

Iconicity in the Igbo Sign Language (ISL)

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Iconicity is a relationship of resemblance or similarity between the two aspects of a sign: its form and its meaning (Meir & Tkachman (2018), and it is a general feature in all sign languages. This work sets out to investigate the manifestation of iconicity in the signing patterns of Igbo home signers, with a view to identifying the forms iconicity take in the language. A wordlist containing some iconically motivated Igbo lexical items is administered to selected deaf Igbo home signers to sign. The pictorial representations of these lexical items are presented and motivations behind them also given. Using the descriptive approach and borrowing a leaf from Edward (2005), the data so collected are analyzed and discussed under the concepts of size and shapes, expression of time, emotive and cognitive signs, and directional verbs. The study observes that the Igbo sign language is highly iconic, and has a great similarity with iconic signs in other African Indigenous Sign Languages such as Adamorobe Sign Language (AdaSL). The study concludes, in line with cross-linguistic findings, that iconicity is an essential of sign languages. The study recommends more scholarly works on iconicity in other African indigenous sign languages.

Keywords: sign language, iconicity, home signs, Igbo, deaf

1 Introduction

An icon is a visual representation of something else. It can be an object, person, place, idea to mention but a few. Icons have iconicity when they are similar in some way to what they represent. Iconicity is the characteristic of a sign where the form of the sign mirrors its meaning. What this implies is that the sign resembles what it depicts. It is a general feature in all sign languages. An iconic sign is that whose form looks like its meaning in some way. For example, wall street bull representing a bull stock market, a restroom sign showing a picture of a man or a woman represents which rest room is for men and which one is for women, a stethoscope can represent a profession of a doctor and so on. White (2020) states that it is not all iconicity is visual in nature, she acknowledges that linguistic symbols, such as sounds and sign language can also be iconic.

The focus of this study is on “Iconicity in the Igbo Sign Language” which tries to investigate the manifestation of iconicity in the Igbo sign language, by exploring the communication system of the Igbo home signers: an informal basic sign system that is sometimes developed within a single family in the Igbo community, especially when hearing parents who have no skills in sign language have a deaf child. The study informed by understudied and underdeveloped situation the Igbo Sign Language is presently facing, the researchers set to carry out this research in order to align with 2020 declaration of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages by United Nations/ UNESCO, and to bring the Igbo Sign Language to limelight as other indigenous sign languages. The above-mentioned problem is actually the gap which this work wants to bridge.

Ajavon (2006), Orié (2013), Nyst (2007) and Asonye et al. (2018) which are on native Nigerian sign systems are true evidence that indigenous African sign languages can and should be studied. As Ajavon (2006: 1) aptly puts it, “Persons with special needs in Nigeria have a history of neglect and marginalization within their families and communities”. Her work reveals the discrimination and social exclusion suffered by the deaf, dumb and hard of hearing Nigerians due to difficulties they have communicating with hearing people around them. The reality seen in Ajavon’s (2006) assertion spurred the researchers’ interest more on how the Igbo Sign Language (ISL) can be developed just like other indigenous African languages. Interestingly, Orié’s (2013) work on Yoruba Sign Language, Nyst’s (2007) on Village Signs in Ghana, Mali and Nigeria also had a snowball effect on the decision to embark on this research.

The subsequent parts of the study come in the following five sections: section two reviews the related and relevant literature and elucidates the concepts used in the study, section three provides the methodology of the study, section four presents the data and analyses them, while section five concludes on the study.

2 Elucidation of basic concepts

2.1 Sign

Sign can be seen as an object, quality, event, or entity whose presence or occurrence indicates the probable presence or occurrence of something else. It can be a gesture or action used to convey information or an instruction. Sign is a general feature in all sign languages. According to Bussmann (1996: 936), “Sign is an abstract class of all sensually perceivable signals that refer to the same object state of affairs in the real world”. MCGregor (2009) sees sign as a fundamental item made up of two inherent components, a form sometimes called “signifier” and a meaning also called “signified.” Crystal (2007) says that in such phrase as sign language and sign system, the term “sign” has a very restricted sense, referring to the system of manual communication used by certain groups as an alternative to oral communication. For the purpose of this work, the definition of ‘sign’ by Crystal is considered.

2.2 Sign language

The term sign language is also known as Dactylogy. In Encyclopedia Britannica, fingerspelling or dactylogy is defined as the representation of letters or numerals using only the hands. It is a method of communication in which letters or numbers are represented through specific positions or movements of the fingers and hand, commonly used in manual alphabets of sign languages. Riekehof (1987) put it that sign language is a language that uses manual symbols to represent ideas and concepts. The term, according to her is generally used by the deaf people where both manual signs and finger spelling are employed. MCGregor (2009) also captures the same phrase “sign language” saying that it uses gesture to represent words, ideas and concepts. The National Association of Deaf (NAD) recognizes sign language as a language which uses manual communication and body language to convey meaning as opposed to acoustically conveyed sound patterns. It added also that sign language can involve simultaneously combining hand shapes, orientation and movement of hands, arms or body and facial expression to fluidly express a speaker’s thought.

From the foregoing, we see that sign language can be considered to be a visual gestural language which is expressed through the hands and face, and is perceived through the eyes. Therefore, this work adopts the description which says that sign language is a language that uses manual communication and body language to convey meaning as opposed to acoustically conveyed sound patterns for the term sign language. The concept of sign language is not just waving one's hands in the air. One can add meaning or change meaning in the language furrowing the eyebrows, tilting the head, glancing in a certain direction, leaning one's body a certain way, puffing one's cheek or any other type of inflections. Examples of signs and information they represent in American Sign Language are shown below:

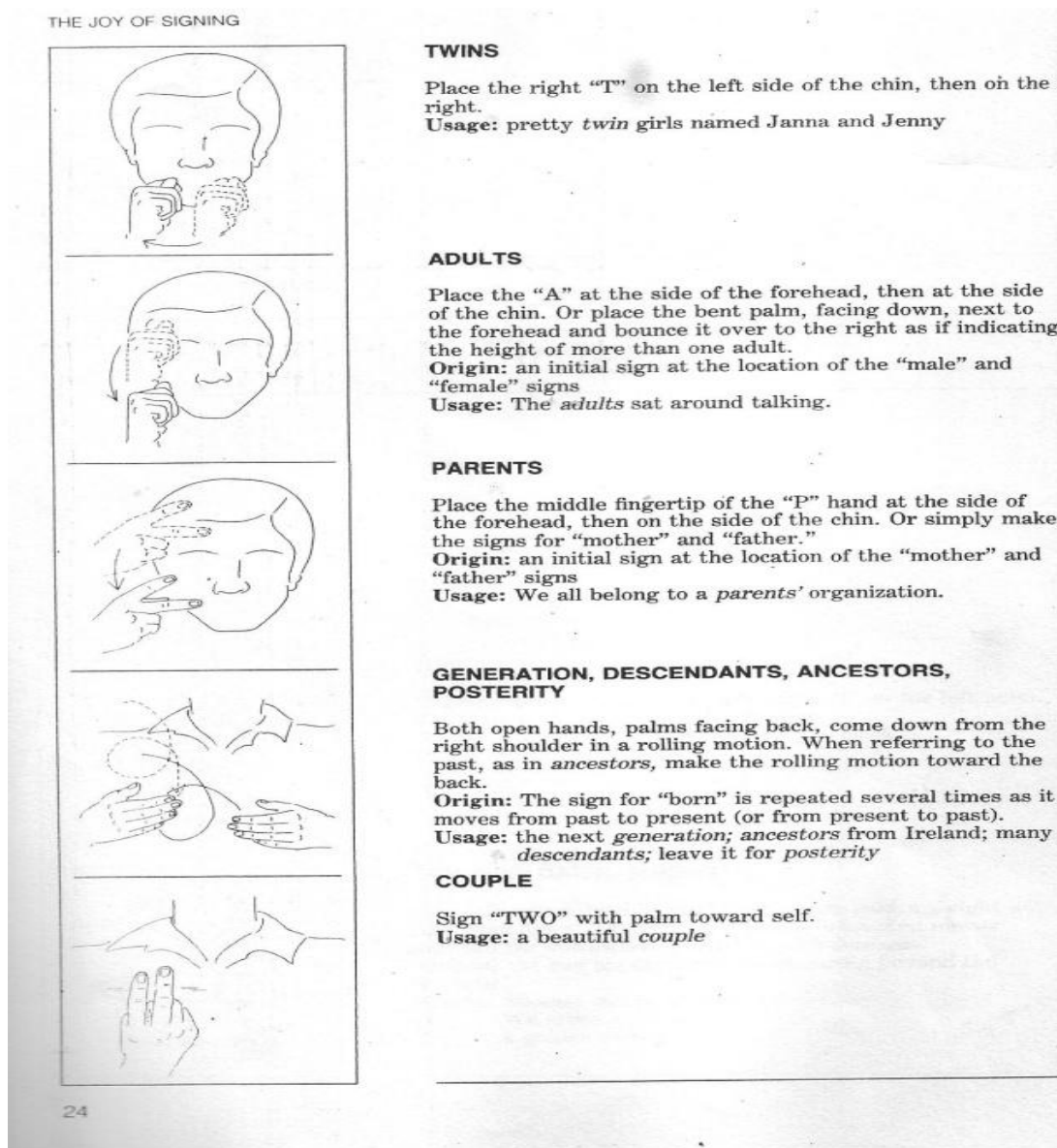


Figure 1: Some American Signs and their Explanations (Rickehof 1987: 24)



Figure 2: How some words are signed in ASL (<https://www.handspeak.com>)

2.3 Gesture

Crystal (2007) describes gesture as a term used in the phonology for a matrix of features specifying a particular characteristic of a segment. In his example, an oral gesture would specify all supraglottal characteristics such as place and manner of articulation, and a laryngeal gesture would specify characteristics of phonation. McGregor (2009) talks about gesture saying that it is the distinctive movement of a body part conveying meaning, for example, a manual gesture conveying meaning “Ok”, or shaking the head in denial. Gesture is part of what Hall and Hall (1971) call “Nonverbal communication” in their study on *The Language of the Body: Kinesics and Proxemics*. They mention that nonverbal communication which includes gesture is the first form of communication one learns, and the only language used throughout most of the history of humanity. Evans (2019) says that gesture refers to the use of hand, arm, head and torso movements, as well as facial expressions, that that are co-timed with language. Kendon (2004) claims that gesture constitutes visible action as utterance: gestures complement and often supplement information conveyed via the spoken medium, adding meaning not otherwise

apparent. The description of the term “gesture” by Evans (2019) is adopted in this work, as it has a closer relationship with the field of linguistics we are researching on.

2.4 Iconicity

Iconicity is basically seen as the resemblance of a symbol to its referent. It is an essential tool in creation of language, spoken or signed (e.g. Imai & Kita 2015; Perniss & Vigiliocco 2014). Meir & Tkachman (2018) assert that iconicity is a relationship or similarity between the two aspects of a sign: its form and its meaning. In their further explanations, they mention that because iconicity has to do with the properties of sign in general and not only those of linguistics signs, it plays an important role in the field of semiotics. They identify various kinds of iconicity saying that the form of a sign may resemble aspects of its meaning in several ways: it may create a mental image of the concept (imagic iconicity), or its structure and the arrangement of its element may resemble the structural relationship between components of the concept represented (diagrammatic iconicity). An example of imagic iconicity for them is the word “*cukoo*”, whose sounds resemble the call of the bird, or a sign such as RABBIT in Israeli Sign Language, whose form (the hands representing the rabbit’s long ears)-resembles a visual property of the animal. Example of diagrammatic iconicity is given as *vēnī, vīdī, vīcī*, where the order of clauses in a discourse is understood as reflecting the sequence of events in the world. Crystal (1987) points out that icons are symbols which show a physical resemblance of objects they represent. Because of the similarities between object and icon, he says that symbols are usually interpreted with little difficulty.

2.5 Iconicity in Sign Language

The initial studies on Iconicity in American Sign Language (ASL) have their publications in late 1970s and early 1980s. During that period, a good number of sign language linguists did not accept the notion that iconicity was an essential part of sign language. This is seen in the words of Frisberg (1975) when she declares that many early sign language linguists rejected the notion that iconicity was an important aspect of the language. Klima and Bellugi (1979) also add that though these early sign language scholars recognized that some aspects of the language seemed iconic, they still considered it as merely extra linguistic, a property which did not influence the language. A very influential paper on the relationship between arbitrariness and iconicity in ASL written by Frisberg (1975) concludes that though originally present in many signs, iconicity is degraded over time through the application of grammatical processes. This is to say that over time, the natural processes of regularization in the language obscures any iconically motivated features of the sign. However, the rejection of iconicity in the traditional research of sign languages, owing to the fact that it is believed that having iconicity in a system does not entail arbitrariness has been disputed by the pioneers of sign language linguistics, who were overwhelmed with the task of trying to prove that.

Nyst (2013) describes iconicity in African Sign Languages referring to it as the perceived resemblance between the form of a sign and its meaning. For her, it is a powerful structuring force in many, if not all sign languages. However, she says that how iconicity takes shape may differ from one sign language to another. For example, where the sign language of Guinea-Bissau (SLGB) signs for “elephant” refers to the ears of the animal, the AdaSL sign represents its trunk.

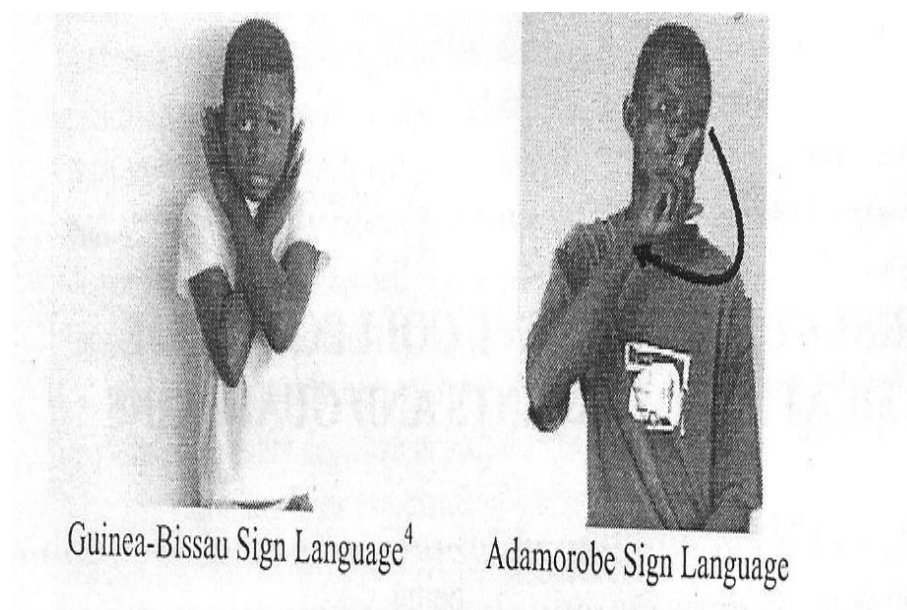


Figure 3: Signs for Elephant in SLGB and AdaSL (Nyst 2013: 79)

From Edward (2015), it is understood that sign language is iconic or picture-like. Because icons are, in most cases, visible symbols, it is understandable that observers may relate shape and symbol when they study language. According to her, a close and careful look will clarify whether or not iconicity is a significant factor in sign language. In her further explanations, she has it that the relationship between a word and the concept it represents is considered thus: the word “dog” neither looks, smells, sounds, feels nor tastes like the object to which it refers. The same applies to “table” and “human”. The relationship between words (whether spoken or written) and the concept they represent is generally arbitrary. Since arbitrary symbols share no physical characteristics with the things they symbolize, it can be said that arbitrariness is the opposite of iconicity. The concept represented by the word *house* is represented by *casa* in Spanish, *maison* in French, *don* in Russia and *bait* in Hebrew. These words are not related to each other, nor are they like the concept they represent, although the icon (picture) may be clear to all the speakers of these languages. She mentions that in American Sign Language (ASL), when house is made by itself, it appears to be iconic; the image of a roof and two walls are outlined by both hands. Many other signs tend to be iconic such as eat, milk, sit, and cat.

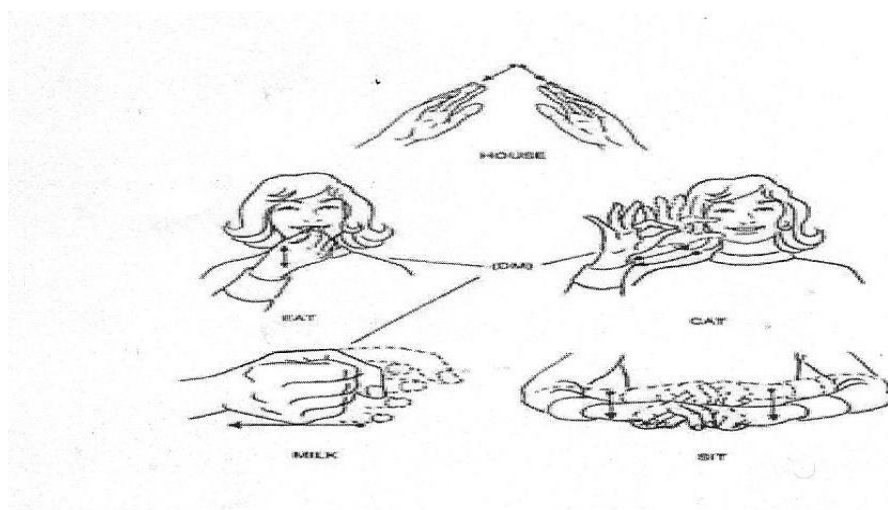


Figure 4: Examples of icon signs in American Sign Language (ASL) ([www. quora.com](http://www.quora.com))

In further review of iconicity in sign language, a study done on iconicity in the Adamorobe Sign Language (AdaSL) by Edward (2015) analyzes iconicity in Adamorobe, explaining the signs under the following concepts: size and shapes, expression of time, emotive and cognitive signs and verb directionality. This is actually where this study borrowed leaf in analyzing iconic signs in Igbo.

Summarily, from the literature so far reviewed, no work has been specifically done on iconicity in the Igbo Sign Language. This is actually a worrying situation, a gap which this study sets out to bridge by venturing into studying the Igbo iconic signs, to see the different ways they manifest in the signing patterns of Igbo home signers, with the aim of bringing the Igbo Sign Language to the limelight among other indigenous African Sign Languages.

3 Methodology

The area where this research was carried out is the Igbo region of Nigeria. The states in the core Igbo region include Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. The Igbo language is primarily spoken as L1 by the Igbo people in Nigeria who occupy the southeastern part of the country. Some Igbo communities viz: Lekwesi in Abia, Nteje in Anambra, Ugbenyim in Ebonyi, Ovoko in Enugu and Alike Umulumo in Imo were randomly selected for the fieldwork. We choose these linguistic communities because they harbor deaf signers that have not acquired any formal education, this is to say that these deaf persons have Igbo as their L1.

According to Williamson and Blench's (2000) classification, Igbo belongs to the West Benue-Congo sub family of the Proto Benue-Congo language family. The CIA World Factbook puts the Igbo population of Nigeria at 18% or approximately a total population of 44 million people. There is no known resource or research done on the already endangered language of the deaf group of people in Igbo. This is part of the stigmatization and negligence as no one cares to know much about them. There is little or no trace of a well-researched work done on their language of communication. In the 2016 Ethnologue, the Igbo language is shown by a large coloured (Purple) dot meaning that the language has been developed to the point that it is

used and sustained by institutions. The Igbo deaf individuals who reside in their various homes and their relatives who understand them better were used as informants for this study.

Data elicitation for the study was from among the deaf individuals found in Igbo locality. In the elicitation of information, the researcher made use of structured interview and wordlist. The informants hail from the five mentioned Igbo states. Through simple random sampling technique, five deaf persons were chosen, one from each state, plus one relative of each of the chosen deaf individuals, making it ten informants altogether. These relatives of the deaf were useful in the interpretation of signs. Our corpus targeted up to 25 words were collected through videos and snapshots for analysis and proper documentation purposes. The pictures depicting signs of each of the words in the wordlist administered to the informants were presented according to how a signer from a named Igbo state expresses it. The selected informants were not found in a deaf community but in isolation as they live with their hearing relatives in their respective homes. Each sign is rightly labeled and phonemically transcribed in the local language and then glossed. The transcriptions so given are also tone marked as the language of our research is a tone language. High tone is marked with the acute accent [´], the low tone with grave accent [˘] and the down step tone with macron [-]. By adopting qualitative method, the researchers borrowed leaf from Edward (2015) and analyzed the data under the concepts of size and shape, expression of time, emotive and cognitive signs, and directional verbs.

4 Discussion and findings

4.1 The Igbo sign language

Igbo sign language is a yet to be standardized language of the deaf persons in the Igbo communities, which is still under investigation. Ezeani (2023), is a PhD dissertation, titled “Igbo Sign Language Development: A Case for Igbo Home Signs” which focuses on developing the communication system of the home signers. Just like Adamorobe Sign Language and other indigenous African sign languages, Igbo Sign Language is not yet a documented or a formal language that is employed in official businesses. The history of this system of communication is still vague and deaf population in Igbo region is not known yet. This is due to poor attitudes played against them through neglect, marginalization and stigmatization in the Igbo area, such that only a handful of hearing individuals care to know about them and get their means of communication developed. There are little or no scholarly studies on the Igbo Sign Language. The only few noticed are yet to be published or recently published (e.g. Ezeani & Eme 2023 and Chikeluba 2022).

4.2 Iconicity in the Igbo sign language (ISL)

Iconicity is evident in most lexical structures in the Igbo Sign Language (ISL). For the purpose of this study, we are going to focus on iconic elements that indicate size and shape, expression of time, emotive and cognitive signs, and directional verbs. The signs for the above concepts in Igbo are those that have iconic intent. Here, some of the iconically motivated signs in the Igbo Sign Language (ISL) are presented. The motivations behind these iconic signs are given alongside the pictures of the signs.

4.2.1 Iconicity in expression of size and shape in the Igbo sign language (ISL)

The structure of sign here focuses on the shape and size of the entity that is being represented. In the Igbo Sign Language, the signs that depict size and shape entities are highly iconic. For instance, the signs for *efere* (plate) and *achicha* (bread) in Igbo home signs are depicted by making a circular movement with two hands to show the round shape of the plate and a vertical raising of the dominant hand to show the long size of the bread as in figures 5 & 6:

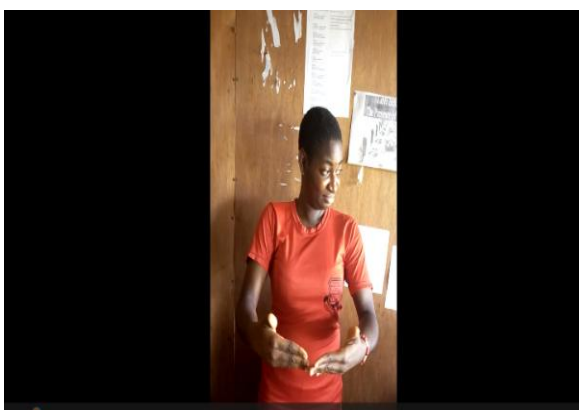


Figure 5: *efere /éféré/* “plate”

The motivation behind this sign, *efere/éféré/* “plate” is the circular movement of the two hands made by the signer indicating the normal round shape and portable size of plates.



Figure 6: *achicha/àfìfà/* “bread”

The motivation behind the sign *achicha/àfìfà/* “bread” is the vertical raising of the right (dominant hand) to show the shape and size of the entity in question.

4.2.2 Iconicity in expression of time in Igbo sign language (ISL)

Another area where iconic signs are expressed in the Igbo Sign Language is in expression of time. Alkoby (1999) identifies two types of signs that express time in American Sign Language (ASL): Lexical tense markers which are lexically independent time signs, and Time adverbials that function as adverbs. There are evidence of lexical tense markers and time adverbials in the Igbo sign language and both of them are what we grouped under signs that express time. In American Sign Language (ASL), time indicators are usually referred to as time signs, for example, words like *finish* and *will* indicate time. *finish* indicating past or completed actions while *will* indicate future actions. Words like *now* and *today* are also referred to as present time signs in American Sign Language (ASL) according to Alkoby (1999). He stressed that these time signs have a relative location on the time line, which corresponds to their meaning (i.e past is behind and present and future are in front, and they are deictic in nature. Figure 7 is a pictorial illustration of time line:

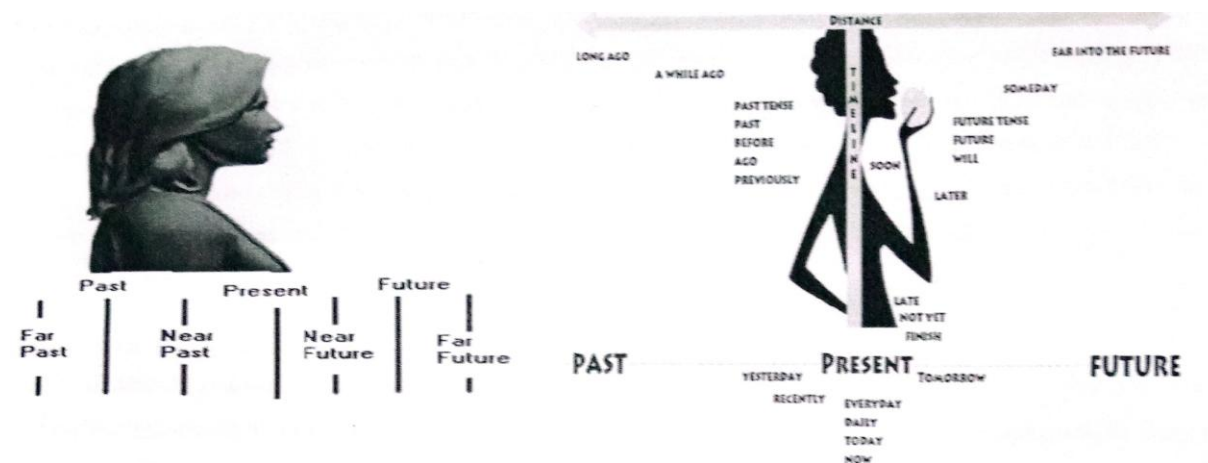


Figure 7: Culled from Alkoby (1999: 5)

In the Igbo Sign Language (ISL) also, there are signs that indicate past (back), present or future (present), indicated in figures (8) – (10) respectively:



Figure 8: *unyaahu/òjàáhò*/“yesterday”

The motivation behind the sign *unyaahu/òjàáhò*/“yesterday” is the backward pointing of one finger (either the index finger or the thumb) to indicate time in the past.



Figure 9: *taata/táàtà*/ “today”

The motivation behind the sign *taata/táàtà*/ “today” is the downward and steady pointing of the two-index fingers to indicate present time. Thus, *taata/táàtà*/ “today” and *ugbua/ùgbùà*/ “now” can be signed the same way.

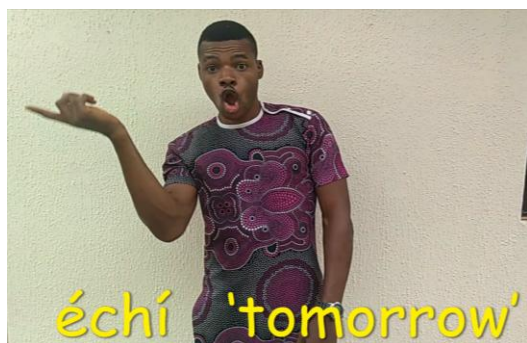


Figure 10: *echi/éfi* “tomorrow”

The motivation behind the sign *echi/éfi* “tomorrow” is the forward pointing of the index finger to indicate future time.

4.2.3 Iconicity in expression of emotive cognitive signs in the Igbo sign language (ISL)

Edward (2012) mentions that cognitive signs in Ghanaian Sign Language are limited to the forehead while emotive signs are limited to the chest area. This shows the iconicity of these signs in the sense that emotions are related to the heart which positioned at the chest and cognition related to the mind located at the forehead. These same limitations are equally applicable to the Igbo Sign Language (ISL). There are also certain facial expressions that usually accompany emotive and cognitive signs in the language which give additional meaning to the signs. Illustrations of iconic motivated emotive and cognitive signs from the Igbo Sign Language are shown figure 11:

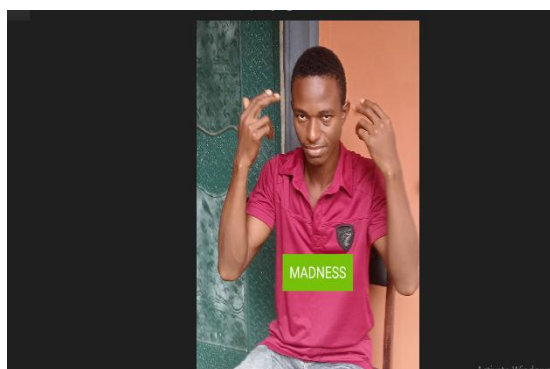
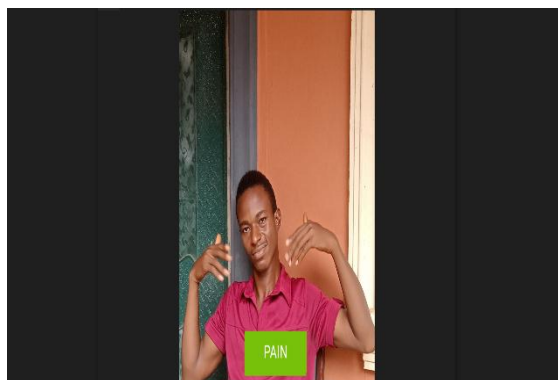


Figure 11: *ara/árá*/ “madness”

The motivation behind the sign *ara/árá*/ “madness” is the steering movement with the two-index fingers beside the two sides of the forehead indicating disorderliness of the brain future time.



The motivation behind the sign *ufu/ófó/* “pain” is the shaking of the two hands indicating pains, accompanied with squeezing of the face.

Figure 12: *ufu/ófó/* “pain”



The motivation behind the sign *onu/ónò/* “happiness” is bright and cheerful look accompanied with jovial display.

Figure 13: *onu/ónò/* “happiness”

4.2.4 Iconicity in expression of directional verbs in the Igbo sign language (ISL)

Directional verbs are outstanding iconic signs in the Igbo Sign Language (ISL). Most verbal signs from our data directional and the direction of the signer’s hand has to do with location of the signer and the addressee. Sign movement from the signer to the addressee and vice versa depends mostly on being passed across. As the speaker is the deictic point in spoken languages, the signer is the deictic point in sign languages in discussions of verbal agreement thus, achieving the rule of economy and iconicity. Deixis is associated with the location of the speaker and the addressee. Edward (2014) mentions that the distance relevant to the speaker or the addressee could be proximal or distal and the spatial deixis are used to communicate the information that has to do with change in direction or the use of direction. Directional verbs are seen as agreement verbs showing that they agree iconically with the subject or object of reference (Edward 2014; Nyst 2007). Some directional verbs noticed in the Igbo Sign Language (ISL) are presented in figures (14) & (15):



The motivation behind the sign *kwu/kwú* “talk” is the two-way directional movement of the dominant hand toward the signer and the addressee.

Figure 14: *kwu/kwú* “talk”



The motivation behind the sign *weta/wètá* “bring” is the one-way directional movement of the dominant hand toward the signer alone.

Figure 15: *weta/wètá* “bring”

From our discussions above, the researchers found out that in the Igbo Sign Language, iconicity is a predominant element of signs that manifests at a high level under the core concepts of iconicity analysis: size and shape (figs. 5 & 6), expression of time (figs. 8, 9 & 10), expression of emotive and cognitive signs (figs. 11, 12 & 13) and expression of directional verbs (figs. 14 & 15).

Cross-linguistically, the researchers found out that most examples of iconicity in indigenous African sign languages that are yet to be official/standardized are very much similar to each other than to the already standardized and official American Sign Language. This, we say might be the reason why these African sign languages are still at the verge of being developed at every level of language development.

5 Conclusion

Iconicity is a vital and prominent element of sign languages that refers to the characteristics of a sign where the form of the sign conveys its meaning. It is evident in all languages, both spoken and signed. This study is a step in the right direction to promote the development of indigenous languages especially the most endangered ones as declared by United Nations/UNESCO in 2020, the international decade of indigenous languages. Following the

declaration, it becomes expedient to promote the study of African languages (the Igbo sign language inclusive) in order to accord them equal growth and development opportunity in the global space. This study is therefore a good contribution to knowledge as it aims at bringing an already endangered Igbo Sign Language to the limelight, beckoning on the African linguistic scholars to join the trend to get the language developed and standardized.

6 Recommendation

The researchers recommend that more intensive cross-linguistic study on iconicity of many other indigenous African sign languages should be carried out to ascertain clearly the iconic similarity and differences that exist among them.

Abbreviations

AdaSL	Adamorobe Sign Language
ASL	American Sign Language
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
FIG	Figure
ISL	Igbo Sign Language
NAD	National Association of Deaf
SLGB	Sign Language of Guinea-Bissau

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