

## THE ECONOMIC FACTORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF IGBO LANGUAGE

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### Abstract

Language grows and develops with time. Numerous factors contribute to language development. It may be social, cultural, political, religious, educational, economical etc. This study explores the economic factors in the development of Igbo language. The study is motivated by the lack of scholarly insights into the economic factors in the development of the language. Despite the growing number of studies on Igbo language development, the economic factors to its development have not been explored extensively. Efforts are made to highlight the constituents of those factors, the nature of those economic factors, the challenges grossly faced by those factors and as well, the extent at which if these factors are maximized, can help develop Igbo language for the good of immediate generation of speakers and her posterity. The study used secondary source for gathering reliable and adequate data. It reveals that there are outstanding factors in the development of Igbo language. It was also concluded that those explored economic factors are paramount to the development of Igbo language and therefore, should not be underestimated.

**Keywords:** Economic Factors, Language Development, Igbo Commercial Nobility (I.C.N), Igbo Entertainment Industry, Igbo Agricultural Prowess (I.A.P).

### Introduction

Language is the life wire of every society. Whatsoever is done in life is done with language. This suggests that language cuts across every life endeavours, be it political, sociological, economical, cultural, religious, educational etc. The economic values of a people are influenced by the language they speak and the language as well, is influenced by the economic values. That is to say that the influence is bidirectional. This is in line with Marxist view put forward by Dittmar (1976) that speech behaviour and social behaviour are always in constant interaction and that material living conditions are important factors in the relationship. The point here is “material living conditions” are important factors in the relationship.

Suffice this to say that the economic values of people are vehicular in their lives’ sustainability. These economic values constitute certain economic factors that influence their linguistic repertoire and core values.

Igbo language is an area of interest with regard to such phenomenon. It is one of the three main dominants languages recognized by the federal Government of Nigeria as an official language. It is mostly spoken by the people living in the eastern part of Nigeria within the

states like Anambra, Abia, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo and some parts of Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta States. Igbo people are distinct from other ethnic groups in Nigeria particularly in their economic prowess. The importance of this distinguishing factor should not be undermined as it is part of the people's life and culture. This is in consonance with Mazuri's suggestion in Onu and Obianika (2019) that the economic foundation of democracy, therefore, seems, to favour the choice, development and promotion of one or more indigenous African language widely understood by the people. Igbo language and/or people possess and are favoured in this aspect of economic vigor and productivity as economic veterans. This is what this article hopes to discuss subsequently.

### **Definition of Concepts**

**Economic Factors:** Economic factors are those factors that affect the economy of people and include commerce, interest, rates, tax rates, law, polices, wages, and governmental activities. It is a set of fundamental information that affects a business or an investment values. According to Bamgbose (1991), such key economic factors include labour costs, interest rates, government policy, taxes and management.

**Language Development:** Eberhard *et al* (2010) see language development as the result of the series of actions planned and executed by language communities to ensure that they can effectively use their language to achieve their social, cultural, spiritual, political and economic goals. Eberhard *et al* (2019) further proposed that those cause of actions most often include the development of writing systems, the standardization of norms, and the elaboration of terminology designed to expand the functions of a language in a society. This in a nutshell, according to him, can be summarized thus: graphization, standardization, and modernization. Language development may also go beyond corpus planning and cover abroad range of activities including advocacy on behalf of the minority language and other actions outside of the realm of linguistics proper. Here, language is used in a variety of ways in which the community finds it useful. With the above concepts in view, Katie (2015) asserts that the very roots of a culture can often be lost or scarified in the rapid-paced push towards globalization and economic development. She added that the result of the economic power of countries like U.S and China has a direct correlation with the extinction of minor languages because of their place in the world economics.

In fact, experts say that the more economically successful a nation is, the faster its languages are lost. This could reveal why the shared claim that Igbo language is facing a serious endangerment, where there is a noteworthy number of the people preferring English language to their mother tongues and code switch stylishly, defiles all opposition. Now, to what extent can economic development contribute to the development or death of a language? This study is poised to answer this in an elaborate manner.

### **Literature Review**

In Nigeria and beyond, the Igbo people had at various times demonstrated the strong will to develop their society and economy. This can be seen in Equiano's "Interesting Narratives" which was released in 2005, where the living paradigm of the Igbo people was x-rayed narratively. In his words he said,

*"Agriculture is our chief employment; and everyone, even the children and women are engaged in it....our land is uncommonly rich and fruitful, and*

*produces all kinds of vegetables in great abundance... My father has one of those elders or Chiefs I have spoken of, and was styled Embrenche; a term as I remember importing the highest distinction, and signifying in our language a sort of grandeur.”*

This goes to suggest that Igbo people in their precolonial era were experts in agriculture, importation, craftworks and had a rich soil.

In a similar standpoint, Adams and Crow (1977) comment:

*“The Eboes (Igbo)... are a well formed people of the middle stature: Many of their women are of remarkably symmetrical shape and if white, would in Europe be deemed beautiful. This race is...of a more mild and engaging disposition than the other tribes particularly the Quaws...they are preferred in the West India colonies for their fidelity and utility as domestic servants, particularly if taken there when young as they then become the most industrious of any of the tribes in the colonies”.*

To buttress further the industry and adroitness of the Igbo economically, “Ndi Igbo, the lost Tribe of Israel by Eneako” unveils that the referent name “Oyibo” came to be during the slave trade era. During this period, the Igbo slaves were the most demanded brand at the “slave market”. Whenever slaves were brought to the slaves market, the buyers who were mainly the white usually asked, “Is this one Oyi Ibo?” (Interpreted, is this one from Igbo extraction?). If the answer was yes, such slaves had more monetary values than their equals. According to Eneako (2002), their high-rated value was because the Igbo slaves were hardworking, honest and satisfactorily faithful. That was how the word “Oyibo” came to be, and not the common shared opinion that the name was the name given to the Europeans either.

Chukwu (2015:70) avers that “Igbo economy was practically anchored in the three main pivotal sectors namely; agriculture, non-agricultural production and trade”.

Based on these claims and premises of these scholars ranging from Dittmar (1976) Equiano, Adam and Crows (1977), Eneako (2002) and lastly Chukwu (2015), it would be unarguably true to include the following as the economic factors that influence Igbo language development: **Igbo commercial Nobility (ICN), Igbo Agricultural prowess (IAP), Natural resources, Human resources, Non Agricultural or Industrial Production Dexterity of Igbo, Economic Policy and Macro-economic Stability, Foreign Aid and Improvement in science & technology.** These factors form our basic discussion concepts with a view to highlighting the nature of these economic factors, the challenges facing them as well as how to maximize them to the development of Igbo language.

### **The Igbo Commercial Nobility (ICN)**

One of the economic factors in the development of Igbo language is commerce. Commerce is the exchange of goods and services especially on a large scale. It includes legal, economic, political, social, cultural and technological systems that operate in a country or in international community. Commerce is highly prominent to the Igbo people. Every ethnic group has definite attributes and peculiarities that distinguish them from every other set of people in a particular geographical location. One of Nigeria’s greatest assets is our diversity.

Igbo people have great reputation in Nigeria and beyond as resilient and dogged traders who build viable small scale business to large enterprises which are sometimes independent of government intervention or funding. This can be seen in Igbo entrepreneurial activities.

Orugun and Nafiu (2014:158) opine that “entrepreneurial activity is the enterprising human action in pursuit of the generation of value through the creation or expansion of economic activity by identifying and exploiting new products, processes or markets”. This definition captures the entrepreneurial tact of Igbo as they are good at discovering and harnessing new business opportunities. In line with the above claim, Maliga in Orugun *et al* (2014) discloses that 74% of investments in Lagos are owned by Igbo, 5% by Hausa/Fulani, 15% by foreigners, 5% by other Nigerians and 1% by Yoruba extraction.

The Igbo as business veterans have their business tentacles spread across Nigeria and beyond. There is no continent on earth where Igbo people are not found pursuing their business enterprise. Nworah (2011) outlined some of the business areas where the Igbo entrepreneurs have their ventures as follows: transportation, construction enterprise, petrochemicals, pharmaceuticals, real estate management, commerce (import and export), appliances, building materials and clotting.

Igbo people ply their trade in some of the largest markets in the whole of Africa where most of these goods and services are displayed. Places like main market Onitsha, Ariaria Market, Aba; Alaba International Market, Lagos; Oshodi Market, Lagos, among others. Igbo people do not carry out these business activities in isolation. Many other tribes and languages associate and interact with Igbo people causing language contact. When two languages come in contact, the tendency is either code-switching or code mixing. This is in line with Katie (2015) in her discourse on how “Economic Development Affects Language”. She says, “the two dominant language of our time when it comes to business are English and Mandarin Chinese. Indeed, as China currently has the fastest growing economy in the world, the many benefits of learning Mandarin Chinese cannot be overemphasized. And with the U.S, Britain and Australia still considered as the economic power houses, countries which refuse to give into the English speaking “craze” seriously run the risk of being left out not only economically but on the political stage as well”.

The result of the economic power of countries like the U.S and China has a direct correlation with the extinction of minor languages. Just as it was stated earlier, experts say that the more economically successful a nation is, the faster its languages are lost. For instance in North America, Upper Tanana reportedly spoken by more than 25 people in Alaska, is quickly disappearing, giving way to the more dominant English language. China, a country with linguistic diversity as expansive as the nation itself, has just under 300 living language today. However, as Mandarin has become the verbal currency to business, education and politics, a large quantity of these are lost, never to be heard again, (Katie 2015).

This theoretical viewpoint answers the question, “to what extent can economic development affect language?” As Igbo people travel far and wide, there is language contact. Many drop Igbo language at a time for other ‘business language’. This has negative effect on Igbo language. More so, some people who have business in retail or consumption basis, try as much as possible to create a good business environment by learning Igbo language. There is

this factual assumption that when you speak Igbo language to an Igbo business man, it creates room for healthier and harmonious business environment which may lead to price reduction. So, Igbo language grows in this aspect and covers a wider geographical range and numerical acceptance.

Onuand Obianika (2019), must have captured this reality, by asserting that because of the commercial nature of the Igbo people, if the language is developed in international standard, there is no doubt that it will attract foreign investors. For them, of everything we consume in Nigeria today, 70% has Igbo signature on it either in production, distributorship, marketing, transportation and importation.

### **Igbo Agricultural Prowess (IAP)**

As started earlier in our introduction, agriculture is said to be one of the mainstays of Igbo economy involving men, women and children. Most of the Igbo people especially in rural settings are farmers. Igbo land is located at the tropical rainforest zone. The soil is fertile, rich in soil nutrients, and this is very conducive for farming; and operate an ideal land tenure system that provide for the land needs of the member of the community.

At present, certain crops are associated with Igbo because of their religious role in Igbo cultural context like yam. Some other crops that are widely produced among Igbo community include rice, plantain, banana, maize, cassava, cocoyam, pumpkin, peppers, cucumber, water yam, gourds, okro, vegetables etc. Yam is recognized as the king of Igbo crops and plays some important roles in ritual and religions context. Yam is gender conventionalized in Igbo setting. It is popularly associated with men. The importance of yam in the economic and social life of the Igbo granted the religious outgrowth of Ifejioku (god of yam) in many Igbo communities. It represents a ritual object in Igbo religious ceremonies like naming ceremonies, marriage ceremonies, title ceremonies, covenant making ceremonies e.t.c. Some Igbo elites can travel to nations to celebrate the new yam festival with their family and friends as seen in recent event where a certain Nigerian senator was rumored to have gone to celebrate it in Germany.

Rice is another crop produced at a commercial rate by Igbo people. Rice is one of the staple foods in Nigeria, for both the rich and the poor. The domestication and cultivation of rice is one of the most important events in the Igbo agricultural system. Although Igbo are not the highest rice producing state in Nigeria, Okeke and Oluka (2017) enumerate the following to include the percentage values on the level at which the Igbo people are operating in rice production. Ebonyi-81%, Imo-80%, Enugu-69% etc.

Although some Igbo communities show less interest in farming because of urbanization, and practice it at subsistence level, the Abakaliki, Nsukka and some other Igbo communities practice agriculture at commercial level. The farm produce has attracted both internal/local and external bodies who came to patronize the producers. At times the products are tagged Igbo names that are of Igbo lexicon while some customers tend to speak the language to enable them have a very harmonious business environment. Through these, the language grows. However, it is noteworthy that the federal government can enhance agricultural practices in Igbo land by providing the farmers with the necessary mechanism to enhance productivity.

### **Natural Resources**

This is another economic factor that gives a particular geographical location an edge over another. Natural resources are made up of those concentrations of natural occurring solid materials in or on the earth's crust in such forms that economic extraction of the material deposit is currently or potentially feasible (Ugwuoke and Madu, 2016).

At the contemporary time that Nigeria's economy yearns urgently to diversify its mainhold from crude oil, researchers are in various fields to uncover alternative economic sustainability. The Igbo land should be the focus point for there lies numerous of them unexploited. The following natural resources are found in Igbo area:

**Ebonyi:** lead ore, Zinc ore, limestone, clay, and kaolin deposits, which were used as agents in vegetable oils, bricks and ceramics, salt, gold, marble, brine, shale, granite, quartz timber, etc

**Abia:** Phosphorus, oil and gas, shale, gypsum, lead, zinc, copper, glass sands, granite, timber oil, palms rubber trees e.t.c.

**Enugu:** Coal, iron, ore, clays, oil and gas, shale, glass sands, granite uranium etc.

**Imo:** Timber, zinc, crude oil, gas, lead, calcium carbonate, white clay, limestone, oil palms, basalts, marble, gravel, gold ore, copper ore etc.

**Anambra:** Natural gas, crude oil, bauxite, ceramic, e.t.c.

Some other Igbo regional enclaves are blessed with different mineral resources like Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers state, etc. Some of them are undiscovered and untapped. Naturally, they shade value to the personality of the Igbo as a nation and as a linguistic group. Developing them and utilizing them can brace up the linguistic repertoire of Igbo people. This is in agreement with Ugwuoke and Madu (2016)'s claim that the discovery of more natural resources such as mineral deposits will give a boost to the economy and the people there in.

### **Human Resources (Labour Force)**

The skills, education and training of the labour force have a direct effect in the growth of an economy. A skilled, well-trained workforce is more productive and will produce a high quality output that adds efficiency to an economy. A shortage of skilled labour can be a deterrent to economic growth. An under-utilized, illiterate and unskilled workforce will become drag on an economy and may possibly lead to higher unemployment.

This suggests that the greater a percentage ratio of workforce or human resources is, the greater the economic productivity of a people. Igbo language and her corresponding dialects have not received the crucial attention they deserve, but there are people who are assiduously working to bring Igbo to limelight and enhance its value both in Nigeria and in diaspora. The shocking threat faced by Igbo language rather is the attitude of the speaker towards the language. According to Ani (2012), Igbo language instead of gaining communication height in the hierarchy of languages is currently moving in the downward trend in the comity of human languages and this draws increasing concern amongst individuals and scholars within the Igbo nation and beyond. To buttress this further, he lamented that the prediction of UNESCO that Igbo language may be heading for extinction and subsumed by other stronger Nigerian languages by 2025, if nothing is done, might be unarguably realizable.

Okoye and Onwuegbuchanam (2011:547) have shown that "hardly can an Igbo man make a statement without code switching". This is in line with Onu and Obianika (2019) claim while



stating the factors militating against the growth of Igbo language by the owners of the language.

So, the current situation of the Igbo language endangerment can be remedied by the speakers and scholars of Igbo language by showing deeper interest in the language. Indigenous languages should be used in the training and development of work force. It would help sustain native languages, Igbo included.

### **Macroeconomic Stability and Economic Policy**

Eberhard, Gary and Charles (2019) see economic policy as a course of action that is intended to influence or control the behaviour of the economy. In other words, they are measures by which the government attempts to influence the economy. This kind of policy covers the systems for setting levels of taxation, government budgets, money supply, interest rates, government ownership, etc.

Similar to this, macroeconomic stability encourages investment and development. Rapid devaluation can cause capital flight and decline in the growth of an economy. An economic policy on the other hand can enhance the development of an econolinguistic repertoire of a language or marit. As argued by Onu and Obianika (2019) while making reference to Nigeria policy on language, the reason for the decline of Igbo language rests on the non-application of the National Policy on Education (NPE) as it concerns the medium of instruction at different levels of education. In Nigeria, some economic policies do not give an enabling atmosphere for some languages' health, sustenance and economic growth. Economic growth is measured by increase in the amount of goods and services that are produced in a country.

Some economic policies most times seem to be targeted at a particular ethnic group. The cashless policy, placing bound on importations of some goods where Igbo thrive at etc. Many people have alleged that all these threats are signals of fear on the other ethnic nationalities of competing with the southern easterners who are good at entrepreneurial activities. These threats in no small way hamper not only the economic activities of Igbo but also their language development. It goes a long way at compressing Igbo linguistic core values thereby giving room for language endangerment. In some occasions, some are challenged not to openly disclose their linguistic identity so as not to lose some economic opportunities.

### **Industrial Sector in Igbo Language Development**

In the pre-colonial era, this sector involved a number of local industries and crafts which includes pottery, blacksmithing, smothery, mat-making, sculpture, wine tapping, cloth weaving and fish smoking among others. Earlier before now, these industries flourished in Igbo land before they began to face teething challenges. The first major challenge was slave trade where some able bodied men, women, youth and even the aged were kidnapped and sold to Europe.

Adam in Chukwu (2015) estimated slaves sold annually of Igbo extraction to be not fewer than 16,000. So also during the colonial era, the colonial master crippled the Igbo traditional local industry by incessant importation and influx of foreign goods thereby choking the Igbo products.

Notwithstanding, at the exit of the colonial masters in 1960, Igbo industrial tact regained vigor. Many manufacturing companies in Nigeria today are owned by Igbos like the Innoson motors producing all sorts of automobiles for Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Ghana, etc, the Awka arts and crafts, Igbokwu smith, the Aba textile industry, Abakaliki rice mill industry etc.

### **The Igbo Entertainment Industry**

The first Nollywood movie was made by a small time electronics trader named Kenneth Nnebue and the movie was entitled *Living in Bondage*: The Igbo popularity in movie industry is evident in the ‘who is who’ in Nollywood industry today like Genevieve Nnaji, Nkem, Owo, Pete Edochie, Chinedu Ikedieze (Aki), Osita Ihome (Paw Paw), John Okafor (Mr Ibu) Patience Ozokwor (Mama G.), Some of these movies are acted in Igbo language thereby enhancing the growth of the language.

The Nigerian Music industry has also blossomed with many Igbo artists. These artists have been in the limelight even before Nigeria’s independence. They have also contributed tremendously to the growth and development of the Igbo lexicon through creation of new words, slangs etc. Current Nigerian music stars of Igbo origin have also continued in this direction through their various genres of music. It is noteworthy to state that there should be local and international set ups to invest massively in the Igbo entertainment industry. This would bring about sustained industrial revolution, growth and development.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Language and life are an inseparable whole. Language cuts across every human endeavour and it is vehicular in life sustainability. It is therefore worthwhile to see to it that Igbo language does not die. To actualize this, the economic shared values of Igbo people as veterans in economic activities should be encouraged. Certain economic factors like commerce, agriculture, natural resources, human resources, industries, economic policies etc, should not be under emphasized in Igbo “econolinguistic”. The development and growth of a society cannot be separated from the language they speak. The challenge of promoting the development of Igbo language demands actions on all fronts. Igbos should not be unaware that their economic activity can be a threat to the language in some occasions as they interact with people of other ethnolinguistic group. They should develop more interest to speak the language and influence others to do same using their commercial capabilities as an advantage. So also, Igbo economic and entrepreneurial moguls should change their uncritical attitude of external investments by hearkening to the quality advice articulated by most Igbo economic scholars. Interestingly, they should be aware of certain tribalistic and ethnic threats to their economic livelihood like some Nigeria economic policies and seek ways to outsmart and maneuver them.

So also, in the midst of the crisis of the national question however, some experts believe that Igboland and territories around it can be transformed to become the economic hub of not only Nigeria but West Africa Sub-region. In view of this, Nigeria’s first minister of Aviation, Chief Mbazulike Amechi recently stated that “the only reasonable thing to do is for the Igbo to use what God has given them; the gift of hard work, the gift of entrepreneurship, trading expertise and the gift of their technological superiority to exploit and look inwards and develop Igbo land industrially and technologically to such an extent that Nigerians will be forced to depend on Igbo technology, expertise and industry”. When this is done, Igbo



language will grow healthily in all aspects of language development, in values and especially in technological outputs.

In conclusion, it is not gainsay that Igbo people have contributed immensely to the economic growth of the nation. Moreover, aside the natural resources which are found in various parts of Igbo land, agricultural sector has not suffered loss, as its capacity has been boosted by the Igbo people. Furthermore, industrialization such as smiting, carving, commercial activities and several arts works have also contributed to the economic growth of the nation. Finally, the Igbo entertainment industry; movies, music, comedies, etc are great economic back bone to the nation. Developing Igbo language and the people is an investment that will yield great outcome. Therefore considering these aforementioned factors would yield an increase economically.

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