

On The Diaspora Igbo Language Variety

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Abstract

Igbo language is often used as a means of communication by the Igbos in the diaspora during the celebration of activities such as Igbo day, new yam festival and other landmark events. Furthermore spectacular feats achieved by the Igbos in the diaspora are most times celebrated using Igbo as the code of communication. This paper explores the Igbo language spoken by the Igbos in the diaspora during the celebration of such significant milestone in order to ascertain if there are apparent distinguishing features. Data for the study were derived from three isolated events organized by the Igbos residents in the United Kingdom and United States of America. These events are the Ohafia New Yam festival, 2019 held in London, Merit Award Ceremony in honor of Mrs. Anna Mbachu, Mayor of London and Dr. Shirley Echendu a twenty two (22) years old Igbo Doctorate Degree holder in the United Kingdom and the New York Igbo dinner. The recorded video clips of these events were viewed and following a detailed analysis of the clips, the study establishes cases of style and language choice by the speakers in addition to the preponderances of codeswitching. The study therefore recommends the creation of awareness to the Igbos in diaspora on the need to maintain the standard variety of the language in order to properly exhibit the rich cultural heritage which the Igbo language largely reveals.

KEYWORDS: MIGRATION, IGBO LANGUAGE, CODESWITCHING

1.0 Introduction

Language proficiency entails a full comprehension and production of a particular language, what Noam Chomsky calls competence. Scholars like *Isphording (2015)* posit that language proficiency is key to the integration of an immigrant.

It has also been noted that proficiency involves a measurement of the mastery of an individual towards a language which can be viewed from the four domains of reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Variations could occur in the speech of individuals hence *Hudson (1996:22)* defines a variety of language as “a set of linguistics items with similar distribution”, based on this definition, one can say that American English, British English, the English of football commentaries are all varieties to mention but a few. Linguists like *Wardhaugh (1998)*, avers that it is quite difficult to define concepts like variety nevertheless, a variety can be viewed as different means or ways of usage. In the Igbo context, an Onitsha man could speak differently from the Nsukka man just simply because of Igbo language varieties. These varieties are usually geared towards achieving the same communicative function within a given speech community. It is important to note that these varieties always come up in geographical distinction or boundaries.

This paper, however dwells mainly on the Igbo language variety spoken by Igbos in the diaspora.

The effort in the present study is to explore the features of the diaspora Igbo language variety. In addition, the paper

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accounts for the possible reasons behind the observed features.

The paper is divided into five (5) sections. The first section introduces the study, section two reviews related literature, section three shows the methodology while section four presents and analyzes the data. Section five forms the summary and conclusion of the study.

The next section goes into a review of concepts relevant to the present study. Concepts such as code switching, style and language choice are explicated below.

2.0 Conceptual Review

Akindele and Adegbite (2005:34) describe code switching as a means of communication whereby a speaker uses a language A and then turns to use language B. It could then be drawn that code switching is a result of contact language and an implication of multilingualism because one cannot switch if he/she is just proficient in one language. A typical example is starting a conversation in German and ending in English which also means that both interlocutors are knowledgeable in the languages.

In addition, *Akindele and Adegbite (2005)* posit the formal and functional types as types of code switching. Formal code switching is divided into inter-sentential and intra-sentential while functional code-switching has three divisions which are conversational, situational and metaphorical code-switching. Whereas inter-sentential code-switching occurs across sentence boundaries in an utterance, intra-sentential occurs within a sentence. Conversational code-switching entails a situation whereby speakers use two (2) languages in the course of their utterance.

An example could be 'Kedu maka family gi? Situational code-switching is a switch induced by change in the situation the speaker finds himself. For metaphorical code-switching, factors such as settings, activities and participants remain the same. The idea here is that the switch between the languages is metaphorically motivated.

Akindele and Adegbite (2005) assert that code-switching may be due to a change in subject or a new set of role relations. For instance, a visitor in a government organization could automatically lower down the English language which is the official code and switch to Igbo language after recognizing that the person sought for is an Igbo.

Ike (2007) in his own view submits that code-switching is a consequence of bilingualism. For the author, 'code-switching illustrates the switch bilingual speakers make (depending on the audience and context) between either the standard or regional forms of a language or between two languages of use (for instance, English and Igbo) or between occupational and domestic varieties'. *Ike (2007)* is of the same school of thought with *Akindele and Adegbite (2005)* as he notes that code-switching could be functional or formal. The author also agrees with *Akindele and Adegbite (2005)* on the subdivisions of functional code-switching which include conversational, metaphorical and situational code-switching. Inter-sentential and intra-sentential code-switching were also identified by *Ike (2007)*

Hamzah (2010) investigates online conversation of Indonesian-English bilinguals. The study which aims to find out if there are obvious differences in online conversation as opposed to face to-face conversations discovers that code-switching that occur in the online platform were similar to the ones obtainable in face to face interaction. The study submits that both inter-sentential and intra-sentential code-switching apply to both occasions.

Deuchar (2020) presents a position paper on code-switching in linguistics. The aim of the position is to provide a critical review of the state of the art in code-switching research being conducted in linguistics. *Deuchar (2020)* explores the areas of code-switching versus borrowing, grammaticality and variable versus uniformity. Based on the research findings, *Deuchar (2020)* submits that lack of facility in a language, emphasis, confidentiality among others comprise the

reasons for code-switching. In support of *Holmes (2013:35)*, *Deucher (2020)* asserts that code-switching is usually done with solidarity, ethnic identity, group membership and change of situation.

Wardhaugh (1986:100) sees code-switching as a conversational strategy which is usually aimed at establishing, crossing or even destroying group boundaries to create or change interpersonal relations with their rights and obligations.

Obiamalu and Mbagwu (2008) discuss code-switching to be a rule governed behavior which emanates from several socio-psychological factors as opined by *Akindele and Adegbite (2005)*. The researchers also investigated why people switch a lot especially from Igbo to the English language.

On the other hand, *Emeka-Nwoba (2014)* investigates code-switching among Igbo-English bilinguals focusing on the concepts of code-switching and especially, the typology of code-switching that occurs in the Igbo-English bilingual speeches. For the researcher, code-switching is functionally motivated. *Aharanwa (2013)* in another study examines code-switching and code-mixing from spontaneous speeches of Owerri Metropolis based speakers. After all, the researcher discovers that the major determinants are audience, locale and topic of discussion which is in line with *Holmes's (2013)* definition.

With regards to language style, a speech runs into different contexts whereby the context dramatically influences the form of speech, *Holmes (2013:239)*. This explains that language changes depending on the user or person involved in the speech act. Speech act means the force behind every speech as Austin introduced the speech act theory which was later revisited by Searle. *Holmes (2013)* adds that formal or informal speeches could be dependent on the addressee; with age and social backgrounds as factors. There have been studies on style by scholars like *Indra and Hamzah (2018)*. These authors were interested in finding the language style and the frequency of the style

by Facebook users in Indonesia. *Indra and Hamzah (2018)* discover that there are four (4) language styles namely; formal, consultative, casual and intimate styles. Furthermore, the study posits that the casual style is rated predominant among facebook users in Indonesia.

Language choice is a situation whereby a speaker chooses out of the languages he/she is competent in. This is essentially obtainable in a multilingual setting. David (2006) argues that language choice could be triggered by some factors like social placement, gender, educational qualification, ethnicity, age, occupation, rural and urban origin, speakers, topics, place, media and formality of the situation.

A research by *Dweik and Qawar (2015)* on language choice and language attitude in a multilingual Arab-Canadian community was targeted at investigating language choice by Arabs of Quebec-Canada using age and gender as variables. The authors discover that the Arabs of Quebec-Canada mix languages in the domain of neighborhood, with friends and media.

Having discussed code-switching, style and language choice as concepts applicable to the present study, we turn to the methodology in the next section.

3.0 Methodology

This section demonstrates how the data for this paper were sourced as well as the design for the data presentation and analysis.

The data for this research are from three isolated events organized by the Igbos residing in the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Two of the events were held in London while one took place in New York City, United States of America. YouTube videos of these events were downloaded from the internet. The events held in London are the Ohafia New Yam Festival, 2019 held in London, the Merit Award ceremony in honours of Mrs. Anna Mbachu, the Mayor of London and Shirley Echendu, a twenty two (22) year old doctorate degree holder and the youngest PhD holder among the Igbo community in London. The event held in New York is the Igbo dinner held by the Igbos based in the

United States of America.

For a proper examination of the data, the video clips were played and listened to severally. This effort enabled the researchers unravel the features associated with the diaspora Igbo language variety. For ease of presentation and clarity of analysis, we have itemized the events separately and assigned specific labels to the events. The Ohafia New Yam Festival is labeled Clip A, Clip B is the London Merit Award while the New York dinner is regarded as Clip C.

Excerpts from the clips as well as the observed features are shown in section 4.0 following.

4.0 Data Presentation

CLIP A

- i. Anyi mege iri ji ndi Ohafia ee...
We are celebrating New Yam Festival of Ohafia people...
- ii. I ma ali Ohafia ri twenty six (26) villages ife anyi bu...
You know Ohafia has twenty six villages.
- iii. Nke o first time unu na-eri ji na London?
Is this the first time you people are observing new yam festival in London?
- iv. Unu o na eri ya every year?
Do you people eat it every year?
- o
- v. ife anyi na-eme every year.
That's what we do every year.
- vi. So, ayi riga ji taa
So, we are eating yam today.
- vii. Ka anyi bu ga ya na high table
Let's take it to the high table.
- viii. Ihe di egwu ga-eme taa, you know...
Remarkable things will happen today, you know
- u
- ix. nu ga ahụ ezigbote egwu taa, just relax and enjoy.

You all will see a thrilling/interesting dance today, just relax and enjoy.

- x. Today, ayi mega iri ji Ohafia.
Today, we are doing new yam festival of Ohafia
- xi. (a) Unu ga afu the culture
(b) Unu ga afu the dressing
(c) Unu ga afu the war dance.
*a) You all will see the culture
b) You all will see the dressing
c) You all will see the war dance*

The excerpts from Clip A shows obvious cases of code-switching. These observed occurrences which have been italicized usually manifest at the sentence boundary as seen in excerpts iv, v, vii, viii, ix and xi a, b & c. From the incidences, it appears that there is an obvious inability on the part of the Igbos in the diaspora to represent the concepts every year, high table, you know, just relax and enjoy, ,culture, dressing and war dance in the Igbo language. This apparent inability may have arisen based on the facts that the participants in the events have stayed away from the Igbo land where these concepts are usually used. In excerpts vi and x, the English words so and today appear at the sentence-initial positions possibly for emphasis.

Regarding the choice of language, the Ohafia variety of the Igbo language is used alongside the English language. English language is used in cases of inability to express concepts in Ohafia and for emphasis.

As for style, the natives of Ohafia can be said to be informal and relaxed as they celebrated their new yam festival. Though there were some bits of foreign culture influence with regards to utterances from both the interviewee and the interviewer during the event. It could be understood that the western influences perceived on the speeches derive from cross-cultural effect.

CLIP B

- i. Na me dey tuo le gi this one
It is me that is hailing/praising you.

- ii. And every one that came here, unu lawa, ukwu unu jiri bia ka unu ga eji alaa...
And every one that came here, while going, I wish you safe journey.

In excerpt I in clip B, we notice a unique speech form which comprises a mix of Pidgin English and Igbo. The speaker in congratulating the celebrant switches from Pidgin English to Igbo language possibly for humor and for emphasis. In excerpt ii, code-switching is present because the speaker seeks to portray ethnic identification which was posited by *Holmes (2013)* as a reason for code-switching.

With respect to the choice of language, the speakers that participated in the merit award ceremony of Mrs. Anna Mbachu and Dr. Shirley Echendu used the British English code with only a little switch to Igbo language.

The language style for the award ceremony was formal possibly due to the presence of European audience. Igbo language was not prominent in the event notwithstanding that the event was organized by the 'Anambra Women Association in London' cultural group.

CLIP C

- i. Onye nọ immediate aka nri m...
The person at my immediate right
- ii. So, ọọ... the area I'm going
So, that's the area I'm going
- iii. I nọ physically?
Were you there physically?
- iv. I na ekwu okwu one Nigeria.
You are talking about one Nigeria.

Clip C has cases of code-switching. For the purpose of linking, we notice in excerpt ii, that there is a mix of both the English and Igbo language. In excerpts iii and iv, emphasis is achieved by switching to the English language at the sentence final position.

The language choice used by the dinner participants is basically the English code.

This is possibly due to the fact that as immigrants, who may have naturalized, using the English language has become more of a norm irrespective of the fact that the dinner is organized by Igbos for the Igbos. However, the Chairman of the event used the Igbo language most likely for ethnic identification. The other speakers choose English language which is an implication of foreign culture influence on them after a long sojourn in the United States of America.

On the issue of style, the event appears to be more of an official meeting notwithstanding that is a meeting based on solidarity.

5.0 Summary and Conclusion

Hitherto, it is quite clear that the Igbo language is seriously endangered hence the call on linguists and other language activists to see to that measures that will combat the said endangerment are put in place. Since language is an embodiment of culture, Igbo language has the capacity to showcase the Igbo culture even in the diaspora.

The present study set out to examine the Igbo language as used by the Igbos in the diaspora particularly in their celebration of events considered as milestone. The intention being to identify the features that characterize the diaspora Igbo language variety. From the study, we notice the preponderance of code-switching as a characteristic feature in the clips analyzed especially with reference to Clip A.

Code-switching as seen in the present study were used for purposes which include ethnic identification, solidarity, inability to express a concept in Igbo language among other factors.

Furthermore, this study notices the influence of foreign culture on the Igbos in the diaspora in both the use of language and subsequently on the style which they display unconsciously.

Having discovered that the diaspora Igbo language variety is replete with foreign influences, this paper suggests the projection of the Igbo language for promulgation and promotion of the rich Igbo cultural heritage. The study also

recommends that the members of Igbo organizations in diaspora should endeavor to adopt the standard Igbo language in the celebration of their landmarks events such as Igbo day, Igbo Dinner, new yam festivals among others.

We further recommend that Igbo parents in the diaspora should engage their children and the younger generation in these activities for posterity sake.

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