

AN EVALUATION OF IGBO LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT AND PRESERVATION IN NIGERIA

Ngozi Clara Chinwuba

Dept. of Igbo, African & Communication Studies,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.

Onyidochinwuba12345@gmail.com

+2348162029938

Abstract

Language is an indispensable tool of communication in every society. Societies vary, so do their languages. Each language serves the purpose of expressing the culture of the people that owns it, hence the saying that no language is better than the other. One thing that poses a problem in language discussion is the origin of any given language. By this we mean that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to tell, who first spoke Igbo language, where, when and how it was first spoken. Igbo language was left generally at the hands of generation of old parents. The researcher uses descriptive and historical theory in analyzing the data. The study covers the whole Igbo speaking regions in Nigeria. It was observed that many younger generations of Igbo and families no longer speak Igbo language. It was also stated that most Igbo persons have undesirable language attitudes

and disloyalty to Igbo language. The Igbo nation is fast losing her good attributes as a result of colonization, civilization and marginalization. As a result, it is on this premise that this paper sets out to look into how the linguists and scholars can display a great loyalty to the Igbo language by sensitizing the Igbo both young and old to retrace their steps and start speaking the language in whatever engagement in their daily lives so as to rescue it from imminent death.

Keywords: Igbo, Language, Endangerment, Causes, Preservation

Introduction

The term, “language” is defined simply as: “the system of words or signs that people use to express thoughts and feelings to each other. The Collins on-line Dictionary defines language as “a system of communication which consists of a set of sounds and written symbols which are used by the people of a particular country or region for talking or writing. This definition introduces the element of ethnicity or regionalism. A language is shared by an ethnic group or a particular country or region. The language and culture of a people are the same. Before the advent of colonial rule and Western Civilization, it is a familiar expression that language is found in culture and culture is found in language, and it is these distinct cultural and linguistic features

that distinguish the Igbo as one of the progenitors of African civilization.

The tracing of origin and evolution of the Igbo language and culture over the generations can be problematic if it does not take cognizance of the periodization from the age of oralness to the period the language was reduced into writing. The material for this study involves both primary and secondary sources. Studies have shown that an in-depth study of the origin and evolution of languages and culture over the generations could go a long way to ameliorate the unfair treatment given to most of the endangered languages in which Igbo language is one of them.

This study engages itself with the task of making an inroad that Igbo language is not thrown overboard. It is also expected to spur scholars to contribute to the vast domain and enriched qualitative and quantitative features of the language of the Igbo, which in turn adds to an all-round appreciation of the Igbo in the global commitment towards sustainable development.

Brief Look at the Linguistic Phenomenon of Language Endangerment

According to Onyefulukwe (2002: 7), "... the coming into contact of many languages is a world phenomenon." Nevertheless, it is more pronounced in multi-lingual countries of the world. Significantly, 5170 languages are distributed in the

world all over the continents. Europe and America are linguistically the poorest or the more homogenous (3% and 15% respectively), as opposed to Asia and Africa which have numerous languages (31% and 31.09 respectively); according to the most recent data provided by Jacques Leclerc. These data reveal that economically advanced countries are generally characterized by linguistic homogeneity while underdeveloped or developing countries tend towards linguistic heterogeneity. It is not surprising that Nigeria, the country in which Igbo language, the focus of the present study is spoken, is highly a multilingual nation of about 395 to 400 languages according to Dawulung, Emenanjo, and Bleambo (1999:45). Today, current statistics show that Nigeria has 514 indigenous languages and 521 languages on the whole when cognizance is taken of the first and second official languages (English and French respectively), and other imported languages.

With coming into contact of such diversity of languages in Nigeria, the scene is set for diglossic discourses among the kaleidoscopic ethnic groups with attendant diglossic conflicts generating a couple of sociolinguistic phenomena such as code-switching and code-mixing with nefarious consequences culminating sometimes in language death.

Interestingly, three out of the 514 autochthonous languages of Nigeria serve as major languages of

the nation. These are Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. The rest are minority languages. Examples are: Tiv, Gworok, Efereferere, Birom, Ishan, Igala, Idoma, Ibibio, etc. many of these minority languages have not been codified; they are still at the pure oral state. The three major Nigerian languages have been codified or standardized. A good many of the minority languages of Nigeria are endangered. In the analysis of Dawulung (2018:86), in Plateau State of Nigeria, all the indigenous languages including the minority languages, are either endangered or disadvantaged. These languages are, without doubt, likely to become extinct in the near future.

Going by estimates given by linguists, every two weeks, a language dies somewhere in the world. It has been estimated that with this global linguistic phenomenon of language endangerment and language extinction, in the next fifty years, 3000 languages would have disappeared from the surface of the earth. Latin has become fossilized like Sanskrit and Classical Greek. A pertinent question is: if minority languages which are not yet codified or standardized run the risk of dying, what of the Igbo language which has clearly been standardized? What could be the reasons for the endangerment of Igbo?

Igbo: An attempt at definition of the word “Igbo” refers to the Igbo as human group as well as the linguistic medium through which individuals in the

group express their culture and communicate with one another both within their sub-culture and in the macro globalizing world of today. Thus we talk of “Ndịigbo” (short for “Ndị Igbo”) meaning “the Igbo” or “the Igbo people” and their language, “Igbo” or “the Igbo language”.

Notice, the word “Igbo” was wrongly spelt and also mispronounced as “Ibo” in colonial books and by colonizers and some colonized Africans, probably because the nearest phoneme to /[gb]/ in the English language, the ex-British colonialists’ more familiar code is /[b]/. Another plausible reason for that linguistic interference is that the Whiteman finds it difficult to pronounce /[gb]/ and so opts to give the erroneous rendition /[b]/ for /[gb]/. It should also be pointed out that today, “Ndịigbo” put forward by Ohanaze is gradually replacing “the Igbo” or “the Igbo people”.

What then is the meaning of the word “Igbo”. The word “Igbo” is probably derived from the verb “Igbo” meaning “to prevent, to obstruct or to mix.” Therefore, “Ndịigbo” means the people that can mix well, who can adapt successfully with people of other tribes/nations. One may also extrapolate that the language “Igbo” is a language that can easily mix with other languages; a language which can easily adjust, adapt, to accommodate other codes. Hence the high level of code-switching and code-mixing witnessed among native speakers of the Igbo

language and the Igbo people's propensity.

Geographical Location of Native Speakers of the Igbo Language

Whoever talks of Ndiigbo is, without doubt, referring to the Igbo nation, one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. According to Edeh (2006:9) says that Ndiigbo constitutes one of the largest peoples of Africa with a population of ten million according to the 1963 National Census figures. With the population of Nigeria said to be a hundred million that of Ndiigbo must have witnessed a remarkable increase. The Igbo population is unevenly distributed but located within the present Anambra, Imo, Abia, Enugu, and the Ebonyi States as well as parts of Delta, Cross River and the Rivers States of Nigeria. The bulk of the Igbo population is found along the Onitsha, Orlu, Okigwe and Mbaise geographical axis where the population density is well over 3,000 persons per square mile. Basden (1999:98) says that the Igbo nation shares borders with various other ethnic groups in Nigeria, viz.: the Ogoni, the Okrika, the Ijo, the Kalabari and the Atlantic ocean in the South; the Tiv, the Ukelle, and the Igala in the North, the Urhobo, the Bini, the Ishan, the Isoko peoples in the West and the Ibibio, the Mbembe, Yako, the Effik and the Ekoi peoples in the East.

Important Character Traits of Ndị Igbo

Ndị Igbo has the political culture of dispersal all over the world. They are the most dispersed group in Nigeria. The Igbo are found even in the remotest village of Northern Nigeria as well as other parts of the world. It will not be a surprise to meet an Igbo man in Iceland. This phenomenon is attributed to their great pursuit of wealth, persecution, war, land pressure at home, a quest for business ventures, physical adaptability, and receptivity to change and innate polyglottism. Onyemelukwe (2020:8) as she clearly shows that Igbo being tools for regional and cultural integration, Peace loving by nature, their methods of geographical or regional expansion are essentially peaceful namely, penetration, an attraction of relatives, absorption, and assimilation. This special ethnic group is known for being bold, daring, adventurous, patient and tolerant. The Igbo are strong, determined, outgoing and industrious.

Furthermore, they are creative, resourceful, innovative and productive. In the words of Onyemelukwe, “Ndị Igbo are astute businessmen, love money to a grotesque proportion. They are go-getters, achievers who hardly throw in the towel or succumb to politics of frustration. They are true-to-type, pragmatic and live in a highly competitive world”. Strikingly, Ndị Igbo, generally, has a knack for languages. This lends them easily to polyglottism.

Igbo language situation in Nigeria Today

As it has been pointed out earlier, in the Nigerian context, Igbo is indigenous and one will therefore expect that at our present stage of national development, Igbo should be playing the master's role while English complements it when necessary as happens in English between English and French languages but what we have is the opposite of our expectation. In fact, Igbo continues to lose ground with each passing day and where they manifest are as follows:

1. Government Language Policy: Governments at both the federal and state levels have neglected to give Igbo language a pride of place. Because Igbo language was not compulsory and students who do not write or rather pass it will eventually gain meaning employment. With this lopsided government policy, there is little wonder that students hardly focus on learning Igbo language.

2. Administrative lapse: This is a reference to activities of school principals who deliberately work against the growth and development of Igbo language. In their school timetables Igbo is taught once or twice in a week. Some of them even go to the ridiculous extent of banning the use of Igbo language by their students. In such schools you see displayed conspicuously inscriptions such as "Igbo language is prohibited in this class." "If you speak Igbo you pay a fine of fifty naira" etc. and the

students sometimes get punished for daring to express themselves in Igbo language. This is, to say the least, imaginably embarrassing. Onyemelukwe (2020:9) In her own opinion states that school administration, classroom teachers, parents and pupils themselves should play a major role by promoting children's digital literacy skills in most especially in primary and secondary schools in present day digital world. She further said that this will be a better way of transforming them from digital natives to digital citizens.

3. Social Interaction: English language has eroded the Igbo culture so much that it is beginning to take over the place of Igbo in inter-personal relationship. According to Mbamalu (2012:3) says that “ Igbo nation is losing her glory and dignity by fallen headlong into it at the detriment of our cultural heritage as a result of instability, insecurity, fears etc. On the other hand, Egwu (1994:34) opines that the situation is such that most Igbo people cannot make a complete Igbo sentence without decorating it with a word or two from English. Even in purely traditional Igbo celebrations such as festivals, marriage, worship, and village meeting etc. Igbo is already a lost language in most Igbo families as most parents no longer speak nor teach children the language. Instead they beat and scold their children for speaking Igbo. This is due to a negative attitude that some parents have toward the Igbo language and

the preference of the younger population for foreign culture, identify, name and language.

Chukwuma (2015:16) opines that external and internal factors that affect the fastened growth of Igbo language are the presence or absence of norms, status, and cultural use, intense code-switching and code-mixing coupled with an unbridled language shift. He also said that the bilingual environment in which English has established itself as the language of opportunity and upward social mobility has created an increasingly large body of new homes in which parents unwittingly speak more English than Igbo to their Children. They are no longer taught the Igbo language as mother tongue at home. The youngest speakers of the language are thus of the generation of the parents. In this case, the parents continue to talk to their children in their language, but generally, their children do not respond in this language. As a matter of fact, Igbo is often not spoken at all in such homes. Some parents even go so far as to specifically forbid visitors from speaking Igbo to their children.

4. Wrongly Spelt Words: According to Odoemena (2016) where people out rightly spell Igbo words wrongly. Such wrong spellings lend to confusion in pronunciation and understanding e.g. Ibusa instead of Igboṣo, Awka instead of Oka, Onitsha instead of Onicha, Kwale instead of Ukwuanị etc. what is actually confounding in this whole issue of wrong spelling of Igbo words is that it is often done by

those who should know better. Here I am talking to scholars in Igbo language. The excuse we often give is that these names were originally spelt wrongly by the white men when they came to colonize us. We have already corrected many of the wrong impressions created by the white man; so why have we ignored this one as if it is any less important?

Iwuoha (1997) takes a good look at the situation and warns that “progressively the Igbo language has been recording fewer original speakers over the year than is healthy for the language and the culture which it is a main transmitter of “According to him has become so worried that he recently called for an intensive campaign to resurrect Igbo Language from its coma.

The future preservation of the language.

There is no gain saying the fact that what will happen to the language in future will depend to a large extent on what happened to it in the past and what is happening to it presently. The introduction of English language by the colonial masters is a facilitating agent of colonialism produced multifarious challenges to Igbo Language. It did not only dwarf and dominate the local languages but also introduced other variants in a bid to have a direct communication channel with Africans. Consequently, the situation has come to a height where concerned people of Igbo extraction express fears that the Igbo language would go into extinction within a foreseeable future.

It has been observed that language loss occurs when the language has no native speakers and automatically becomes a “dead language”. The picture is grim and worrisome as Igbo language is obviously one of those endangered languages.

According to Obinugwu (2021:15), sites that “Ndigbo has been described as a stoic, remarkable, ubiquitous and progressive tribe.” They are egalitarian, resourceful, resilient and adventurous. They could be found in every nook and cranny of the world, in all the pinnacles of most major industries and government. They are well-endowed intellectually and are celebrated at all levels of the world’s ivory towers and centers of excellence. They are also one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa. Going by the UNESCO prediction, as is always the case, the death of a people’s language invariably heralds and precedes the extinction of the group.

Igbo Language can be reformed and Preserved by the following ways:

1. **Reforming our culture:** This will be possible when our religious leaders will cease to compale Igbo parents to choose English names during baptism and naming ceremony first and abandoned Igbo name or relegating the Igbo names as if there was something wrong and sinister with the names. There are real meanings behind every Igbo name because they capture the circumstances

of one's birth and consequently reflects people's true personality.

2. **Parents:** Most especially the mothers should stop scolding their children against speaking Igbo language. Some even go to the extent of warning any guest who speaks Igbo to any of their children. Little wonder, some young Igbo cannot pronounce names of Igbo delicacies or make a good sentence in Igbo let alone writing the Igbo alphabets. It is against this backdrop that educated Igbo elites should rise to their feet and remedy this situation.

3. **The Government:**

Government at all levels especially the eastern part of Nigeria should invest in the teaching and propagation of Igbo language, history and culture. The Federal Government according to Emenanjo (1983:57) reviews that the existing language policy with a view to accommodating recent developments in language studies. Beyond this policy formulation or review the government should adequately fund the effective implementation of the policy. In this regard enough Igbo language teachers should be trained and incentives should be provided to them for purpose of motivation. The new policy being envisage should emphasize the supremacy of Igbo language at the nursery, primary and secondary levels of education. The implication of this is that Igbo language should be compulsory up to junior and secondary level.

Non-Governmental organizational (NGOs) should wake up to this responsibility by championing the cause of Igbo language.

4. The cast of wrong spelling of Igbo names can no longer be defended. The society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC) has a major assignment. They should mount vigorous campaigns aimed at correcting the wrong spellings.

As for scholars of Igbo language who pretend that these errors in the spelling of their personal names do not matter, we cannot but advise them to stop playing the ostrich. That they act only maintaining the spellings of the names (especially surnames) as they inherited them does not make the errors any less unpardonable. Language is known to be dynamic, they should be bold enough to do what they know to be right-begin today to spell all names/words correctly according to the rules of the language.

Conclusion

The paper has delved into the erroneous unsustainable and endangered of Igbo language as it has been losing its glory by the day and the necessary to redress the situation of its sustainability. Finally, every sector of Igbo language with all these and more, Igbo language would never go into extinction.

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