

## LANGUAGE AS A VEHICLE FOR CULTURAL TRANSMISSION: THE CASE OF IGBO LANGUAGE

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### Abstract

*Language is a means of communication. It enables humans to co-exist as well as helps to preserve information. The culture of a people is a very important aspect of their being. It therefore requires that a people's culture should be well preserved, as well as handed over to up-coming generations in order to sustain the life and relevance of the people. In so doing, language plays a key role and language itself is culture. It begins from the home to the governments and nation as a whole, using different institutions. The paper surveys the position of Igbo language in transmitting culture. The paper observes that many people and agencies fail in their responsibility in transmitting culture. Such organs as the family (parents), the church, the media, schools, and so on have been presented as useful organs in transmitting Igbo culture using Igbo language. The Igbo people themselves are advised to patronise their language at every level of their communication as doing so is a good effort in transmitting the Igbo culture.*

### Introduction

Language is the most precious human resource (Dixon, 1997). Indeed, human society is inconceivable without language. Language defines our lives, it heralds our existence, it formulates our thoughts, it enables all we are and have. According to Anagbogu, Mbah, and Eme (2001:1), "Language is normally learnt through a system of symbols which every fluent speaker of any language has thoroughly learnt". This is to say that language is a medium through which people communicate their feelings, thoughts and aspirations to one another. Hornby (2006) defines language as "The system of sounds and words used by humans to express their thoughts and feelings". It is a method of human communication either spoken or written, consisting of words in a structured and conventional way. Fischer (1999:11) stresses that "Language in its simplest definition signifies medium of information exchange". This definition allows the concept of language to encompass facial expressions, gestures, postures, whistling, hand signs, writing and so forth. It includes any non-verbal method of expression or communication. A language then is not only a means of communication but carries with its vocabulary, its structure and its contexts much that it is indicative of the meaning of life to people. A language is to a large extent the embodiment of a peoples world view.

Igbo language is indigenous to the Igbo people and is one of the three major languages of Nigeria. It belongs to the African Kwa group of languages. Igbo language is spoken in South-eastern area of Nigeria in the following states; Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Abia, Imo, parts of Delta, Rivers States. In Igbo land, 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.

### **The Relationship between Language and Culture**

Language is an important part of the culture of a people. It is through their language that a given people express their folk tales, myths, proverbs and history. Udofot (1998:96) as quoted by Onwudiwe (2006) has this to say:

***The language of a particular society is an integral part of its culture. The lexical distinction drawn by each language will tend to reflect the culturally important features of objects, institutions and activities in the society in which the language operates.***

The language we speak is relevant to the people who use it more than anybody else. In other words, language relevance is tied to the culture of a people hence language is described as an aspect of people's culture. In other words, no culture can survive without retention of its language.

Ene, (2009) defines culture as the "Totality of behavioral patterns of a particular people: the creed, art, linguistic legacy, values, socio-political set up, ancestral religion and other peculiar legacies". He emphasizes further that culture is a people's way of life. It is the totality of socially transmitted values, languages, dialects, attitudes, social structures, political perspectives, social sophistication, economic endeavours, technological techniques, etc. Culture is also the aggregate of all products of human endeavours and thoughts: patterns, traits and particular products expressive of a particular period, class community or population. From the above, it is clear that culture is the totality of people's way of life.

In Hudson's (2001) view, "culture is the kind of knowledge which we learn from other people, either by direct instruction or by watching from those around us, we may assume that we share it with them, so this kind of knowledge is likely to play a major role when we communicate with them and in particular when we use language (Hudson 2001:78).

The essential features of culture that is learned and transmitted from one generation to the next rests on the human capacity to think symbolically. Language, perhaps the most important feature, is a symbolic form of communication. The word table, for example, is nothing other than a symbol for the actual thing, a table. Without language, culture could not be transmitted, people could not learn from one another across generations, and there would be no cultural continuity (Jervis 2006).

In reality, culture can hardly be fully developed and applied outside language and conversely. Language and culture are coeval, and are meaningful and comprehensible only in the context of each other. Language experts sometimes describe language as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which members of a "speech community" interact with one another. Speech communities may vary but the commonest type, the one that is most easily perceived is the so called ethnic; those who share one culture and speak one language recognized and established as one language in spite of dialectical variations. Language is therefore, an important factor in identifying a community characterized by a common culture.

Language is culturally transmitted. It is an integral part of culture, a reflection of many features of a given culture. Language does not exist in a vacuum. It is always contextualized. That is, it is situated within a socio-cultural setting or community. There is a necessary connection between language and society. It is a means of expressing a society's tradition and culture, so language exists as an aspect of a culture. Like culture, language is a learned and shared activity and is certainly one of the greatest means of acculturation in one's community (Biobaku 1981).

### **Language as a Vehicle for Cultural Transmission**

Language is the means by which humans are able to teach the upcoming generation all that they have learnt to date. If we did not have the ability to use language, then it would be largely impossible to transmit our knowledge and experience to the next generation of humans and successive generation would have to start afresh. However, because we have language, we are able to communicate necessary knowledge and social norms of behaviour to the up-coming generation. The above view is supported by an internet source (Kasper) which says that language enables human beings to transmit culture not only in the present but also from past to future generation. This is to say that language is an integral part of culture and it has the ability to transmit a people's culture. The main purpose of language is to transmit culture from generation to another generation. This culture is learned by new members of the group and shared by all members of the group through language. Languages have evolved to serve the cultural need of their speakers and serves as the principal vehicle for cultural transmission across generations. Indeed language enables people to transmit their tradition; for it is a store-house of all the values that sustain a people from generation to generation.

To Anagbogu, Mbah & Eme (2001), socialization (the process by which somebody, especially a child, learns to behave in a way that is acceptable in their society) is achieved primarily through language because it is a means the older ones in a society use to 'teach' the younger ones the culture of their society. Access to and participation in cultural life will only be possible and meaningful if we devise strategies for using our language for the expression of our scientific, technological, social, political, aesthetic and religious experiences. That one's own language is the embodiment of one's life experience is a well-known fact. No other language can crystallize our thought, give concrete meaning to our sensory experiences, express our affective moods and encode our beliefs and philosophies as eloquently as our first languages. In other words, all elements that give distinction to our culture are best transmitted through the language we have first learnt; and it is also the same language, which we can most effectively use to develop ourselves culturally. Disuse of our language leads inevitably to the distortion of our culture and to its ultimate bastardization and extinction.

Granted that there are other metaphorical senses of language which represent instruments also used as repositories and vehicles of expression of cultural communication: music and dance, arts and crafts, symbols and emblems, associations and institutions and so on, none can be equalled with verbal expressions. Therefore, the easiest and most readily used mode of preserving, expressing and transmitting culture continues to be verbal language.

### **Other Agents of Cultural Transmission**

Cultural transmission, also called cultural learning is the way a group of people in a society or culture tend to learn and pass on new information. Learning styles are greatly influenced by how a culture socializes with its children and young people. The key aspect of culture is that it is not passed on biologically from parents to the offspring, but rather learned through experience and participation. All culture is learned and not based on instinct. It is handed down from generation to generation.

For a proper transmission of the Igbo culture, Igbo language which is an integral part of the culture should be maximally utilized by the following agents of cultural transmission:

#### **The Family (Igbo Parents)**

As the saying goes; charity begins at homes. The family, here, the Igbo parents has the greatest role to play in the transmission of the Igbo culture. It is a well known fact that humans acquire language through social interaction in early childhood and children generally speak fluently when they are around three years. Children learn by imitation, they do what they see their parents or elders do. If Igbo parents are not proud to speak Igbo language to their children, it will be impossible for their children to learn the language talkless of speaking it. Every culture has a language and a culture is best transmitted in its language. Nwadike (2002:9) supporting this view affirms:

***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 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 instruction 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 takes place everywhere: in the home, on the play ground, on the farm, in the market, on the way to the stream, etc.***

Most regrettably, Igbo parents today have forgotten the mid night story-telling through which children are taught the Igbo norms and the dos and don'ts. The tongue-twisters which sharpen their tongue in speech: "gwa m gwa m gwa m" which sharpen their intellect as well as educate them. All these have been overtaken by film-watching most of which are in English language.

To redirect our young ones to the Igbo culture therefore, Igbo parents should go back to our cultural roots. Denying our children the use of Igbo language is denying them the reason for their existence. It is not by accident that we are Igbo, therefore, every Igbo parent should be proud to promote the Igbo language and culture starting from our homes. The use of foreign language in Igbo families is an indirect way of making our children look down on our indigenous language.

### **The School:**

With the introduction of Western Education, schools could play a major role in transmitting culture. Kasper (n.d.) stresses that "the function of the schools is not merely to impart knowledge and skills but also to transmit culture". All schools in Igbo land could be used to transmit the culture of the Igbo where they are located. In line with the above, Mr. Peter Obi, the governor of Anambra State publicly signed into law a bill to enforce the speaking and writing of Igbo and wide spread usage of Igbo language among "ndiigbo" in Anambra State and the diaspora (The Igbo language Usage Enforcement Law 2010). The law provides that principals of secondary schools in the state who promote pupils from Junior Secondary School III (JSS III) to Senior Secondary School I (SSS I) without passing Igbo, are to be removed from their positions and fined N5,000 for each pupil so promoted. Also any state or privately owned tertiary institution in the state found not to have established an Igbo language department or made Igbo language a mandatory general studies course by September 2011, shall pay a fine of N100,000 for every month in which the offence continues. Among others, the law bans administering of corporal punishment to students who speak Igbo in schools in the state. The law also makes Igbo language compulsory in all the categories of educational institutions in the state just as English and Mathematics. If the westerners are using schools to propagate their culture through their language, then we have to be wiser.

This paper is of the opinion that all the schools in Igbo land should be made to make Igbo language as compulsory as English language, (if not more if truly we are independent). The curriculum of Igbo should also be redesigned to emphasize oral Igbo, Igbo customs and traditions, Igbo skills and crafts, Igbo system of government, Igbo dressing and foods.

The structural base for government and politics is the family. Family here refers to all forms-nuclear, extended and even the kindred. From here, it extends to the village, then town up to the state and the nation. From the family to the town level, at least, Igbo culture should be propagated using Igbo language as the tool. Within the set-up are the various arms of government ndiichie, ndinze, ndi ozo and ndi igwe/eze. Each arm is supposed to champion the use of Igbo language in its activities.

### **The Government:**

This is another important agent for cultural transmission. Government in this context refers to the group of people who govern a country or state. The government has the power to determine the language that should be used and at what time. All Igbo governors should take a leaf from what the Anambra State governor is doing to promote the Igbo language and culture. It is not enough to sign a bill into law; the government should go further to see that the law is obeyed to the letter.

### **The Mass Media**

This includes Radio, television, Newspapers, magazines, in fact all means of communication which are directed towards a vast audience in society. The mass media are used to persuade, entertain, enlighten, mobilize and inform the citizenry. The mass media, especially television, have considerable influence on the process of socialization. Because children spend a great deal of their time watching television, Igbo scholars, and teachers of

Igbo language should be encouraged/sponsored to produce Igbo programmes which will help our children to learn the Igbo culture. Also, elders in the Igbo culture could be invited to speak on different aspects of the Igbo culture from time to time. Efforts should be increased by the various media to introduce more programmes in Igbo. Igbo newspapers should be established and sponsored. This will go a long way to change the attitude of Igbo children toward our mother tongue.

Again our media houses should understand that reading news more in English language is another way of killing our language. Efforts should therefore be made to broadcast news more in Igbo language especially in state-owned broadcasting houses.

#### **The Church:**

The church has a role to play in cultural transmission. The clergy in the churches in Igbo land should of a necessity use more of Igbo language in their messages. It is now fashionable for an Igbo preacher to deliver sermon in English language with an Igbo interpreter. This is because of the belief that any preacher preaching in Igbo language is not highly esteemed; and his message is not fully anointed. This attitude is very wrong, whichever way we look at it. Igbo language should not become a second language where it ought to be the first. Igbo preachers should learn the Igbo language very well in order to preach with it in Igbo land.

#### **Igbo language for cultural transmission**

Language is an important factor in identifying a speech community characterized by a common culture. Indeed, language enables people to transmit their tradition. Okediadi, (2009) opines that "Language is indispensable in transmission of culture for without it, man will automatically be an animal". In line with the above view Bodomo(1999) as quoted by Okere & Ahumaraeze (2011) says: "Each language is systematically different from the other in the sense that it has a particular way of arranging the signs that encode meaning and of communicating the world to its speakers". In this sense then, every language is an efficient tool for encoding the peculiarities of the particular environment in which a people live.

As had been pointed out earlier, language is an important part of the culture of a people. It is through their language that a given people express their folk tales, myths, proverbs and history. No culture can survive without the retention of its language. Igbo language is the language of the Igbo people. The Igbo language encapsulates, nourishes, and fattens the totality of the Igbo culture and preserves its distinctness. In attempting to transmit the Igbo culture to the next generation, we must rely more on Igbo language. Igbo culture cannot be adequately and satisfactorily expressed in Yoruba, nor can Yoruba culture in Hausa or Hausa in Ibibio and so on. Language is a part of a culture and express culture. In reality, however, a people's language cannot be separated from its culture.

The culture of "ndiigbo" finds expression in their agriculture, intellectual reasoning, moral values, dressing, food, kinship, marriage and languages. Other avenues of expressing Igbo culture includes the customs, beliefs, burial, social norms, religion, social and material traits of the people. How this culture survives depends on the capacity of "ndiigbo" to learn and transmit it to the succeeding generations.

The fastest way to obliterate the Igbo culture is to dwarf the linguistic legacy (Ene, 2000). But very few people have made serious effort in the advancement of Igbo language. Unfortunately, the efforts have not always been appreciated and exploited. In recognition of the contributions of F.C. Ogbalu to the Igbo language, Nwadike has this to say:

*There is no greater contribution one can make to one's motherland than to strive to preserve its cultural heritage, for any people who lose their culture, stand to lose their identity, therefore, stand to face extermination like the Tasmanians of Australia or some other peoples of this wide world who have lost their identities to others and were, therefore assimilated. Ogbalu forestalled the Igbo from being any of these. Really he was the father of Igbo language the architect of modern Igbo culture.*

In line with Nwadike's view, Afigbo (1995) speaking about F.C. Ogbalu's achievement observes:

*His concern was to create popular awareness of an interest in Igbo language, Igbo literature and Igbo culture. He was also concerned to show that the Igbo language was and is an adequate enough vehicles for Igbo culture, and that Igbo culture lacks nothing necessary for ensuing the Igbo people a fulfilling life.*

It is important to stress that the need for a sustained campaign for the upliftment of our language and culture is still important for us as a people. Ogbalu has made his own contribution to the development of Igbo language and culture. It is our responsibility as his students to expand the boundaries and frontiers of F.C. Ogbalu's crusade for linguistic, literary and cultural enlightenment. We have to rescue the Igbo culture by promoting it in our language. There is also the possibility of losing much of our culture, if no deliberate and directed effort is made to develop and apply it to the daily lives of the rising generation of Igbo people as expressed in the language.

### **Conclusion**

The fastest way to obliterate the Igbo culture is to dwarf the linguistic legacy. The culture modifies Igbo thoughts, speech, actions, and general behavior. How this culture survives depends on the capacity of Ndiigbo to learn and transmit it to succeeding generations. Translations are possible and sometimes necessary, but they will be as reliable as one wants to make them because some Igbo idioms and proverbs are not designed to be explained. We must therefore dedicate more effort to teaching Igbo linguistics.

The rising and falling of the Igbo language lies in the hands of the Igbo people themselves. In line with the above view, Hair (1967) states:

*...the Ibo experienced an upsurge of interest in literacy, - but it is not a genuine and continuing interest in VERNACULAR literacy. Ibo children, having been thought*

**to read vernacular primers, were hurried on by their parents to acquire, and to read English, the language of opportunity; in this way the Ibos gained a position of power in the colonial and post-colonial social and administrative order in Nigeria, but the Ibo language was neglected.**

The Igbo people need to be reminded that despite the immediate gains language replacement brings, those who voluntarily give up their language invariably sense a loss of ethnic identity, a defeat by a colonial or metropolitan power (with concomitant sensation of inferiority) and a distressing defection from one's sacred ancestors. This also entails the loss of oral histories, chants, myths, religion and technical vocabulary, as well as of traditions, customs and prescribed behaviour. Therefore, in attempting to transmit the Igbo culture to the next generation, we must rely on Igbo language.



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