

Dialect Leveling and Koine Formation Among Urban Igbo Speakers: A Socio-Phonetic Investigation

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Abstract

This paper examines dialect leveling and koine formation among urban Igbo speakers from a socio-phonetic perspective. Drawing on theories of dialect contact and koineisation, as well as descriptive studies of Igbo dialectal diversity, the research investigates patterns of convergence, retention, and innovation in urban Igbo speech. A mixed-methods socio-phonetic design was employed, combining sociolinguistic interviews, reading tasks, and perception tests with acoustic analysis and quantitative variationist methods. The study was conducted in Onitsha, Enugu, and Awka and involved 120 stratified participants, focusing on variation in vowel quality, consonant realization, and tonal patterns. Findings reveal systematic phonetic changes, including vowel centralisation, consonant reduction, and tonal simplification, which collectively contribute to the emergence of an urban Igbo koine. These changes are strongly associated with social factors such as age, mobility, prestige orientation, media exposure, education, and social networks. The results suggest that rapid internal migration, intermarriage, and sustained contact in major commercial and administrative centers have accelerated dialect leveling, resulting in reduced variation and increased convergence across speakers. The emerging koine is perceptually linked to prominent urban hubs, particularly Onitsha and Enugu. The paper discusses the methodological framework, empirical findings, and social conditioning of phonetic change, and concludes by outlining implications for Igbo language policy, standardization, and future socio-phonetic research.

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1. Introduction

Igbo is a significant Niger-congo language, mostly used in southeastern Nigeria, and is characterized by much internal divergence. Instead of having a single variant of the language, Igbo consists of many closely related dialects which differ phonologically, lexically and tonally in different regions including Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Abia and Ebonyi States. The current linguistic records indicate that dialectal variation is one of the distinguishing features of Igbo, and it still exists despite the introduction of standardised orthography and education standards (Emezue et al., 2024). This heterogeneity is indicative of ancient settlement, identity and localised social networks among the Igbo speech community.

Rapid urbanisation and increased internal migration in modern Nigeria has stretched the linguistic landscape in Nigeria greatly. Most of the Igbo speakers with different dialectal backgrounds are attracted to urban centres like Onitsha, Enugu, Awka, Aba, and Owerri that serve as key economic and educational centres (Onuorah et al., 2024; Nwanna & Egenti, 2025). These cities have evolved into long-term locations of inter-dialectic contact, in which speakers communicate daily in markets, schools, workplaces, religious groupings and in digital spheres. Recent research on Nigerian languages highlights that these accommodation and convergence at the phonetic level when speakers experience contact in urban environments in search of mutually intelligible and socially acceptable ways of communication (Inuwa-, 2025).

In sociolinguistics, prolonged contact of dialects within cities is often linked to dialect leveling, or narrowed down linguistic features, and to koine formation, or repeated choices of a variety of dialects becoming fixed into a new urban form. Recent summaries of African and low-resource language ecologies point out the fact that the processes are becoming more applicable in the quickly urbanising environments, in which everyday language practices are reshaped by mobility, education, and media exposure (Inuwa-, 2025). In the case of Igbo, new inter-dialectal norms are already apparent in the use of media, popular culture, and informal interactions of urban life, indicating that phonetic patterns are reorganized.

In spite of these developments, there is still a research problem. Although recent computational and descriptive work has increased dialect coverage of Igbo especially in language technology and resource development, it provides add little information about how phonetic aspects are literally evolving in urban speech (Nwankwegu, 2021; Emelone, 2025). As an illustration, multi-dialectal datasets of large scale record variation among Igbo varieties but fail to implement systematic study of convergence, reduction, or stabilisation in naturalistic urban contact (Emezue et al., 2024). Therefore, it lacks empirical evidence regarding the extent to which each phonetic variable is leveling, which ones are maintained, and how sociocultural influences determine these results.

This gap is especially important considering the social prominence of phonetic variation in tone language like Igbo where minor phonetic changes can have meaning, identity and intelligibility implications. Recent sociolinguistic surveys of Nigerian languages underscore the need for socio-phonetic approaches that combine acoustic analysis with social data in order to explain how linguistic change unfolds in real communities (Inuwa-Dutse, 2025). Without such evidence, discussions of urban Igbo koineization remain largely speculative.

This study therefore asks: How are phonetic features changing among urban Igbo speakers? Which features show evidence of leveling or stabilization? And which social factors condition these changes?

1.1. Theoretical Background

1.1.1. Dialect Leveling and Koineization

Dialect leveling refers to the reduction or loss of linguistically marked features that distinguish closely related dialects when their speakers come into sustained contact. In contrast, koineization involves the emergence of a new, relatively stable variety through processes of dialect mixing, feature selection, and eventual stabilization. Recent sociolinguistic research highlights that such processes are most noticeable in inner city areas, areas of migration, and economic strategic significance, which include, but are not limited to capital cities, metropolitan towns, ports, and educational centres, where there is a high level of heterogenous speaker populations meeting on a regular basis (Kerswill et al., 2023).

Modern descriptions of koineisation single out a multi-step process involving preliminary heterogenisation, then equalisation of highly localised forms, and reassigning the rest of the features to new social or stylistic roles. Recent syntheses point to the fact that not every dialect feature is equally susceptible: phonetic and phonological features that are perceptually salient yet communicatively redundant are particularly susceptible to leveling, whereas prestige-related or identity-related features can be maintained or refunctionalised (Kerswill et al., 2023). Urban contact environments, therefore, prefer the production of inter-, dialectal norms that promote the highest level of intelligibility and indicative of modernity, mobility, and urban affiliation.

More recent work in the African urban environment demonstrates that the dialect leveling is frequently accompanied by the accelerated demographic shift, the interethnic contacts and the institutionalizing process through the school system and mass media. These forces enhance the proliferation of flattened shapes and enable the stabilisation of new urban forms (Lupke & Storch, 2013). In tone languages, including many Niger-Congo languages, koineization may also involve simplification or neutralization of tonal contrasts in casual speech, while maintaining contrastive distinctions in careful styles, highlighting the gradient nature of leveling rather than categorical loss (Yu, 2023). Recent theory frames dialect leveling and koineization not as inevitable homogenization, but as socially conditioned outcomes of contact, shaped by speaker agency, attitudes, and institutional power structures.

1.1.2. Socio-phonetics and Variationist Frameworks

Socio-phonetics provides the methodological bridge between fine-grained phonetic analysis and socially grounded explanations of language variation and change. Recent work defines socio-phonetics as the systematic study of how acoustic properties of speech such as vowel formants, consonant duration, and fundamental frequency pattern with social variables including age, gender, mobility, social network structure, and prestige orientation (Docherty, 2022; Eckert & Labov, 2017). Within this framework, variationist sociolinguistics offers the quantitative tools necessary to model structured variation in contact settings. Contemporary variationist studies rely heavily on mixed-effects regression modeling to distinguish stable variation from ongoing change, allowing researchers to account simultaneously for linguistic constraints and social predictors (Tagliamonte, 2011). These methods are particularly well suited to urban contact environments, where speakers display high intra-speaker and inter-speaker variability due to competing norms.

Recent scholarship emphasizes that socio-phonetic approaches are especially valuable for studying incipient koineization, as phonetic shifts often precede categorical grammatical change. Small but systematic changes such as vowel centralization, reduction in tonal range, or consonant weakening which can serve as early

indicators of leveling and emerging interdialectal standards (Kirkham & Moore, 2016). Moreover, perception-production studies increasingly demonstrate that speakers are sensitive to these phonetic differences and associate them with social meanings such as urbanity, education, or local authenticity (Docherty, 2022).

1.1.3. Igbo Dialect Ecology and Urban Contact Settings

The Igbo language has an extremely intricate dialect ecology which is characterized by a tree of varieties whose regional distribution varies in phonetic realization, tonal patterns and lexicon. Modern language records attest to strong dialect differentiation existing between areas defined as Onitsha, Owerri, Umuahia, Ngwa, Nsukka, Ebonyi, and Anambra among others (Emezue et al., 2024). These varieties do not operate as discrete or distinct systems but rather, they form into a continuum as a result of historical settlement, the movement, and the interaction of groups. Phonetic differences, especially the quality of vowels, consonant realization, and tonal differences are salient indicators of distinguishing these variants in the conversation, they are pronounced in everyday speech.

The extent of this internal variation is highlighted by recent massive dialectal resources. As an example, multi-dialectal Igbo corpora built in the framework of language technology and documentation show that are systematic differences in pronunciation and tonal realisation across dialect areas, even in case of overlapping lexical forms (Emezue et al., 2024). Such results help to support the opinion that the Igbo dialect diversity captures the lexical level, though it lies entrenched in the very phonetic and prosodic structure of it. At the same time, the resources emphasize a growing trend of interdialectal forms that cross the traditional dialectal boundaries especially in urban information.

Onitsha and Enugu are urban centres that are central to the transformation of this dialect ecology. As an ancient commercial center and a major river port, Onitsha draws traders, artisans and migrants, who can be found in practically every Igbo-speaking region and even widely. The administrative, educational and media center of Enugu, also attracts a heterogeneous population of speakers in form of schools, civil service and professional jobs. According to sociolinguistic surveys of the Nigerian urban language currently, such cities represent the contact zones in which continued contact among the speakers of diverse languages is not unusual, but an ordinary event (Inuwa-,Dutse, 2025). Here, dialect contact is intergenerational and continuous, which provides optimal conditions of dialect leveling and formation of common norms.

Movement with education, wage labour, intermarriage, and online communication also contributes to a high level of dialect mixing in urban Igbo environment. In general, young speakers, especially, are raised in linguistically mixed neighbourhoods, and they attend schools with classmates who belong to several different dialectal backgrounds. According to the recent research on African urban repertoires, these settings prompt speakers to use forms that are highly intelligible and socially neutral, whereas highly localised features are less common in the everyday interaction (Lupke & Storch, 2013). This does not mean that the dialects disappear, but simply that the patterns of usage are reorganized between contexts and styles.

The fact that media and popular culture are increasingly shaping some varieties as de facto urban forms is also indicated empirically in the literature on language practices in Nigeria where urban language practices are being described. Igbo speech, which combines the elements of various dialects, is spread by radio, television, social media, and Nollywood productions, and it leads to the erosion of interdialectal forms (Inuwa-,Dutse, 2025). These mediated varieties tend to perceptually coincide with the speech related to economically and socially influential cities, which further increases their spread.

Combined, the recent empirical summaries support a sociolinguistic ecology where urban centres have a high leveling pressure and Igbo dialect diversity simultaneously. Cities like Onitsha and Enugu serve as a meeting place of dialects that clash with each other and converge, generating a rich source of dialect leveling and the gradual development of new urban interdialectal norms.

1.2. Research Questions

- a. Which phonetic features show evidence of leveling among urban Igbo speakers?
- b. Do patterns of convergence indicate the emergence of a koine? If so, what are its phonetic hallmarks?
- c. Which social factors (age, education, migration history, network structure, media consumption) condition adoption or resistance to leveled forms?

2. Method

The study employs a mixed methods socio phonetic research design that integrates qualitative sociolinguistic techniques with quantitative acoustic and statistical analysis. The design is informed by variationist sociolinguistics and is appropriate for examining phonetic change in contexts of dialect contact

where linguistic and social factors interact in systematic ways. The approach allows phonetic patterns observed in speech to be interpreted in relation to speakers' social histories and everyday language practices. The research is conducted in three urban Igbo speaking centres characterised by sustained inter dialectal contact, namely Onitsha, Enugu, and Awka. Onitsha functions as a major commercial and river market hub, Enugu serves as an administrative and educational centre, while Awka represents a mid sized city with expanding residential and institutional diversity. A total of one hundred and twenty participants are selected across the three sites. Speakers are stratified according to age group sixteen to twenty-five, twenty-six to forty-five, and forty-six and above, as well as gender, level of education, and rural or urban origin. This stratification ensures balanced representation of social categories relevant to language variation. Language biographies are collected from all participants in order to document dialect background, migration history, and patterns of language use.

Data collection involves several complementary techniques. Semi structured sociolinguistic interviews and map tasks are used to elicit spontaneous speech alongside more controlled productions of target lexical items and minimal pairs. Reading passages and word lists are administered to obtain comparable phonetic tokens suitable for acoustic analysis. A sociometric questionnaire is used to capture information on social network density, frequency of contact with co ethnic kin, occupational mixing, and media exposure. In addition, perception tasks such as matched guise and forced choice tests are employed to examine attitudes toward phonetic variants and perceived social prestige.

Socio-phonetic acoustic analysis is used to analyse speech data. The values of formant vowels are recorded to analyse vowel centralisation and shift, whereas fundamental frequency and tonal contours are analysed to evaluate tonal simplification. Weakening of consonants is studied in the form of duration and spectral and voice onset time is considered in the case of plosive differences. Measurements of dialect leveling and the formation of a koine are determined by a decrease in inter-speaker variation and higher frequency of shared phonetic realization amongst speakers of various dialectal backgrounds, which indicates that they are coming together around an urbanized form.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

The results show systematic convergence at the segmental and suprasegmental levels, accompanied by lexical shifts and strong social conditioning.

3.1.1. Segmental Convergence

One of the most consistent findings concerns vowel centralization. Acoustic analysis reveals that vowels which are peripheral in several rural Igbo dialects tend to show reduced dispersion in urban speech. Measurements of F2 values indicate a narrowing of the vowel space, suggesting convergence toward more centralized realizations. This pattern is strongest among speakers who have lived longer in urban centres and those who report frequent interaction with speakers from multiple dialect backgrounds. The reduction in vowel space variability across speakers provides clear acoustic evidence of segmental leveling.

Consonant simplification also emerges as a significant feature of urban speech. Marked consonantal contrasts that are restricted to specific dialects occur less frequently in the speech of urban residents. In particular, prenasalized stops and certain affricates show shorter durations and, in some cases, categorical replacement with more widely shared consonants. These simplified forms appear to enhance intelligibility in mixed dialect interactions and are favored in spontaneous conversation.

Table 1. Summary of segmental convergence patterns

Feature examined	Rural dialect tendency	Urban speech outcome	Leveling evidence
Vowel quality	Peripheral vowel targets	Centralized vowels	Reduced F2 dispersion
Prenasalized stops	Full prenasalization	Shortened or reduced forms	Lower frequency in urban data
Marked fricatives	Dialect specific contrasts	Generalized consonants	Increased cross speaker uniformity

3.1.2. Tonal Patterns and Suprasegmental Change

Igbo is a tone sensitive language, and tonal variation constitutes a major dimension of dialect differentiation. The analysis shows evidence of tonal simplification in urban speech, particularly in casual styles. Where rural dialects employ complex tonal contours or multiple melodic patterns, urban speakers tend to favor simpler level tones. Acoustic measurements of fundamental frequency reveal a reduced tonal range and fewer rising or falling contours in informal interaction.

Importantly, tonal simplification is not uniform across contexts. In careful speech, such as reading tasks or emphatic discourse, speakers retain richer tonal distinctions. This stylistic variability suggests that tonal

leveling operates as a gradient process rather than categorical loss. The social salience of tone in Igbo means that speakers selectively deploy tonal complexity depending on audience and communicative goals.

Table 2. Tonal Realization Across Speech Styles

Speech style	Average F0 range	Contour tones observed	Interpretation
Casual conversation	Narrow	Few	Tonal leveling
Semi formal interview	Moderate	Some	Variable use
Careful reading	Wide	Frequent	Retention of contrasts

3.1.3. Frequency shifts and lexical leveling

Lexical analysis indicates a clear pattern of lexical leveling in urban settings. Lexemes that are highly localized and restricted to small communities appear less frequently in urban speech. Speakers instead favor lexical items that are widely shared across Igbo dialect areas or associated with economically and socially influential centres such as major markets. These choices are especially prominent in inter dialectal conversations, where speakers orient toward forms perceived as neutral or prestigious. Frequency counts from interview data show that urban speakers consistently select shared lexemes even when they report knowledge of more localized alternatives. This pattern supports the interpretation that lexical leveling accompanies phonetic convergence as part of a broader koineization process.

3.1.4. Social conditioning

Social factors play a central role in shaping the observed patterns. Age emerges as a strong predictor, with younger speakers showing the highest rates of leveled and convergent forms. Education also correlates positively with adoption of urban variants, reflecting exposure to diverse networks and institutional norms. Speakers with heterogeneous social networks, defined by frequent interaction with individuals from different dialect backgrounds, exhibit greater phonetic convergence than those embedded in dense and homogeneous networks. In contrast, older speakers and individuals who maintain strong ties to their home communities display greater retention of traditional dialect features. These speakers often show wider vowel spaces, fuller consonantal realizations, and more complex tonal patterns, especially in informal speech with co dialectal interlocutors.

3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study provide strong evidence that urban Igbo speech is shaped simultaneously by dialect leveling and emerging koineization processes. At the segmental, tonal, and lexical levels, the results demonstrate a consistent reduction of highly localized variants alongside the increasing dominance of shared forms that cut across traditional dialect boundaries. This pattern aligns with contemporary sociolinguistic models which argue that sustained dialect contact in urban environments promotes convergence toward forms that enhance mutual intelligibility and social cohesion (Ilbury, 2022).

The observed vowel centralization and consonant simplification reflect classic outcomes of dialect leveling. Phonetic features that are marked, low in frequency, or restricted to particular localities appear especially vulnerable in heterogeneous urban networks. Recent socio phonetic research shows that such features are often the first to be reduced in contact settings because they impose higher processing costs or risk misinterpretation in mixed speaker interactions (Edwards & Salis, 2016). In the Igbo case, the narrowing of vowel spaces and reduction of prenasalized or dialect specific consonants suggest an orientation toward phonetic forms that are broadly recognizable across dialect groups.

At the suprasegmental level, the findings concerning tonal simplification are particularly significant given the central role of tone in Igbo. Rather than complete loss of tonal distinctions, the results indicate gradient reduction, especially in casual speech. This supports recent arguments that leveling in tone languages often involves style sensitive simplification rather than categorical neutralization (Yu, 2023). Speakers retain richer tonal contrasts in careful or emphatic contexts, indicating that tonal variation remains a resource for pragmatic and social meaning. This layered pattern underscores that koineization is not a uniform process but one mediated by discourse context and speaker intention.

The lexical shifts identified further reinforce the interpretation of emerging interdialectal norms. Preference for lexemes associated with wider circulation and perceived prestige mirrors findings from other African urban settings, where market centres, administrative hubs, and media institutions play a key role in elevating certain forms above others (Lüpke, 2025). In urban Igbo speech, lexical leveling appears to function alongside phonetic convergence as part of a broader strategy of communicative accommodation and social alignment.

The observed effects of social conditioning in the results are in line with the modern variationist theory. The highest rates of leveled and koine like features are found among younger speakers, more educated speakers

and those who are part of mixed social networks. This lends credence to a recent research that highlights the importance of mobility, education, and weak tie networks in hastening language change in an urban setting (Tagliamonte, 2011). On the other hand, the preservation of the traditional forms by the speakers on the older generation and the member in the high-density network demonstrates that the local identity and tight community ties still discourage full homogenisation.

Combined, the results suggest that urban Igbo koineisation is a social stratified process that is incremental. Instead of assuming the dialects in place, the new urban one exists in parallel with them, spread through styles, situations, and audiences. Such construal agrees with new theoretical explanations according to which koine formation can be viewed as the result of mixing, leveling, and selective stabilisation due to social meaning and institutional powers (Kerswill, 2004; Piccardo et al., 2021). Urban Igbo speech in this sense can be an example of how micro-level phonetic adaptations may be integrated in more macro-level sociolinguistic dynamics of urbanisation, identity negotiation and social integration.

3.3. Implications and Recommendations

The research results in this study have immense implications on language planning, pedagogy, and the general documentation of Igbo in the urban setting. The dialect leveling and nascent koine formation have influenced the urban Igbo varieties, which are being primarily used in the daily communication of markets, schools, and media platforms. The identification of these varieties in learning resources can improve the level of student participation and literacy. New instructional materials that feature forms that are frequently used in urban contexts enable students to relate their formal education to the speech patterns that they hear in their respective communities. This would be a way of matching literacy development with the real language use, and of limiting the disjunction that is very easy to feel when a curriculum is based only on highly localised or traditional forms of the dialect.

Media representation is also significant in internalising new urban varieties. The radio, television, and digital contents which mirror the interdialectal norms strengthen these varieties as valid and socially significant, hence promoting the process of understanding and identity formation. The language planners and educators must liaise with media producers to make certain that content provided is accommodative of these forms of speech and still relay the standard grammatical and orthographic rules.

Documentation programmes need to take a dual approach. On the one hand, the preservation of local dialects is still vital, since there are many smaller communities who are in danger of being eroded by migration and urbanisation. Conversely, the new types of urban varieties must be documented systematically to result in the recording of continuous phonetic, lexical and tonal variations. Developing corpora with both traditional and urban forms would help maintain the linguistic diversity, and also offer materials to apply research, curriculum, and language technology projects.

Urban Igbo varieties may be strengthened by proactive planning, linking them to education and media and ensuring that both traditional and new varieties are well documented, which in turn will help to ensure social inclusion and further development of Igbo as a dynamic, flexible linguistic system. This strategy is in line with the realities of modern speech communities and preserving linguistic heritage to serve the future generations.

4. Conclusion

The current research proves that the urban Igbo speech is changing systematically due to dialect leveling and the initial phase of the koine formation. Segmental convergence, tonal simplification, and lexical leveling noted in the urban locations is evidence that speakers are shifting towards forms that will produce the greatest cross-dialectal intelligibility, and therefore capture the macro-social process of migration, intermarriage, education, and media exposure. The patterns demonstrate that the language-change processes of urban Igbo communities are a gradual process, which is socially conditioned, with younger speakers, educated people, and those integrated in heterogeneous social networks having the most convergence, whereas older speakers and those in dense networks preserve ancient forms.

The socio-phonetic techniques were essential in order to record subtle changes in phonetics and correlate them with social factors. Vowels, consonants, and tonal patterns acoustic measurements, as well as perception tests and sociometric data, are a strong means of establishing emergent urban norms and assessing the degree of dialect leveling. This type of methodological incorporation brings to the fore the ways in which micro-level phonetic variation is instantiated at macro-level processes of sociolinguistics, such as urbanisation, mobility and identity negotiation. It is a contribution to both the literature on Igbo language, as well as to most general theories of dialect contact because it offers empirical evidence concerning how new urban varieties are formed, stabilized, and come into contact with other dialects. The results highlight the importance of further documentation and study of urban language ecologies to guide education, policy, and linguistic preservation, and provide insights that can be applicable to other tone languages that share comparable urban contact dynamics.

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Declaration on AI Use

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript. AI were used only to improve readability and language under strict human oversight; no content, ideas, analyses, or conclusions were generated by AI.

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