

# THE EXTINCTION OF MOTHER TONGUE IN OUR SOCIETY: THE IGBO EXAMPLE

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## Abstract

*This paper examines “the extinction of mother tongue: the Igbo example”. It delves into the impact of European influence and colonial rule on Igbo culture, traditions, religion, and language. As the Igbo people embraced Western culture and education for subject verb agreement leaving their culture to erode, with the younger generation playing a significant role in its disappearance. This study focuses on the loss of the Igbo language and aims to determine its current status, importance, parental roles, revival strategies, and the challenges it faces. Using a descriptive survey research design, data were gathered from relevant library and documented materials and also daily conversations among the Igbo-speaking communities. The behaviourist theory is employed to emphasize the significance of the Igbo language in society. The findings reveal neglect of the language due to European influence and foreign cultural imitation. Recommendations and conclusions are drawn based on these findings, highlighting the urgency of preserving the Igbo language.*

**Keywords:** Mother tongue, Language, Igbo Language, Extinction, The Igbo people, society

## Introduction

Every tribe, nation or society is defined by its language, culture, tradition, belief. This heritage is passed down through generation to preserve it for posterity. When a child is born into a community, it becomes the duty of the parents and the community to teach them the language of their immediate environment, known as the mother tongue.

Among the three prominent languages mandated for study in Nigerian primary and secondary schools by the National Policy on Education (NPE), Igbo language has lagged behind the others. The infiltration of Western culture, education, and language into Igbo society following Europeans colonization has eroded the cherished heritage of the Igbo people. This infiltration was facilitated by the friendly and open-minded nature of the Igbo people. They embraced new religions and aspired to become educated in the Western

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sense, which had a detrimental effect on their culture and traditions. The most significant casualty of this cultural shift is the Igbo language, which holds a central place in the identity and communication of Igbo society.

The perilous situation facing the Igbo language has led to dire predictions by organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Urgent action is required to prevent its extinction. This study aims to investigate how the advent of Europeans and Western education contributed to the decline of the Igbo language. Considering what Emeribe and Anyanwu's description (2015, p.164) as the friendly and liberal minded nature of the Igbo people. This quality according to Emeribe and Anyanwu makes it possible for them to easily accept and dwell amongst strangers.

They desire to accept, embrace, cherish and behave in the ways of the new religion, as well as to acquire, behave, and live as an educated person really dealt a destructive blow to the Igbo cultures and traditions. The greatest victim of this heritage loss is Igbo, the language of the Igbo people. In every African society, indigenous language is the greatest heritage. It is then greatest identity and the means of communicating every other societal value. The danger here is that whenever a generation for any reason, loses their heritage, the future suffers the vacuum. Obviously, the language is currently losing its value in directory of world indigenous languages in the world and this calls for urgent actions.

Advisory committee on language pluralism and multi-language education that; "Igbo language and by implication, culture, may be heading for extinction, and subsumed by 2025 if urgent steps are not taken". Another prediction in this order portrayed by Ejiofor (2012) affirms that Late President Umaru Yar'dua's on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July, 2009 at Owerri, Imo state, predicted "...By the year 2015, Igbo language must have been consumed by other stronger languages". Good a thing, 2015 has come and gone, we must ensure that all the predictions come to past. He added that, the Igbo speaking race is bigger than some nations such as Belgium, Greece, Portugal, Sweden, Saudi Arabia, etc. the people (Igbo) therefore should feel blessed, be proud of themselves, their land, culture, traditions and as well embrace, love and cherish their language as other tribes do like the Hausas and Yorubas, in his words, he called for all to rise up to the occasion and not to fold hands while our language beckons for help.

This study therefore seeks to determine how the advent of the Europeans and Western education contributed to the present extinction of Igbo language. The researchers would use the findings here as needful resources to engage the world of the present day situation of things with strategic tools for reviving the Igbo to prevent extinction.

### **Statement of the problem**

The neglect of Igbo language by its speakers is a significant issue. The current state of Igbo language and its comparison with other indigenous languages raise questions about the future of the language. This study seeks to address these concerns, emphasizing the urgent need to safeguard Igbo language question which was the primary aim of this study Abanobi (2012).

A language on the verge of extinction or has become seriously endangered language when the young people that speak them have reached or passed middle age or have only a few elderly speakers. As English language in Igbo land today, it is a common occurrence to have English as the language of communication in our various homes (rural and urban), market squares, village gatherings, etc.,

### **Purpose of the study**

This study seeks to determine:

1. If the Igbo language is genuinely on the brink of extinction.
2. The reasons why Igbo people hesitate to speak their mother tongue.
3. The importance of speaking the mother tongue in our society.
4. The challenges contributing to the extinction of the mother tongue.

**Scope of the study:**

This study focuses on assessing the extinction of the mother tongue, using the Igbo language as a case study. The research was conducted in Nigeria, specifically in Igbo land, with a primary focus on the Igbo language's precarious status, reasons for reluctance in its usage, the necessity of speaking Igbo, and the challenges associated with its extinction.

**Methodology:**

A descriptive survey research design was employed in this study. Data were collected from documented materials such as texts, journals, newspapers, and other relevant sources.

**Literature Review:**

The literature review is divided into two sections: Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Framework.

**Conceptual Framework:**

**Mother tongue:** It refers to the language spoken by the inhabitants of an area, serving as their primary means of communication. Children are exposed to their mother tongue from infancy. According to Nwajiuba and Okereke (2009), mother tongue is the language spoken by the inhabitants of an area which are their major instruments for communication. In the stages of development, a child is exposed to the language in his environment, the child speaks and understands that particular language he finds himself in. It is obvious that at infant stage, a child is prone to understand many languages as he/she can which is quite different from his mother tongue. A typical example is an Igbo couple who live in Yoruba or Hausa land with their children. If the language of communication is Yoruba or Hausa respectively, it is obvious that those children will speak either Yoruba or Hausa language fluently. The parents might be speaking Igbo language to this children, consequently, they will also learn the language of the immediate environment which is Yoruba or Hausa respectively.

**Language:** Language is a fundamental aspect of a society's identity and communication. Its loss can result in the loss of culture, identity, and a sense of belonging. **Language**

Language is the key to the heart of the people. If we lose the key, we lose the people. If we preserve the key and keep it safe, it will unlock the door to untold riches, riches which cannot be guessed at from the other side of the door.

The above statement excerpt articulately succinctly articulates what great role language plays within the life of a people because language is the embodiment of the people's life experiences, crystallizing its thought and giving concrete meaning to its ethos. The people that lose its language will be people without a culture, and when people have no culture, it can be identified as the people, it becomes a people without a future and identity (Nwadike 2011)

In the words of Akpu and Opara (2015), Language is not only a means for transferring information, but a very important means for establishing and maintaining relationship with one another, and man can make progress in all spheres of life in the world today with his ability to communicate through his language.

In other words, language is said to be a veritable tool for communication between one another. Without language, people's life experiences will be difficult, both physically, emotionally, and otherwise. From the foregoing, we can observe that language as a means of communication and expression can be double-edged, it can either promote or destroy as Afolayan (1982) summarizes thus:

...language makes it possible for men to translate knowledge across space and time. It is the means of socialization. it enables us to pull our various kinds of knowledge, skills, and abilities together and subsequently organize the community intricately on the principle of a division of labour. Unfortunately, language can also play a divisive role in human society. It is the most suggestive index of the groups and sub-groups within society.

**Igbo Language:** Igbo is the language spoken by the Igbo people of South-Eastern Nigeria. It plays a crucial role in their culture, rituals, and daily life. Igbo language is that language known to be spoken by the Igbo people of South-Eastern Nigeria. Igbo language is one of the worlds recognised and respected languages. It is also the language spoken by people of the South-East geo-political zone of Nigeria as well as parts of South-South zone geo-political zone of Nigeria. It is meant to be part of the culture of the people as it is the medium of communication in their observances, rituals and other forms of engagements. They are the indigenous people of Igbo land. They occupy the South-East geo political zones of Nigeria namely; Abia, Imo' Anambara, Ebonyi , and Enugu states (Agugu, 2006).

The Igbo people are as well found in Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, Cross River, Kogi and Rivers State. Those in Kogi state are diffusing into other ethnic groups because of the prosecution of the Igbo race in Nigeria especially since after the Nigerian civil war.

Inspite of the richness of the Igbo language, both in words and sentimentalism, the language appears to be forsaken by those who are supposed to guard its alters and project its uniqueness, sophistication , and beauty to the outside world. The speakers appear to be no longer interested in identifying with the language especially when it involves the distribution of the good things of life outside their enclave. The people seem to prefer the English language to their indigenous language where they will be identified as being sonorous and highfalutin. Many of the people speak to impress in the English language while at the same time forgetting that Igbo language is rich in idioms which are superlative to ingredients necessary for oiling the wheel of communication. This apparent neglect of the language must have compelled Chinagorom (2009, p.28) to insist that the looming negligence of Igbo language in the South-East geo-political zone has affected their response to cultural values, resulting in lack of originality of thought, productivity and even running fast for a consumerist society.

**The Igbo people:** The people belong to the Negro role in Africa who speak language that belongs to the “kwa” group of languages found in West and Central Africa. They are one of the three dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria. They also occupy vast areas of land on the left bank of Niger. There are about five states in South East States namely: Anambra, Enugu, Imo Abia and Ebonyi. The people are also traceable in some parts of Rivers, Delta and Crossriver states. (Anyasodo, Anumudu and Okere 2022).

**The Society:** Nnajiето (2011, p.17) affirms that, society is a sub-community whose members are socially conscious of their mode of life and are united by a common set of norms and values. It can also be viewed as a group of human beings sharing a self-sufficient system of action and is capable of existing longer than the life span of an individual. According to Giddens (2000), a society consists of individuals' belonging to groups, which may vary in size.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

This study employs a sociological approach to understand the extinction of mother tongue in Igbo society. It explores the sociological factors contributing to this decline, including the impact of modernity and the antagonism towards native languages.

### **Problems confronting the language:**

Several factors contribute to the decline of Igbo language, including:

**The Family:** Igbo parents often prefer their children to communicate in English rather than their mother tongue, contributing to the language's erosion. It is a known fact that the Igbo families are the major cause of these problems. They are not helping matters in the resuscitation and sustenance of their language. The family being the first agent of socialization the child comes into contact with, plays a vital role in socializing it for future life behaviour. Where the family exhibits ant, Igbo language trait, it will definitely reap what it has sown.

It is evidenced that Igbo parents take pride in their children communicating in the English language in preference to Igbo. Most times, they proudly say that their children cannot speak and understand Igbo. They are

comfortable that these children speak high sounding words in impeccable Queen's English. Even Illiterate parents want their children to speak the Whiteman's language only to show that they can do what the elites do. These parents wants to be known as people who have mastery of the English Language.

This, they exhibit at any available forum especially public fora. If one functions, he is given a standing ovation. This is aptly captured by Chinua Achebe in his book '*No Longer At Ease*' where the people of Umuofia were angry with their son Obi Okonkwo, for speaking "is" and "was" after having been sent overseas (white man's land) to study. This was part of their disappointment with Obi Okonkwo. This feeling pervades the Igbo society till date.

**The School:** Schools often discourage a use of native languages, imposing fines on students who speak them. This practice further diminishes the importance of the language. In the words of Agbadiuno (2021), in the school system, children are compelled to speak the English language. Those who speak the native language are usually punished, and fines are posed on them by their teachers. A well-known Igbo musician by name Bright Chimezie in one of his music albums graphically explained how he was flogged and punished by his teacher for speaking Igbo language. This attitude towards the language persist till today.

The implication of compelling teenagers to communicate in English language in our schools is a gradual but systematic annihilation of the language. It is the first step towards throwing the native language into the trash can. The school in this regard, complements the efforts of the family in destroying the language.

The more frustrating thing is that, students who pick interest in the language especially in higher institutions of learning are treated with contempt and looked upon with disdain as people in an undignified area of study. Most times, they are derogatorily labelled such names like "Igbo-Igbo-BK", and the likes, while their counterparts studying English are accorded some respect.

The down playing on Igbo language has negatively impacted on the perception of language hence the overt preference for the English language in Igbo land. This is why the trend has to be reversed if Igbo language has to survive as a respectable and recognizable language. This is achievable by making the people develop interest in the language early enough in life.

### **Igbo Language Inside School Environment:**

Even within schools in Igbo land, students are penalized for speaking their native language, reinforcing the dominance of English. The youth on the other hand, are facing the same problem. They feel shy to interact in their indigenous languages, especially at social gatherings, school environment, in churches, markets, on transit, etc. The problem being that their parents did not teach them the language which should be the language of the immediate environment.

**Igbo Language and the Family:** Many Igbo parents neglect teaching their children their mother tongue, leading to a decline in language use within the family. A handful of them say their greetings, prayers, etc in English language.

**The Igbo Language and Delicacies:** Traditional Igbo foods have been replaced by English dishes, further distancing the language from daily life. In the ages during the time of our ancestors, the major foods for the people include foofoo, pounded yam, locust beans, three leave yam, yam, etc. with their local soup such as bitter leaf, egusi, uha, nturukpa, uda, uziza which are known to be cooked for women who give birth to new born babies. Nowadays, these foods have faded away and have been replaced with English foods such as spaghetti, noodles, rice, etc. thereby creating problems for themselves.

**The Igbo Language and their Traditional Medicines:** The use of traditional Igbo herbal medicine has declined due to the adoption of Western medicine. They are known to be those who treat sicknesses with their local herbs. All of a sudden, those things keep disappearing and replaced with English medicines which has been causing more harm than good.

**Igbo Language and Place Names:** English versions of Igbo place names have become commonplace, erasing the language's influence. Some of them include:

Owere - Owerri  
Ọnichá - Onitsha  
Enugwu - Enugu  
Ọka - Awka  
Ọlụ - Orlu  
Anambara - Anambra, etc.

**Igbo Language and Proper Names:** Igbo names are being replaced by English names in many cases. In the next decade, Igbo names might vanish and be replaced with English names. Let us look at some of the names we see people bearing in our society today. Such names are: Mikel, Clinton, Abiu, Treasure, Michel, Jones, Ryan, Zurel, Ariana, Sheila, Derek, Laurel, Morris, Vanessa, Mara, Joses, Sandra, Clarence, etc. in place of Igbo names.

**Igbo Language and GSM:** Despite the integration of Igbo language in mobile phones, users often prefer to communicate in English. Notwithstanding, the people find it difficult to use it, rather, they prefer the English version. The question is this; how many of us make use of Igbo language to send text messages, send e-mails, Facebook messages, WhatsApp messages, etc?

### **Discussion and Findings**

Conversation 1 on daily interactions between 2 children in the urban area;

Ebuka: What are you doing there?  
Wisdom: I'm sweeping.  
Ebuka: Sweep it very well now...  
Wisdom: What do you mean?  
Ebuka: Can't you see that this side is dirty?  
Wisdom: Shut up your mouth.  
Ebuka: Are you mad?  
Wisdom: Yes, you are mad.  
Ebuka: Thunder fire you.  
Wisdom: Stupid idiot.  
Ebuka: Are you telling me stupid?  
Wisdom: Yes.  
Ebuka: Idiot

From the above conversations between the two children, one realizes that there was no single Igbo language in their discussions. The data analyzed showcased the tendency of the decline in Igbo language. Their major language preference was English Language. Moreso, there is a clear evidence that Igbo indigenes prefer English Language to Igbo Language. Even though both of them are the sons of the soil in Imo State, Owerri North Local Government Area precisely.

### **Conversation II on daily interaction between two primary school pupils in the rural area;**

Miracle: Come let's play ball.  
Obinna: Play gini?  
Miracle: Ball nah...  
Obinna: I have not done my home work and you want me to come and play ball.

- Miracle: Ngwanu let me wait for you nah...
- Obinna: Ok, I will do it fast-fast ka anyi gbaa ball.
- Miracle: Have you finish doing the home work?
- Obinna: No o..., o fọrọ small.
- Miracle: Ok, do fast-fast let's play ball.
- Obinna: Ok.

The above dialogue is between the two pupils, Obinna and Miracle. A primary five and four in secondary school level. From the above discussions, one finds out that the discussion lacks language proficiency. There was code-mixing between them in their conversations. Moreso, the English lexemes were greater than the Igbo.

### Recommendations

To revive the Igbo language, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Parents should raise their children to be bilingual, teaching them their mother tongue from infancy.
2. The government should enforce the teaching of Igbo language as a compulsory subject in schools at all levels.
3. Initiatives like SỤWAKWA Igbo, promoting the use of the Igbo language, should be supported and expanded.
4. Youths should be encouraged to study Igbo language at tertiary institutions.
5. The Igbo people should take pride in speaking their language in all social settings.
6. Regular seminars, workshops, debates, quizzes, and creative writing competitions in the mother tongue should be organized.

### Conclusion

Language is an essential aspect of identity and societal cohesion. The Igbo language, with its rich history and cultural significance, is endangered. Revitalizing Igbo language requires the collective effort of its speakers, government, linguists, and educators. If the younger generation is exposed to Igbo language from an early age, it can once again become a vibrant and recognized language, ensuring the preservation of Igbo culture and identity

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