

Chapter Seventeen

IGBO LANGUAGE AS A CRUCIAL INSTRUMENT FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

One basic distinction of man from other animals is a high level of rationality, involving clear verbal language or speech. Man thinks and expresses himself in language. Language therefore, is one aspect of rationality that is peculiar to man: it is a human activity. The English language is generally believed to be the most widely spoken language in the world today. Incidentally, it is also the lingua franca in Nigeria. Besides English, Nigeria is estimated to have over two hundred ethnic languages. The major three among them are Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. But the problem is that while the Hausa and Yoruba languages can be said to be progressing, as their range of acceptability (even by their non-native speakers) increases with time; the story is different with the Igbo language which dwindles day-by-day, irrespective of the fact that it promises to be a crucial tool for national development, especially considering its commercial background. This paper, therefore, addresses the problem, with a view to resuscitating and repositioning the Igbo language to assume this all important role.

Introduction

The importance of language to national development is best deduced from the intelligible importance of education to national development. Education equips, facilitates, or prepares the human resources, which eventually act on natural resources, to produce goods for the satisfaction of human needs. Education or training means to impart knowledge and skills on, awaken the curiosity, as well as develop the intellectual capacity, of an individual. Recognizing this fact, Unachukwu (2003) states:

Education is the tool that propels development -- human, spiritual, cultural, social, economic and industrial. An uneducated society is doomed to perpetual backwardness, retrogression, general human and material decay, while an educated society is a salvager of its own future.

In the process of education, language is the medium of instruction. The effectiveness of the educational programme or a training programme depends, to a large extent, on whether or not effective communication has taken place between the teacher and the learner. The knowledge, skills and values necessary for a person to become an effective agent of change are provided through education by an appropriate language medium. Therefore, the role of language in the process of national development is extremely very important. It was the Renaissance philosopher, Francis Bacon, who made the postulation that “knowledge is power” (Omoregbe 2). According to him, the universe or nature has to be conquered and

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dominated, and the weapon with which nature can be conquered and dominated is knowledge (Omogbe 2). Knowledge itself is communicated through language. Language, therefore, is a vital tool in the struggle to gain dominion over nature. In fact, the importance of language to national development cannot be over-emphasized since it is with language that the entirety of reality can be explained. A contemporary British philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1961: 4:221), describes language as a picture of reality, i.e. a picture of the world. He holds that when language is analyzed, it can be seen to be composed of names in immediate combination. According to him, "It is obvious that in the analysis of propositions we must come to elementary propositions, which consist of names in immediate combination" (Wittgenstein 1961: 4:221). Wittgenstein makes it clear that just as a simple proposition is composed of a combination of simple names, so is a state of affairs in the world composed of a combination of things. Reality, according to him, can also be analyzed and broken up into 'atomic units' corresponding to the 'atomic units' of language. According to Wittgenstein (1961: 2:161), the world is made up of facts, which we picture through image:

The world is the totality of facts, not of things. The world is determined by the facts, and by their being all facts. For the totality of facts determines what is the case, and also whatever is not the case.... The world divides into facts. Each item can be the case while everything else remains the same. What is the case -a fact- is the existence of states of affairs. These facts (of which the world is made) are pictured by language, so that by means of language, we make to ourselves picture of facts.

In his analysis, John Locke (Omogbe 59) makes a link between language and national development. He states that there are interrelationships in-between language, words, ideas and knowledge; in other words, that they are closely related. According to his explanation, language is the means of human communication and it is made up of words; words are signs of ideas, that is, signs which signify ideas; ideas, in turn, signify and represent things, and they are the immediate objects of our knowledge (Omogbe 59). Since there is a link between language and knowledge, there is also a link between language and national development because knowledge is a sure key to national development. In fact, it is of common knowledge that national development cannot take place without knowledge. The importance of knowledge in the process of national development buttresses the importance of language, as knowledge is not only linked to language but is also transferred or imparted through it. The relationship between language and national development is stressed by Chumbow, in Emenanjo (1990:63) in these words:

The relation between language and national development should be obvious from the fact that since education is crucial in the training of manpower for national development and the language-medium is crucial in the educational process, it follows that language is important and in fact vital to national development as well.

Hindrances to the growth of the Igbo language

There are three major reasons for the decline in the learning and speaking of Igbo language. They are:

- i. Lack of adequate interest in Igbo language by the owners of the language due to their general ignorance of the great potential that it offers.
- ii. A misinterpretation of the relevant part of the National Policy on Education (NPE) as it concerns the medium of instruction at the primary level of education.
- iii. The iconoclastic attitude of many Igbo people with regards to language.

The overwhelming reason for this ugly development is that the native speakers of Igbo language do not show adequate interest in it. The native speakers of Yoruba and Hausa languages show much interest in their languages. Finding the English language as the inevitable *lingua franca* in Nigeria, the native speakers of Yoruba and Hausa languages accommodated the language as, and only as, the *lingua franca* which it is. In spite of the English language, they also speak their native languages with pride and do not feel ashamed to speak it or to identify with it anywhere. They ensure that their children learn to speak, read and write it. Hence, very educated and highly-placed Yoruba and Hausa speak their native languages fluently. Those of them in the diaspora are no exceptions. This positive attitude of the Yoruba and the Hausa towards their languages invariably endears these languages to non-native speakers and has thus won the languages a lot of admiration and recognition, both locally and internationally. This is exemplified in the fact that, for some time now, both languages have been enjoying the opportunity of air-time in both the Voice of America (VOA) and the British Broadcasting Service (BBC).

However, the story of the Igbo people and their language is different. Experience makes it seem that the English language means more to the Igbo people than just a *lingua franca*. It is as if the people have even decided to replace their native language with English. This phenomenon is manifest in the fact that most Igbo people, unlike their Hausa and Yoruba counterparts, cannot write or read the Igbo language properly. Many cannot even speak it well, let alone be able to write it well. Worse still, some Igbo youths, especially some of those who have, for a long time, lost contact with their cultural root due to long stay outside of it, treat the language with levity. In their ignorance, such youths would prefer to learn and speak the ethnic language of their place of abode. The reason for this lack of adequate interest in Igbo language by the Igbo people themselves is traceable to the ignorance of most of the native speakers of the language. The ignorance here is not only their ignorance of the great importance of the language to the Igbo race and to the entire nation, but also that of the great danger its decline or extinction portends to the Igbo cultural identity, and its far-reaching implications to the socio-economic life of the Igbo people in particular and the entire nation in general. The immediate implication of the Igbo lack of interest in Igbo language is that it discourages some non-Igbo people who, for one reason or the other, have the enthusiasm to

learn the language. Such people get dispirited when they observe the carelessness with which the very owners of the language treat it. An Igbo adage reads thus: 'Onye kpọọ ọba ya mkpọkọlọ, agbataobi ewelu ya kpoo afifia'. This is directly translated as: 'if a person calls his vessel useless, neighbours will use it to pack rubbish'. Semantically, it says that if a person treats his vessel with levity, others will have room to treat it likewise. In other words, the adage expresses the view that if a person fails to accord adequate respect to a thing that belongs to him, others will also disrespect it. This is exactly the case with the Igbo language and its native speakers.

Another major reason for the decline in the learning and speaking of Igbo language is the misinterpretation or misunderstanding, or to be sure, the non-application of the National Policy on Education (NPE) as it concerns the medium of instruction at the primary level of education in Nigeria. On this issue, Section 3; Paragraph 4 of the National Policy on Education states:

Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother-tongue or language of immediate community and, at a later stage, English (NPE 13)

Nevertheless, in contrast with the above dictate, in many primary schools in the country (especially in Igbo land), English is used as the major language of instruction. The situation is worsened by the fact that in many Igbo-based primary schools, not only that pupils are denied the right of being taught in their mother-tongue, they are even punished for daring to speak it during school period. This attitude sends the wrong signal to a child about his or her mother-tongue, and immensely diminishes interest in it.

Thirdly, the iconoclastic attitude of most Igbo people gave rise to the emergence of an unreasonable fashion among parents: the fashion of encouraging early learning and speaking of English by their children without a corresponding encouragement in the learning and speaking of the Igbo language. According to Ezeani (25),

The situation of the Igbo is made worse because, today, they are both the subjects (agents) and objects (victims) of the discourse, which belittles and disdains their own language. So, the Igbo of the present generation are the victims and victimizers of their own, though inherited, discourse.

Igbo Language as a Crucial Instrument for National Development

Obviously, knowledge is a key factor in national development, and since meaningful knowledge can only be transferred through language, it means that, as already noted, the importance of language to national development cannot be over-emphasized. The Igbo language is particularly crucial to national development because of the commercial nature of the South-eastern part of the country which harbours the native speakers of the Igbo language. People who do not possess the necessary knowledge are not likely to advance in social and economic spheres. Communication is most intelligible in a language with which the person is at home. It was in appreciation of this fact that the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) called on every European citizen to learn how to speak, read and write his or her native language (Ezeani 23). This should be a lesson for Nigerians. It implies that even those without formal education, can imbibe a skill or knowledge better in their respective indigenous languages than in English. The issue should be of particular interest to Igbo people, considering the fact that the South-eastern part of Nigeria which is the geographical base of the Igbo language embodies some of the largest markets in the whole of Africa. Owing to this fact, an improvement in the learning and speaking of the Igbo language, both among the Igbo and the non-Igbo, will ensure efficiency in communication and consequently lead to the enhancement of the economic growth of the nation. If the language is developed to international standards and made an international language, there is no doubt that it will attract foreign investor-companies which will find it easier to have their personnel trained in Igbo language before sending them to their industries and companies in Igboland. In this way, communication with the local workforce will be easier and more effective, leading to greater productivity.

Moreover, Igbo language provides great potential in the areas of social order, religion and politics. With an improvement in the study and learning of the language, Nigerians of other ethnic extractions, some of who complain that the Igbo language is complex, will be better guided in learning it. This will certainly enhance the spirit of brotherhood among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria, and ultimately heighten the level of social order, religious tolerance and political stability in the nation.

Recommendations

As already noted, ignorance is the mother of this lack of interest which is the crux of the problem of the Igbo language. As soon as the Igbo begin to show adequate interest in the Igbo language, the non- Igbo will follow suit. When this happens, Igbo language will have been placed on the threshold of a new existence where its immense potential as a language of commerce will be realized.

As part of the efforts towards resuscitating and repositioning the language, it is of primary importance that concerned Igbo elite use every available forum or opportunity to educate the Igbo masses on what is at stake. They should be made to understand that language is the pivot

around which the wheel of a people's culture rotates. Igbo people should be made to realize that language is a crucial index of culture and that it is culture that gives a people their identity as a people. The implication, therefore, is that the more a people's language dwindles, the more they are at the verge of losing their identity. Every Igbo person should learn to write, read and speak Igbo language properly. Igbo idioms and wise sayings, which add beauty to the language, should not be left out. Your proficiency or fluency in your mother-tongue is what establishes you as a true child of your origin. An Igbo adage says: 'Onye loo afa nna ya eloo, I malu na oburo ya mulu ya'. This means that when a person takes time to remember his father's name, then you can be sure the man is not actually his father. Parents should ginger their wards to learn to speak, read and write Igbo language. They should ensure that these children achieve a corresponding proficiency in Igbo language as in English.

Schools and media houses that are Igbo-based should be in the vanguard for the resuscitation and propagation of the Igbo language. They should help to formulate suitable Igbo words for some English vocabularies that do not yet have Igbo translations. Those in the education sector should ensure that the misinterpretation of the National Policy on Education as regards the medium of instruction at the primary school level is corrected. The stakeholders in all the Igbo states should insist that all primary schools in Igbo-land revert to the NPE dictate that, at the primary school level, pupils be taught initially in their mother-tongue, and then at a later stage, English. Houses of Assembly in all Igbo states should use legislation to stop the practice of pupils being punished for speaking Igbo during school period. Wealthy Igbo men and women should award scholarships to interested Igbo, and even non-Igbo boys and girls desirous to study Igbo language in the university or any higher institution.

Above all, serious effort should be made to make the Igbo language lucrative. This is necessary because it is of common experience that, in human affairs, incentives attract greater stimuli than mere exhortations. As soon as the monetary value of the Igbo language is increased, the zeal to speak or/and study it in school will rise tremendously. Advancing the same argument, Ejiiofor (2002:130) writes:

By the time our people see that they have to pass Igbo in order to get employed or promoted, they would start learning it, and when they see that people can earn their daily bread just by being good in Igbo, when they see that Igbo speakers and writers are accorded places of honour like attaining professorships in universities, being elected secretaries of unions/associations, reading welcome addresses and addressing important public gatherings, by the time they see others owning beautiful cars and setting up tall buildings just because they know Igbo, they will start using their language in their daily life.

Conclusion

Language is the means by which we communicate. The importance of communication as a factor in national development is most manifest with regards to trade. As a 'commercial language', Igbo language is not only a vital tool for national development but also very important to the on-going globalization which also considers trade as one of its major areas of focus. With renewed interest in, and enhanced learning of Igbo language, championed by the native Igbo speakers, the language will soon be appropriately positioned as a vital instrument for national development and, by extension, global development.

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*The reflexive construction in Igbo is made up of the nominal ònwé and a personal pronoun, both of which give rise to the structure:
[ònwé + pronoun].*