

Linguicide In Nigeria: Consequences of Marginalized Indigenous Languages

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Abstract:

This study x-rays language death in Nigeria as a result of unjust marginalization against the country's indigenous languages. It goes on to point out those responsible for this marginalization and suggests some possible remedial strategies to curb the already existing anomaly. The paper goes further to lament the extinction route most of our indigenous languages are already towing and proposes proper promotion of our indigenous *languages* both in the homes, in the schools, and in the society at large.

Keywords: Linguicide, marginalization, indigenous languages.

Introduction

Every language is the pride of its speakers. It also reflects the culture, beliefs and ideologies of such people. One of the unfortunate things that could happen to a people is for them to lose their language or for their language to vanish into the thin air right under their watch. Linguicide is a term used to define language death. Crystal (p. 1) says that a language dies when nobody speaks it anymore. According to him, to say that a language is dead is like saying that a person is dead. He went further to opine that there could be no way a language could exist without people.

Linguicide in Nigeria has to do with death of languages in the country. Nigeria as a multilingual nation is bedeviled with lots of linguistic challenges consequent upon the

careless, carefree and nonchalant attitudes of the speakers of these languages. A challenge which has led to several abridged forms of our different indigenous languages.

The presence of a lingua franca which is a foreign language is another bane of our linguistic stability in the country. A lingua franca, which has been given more value by all and sundry, to the detriment of our various indigenous languages has caused more harm than good to the standard and quality of our indigenous languages.

This study will look into the problem of linguicide in Nigeria, outline some already dead languages in the country, investigate into the impending endangerment of the Igbo language, x-ray the consequences of marginalized indigenous languages and

suggest possible steps to take in order to curb the contemporary linguistic anomaly in the country.

MEANING/CONCEPT OF LINGUICIDE

The word, “Linguicide” has to do with deaths of languages. Crystal in Ikoba et al. (p. 1) Says that the world today is littered with thousands of languages and several hundreds have been documented to have become extinct. Lewis et al in Ikoba et al says that of the known 7,192 living languages, 22% of them have been categorized as “in trouble”, 13% dying while there is a loss rate of about 6 languages per year. A language is said to be considered dead when it has no native speakers and no spoken descendants. A language dies when the last speaker of the language dies or loses knowledge of the language.

Although new languages may emerge through geographical isolation when former dialects become mutually unintelligible to the speakers and when creolization (combination of languages) occurs (Fernado in Ikoba et al) but a nonchalant or lackadaisical attitude of any generation of speakers of the language towards it may cause it to either go into extinction, moribund or endangered. In the Nigerian context, Ohiri-Aniche in Ikoba (p. 22) claims that more than 400 Nigerian languages are endangered. On her own, Onyemelukwe (p. 1) noted that a good number of Nigerian minority languages are endangered. She maintains that 3 out of 514 autochthonous languages of Nigeria serve as major languages of the nation namely

Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. However, the rate of marginalization against these languages both in the school, the government, homes, trade and even social life calls for serious attention. A popular Nigerian singer from the Igbo extraction by name Bright Chimezie once narrated in one of his songs, his ordeal during his school days when he was punished by his class teacher for speaking his mother tongue which was tagged “vernacular” in the school.

The truth remains that every language is specie specific and specie uniform, and, as a result, no language is greater, superior or more important than the other. It is therefore highly suicidal for a foreign language to be regarded as superior in Nigeria by Nigerians and the indigenous languages inferior as is seen in our setting and especially in most of our urban and village primary and secondary schools where English language is highly glorified above the mother tongue.

Onyemelukwe (p. 1) noted that language is the system of words or signs that people use to express thoughts and feelings to each other. It is also seen as a system of communication which consists of a set of sound and written symbols which are used by people of any particular country or region for talking and writing. The language of any nation therefore is the identity of such a nation and it reflects the culture of its people. Loss of language of any nation means loss or death of the identity of such a nation.

It is appalling the way our Nigerian parents and schools mandate our children to speak English language to the detriment of our indigenous languages. Considering these unfortunate factors, Onyemelukwe

lamented that the Igbo language is trading the route of endangerment. The carelessness of our people in terms of handling our language has resulted in such “identity-less” speeches like code-mixing. It is difficult today in the Igbo setting for a typical Igbo indigene to stand in the public and speak in purely Igbo language without the interferences such as code-mixing and, or code-switching. It can be seen in such words as:

1. my friend gaa noro odu.
2. Nwoke m nyem that thing oso oso.
3. Emeka bia here.
4. Biko nye m that book, etc.

The fact is that the above statements can neither be classified as English language nor Igbo language and the fear is that with the development of such trends, the projection of Ohiri-Aniche in Ikoba (p. 62) that many Nigerian languages will be in extinction in the next 50 to 70 years may come true on Igbo language. According to him, about 25% of children under the age of 11 are unable to speak their parents’ indigenous languages. He maintains that many Nigerian languages are endangered mainly due to neglect and denigration. He goes further to express concern that many Nigerian languages are not handed over correctly to the children in homes and in the school. Marginalization of a language is the unfair degrading or relegation of a particular language to the background for the glorification of another language. It is worst and suicidal when the marginalization is championed by

the indigenous owners of the marginalized language(s) as is seen in the Nigerian case. The consequence is so detrimental that recovery from its harm may be a mirage. It can lead to the total death of such language (linguicide) and when this happens, both the culture and identity of such people will be lost forever.

SOME LANGUAGES THAT HAVE DIED IN NIGERIA (CASES OF LINGUICIDE IN NIGERIA).

Presently, there are records of linguicide in Nigeria. There are some languages that once existed in Nigeria, but today, there is no one speaking them again and they have been therefore categorized dead. Some of these languages include the following:

1. **Ajawa:** Ajawa is an extinct Afro-Asiatic language formerly spoken in Bauchi State, Nigeria. Records have it that this language became extinct between 1920 and 1940 due to the presence of Hausa language and the speakers eventually switched over to Hausa.
2. **Basa-Gumna Language:** Basa-Gumna is an extinct Kainji language formally spoken in Nigeria in Chanchaga, Niger state and also in Nasarawa, near the Basa homeland. It became extinct in 1987. Speakers of this

language later switched over to Hausa language. Gumna is situated about 10 kilometers to the west of the Tegina-Zungeru road. And, around 1963, speakers of Basa-Gumna moved to the road. Presently they live in Yakila town where only two semi-speakers of the language were found in 1986. But today, the language is nowhere to be found and therefore has been categorized as dead.

3. **Auyokawa language:** This is an Afro-Asiatic language once spoken in Auyo Local Government Area of Jigawa state, Nigeria. The date of extinction or death of this language is not certain. However, the language is no longer spoken by anyone in the contemporary Nigerian society. It is therefore considered dead.
4. **Gamo-Ningi language:** Gamo (Buta) and Ningi are extinct Kainji dialect cluster earlier spoken in Bauchi state, Nigeria but today, no one speaks them anymore. The date of its extinction is not known.
5. **Kpati language:** Kpati language is an extinct Grassfields language formerly spoken in Wukari and in Takum Local Government Areas of Taraba state, Nigeria. It became extinct in 1984. Wikipedia.com says

that this language was classified as Ngemba language by Fivas-Scott (1977) and that the language was first reported as extinct by Grimes, Barbara (1984).

6. **Mawa language:** This language is different from a Chad language also called Mawa. It is rather an extinct and unattested language of Nigeria spoken in the Bauchi area of the country. Its language family is unclassified and the date of its extinction is missing.
7. **Kubi language:** Kubi which is also known as Kuba or Kubawa is an extinct Afro-Asiatic language once spoken in Bauchi state, Nigeria. The members of the ethnic group who spoke this language then now speak Hausa language. The date of its extinct is not known.
8. **Teshenawa language:** Teshenawa is an extinct Afro-Asiatic language formerly spoken in the Teshena town in Kafin Hausa Local Government Area of Jigawa state, Nigeria. Its extinct date is missing.

THE CASE OF THE IGBO LANGUAGE; A LOOMING LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT

Marginalization of a language is the unfair treatment, relegation or negligence of the language for the promotion of another. Onyemelukwe (p. 1) noted that many of the Nigerian minority languages are endangered. This could be as a result of marginalization against these languages.

A survey of some primary and secondary schools in Ideato North Local Government Area on the marginalization of the indigenous language (Igbo Language) is highly disheartening. The researcher took time to visit some of these schools and through oral interview and physical monitoring, discovered the following:

At St. John Chrysostom Seminary, Osina, students are only allowed to speak Igbo once a week and that is on Wednesdays. Every other day must be English language. At Christ the King Comprehensive Secondary school, Akokwa, students are banned from speaking Igbo language except on Igbo day celebration which is celebrated only once in a term. At National High school Arondizuogu, there is no trace of Igbo language promotion except during the classroom period for Igbo lessons (Asusu Igbo) and that is the only time the students are permitted to speak the language. At Model Primary school, Arondizuogu, pupils are even compelled to pay fine by some classroom teachers for speaking Igbo and when interviewed, it was discovered that they use that to checkmate noise making in the class. At St. Nicholas Primary school Osina and St. Peter's Anglican College, Arondizuogu, promotion of indigenous language (Igbo language) is rarely done as

all the activities of the schools are done using the English language on daily basis. As a result, students eventually end up neither speaking correct English nor correct Igbo language, rather another version of language that can neither be classified as English nor Igbo. Some of them speak pidgin which they generally call "broken English" while a few who try to speak the queen's English end up committing lots of grammatical blunders. This is an unfortunate way of losing a language and, or endangerment of the language.

A pastor of a Church while preaching in his Church once said that he was going to use "Engli-Igbo." I wondered what sort of language that could be until I listened to the message and discovered words like:

1. Before I start, a choro m ibu uzo kenee everybody no ebe a.
2. Jesus kwuru si that everybody choro ife Chineke ga-eburiri uzo rejectia sin kpam kpam.
3. If you are a member of this church mana inaghi eme ihe ikwesiri ime, ihe o putara bu that na i so mana i soghi.
4. I want to thank God maka ututu taa because na the weather di so clement. etc.

To be frank, I wept for my mother tongue "Igbo language" after listening to the pastor murder our language in the name of "Engli-Igbo"

Also, in some neighboring homes I've been privileged to visit in the recent times, I discover that some parents compel their children to speak English language at the detriment of their mother tongue and, in order to satisfy their parents,

you see these children struggling with the grammar and phonemes of the English language. Sometimes, they even end up saying the opposite of what they actually mean. I once confronted one of my friends on this and he said that he wants his children to be intelligent in school. However, the reality is that he is misinformed.

The fact remains that if we continue like this, a time may come when there will be nobody again speaking the Igbo language as every Igbo man or woman may either be speaking English, pidgin or abridged form of the Igbo language as is popular among the majority of Igbo speakers today. This unfortunate situation is a high risk of language endangerment and, or eventual death. Crystal (p. 1) says that a language dies when nobody speaks it anymore.

CONSEQUENCES OF MARGINALIZED INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

From our study so far, the presence of a global/national language in Nigeria is a major reason for the marginalization of our indigenous languages. Crystal (p. 14-15), writing on the dangers of the global language has this to say:

Perhaps a global language will cultivate an elite monolingual linguistic class, more complacent and dismissive in their attitude

towards other languages. Perhaps those who have such a language at their disposal and especially those who have it as their mother tongue will be more able to think and work quickly in it, and to manipulate it to their own advantage at the expense of those who do not have it, thus maintaining in a linguistic guise the chasm between rich and poor. Perhaps the presence of a global language will make people lazy about learning other languages, or reduce their opportunities to do so. Perhaps a global language will hasten the disappearance of minority languages, or –the ultimate threat –make all other languages unnecessary.

Considering the above, we can deduce that the consequences of marginalized indigenous languages are enormous.

1. It can lead to the death of the marginalized indigenous language, thus causing the owners of the language to lose both their cultural heritage and identity.
2. It leads to inequality and the preference of one language above the other, thus making one language look superior to the other.
3. Marginalization of our indigenous languages breeds an unhealthy vacuum between the rich and the poor.
4. It makes people lazy to learn their indigenous language or even see it as unnecessary since

they have an alternative language which has been preached to be superior to their own mother tongue.

5. It leads to inferiority complex as the owners of the marginalized language and those who are unable to speak the foreign language will begin to feel that they are of low esteem and inferior to the owners of the promoted language or those who acquire it, etc.

FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MARGINALIZATION OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN NIGERIA

Crystal (p.15) opines that perhaps, a global language will hasten the disappearance of minority languages. A lot of factors contribute to the unjust marginalization of Nigeria's indigenous languages. The ones which are obviously prevalent in our environment as is listed by Ikoba et al (P. 5) include:

1. Inter-tribal marriages
2. Civilization and Western culture
3. Feeling of inferiority of the indigenous language to the English language (mental slavery)
4. Belief that the child may be limited in school if he/she imbibed his/her indigenous language
5. Parents living away from their home land where the children rarely meet their mates speaking their indigenous language.
6. Negligence of parents.

7. When parents are unable to speak their indigenous language.
8. Some school teachers and administrators are mis-informed (wrongly informed)
9. The multi-lingual nature of our country.
10. The presence of the English language.

AGENTS OF MARGINALIZATION AGAINST THE NIGERIAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

Crystal (p. 15) opines that perhaps, a global language will hasten the disappearance of minority languages. From our studies so far, it can be deduced that the following serve as agents/channels of marginalization against our indigenous languages in Nigeria:

1. The parents
2. The school teachers/administrators
3. The government
4. Traders
5. The elites
6. The society, etc

SUGGESTED REMEDIAL STRATEGIES

The following suggestion may serve as effective strategies to remedy the anomalies already created by the existing marginalization against the Nigerian indigenous languages

1. Nigerians should be proud of their respective indigenous languages and

cherish it as their identity and culture. We should always speak it with boldness, pride and confidence wherever we find ourselves and should be proud to be identified with it. Likewise, we should be glad and willing to share it/transfer it to others.

2. Parents should train their children in their indigenous language (L1). They should stop using English to form the foundation of their children's language development as the children may not find their bearing again trying to learn their mother tongue in the future and as a result lose their indigenous language.
3. The government should recommend one or more of our indigenous languages as the official language of the nation or at least, 'glo-calize' the English language in such a way that it reflects our culture and identity.
4. Teachers and school administrators should promote the indigenous language of their immediate environment and desist from undue

punishment of student and pupils for lack of competency in English language or for speaking “vernacular”

5. Nigerians should desist from the mental slavery which makes them believe that English language is superior to our native languages. We should have in our mindset that just as Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Efik or Idoma, etc are local languages to us here in Nigeria and English language is foreign, so also is English language local to the English people in USA and England and our own languages foreign to them. We must note that all languages no matter who speaks them are arbitrary, specie specific and specie uniform. So we must try and overcome the mental slavery of inferiority complex by protecting and promoting our own.
6. The Nigerian traders and merchants should promote our indigenous languages by using it as a language of trade. We should stop ass-licking the white man by trying to please them; learning their language for effective business transaction. If they are interested in our goods or services, then they should learn our own language and communicate to us through our indigenous language. In as much as learning their language is not discouraged at all by this paper, I am of the opinion that we are not obligated to learn their language.
7. The Nigerian elites should stop parading English language as the key to valued life and respect in the society. We must learn to value our indigenous language and be proud to identify even with the commoners

who speak it. Nobody should be looked down upon because of inability to speak the English language. In my opinion, the worst vagabond is a person who can neither hear nor speak his indigenous language but is fluent in a foreign language. Such a person is like an “efulefu” and we should not be proud of him/her no matter his/her antecedents

Conclusion:

The rate of carelessness over our indigenous languages in Nigeria calls for serious attention by all and sundry. The reckless marginalization against these languages should be checkmated in order to avoid a high rate of linguicide in the future. The consequences of marginalized indigenous languages can be enormous. It creates inferiority complex in the mind of a child who is forced to believe that his mother tongue is inferior and below standard, it leads to the death of such marginalized languages, it causes the

loss of cultural identities of the indigenous owners of the marginalized language, etc.

A collective effort of everyone, irrespective of class will go a long way in alleviating or putting a complete stop to the impending danger of linguistic in Nigeria.

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