



## From Linguistic Repression to Revitalization: The Igbo Language Case

**Chinweude Nwakaego Ugochukwu\***

Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria

### **Abstract**

Language endangerment is presently one of the humanity's greatest cultural challenges, posing enormous scientific and humanist problems. Many indigenous languages have become endangered due to linguistic repression caused by colonization, in which the original language is replaced by that of the colonist. It is sad to note that after a long time of gaining independence from the colonial masters, most indigenous languages are still being repressed by the owners of the language themselves. An increasing number of communities are giving up their language by their own choice. Many believe that their children will not acquire a professional qualification if they teach them tribal languages. This paper examines the level of post-colonial repression bedeviling indigenous languages using Igbo language as case study. The work suggests practical steps to the revitalization of the Igbo language. The paper also calls for more spirited efforts in saving the Igbo language not only as a special gift from God, but most importantly as part of our country's natural resources which could be consumed locally or exported to other countries.

**Keywords:** Colonization, Indigenous Language Repression, Igbo Language Case, Revitalization

### **INTRODUCTION**

Many linguists predict that at least half of world's 6,000 or so languages will be dead or dying by the year 2050, languages are becoming extinct at twice rate of endangered mammals and four times the rate of endangered birds. If this continues, the world of the future could be dominated by a dozen or fewer languages (Ostler 2000). Languages more often die than the people who speak them (Fischer 1999). The process of language extinction begins with intergenerational transmission stops and when mother tongues are undermined to such an extent that parents and grandparents feel ashamed to speak.

A language may be endangered because there are fewer and fewer people who claim that language as their own and therefore neither use it nor pass it on to their children. It may also or alternatively, be endangered because it is being used for fewer and fewer daily activities and so loses the characteristically close association of the language with particular social and communicative functions. Many indigenous languages have become endangered because of language deaths or linguisticicide caused by colonization, in which the original language is replaced by that of the colonists (Colls, 2013).

Repression is the act of subduing someone or something by force, it is to control, to put down or to suppress. It involves the use of political and/or military force to control a people and restrict their freedom. A language is repressed when another language is chosen voluntarily and deliberately by the owners of the language to get better jobs or for another reason. During the colonial era, many African indigenous languages were repressed. As Philipson (1994:8) puts it;

The colonial masters who set out to discover and dominate the rest of the world knew from the outset the importance of language as an instrument of state and therefore put the language in the hands of their satellite (the elite) to use as a weapon for linguistic.

Colonizers usually imposed or encouraged the dominance of their native language unto the people colonized, even forbidding natives to speak their mother tongue. Nigeria as an ex-colonial territory even after her 51<sup>st</sup> independence still struggles under the indirect influence of the imperial European powers whose residue is the English Language. In his observation, Olu, (2012) says

The presence and dominance of foreign languages through which education is carried out in our country has severely hampered the development of the numerous languages and dialects of Africa. Thus, our indigenous languages are under-developed in competence, vocabulary, structures and so on. When we compare this to what obtains in the 'developed' nations where normal, daily routines, including research and development are carried out in their own indigenous languages – it is absurd that foreign languages continue to subtend as language of official transactions in Nigeria.

The continued use of the English language in Igbo land in particular has led to the abandonment of most of our culture. It is affecting every area of our life; the dress code, entertainment, religion etc. the God-given means of livelihood to the Igbo people have been relegated to the background – no wonder the level of poverty in the land.

The deep-rooted repression has made majority of Igbo people feel that there is nothing good in our culture, suggesting that God made a mistake in creating us or that He created us to be dominated by the whites. There is need to decolonize the mind of the Igbo people in order to take pride in the preservation of our language.

Bringing a language back from the brink of extinction takes intensive effort, money and community support. Igbo language could be brought back from the brink of extinction or preserved through the process of revitalization which is the act of making something stronger, more active or healthier. Language revitalization is the attempt by interested parties to halt or reverse the decline of a language or to revive an extinct one. Those involved include parties such as linguists, cultural or community groups or governments.

The rising and falling of the Igbo language lies in the hands of the Igbo people and the government. The government should rise to the challenge of linguistic repression otherwise there is no need of celebrating independence. We should stop celebrating the excellent mastery and development of the colonist's language and culture to the detriment of our God-given Igbo language.

## REPRESSION OF THE IGBO LANGUAGE

Igbo language is the principal native language of the Igbo people. There are approximately 24 million speakers who live mostly in Nigeria and are primarily of Igbo descent. There are several dialects spoken, but all are distinct dialect forms of the Igbo language. There is also the standard Igbo which can be spoken and understood by everyone who is competent in the language. Nwadike (2002:9) captures the state of the language before colonization;

Long before the Igbo had contact with the Western civilization through whose influence their language was reduced to writing, their languages as well as their rich corpus of literature were orally transmitted. Because the language and the culture of the people were one and the same, no institution was set apart for teaching them to the young ones and the strangers. This did not mean that instruction in these was not taken seriously. So serious was this that traditional education in all its ramifications in the Igbo society starts from infancy. Basic instructions are given in the mother tongue and the child is made to live a full life in which he participates from the beginning...his education goes on all the time, and everywhere: in the home, on the playground, on the farm, in the market, on the way to the stream, etc.

The use of English in Nigeria survived the departure of the colonial administrators as the language of administration. Now, several years after independence, English still survives and has assumed a more important status in Nigeria. Apart from being a medium of social and ethnic communication, English is a national language and it is used to conduct legislative, executive and judicial functions at the three tiers of local, state and federal government levels. One would have expected that with the attainment of independence and the casting off of the yoke of imperialism, the language referred to as the language of conquest and oppression would have been abolished. On the contrary, the English language has come to stay as the official language despite the fact that Nigerians have their indigenous languages before the arrival of the colonists. For obvious reasons of maintaining law and order for communication, people were employed as interpreters, tax collectors, consular police, cooks and guards. The enormous advantage these had over the other natives created a land of awareness that made the indigenes want to improve their status through the acquisition of the English language. This of course marked the starting point of the status symbol marker that the English is today.

In view of the prominent role assigned English in the Nigerian constitution, the participation function of the language becomes crucial to the lives of people. Those who wish to participate in the social, political and economic life of the country must know English. As a result of the exposure to English language and its benefits, Igbo language has suffered and is suffering untold repression by the Igbo people themselves at different levels as exemplified below.

## LINGUISTIC REPRESSION IN INSTITUTIONS OF LEARNING

The presence and dominance of foreign languages through which education is carried out in our country has severely hampered the development of the numerous language and

dialects of Nigeria including Igbo language. At the level of formal education, the Nigerian youth of school age is quickly made to understand by the school system, parents, examinations bodies and potential employers that English is the key for getting good grades, passing other subjects, getting a good job after school and for general successful upward social economic and political mobility (Uzoezie 2011:90).

Despite the immediate gains of the use of foreign language in the institutions of learning, it is worthy to note that what happens in our institutions with Igbo language will go a long way in determining the future of Igbo language. In virtually all the higher institutions in Igbo land today, it is out of fashion to speak Igbo because the speakers themselves feel inferior and are looked down on. It is a common knowledge that no language is superior to the other but today in Igbo land we see the Igbo people treating foreign languages in a way that suggests that those languages are superior to our own Igbo language. Take for instance, in most of our higher institutions, some of the foreign languages that are studied have departments of their own (e.g. English, French and even Chinese), but in most of our institutions our indigenous languages (including Igbo) are squeezed together to form a department. It was a great fight spearheaded by Chief F.C. Ogbalu of blessed memory to institute Igbo language as a course of study in some higher institutions in Igbo land (Muogilim 1995:72). Yet this effort is still not well appreciated. There is little or no spirited effort to sustain the growth of the language. This is evident in the dwindling population of students studying Igbo language in higher institutions. In most of the institutions, the majority of students in the so-called amalgamated departments are studying other languages with very few majorities in Igbo studies. In some federal institutions today, French and Chinese languages are being patronized by a lot of students of Igbo origin because of the rewards they hope to get and are getting from the owners of those languages.

The story is the same in secondary schools in Igboland where students are fined for speaking Igbo language in the classroom. In some of the classrooms, there is always a notice "Igbo speaking is not allowed". Come to think about it..... in a classroom of Igbo students and in a school set up in Igbo land, the Igbo language is being repressed to death not by the whites, but by the Igbo people (teachers) themselves.

At the Nursery Primary level, apart from the less than one-hour period given to the study of Igbo language, all other activities in the school are done in English language which is taken to be more prestigious than our mother tongue. The result is that the Igbo child grows with the mentality that English which is the official language in Nigeria is the one and only language that should be spoken and heard.

### **LINGUISTIC REPRESSION IN IGBO FAMILIES**

The use of language in homes determines the longevity of that language. In most Igbo families today, Igbo language has since disappeared from their vocabulary. Most urban parents associate the English language with upward social climbing, good jobs, bureaucratic and better education. They therefore discourage their children from putting interest in Igbo as a subject in school and even speaking it hence the children associate "their mother tongue" (Igbo language) with the village and primitiveness", this is gross

inhumanity to our language. It amounts to denying our root. Permit us to ask this question to Igbo mothers – As a mother, how will you feel if your child that you carried in your womb for nine months and nurtured to maturity turns around to deny you as the mother? This question also goes to the Igbo fathers. What will it look like being denied by your biological child? A sincere answer to this question will reveal the level of harm we have done and are doing to our dear language.

Any Igbo parents that stop their children from having anything to do with the Igbo language are not worthy of living in Igbo land. If they are living outside Igbo land, they should never think of having any inheritance in Igbo land. What these parents are doing is helping an enemy to gain grounds not knowing that by the time he gains enough grounds by your support he will then turn around to place you where you belong – perpetual servitude. Failing to speak Igbo to our children and giving our children foreign names are some of the ways of repressing Igbo language.

### **Linguistic Repression in the Church**

The Igbo language repression is also made manifest in the present day churches in Igbo land. When the white men brought their religion to Nigeria, they preached through interpreters who have learnt English language. Later, the whites made some efforts to learn our indigenous language having discovered that the best way to reach a people is through their language. Though their efforts were discouraged by the numerosity of dialects within the Igbo language. Hence S.C. Schon in Nwadike (2002:29) has this to say about the Igbo language:

.....the dialect of the Igbo language on which I had bestowed so much labor in Sierra Leone, differs widely from that spoken and understood in this part of the country. It never escaped my observation that a great diversity of dialects existed. But I must blame myself much for not making stricter inquiries about that which would be most useful for the present occasion.

The Whiteman would have made further effort to learn the standard Igbo, but he had to give up since the Igbo people showed willingness in learning English language. The rate with which the Igbo people grabbed the English language made the whites lose interest in trying to learn the indigenous language since the owners of the language were willingly giving up their language.

According to a French linguist Claude Hagege, as quoted in (Colls 2009);

An increasing number of communities are giving up their language by their own choice. Many believe that their languages have no future and that their children will not acquire a professional qualification if they teach them tribal languages...

He concludes this way; “we can do nothing when the abandonment of a language corresponds to the will of the population”. This is exactly the case with the Igbo language. Our problem is no longer with the colonial masters, rather the problem is with us – our understanding of the role of language has some problems that need serious attention.

Today, it is very rare to see a good preacher using the Igbo language without mixing it with English language. This is because any man preaching in Igbo language is regarded as a village man who probably did not go to school. Church services are held in English and on few occasions an Igbo interpreter is engaged for the sake of a few who are believed to be “illiterates”.

In a particular church in the Eastern Nigeria, an attachment was added to the main church auditorium, where those that do not understand English are permanently kept during services. The attachment is built in a way that those illiterates do not see or partake in what is going on in the main air-conditioned auditorium; they only do what the interpreter tells them to do. What could this be called if not segregation even in the heart of Igbo land? Also in some churches that have two or three services on Sundays; the only service that is meant to be in Igbo is still a mixture, so that 2/3 of the program is still done in English and this supposed Igbo-English service is reserved for the aged or the less privileged ones who could not meet up with the English services.

Majority of preachers today prefer to preach in the prestigious language – English in order ‘to belong’ and to attract large audience. The Igbo youths of today troop to churches where everything is Americanized i.e. the preacher preaches like the whites. The choir sings English songs the way the whites will sing. Igbo songs are never sung and if at all Igbo songs will come in, it will be sung in American way. This is a misnomer that is not helping and will never help us as a race rather our dear language is being further repressed.

## **REVITALIZATION OF THE IGBO LANGUAGE**

Language revitalization is the attempt by interested parties to halt or reverse the decline of a language or to revive an extinct one. From what was highlighted above, Igbo language is suffering untold repression from all angles but there is hope for the language if something serious in the form of revitalization will be seriously adhered to.

Reyhner (1999) says “language revitalization is part of a larger attempt by indigenous peoples to retain their cultural strength in the face of all-pervasive modern individualistic, materialistic and hedonistic technological culture”. It is the act of making something stronger, more active or healthier. Revitalization of a language is a process by which a language community through political, community and educational means, attempts to increase the number of active speakers of an endangered language.

Language revitalization is often deemed necessary because of the sheer amount of linguistic diversity that is being lost. In recent times alone, it is estimated that more than 2000 languages have already become extinct around the world. In his words Hagege asserts; “What we lose is essentially an enormous cultural heritage, the way of expressing the relationship with nature, with the world between themselves in the framework of their families, their kin people”.

Language revitalization projects require not only good intentions but enormous practical efforts. Krauss (1992b) maintains that;

All important is the people's will to restore their native language. You cannot from the outside inculcate into the people the will to revive or maintain their language. That has to come from them, from themselves. If languages are to be revitalized, it is crucial for native speakers to see the value of doing so and get actively involved in the process.

The United Nations' Article 14 of its Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People States;

Indigenous people have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literature as to designate and retain their own name of communities, places and things.

The definition of a healthy language is one that acquires new speakers. No matter how many adults use the language, if it is not passed to the next generation, its fate is already sealed.

Though the goals of language revitalization vary greatly from case to case, they typically involve attempting to expand the number of speakers and the use of a language or to maintain the current level in order to protect the language from extinction or language death.

There are different theories or models that attempt to lay out a plan for language revitalization. One of these is provided by celebrated linguist Joshua Fishman. Fishman model for reviving threatened (or sleeping) languages or for making them sustainable consists of an eight-stage process. Efforts should be concentrated on the earlier stages of restoration until they have been consolidated before proceeding to the later stages. The eight stages are as follows:

1. Acquisition of language by adults, who in effect act as language apprentices (recommended where most of the remaining speakers of the language are elderly and socially isolated from other speakers of the language).
2. Create a socially integrated population of active speakers (or users) of the language (at this stage it is usually best to concentrate mainly on the spoken language rather than the written language).
3. In localities where there are a reasonable number of people habitually using the language, encourage the informal use of the language among the people of all age groups and within families and bolster its daily use through the establishment of local neighbourhood institutions in which the language is encouraged, protected and (in certain contexts at least) used exclusively.
4. In areas where oral competence in the language has been achieved in all age groups, encourage literacy in the language but in a way that does not depend upon assistance from (or goodwill of) the state education system.
5. Where the state permits it, and where numbers warrant, encourage the use of the language in compulsory state education.

6. Where the above stages have been achieved and consolidated, encourage the use of the language in the work place (lower work sphere).
7. Where the above stages have been achieved and consolidated, encourage the use of the language in local government services and mass media.
8. Where the above stages have been achieved and consolidated, encourage the use of the language in higher education, government etc.

This model of language revival is intended to direct efforts to where they are most effective to avoid wasting energy trying to achieve the later stages of recovery when the earlier stages have not been achieved. For instance, it is probably wasteful to campaign for the use of a language on television or in government services if hardly any families are in the habit of using the language.

Additionally, Tsunoda (2005) identifies a range of different techniques or methods which may be used for attempts at language revitalization including those to revive extinct languages and those to maintain weak ones. Some of the techniques include:

- a. Immersion – In this method of linguistic revival; schools are set up in which the target language is the only language of communication.
- b. Master – Apprentice technique: This is one to one transmission on language proficiency.
- c. Use of Technology: This technique involves the use of technology such as recordings or media.
- d. Electronic courses and online recordings are techniques that can be utilized for languages in any state of viability.
- e. Documentation is another method that can be used to preserve endangered languages. It involves recording spoken languages and by using computers to store the information for study by scholars.

It is noteworthy that a good number of endangered languages have been revitalized with the use of the above model and techniques. Some revitalized languages include Irish, English, French, Leoki, Calatan and Hebrew etc. It is strongly believed that Igbo language will be preserved from extinction through the application of the above revitalization model and techniques.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Having looked at the forms and levels of repression bedeviling the Igbo language and the different revitalization techniques, that have been used to revitalize other languages, there is need for a co-ordinated action among the bodies involved in support of indigenous languages including government, language organizations, education and research institutions on state levels to support and maintain the teaching and learning of the Igbo languages. In order for Igbo language to feel like a real living language, like English, it needs to be seen, heard and utilized everywhere and that includes the use of computers.



Igbo scholars should learn from English scholars. English language is growing because of the rapid changes that it is undergoing on many different levels- phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic. For the revitalization of Igbo language; the following suggestions are proffered to be carried out at different levels. It is believed that the recommendations if positively adhered to will go a long way in revitalizing the Igbo language:

At the family level, Igbo parents should note that the family is the bedrock of every society, hence whatever positive change that does not start in the family may not have the desired result on the society. All parents should therefore as a matter of urgency make Igbo the language of the home. They should be proud of the language and as the saying goes - "action speaks louder than voice", the children, with time, will eventually become proud of their mother tongue. In addition, Igbo parents should take pride in giving and calling their children Igbo names.

The federal government of Nigeria should take cognizance of the fact that language is at the root of the development of any nation. Therefore, the already formulated languages should be fully implemented. A monitoring committee should be set up to ensure full compliance at all levels of education in the nation. There should be proper allocation of fund and resources needed to preserve and develop indigenous languages. Government should also award scholarship for post graduate studies in indigenous languages in Nigeria. This is very important as it has been discovered that no nation can develop or prosper without her language. At the state level (Igbo states), the government should ensure maximum implementation of the language policies at the grass roots. Igbo state governments should award scholarship for post-graduate studies in Igbo language either in Nigeria or abroad. Learners of Igbo language should be encouraged through incentives and allowances just as it was done during the colonial era for those learning English. This is still being practiced by some countries for students studying languages like Chinese, French etc. This will boost the interest of Igbo youths as long as the money will be made available.

Job opportunities should be created for graduates in Igbo language, this will go a long way to entice our youths to read Igbo language in higher institutions. Appointment for jobs in either public private sectors in Igbo states should require evidence of proficiency in Igbo. Laws and key political texts should be translated into Igbo language to enable maximum participation of indigenous people in the political and legal fields. It should be made a law in all Igbo states that road signs, bill boards, poster, handbills, public notices etc., should be written in Igbo. State governments should also ensure that goods produced in Igbo land by Igbo people should be labeled in Igbo just like most China products. Rather than repressing Igbo language, government should encourage Igbo people to continue to speak Igbo language among themselves while also actively using a metropolitan language such as English to communicate with outsiders. Financial support should be provided for publishing and translating works into Igbo language. Leaders at different levels and capacities should endeavor to use their positions to further the course of Igbo language. Igbo language should be used in all social functions done in Igbo land, it does not matter how many people in the gathering that are from other tribes. This will encourage visitors

to be interested in learning Igbo language. Government approval should be withdrawn from private schools that will refuse to use Igbo as a medium of education and communication in schools. It should be ensured that the amount of time given to English programs in all broadcasting houses in Igbo land is reduced. More Igbo programs should be encouraged and sponsored.

In the institutions of learning located in Igbo land, morning assembly in schools both private and public (Nursery, primary, secondary) should be conducted in Igbo language. The National Anthem should be sung in Igbo and the Pledge should be said in Igbo. A law should be made to stop the "oppression Igbo speaking is not allowed" in all schools especially in private owned (Nursery & Primary) schools where it has become the order restricting young ones from speaking their heritage language. Igbo language should be made a core subject for all students of Igbo origin in all secondary schools in Igbo land as it is done now in Anambra State. Igbo scholars should fight to make Igbo language one of the subjects taken in Jamb. Also, a credit level pass in Igbo language should be made one of the requirements for admission into higher institutions for all Igbo students as it is the case with English. More time should be assigned to Igbo language per week in the school curriculum. Igbo language teachers should be given incentives. Operation "English speaking is not allowed" should be introduced in all private and public schools including pre-nursery and nursery schools because these children are the hope for the survival of Igbo language. Those that speak English in class should be fined just as it is/was done against speaking Igbo. Igbo scholars should lobby for the removal of the ban on the use of Igbo language as a medium of education at all levels and not just at primary school level.

Essay competition in Igbo language should be organized and sponsored regularly at secondary school level. As it is done with other subjects, students that made excellent results in Igbo language should be encouraged with good prizes at primary and secondary school levels. Additionally, there should be an increase in the Igbo language student quota in all institution of higher learning in Igbo land and beyond. At University level, a center for developing computer program in Igbo should be established in Igbo state universities and federal Universities located in Igbo land. The center's philosophy should be not only to develop computer content in Igbo language but also to make necessary changes in menus, commands and alerts in order to provide a total immersion computing experience in Igbo. Good drama/plays written in Igbo should be dramatized and recorded for sales. This will be used to replace or check the influx of foreign films that have nothing good to inculcate in our youths. Like other indigenous people, the Igbo people (linguists) should seize new technologies to help overcome its challenges. Videos and other media technologies should be used as important educational linguistic tools to capture and preserve the voices of Igbo native speakers. A system of immersion should be introduced in all Igbo schools where Igbo language will be the only vehicular language, this will help to raise Igbo journalists and Newspapers written in Igbo.

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speakers. Igbo language activists and scholars should take advantage of every possible tool to promote Igbo language, including the use of computers and the internet. Igbo people should be proud to send text messages/e-mail in Igbo.

## CONCLUSION

The most serious potential consequence of language repression is of course, language loss. This revelation should send an alarm to every well-meaning Igbo scholar that serious action needs be taken to salvage the state of the Igbo language since each language is a unique response to the human condition and each is a living heritage we should cherish.

As (Campbell 1994:1996) rightly observes; “Every language is the guardian of its speaker’s history and culture and its extinction represents the irretrievable loss of a portion of our humanity”. This paper has shown that the repression of Igbo language is no longer done by the colonists but rather by the Igbo people themselves.

The revitalization techniques as highlighted in this work will go a long way to restore the dignity of the Igbo language. No nation has ever prospered without their language. Countries like Japan and China acquired their science and technology through the use of their indigenous language. Today, they are among the technologically developed nation of the world. This is possible because language is the only creative property unique to human beings. It is the only road to thinking which makes human society possible. It is good and wonderful to study other languages but that should not be to the detriment of our own God-given Igbo language. We cannot continue to promote and build up other people’s language while our own language remains under developed. Enough of this foolishness! It is only a fool that toys with his birthright like Esau in the Bible – however, when Esau eventually came to his right mind, he wept bitterly for his foolishness but then it was too late.

So much is hidden in indigenous languages (Igbo language) waiting to be harnessed to shoot Nigeria into socio-economic prominence. There is still hope for Igbo language if we (the Igbo people) will desist from repressing our language and engage in spirited revitalization processes for our dear language. This paper is a passionate call to all Igbo language lovers; those who are not ashamed to be called ‘Igbo people’, those who are not ashamed of their God-given tongue, those who are not ready to sell their birthright to arise and take up the challenge of revitalizing Igbo language no matter the cost.

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