

# TRIBE, TONGUE, ENCULTURATION THREATENED

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## Abstract

Intra- and Inter-problems of a language threaten the locale of the language as well as the offshoot's enculturation via such a language. The success of this threat precariously placed the owners of the language on the pedestal of rootlessness as language is the vehicle for conveying habits, practices and worlds values (philosophies) of a tribe. This paper examines the intra-problems bedeviling the Igbo language, the Inter problems hamstringing its progress, a review of the attempts to halt the language momentum of rolling downhill, and a food for thought for all of us to make spirited endeavour to check the erosion of this live-wire of our cultural root.

## Introduction

Spoken language (tongue) denotes mother tongue, otherwise termed first language, second language and foreign language. Second and foreign languages are not universally distinguishable as both describe users already possessing their native languages. First language, Crystal (255) explains, refers to “the abstract system underlying the collective totality of the speech/writing behaviour of a community (the notion of language), or the knowledge of this system by an individual (the notion of competence)”. Elucidating the prototypical native speaker of first language, Crystal (308) says it refers to “someone for whom a particular language is first language or mother tongue”. He further explains:

The implication is that this native language, having been acquired naturally during childhood, is the one about which a speaker will have the reliable

INTUITIONS, and whose judgments about the way the language is used can therefore be trusted.

Acquiring language naturally and making effortless judgments about how the language is used demonstrate tribal identities. The identities of a tribe conveyed through language acquired naturally are the cultural practices, habits, unwritten customs in the living memories of the inhabitants of a such a tribe handed down from generation to generation. The continuous retention and transmission of these legacies – materials and abstracts – distinguishing identities are facilitated by language. Chukwu (2008) aptly singles language out as the substructure supporting these cultural instruments of survival.

The enculturation along with the acculturation ensuring cultural retention and transmission is linguistically facilitated. Language, the mainstay of culture, is culture bound. It is the evident agent perpetuating culture verbally and graphically, and delineating individuals' cultural identities. The linguistic nomenclatures of people, interlocutors' linguistic intelligibility and such non-linguistic tribal recognition as modes of dresses, engraven facial marks and dish favourites betray the cultural backgrounds of people.

The resultant exposure of the civilizing and edifying propensities of the Igbo language is deftly portrayed in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Indulging in Africanism, Achebe elevated Igbonized English. The Igbo language (culture) projected is a mechanism for inculcating industry as always enunciated in folk-tales, proverbs, songs and riddles, but shuns loafing as represented by Unoka, for encouraging boldness as intrepidly demonstrated by Okonkwo, and for commending

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obedience to world values, philosophies and mores as exemplified by Obierika.

The vital function of language as a vehicle or a dress of thought conveying or clothing it throughout ages has been the steadfast discourse of linguists and literary writers as Edward Sapir and Elechi Amadi. Affirming this unparalleled job of language, Halliday et al, as referenced by Boadi et al (33), stress that language encodes thought or ideas: "... the only reality lay in ideas, and language was at best a clothing for these ideas". Explaining this role of language further, Boadi et al say that "in the new ideology it was reality that was considered to be structured, and thought reflected reality; language was merely the imperfect expression of thought".

The reality of the Igbo race and the substructure of her world values torched is trapped in a language whose associative message evokes the sensory picture of a race in a shambles. Achebe through a character, Obierika, informs the world of the debilitating mission of Britain to Igbo land:

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart (124).

The devastating role of the missionaries as alluded above in the subjugation of Igbo to make way for Britain's civilizing mission is also gleefully reported by a white agent of cultural suppression. G.T. Basden reports that Sir H.H. Johnston gave credit to missionaries for subverting the cultural values of the natives:

For its effectual abolishment (not slavery), which has been of the greatest benefit to the well-being of

Europeans and natives alike, we owe out thanks, not to the intervention of Naval or Consular officials, nor to the bluff remonstrances of traders, but to the quiet, increasing labours of the agents of the Church Missionary Society (293).

These agents scrambling for honours from His or Her Royal Majesty and representing British government (consular officials), British military (Naval officers), British economy (traders), and British social system (missionaries) worked hand in hand in ensuring that the noticeable civilization far more advanced in holding out edifying practices and putting this race in a higher pedestal of enlightenment was suffocated, discouraged and supplanted.

Arising from this misguided civilizing mission by a race much more engrossed in brutish bestiality in Africa and the New World, coupled with the nascent distaste for using (reading, writing, speaking) the Igbo language by the Igbo is examined to ascertain how the problems engendered have placed this natural language on the pedestal of endangerment and eventual extinction.

### **Intra-Problem of the Igbo Language**

The population of the speakers with definitive symbols for communication makes the Igbo language with its speakers comparable with the other defined language groups – Yoruba and Hausa – in Nigeria. This distinctiveness also earned the language the consideration as one of the 250 languages in Nigeria, as well as among the languages of the world. However, Igbo as a language did not have defined writing. Igbo writing was non-existent prior to the advent of the English. Surely, sign writings existed, but they were cultly restricted: priestly cult, medical cult, hunters' cult had their writings or sign languages perhaps derived from the parent

language. Alluding to sign language, Basden (60) describes medical cult recruitment of baby male boys via supposedly supernatural engraven signs on the baby's body. During the dedication,

the *dibia* (medicine man) detects some sign which convinces him that this baby is a reincarnation of former *dibia* and hence, ipso facto, he must be dedicated to the medical cult. The boy lives with his parents until he is about eight years of age, and is then transferred to the care of the *dibia*. As he grows up he is gradually initiated into all the mysteries of the profession. This is the manner in which the ranks of the *dibias* are recruited.

Basden's statement is suggestive of the secrecy surrounding professional groups in Igbo. The public used the day-to-day language while the selected few initiated in certain cults spoke the cults' languages. Consequently, the death of the cult members ultimately marked the death of their secret knowledge. Nothing was recorded (written); nothing was read/studied until the white came to erroneously or rightfully claim to have brought literacy to "darkest Africa", Basden (26).

It is worthwhile to note the existence today of a cuneiform pattern/system of writing. The countries of the far east – Japan, China, and Korea propagate these wedge – type symbols of writing. These nationals learn English as a foreign language to relate and transact business with native speakers, but they never for once contemplated doing away with their spoken or written languages. Similar writing called "INSIBIDI" is known to have existed in the former Eastern Region. it served the purpose for which it was adopted. Its non-development and eventual extinction suggest it as a cult language known only to members. When a better defined, all-

inclusive English made incursion into this area, both cult and non-cult Igbo forsook their language for this encroaching one.

### **Inter Problems of the Igbo Language**

Histories on the studies of the Igbo language are the histories of the British civilizing mission in Igbo land. According to Nwadike (26), one Rev. G.C.A. Oldendrop “recorded some Igbo numerals and nouns” in faraway West Indies and Pennsylvania (USA) during the slave trade. Other recorders of Igbo were slave returnees or offspring’s of Igbo slaves who spoken English. The significance of this linguistic study and teachings is that learners were learning two languages, and they subsequently yielded wholly to the one holding out new experiences and enabling them to speak like the Whiteman or the white imitators. Again, Basden (45), capturing Igbo values, says that the Igbo are contented with their surroundings and their bare livelihood only when novelties are not introduced. But, according to him,

discontent with primitive conditions comes only with the introduction of novelties from the outside world, and then, like a child, the Igbo covets what he sees. Left to himself he neither needs nor desires foreign luxuries, but once the possibility of securing them presents itself, be they ever so incongruous, he will not relax his efforts until they become his cherished possessions.

Presenting the Igbo with a language whose syntactic system and literary outputs are well-defined, as well as the opportunities of exercising economic and political authorities, the Igbo decided to learn to read, to speak, and to write in the target language.

Adding to the absence of reading, speaking and writing texts is the problem of language contact. The success of the

British mission to the Igbo land is the success of their English language. Language contact results in three ways: superstratal, substratal and adstratal. According to Millar (388), adstratal contact is when two or more languages come into contact, but none is dominating; substratal when a less dominating is influencing upon a dominant language; superstratal is when “the language of a socially powerful element in a society influences the language of less powerful groupings. This is a commonplace post-colonial experience, with words from the colonizers’ language finding their way into the language of the colonized...”

The English language, a superstratal language, is dominating the Igbo language by the opportunities it is offering through economic, political and social prestige traceable through pre-colonial equal bilateral relations, colonial unilateral dominance and post-colonial seemingly bilateral relations.

Arising from the superstratal domination is a devastating agent, described as parents’/guardians discouragement of their children/wards from learning and using the Igbo language. Some parents, even in conferences, accept dissuading their children from learning and speaking Igbo. Their reason is to ensure that their children who concentrate on learning English compete favourably with the children using English natively or near-natively. Millar (426) in Chukwu (2008) affirming this twisted view says the elderly speakers consider the language inferior to the other one as not being the language of education, and of not being the language of the “affluent and technological rich societies”. Hair as Nwadike (20) quoted recorded this devastating posturing endangering and eventually killing the Igbo language.

...the Igbo experienced an upsurge of interest in literacy but it was not a genuine and continuing interest in VERNACULAR literacy. Igbo children,

having been taught to read vernacular primers, were hurried on by their parents to acquire and read English, the language of opportunity; in this way the Igbo gained a position of power in the colonial and post-colonial social and administrative order as Nigeria, but the Igbo language was neglected.

Equally creating problems and sounding the death – knells of the Igbo language is the inferiority complex of scholarship and applied scholarship in the language. Many departments of Igbo have changed these departments to names eclipsing the language. We read about departments of African Languages, of African and Asian Languages and of Nigerian Languages and Literature. These nomenclatures are to attract students and make them pride themselves on a department that does not name the study of the Igbo language even though they will obtain degrees in this language. Similarly, many of the students studying Igbo are not comfortable in admitting publicly of undergoing this course of study. Their attitude is that of temporizing until they secure admission to study courses of their choice through retaking JAMB examination. In the long run, few graduated in the language can never be enough as teachers of Igbo in secondary schools. A result which negates the teaching of Igbo to secondary school pupils and the continual turning out of secondary school graduates who cannot recite the Igbo alphabet, write correct Igbo sentences, or make use of wealth of experiences and ideas with which the Igbo culture is enriched. Also glaring is the disheartening attitude toward reading Igbo textbooks and novels, dramas and poems. The majority of Igbo children cannot read, write or speak Igbo today. Confirming this apathetic view accounting for a language problem and gradual death, Millar (425) observes:

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Most often the speakers of a language simply abandon it in favour of some other language which is seen as more prestigious or more useful, in the process known as language shift. Such shifts of language have undoubtedly happened countless of times during human history.

What I term applied scholarship as grudgingly been done with the Igbo language is what Inno Nwadike (44) observed as the distaste of Nigerian film industry peopled by about 80% of Igbo, but still, the quality of works in the Igbo language is negligible. Today, we watch Yoruba and Hausa plays with glee via satellites. They do not watch Igbo plays because they consider them inadmissible to their world views. Is this disdain for the Igbo language not a sufficient problem for the language which, if not arrested, will culminate in its eventual demise?

### **Can these Problems be Arrested?**

St. Paul says that he can do all things through God who protects him; Napoleon says that impossibility is found in the dictionary of fools; Lao Russel says that God will work with you, but not for you. Napoleon's presumptuous statement suggests the existence of solution to any problem. God, a solution to Paul's all things and to Mrs. Russell's work, is also a solution to arresting the problem bedeviling the language He created. Ogbalu became a tool for solving the Igbo language problem. He founded and nurtured the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPICC) in 1949. His literary wirings along with the guiding objectives of his society inspired many Igbo scholars to produce texts in Igbo syntax, Igbo literature, Igbo history and Igbo customs, as well as the recognition of the language as a subject of study by many examining bodies like WAEC. The foundation laid by Ogbalu for the study of the Igbo language and culture was also taken

up by some Igbo scholars at University of Ibadan, University of Nigeria, Abia State University, but the vague ideas about Igbo studies and the personal clashes or differences of some Igbo members of a body to consolidate the Centre for Igbo Studies (CIS) crippled the intent (See Ogbalu Memorial Lecture 2000 by Afigbo).

Recently, Peter Ejiofor shocked by the contempt displayed for speaking the Igbo language is crying out through his pet body “SUBAKWA IGBO” to Igbo, home and in diaspora, to resuscitate the speaking of Igbo in Igbo homes. Ejiofor is canvassing the recognition of Igbo as subject necessary for admission into secondary schools in Igbo enclave. This is to make Igbo children conscious of the language making their root real.

It is still uncertain how these clamours for going back to our roots will reawaken in the Igbo the nationalistic love of recalling where the rain of possible tribal identity forgetfulness has started beating them to enable them to stage a retreat to pick up the bits and pieces to patch up what will be the vestiges of a culture that may no longer be fully retrieved.

### **Measures for Checking Threats to Tribe, Tongue and Enculturation**

Looming large before him, at both flanks of his army and behind him the friendless sea, Julius Caesar’s opposing force (Britain) seemed confident in overwhelming him. Defying this precarious situation, Caesar presumptuously commanded his soldiers to advance and conquer. Caesar with his force overcoming this threatened danger uttered an evergreen statement of victory: Veni, vidi, vici – I came, I saw, I conquered. The intra and inter problems threatening the Igbo language are man-made. And, just as the Roman soldiers overcame their man-made problems of British soldiers, the

Igbo will also get through the problems of restoring the live-wire of their culture.

One of the measures to be adopted is to engage in massive borrowing of words to account for certain terms unable to be named in the cultural convention of Igbo in the modern cultural globalization. It should be recalled that the Celtic and Teutonic tribes occupied Northern and Western Europe before the 5<sup>th</sup> century (450 AD). During this period, these Germanic invaders from Northern Europe: the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes conquered and dominated the Celts and the Teutons. These invaders according to Mc Coy (2) had “similar language and culture”, “shared the same pagan religion and clannish social structure”. It is from one of the invaders, the Angles, that the name England or Angle land was coined and their language, Anglisc or Englisc imposed. The English language, a superstratal language dominating the Celtic language, ever since then has indulged in massive borrowing to take care of technological inventions, new trade names, and names of terms in countries with which she has diplomatic relations. So, the Igbo language, confronted with the problem of possible defacement, should admit terms, and if necessary modify such terms after Igbo pronunciations to accommodate such terms in the language.

Interdisciplinary teaching of the Igbo language and culture should be given impetus. Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka has a chapter in a text entitled *Nigerian Peoples and Culture* devoted to the Igbo language. The manner of teaching this topic to students is without stimulus. Students strive for passes in this general studies course and not for understanding, digesting and assimilating the features of the peoples and cultures of Nigeria let alone understanding and digesting the unexciting chapter on a little known Igbo language. Again, the number of students champed in a hall points out the fact that success, resulting from digestion and assimilation of the

courses among which is Igbo, is not the goals of the teacher and the learners. A more interesting scheme in teaching the Igbo language was noticeable at the University of Port Harcourt. The Igbo language was taught to sophomores of all the fields of study in the Faculty of Humanities of the University. Professor Emenanjo was the dean then (1988). It was he who taught those of us who opted for Igbo in a course entitled Nigerian languages”. It was after this course that I had a better idea of Igbo and I was able to be making clear comparative juxtaposition of English and Igbo. A part of the course then was a tape-recording of the English and Igbo names of a number of animals and birds in Igbo land. This proved a veritable means of enculturizing us and sustaining the tribal identities through this language presently neglected by many. It behoves us therefore to have recourse to Uniport’s strategy rather than to the so-called Unizik’s methods in arresting the problems of negligence in ensuring the survival of this language.

Another measure is the reversal of presenting the “Ahiajioko” and the “Odenigbo” lectures in English. These lectures, which can be translated into English afterwards, should reflect the nuances of Igbo culture by depicting the effortless command of the Igbo language, the adept use of Igbo proverbs, Igbo anecdotes, Igbo riddles, Igbo songs projecting Igbo cultural habits, practices and beliefs. I am not advocating the use of Igbo exclusively in writings. This will limit the audience. But, lectures encompassing Igbo world-views and serving as a reawakening of Igbo though about their root should be carried out in Igbo. In so doing, the lectures will be reenacting the village assembly system of administration in pre-colonial Igbo. Similar to Igbo lectures is Igbo cultural fiestas. These festivals like yam festival (Iri ji) and Masquerade Festival (Mmonwu) should be made periods for demonstrating the speaking of Igbo. Any Igbo sons and

daughters should be constrained to speak in Igbo. This constraint no doubt should forestall many willing to speak, but it will as well make many denied speaking rethink about dissuading their children and wards from learning and using Igbo.

More encouraging to these measures is the unconditional scholarship given to students studying Igbo and her cultures at the Anambra State University. The government of Anambra State touched by the gradual loss of the Igbo language legislated a tuition free programme for Igbo and a compulsory use of Igbo on a day in running the affairs of the state.

Towing the encouraging step of Anambra State government, but taking a different measure, Nnamdi Azikiwe University has added the study of the Igbo language as one of the courses taught by the General Studies Unit. Students as from 2011/2012 academic session will be taking some studies in the Igbo language and cultures, and write and pass examination arising therefrom. This is a precondition for awarding any degree of the University.

Anambra State Government and Nnamdi Azikiwe University's example no doubt will effectively grip some interesting scholars who will want to know more about a culture and language in decline.

## **Conclusion**

The practices, beliefs and habits of a community are sustained by language. Language, spoken or written, encapsulates world-views and mores of its tribal locale. These social behaviours originate as thought which is then conveyed by language for the enrichment of man and his environment. Sapir (15), giving credence to language as a dress or vehicle of thought, says that "language is but a garment" of thought which should be "jogging along with it, hand in hand". Nonetheless, language

can be a rightful vehicle or garment of thought if one speaks it as a native speaker whose competence is demonstrated by knowing when to speak and when not, knowing what to say and how to say it. This communicative competence is effected only if there is real learning and” understanding something of the pattern and values of the culture of which it is a part”, Robert Lado. What Igbo children, except those born and bred in native language speaking areas, can brag about learning and understanding fully English culture and intuitively reflecting their thoughts in English? Igbo thought will easily be encoded in the Igbo language the livewire of Igbo culture. It is therefore high-time we retreated to our root which nurtured our forebears who “used their brains and created things for themselves without mimicking or imitating foreigners”, Ayittey (7).

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