IGBO AS AN ENDANGERED INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The paper examines the low-usage of Igbo language among some selected secondary school students in three Local Government Areas of Owerri. The paper uses questionnaire with close test to measure the knowledge of Igbo language among respondents in three LGA in Owerri speaking areas in Imo State in the SoutheastNigeria. The results of the data show that Igbo language enjoys low patronage and patriotism amongst the students used for thedata. Many of these students found it extremely difficult to express themselves freely in Igbo language and at the same time, they were unable to provide meanings for selected Igbo proverbs, words, and expressions. The significance of this work is seen in the fact that Igbo language stands the risk of gradual extinction if urgent measures are not taken by all stakeholders concerned to arrest the dwindling fortunes of the language.

Introduction

Language is the hallmark of any people's life and culture. Language encompasses people's worldview, custom, way of life and history in general. The loss of any language by a people according to Balogun (2013) is the loss of their root and the loss of their identity. When a language is lost, such a people who experience the loss continue to live in the shadow of other people's identity and culture. Ethnologists put the living languages of the world at seven thousand with a sad list of three thousand five hundred that are endangered and may beout of reach at the end of the twenty first century. Nigeria as a multilingual country is currently said to have over five hundred languages, though the dominant languages officially recognized by the government remain: English, Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo.

The exact number of languages spoken in Nigeria is not quite certain as there are some languages which are yet to be discovered. In fact, what constitutes a language or a dialect has been debated for too long a time by linguists. Hoffman (1974) classifies 396 language families

in Nigeria excluding dialects that are recognized while Hansford (1976) recognizes 395 languages in Nigeria. Blench and Dendo (2003) recorded 150 languages as spoken in Nigeria. Adekunle (1976) classifies the languages of Nigeria into groups according to their functions as medium of communication in the Nigerian context as examined below:

Group 1: Languages are the-major indigenous languages spoken by at least six million native speakers and used widely outside their state of origin by Nigerians whose mother tongues are different. They are; Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

Group 2: Languages are those not much used outside their state of origin but officially recognized and used at the national or federal level as one of the nine major languages. They are Kanuri Fula, Edo, Efik, Tiv, and Ijo, etc.

Group 3: Languages are minor languages with no official recognition at the state level. They are: Bura, Longuda, Aduge, Efai, Gwari, Kalabari etc.

While Adekunle's claims as regards theabove classification may be questionable in somerespects, especially with reference to Group 3 languages. It should be acknowledged that theFederal Government of Nigeria (1979) officially recognizes Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as tools forthe conduct of business in the National Assembly side by side with English. The multilingual character of the Nigerian nation has resulted in its inability to develop a national language thatcan reflect and integrate the cultural diversities of the nation. This development has placed the English language in a preponderance official life. Though regional languages like Yoruba, Igboand Hausa are also recognized by the constitution as official languages, it is, however, important to emphasize the fact that, English enjoys more prominence among the other languagesbecause while these indigenous languages are restricted to the regions which culturally produced them, English language cuts acrossculture, borders and races. Thus, the focus of this paper is onthe dwindling fortunes of the Igbo language and its progressive systematic displacement by the English language among secondary schools students in three local government areas of Owerri.

Review of Related Literature

Endangered languages are not necessarily languages with few speakers; in fact, the size of a group hardly matters. The viability of a language is determined first and foremost by the general attitude of its speakers with respect to their traditional culture, of which their language is consideredone of the most important exponents. NOW (2000) report is of the view that language endangerment arises in situations of contact between groups. Contact involves not only an exchange of cultural elements and products, but also of cultural prestige, which is often correlated with different degrees of technological advancement. A difference in technological know-how may lead to a sense of inferiority in the less highly developed group, which may then lead to dropping its culture, including its language, in favour of the more highly developed group. The report is keen to say that: the loss of one language is the gain of another, except in the case of genocide, a language is usually lost because speakers shift to another language.

Mufwene (2002), claims that languages are parasitic species whose vitality depends on the communicative behaviour of their speakers who in turn respond adaptively to changes in their socio-economic ecologies". Mufwene (2002) cited above is a general critique of the literature of the past decade on language endangerment. Other scholars like Muhlhausler (1996), Dixon (1997), Brenzinger (1998), Grenoble and Whaley (1998), Calvet (1998), Crystal (2000), Fishman (1997), Hagege (2000), Nettle and Romaine (2000), Maffi (2001) and Renard (2001) have also dealt extensively on this subject.

Derhemi's (2002) work is devoted to problems of endangered languages, particularly endangered languages spoken by minorities, focusing on the sociolinguistic study of the causes, circumstances and results of endangerment and other structural and social processes related to endangered languages and to their survival. Omo-Ojugo (2004) asserts that a language can only resist death/extinction if it is able to move from the status of oracy to a written status. In his definition of endangered language, Darhemi (2002:6) avers that an endangered language is a language that may soon vanish, ceasing to be used as a vehicle of communication, perhaps even disappearing completely from human history. This position is similar to Godesborg (2007:4) quoted in Balogun (2013) where Godesborg opines:

- a. Any language with over 50.000 speakers is 'not threatened'.
- b. Any language with under 400 speakers is 'definitely threatened.
- c. Any language with fewer than 3000 speakers with no status data has been assigned to 'no information' on the grounds that it might well be threatened.

To analyze the concept of an endangered language, the current paper supports Woodbury (2012) who is of the opinion that languages can be considered dead or endangeredwhen they arenolonger spoken in the form which we find them in ancient writings". He also opines that any language that is falling out of use or whose speakers are not handing the language over to the next generation is endangered and could go'into extinction in the near future. In other words, these are languages that have lost or fast losing their original forms and have become adulterated languages. In which case Igbo language fits in properly because of the fact that younger generation are finding it more convenient to use the English language than the Igbo language which istheir indigenous Language. Irrespective of the numerous texts and efforts of most Igbo scholars what matters in a language is usage and not written form. Wurm (1998) recognizes fivelevel mode of language status: (i) potentially endangered, (ii) endangered, (iii) seriously endangered, (iv) moribund, and (v) extinct. Following Wurm, therefore Igbo language may be classified as belonging to the first level. Any language thatcrosses the lines of either being potentially endangered or endangered is already passed into the limbo of time. Such a language may continue to have existence in a recorded form but could be falling out of use because of the preference of its speakers for more socially acceptable language. Indeed, languages with large number of speakers like Igbo can nonetheless be indanger.

Fishman (1997) points out that it is not because languages are not being taught in schools or lackofficial status that make them to be endangered but that they become endangered because theylack informal intergenerational transmission and informal daily life support. Fishman maintains that a language is simultaneously indexical of both the material and the non-material

properties of its traditionally associated culture, symbolic of that culture (and of membership in that culture) and, therefore, like all symbols, easily politicized, and finally, language is also part and parcel of the bulk of any culture (notethe complete interdependence of language and laws, religion, education, jokes, riddles, songs, blessings, curses, greetings and thousand pleasantries of everyday life). Culture and language are in large part identical rather than merely the occurrences or "fellow-travellers" that theyare all too often taken to be.

Reasons ForLanguages Endangerment

There are both remote and immediate causes responsible for the gradual dying out of specificlanguages. For instance, there could benaturalruinous causes like the physical well-being of the speakers, unfavourable climatic and economic conditions, that is famine and drought, habitatdisplacement, devastating ferocious diseases, desertification as well as unpredictable humanmigrations. All these are possible reasons why a language can be said to be endangered. Discussing one of the factors responsible for language endangerment and language death, Romaine (2002) posits that many language-policy statements are reactive adhoc declarations lacking a planning element. A policy is a government statement on a planned course of action usually contained in national documents such as The Constitution and National Policy on Education. The Nigerian National Policy on Education (NPE) states among other things the national policy on language use in government, education and so on. The Native American Languages Act (NALA of 1990) as an example of such policy as cited in Romance (2002) argues further that NALA is one of the most explicit statements on language ever issued by the United States Congress, yet it is a classic example of a policy with no planning dimension. Likewise, Watahomigie and McCarty (1998: 321) observethat "in practice, language rights have not guaranteed language maintenance, which ultimately depends on the home language choices of native speakers. Such decisions are notoriously difficult for extra-familial institutions to control, even when those institutions are community controlled".

In the specific case of Igbo language, the attitude of native speakers is one of the major factors responsible for its endangerment. Parents want their children to speak and learn English for social acceptability and economic advancement. However, it has been found out that the total abandonment of the Igbo languagebrings total dislocation and loss identity. The negative negligence and negligible use of Igbo by the elite, has spilling over effects on Igbo as a discipline. As good as the introduction of the so-called western education in the Igbo land is, it has however made majority of the elite divided personalities. Many of them are cosmopolitan nativists, fighting very hard to eschew their nativity, and at the same time fighting very hard to be adopted into the-cosmopolitan order. This is conspicuously demonstrated in the elite attitude towards the use of Igbo language.

Another factor which has affected the fortunes of the Igbo language is the issue of job opportunities and economic policies. Fabuamiand Salawu (2005) further affirm that this factor. Directly relates to the attitude of the elites, among the elites in Nigeria, the ultimate reasons for embarking on any educational discipline are financial inducement and economic well-being of the person pursuing such a discipline. In fact, rather than stick to their calling, some degree holders in Igbo language still struggle to find their ways into the so-called big money-spinning commercial ventures in telecommunications, banking and the oil and gas industries. It appears that in today's globalised village, the major dictate of the trans-national global market economic

policy is self-reliance. Thus, a greater number of the elites will never permit their children to study Igbo as a discipline because of lack of financial self-reliance. To them, therefore, of what use is the language if it cannot meet the dictates of the global economy?

Research Method and Data Presentation

The method applied in this research comprises questionnaires, observations and interviews specifically meant to test students' knowledge ofIgbo language and the parents' attitude towards the language.

Population

Three hundred students comprising public and private schools in Owerri Municipal, North and West Local Government Areaswere sampled. The questionnaires were structured into two parts and the students were givenforty minutes to complete them. Ten schools were used in each of LGA Senior students in year two (SS2) were used as subject for the questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed with the help of the subject teachers and the class teachers. These were also collected immediately upon completion by the students with the same time limit given all of them. The questionnaires were later analyzed in order to test our hypothesis.

To test the parents' attitude to Igbo language vis-a-vis the two other dominant indigenous languages which are Hausa and Yoruba languages in Nigeria, personal observation and interviews were conducted on the parents across the three dominant languages in orderto compare the parental attitude towards each of the three regional languages in Nigeria.

Analysis and Discussion on Data Collection

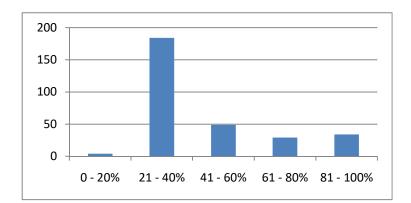
Section A: It was discovered that Igbo language is the mother tongue of all the students. All the respondents claimed that they can speak their indigenous language which is Igbo language, and they make use of the language at home and with friends. More than 70% of these students said that they take Igbo as one of their subjects in school because it is compulsory. But it is very surprising when only 43.1% of the total students sampled claimed that they can speak their indigenous language clearly without mixing it with English, 4.1% said this will be impossible for them. 52.8% of the students said that they are not sure they can speak Igbo without mixing it with English language.

Section B: Part of the question was divided into four parts which comprised a comprehension passage with five questions. It also had five proverbs to be completed; five English words to be translated into Igbo language and five Igbo words and expression which the students were asked to supply their meanings. These were structuredintoB, 1, 2, 3 and 4 respectively while the answers were categorized and graded as follows: (0-21%), (21-40%), (41-60%), (61-80%) and (81-100%).

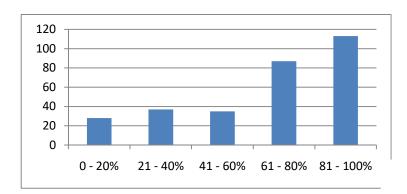
Using the simple percentage frequency the results of the questionnaires are graphically presented below:

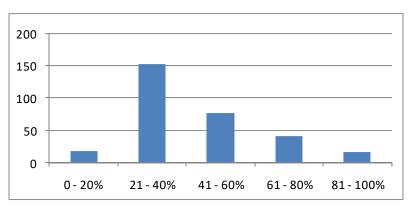
Comprehension	Proverbs	Translation	Meaning	Grade Level
4	28	17	133	0-20%
184	37	152	135	21-40%
49	35	76	18	41-60%
29	87	40	10	61-80%
34	113	15	4	81-100%

COMPREHENSION



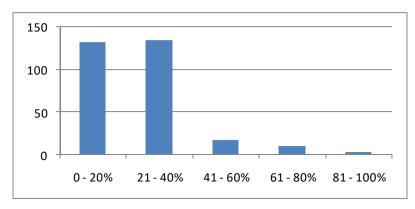
PROVERBS





TRANSLATION

MEANING



In B1, the students' results in comprehension were not encouraging because they did not demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of fading comprehension in Igbo language. It is disheartening that, based on the performances of these students as presented above; they have deficiencies in reading which serves as the foundation of knowledge in any human endeavour. This showed that most of the students find it difficult to read Igbo language. This fact was attested to in the performance indicated above. In fact, more than 50% got between 21-40%. This 21-40% performance group remains a pointer to the low failure rate recorded in other grade level as seen above. 49 candidates were able to make the grades within 41-60% while 34 and 29 candidates respectively fell between the grades levels of 61-80% and 81-100% as it were.

The analysis for proverbs in B2 showed that the students had the full grasp of the common proverbs given to them. This is evident in their grade levels which showed a highest frequency (113 candidates) in the total number of students who fell between 81-100%, 87 students got between 61-80%, 35students fell between 41-60%, 37 students were within the limit of 21-40% while 28 students got between 0-20%. This showed that they have internalized the given proverbs as they have nearly become common expressions among Igbo users especially students.

It could still be noted that 55 students out of the total number of students examined got below the average which is an indication of their deficiencies in their indigenous language.

In section B3, the students were asked to translate the following English words into Igbo language. They are: *deep*, *sleep*, table, *argument*, *and child*. The results that were got also revealed that most of these students even though they claimed they still take Igbo as a subject; they are nonetheless not properly grounded in the grammar of the language. This is because though we have just 17candidateson the 0-20%, 152 of them fell between 21-40%. 76 fell between the range of 41-60%, while 40 and 15 were between 61-80% and 81-100% receptively. The implication of this is that many of the students have general knowledge of Igbo language since they claimed that they use the language at informal levels and mostly with their friends when they have the opportunity.

Section B4 was based on a test of meaning of some Igbo words. Students were asked to provide meaning to five Igbo words which are *ura*, *ochenkwago*, *mghagha*, *nwa*, *ndakpu*. The analysis showed that 133 students got less than 20%, 135 students got between 21-40%, 18 students got between 41-60% while 10 students got between 61-80% and only 4 students were able to make the grade level that fell between 81-100%. What this suggests is that the students have peripheral knowledge of their indigenous language which makes the language to stand the risk of losing its original form as it were.

Research Limitation

As a result of time and money constraint, the researcher could not visit the three LGAsto interview parents and also to observe their modes of communication with their children. Thus, the visit was limited to *Alaba market*, *Orie Obibi market and Nkwo ukwu Ihiagwa market* all in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria on different days. Before the researcher interviewed few parents, she had monitored and observed the communication modes between the parents and the children.

Alaba market in Owerri Municipal LGA where there are different classes of women: highly literate, semi-literate and very few illiterates who have even been exposed to English language and could speak a bit of theEnglish language. All these classes of women used English language as their main means of communication with their children. When they were interviewed, they were of the opinion thatsince the medium of instruction in school *is*English, speaking English with their wards will help them to master whatever subjects they are taught in school.

At *Orie Obibi* market in Owerri North LGAmany Igbo motor spare parts sellers were put under observation as they related with their children and apprentices. This place consist of young boys who usually come around to assist their parents after school hours and some apprentices learning how to sell motor spare parts. Amongst these people, their dominant language is Igbo language which they speak with their children and apprentices even though sometimes, they code mixed with English language.

Interviews conducted on some of these parents(mostly male) revealed that language showed their identity and bond them to their roots andthis is what they want for their children hence, the usage of their language.

At *Nkwo Ukwu Ihiagwa* market in Owerri West LGA, the dominant language between parents and children who are still teenagers was Igbo language. The parents mostly women are uneducated and when interviewed, they lamented their inability to speak English and said that they speak Igbo language to their children because that is the only language they could speak.

From the different studies carried out; it was discovered that most of these students identified with Igbo language but they obviouslyare not very well exposed to the language, they have it as their first language and it still remains their mother tongue. It was discovered that most of them were first exposed to English language in schools which accounted for their ill performances especially in reading, translation and the provision of meaning for some common Igbo words and expressions. It is disheartening to know that parents who are Igbo speakers pride themselves in the fact that they communicate with their children in English. They thereby discourage their children from speaking and using the language as a means of communication. Parents buy story books in English language for their children but they do not deem it necessary to do the same for Igbo language thus, they are far contributing to the gradual extinction of the language as they help to reduce its spread by their various actions without knowing.

The Implication

When a language is moving gradually towards extinction as a result of the users' attitude, it is an indication that aculture is going out of existence. It is a pointer that the story of a people is about to be lost. Igbolanguage with its rich culture of aphorisms, proverbs, folklore, folktale, oral poetry, oral tradition, moonlight stories, songs, panegyric, praise, and others is gradually losing its relevance and emphasis. While parents do not find time to sit down and pass down cultural heritage through the earlier mentionedmedia to their children, the cultural values are ebbing out and these are being replaced with foreign cultures as exemplified in different forms of attractive entertainment like the Cartoon Network, Disney World and others. These acts and many others will have negative impact on the younger generation as it will push them further away from their roots and culture. Many students process their thoughts in English language and so produce expressions like: "The spoon has fallen off the rack" for "Ngaji esila n'ebe nfanye ya dapu". Emeka juru ipiki call mu yesterday, an expression which is more of English than Igbo language and many other expressions likethese. Notwithstanding the aforementioned facts, the paperrecognizes that language changes overtime as a result of many things, these changes in any case, validate the dynamism of language. The position of the paper is that such changes should enhance, enrich as well as strengthen the language rather than inhibiting it.

The Way Forward

There is the need for government, parents, schools, policy makers, language planners and other stakeholders to put in place urgent measures that will arrest this unwelcome situation. The first thing to do is to create cultural awareness and revival with the aim of repositioning Igbo language in a way that an average Igbo person will be proud of the language and also wants to identify with it. This can be done by encouraging people to speak pure mother tongue. The mixing of Igbo languagewithEnglish by Igbo speakers should be discouraged. We should borrow a leaf from the French & German government who banned the mixing of French& German language with any other language on her media. We need to concentrate more on the upcoming generation so as not to sell outIgbo culture totally to a foreign culturelike the English language. Also, parents need to go back to the tradition of storytelling to teach morals and cultural values; they should speak Igbo language to their children and encourage the children to do the same thereby enhancing their knowledge and confidence in the language.

Furthermore, it is ironical to see academics in Igbo language presenting papers in English; they should be encouraged to write their papers in Igbolanguage instead of English language to lend credence to what they are professing. The media is not left out in this crusade; the media must encourage and look for sponsors for pure Igbo programmes. Also interesting programmes in Igbo language that ourchildren and youth-related must be encouraged. Children and youth-focused drama, comedy; music with the active involvement of the target audience; the youths and children must be encouraged. This could gradually displace the Cartoon, Nickelodeon and the Disney series which have nearly captured the upcoming generation. Government also needs to actively encourage the preservation of indigenous languages. It is not enough for our government to put policies in place but they must follow such policies up. Such emphasis that they lay on payment of tax by the citizenry should also be laid on the importance of the mother tongue by way of seeing that these policies are implemented.

Government can sponsor jingles to create awareness on the importance of the mother tongue; it can also sponsor billboards that will also create awareness with such written in Igbo language. Competitions that attract motivations and rewardfor excellent performance in Igbo language at all levels should be encouraged and given wide publicity in order to effect positive impact on other students. Igbo language dictionary should be made available online as a resource material, specialist in the language can also teach Igbo language in an interactive manner online. This no doubt will assist sincere and willing students to learn and improve their knowledge of the language. Lastly, this paper supports the establishment of an Igbo Academy which will encourage academic research in the culture of Igbo as well as encourage thetranslation of some scientific-oriented subjects into Igbo language.

Finally, it is worthy of note that Nigerian's National anthem is rendered in English in all the geopolitical zones in the country. To enhance cultural rebirth and identification, the onus lies onregional/state governments in all Igbo speaking states to ensure that the national anthem is also sung in their respective regional languages. This could help ignite a cultural rebirth especially in terms of language usage.

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