

THINKING ENGLISH, LOSING CULTURE: THE NEAR EXTINCTION OF THE IGBO LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Language is a matter of identity. It has the propensity to transmit culture and so the moment an individual loses his language, it is obvious that his culture will be jeopardized. People, the world over, use their language for home and official interactions and specifically in Nigeria, most other tribes show a high degree of respect for their vernacular but the same cannot be said of the Igbo people. The Igbo families of today try to be more English than the Queen of England herself and so we find that children of such homes, though born and bred in Igbo land, cannot speak the Igbo Language when, on the contrary, some Igbo parents living abroad with their children make it a point of duty that the means of communication in their homes is Igbo. This paper identifies colonial experience, quest for power, the Nigerian civil war, language policy and media programmes as some of the factors affecting the Igbo language. It sees government intervention, preachers, scholars and researchers as factors that can help propagate the Igbo language as well as admonish errant Igbo parents within and outside Igbo land, who do not tow this line of upholding the Igbo language to revitalize its use so that it does not go extinct.

Keywords: Language, Culture, Thinking English, Extinction, Igbo Language

Introduction

The roles of language in the identity of any people are obvious. Apart from the communicative essence of language, there are other significant uses to which it can be put. Highlighting these roles, Obi-Okoye (2008: 11) observes that "clearly language controls thinking, learning and all other mental processes and behaviour as well as acting upon and shaping human personalities and moods".

If one accepts the above assertion, it therefore implies that man loses his personality at the point of losing his language. By extension, a people derive their identity and heritage from sharing the same language. Thus, such identity is lost once the binding factor of language - is lost. A common language ensures social cohesion, common worldview and perception as well as a common culture. It marks a major difference between a people and

others. This paper seeks to examine the Igbo Language and culture against the background of their near extinct state.

Language and Culture

The relationship between language and culture is not in doubt. According to Emenanjo (1988: 13) "Language and culture are not only symbiotic but rub off on each other in a mutual cause and effect manner". He further cites Durkheim thus:

In any community, human intercourse rests on a tripod of exchanges: exchange of information, exchange of women and exchange of commodities. Of these, that of information has primacy; for the two other forms are encodable and decodable in human language. (1988: 13)

This intricate relationship between language and culture received a major boost from the Whorfian hypothesis, when Wardaugh (2006: 221) quotes that: "The relationship between language and culture is that the structure of a language determines the way in which speakers of that language view the world". Ethnographic investigations have also proved this inseparable existence. Language forms part of the culture of a people. It is also through language that culture and collective consciousness of a people receive expression. It is difficult to think of a people without recourse to their language and culture.

One of the characteristics of human language is that no language is inferior to others. However, bilateral / bicultural relations tend to endanger some languages by placing certain social, economic, political, technological, religious and other forms of advantages on some languages to the detriment of some others. This is the case with the Igbo and the English languages.

Igbo Language Vis-À-Vis the English Language

The Igbo language is one of the three major languages spoken in the pluralistic Nigeria, alongside Hausa and Yoruba Languages. Its domain is South-East Nigeria (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States), with noticeable splinters of dialects that extend to parts of Delta and River States of the South-South region. The Igbo people are known for their mercantile exploits, which traits have taken them to different parts of the globe, so much so that if there is a relationship between language spread and being itinerant, the Igbo Language should receive remarkable widespread recognition. Conversely, it proves to be the most endangered among the three languages mentioned (Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa). It is noteworthy that the English Language has been identified as a major threat to the Igbo Language.

The contact between the English Language and the present-day Nigeria dates back to the 15th century European trade incursion (Ogu, 1992: 65). The earliest major contacts happened along the coastal areas of Warri, Brass, Calabar, etc. and later spread to the hinterlands including the present-day Igbo speaking regions. However, it was not until Britain displaced other mercantile lords like the Portuguese, to establish firm colonial and administrative control that the English Language also gained control over the linguistic psyche of the people. Till date, the English Language has remained the language for education, commerce, politics, administration, law, judiciary, etc. in Nigeria. This incursion notwithstanding, most tribes in the country have retained the prominence of their mother tongues, while the Igbo Language opened its doors for gross endangerment.

The UNESCO *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing* describes endangered language as "one which is no longer spoken by children..." (cited in Osuafor, 2005: 131). The latter, further relies on Fakuada (1999: 66) to state:

...endangerment is a part of a much larger process of cultural and intellectual diversity in which politically dominant languages and cultures, simply overwhelm indigenous local languages and cultures, placing them in condition which can only be described as embattled.

This is what the English language has done and is still doing to the Igbo Language. Making reference to yet another UNESCO proclamation that the Igbo Language might become extinct in the next fifty (50) years, Wogu (cited in Sams, 2010), is alarmed because he had thought that "the Igbo Language enjoyed a high level of scholarship" but has found out that "the Igbo Language may be getting extinct because the Igbo family stopped speaking to their children in their mother tongue". The Igbo people, unlike the other major and minor tribes in Nigeria, are very eager to discard their language identity without recourse to the clear and present danger such trait portends.

Factors Responsible for Near Extinction of the Igbo Language

A number of factors can be adduced for the diminishing use of the Igbo Language.

- a) **Colonial Experience** One factor responsible for the Igbo language endangerment is colonial experience. Obviously, colonization adversely affected all the native languages of the former colonies, but the Igbo Language experience is made more precarious by the "more English than the queen" instinct of the Igbo people. During the colonial era, the English Language was elevated to an enviable status, resulting in a seeming mad rush to learn it as it was an avenue for status conferral and the juicy jobs of the civil service. However, post-colonial experiences have shown that while other language tribes in Nigeria are making conscious efforts to regain and restore their battered culture and threatened languages, the Igbo people have consistently kept their doors open for free incursion of western cultural dominance. This is evident in the constant attack on and destruction of cultural artifacts and historical landmarks in the name of religious and spiritual liberation as was the case of the Ikenga sculpture in the Owerri Municipal of Imo State.
- b) **Quest for Power** The unguarded quest for power is another factor. At independence, power acquisition resided in speaking the English Language. Everyone therefore struggled to learn and use it as a means of achieving his ambition. The Igbo people are often described as egalitarian and republican. There is also the uncomplimentary saying that, "Igbo enweghi Eze" (Igbo people have no king). Although this study does not subscribe to this saying because "Ndi Igbo nwere Eze" (Igbo people have king), it is also obvious that the Igbo people possess strong and competitive spirit that has manifested in their drive in trade and commerce as well as other sectors. Sadly, in an attempt to be hard-working and to achieve spurious interests, nothing is left sacrosanct. It is still common to hear among the Igbo people questions like "Onwere onye nwere ibe ya nri?" (Is there anyone who feeds the other?). This "if" can do it spirit has led to loss of respect for elders and institutions, while culture, tradition and language have consistently been sacrificed.

Furthermore, the Igbo people who have been scattered all over the globe in an attempt to pick their wreckage from colonization and civil war have also developed great propensity towards adapting to new environment. This approach to survival has made them cultural halfcastes. In a bid to integrate into new environments and remain comfortable, basic native values are abandoned, language is threatened and the newly embraced ones take pre-eminence over the native ones. Examples abound in marriage and funeral ceremonies, mode of dressing, etc. It is alarming that this trend does not seem to disturb some Igbo people who after listening to Wogu's concern about the UNESCO declaration carelessly retort that the Igbo language can die if it wants to.

- c) **Civil War Experience** The civil war, which the Igbo people prosecuted and lost, came on the heels of an end to the colonial experiences, thus dealing a double blow on the psyche of a people who were still battling to recover from the dislocation of values attendant to war situations. At the end of the Nigerian Civil War, the Igbo people lost cohesion, there was virtually no need to retain an identity which had been eroded by the war and which had become a barrier rather than a tool for survival. One of the aftermaths of the war was that their homes and landed properties in Rivers State were declared abandoned and confiscated by the natives of the various towns that make up this State. The struggle for reintegration led to mass exodus from Igbo environment. New cultures, languages and ways of existence must be embraced for one to survive. Names were altered or out-rightly changed. These were all in a bid to survive, but today, they have become part of existence.

Thus, most Igbo people have discovered potential powers for survival in other languages than their native language. Survival here refers to enhancement opportunities for employment in offices, recruitment in the military and the paramilitary, business opportunities to mention a few. The Igbo Language therefore is not seen as having a strong utility value in these directions once looked down upon.

- d) **Language Policy** Government language policy is another contributing factor to the near death situation in which the Igbo Language is found. The preference given to English Language in government transactions reduces the utilitarian values of Nigerian languages. Many believe that there is a one to one correspondence between government office and the language one must speak, so much so that, even in informal transactions, one must speak English language in order to retain the pride and accolade of the office. It is this senseless pride that pushes some school administrators to out-rightly ban the speaking of the Igbo Language in their schools, even in informal discourse. The same virus has engulfed many families who take pride to announce to the world that their children cannot speak the Igbo Language, their supposed mother tongue and first language.

When a child is banned from speaking a language both at home and in school, and the same child grows up to discover that the language is not used in government activities, such a language becomes worthless to him. How then can that child be taught to imbibe the values and culture of a people without their language?

- e) **Media Programmes** It is evident that most homes have television and radio sets, and that these air various programmes that highlight alien cultures but portray the Igbo culture as barbaric and not to be emulated. There are positive aspects of the Igbo culture which are allowed to fade just because it is the idea of the programmes director that they are not rich. This should not be the case. School subjects can be made easier using the Igbo language, for instance, in drama sessions, so that what is acted out stays in the memory, and makes for better assimilation than the theoretical method of teaching.

Consequences

- a) **Loss of Value** It has earlier been averred in this paper that language is part of culture. The way a person behaves is a manifestation of the nature of society that breeds him. If an individual grows up in a society that has little or no love for her language, correspondingly he would not have love and respect for the values of that society. This is because such values are expressed in the language in which he had not been raised. Igbo families have lost their "Igboness" in an attempt to think English. As values and culture are fast eroding, so is language, *mutatis mutandis*. Most Igbo people, in an attempt to speak English and live English, are now left linguistically and culturally docile.
- b) **Loss of Research Interest** This lackluster attitude of the Igbo people is also manifest in academic research and programmes. There seems to be a correspondingly low interest in researches in Igbo values and culture by Igbo scholars. Such values and culture would best be appreciated and projected from the perspective of Igbo scholars rather than those of foreign ethnographers. When others are busy extolling and projecting their culture on the international arena, some Igbo people are busy destroying and devaluing ours. Recently for instance, there were reported cases of verbal attacks on one of the most respected African priests, Cardinal Francis Arinze, for writing a book entitled *Sacrifice In Igbo Land*. To such critics, Cardinal Arinze's effort amounts to being an anti-Christ. But a Western ethnographer, Bahisen, has written on *The Water Goddess in Igbo Cosmology: Ogbuide of Oguta Lake* and another - Cole - has also written on *Mbari: Art & Life among the Owerri Igbo*. Few years back, a government official in Imo State supervised the pulling down of one of the sculptures used to beautify and express the cultural values of the Igbo people in the Imo State capital, and replaced it with a giant cross. That shows how the Igbo people view their culture *vis-à-vis* western culture. Yet, people and government spend millions of dollars annually on pilgrimages to religio-cultural sites in foreign lands, while they are busy destroying their own sites at home.

It is accepted that the West brought English Language, English culture and English religion but these should not downplay the values embedded in the African culture in general and Igbo tradition in particular. Interestingly, the supposed superior culture is coming back to study what we Africans regard as the inferior, the illicit and the pagan. Some questions are pertinent at this juncture: How many Igbo families, for instance, still tell their children Igbo folktales and folklore? How many teach their children the rich didactic folksongs, or how many lead their children to appreciate the choreography in the indigenous dances? The parents are already beclouded, hence their children. So naturally, the Latin Maxim, *nemo dat quod non habet* (you cannot give what you do not have), applies.

It is therefore obvious that making the Igbo Language seem inferior has had negative consequences on the promotion of Igbo culture and values. This is because culture, norms and values are transmitted via language. They are stored in a language, appreciated in a language and are nativised in a language. Little wonder, Ebelebe (2010, para 4) referring to the Igbo people, bemoans that *owe* as a people are among the most literate ethnic nationalities in Africa if not the world over but we are illiterate in our own language.

The governments of the Igbo speaking states have continued to speak through both sides of the mouth. They fight for the promotion of Igbo culture and language when most of their cultural festivals and activities are conducted in the English Language. A good case is the *Ahijioku Lecture* organized by the Imo State government. This paper makes bold to suggest that the government of Igbo speaking states can have their addresses in the Igbo Language when the gathering is of the Igbo people, and then have them translated into the English language as is found in Hausa and Yoruba settings. They can borrow a leaf from the richly packaged *Odenigbo Lectures* introduced by the Catholic Archbishop of the Owerri Archdiocese, His Grace Archbishop A.J.V. Obinna and completely delivered in the Igbo language. The *Odenigbo* series is a clarion call for the preservation of the Igbo Language and culture.

The Way Forward

- a) **Family Efforts** The first step forward must begin from families. Parents should learn to encourage their children to speak the Igbo Language, by speaking it themselves. Parents form the basic and most affective mentors of their children and must therefore realize this power in order to use it positively.
- b) **Government Intervention** The governments of the Igbo speaking states should be more proactive, matching their words with actions. Policies are never implemented through rhetoric. They cannot claim to be promoting the Igbo Language and culture, yet stand dumb in the face of counter-practices, like punishing a child for speaking the Igbo Language in school.
- c) **Preachers and Clerics** Furthermore, religious clerics and preachers also have roles to play. A situation where an Igbo native preacher preaches his sermon in the English Language to a local congregation, only to use an interpreter, suggests linguistic arrogance or ignorance. Also, it places superiority on the English Language over the native language. Again, the wanton destruction of cultural and historical landmarks

and monuments amounts to cultural extermination. These should be stopped where true promotion of indigenous language and culture is to be achieved.

- d) Scholars and Researchers** Scholars and writers of Igbo extraction have roles to play. The questions remain: To what extent have the Igbo people written, described and projected Igbo values and culture? Is it ideal to read such values from a foreigner's perception? To what extent have the new-generation creative writers written in the Igbo language? Osuafor's data here is disturbing:

In Nigeria, 98% of creative writing is in English as a second language. The remaining 2% is shared among the over 400 languages in the country. The situation is such that it is rare to find a new generation writer of literature in Nigerian language (2005: 15)

Emenanjo (1988: 27) advises that:

í it is the people themselves who have to develop their language. No government, local or state or federal can do this for them. Governments through their agencies may and should provide the infrastructure through curricula, syllabuses and language policies. It is the people themselves who have to provide all the texts they need for purposes of all forms of literacy programmes in their languages.

- e) School Administrators** Similarly, school administrators and teachers should refrain from the ineffective emphasis on spoken English among infants and pupils as a source of credit to their schools. It is now evident that little corresponding relationship exists between speaking and knowing the English language. Rather, the study of the English Language should take its proper place as a subject to be methodically taught and studied at the stage where it can be used as a medium of instruction. On the other hand, mother tongue should be practically (not theoretically) used as a medium of instruction at the levels specified by the National Policy on Language Education in Nigeria (1996). Again, mother tongue which in this paper refers to the Igbo Language, must be allowed as a medium of domestic and social interactions among pupils and students. The English Language should only complement in cases of linguistically complex settings.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the Igbo Language and culture against the backdrop of their near extinct state. It has also examined some of the possible factors responsible for this ugly development, as well as possible steps towards redressing the situation. It therefore concludes that as Igbo people continue to support, encourage and teach their children to disrespect, ignore and abandon their native language - the Igbo language -, invariably, the children are also supported, encouraged and taught to abandon self, for according to Emenanjo (1988: 14):

If one buries oneself, one's hand will be found uncovered. If a tiger likes to please its political masters and linguistic midwives, it can change its name through swearing to an affidavit. Or it can translate its name into another language. Or it can re-interpret it into another language. Or it can re-spell it by adding archaic affixes or spell it in such a way that it will no longer be recognizable except to the initiate. All these battles will be fought and lost simply because the tiger cannot do anything about its turpitude.

It must be emphatically stated here that this paper takes into cognizance the mixed grid of people in this intellectual harvest and so is simply presented in the English language so that the presenters are not misconstrued as selfish and inconsiderate if they read it in the Igbo Language. This paper is an urgent call on the Igbo people to extricate themselves from the shackles of inferiority, naivety and mediocrity, get a grip on their cultural values via the Igbo Language, so that they would not, like the first home video drama that made waves in this nation, be living in bondage.

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