

BEFORE THE LAST STRAW: SAVING THE SOUL OF IGBO LANGUAGE IN THE GLOBAL WORLD.

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Abstract:

The belly button of every society is language. Apart from being a means of communication, it is the vehicle that grants one access to the world of the people: their worldviews, cultures, and beliefs. Every society's presence in human society is sustained by its language. This reveals the overwhelming relevance of language to every society. Unfortunately, with the world having become a global village, uniting people across borders, indigenous languages are lost, particularly African indigenous languages, often considered not so fit to ring out from the global table. This leads to reliance and emphasis on global languages like English and French as a valid medium of communication, relegating indigenous languages to the background. It is in light of this that this study sheds light on the Igbo language of the indigenous Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, which seems to be gradually easing into extinction, as it is increasingly supplanted by powerful global languages. Hence, this paper raises the pertinent question: How do we save the soul of the Igbo language in an increasingly globalised world? To answer the question, the paper adopts a critical analytical method, while relying on secondary sources such as books, online journal articles and the internet. The study is significant in that it joins the already existing conversations on the possible effective means of saving the Igbo language and also brings new insight into the discourse.

Keyword: Global Village, Indigenous languages, Igbo language, Soul.

Introduction:

According to linguistic estimates, a language disappears approximately every two weeks somewhere across the globe (Tabouret-Keller and Varro, as cited in Onyemelukwe, 2019). Projections indicate that, within the next fifty years, as many as 3,000 languages may vanish entirely from human use, a consequence of the accelerating phenomenon of language endangerment and extinction (Onyemelukwe, 2019).

Within this global context of linguistic decline, a troubling trend is observable in contemporary Igbo society: the diminishing use of the Igbo language within domestic settings. It is increasingly common to encounter Igbo-speaking parents who exclusively communicate with their children in English. Interestingly, these children are neither raised abroad nor outside Igboland; rather, they are born and socialised within the region yet exhibit little or no ability to speak the language. Some may possess passive comprehension but are unable to engage in active speech. This

phenomenon extends to educational institutions where Igbo students are predominant. In many such schools, the Igbo language is not only excluded from formal instruction but is often discouraged or even prohibited in informal, everyday communication among students.

The twin forces of urbanisation and migration have significantly contributed to the decline of indigenous languages. A particularly distressing manifestation of this trend is evident among individuals of Igbo descent who, despite being born to Igbo-speaking parents, are entirely unable to comprehend, speak, or read the language. While it may be tempting to absolve such individuals of responsibility by attributing the situation to broader societal changes, the pertinent question remains: where does the responsibility lie? It is difficult to justify a scenario in which individuals of Igbo heritage—raised by parents fluent in the language—remain linguistically disconnected from their cultural roots.

This condition reflects a profound disregard for the Igbo language. The deliberate exclusion of Igbo from domestic communication and educational settings, often in favour of English or other dominant languages, contributes directly to its endangerment. The marginalisation of the language, both at home and in school, underscores a collective failure to preserve a vital cultural resource. Frequently, when confronted with their linguistic choices, some Igbo parents justify their actions with the rhetorical question, “*E ji Igbo eje ebee?*”—implying that the Igbo language holds little to no value in a globalised world. Such reasoning suggests a perception of Igbo as an impediment rather than an asset, thereby reinforcing the notion that only globally dominant languages are worthy of transmission. This mindset not only erodes the language’s relevance but also paints a sobering picture of its possible extinction soon.

The notion that a language’s value is determined solely by its global relevance is a profound misconception. Regardless of its global reach, every language holds intrinsic importance. Language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as the lifeblood of a people’s identity. It serves as the principal channel through which a society’s worldview, cultural heritage, and belief systems are expressed and transmitted. Indeed, the continued existence of any society within the broader human community is fundamentally anchored in the vitality of its language.

Language encapsulates the historical memory of a people; it is through language that traditions, customs, and collective experiences are preserved and passed on. This underscores the indispensable role language plays in sustaining societal continuity and identity. However, in an increasingly globalised world where borders are continually bridged by transnational interaction, indigenous languages—particularly those of African origin are being progressively marginalised. These languages are often deemed inadequate for participation in global discourse, leading to an overreliance on dominant world languages such as English and French. This trend not only displaces indigenous languages but also relegates them to the periphery, endangering their survival and weakening the cultural foundations they support.

Globalisation has enabled greater interaction and integration among cultures and peoples. As a linguistic phenomenon, it is largely driven by the English language, which serves as a medium for communication across diverse cultures. English is promoted not only by linguistic factors but also by social, political, demographic, and economic influences (Bob, 2020). As a result, it holds the status of a global language, spoken as a first, second, or foreign language in many parts of the world. In countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania, characterised by linguistic and ethnic diversity, English plays a unifying role. However, despite the benefits of globalisation, it also has significant drawbacks. One of these is the growing threat to indigenous languages, such as Igbo. The Igbo language, spoken by the Igbo people—Nigeria's third largest ethnic group numbering between 20 and 25 million is native to states such as Imo, Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, and parts of Rivers and Delta (Prisca & Kwekowe, 2023).

It is against this backdrop that the present study focuses on the Igbo language, spoken by the indigenous people of southeastern Nigeria, which appears to be gradually declining in contemporary Igbo society. This decline is marked by its increasing replacement with dominant global languages. The urgency of this linguistic shift is supported by Egwuonwu (2022), whose research highlights the growing threat to the survival of the language. UNESCO (2022) similarly warns that the Igbo language may face extinction within the next fifty years, noting that nearly 43% of the approximately 6,000 languages currently spoken worldwide are endangered. Africa, with over 520 native languages, represents significant linguistic diversity. However, in a rapidly advancing technological environment dominated by global languages such as English, Mandarin, French, Spanish, and Hindi, many African languages—including Igbo—are at risk of digital

extinction (Orji & Korie, 2024). This risk is further exacerbated by the increasing marginalisation of the Igbo in both homes and schools.

Regrettably, even among fluent speakers, the Igbo language is increasingly spoken with heavy reliance on English expressions. Ahmed and Daniel, in their study *Globalisation and Language in Conflict: A Case of Igbo*, highlight this ongoing challenge, noting that:

Igbo language, which is the language of the paper, is one of the three major languages in Nigeria, but it is quite unfortunate that the native speakers of the language show a negative attitude towards the use of the language. They prefer English to Igbo in their daily interactions, thereby showing total neglect for the language and culture. This attitude has given English an advantage over Igbo, as Igbo is relegated to the background by the speakers. Presently, many young people can no longer speak the language fluently, let alone write it, because the language is not spoken either within the homes or in the schools. In other words, the impact of English on the Igbo language has been viewed as one of the places where English dealt a deadly blow in Nigeria. The English Language has affected the Igbo language, especially in its expression of the language, where it has been variously argued that these practices have demeaned the strength of the language (p.176).

Ahmed and Daniels (2018) further observe that Igbo students often perform more poorly in Basic Studies courses in the Igbo language during their first year at the university than they do in courses on the Use of English. This decline in language proficiency is mirrored in the Nigerian film industry (Nollywood), where English dominates as the primary language of production, while films in indigenous languages remain few. The preference among Nigerian audiences for English-language films, which tend to reflect Western cultural norms, contributes to the marginalisation of indigenous languages and cultures. Among the Igbo, this growing preference correlates with a declining interest in films produced in their native language, a trend that subtly fosters cultural disconnection and the erosion of identity.

Therefore, this paper raises the pertinent question: How do we save the soul of the Igbo language in an increasingly globalised world? To answer the question, the paper adopts a critical analytical method, while relying on secondary sources such as books, online journal articles and the internet. The study is significant in that it joins the already existing conversations on the possible effective means of saving the Igbo language and also brings new insight into the discourse.

Conceptualisation of Indigenous Language

An indigenous language refers to a language that is native to a specific region and spoken by people who share common cultural values and beliefs. It serves as a local medium of communication within a community and embodies the collective wisdom and worldview of that community (Egwuonwu-Chimezie, 2022). Indigenous languages play a crucial role in the mental, moral, and emotional development of the child. Rezvan (2008) affirms this by noting that when a child acquires their mother tongue through social interaction, it enhances cognitive functioning. Thought gives rise to language, and in turn, language shapes thought, forming a continuous cycle throughout one's life. Similarly, Ramlatu (2014) defines indigenous languages as tribal, native, or local languages spoken by a people who have inhabited a particular region for generations. These languages originate from linguistically distinct communities and are essential markers of cultural identity and continuity.

Nigeria is home to approximately 500 indigenous languages, yet only a few of these have developed written forms (Adeniyi and Bello, 2006, in Ramlatu, 2014). Bamgbose (1992), cited in Abidogun and Adebule (2005), puts the number at 513. Despite this linguistic richness, only three languages—Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba—have been designated as national languages. However, these languages are often confined to their respective regions and remain largely neglected, despite their official status. Globally, many indigenous languages face the threat of extinction, despite their cultural and intellectual contributions. In response to this growing concern, the United Nations declared 2019 the International Year of Indigenous Languages, aiming to raise awareness not only for the benefit of native speakers but also to promote global appreciation of the cultural diversity these languages represent. This initiative marks a positive step toward preserving linguistic heritage. Research in education, linguistics, anthropology, and cognitive psychology strongly supports the value of indigenous languages. As McCarty (2003), cited in Adeyemi (2012), notes, students whose primary language differs from the dominant or national language show significantly better academic performance when they receive sustained support in their native language.

Many scholars, including Egwuonwu-Chimezie (2019), agree that the use of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction can significantly enhance cognitive development and reduce learning barriers, thereby contributing to sustainable educational outcomes. However, the

designation of English as Nigeria's official language has adversely affected the development of many indigenous languages. In numerous households, English has replaced indigenous languages as the primary language spoken to children. Similarly, in most schools, English remains the dominant language of instruction, further marginalising indigenous languages in both domestic and academic settings.

An Exploration of the Igbo Language and People.

In her work *Language Endangerment: The Case of the Igbo Language*, Onyemelukwe (2019) defines the Igbo language. She explains that the term "Igbo" refers not only to the ethnic group itself but also to the linguistic medium through which members of the group convey their cultural identity and engage in communication, both within their immediate subcultures and within the broader global context. This dual significance is reflected in expressions such as *Ndigbo*, meaning "the Igbo" or "the Igbo people," and *Igbo*, referring to the language they speak. Focusing more closely on the term "Igbo," Onyemelukwe further asserts that:

The word "Igbo" was wrongly spelt and also mispronounced as "Ibo" in colonial books and by colonisers and some colonised 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, "Ndigbo" put forward by Ohaneze is gradually replacing "the Igbo" or "the Igbo people" (pp21-22).

Going by the above, it simply means that Ndigbo generally refers to the Igbo people. What, then, does the word Igbo mean? Onyemelukwe also attempts a historical explanation of the word. In her words:

The word "Igbo" is probably derived from the verb "igbo", meaning "to prevent, to obstruct or to mix." Therefore, "Ndigbo" means the people who 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 (Onyemelukwe, 2013, in Onyemelukwe, 2019, p.22).

The Igbo language, a tonal language, is classified within the Kwa branch of the Niger-Congo language family, alongside several other indigenous West African languages. It comprises approximately 250 dialects (Emenanjo, 1975; Onyemelukwe, 1999, as cited in Onyemelukwe, 2019). In some cases, the dialectal variations are so pronounced that mutual intelligibility among speakers of different dialects becomes difficult. This linguistic diversity underscored the need for a standardised form of the language (Emenanjo, 1975; Onyemelukwe, 1982, in Onyemelukwe, 2019). The Igbo language has a long and rich oral tradition, preserved through folktales, proverbs, and songs, which served as the primary means for transmitting cultural knowledge across generations. The development of a written form began during the colonial era, primarily through the efforts of Christian missionaries who translated religious texts into Igbo. This period also marked the creation of the first Igbo alphabet and grammar books, laying the foundation for the standardisation of the language (Nwankwegu, 2021).

Despite differing views on the codification of the Igbo language and the lengthy process it entailed, the Onwu orthography was eventually adopted as Standard Igbo (SI) in 1961. This standard form was primarily based on three dialects: the generalised Owerri, Umuahia, and Onitsha dialects. Standard Igbo is now widely spoken, understood, and used across many Igbo cultural communities. Given the tendency of the Igbo people to migrate and integrate into various regions, the Igbo language is not only prevalent within Igbo enclaves but is also spoken and recognised by non-Igbo populations across Nigeria. As Ubahakwe (2002, in Onyemelukwe, 2019) notes, the widespread presence of the Igbo people contributes significantly to the visibility and influence of the language throughout the country.

The Igbo language is spoken by the Igbo people, who constitute the third largest ethnic group in Nigeria, with an estimated population of between 20 and 25 million. They are primarily located in the southeastern states of Imo, Abia, Anambra, Enugu, and Ebonyi, as well as parts of Rivers and Delta States (Prisca & Kwekove, 2023). Historically, the Igbo have been recognised for their intricate social structures, vibrant trade systems, and rich cultural traditions. Although the Igbo population is unevenly distributed, it is concentrated within the present-day states of Anambra, Imo, Abia, Enugu, and Ebonyi, and extends into areas of Delta, Cross River, and Rivers States. The highest population densities are found along the Onitsha, Orlu, Okigwe, and Mbaise axis, where densities exceed 3,000 persons per square mile (Edeh, 1985, as cited in

Onyemelukwe, 2019). Geographically, the Igbo nation shares borders with several ethnic groups: to the south, the Ogoni, Okrika, Ijo, Kalabari, and the Atlantic Ocean; to the north, the Tiv, Ukelle, and Igala; to the west, the Urhobo, Bini, Ishan, and Isoko; and to the east, the Ibibio, Mbembe, Yako, Effik, and Ekoi peoples (Basden, 1921, in Onyemelukwe, 2019).

Today, the Igbo language is spoken by millions, not only within Nigeria but also across diaspora communities worldwide. However, despite its broad geographical presence, the language faces an uncertain future. Several factors contribute to its decline, including the dominance of English as Nigeria's official language, which has significantly reduced the use of Igbo, particularly among younger generations. Other contributing factors include urbanisation, migration (Onyemelukwe, 2019), and, most notably, globalisation. These dynamics have collectively placed the Igbo language in an endangered position within contemporary society.

Endangerment of the Igbo language in contemporary society and Leading Factors.

A language is considered endangered when it is on the path toward extinction. This occurs when speakers reduce their use, stop communicating in it, or fail to transmit it to the next generation (Egwuonu-Chimezie, 2022). A language faces endangerment either due to the decline or loss of its speaker population or as a result of language shift, where speakers adopt another language in place of their heritage tongue. This shift is the primary cause of language death, which ultimately occurs when no native speakers remain to sustain it as a mother tongue (Bob & Kwekove, 2023). The current state of the Igbo language can be better understood through UNESCO's framework for language vitality and endangerment, which outlines six degrees of vitality based on nine key factors. Among these, the most critical is intergenerational transmission—whether or not the language is spoken within the home and passed down to children (Egwuonu-Chimezie, 2022).

The first level of language vitality is classified as *safe*. At this stage, the language is spoken fluently across all generations, and intergenerational transmission remains fully intact. The second level is *vulnerable*, where the language is still spoken by most children, though its use may be limited to specific domains, such as within the household. The third level is *definitely endangered*. In this context, children no longer acquire language as their first language. The youngest active speakers typically belong to the parental generation. While parents may continue to use the language with their children, it is not commonly spoken in return. The fourth level is

severely endangered. At this stage, the language is primarily spoken by members of the grandparental generation. Although older adults may understand the language, they do not actively use it with children or even consistently among themselves. The fifth level is *critically endangered*. Here, the language is used only by the oldest members of the community, such as grandparents, and even then, only partially and infrequently. The sixth and final level is *extinct*. At this point, there are no living speakers of the language, and it has ceased to function as a medium of communication.

A critical assessment of the degrees of language endangerment suggests that the Igbo language currently falls within the third stage—*definitely endangered*, though some may argue that its position is even more precarious. At this stage, children no longer acquire the language as their mother tongue. Egwuonwu-Chimezie (2022) reports that in many urban centres within Igboland, particularly in Owerri, Imo State, a significant number of parents do not speak Igbo to their children. As a result, children in these areas no longer learn Igbo as their first language. Instead, English has become the dominant language of communication, and in some cases, especially among those from less elite backgrounds, Nigerian Pidgin is adopted as a social identifier. Based on these findings, Egwuonwu-Chimezie concludes that in urban areas, the Igbo language exists between the *definitely endangered* and *severely endangered* stages. While most parents are still fluent in the language, it is rarely transmitted to their children, thereby weakening its continuity across generations.

It is alarming that approximately 50 per cent of Igbo children are unable to speak the Igbo language (Odinye & Odinye, 2010). While parents are increasingly focused on ensuring their children speak English, there is little to no encouragement for the use of Igbo. The language is largely absent from key domains of public and private life, including government, schools, churches, community meetings, and even family conversations within Igbo-speaking regions. The rapid decline of the Igbo language, with minimal intervention from both the people and the government, is a cause for serious concern. Akwanya (2014) attributes this decline to the pervasive influence of the English language and the broader political structure of the Nigerian state. In his words:

The future of the Igbo language is a constant source of worry for researchers in the language, policymakers, and educational planners. The

threat is mainly from the powerful language, English, which was introduced in the Igbo cultural region by the agency of colonial expansion during the second half of the 19th century. This language had the advantage to itself since it was backed up by the power structure, which also introduced and supervised an educational system based on English. The language was both taught as a principal subject and served as the medium of instruction for all other subjects. It may even have served in some cases for the teaching of Igbo when this language was introduced in the educational curriculum. Igbo was further disadvantaged in being incorporated into a nation where, statistically, its speakers comprised a minority of the overall population. The political architecture of Nigeria, whether deliberately or inadvertently, was crafted in such a way that no single language group comprised a majority of the overall population. So there was no question of imposing one of the local languages as a lingua franca. Igbo, of course, had an additional disadvantage which hampered its development; namely, it did not have a written script, and so the colonists did not accord it the same level of respect and recognition they accorded Arabic and Hausa in the region and environments where these functioned (p.2).

Apart from these points raised above by Akwanya as leading causes of the decline of the Igbo language, other factors endanger the Igbo language.

According to Egwuonwu-Chimezie (2022), government policy and educational marginalisation are among the primary factors contributing to the endangerment of the Igbo language. The 2013 National Policy on Education (NPE) specifies that, in monolingual communities, the medium of instruction during the first three years of primary education should be the language of the immediate environment, while English is to be taught as a subject. From the fourth year onward, English is designated as the primary language of instruction, while the local language, along with French and Arabic, is to be taught as a subject. This policy framework does not adequately support the promotion of indigenous languages. In practice, the initial provision that mandates instruction in the language of the immediate environment is rarely implemented, and educational authorities have made little effort to enforce it. Furthermore, in secondary schools, indigenous languages are no longer included among the compulsory cross-cutting subjects, further weakening their role in formal education.

Another significant factor contributing to the endangerment of the Igbo language is what Ani (2012) describes as *home-engineered violence*. This form of linguistic marginalisation originates within the family setting and strikes at the core of Igbo cultural identity. It fosters the perception,

particularly among some Igbo speakers, that their language is inferior. Such internalised attitudes have led many parents to avoid speaking Igbo to their children. This perception extends into formal education. At the university level, students enrolled in Igbo language programmes are often ridiculed by their peers, who view the pursuit of a degree in Igbo studies as unworthy or unproductive. This negative outlook is rooted in the official status granted to English in Nigeria, which has led many to associate indigenous languages with limited value or relevance. Some parents actively discourage their children from speaking Igbo, viewing it as lacking global significance. In contrast, the growing interest in languages such as Chinese in Nigerian schools highlights the impact of deliberate efforts by language communities to promote their linguistic heritage. As Egwuonwu-Chimezie (2022) notes, for any indigenous language to gain broader recognition and relevance, it requires substantial commitment and investment from its native speakers.

One of the long-term consequences of the endangerment of the Igbo language is the potential for its eventual extinction. This possibility raises critical concerns about the future of the Igbo people, for whom the language functions as a primary medium of communication (Onyemelukwe, 2019). As language is a fundamental marker of cultural identity and a vehicle for preserving a people's heritage, the decline of the Igbo language poses a serious threat to the continued survival of the Igbo ethnic group. Another significant long-term implication is what may be described as the linguistic and symbolic death of the Igbo nation. As the language becomes increasingly marginalised, the Igbo people risk becoming disconnected from their cultural roots, leading to weakened family structures, diminished ethnic unity, and a loss of communal integration. Onyemelukwe (2019) warns that individuals alienated from their linguistic heritage risk losing their sense of identity becoming socially disoriented and vulnerable to cultural assimilation or erasure.

Globalization

Adamu (2003) characterises globalisation as a wildfire, once ignited, it becomes uncontrollable, with uncertain outcomes. Its pervasive influence affects every aspect of society, leaving no individual, family, or religious group untouched. Globalisation is reshaping labour markets, patterns of inequality, consumption habits, healthcare systems, political stability and legitimacy, societal values, and lifestyles. As Ugochukwu (2022) observes, humanity both influences and is

influenced by globalisation; it is a reciprocal process in which we are simultaneously the agents and subjects of transformation.

Globalisation is a multifaceted concept that holds different meanings for different individuals and disciplines, though it is fundamentally rooted in technological advancement (Williamson, 1998, as cited in Bob & Kwekwe, 2023). Broadly, it refers to the process of homogenising social, economic, political, and cultural relations among nations. This perspective aligns with the view of Mitelman (2005, as cited in Bob & Kwekwe, 2023), who argues that globalisation reduces national boundaries, thereby facilitating closer economic, political, and social integration. Historically, this trend became more pronounced with events such as the discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus, marking early efforts by Europeans to link the Old World with the New, an early manifestation of global interconnectedness. From an economic standpoint, globalisation is primarily associated with the integration of global markets. In the field of linguistics, however, globalisation is often understood as the global spread of the English language. According to the World Bank, English functions as a global language and a principal medium of international communication, reinforcing its role as a dominant linguistic force in the globalised world.

Globalisation, as it is understood today, is largely a product of advancements in information and communication technologies. McQuail (2005) asserts that technological and communication revolutions often lead to broader social transformations. In this regard, Solo-Anaeto and Jacobs (2015) describe globalisation and modernisation as interrelated phenomena, driven by technological innovation and resulting in shifts in societal attitudes, behaviours, and perceptions. Igboeche (2014, as cited in Odionye, 2024) characterises globalisation as the rise of a “global culture” in which people across different nations consume similar goods and services and increasingly adopt English as the common language of business. Similarly, Okunna and Omenugha (2012) contend that globalisation facilitates cultural interaction but often does so at the expense of local traditions, which risk being overwhelmed. Broadly defined, globalisation is the process of integrating the global community into a unified system, economically, socially, and culturally. It signifies a movement toward modernisation and the narrowing of economic, technological, and cultural divides among nations.

Building on McLuhan's (1962, as cited in Odionye, 2024) concept of the global village, nations around the world have increasingly become identified with specific cultural expressions. Through this interconnectedness, ideas, cultural values, norms, and moral systems are rapidly transmitted across borders. Such exchanges of knowledge, technological innovation, and cultural values contribute to the developmental and economic growth of the nations involved. However, a major concern lies in the asymmetry of this cultural exchange. The flow of influence has largely favoured the West, resulting in the dominance of Western economic systems and cultural norms over those of Africa. Consequently, there is a growing dependence on Western sources of information, ideas, and innovation, often at the expense of Africa's indigenous cultural heritage (Odionye, 2024).

The Igbo language and globalisation

A remarkable advantage of globalisation is the transformation of the world into a global village, in which content, ideas, and information are shared seamlessly across national boundaries. This global exchange promotes the dissemination of news, cultural heritage, languages, and innovative ideas, thereby enhancing mutual understanding and communication among nations.

However, this exchange is not without its drawbacks. In many developing countries, the widespread adoption of foreign values, languages, and cultural practices often occurs unconsciously, leading to the erosion of indigenous traditions. As Odionye (2024) observes, such cultural assimilation poses a significant threat to the preservation of local heritage, exemplified by the growing endangerment and potential extinction of the Igbo language and culture.

Odinye and Odinye (2010) expand upon this perspective by asserting that globalisation plays a significant role in contemporary global politics and serves as a major determinant in the survival or decline of languages. They argue that globalisation, while promoting connectivity, indirectly discourages linguistic diversity by fostering cultural and linguistic homogenisation, most notably through the dominance of English as the global lingua franca. Fishman (2001, as cited in Odinye & Odinye, 2010) supports this view, suggesting that the spread of pan-Western, particularly pop-consumer, culture through globalisation has become a primary driver of language shift. He contends that because globalisation is largely shaped by American economic, technological, and cultural dominance, it fuels modernisation and Westernisation, any effort to preserve endangered

languages must confront the most powerful and far-reaching global forces. In this context, the Igbo people, like many others, find themselves subject to the pervasive influence of globalisation, which challenges the vitality of their language and culture.

Globalisation presents a significant challenge, particularly as individuals increasingly seek integration into the global system—a core feature of globalisation itself. In this context, the Igbo language and modes of communication have been progressively marginalised. This is largely due to the universal acceptance of foreign languages, especially English, as the principal medium of globalisation and modernisation. Ahamefule and Okoye (2014) observe that the widespread use of the English language has been greatly facilitated by mass media, the internet, satellite television, telecommunications, and other information and communication technologies (p. 94). This global prominence of English poses a substantial threat to the vitality of the Igbo language. Igbo speakers often conform to this global linguistic trend, adopting behaviours and attitudes increasingly shaped by Western norms.

This influence is evident in the home, where many Igbo parents speak English to their children, and among youth who prefer English when interacting with peers. In educational settings, textbooks and reference materials are predominantly available in English, with minimal content in Igbo, even within Igbo-speaking regions. Most notably, students in higher institutions rarely choose to study or specialise in the Igbo language, likely due to the perception that it holds little relevance or value in the global community (Odionye, 2024).

The music and film industries have not been immune to the forces of modernisation, as evidenced by the increasing use of English in their productions. Even in films classified as Igbo-language movies, it is common for actors to intersperse English into their dialogues, rather than conveying the entire script in Igbo. Furthermore, recent trends in music and film production reveal a strong Western influence, visible in elements such as settings, costumes, makeup, soundtracks, and general stylistic choices, reflecting the rapid spread of globalisation. This trend does little to support the preservation of the Igbo language and culture. On the contrary, it indicates a shift that may accelerate the language's decline if left unaddressed (Odionye, 2024).

Ahamefule and Okoye (2014) highlight the presence of subtle cultural assimilation occurring globally, noting that the direction of this cultural exchange has largely disadvantaged African

cultures, particularly that of the Igbo. Their findings suggest that the Igbo language and culture face an imminent threat of extinction if current globalisation trends persist unchecked. Supporting this concern, Ani (2012) asserts that the emergence of new media has transformed communication patterns among the Igbo. Similarly, Ya'u (2002, as cited in Odionye, 2024) points out that globalisation, alongside media convergence, has significantly reshaped the way information is delivered and consumed, contributing further to the erosion of indigenous linguistic practices.

The advent of Western education marked a turning point for many Igbo communities, leading to widespread adoption of Western values and Christianity. Over time, Western education became a symbol of elevated social status. Consequently, the English language and Western cultural norms have come to dominate key sectors such as governance, education, communication, science, and technology, often to the detriment of the Igbo language and culture (Odionye, 2024). Due to the global prominence and acceptance of the English language, Igbo speakers increasingly adopt it as the preferred medium for social interaction and communication, particularly within the global village framework (Ahamefule & Okoye, 2014). The desire to identify with this universally recognised language has led to the gradual marginalisation of the Igbo language. As Odionye (2024) argues, the endangerment of the Igbo language can be attributed to both internal and external pressures associated with globalisation and modernisation.

In the final analysis, it is obvious that globalisation, even while it spells a potential doom, has come to stay. Ugochukwu (2022) aptly captures this sentiment in these words:

It is clear that globalisation in all its forms has come to stay. It is also clear that no nation, culture or especially language is immune to it. Some countries and cultures are benefitting remarkably from the dividends of globalisation, while others are being negatively affected. The nations that are benefiting are doing so with their languages. This shows that the internet, which is one of the greatest inventions of science and technology and the most vital instrument for globalisation, is a platform that is open to all and sundry irrespective of language or culture. From all indications, any language can be used on the net, and several languages are showing their presence on the net. The task on ground is for the owners of the Igbo language to recognise the fact that it is their duty to protect and project their language to whatever level they want it to get to knowing that every language including Igbo can only get to the level the owners want it to reach or perform the functions it is expected to perform (153).

Going by the above discussions, which have given insight into the possible grim fate of the Igbo language in the global world in the nearest future, it becomes pertinent to put all hands-on deck in saving the soul of the language.

Saving the Soul of the Igbo Language in a Global World.

Language serves as a crucial medium for the transmission of information, facilitation of trade and commerce, and the communication of technological advancements. It is essential not only for functional exchange but also for capturing and conveying the progress of modern science and technology. As Ugochukwu (2022) observes, language plays a vital role in shaping individual and collective identity, particularly in a rapidly changing global landscape. The prominence of a language is often linked to the number of its speakers; the greater the number, the more influential the language becomes. Linguists estimate that nearly half of the world's approximately 6,500 languages may fall out of regular use by the end of the century (Turin, 2013, as cited in Ugochukwu, 2022). Many of these endangered languages struggle to meet the demands of contemporary life, particularly in an era defined by technological advancement and a global pursuit of progress and prosperity (Ugochukwu, 2022).

Globalisation facilitates the widespread diffusion and dominance of certain languages and cultures across the globe; however, it also contributes to the extinction of others (Ugochukwu, 2022). Language plays a critical role in the formation of culture, serving as a vital marker of group identity. It enables individuals within a community to recognise their shared heritage and collective belonging. In the absence of language, cultural identity is significantly undermined. Moreover, language is fundamental to intercultural communication. As Delhumeau (2011) observes, the knowledge of one or more languages expands an individual's worldview, fosters global thinking, and deepens one's understanding of both self and others. In this sense, languages are indispensable to the process of globalisation; they constitute its lifeline. Without language, globalisation would not be possible; conversely, without globalisation, the emergence of world languages would be inconceivable.

In the current global landscape, only a select number of languages benefit significantly from globalisation, while many others face the threat of decline or extinction. Delhumeau (2011) notes that, although there are approximately 6,500 natural languages in existence, just eleven account

for the primary means of communication for more than half of the world's population. These include Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, Hindi, French, Bengali, Portuguese, Russian, German, Japanese, Arabic, and English. In today's interconnected world, language has become a marker of identity and a means of integration into the global system—a system that tends to disproportionately favour those who constructed and dominate it. Given this reality, it becomes imperative to ask: What proactive measures can be undertaken to preserve and revitalise the Igbo language in the face of mounting global pressures?

One of the primary steps to saving the Igbo language is the acceptance of the language. A fierce loyalty that divests any shame one feels about the language. Ugochukwu (2022) buttresses this position when he noted that:

It is not an accident that Igbo people have Igbo as their language, but the attitude of a greater percentage of the Igbo people shows that the language has no place in their hearts. No people who abandoned their language have prospered. Most of the countries that are making waves in the global market are doing so with their languages. Languages do not develop against the interests of the language owners. It is the owners of a language who determine how far their language can go. The Igbo language can be pushed beyond the present level, but it will take love and acceptance from the Igbo people themselves. Love for the Igbo language will affect so many other things that people can do for their language. Not loving one's language simply shows a lack of love for oneself. One should love everything about oneself to amount to anything in life (p.153).

Therefore, the Igbo people must draw lessons from other ethnic groups that have successfully preserved and promoted their native languages. Time is of the essence, as any delay in proactive measures allows the forces of globalisation to further erode the cultural and linguistic fabric of Igbo society, particularly among the youth. As Ugochukwu (2022) warns, the longer meaningful action is postponed, the deeper the impact of global influences, accelerating the endangerment of the Igbo language.

In alignment with the above concerns, Adichie (2018, as cited in Ugochukwu, 2022) appeals to parents to prioritise the use of Igbo within the home, emphasising that encouraging children to speak their native language is essential to preserving their identity, even as they navigate a globalised world. While it is possible and indeed necessary to engage with Western technology, this should not come at the expense of one's cultural heritage. The importance of language

loyalty in halting the endangerment of Igbo is powerfully articulated by Onyemelukwe (2019), who, citing Emenanjo and Bleambo, notes that “language endangerment is stalled by robust language loyalty no matter the population of its speakers. Language loyalty itself prevents language shift” (p. 28). In essence, a committed attachment to the language is a crucial defence against its decline.

Bob and Kwekwe (2023) further argue that reversing the downward trend of the Igbo language requires reversing the ongoing shift away from it. They propose that political and educational strategies are key. Specifically, the existing language policy should be revised and implemented in a way that mandates the teaching and use of Nigeria’s three major indigenous languages—including Igbo—as compulsory subjects in schools. Furthermore, proficiency in these languages should be a prerequisite for admission into higher institutions and for securing employment. Such measures would not only raise the number of active speakers but also help rescue the Igbo language from the threat of extinction. Equally important is the promotion of education and literacy through the Igbo language as a medium of instruction and cultural empowerment (Bob & Kwekwe, 2023).

Furthermore, given the recognised cultural value of indigenous languages and the detrimental consequences of language loss, it is essential that the government, in partnership with the Ministry of Education, the National Universities Commission, and institutions of higher learning, adopt deliberate strategies to attract more students to the study of the Igbo language (Ugochukwu, 2022). A variety of approaches can be employed to achieve this goal, with the ultimate aim of increasing the number of proficient speakers and academic interest in the language.

Countries such as China, France, and Germany have demonstrated a commitment to the promotion of their native languages through targeted investment, including scholarships and institutional support. These efforts not only expand the number of language users but also increase their languages' digital and global visibility. Similarly, the Igbo people must rise to this challenge. As globalisation continues to shape cultural and linguistic priorities, the relevance of indigenous languages on global platforms becomes increasingly critical. In this regard, Igbo scholars and educationists must align with global trends by working to boost enrolment in Igbo

language studies and expand the community of speakers, ensuring the survival and vitality of the language in the 21st century.

Language maintenance is equally critical in the preservation of the Igbo language. It entails the sustained and deliberate use of a language, particularly in contexts where it is at risk of being overshadowed by a more dominant one. As Bob and Kwekove (2023) observe, success in this endeavour requires a competitive commitment—one that the Igbo people can achieve only by fostering a positive disposition toward speaking, learning, and transmitting the language across generations. Moreover, as Ugochukwu (2022) rightly argues, there is no language inherently designated for globalisation or modern technological engagement. This implies that any language—including Igbo—can function effectively on digital platforms such as social media, the internet, and broadcast media. If other indigenous languages are making inroads into digital spaces, then the Igbo language should not be left behind. Efforts should therefore be made to expand its digital presence and promote its use in modern communicative contexts, even as work continues in the background to refine and standardise the language. Criticising the limitations of the Igbo language offers no solution; rather, proactive engagement and strategic development are essential for ensuring its survival and relevance in the global era (Ugochukwu, 2022).

Despite advancements in technology, many indigenous communities still face significant barriers in accessing digital information in their native languages, whether in educational settings, workplaces, or public domains (Egwuonwu-Chimezie, 2022). Consequently, there is an urgent need to empower indigenous children, youth, and adults by ensuring they have access to education, information, and knowledge in their mother tongues. Doing so will not only promote linguistic inclusion but also enhance the collection, dissemination, and exchange of data related to indigenous languages. Leveraging language technologies and other digital communication tools is essential to achieving this goal and ensuring the preservation and functional relevance of native languages in the digital age (Egwuonwu-Chimezie, 2022).

In recent years, notable strides have been made toward the preservation and digitisation of the Igbo language through initiatives such as the development of the Igbo Wikipedia, online Igbo dictionaries, and mobile applications for Igbo language learning (Iruoma et al., 2021, in Ijeoma & Korie, 2024). These digital resources have significantly enhanced the accessibility of the language across platforms such as mobile devices, websites, and social media, providing

opportunities for speakers to learn, use, and engage with Igbo in contemporary contexts. Further advancements include the creation of language datasets and machine translation models aimed at enhancing Igbo linguistic applications in artificial intelligence (Adelani et al., 2021, in Ijeoma & Korie, 2024).

Moreover, language revitalisation programs, grassroots community organisations, and educational institutions continue to play a critical role in promoting the use of Igbo. However, these initiatives are largely fragmented, emerging from independent research groups and private actors, rather than as part of a comprehensive, coordinated strategy (Ijeoma & Korie, 2024). While recent progress in machine translation and natural language processing (NLP) technologies presents an opportunity to support Igbo language development, challenges persist, particularly the scarcity of linguistic data and resources. To advance the creation of effective and accurate language technologies for Igbo, collaborative efforts among linguists, AI researchers, and native speakers are essential (Ijeoma & Korie, 2024).

In all, saving the soul of the Igbo language will primarily begin at homes. If children are made to love the language, if parents speak it to them unashamedly, the love for the language naturally grows. In this way, instead of getting scared of the impending strides of globalisation, we become more focused on leveraging it to sustain the Igbo language. But first, there must be loyalty and love for the language, bearing in mind that a people without a language are as good as dead.

Conclusion.

With the emergence of globalisation, there has been a massive thinning of indigenous languages. These languages risk extinction as the global languages, particularly English, have been pervasive in flushing out indigenous languages from the mouths of their users. In this study, we have established that the Igbo language is a victim of this situation. With UNESCO's projection of the possible extinction of the language, the language has become endangered. Given the place of language as an essential vehicle for transporting people's culture from generation to generation, ensuring its sustainability, saving the soul of the Igbo language amidst raging globalisation has become imperative. Although the grim future of the language still lurks around, there is still hope of revitalisation for the language. Therefore, in this study, we have successfully

shown the possible ways through which the soul of the Igbo language could be saved. Among these suggestions, one stands out, which is: Instead of caving into globalisation, we can leverage globalisation tools such as Artificial Intelligence, mobile apps, television, etc., in preserving and keeping the language afloat. Still, this does not substitute the necessity of speaking the language at home. It is in this speaking that the love and loyalty for the language grow. In all of this, the paper's research question, "How do we save the soul of the Igbo language in an increasingly globalised world?" has been answered. With the exploration of indigenous languages, the Igbo language, factors that endanger the Igbo language and possible solutions, the study is significant in that it joins the already existing conversations on the possible effective means of saving the Igbo language and also brings new insight into the discourse.

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