

## **A look at the degradation of the Igbo language and culture**

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*Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are recognized as Nigeria's three major languages. However, the Igbo language currently cannot be said to compete with the other two major languages, Hausa and Yoruba because of the degradation noticed in the Igbo language and culture particularly in schools, business sectors and churches. This degradation is attributed to the poor attitude of the Igbo towards their language and culture. This paper highlights the attitude of the Igbo exhibited in schools, business sectors and churches towards their language and culture and makes recommendation on how to overcome the problem.*

### **Introduction**

Language plays an important role in man's ability to communicate well. According to Pratt and Traugott (1980:56), language has been defined as a systematic means of communicating ideas and feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, and gestures having understandable meanings. Obi (2002:144) aligns with Pratt and Traugott by saying that if our language does not have a word for something, then that thing automatically does not exist for us.

Language is an important tool for culture transmission. Oderinde, (1996:234-239) said that loss of primary language is loss of cultural heritage. In the words of Kayode (1997:6-7) "vandalism, hooliganism and violence would have been the order of the day if a society exists without language". This will therefore make man and his environment neither to develop nor progress. That is why Nigerian policy on education (NPE, 1998) states that for the interest of national unity, each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major Nigerian languages.

These three major Nigerian languages are used to enlighten the people on what is happening in the country. In the words of Obi (2002:149), “People cannot observe what they do not know. People can always be carried along if language is properly used.”

### **Roles/functions of language**

The following have been listed as the roles and functions of language.

- To direct motion in others, both men and animals.
- To communicate ideas, message etc.
- As a means of expression.
- To give delight merely as sound etc.
- Expressive/emotive function: This occurs when language is used to express the speaker’s inner feelings or state of the mind.
- Directive/persuasive function: The speaker in this use of language directs the hearer to carry out an action.
- Poetic function: the language user uses it creatively to achieve aesthetic purpose.

### **The contribution of language to the growth/ development of culture**

Language contributes immensely to the development of culture. It is through it that culture is transmitted. As an integral part of culture, it reflects many features of a given culture. Language and culture go hand in hand. As a result, the development of language brings about the development of culture.

There is nothing new in the observation that there is a one-to-one relationship between language and culture, especially among a people for whom there has not been any language death. In spite of all that have happened to the Igbo people and their culture, their language has shown a great deal of resilience and vitality, more so in spoken medium.

Language is a core aspect of every culture. Without language there will be no heart-to-heart connection between species of any kind. The Igbo language is a cultural legacy our forefathers transmitted to us. This is an identity that we must keep. Without it, the Igbo people are lost and the tribe forgotten.

In Igbo land today, we are experiencing death in our language and culture because the foreign languages and the ways of life of their owners are more respected in Igbo land. This is especially the case with the English language. We also respect the Western/European ways of

dressing and behaviour. We feel aggrieved this day how the Igbo language is fast deteriorating. In our schools, markets, public places, business sectors, and even at home, no one seems to speak the Igbo language anymore. This is indeed sad, knowing full well that the Igbo language is one of our major forms of identity. The importance of language, the Igbo language, is very much obvious. Without being told, the Igbo language makes a clear distinction between Onye Igbo/Ndi Igbo and the rest of the Nigerian populace. It is indeed a shame that many Igbo people no longer see Igbo culture as very valuable, unique and worth showing off in public places. The Igbo language is our identity at home and abroad, an identity God has given to us just as he gave to others. At present, foreign languages are more respected in Igbo land, especially the English language which has today become our lingua franca, to the extent that you must credit the subject before you can gain admission into institutions of higher learning. Many Igbo students fail to gain admission into the University because of their inability to credit the English language even after scoring well above credit in other subjects including their native language. It is not as if we should not learn or speak foreign language but this should not be to the detriment of our own language.

### **Characteristics of language**

The following are characteristics of language:

conventional and arbitrary

systematic

resourceful

dynamic

symbiotic

social usage

uniqueness

universal

variable

culturally transmitted

### **Places where degradation of the Igbo language are observed**

\* *In schools*

The most successful way of ensuring that the Igbo language does not disappear from the face of the earth is teaching and learning it in our schools from the nursery to the university level. But sometimes people are regarded as being savage if they speak Igbo. You will be tagged “Jew man”. Whatever that means is still a mystery to me. The language has so deteriorated in our nursery schools which is the bedrock of western education, to the extent that you hardly find a young pupil speaking Igbo.

\* *Business sectors*

If there is any sector in social life where one needs to understand people’s culture, then it is the business sector, more so under Nigeria’s capitalist, business society. But this sector does not make use of the Igbo language. Igbo people prefer western culture to the detriment of their own language.

\* *In churches*

Most preachers who organize church programs, or crusade in places where there are plenty of old men and women who speak and understand Igbo will also prefer to preach in a foreign language which these old men and women would not understand.

\* *In offices*

Igbo people working in different government sectors prefer to use English in carrying out their work even when they are dealing with their fellow Igbo. Even when the person they are dealing with does not understand the English language, instead of using a native language (Igbo) that the person will understand, they will make jest of that person by speaking English. It is only among the Igbo people that such behaviour is noticed. Yoruba and Hausa people have been noticed to employ their languages when dealing with people from their tribe.

### **Recommendation**

Government should seriously take into consideration the importance of improving major languages in Nigeria. Igbo language particularly should be used in our schools and pupils and students should be encouraged to speak the language.

Books should be published in the language which should be used from nursery to university level. Business sectors and those organizing any programme should use native language which everybody, young and old people, will understand unless in a place where there is audience from other tribes.

## **Conclusion**

Language which has been described as an important tool through which culture is transmitted should be religiously used by those that own the language. People should not allow anything to set their language and culture back. Instead they should employ everything at their disposal to see that their language is moving forward.

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