

REVITALIZATION OF IGBO LANGUAGE AFTER THE UNESCO PREDICTION

Sunny Ifeanyi Odinye (PhD)

Department of Igbo, African and Asian Studies

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria

Email: is.odinye@unizik.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

Language is a system of communication whether spoken or written which consists of sounds for speaking and symbols for writing that is used by members of ethnic group or nation for communication, expression, identity and culture. Igbo is an ethnic group of south eastern Nigeria whose language has about 25 million speakers who live in Nigeria and abroad. Unfortunately, Igbo language is endangered and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) forecast its extinction in future if nothing is done to revitalize it. Surprisingly, there are divergent opinions about the UNESCO prediction. However, the prediction has awakened the call for a revitalization among the Igbo people. This paper examines the revitalization of Igbo language after the UNESCO prediction with Hinton (2018) principles of language revitalization as a model. At the end, it was found that a positive language attitude precedes language revitalization. In conclusion, some recommendations and suggestions were made in which home/parents and school/teachers are most important and effective in language revitalization.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a world without a language. In that a world, there were no communication, interaction, teaching, learning, marriage, family, school, etc. In fact, such a world is meaningless without a language. Language is a unique gift from God to humanity. Language is a feature with which every human being (unless the person has a speech disorder) is endowed with. Human language is different from animal or other types of language. Language is species-specific to human being. The most crucial features of human language are its infinite productivity and creativity. Human beings are infinitely productive and creative in use of language. This is why human beings are unrestricted in their communication. These features and characteristics are not found in animal language. Animal communication is by contrast finite and restricted. In this study, language is referred to human language.

We live in a world of language. Whatever we do in this world: relationship, trade, interaction, teaching, instruction, etc., we make use of language. Language is the tool for communication. Orji and Enweonye (2011) confirm this statement by saying that “language is used as a means of communication. It is its most obvious use. As a means of communication, we refer to all and types of ‘verbal’ interaction among human beings”. In other words, communication is the major function of a language. According to the *Webster’s International Dictionary*, language is “a

systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures or marks”. Similarly, *Collins Dictionary* defines language as “a system of communication which consists of a set of sounds and written symbols which are used by the people of a particular country or region for talking or writing”. This is to say that in communication, we make use of sounds primarily and symbols/marks/gestures secondarily. The online *Encyclopedia Britannica* offers the following definition of language:

Language, a system of conventional spoken or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves. The functions language include communication, the expression of identity, play, imaginative expression, and emotional release.

From the foregoing, language is a system of communication whether spoken or written which consists of sounds for speaking and symbols for writing that is used by members of ethnic group or nation for communication, expression, identity and culture. There are different definitions of language proposed over time which are somehow generally similar and related in their meanings. Nevertheless, there is no one particular generally accepted definition of language. We will cite a few definitions of language here from linguists and scholars to support and affirm the above definitions. Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), widely considered one of the fathers of modern linguistics defines language as “a social product of the speech faculty and a collection of necessary conventions which they have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty” (Saussure, 1916). He distinguished between *langue* (language) and *parole* (speaking) in his book, *Course in General Linguistics*. *Langue* consists of the abstract, systematic rules and conventions of a signifying system. It involves the principles of language, without which no meaningful utterance would be possible. Whereas *parole* is the concrete examples of the use of *langue*.

Edward Sapir in his book, *Language: An introduction to the study of speech* defines language as “a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols” (Sapir, 1921:7). Furthermore, Okediadi (2011:527) says that “for the linguist Edward Sapir, language is not only a vehicle for the expression of thoughts, perceptions, sentiments, and values characteristic of a community; it also represents fundamental expression of social identity”. In defining language, Chomsky, the originator of the generative theory of grammar gives linguistics a new direction. To him, knowing a language means being able to produce an infinite number of sentences never spoken before and to understand sentences never heard before. In this regard, Chomsky (1957:13) says that “language is a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length, and constructed out of a finite set of elements”. Chomsky defines language as the construction of sentences that can be generated using transformational grammars (Trask, 2007).

IGBO LANGUAGE

Igbo language is a member of Kwa group of languages from the Niger Congo language family according to Joseph Greeberg's 1963 and Bendor-Samuel's 1989 classifications of African languages (Asonye, 2013). The Igbo language is one of the eight major languages in the Benue-Congo Group of African languages. It is spoken by an estimated twenty million Nigerians (Echeruo, 2001). According to Wikipedia, free online Encyclopedia, "Igbo is the principal native language of the Igbo people, an ethnic group of south eastern Nigeria. The language has approximately 24 million speakers, who live mostly in Nigeria and primarily of Igbo descent". The Igbo are the speakers of the Igbo language. They today occupy the south eastern region of Nigeria, which comprises the states of Imo, Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, parts of Rivers and Delta and Cross River states. The above mentioned areas are where the Igbo are predominantly found, but they can be found even in their large members in all parts of the world (Igbokwe, 2013). However, according to Uwechie (2016), "Igbo language is obviously one of these endangered languages spoken by about 25 million people. Igbo is the principal native language of south eastern people and it has more than 20 different dialects. It is also recognised as a minority language in Equatorial Guinea".

The fact that Igbo language instead of gaining community height in the hierarchy of languages is currently moving in the downward trend in the comity of human languages is drawing increasing concern amongst individuals and scholars within the Igbo nation and beyond (Ani, 2012). The increasing concern calls for revival of the endangered Igbo language. According to Wikipedia, an endangered language is "a language that is at risk of falling out of its use as its speakers dies out or shift to speaking another language". In the case of Igbo language, the language speakers are not dying out but shifting to speak English and other foreign languages. Uwechie (2016) says "English is used today at all educational levels and for transacting all government businesses relegating Igbo and all local languages to the background". Because of this, "it has been observed that Igbo language is fast deteriorating. In our schools, markets, public places, business sectors and most annoying at homes, no one seems to speak Igbo language anymore..." (Igbokwe, 2013). In the same vein, Orji and Enweonye (2011) say "Igbo language use continues to lose its ground among its users each day especially the youths of this present generation". They go further to state that "Igbo language use and its importance are issues that continue to generate views among Igbo linguists". The decline in the use of Igbo language, not only among the youths but also among the adults – educated and uneducated, has generated views and concerns not only among Igbo linguists but also by every Igbo person, home and abroad.

THE CONDITION OF IGBO LANGUAGE

There is a decline in the use of Igbo language at homes, in schools, churches, at social and cultural events, and even in government long before the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) prediction of Igbo language extinction. This is caused by colonisation, civilization and introduction of English language to Nigeria, particularly in Igboland. The decline in the use of Igbo language by Igbo people especially the elites and educated ones are the effects of colonisation and globalisation. According to Uwechie (2016), "certainly, the declining use of Igbo language can be traced to the beginning of British

colonisation and the subjugation of Igbo culture and language to English culture”. Uwechie (ibid) goes further to say that the colonizers successfully indoctrinated Ndigbo to despise their way of life as primitive and satanic, and to covet the colonizer’s way of life as the ultimate form of civilization and godliness.

Out of ethnic groups in Nigeria, Igbo ethnic group seems to be the only one that suffers most the effects of colonisation, civilization and globalisation. Igbo people are good at imitating and copying other people’s culture to the detriment of their own culture. It is true that British colonisation in Nigeria had ended in 1960, but English language which is the British language has grown and become an official language in Nigeria. Uwechie (ibid) states that English language as the official language of Nigeria was enthroned by British government in Nigeria as a direct consequence of colonisation. In Nigeria today, English language is not just an official language but a lingua franca. English language has dominated almost all Nigerian indigenous languages. Igbo language suffers it the most.

In 1949, Frederick Chidozie Ogbalu, a mission tutor at Dennis Memorial Grammar school, Onitsha formed the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC). According to Abanobi (2018), “The Society was to be one veritable instrument with which he was to register most of his achievements for the language and culture of the Igbo people for the rest of his life”. He goes further to say that in terms of contribution to the development of Igbo language, culture and literature, Ogbalu towers above all. Mazi Ogbalu published more than 100 books in Igbo language, literature and culture. Before his death in 1990, he took Igbo language and culture to a greater height with his Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture.

After the death of Mazi Ogbalu in 1990, the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPLIC) also died after some years. The death of Mazi Ogbalu and SPLIC affected the development of Igbo language. This and the domination by English language had led to the decline in the use of Igbo language in schools and other places. Many schools in Igboland stopped the teaching of Igbo language. Some schools even banned the use of Igbo language in classroom. Igbokwe (2013) says, “In the classroom, Igbo speaking is a taboo, pupils who speak Igbo in classes are made to pay fines or punished”. A young linguist, writer and campaigner for the revival of Igbo language, Maazi Ogbonnaya confirmed what Igbokwe (2013) said from what he wrote on his Facebook page on 28th September 2018 thus,

Schools in Igboland: They punish anyone that speaks Igbo, I was a victim. In each class there is an inscription: ‘Igbo speaking is highly prohibited in the class’. I was flogged mercilessly for speaking Igbo while in secondary school. You are laughed at or seen as dullard if you speak Igbo continuously

I was in secondary school when Igbo language was referred to as a vernacular. I was banned from speaking vernacular in the classroom. The class prefect recorded and submitted the names of students who used vernacular – Igbo language. The ‘defaulters’ would be punished or forced to pay fine. Uwechie (2016) affirms by saying, “speaking ‘vernacular’ in class at most secondary

schools is a punishable offence”. It was and still an offence to speak Igbo language at some schools in Igboland. This is the present state of Igbo language. Uwechie (ibid) says that “most primary and secondary schools do not offer Igbo language as a subject on their curriculum thereby setting the stage for the early and slow death of the language”. If Igbo language is not taught in primary and secondary schools in Igboland, tell me how it can be revived? This is opposite of what is obtainable in most schools where English, sometimes French or even Chinese languages are made compulsory.

In recent years, Chinese government is promoting her national language, Mandarin Chinese all over the world. Most Nigerians especially Igbo students are learning Mandarin Chinese with pride. Igbo people are not proud of their God-given language. Okoye and Onwuegbuchunam (2011:547) assert that “the Igbo people feel proud speaking other languages like English, Hausa, Yoruba and feel shy speaking their local languages or dialects”. In support, Ogbonnaya (2018) says that shying away from speaking your mother tongue and pride in other languages as superior to your is what should be criticized. We should criticize and condemn Igbo people who take pride in speaking other languages, local and foreign and shy away from speaking their own language. Asonye (2013) has this to say:

Igbo people have developed a positive attitude towards English to the detriment of their own language. An average literate Igbo person wants to flaunt his or her mastery of English language at the expense of Igbo.

The positive attitude of Igbo people is not only towards English language but also towards French, Spanish, German, and recently Mandarin Chinese. Igbokwe (2013) asserts, “The Igbo have embraced foreign languages in place of their mother tongue”. This is a very serious problem. It is like ‘loving other people and hating oneself’. According to Ani (2012), “Igbo language is falling out of the communication choice of many Igbo people”. In other words, Igbo people prefer other languages to their own language. This is to say that many Igbo people hate Igbo language. There is a negative attitude towards Igbo language by Igbo people. In support of this assertion, Anonye (2013) says, “It is a fact that Igbo people acknowledge that Igbo people exhibit a negative attitude towards their language”. Nwadike (2002:97) captures the picture by saying that, “The greatest problem that has faced Igbo from all times is the apathy of the Igbo man towards his language”. And similarly, Ani (2012) says, “The greatest problem facing Igbo language is the Igbo man’s attitude to his language”. These hatred, apathy and negative attitude from Igbo people towards Igbo language are a serious challenge to the revival of Igbo language and culture. According to Adichie (2012:26), “We are all responsible for the poor state of Igbo language today”. We should blame ourselves for the decline in the use of Igbo language at home, in schools, in churches, at social and cultural gathering. Parents and teachers are the first set of people to blame. It is at home and schools that children acquire and learn their local languages with ease. Both parents and teachers including the school administrators are guilty of this heinous crime against Igbo language. Maazi Ogbonnaya (2018) says this about Igbo parents:

Igbo parents: they punish their children for speaking Igbo and even go to schools, telling school administration to stop teaching their kids Igbo. Due to this, Igbo is now optional in schools in Igboland till this minutes.

The young parents are victims and their children automatically become victims in this circumstance. Language as a part of culture is preserved by passing it down from one generation to the other. Many Igbo parents failed to teach their children Igbo language. By so doing, they failed to preserve Igbo language. Igbokwe (2013) says that “Igbo is a lost language in most Igbo families as most parents no longer speak nor teach children the language. Instead they beat and scold their children for speaking Igbo”. In support of this claim, Ani (2012) says that “It is no longer a taboo to hear and see parents that shamelessly ban their children from speaking Igbo language at home”.

The church, in recent times, has contributed to the decline in use of Igbo language in Igboland. Igbo people are mainly Christians after the introduction of Christianity by the Europeans. Christianity helped to abolish evil traditions in Igboland like killing of twin. However, Christianity contributed to the neglect of Igbo language and culture by the Igbo people. Christianity was introduced side by side with western education which English language is the medium. For one to acquire the western education and be converted to Christianity, one needs a mastery of English language. In pursuit of western education, Igbo people abandoned and neglected their own language. Okoye and Onwuegbuchunam (2011:547) state that “The reality is that the hegemonic influence of English has relegated Igbo to the background, especially in the practice of Christianity”. Because of influence and dominance of English language in Nigeria, particularly in Igboland, churches even at village conduct services in English. The ‘Pentecostal churches’ are the champions in the use of English language in conducting services in Igboland.

The State governments in five Igbo States: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo failed to promote Igbo language which led the decline in use of Igbo language in schools and government. It is unfortunate that during electoral campaigns in Igboland, the politicians and government officials use English language. In the north and west, Hausa and Yoruba are used respectively. Governors in the northern and western Nigeria address their people in Hausa and Yoruba respectively. But in the east where Igbo language is the dominant language, the governors address Igbo people in English language. The State Assemblies in the north and west use their local languages unlike the State Assemblies in Igboland. According to Ani (2012), “the government in Igbo states are practically not doing enough to put the Igbo language in the scheme of first class languages of the country. The government of the Igbo States are still not proactively promoting Igbo language’s place a multi-million language”.

UNESCO PREDICTION: CONFUSION AND REACTIONS

So much has been said and written by Igbo elites in recent times about the alarming decline in spoken Igbo language by Ndigbo themselves and the possible extinction of the language in the

nearest future (Akabogu, 2016). The decline in the use of Igbo language is not only seen in speaking but much more reflected in reading and writing. More people can still speak Igbo language but only a few young people can read and write Igbo language. It is no longer a news that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) predicted that Igbo language will go into extinction in future. Uwechie (2016) says, “Igbo language is one of the many tribal languages that UNESCO predicted in 2012 will become extinct by 2025 if nothing is done to check their fast declining use”. Similarly, Ossai (2017) states “the fear became more pronounced when in 2012, United Nations Educational Cultural and Scientific Organisation (UNESCO) predicted that ‘half of the 7000 plus languages spoken today will disappear by the end of the century’. It is predicted that Igbo language will become extinct by 2025 if nothing was done to save it”. The actual year UNESCO made this prediction is not accurately captured by many authors. Most scholars like Uwechie (2016) and Ossai (2017) agreed that the prediction was made in 2012 while others agreed it was earlier predicted around 2006. According to Asonye (2013), “Towards the end of 2006, the United Nations made a prediction that some minor languages of the world will go extinct in the next 50 years. On the list was the Igbo language spoken in the south eastern Nigeria by over 20 million people”. Another confusion surrounding the UNESCO prediction on the extinction of Igbo language is the actual year when the ‘prophecy’ will be fulfilled. Some authors wrote it is on the year 2025 while others agreed it is on the year 2050. Uwechie (2016) and Ossai (2017) are some of the authors who agreed the year of the prediction is on 2025. Ogbuokiri (2017) and Mbah (2018) cited in Oladele (2018) are part of the group who said that the UNESCO prediction will be fulfilled in the year 2050. Ogbuokiri (2017) agrees that “the United Nations Educational Cultural and Scientific Organisation’s (UNESCO’s) prediction that Igbo language would go extinct by 2050”.

This UNESCO prediction has generated many reactions. Asonye (2013) says that “several reactions from Igbo indigenes and speakers have continued to trail UNESCO prediction of Igbo language death in the year 2053, both positive and negative”. Boniface Mbah, a professor of Igbo linguistics at University of Nigeria, Nsukka is of the opinion that “the prediction by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) that the Igbo language will go into extinction by 2050 is not based on any empirical evidence”. Professor Mbah says that those who claimed that the Igbo language will die based on the analysis that Igbo children are being brought up with foreign languages are not aware of how many children are being born as native speakers of the language. Mbah believes that UNESCO prediction is a claim without any empirical evidence. But the question is how many of these children born as native Igbo speakers continue to use Igbo language? Many of them abandon Igbo language for English or any other foreign language. Another scholar in Igbo language, Mazi Chigozie Nnabuihe, an Associate professor at the University of Lagos declares the UNESCO prediction a fallacy. As a keynote speaker at 2018 UNESCO International Mother Tongue Day Celebration at the Ndigbo Lagos Foundation; he says “...I totally disagree with the UNESCO prediction that Igbo language may soon go into extinction”. His disagreement is based on the large number of speakers of Igbo language which makes the language a major language by every classification. Usually, it is a minor language with a small number of speakers that easily and likely goes into extinction. However, there are examples of major languages in extinction today. Latin and Sanskrit were

two languages with large number of speakers that had gone into extinction. From seeing the UNESCO prediction as a claim by Mbah to a fallacy by Nnabuihe, Mazi Pius Uchenna Okoye, The President General Igbo socio-cultural organisation, Igboezue International considers it an insult and a sacrilege. According to him, “this prediction we considered as an insult, a sacrilege and we therefore resolved never to allow this happen in this generation or in others to come”. But Onowu Michael Ozua Okoye says that rather than see the insult in the UNESCO prediction, the urgent need for the promotion and sustenance of Igbo language and tradition through teaching and learning of language and Igbo cultural values in schools, in order to prevent them from going into extinction. (Ogbuokiri, 2017). UNESCO prediction of the Igbo language death is a fable to those who do not see it as a possibility (Asonye, 2013). Since anything is possible, therefore it is possible for Igbo language to die or go into extinction if nothing is done to avert the UNESCO prediction or prophecy.

It is a fact that the UNESCO’s prediction itself has awoken Igbo scholars and indigenes towards a greater conscious effort to keep their language alive, as several clarion calls are being made by many Igbo scholars for a positive attitude towards the language (Asonye, 2013). This is why Prince Ben Onura, The president of Igbo socio-political group, Igboekulie says that “the group considers the prediction as a wake-up call” (Ogbuokiri, 2017). Whether you agree or disagree with UNESCO prediction of the possible extinction of Igbo language in future, it is a either clarion call or wake-up call to do something in order to prevent the extinction of Igbo language as we earlier warned by Odinye & Odinye, (2010). If nothing is done to save Igbo language from extinction, we will surely see the obituary of Igbo language as Vincent Onyekwulu predicts thus:

The year 2053 and the news headline reads: ‘Obituary: the glorious passing away of Igbo language. With deep heart Ndi-Igbo announce the death of Igbo language after a protracted illness caused by daughters and sons of Igbo land. Igbo language left behind, a multitude of professionals, celebrities, able bodied men and ladies of timber and calibre. The passing away of the highly respected legend and statesman was a sudden death but negligence of sons and daughters of Ndi-Igbo (Onyekwulu, 2008 cited in Asonye, 2013).

In order not to see or hear the obituary announcement of Igbo language in future, many Igbo leaders and scholars have given advices, strategies and recommendations. Ogbuokiri (2017) states “Igbo leaders, groups and cultural enthusiasts said that there is need for a connected effort among Igbo people to revive the culture and rekindle the interest of Igbo children in the study and speaking of the language”. Professor Ginigeme Mbanefo, the former Vice-Chancellor, University of Nigeria, Nsukka at 2014 UNESCO International Mother Tongue Day Celebration in Enugu advises the Igbos to join hands to fight against the extinction of the language (NAN, 2014). Similarly, Professor Anya O. Anya in his opening remarks as the chairman of 2018 UNESCO International Mother Tongue Day Celebration in Lagos says, “I suggest we should adopt the Jewish strategy in order to avert the looming danger of Igbo language going into

extinction” (Kalu, 2018). In the same vein, Onowu Michael Ozua Okoye as cited in Ogbuokiri (2017) suggests as follows:

My advice to the Igbo people is that all hands must be brace up the present challenge. It is not one man’s duty or responsibility. We must work together so that our language and tradition will not go into extinction. Let us make concerted efforts so that our ancestors will appreciate our efforts towards resuscitating the language and culture, then, come to our rescue.

Of course, to save Igbo language from being extinct; it is not a one man’s business, duty or responsibility. All hands must be on desk. However, everybody has a task individually, organizationally, and governmentally. Members of the family especially the parents have the primary responsibility. Schools, churches, groups and governments have the secondary role.

LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION

Once a language (like Igbo) is considered to be endangered, there are three steps that can be taken in order to stabilize or rescue the language. The first is language documentation, the second is language revitalization and the third is language maintenance (Austin and Sallabank, 2011). Language documentation (documentary linguistics) is a subfield of linguistics which aims to describe the grammar and use of human languages. It aims to provide a comprehensive record of the linguistic practices characteristic of a given speech community (Gippert, Himmelmann, and Mosel, 2006). The term language maintenance is used to describe a situation in which a speaker, a group of speakers, or a speech community (like Igbo) continue to use their language in some or all spheres of life despite competition with dominant or majority language (like English) to become the main/sole language in these spheres (Davis and Elder, 2004). Language revitalization, also referred to as language revival or reversing language shift, is an attempt to halt or reverse the decline of a language or to revive an extinct one (Tsunoda, 2005). According to Wikipedia, language revival is when people try to make a language that is not spoken, or is spoken very little, spoken more often again. Language revival wants to save a language that is dead or endangered. Though the goals of language revitalization vary greatly from case to case, they typically involve attempting to expand the number of speakers and use of a language, or trying to maintain the current level of use to protect the language from extinction or language death.

Language revitalization is also closely tied to the linguistic field of language documentation. In the field, linguists attempt to create full records of a language’s grammar, vocabulary, and linguistic features. This practice can often lead to more concern for the revitalization of a specific language on study. Furthermore, the task of documentation is often taken on with the goal of revitalization in mind (Jose & Fernando, 2010). Language revitalization is necessary to preserve linguistic diversity. Culture and identity are also frequently cited reasons for language revitalization, when a language is perceived as a unique ‘cultural treasure’ (Grenoble & Lindsay,

2006). According to Wikipedia, there are many different theories or models that attempt to lay out a plan for language revitalization. One of these is provided by celebrated linguist Joshua Fishman. Fishman's model for reviving threatened (or sleeping) languages, or for making them sustainable, consists of an eight-stage process. Efforts should be concentrated on the earlier stages of restoration until they have been consolidated before proceeding to the later stages. The eight stages are:

1. Acquisition of the language by adults.
2. Creation of a socially integrated population of active speakers (or users) of the language.
3. Encouragement of the informal use of the language among people of all age groups and within families.
4. Encouragement of literacy in the language.
5. Encouragement of the use of the language in compulsory state education.
6. Encouragement of the use of the language in the workplace.
7. Encouragement of the use of the language in local government services and mass media.
8. Encouragement of the use of the language in higher education, government, etc.

Hinton (2018) says that “language revitalization is not an automatic response to language endangerment”. According to Bradley (2003) cited in Hinton (2018), “A change of attitude needs to happen before language revitalization can occur”. A positive attitude is a sine qua non for language revitalization. All efforts in language revitalization project will be unsuccessful if the owners of the language have a negative attitude toward their language. A reasonable number of approaches to language revival have been proposed (Amery 1994:143 cited in Alshehri 2016). Implementation of language revitalization methods is correlated with the degree of endangerment and language endangerment is a matter of degree. A number of language classifications endangerment have been proposed based on four criteria, namely number of speakers, age of speakers, transmission of the language to children and functions of the language in the society (Tsunoda, 2006 as quoted in Alshehri, 2016). Krauss (1992:4) as cited in Alshehri (2016) proposes a language classification endangerment that is mainly focused on transmission to children: “safe language” refers to a language that is still spoken by children and safe from extinction, “endangered language” refers to a language that will be ceased to be learned by children within the century and “moribund language” refers to a language that is no longer used as a native language by children. Another proposed language classification endangerment by Schmidt (1990:54) equally cited in Alshehri (2016) is based on number of speakers, age of speakers and transmission to children and functions of the language in the community: “healthy language” refers to a language that is actively used by all generations, “weakening language” refers to a language that is mainly spoken by older people, “dying language” refers to a language that only has a few speakers and “extinct language” refers to a language that does not have any speakers. Igbo language falls within “endangered language” and “weakening language” according to Krauss (1992) and Schmidt (1990) respectively.

There are many paths language revitalization can take, but they are not mutually exclusive. A central aspect of language revitalization is the creation of new speakers. There are four main

aspects to the revitalization of endangered languages: child learning, adult learning, language modernization, and language use (Hinton, 2018). According to him,

I will focus on four main aspects to the revitalization of endangered and sleeping languages: child learning, adult learning, modernization, and language use. Child learning would include school and home as the main venues; adult learning can occur through university classes, community classes, Master-Apprentice approaches, or learning from documentation (all of which can shade into each other). Modernization includes new vocabulary development and other kinds of language engineering, and use of new writing systems. Language use is the ultimate goal of the other aspects, but for endangered languages, using the language has to begin as a consciously planned endeavor with its own approaches and strategies.

One path is for families to learn and transmit the endangered language at home. Schools are major venues for language learning. Language nests and immersion schools have been especially effective. Adult language education has also become a critical part of language revitalization. Universities and “bootstrap” methods such as the Master-Apprentice Program have been able to bring adults to high proficiency. Linguistic archives have been useful for access to language, especially when there are no speakers left. Modernization of the language is also unavoidable, including new vocabulary and the development of writing systems if necessary. Most importantly, language revitalization should involve increased use of the language, by native speakers and learners alike (Hinton, 2018). It is now obvious that home and schools are the primary venues for language revitalization. This is simple because children and pupils/students spend most of their time at home and schools. Homes and schools are very important places for language revitalization since language is taught and transmitted to children and pupils/students from parents and teachers respectively. As we have identified the significance of home and schools in language revitalization, it is also important to notice the primary function of children/pupils in the project. However, although children/pupils are important in language revitalization since they are future generation who will carry on the language but adult speakers are also important. Hinton (2018) states thus:

Even though it seems commonsense to focus on little children for language revitalization, who are such great language learners, adult speakers are critically necessary for language revitalization. Home-based language revitalization can't happen without parents who can use the language. Language nests and immersion schools can't function without teachers who speak the language. A language revitalization program without a strong adult language-learning program will have great difficulty moving forward successfully. Thus adult language teaching and learning is an extremely important part of language revitalization.

In order for a language to be transmitted and transferred from one generation to another generation, the language has to be used as a daily and regular medium of communication. The most effective language revitalization approach is the use of language at home where children are taught unconsciously and naturally and are encouraged to become active users of the language. This is why Ahah (2010) says, “Reviving Igbo language starts with you and your family. Parents should endeavour to speak Igbo language to their children fluently no matter where they find themselves”. Schools are another place after home where language can be revitalized. It is said that a language can also be passed on if it used as the language of instruction in schools; whenever a language is turned into an object to be studied, rather than into a tool to be used in order to study something else, it has a slim chance of surviving in the long term(<https://johansandbergmcguinne.wordpress.com/2013/02/25/reviving-endangered-languages>). Although school has been and is even now one of the most important reasons why local languages are endangered, there are many reasons why people turn to the schools for language revitalization (Hinton, 2018). As earlier said, pupils/students spend more hours at schools to learn a language. Government policies for language can effectively take place in schools than at home. Schools are both a major agent of language loss and revitalization. It has been observed that schools alone cannot save languages, but schools alone can directly and indirectly kill languages. In summary, any language revitalization project has to be on the terms of the language community’s speakers and that without a natural intergenerational language transmission process in place, any attempt to revitalize a language will be unsuccessful (ibid).

REVITALIZATION OF IGBO LANGUAGE

Unfortunately, it has been observed that Igbo language is fast deteriorating as a means of communication among the Igbo (Igbokwe, 2013). Igbo people are increasingly engaging in the progressive race towards cultural marginalization and geometric linguistic endangerment. Our attitude towards our language is the major factor to its under-utilisation (Ani, 2012). Due to the above situation, “efforts at revitalising and sustaining any ailing language (like Igbo) is often a serious one for the people who understand the effect an endangered language has on the existence of the owners. In fact, an endangered language is like a very sick person who is remanded in intensive care unit” (Onwudiwe, 2016). But unfortunately, “it is a matter of deep regret, however, that only little efforts seems to have made to stem the dangerous tide that is currently eroding the cherished Igbo language...” (Akabogu, 2016). After the UNESCO prediction of Igbo language extinction in near future if nothing concrete and tangible is done, many linguists and scholars have recommended numerous suggestions and solutions to the problem. For Akabogu (2016), “the first thing to do is for governors and State House of Assembly in the South East geo-political zone of the country to come up with a legislation that will make it compulsory for students seeking admission into tertiary institutions within the zone to possess a credit in Igbo language”. This is a good suggestion but unfortunately it is not a good solution. As earlier said, if language is not learnt as a child; it will be difficult to be learnt as a teen or an adult. This is why learning an indigenous language like Igbo is proper and better at home than in school. It is not bad to learn the language in schools but it should begin at pre-primary and primary schools. Igbokwe (2013) has twelve recommendations and suggestions

which cover most areas of language revitalisation program or project. His first two solutions are in line with Hinton (2018) model of home and schools primacy at language revitalisation project. According to Igbokwe (2013), “Igbo parents and care-givers should use Igbo language in bringing up Igbo children. All the schools in Igbo speaking States should ensure that Igbo language is taught in their schools”. It is difficult to ascertain the actual number of families that adopt Igbo language after the UNESCO prediction but there is a little improvement in the number of children and teenagers who can speak Igbo recently. It is sad that most schools (primary, secondary and tertiary) have not started offering Igbo language as a course after the UNESCO prediction. According to Maazi Ogonnaya (2018), “Igbo language is no longer compulsory in senior WAEC”. It is obvious that the enemy of Igbo language is the Igbo people especially, the parents at home and teachers at schools. There have been several calls and efforts recently to revive the Igbo language. There is urgent need to give these efforts legal backing so that they would be enforceable. The enemies of Igbo language especially the schools should be punished and fined for not teaching our children Igbo language.

CONCLUSION

So far this work has defined language and emphasised its importance; introduced and highlighted the condition of Igbo language; discussed the confusion and various reactions from the Igbo people toward the UNESCO prediction; defined and explained language revitalisation; and discussed the efforts in revitalisation of Igbo language. Nevertheless, “the Igbo language contends with a myriad of challenges. Some of the challenges are inherent, while others are imposed (Obiudo, 2011). The worse challenge facing Igbo language is the apathy and hatred by Igbo people. We will not be able to revitalize Igbo language after the UNESCO prediction if there is no positive attitude toward Igbo language and this change starts with me and you.

REFERENCES

- Abanobi, C. (2018). “F.C. Ogbalu: Father of Igbo language, literature”. Daily Sun, 4th August.
www.sunnewsonline.com/f-c-ogbalu-father-igbo-language-literature/
- Adichie, J.N. (2012). “How I trained Chiamanda and her siblings to speak and write Igbo”. Daily Sun, 28th August.
- Ahah, C. (2010, February 9). “Reviving Igbo language: A task for Ndigbo (2)”.
www.nigerianbestforum.com/blog/reviving-igbo-language-a-task-for-ndigbo
- Akabogu, N. (2016). “The revival of Igbo language and culture”. Daily Sun, 10th May.
www.sunnewsonline.com/the-revival-of-igbo-language-and-culture/

- Alshehri, A.A. (2016). "Language revival: significance, strategies, methods and issues". *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, Vol. 4, Issue 6, pp. 53-65.
- Amery, R. (1994). *Heritage and second language programs*.
- Ani, K.J. (2012). "UNESCO prediction on the extinction of Igbo language in 2025: Analyzing societal violence and new transformative strategies". *Developing Country Studies*, Vol.2, No. 8, 2012.
- Austin, P.K and Sallabank, J. (Eds.). (2011). "Introduction". *Cambridge Handbook of Endangered Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Azuonye, E. (2013). "UNESCO prediction of the Igbo Language Death: Facts and Fables". In *Journal of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria*. 16 (1&2): 91-98.
- Bendor-Samuel, J. (Ed.) (1989). *The Niger-congo languages*. Lanham. MD: University Press of America.
- Chomsky, N. (1957). *Syntactic Structures*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Collins Dictionary. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/language>
- Davis, A. and Elder, C. (2004). *The handbook of applied linguistics*. Cornwall: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Echeruo, M.J.C. (2001). *Igbo-English Dictionary*. Lagos: Longman Nigeria Plc.
- Encyclopedia Britannica (15th edition, 2010). <https://www.britannica.com/topic/language>
- Gippert, J., Himmelmann, N., and Mosel, U. (Eds.) (2006). *Essentials of language documentation*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Greeberg, J.H. (1963). *The language of Africa*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University and The Hague: Mouton.
- Grenoble, L. A. & Lindsay, J. W. (2006). *Saving languages: An introduction to language revitalization*. Cambridge, Uk: Cambridge UP.
- Hinton, L. (2018). "Approaches to and strategies for language revitalization" in Rehg, K.L. and Campbell, L. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Endangered Languages*. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190610029.013.22
- Igbokwe, B.N. (2013). "Language and Identity: A case of Igbo language, Nigeria". *International Journal of Development & Mangement Review*, Vol. 8, No. 1, June, 2013.

- Jose, A.F. & Fernando, F.R. (Eds.) (2010). *New perspectives on endangered languages*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Kalu, M. (2018). "Igbo language not going extinct - Experts". Oracle Newspaper, 26th February. <https://oraclenews.ng/igbo-language-not-going-extinct-experts/>
- Krauss, M. (1992). "The world languages in crisis". *Language*, Vol. 68, No 1, pp. 4-10.
- NAN (2014). "Igbos urged to save language from extinction". Premium Times, 22nd February. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/155570-igbos-urged-save-language-extinction.html>
- Nwadike, I.U. (2002). *Igbo language in education: An historical study*. Obosi: Pacific Publishers.
- Obiudo, E.O. (2011). "Indigenous languages and sustainable development: The Igbo viewpoint". In A.B.C. Chiegboka et al (ed.) *The Humanities and Sustainable Development*, Nino: Rex Charles and Patrick Ltd.
- Ogbuokiri, P. (2017). "UNESCO prediction: Igboekulie, others to revive Igbo language, culture". New Telegraph, 5th November. <https://newtelegraphonline.com/2017/11/unesco-prediction-igboekulie-others-revive-igbo-language-culture/>
- Odinye, I.S. and Odinye I.E. (2010) "Preventing the Extinction of Igbo Language" in *Ogirisi: A new Journal of African Studies* published online journal by African Journals Online (AJOL), Grahamstown, South Africa (Volume 7). www.ajol.info/index.php/og/article/download/57925/46291
- Oladele, O. (2018). "Igbo language will not die in one million years". The Nation, 5th April. www.thenationonline.net/igbo-language-will-not-die-one-million-years/
- Okediadi, N.A. (2010). "Language and literature as viable instruments for globalization". In A.B.C. Chiegboka et al (ed.) *The Humanities and Globalisation in the Third Millennium*, Nino: Rex Charles and Patrick Ltd.
- Okoye, C.I. and Onwuegbuchunam, M. (2011). "Under-utilization of indigenous languages and sustainable development: The Igbo language case study". In A.B.C. Chiegboka et al (ed.) *The Humanities and Sustainable Development*, Nino: Rex Charles and Patrick Ltd.
- Ogbonnaya, (2018). Facebook post. <https://facebook.com/maaziogbonnaya>
- Onyekwulu, V. (2008). *Asusu Igbo a na-anwu anwu – Is Igbo language dying?* www.icsn.co.uk/content.php?

- Onwudiwe, G.E. (2016). "The fading phase of Igbo language and culture: path to its revitalisation". UJAH: Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities, 2016.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v17i2.7>
- Orji, D.A and Enweonye, C.I. (2011). "Igbo language use for sustainable development". In A.B.C. Chiegboka et al (ed.) The Humanities and Sustainable Development, Nino: Rex Charles and Patrick Ltd.
- Ossai, J. (April 20, 2017). "Will Igbo language go into extinction?". Tribune Newspaper.
<https://www.tribuneonline.com/83059/>
- Redish, L. (2001). "Native languages of the Americas: Endangered language revitalization and revival". <http://www.native-language.org/revive.htm>
- Sapir, E. (1921). Language: An introduction to the study of speech. New York. Harcourt, Brace. Reprint: Dover Books on language, 2004.
- Saussure, F., In Bally, C. & Sechehaye, A. (1966). Course in general linguistics. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Schmidt, A. (1990). The loss of Australia's Aboriginal language heritage. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Trask, R.L. (2007). Stockwell, P. (Ed.) Language and Linguistics: The Key Concepts (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Tsunoda, T. (2005). Language endangerment and language revitalization. Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter.
- Uwechie, C. (2016). "UNESCO and Endangered Igbo language". Sun Newspaper.
www.sunnewsonline.com/unesco-and-endangered-igbo-language-1/
- Webster International Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/language>
- Wikipedia free online Encyclopedia. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Igbo_language
- Zuckermann, G. (2003). Language Contact and lexical enrichment in Israeli Hebrew. England: Palgrave Macmillan.

