

The Threat of Indigenous Language Endangerment and Its Revitalization in the Contemporary Society: The Case of the Igbo Language

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Abstract

Language has been identified as a tunnel through which culture, idea, thought etc. are transmitted from one generation to another. Indigenous languages are indispensable cultural legacies in which all forms of human interactions can be carried out. Igbo is one of the indigenous languages that is called official language and yet facing the threat of endangerment. This is a review paper that examines the threat of indigenous language endangerment and the need to revive its use in the contemporary society. Great emphasis is on the Igbo language that is seriously fading and the need for its revitalisation is germane. Thus, non-revival of these Nigerian indigenous languages means gradual extinction. This study reviews literatures on indigenous languages. From this review, the fact seen is that Igbo language stands the risk of gradual extinction if urgent measures are not taken by all stakeholders concerned to arrest the dwindling fortune of indigenous languages. This researcher therefore calls on individuals, parents, schools and governments to put their efforts towards forestalling language endangerment and possible extinction of the indigenous languages. This can be achieved by reviving its use through vigorous and regular presentation, encouragement maintenance programmes and mass media.

Keywords: Language, Indigenous Languages, Language Endangerment, Revitalization, Igbo Language.

Introduction

Language is a conduit for transmission of people's culture, norms, ideas and belief. No culture can flourish without language. It is a unique identity of every ethnic group in Nigeria and in the world at large. Language is the system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country. Language brings about the development of people.

Indigenous language is a language that is native to a region and spoken by indigenous people. Jibir-Daura (2014) sees indigenous language as the various tribal, native or local languages spoken in Nigeria. The language would be from a linguistically distinct community that has been settled in the area for many generations. Indigenous languages are treasure of our culture and self-identity. In other words; it is the indicator of history and self-identification (Solanke, 2006). The most effective engine of a people's culture is their mother tongue. According to Nwadike (2000), mother tongue is the key to the heart of people. If the key is lost, the people are lost. If the key is treasured and kept safe, the door to wealth and affluence is unlocked. It is heart-breaking that elements of Igbo culture such as beliefs, ideologies, customs and norms are deteriorating in the recent time. Language, whether indigenous or foreign are indispensable tools in the life of individuals because every aspect of human activity is successful with the effective use of language (Ayodele, 2013).

Nigeria is a multilingual country and this has become one of her greatest challenges in recent times. Igbo language, which is one of Nigerian's major languages, is spoken in the southeast. The population of its speakers is above 50 million. This language has many dialects from different community. It also has standard variety for official use. Consequently, with the effect of Atlantic slave trade, the Igbo language was spread by Igbo slaves in Diaspora. Though wide spread and also one of the official languages in Nigeria, the threat of endangerment is paramount. Igbo language is taught as a first language from the primary school level to

the tertiary level. The dwindling interest in the language as a first language in recent times and the declining population of the younger generation who speaks and study the language makes the language face endangerment. The inability of the government and language policy makers to pick any of the indigenous languages as a national language has made some of these languages to face the threat of endangerment and even extinction.

Nigeria in the 21st century is not only battling with political and economic problems but very importantly battling with gradual extinction of some indigenous languages. Years back, Nigerian languages were made compulsory in the secondary school curriculum but today the policy has become a matter of choice. Many students do not want to be associated with Nigerian languages and so the interest is fading away. Some parents believed that it is a waste of money paying school fees to learn an indigenous language where foreign languages can take their children to foreign countries. All these are indigenous language attitude problems. These attitude problems have weakened the zeal of some universities.

Indigenous languages have been noted to be facing endangerment and there is a serious need for their revitalization in this contemporary society. Igbo language is one of the major languages that is affected by language shift and needs maintenance. This language is facing a serious decline of interest even to the owners and speakers of the language, hence the need for the study. The aim of this study is to examine the threats of indigenous language endangerment with more emphasis on the Igbo language which is a major language in Nigeria and its revitalisation in the contemporary society.

Language endangerment in literature

Igboanusi (2006) in his study discovered that research in language endangerment has received commendable attention. In Nigeria, most studies on language endangerment have concentrated on the threats to minority language either by the major languages or by English language (see Adegbija 1998; Igboanusi and Peter 2004). However, declining interest, pride and prestige in most Nigerian languages has rekindled people's worries about language endangerment particularly for some languages classified as "major". However, in Nigeria, most researches are made in minority languages without looking deep into the major languages. Igbo language as a great example is one of the endangered languages in Nigeria.

Ajepe and Ademowo(2016) in their study discovered that although Nigeria has between 250 and 400 indigenous languages, none of the languages has been considered worthy of adoption as a national language. The dominance of English language and the neglect of Nigerian indigenous languages have slowed down their growth thereby making the indigenous languages to face the threat of endangerment. In line with this, Ndiribeand Aboh (2020) recommend the adoption of Bodo's concept of localized trilingualism in salvaging the multilingual woes of Nigeria, which will circumvent the linguistic Armageddon that appears to be the fate of Nigeria.

In extant literatures, some several scholars have drawn attention to the fact that Igbo language is also among the languages in danger. Kuju (1999:55) concurs, "It is not only the so-called minority or small languages that are endangered in Nigeria. Even the rich also cry." In recent past, the Igbo language is registering fewer and fewer speakers. This is noticeable even among the Igbo resident in Igbo towns and cities where Igbo language should be the chief means of communication. The truth about Igbo language is that there is a reduction in the level of interest among younger generations. This has affected even the schools where Igbo language is studied. The number of students keeps decreasing. Some schools had even abandoned the programme completely. As Igboanusi and Peter (2005) argued, the threat of Igbo is further compounded by the "splitting" of the language particularly in Rivers state into what has erroneously been regarded as Igboid group of languages.

Some previous studies also looked at different categories of language situations in order to determine the level of endangerment. For example, Crystal (2000:20) identifies three language situations as: "... safe, endangered or extinct." Looking at Crystal's classification, Igbo language is regarded as endangered since it is neither completely safe nor extinct. Igbo language is threatened primarily by the corrosive effects of the dominance of English language in Nigeria.

Language revitalization, identity and ideology

Language revitalisation, identity and ideology are key concept in this paper. The term "language revitalisation" refers to a set of language planning practices that are intended to increase the use and transmission of languages that are socially, politically, and economically marginalised, and that have been discussed as likely to disappear entirely within a few generations (Hinton 2003; Grenoble & Whaley 2006). In the field of linguistics, it is strongly associated with efforts to document and record languages prior to their disappearance in order to ensure the availability of a permanent scientific record as well as with the rise of a more ethically engaged practice of working with indigenous and minority communities (Rice, 2006).

On the other hand, language ideology exposes connection between the beliefs speakers have about language and larger social and cultural systems. Language ideology is a conceptualisation about languages, speakers and discursive practices. Identity is a known factor that is most affected by language loss. From anthropological perspectives, language revitalisation is not only a linguistic thing but also a social, political, and cultural phenomenon, and touches upon many complex and intersecting elements of the lives of the populations affected.

Indigenous language endangerment in Nigeria

An endangered language as stated in the introduction is a language at the risk of falling out of use as its speakers die out or shift to speaking another language. Language loss occurs when the language has no more native speakers and become a dead language. Nigeria is a multilingual and multicultural nation with about 400-500 indigenous languages. These languages are very diverse linguistically, unequal in size and status, and at different stages or levels of development. Three of these indigenous languages are regarded as national languages- Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

The status of these three languages as major languages is captured in the national policy on Education (NPE) formulated in 1977 and revised subsequently in 1981, 1989, 1998 and 2004. The orthographies of many of the Nigerian indigenous languages have not yet been designed or developed. This means that many of them are yet to be committed into writing. Many societies are faced with the challenges of language loss, language shift and even language death simply because a greater percentage of the languages are still not properly documented. Hence, the Nigerian indigenous languages are divided into three categories:

2. The major or official Nigerian languages – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.
3. The media languages officially recognised in Nigeria but do not enjoy much usage outside the region- Edo, Efik, Kanuri, Fulani, Tiv, Ijo etc.
4. Purely minority languages with no official recognition. Over three hundred and fifty (350) languages are categorised under this class.

This classification shows that many languages fall under the third category, which suggests that Nigeria's indigenous languages are seriously threatened and on course to linguistic annihilation.

Many indigenous languages have been subjected to linguicide (language killing) as indigenous peoples worldwide have stopped passing on their ancestral languages to the next generation. Instead, they adopt the foreign languages as part of their acculturation into the majority culture. The Nigerian society over the years has been faced with many challenges brought about by the domineering influences of foreign cultures on

our national psyche. This has resulted in lack of appreciation for our culture and its component parts like our indigenous languages. In their study, Eze, Aboh and Eze (2020) report a case of anglicisation of Yoruba traditional names where Yoruba names are made to take the shade of English language structure. This practice is found predominantly among youths. The Igbo language appears not to be left out in this practice. According to Chukuezi in collaboration by the finding of Ohiri-Aniche (1997) which resulted from a study carried out in 1990 reports that among the primary and secondary school children investigated in five states in Nigeria, an increasing number of them are becoming non-speakers of local languages.

Furthermore, Igbo language is endangered due to some reasons. The reasons include: war and genocide. Speakers seek to adopt the language of the land of social and economic advantage to avoid discrimination, migration and death especially in the diaspora offices and homes. Language shift has affected large languages just as it has affected smaller ones. This has been particularly noticeable in the attention of certain semantic domains such as indigenous numeral systems in languages like Fulfulde, Yoruba, Igbo (Ikotun & Akanbi 2013, Prezi 2013). In addition, the Igbo language is undergoing change due to code switching and code-shifting. Anyanwu (2016), for instance, discovered that more than 50% of respondents between 25-34 years old category were unable to produce Igbo agentive nouns for meaning such as ‘fisherman’, ‘blacksmith’, and ‘carpenter’.

The use of Igbo language has declined despite the use of the language in Education (Anyanwu, 2016) and despite the presence of an orthography harmonising dialects (Ekwueme, 2011). “Train up a child the way he should grow and when he grows, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22 vs. 6). This biblical passage explains one of the reasons our youths of today do not speak their mother tongue. Some younger generations were not given the training of their own indigenous languages while growing up and parents are to blame. Again, according to the popular Igbo playwright Anelechi Chukuezi, as cited in Kuju (1995:55), “What is happening is that the English language is fast displacing Igbo as a means of communication to the point of extinction. And the Igbo are not bothered. Most mothers have abandoned teaching their children the language.” It is very embarrassing when trying to pass a secretive message to a child outside the house and the child does not seem to decode anything. Parents should speak their indigenous language to their children and teach them their culture and tradition from the beginning.

Causes of language endangerment and the Nigerian situation

The dominance of foreign languages especially English language to our indigenous languages is a major cause of language endangerment. Consequent upon our colonial experience under the British, English has become Nigeria’s official and dominant educational language. It is used in its written form as the language of administration from the federal to the local government levels. It is the language of commerce and industry, its knowledge therefore is very essential in day-to-day activities (Oyetade, 2002). To Igboanusi (2001), the dominance of English language in Nigeria is overwhelming in virtually every domain, including inter-ethnic communication. This dominance has an adverse effect on the culture and identity of Nigeria.

Generally, it is a disturbing fact that African countries like Nigeria have embraced foreign languages at the expense of indigenous languages; as such, traditions and beliefs that have been passed on from one generation to another are gradually going extinct. Proverbs and stories that served as moral lessons and generational teachings have been traded for foreign stories like Tom and Jerry, mills and bones etc. Foreign movies now serve as institution for today’s children. Today’s mothers now learn foreign cultures from Zee World and TeleMundo to pass down to their children. Indigenous languages have been labeled vernacular or gibberish and as such most of children in schools are punished for speaking their mother tongues. Students who pass foreign languages well are rewarded, while those who score higher marks in their indigenous languages are look down upon or tagged barbaric.

KoomeKiriimi, in one of his quotes, observed, “The world is ailing from an illness, that is, globalisation”. The give-and-take dynamics of globalisation have seen African states like Nigeria give away more than they

have received like their languages, their culture and their identity. As it were, globalisation has made people to believe that it is when you speak English that you belong, which is not the true situation.

The reason for the fading of indigenous languages is because Africans believe that foreign languages are more superior to our local languages in the linguistic marketplace. English language is considered as a language of prestige and if you cannot speak grammatically correct English, then you are considered to be primitive. There is need for decolonisation of the mind of Nigerians in order to take pride in and reserve their indigenous languages.

The effects of all these are that many children and youths cannot communicate in their mother tongue. It is the responsibility of parents to ensure the survival of indigenous languages by communicating and relating to their children solely in their mother tongue. Ditshego (n.d) argues that it is ideal that before, a person can claim authority in another language through books and interaction with teachers or in the case of children, through multi-media platforms; he or she should master his or her mother tongue. One cannot be a master of another person's culture as language is the root of every culture and traditions. A language if not spoken, dies. Language and culture cannot be separated; therefore, lack of the use of indigenous languages by the younger generation has led to the gradual erosion of culture today.

Revitalization: An imperative to Nigeria's endangered languages

Revitalisation is an attempt by linguists, government and community groups to halt or reverse the decline of a language or to revive an extinct one. It is appropriate to state that once a language is said to be endangered, there are two basic steps that need to be taken in order to stabilise or rescue it. First is documentation and the second is revitalisation.

While documentation could be referred to as the process by which language is documented in terms of grammar, and oral traditions, that is, stories, songs, and religious texts; language revitalisation is ensured when a community through political, communal and educational attempts to increase the number of active speakers of the endangered language.

This process is also sometimes referred to revival or reversing language shift. Language revival, revitalisation or reversing language shift could be summed up as attempt by interested parties, including individuals, cultural or community groups, stakeholders like government or political authorities, the media, the parents and the youth to reverse the decline of a language and also review their attitude towards indigenous languages. Although, the motives for language revitalisation vary from case to case, community to community, the goal of many communities is usually to return the language that is extinct or endangered to daily use.

Language revitalisation is very necessary to reserve linguistic diversity, culture and identity. Ene (2007) submits that instead of rating a foreign language high as it is presently done in our own society, indigenous language and courses in teacher education institutions should be planned to equip every teacher with the capacity of teaching in both foreign and indigenous languages. Government should see indigenous languages more clearly as a veritable means of communication and give more attention to its development and promotion than it is presently giving to English, and other foreign languages.

Efforts to revitalise Igbo language include: the Society for the Promotion of Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC) founded by F.C. Ogbalu, Asusa Igbo Teta founded by Professor Eleazu (Ani, 2012). Another individual who has promoted the language is a radio presenter Uzoma Okpo, who encouraged programmes to be broadcast in Igbo. He also called upon preachers to use Igbo language in sermons (Ani, 2012). At least one radio station, 101.5 Unity FM, created a daily Igbo revival advertisement (Ani, 2012). Other efforts

include government instituted programmes like The National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO) founded by the federal ministry of information and culture which needs to be encouraged and supported.

Establishment of Centre for Igbo Studies in Universities and Colleges of Education like they exist in University of Nigeria, Nsukka. These centres need supports and funding to help revive the fading Igbo language and culture.

Conclusions

There are Nigerian indigenous languages at every stage of endangerment starting from some with no fluent speakers to very larger languages like the Igbo language which are beginning to undergo shift. Due to the colonial experience under the British which made English the official language or Nigerian lingua franca; indigenous languages are now regarded as ‘vernacular’ and thus its prohibition by some parents and school systems. This act of prohibition is now a common trend in the contemporary society. The study did not paint a serious danger on language loss but rather drew attention to the threat of endangerment of our indigenous languages even the majority ones like the Igbo language. Once a language is endangered, if nothing is done, it will lead to language shift and language loss. This is a true position of a language and it all depends on the owners of the language. This position concurs with the popular saying that a lost language is a lost identity and a lost generation.

The point here to be stressed is that unless these indigenous languages are made functional and relevant to their users by all especially parents and government, all efforts at reviving their use in the society will amount to nothing. We should take cognizance of the fact that children are very impressionable at a tender age and once the love for indigenous languages is imbibed in them, they will take pride in such languages and would want to promote everything that comes with it. Institutions like the National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO), Igbo Studies Association (ISA) etc. need to be funded and encouraged by government. The programmes of NICO, ISA and others should not only end with workshops, seminars and conferences but rather reached down to communities of these indigenous languages.

Furthermore, for Nigeria to prevent the threats of its indigenous languages endangerment and possible extinction; there is need for urgent remedial steps to be taken, not just by government but by all families. Government must encourage the use of indigenous languages in the school without stigmatizing those who speak it. This should be done by going back to the former secondary school curriculum where one Nigerian language is made compulsory in WASCE and NECO examinations. Competent teachers in these languages should be recruited in schools to teach the languages and also promote other aspects of the culture like fashion or dressing, cooking of different African dishes, and other cultural programmes to enhance and encourage the growth of the languages. Pupils and students who excel in these indigenous languages must be showered with encomium to serve as an encouragement to them and also as a challenge to others. Families must be encouraged to relate with their kids in their indigenous languages thereby making children to understand and appreciate their mother tongue.

It is interesting to note that some people who promoted these indigenous languages in the past like F.C Ogbalu were not scholars in the language. Now at this stage when we have Professors in all the major Nigerian languages, these scholars should be at the forefront in promoting programmes and championing campaigns that will educate and interest our younger generations which are the future of these languages. Individuals and states in Igbo land should encourage Igbo television programmes like BBC Igbo and Igbo radio stations. Also, Igbo publications like newspapers, social media publications and articles should be encouraged too.

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