratives, particularly the distal form, which shows systematic vowel harmony and consonantal insertion. The final vowel of the noun is often copied and linked through an intervening /h/ sound, producing forms that are phonologically smooth and rhythmically balanced. This process contributes significantly to the melodic flow of the dialect and reinforces the interaction between segmental and suprasegmental features in shaping rhythm.

In addition to these patterns, the study identifies level tone tonemic substitution as an important rhythmic resource in Ekwulobia Igbo. In this process, one level tone may replace another without affecting meaning, particularly in grammatical environments such as noun phrases and verb constructions. As shown in Ezenwafor (2013), these tonal alternations are often non-distinctive and are therefore best interpreted as phonetic or stylistic variations rather than lexical contrasts. For instance, tonal differences that might signal contrast in other Igbo varieties do not necessarily alter meaning in Ekwulobia Igbo. This tonal flexibility reduces the functional load of tone and allows speakers to manipulate pitch variation more freely in connected speech. The result is a smooth and continuous pitch movement across utterances, which contributes directly to the rhythmic patterning of the dialect. When combined with rising interrogative tones and vowel-harmonic demonstrative formations, level tone substitution enhances the overall prosodic texture of Ekwulobia Igbo.

Taken together, these findings show that rhythm in Ekwulobia Igbo is not an incidental feature but a structured outcome of interacting phonological processes. Tone functions simultaneously as a grammatical marker, a lexical differentiator, and a rhythmic device. The presence of level tone tonemic substitution further demonstrates that tonal features in the dialect extend beyond meaning distinction to include stylistic and identity-forming functions. Overall, the data support the view that rhythm in Ekwulobia Igbo emerges from the integration of tonal flexibility and segmental processes such as vowel harmony. These combined features contribute to the distinct prosodic identity of the dialect and reinforce its sociolinguistic role as a marker of group identity within the wider Igbo linguistic continuum.

## 5.0 Conclusion

This study has shown that tonal nuances and rhythmic patterns are important features of Ekwulobia Igbo. The use of rising tones in questions and low tones in statements shows that tone plays a key role in grammar. In addition, the way demonstratives are formed through vowel harmony and the insertion of *h* helps to create a smooth and rhythmic speech pattern.

These features work together to give Ekwulobia Igbo its unique sound. The rhythm that comes from these patterns is not accidental; it is the result of regular linguistic processes. This rhythmic pattern also functions as a sociolinguistic marker of identity, helping to distinguish Ekwulobia speakers from other Igbo speakers. Its distinctiveness makes it easily recognizable and sometimes imitated by speakers of other dialects, further highlighting its role in marking group identity.

This study also reinforces the position of Ezenwafor (2013), who argues that tonal nuances, especially in the form of non-distinctive level tonemic substitution, contribute to the rhythmic speech pattern of Ekwulobia Igbo. The findings of this study support this claim by showing how tonal variation, even when it does not change lexical meaning, plays an important role in shaping the overall rhythm of the dialect. Future studies can expand this work by comparing these patterns with other Igbo dialects or by using instrumental methods to examine the acoustic properties of the tones and rhythms in more detail.

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