

Preserving The Igbo Indigenous Knowledge Systems Within Folksongs: The Functionality of Nigerian English Pidgin (NEP)

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Abstract

This study investigates the suitability of Nigerian English Pidgin for preserving indigenous Igbo knowledge systems. It sets to verify the (in)adequacy of Igbo language as a linguistic tool for coding, sustaining and mainstreaming Igbo cultural values in an ever-changing Nigerian social linguistic environment. This study is anchored on symbolic interactionism. A random sample of 40 NCE students at the School of Languages, Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education (AIFCE), Owerri who are of Igbo origin were studied to decipher how well they can render folksongs documented in Igbo language. Structured and unstructured questions were posed to elicit information on their language choices and the underlying reasons for such preferences. The study reveals that about 60% of respondents cannot read the folksongs coded in Igbo Language fluently. This study, therefore, argues that the transliteration of Igbo folksongs into NEP, the language a significant number of respondents accept they conveniently and consistently use in everyday communication, a language that can verbalize socio-cultural distinctions, will reduce to the barest minimum the loss of cultural values of the Igbo people. The study therefore recommends that policies be enacted to facilitate the standardization of NEP for use in codifying Igbo folksongs.

Key words: Folksongs, Indigenous systems, Nigerian English Pidgin.

Introduction

All folk songs from indigenous communities, the Igbo people inclusive, find expression in the vernacular that is integral to their world views. These songs encapsulate indigenous knowledge systems unique to the Igbos of Southeast Nigeria; their values, beliefs, ideas, perceptions, and practices which must be sustained in the face of numerous adaptive challenges within the world's socio-linguistic environment. Presently, a new world order is created owing to the huge demand placed on English language, the language of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and of the global economy. With Britain previously colonizing a quarter of the world and the rise to economic world power of native English-speaking nations, English became a first choice for L2 (Second Language) users worldwide (Njemanze and Amadi 2009); thus, eroding the need for numerous vernaculars and aspects of their indigenous values. Among the Igbo people, the use of English in several domains as well as the official position English language occupies in Nigeria, impact negatively on the attitude of the Igbo people towards their language. Moreover, in Nigeria, the level of competence attained in English Language use gives either social advantages or results in discrimination (Garrett 2010). This foists on the Igbo people a new identity and a new normal. This new Igbo identity results in a need for a language form that will succinctly verbalize the new normal.

The Purpose of the Study

This paper sets to ascertain the adequacy of Igbo Language as a channel for coding, sustaining, and mainstreaming the Igbo people's indigenous knowledge systems embedded in Igbo songs. This is aimed at helping this study arrive at the most functional linguistic code for use in the face of changing times.

Methodology

This study adopts a random sample of 40 NCE students from the five (5) course combinations resident in the School of Languages, Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri who are Igbos. Five common Igbo folk songs from "Ka anyị gwurie egwu' an Anthology of Igbo folk songs (Apakama 2009) was used to test students' aptitude in reading works written in Igbo language. Structured and unstructured questions were deployed to elicit information on the student's language preferences. Qualitative and quantitative explanations were given.

Review of Related Literatures

Ndi Igbo: An Indigenous People

Indigenous people refer to “people who lived in a location before colonist or settlers arrived (Taylor 2021) and whose languages and cultures are continually being eroded by popular culture. The Igbo people are one of the indigenous people of the world (Ibekwe and Umeojiaku 2023). Within the seemingly homogenous Igbo entity, exists other communities which lay claim to a different ancestry, and having distinct dialects and values. For instance, the “Onitsha” Igbo of Anambra State claim ancestry to the old Benin Kingdom. In exhibiting their unique cultural heritage while refusing a diffusion of dialects, they derogatively term other Igbo neighbors “Nwa onye Igbo”. The “Owerri” Igbo of Imo State claim “Uratta” ancestry. They pride themselves in their filial relationships as against their “egocentric” neighbors. Their common aphorism “Ụyọ bụ ụyọ mua gi” and “Anyi tala ugba, ñuola mmii, onye agba agba kuruma” explicate their values of contentment and close bond of friendship.

The collectivity of these communal values, practices, norms, ways of perceiving realities and of living which ensure the survival and continuity of the Igbos as a people, are distilled in songs traditionally transferred through generations in their vernacular.

Traditional Igbo Folk Songs: A Compendium of Igbo Traditional Values.

Traditional folk songs are those tribally rooted songs that reflect the essence and inner characteristics of a culture. To the Igbo people of southeast Nigeria, traditional folk songs are of communal inheritance, and they epitomize historical facts, shared cultural values and important traditions. For instance, “Ọ nūrụ akwa nwa mee ngwa ngwa, Ọ bughị otu onye nwe nwa” teaches collective ownership of and collective responsibility towards children irrespective of parentage. Folk songs also reflect current lifestyles and the ever-changing life conditions. For instance, the folk song “Nwunye nwa m sị m suba bekee” expresses the changing family dynamics between mother in-laws and their educated daughter in-laws. Furthermore, English wordings had infiltrated some native songs eg. Ọnye sị na o nweghị ihe no ngani; dọkita sị ngani, loya sị ngani, polici sị ngani etc. signaling a shift in language use within Igbo communities.

The major drawback is that these traditional folk songs are transmitted in the oral medium, giving room for distortion or loss of vital elements. More worrisome is the intergenerational language shift that limits the ability of the elders to pass on complex conceptual frameworks to the younger people (Abanobi 2012;117).

The Nigerian Language Situation

Language makes the world and within a language, exists all cultural beliefs, values, and norms (Wood 2006;100). Over the ages, language remains the vehicle for cultural continuity (Tekigul, Bayadilova, Sadykova, Iskindirova, Kushkimbayeva, and Zhumagul, 2022). Among the Igbo people, language homogeneity is a farce due mainly to several non-mutually intelligible dialects of Igbo and the differing exhibition of competence in Standard English. The linguistic environment, therefore, seems to be an amalgam of distinct social groupings, consequently, putting pressure for the development of pan Igbo language. (Ani 2012 :113). Consequently, according to Oraka (1983), Dr. Ida C. Ward in 1939 developed a standard Igbo variety termed Igbo Izugbe. The subsequent acceptance of Igbo Izugbe by the missionaries, writers, and publishers enriched Igbo language through the incorporation of several loan words from several Igbo dialects.

However, the negative attitude of the Igbos towards Igbo language coupled with the obvious socio-political disadvantages associated with its usage, arising from the global status of English as a prerequisite for success, tilts language choices away from their vernacular. This language shift leads to a significant decline in the use of Igbo Language, thus, resulting in the erosion of the cultural values and ideas expressed within Igbo Izugbe.

Obviously, the new world order remains an insurmountable phenom. Scholars, (Ani 2012, Samson 2019, Mbalisi 2023) call for integrating Igbo language within the technologically driven world. This is slow in coming into fruition. Therefore, the sustainability of these Igbo values, a sustainable linguistic channel must be embraced to ensure generational transfer. It is therefore most imperative that a

‘nativized’ English form, which has elements of Igbo language structures and vocabularies, known as Nigerian English Pidgin, be used to store and propagate the indigenous meanings of the Igbo people of Southeast Nigeria.

The Nigerian English Pidgin (NEP)

It is a sociolinguistic fact that diffusion of linguistic forms occurs in pluralistic language environments. The NEP, a creole, is a product of linguistic and cultural contact between standard British English and numerous Nigerian vernaculars, Igbo language inclusive. NEP gets its local color from borrowing local languages used to express all the nuances of meanings within the native culture. NEP is termed Naija (Jalaludeen 2016). It is unofficially regarded as the language of the uneducated because its structure differs significantly from standard British English (SBE) taught in schools (Olatunji 2001). A profound acceptance of NEP is noticed amongst most social classes and today, it is used in the corridors of power, in the media, and vastly in the entertainment and advertising industries. Some Igbo words/phrases within NEP which help capture their distinct and peculiar mannerism and which have developed into becoming automatic retorts for WhatsApp replies include Nna-men, Kajad (O kara aka), Kpòm Kwem (On point), Ofe (wealth), O gini di (wetin, what’s that). Some NEP words with Igbo nuance include, born throwaway (Omulu tufuee), tight hand (aka ike), sweet mouth (onu uto), Bekee (Onyeocha), I stand with you (mu na gi kwu), strong head (isi okpukpu) etc.

The structure of NEP has significant resemblance with Igbo language, thereby making it easy to use. For instance, the pronunciation is not gendered. Eg. NEP has “E” as in (E come). In Igbo it is O (O biara) for both males and females. Furthermore, independent particles are used to indicate the tense of verbs in both languages. Both are not inflected languages, eg. (E come; o biara), (E come yesterday- o biara echi gara aga), (E-go come- O ga abia), (E come now now - O biara ugbu a ugbu a), (E no go come – O gaghị abia).

Currently, efforts at documenting and standardizing NEP especially the Wafi (Warri), Pitakwa (PH) and Lagos varieties have begun. The NEP for the Igbo people is still open to creative forms shaped by the needs of the speakers, but it has inbuilt common features and is consistent enough to mark it off as a distinct form deserving a study, language re-engineering, standardization and mainstreaming. This is most necessary in view of the perceived language shift among the Igbo people who seem competent and comfortable to use Nigerian English Pidgin.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts symbolic interactionism. This theory propounded by George Herbert Mead (1863 – 1931) and Max Weber (1864 – 1920) foregrounds the importance of language in creating common symbols and meaning for use in both intra and interpersonal communication (Hall 2007). This theory focuses on shared meanings elicited from stored understanding and interpretations which impact behaviors within a social context (West and Tunner 2017). The theory underpins how language is used to create and maintain a world that shapes individual behaviors which in turn preserves the nature and essence of a people. This theory is chosen because of the important role language plays in creating, modifying, and transmitting shared systems across generations which impacts upon how individuals and groups of people make sense of their world (Carter and Fuller 2015).

Data Presentation/ Discussion

Table I: The Students Language Choice

S/N	Content	Standard British English		Nigerian English Pidgin		Igbo	
		Number of students	%	Number of students	%	Number of students	%
1.	Which language do you speak often	6	15	28	70	6	15
2.	Which language are you comfortable to use among friends	6	15	32	80	2	5
3.	Which language can you use in extended conversation without code mixing	2	5	38	95	0	0
4.	Which language do characters you identify with in written works speak	10	25	26	65	4	10
5.	Which language would you consciously encourage your ward to speak	30	75	10	25	0	0

Discussion

The data generated shows significant tilt towards NEP. Thus, in generating question items 1&2, a significant number, 70% and 80%, of the respondents use NEP and are comfortable in its use among friends without fear of stigma. This finding is significant since all the respondents have a mandatory credit pass in standard English language WASC test to qualify for admission into the school. Oral conversation with the respondents reveals the ease at using NEP arises from lack of strict rules of concord and syntax among others. The data also point to the ease with which the respondents use NEP for intra-social and intra-ethnic communications.

Question item 3 shows the level of competence the respondents have attained in using NEP. The data reveals that 95% of the sample population reported being capable of using NEP without resorting to code mixing. Furthermore, from guided conversations with them, it was gathered that they see their ability to creatively and conveniently weave elements of both languages as a plus towards expressing all nuances of thoughts to suit their value systems and their Igbo world view.

Question item 4 shows that the respondents would identify with characters that use NEP in written works. This is understandable since authors normally cast the youths, especially in urban settings, as NEP users. This finding buttresses their earlier proposition regarding the ease in using NEP.

Question item 5 shows the stiff resistance to an official adoption of NEP in formal settings because elitist English opens doors to the corporate world. The data also indicate a wide gap between respondents who would encourage their wards to use NEP as against SBE. More significantly, the result shows the depth of disuse and the negative attitude towards Igbo language. Oral conversation reveals that they see the teaching and learning of Igbo language as time wasted owing to its low status within the Nigerian language environment. The over-riding question is “Wetin you go do with am? – what would you do with Igbo?” They have the opinion that the time, energy, and resources should be channeled towards learning a language that would be of profit to them in the future.

The study seek to empirically verify the ease with which the respondents render and interpret Igbo folk songs written in Igbo. They were asked to read aloud and meaningfully. Five (5) such songs, one each for birth, death, masquerading, achievement, and new yam celebrations were purposively selected from the anthology. It was discovered that the respondents were reluctant to engage in the exercise citing difficulty in reading Igbo passages. Ten (10) respondents representing 25% outrightly refused an attempt saying that their individual families reside outside Igbo geographical area where NEP is their primary language of communication. While all thirty (30) respondents identified the context for their use, 24 (60%) of the respondents showcased varying degrees of errors noticed in the length of pause, number of word repetitions, and tone realization tilting towards English structure. Only six (6) respondents read the songs fluently. Group discussions show that the domains for their use have been eroded by popular culture. Masquerading is regarded as a form of Pagan worship and Christian songs have taken over from these folk songs in such places as burial and new birth celebrations. Achievements are eulogized on social media and worse still, the respondents did not exhibit enthusiasm towards preserving Igbo language. Thus, conforming with their earlier position that learning/using Igbo is of no significant use to them.

The study reveals that efforts made at documenting this folk knowledge in songs written in Igbo was unhelpful in sustaining its significance among the Igbo people most especially where the predominant language used for communication, even within households, is either BSE or NEP. Thus, the result of the study diverges from the position expounded by Apakama (2009). Ozurumba (2019).

Summary and Recommendations

Songs are usually adopted to transmit messages. Preserving the indigenous knowledge systems embedded in traditional Igbo folk songs is a task that requires some of the exogenous systems of the 21c. These exogenous communication technologies are keyed in the global English. That is the language the new generation of Nigerians feel comfortable to use. In using the NEP, a nativized English form which chiefly consists of English words mixed with the vocabularies and grammar of numerous Nigerian vernaculars, Igbo inclusive, the peculiar Igbo experience could be sustained and shared within and outside the Igbo geographical area.

This paper therefore recommends the following: Nigerian English Pidgin should be made a parallel lingua franca with standard British English. Policy statements and the facilities of state should be deployed towards codifying and standardizing NEP. NEP should be used in official and unofficial domains. This would encourage users to build up the stock of vocabulary through coinages, inversions, and other word formation processes. ICT tools are facilitators of change. 21st century Igbo people among other “Generation Y” could create and share content in this new digital world using eLearning systems. Coding these songs in NEP would help generate interest in them from new users who are vastly knowledgeable in the use of pidgin.

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