LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT: THE CASE OF THE IGBO LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

The present study has the objective of making a case study of Igbo as an endangered language. It sets out to identify the factors leading to the endangerment of the Igbo language, the immediate and long-term effects of this linguistic phenomenon of Igbo language endangerment. Two methods are applied: descriptive and historical. It is established, in this study, that the Igbo language is an endangered language. It is in a dying state and many of the younger generation (Igbo children and families) no longer speak Igbo. Also, they no longer learn it as a mother tongue (MT) informally and imperceptibly at home. Speaking Igbo is left generally at the hands of the generation of some Igbo parents. Factors of endangerment of Igbo found include undesirable language attitudes and disloyalty to the Igbo language and the marginalization of the Igbo language, a majority language. One long-term negative consequence of the Igbo language endangerment discovered in this study is that the Igbo language runs the risk of becoming extinct forty to fifty years from now if no drastic measures are taken to curb the ugly trend. Another long-term effect is the death of Ndigbo (linguistic and symbolic death). Some recommendations are proffered, notably: changing undesirable attitudes to the Igbo language; sensitization of Ndigbo both young and old to the display of great loyalty to the Igbo language, socio-linguistic readiness for literacy in Igbo and development of Igbo to become a language of science and technology through more thorough work on its metalanguage. The speedy and effective implementation of the recommendations will, hopefully, avert for the Igbo language and the Igbo nation the impending doom.

Introduction

The term, “language” is defined simply as: “the system of words or signs that people use to express thoughts and feelings to each other” (https://www.merriam-webster.com>lang>). The Collins on-line 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” (https://www.collinsdictionary.com). This definition introduces the element of ethnicity or regionalism. A language is shared by an ethnic group or a particular country or region. For example, English is the first official language of the people of Nigeria, whereas Hausa is the language spoken in the Northern part of Nigeria. The same dictionary tells us that the words used in connection with a particular subject can be referred to as the language of that subject. Take, for

example, the language of Law. One is not ignorant of the existence of sign language, such as the one used by a category of human beings like the deaf and dumb. The definition which follows seems to take cognisance of most of what language entails in relation to human species: "Language is a system of conventional, spoken, manual, or written symbols by means of which human beings as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves" (https://www.britannica.com>topic>language). Language is implied here as a tool for the expression of a people's culture.

Language which is the medium of communication as well as vehicle for the transmission of the culture of an ethnic group from one generation to the other is not static but dynamic. It lives and its continuous use by the human group serves as a means of sustainable growth. In the words of Emenanjo and Bleambo : "If the language is in use it is alive, vibrant, dynamic, grows and survives. But if a language is not used by its indigenous speakers then its continuous survival is threatened. For it could be lost to language shift" (i).

Multilingualism or polyglottism is a prominent feature of our globalising world. Multilingualism or polyglottism or plurilingualism refers to the situation where an individual is capable of expressing himself/herself orally or/and graphically in many languages. According to Onyemelukwe: a multilingual or a plurilingual possesses different communicative competences in languages A, B, C, D or more he or she is in contact with ("Textes litteraires" 85). Same can be said of a polyglot. Our globalising world is fraught with language endangerment. *The Hutchinson Encyclopedia* like *La Vanguardia* notes that there are about 6,000 languages spoken in the world of which 90% are in danger of falling into disuse while 10% are safe. *The UNESCO Atlas of World Languages in Danger of Disappearing* makes a distinction between "endangered", "moribund" and "extinct" languages. When a language is moribund, it is in a dying state but when it is extinct, it is no longer in existence in the globe. Endangered languages generally range from disadvantaged or deprived to dying or moribund. In the context of this study, an endangered language is a language that is menaced, a language that is in danger. A group of linguists proposed six degrees of language vitality based on their transmission from one generation to the other. The third out of the six degrees is meant for the endangered languages. In line with these linguists' viewpoint, an endangered language is defined thus:

> *La langue n'est plus enseignée aux enfants comme langue maternelle à la maison. Les plus jeunes locuteurs appartiennent donc à la génération parentale.*

> *Dans ce cas, les parents continuent de s'adresser à leurs enfants dans leur langue, mais en général leurs enfants ne leur répondent pas dans cette langue (Moseley12).*
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> *Children are no longer taught the language as mother tongue at home. The youngest speakers of the language are thus of the generation of the parents. In this case, the parents continue to talk to their children in their language, but generally their children do not respond in this language (our translation).*

It is important to note that Igbo was not ranked among endangered languages of Nigeria in this Atlas of endangered languages of the world; a big and ridiculous omission considering that going by the definition put forward by those linguists, the Igbo language fits in perfectly. At this juncture, one needs to throw into relief the thrust of the present research: it is a case study of the Igbo language as an endangered language. The objective of this research is to establish facts which point to the endangerment of the Igbo language. In other words, identify social realities pointing to Igbo as an endangered language. Two methods, namely: descriptive and historical, are used to conduct the study.

A good starting point is a brief look at the linguistic phenomenon of language endangerment. This will be followed by an attempt at definition of the term "Igbo", the geographical location of native speakers of the Igbo language, important character traits of Ndigbo, a succinct description of the Igbo language, factors of endangerment of the Igbo language, long-term negative consequences of the Igbo language endangerment, recommendations and conclusion.

A Brief Look at the Linguistic Phenomenon of Language Endangerment

The coming into contact of many languages is a world phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is more pronounced in multilingual countries of the world. Significantly, 5170 languages are distributed in the world all over the continents. Europe and America are linguistically the poorest or the more homogenous (3% and 15% respectively), as opposed to Asia and Africa which have numerous languages (31% and 31.09 respectively); according to the most recent data provided by Jacques Leclerc (54). These data reveal that economically advanced countries are generally characterised by linguistic homogeneity while underdeveloped or developing countries tend towards linguistic heterogeneity. It is not surprising that Nigeria, the country housing the Igbo society that uses the Igbo language, which constitutes the focus of the present study, is highly multilingual or plurilingual. While Dawulung, Emenanjo and Bleambo, in 1999, give a rough estimate of 395 to 400 languages in Nigeria not taking into account her numerous dialects and

foreign languages like English, French, German, etc., today, current statistics show that Nigeria has 514 indigenous languages and 521 languages on the whole when cognisance is taken of the first and second official languages (English and French respectively), and other imported languages (http://aboutworldlanguages.com/world.languages). With coming into contact of such diversity of languages in Nigeria, the scene is set for diglossic discourses among the kaleidoscopic ethnic groups with attendant diglossic conflicts generating a couple of sociolinguistic phenomena such as code-switching and code-mixing with nefarious consequences culminating sometimes in language death.

Interestingly, three out of the 514 autochthonous languages of Nigeria serve as major languages of the nation. These are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The rest are minority languages. Examples are: Tiv, Gworok, Eferefere, Birom, Ishan, Igala, Idoma, Ibibio, etc. many of these minority languages have not been codified; they are still at the pure oral state. The three major Nigerian languages have been codified or standardised. A good many of the minority languages of Nigeria are endangered. Dawulung notes that in Plateau State of Nigeria, all the indigenous languages, also minority languages are either endangered or disadvantaged. These languages are, without doubt, likely to become extinct in the near future.

Going by estimates given by linguists, every two weeks, a language dies somewhere in the world (Tabouret-Keller and Varro 1). It has been estimated that with this global linguistic phenomenon of language endangerment and language extinction, in the next fifty years, 3000 languages would have disappeared from the surface of the earth. Latin has become fossilized like Sanskrit and Classical Greek. A pertinent question is thus: if minority languages which are not yet codified or standardised run the risk of dying, what of the Igbo language which has clearly been standardised? What could be the reasons for the endangerment of Igbo?

Igbo: An Attempt at Definition

The word “Igbo” refers to the Igbo human group as well as the linguistic medium through which individuals in the group express their culture and communicate with one another both within their sub-culture and in the macro globalising world of today. Thus we talk of “Ndigbo” (short for “Ndi Igbo”) meaning “the Igbo” or “the Igbo people” and their language, “Igbo” or “the Igbo language”.

Notice, the word “Igbo” was wrongly spelt and also mispronounced as “Ibo” in colonial books and by colonizers and some colonised Africans, probably because the nearest phoneme to

/[gb]/ in the English language, the ex-British colonialists' more familiar code is /[b]/. Another plausible reason for that linguistic interference is that the Whiteman finds it difficult to pronounce /[gb]/ and so opts to give the erroneous rendition /[b]/ for /[gb]/. It should also be pointed out that today, "Ndigbo" put forward by Ohaneze is gradually replacing "the Igbo" or "the Igbo people".

What then is the meaning of the word "Igbo". The word "Igbo" is probably derived from the verb "igbo" meaning "to prevent, to obstruct or to mix." Therefore, "Ndigbo" means the people who can mix well, who can adapt successfully with people of other tribes/nations. One may also extrapolate that the language "Igbo" is a language that can easily mix with other languages; a language which can easily adjust, adapt, to accommodate other codes. Hence the high level of code-switching and code-mixing witnessed among native speakers of the Igbo language (Onyemelukwe,"L'alternance codique"4), and the Igbo people's propensity for Type B Polyglottism (Onyemelukwe, "Polyglottism for Regional" 117-120).

Geographical Location of Native Speakers of the Igbo Language

Whoever talks of Ndigbo is, without doubt, referring to the Igbo nation, one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Ndigbo constitute one of the largest peoples of Africa with a population of ten million according to the 1963 National Census figures. With the population of Nigeria said to be a hundred million that of Ndigbo must have witnessed a remarkable increase. The Igbo population is unevenly distributed but located within the present Anambra, Imo, Abia, Enugu, and Ebonyi States as well as parts of Delta, Cross River and Rivers States of Nigeria. The bulk of Igbo population is found along the Onitsha, Orlu, Okigwe and Mbaise geographical axis where the population density is well over 3,000 persons per square mile (Edeh 9).

The Igbo nation shares borders with various other ethnic groups in Nigeria, viz.: the Ogoni, the Okrika, the Ijo, the Kalabari and the Atlantic ocean in the South; the Tiv, the Ukelle and the Igala in the North; the Urhobo, the Bini, the Ishan, the Isoko peoples in the West and the Ibibio, the Mbembe, Yako, the Effik and the Ekoi peoples in the East (Basden 3).

Important Character Traits of Ndigbo

Ndigbo have the political culture of dispersal all over the world. They are the most dispersed group in Nigeria. The Igbo are found even in the remotest village of Northern Nigeria as well as other parts of the world. It will not be a surprise to meet an Igbo man in Iceland. This phenomenon is attributed to their great pursuit of wealth, persecution, war, land pressure at home,

quest for business ventures, physical adaptability, receptivity to change and innate polyglottism; the last two, as Onyemelukwe clearly showed, being tools for regional and cultural integration ("Polyglottism for Regional" 117).

Peace loving by nature, their methods of geographical or regional expansion are essentially peaceful namely, penetration, attraction of relatives, absorption and assimilation. (Njaka; Onyemelukwe, "Polyglottism for Regional" 116-120). This special ethnic group is known for being bold, daring, adventurous, patient and tolerant. The Igbo are strong, determined, outgoing and industrious. Furthermore, they are creative, resourceful, innovative and productive. In the words of Onyemelukwe: "Ndigbo are astute business men … love money to a grotesque proportion … They are go-getters, achievers who hardly throw in the towel or succumb to politics of frustration. They are true-to-type, pragmatic and live in a highly competitive world" ("Polyglottism for Regional"111). Strikingly, Ndigbo, generally, have a knack for languages. This lends them easily to polyglottism.

A Succinct Description of the Igbo Language

The Igbo language, a tone language belongs to the kwa family of languages along with many other autochthonous West African languages. Using the monolithic dialectal approach, the Igbo language has about 250 dialects (Emenanjo, "Central Igbo" ; Onyemelukwe, "Polyglottism for Regional" 107-108). The dialectal differences are so great in some cases that individuals of the same ethnicity are thrust into incomprehensibility. There was thus the need for a standardised Igbo. (Emenanjo, "Central Igbo"; Onyemelukwe, "Problems of Pronunciation of French Sounds"). Despite divided opinions regarding the codification of Igbo and the long process it took, the Onwu orthography eventually emerged as the Standard Igbo (SI) in 1961. The SI was drawn principally from three dialects of Igbo viz.: generalised Owerri, Umuahia and Onitsha dialects. This variety of Igbo is widely used, spoken and understood in a great deal of Igbo cultural enclave. Following Ndigbo's general tendency to mix freely and spread all over, their language Igbo is heard and used by others who are not Igbo and Igbo presence is, to a large extent, felt in all parts of Nigeria (Ubahakwe 270).

Factors of Endangerment of the Igbo Language

Three major factors are identified as shown below:

1. Undesirable Language Attitudes and Disloyalty to the Igbo Language

i. Ndigbo's exhibition of Type B Polyglottism.

Onyemelukwe vividly demonstrated that contrary to the French, for example, who exhibit what she termed Type A polyglottism i.e. polyglottism + L_1 (mother tongue), Ndigbo are prone to what she tagged Type B polyglottism; i.e. polyglottism - L_1 (mother tongue) ("Polyglottism for Regional" 117-119). She explained that Ndigbo are, generally, more inclined to speaking non-indigenous African languages (English, French etc) among autochthonous African languages in their linguistic repertoire while relegating their mother tongue, Igbo, to the background. The polyglottism of Ndigbo is represented thus:

TYPE B POLYGLOTTISM = POLYGLOTTISM – IGBO

The Igbo polyglot shows no loyalty to Igbo. This unhealthy attitude among the Igbo does not augur well for the promotion and sustenance of the Igbo language and spells out doom for the Igbo language in the near future.

ii. Non-speaking of Igbo in Igbo families/groups

Most Igbo parents prefer to speak English to their children and wards. The English language thus displaces Igbo as a language of communication in the home.

Some parents especially in cross-cultural marriages employ Igbo maids to help the children speak Igbo. This does not help matters because these Igbo maids usually recruited from rural Igbo areas see this as a great opportunity to improve on their English. Thus, rather than speak Igbo to the children, they speak broken and sometimes corrupt English to the children, often affecting negatively their English.

At family and group meetings, many Igbo adults today cannot make an address in Igbo without code-switching from Igbo to English or code-mixing Igbo and English. This situation is appalling and contributes in no small measure to the endangerment of Igbo.

It should be pointed out that even though Type B polyglottism is a feature also found among other tribes in Nigeria, it is minimal with them and very pronounced with Ndigbo (Onyemelukwe, "L'alternance codique" 2). Equally important is the fact that a few Type A polyglots exist among the Igbo. Such Igbo people still speak undiluted Igbo, well spiced with proverbs and other figures of speech. However, these belong to the old generation of Ndigbo.

Such raise up their children with the Igbo language and culture. This trend is worthy of emulation.

However, the majority of Ndigbo show undesirable language attitudes and disloyalty to the Igbo language. Consider that many Ndigbo when found in the company of people from other ethnic groups readily give up Igbo for the language of the immediate environment or the official language. This trend which is attributable to Igbo people's grave disloyalty to their mother tongue and excessive receptivity to change, does not stop at language alone but cuts across other elements of Igbo culture. Onyemelukwe opines that: "Of all the tribes of Nigeria, Ndigbo are the most receptive to change as evidenced in their eating habits, dress habits, conversational practices" ("Polyglottism for Regional"112).

She adds that:

> *The negative impact of their receptivity to change cannot be overlooked: Igbo names, traditions, dress codes, cultural practices – greetings, respect for Eze and Ndi Ichie and Igbo language appear to be the most corrupt in the country. Igbo culture and civilization are being greatly eroded ("Polyglottism for Regional" 112).*

She critiques thus:

> *Ndigbo are not indicted here for loving variety and diversity per se; No! but for excessive attachment to diversity to the point of generating intratribal disunity …. God … gave nations variegated cultures, kaleidoscopic languages for us to maintain unity in diversity. Ndigbo should, therefore, thread with caution so that in their quest to embrace other people's way of life, their own God-given culture and language may not suffer extinction ("Polyglottism for Regional"112).*

2. Igbo Children's Progressive Illiteracy in Igbo

The unhealthy practice of failing to use Igbo as medium of communication at home leads to Igbo children's progressive illiteracy in Igbo. This is unfair not only to these Igbo children but also to the entire Igbo community. Why? This may orchestrate eventually the alienation of Igbo children from their language roots maybe in forty years time except urgent steps are taken to arrest such.

3. The Igbo Language: A Marginalized Majority Language

Although the *National Policy on Education* expects that in the interest of national unity, "every child shall be required to learn one of the three major Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba" (FRN 9), a simple survey done by the researcher shows that a lot

more institutions of learning make provision for the teaching and learning of Hausa, and Yoruba than Igbo. Moreover, Yoruba and Hausa in particular, have attained a much higher level of development as language of science and technology than Igbo. Hausa is transmitted from Cairo, Beijing, Washington DC, BBC, Dutchabeli, Voice of Germany in Koln and Moscow apart from the Voice of Nigeria. Igbo is transmitted only from Voice of Nigeria and BBC. Some Home Videos also publicize it just like some others publicize Hausa and Yoruba etc. Some pertinent questions come to bear: What has become of Igbo, the language of great achievers? Is it good only as a national language? Can it not be elevated to the status of an international language in this era of globalisation? Can it also not become a language of international trade, politics and lobbying. Can it not be developed to become a language of science and technology? How many people learn Igbo? Can Yoruba, Hausa, Tiv, the English and French, for example, not learn Igbo just as Igbo polyglots learn various other languages? When will the teaching of Igbo in schools such as Federal College of Education, Zaria transcend L_1 teaching to L_2? How much Igbo is taught in the Nigerian school system let alone abroad? These questions throw up some challenges much as they echo loudly the bad news that Igbo is disadvantaged, deprived and dying.

Long-term Negative Consequences of Igbo Language Endangerment

One long-term negative effect of the endangerment of the Igbo language is that the Igbo language becomes extinct. Talking about the endangerment and extinction of the Igbo language raises the question of the future of the Igbo people for whom the endangered language serves as the instrument of communication. Since language is a factor of cultural identity and means for preserving the culture of a people; the endangerment of the Igbo language will definitely threaten the survival of the Igbo ethnic group. It goes without saying that another long-term effect of the endangerment of the Igbo language is the death of the Igbo nation (linguistic and symbolic death).

With alienation from their language roots, Ndigbo will suffer loss of cultural roots, loss of family and ethnic unity and integration. An individual without identity is neither here nor there. He is floating and can easily be submerged or swallowed up. Umeh aptly notes that “it is impossible for a tree, no matter how giant (sic) its size may be, to remain alive when its roots are cut” (ii). Onyemelukwe maintains firmly that:

> *Majority of Ndigbo have lost touch with the Igbo language, culture, civilization, achievement motivation, a sense of pride, orientation to success and laudable tenets mostly because of displacement of value system, loss of norms, ideals and desirable character traits of Ndigbo. The Igbo man's quest for academic pursuit and excellence has been tragically replaced by inordinate and blind pursuit of money even among minors … Where will this lead Ndigbo to? The Igbo soul is being stripped naked (" Polyglottism for Regional"124).*

Indeed, the Igbo man is dying slowly, steadily and silently. There is a clear indication that Ndigbo are dying slowly just as the Igbo language. Onuekwusi laments thus: "Our beloved homeland Anambra State has been in decay. It has been dying slowly" (4). He pleads with Igbo Professionals, technocrats and administrators: "Do not let our homeland die. We the people of Anambra State must return to God" (4). Here, Dr. Ndi Onuekwusi, the President of the League of Anambra Professionals (LAP), uses "Anambra State" as a synecdoche to represent Ndigbo. In essence, he is throwing a challenge to appropriate stakeholders to put in motion urgent intervention strategies to stall the impending extinction of Ndigbo. Ikejiani-Clark opines that: "Post civil war Nigeria rather than abstract from marginalization of the Igbo, intensified deprivation and alienation of the race, especially in the composition of the military, political appointments and provision of social amenities and infrastructures" (629). Available statistics provided by this critic lucidly confirm this absurd situation. While reacting to this gruesome state of Ndigbo, Senator Ukpo quoted by Ikejiani-Clark sounds a note of caution: that except an urgent measure is taken, "Easterners (Igbo) may be facing extinction" (Cited by Ikejiani-Clark 630).

Recommendations

The findings of the present research compel us to make the following important recommendations:

1. Changing Undesirable Attitudes to the Igbo language

- Reclamation of adult Igbo to Type A polyglottism
- Willing readiness of the Igbo people to use the Igbo language
- Cultivating the art of speaking fluently in Igbo
- Avoiding code-switching and code-mixing when using the Igbo language
- Reclamation of Igbo children to Type A polyglottism

- Parents should socialize their children in Igbo
- Igbo should be used as the medium of communication in the home
- Communication with God (prayers) in Igbo families should be in Igbo

2. **Sensitization of Ndigbo both young and old to the display of great loyalty to the Igbo language.**

Emenanjo and Bleambo have aptly remarked that: "Language endangerment is stalled by robust language loyalty no matter the population of its speakers. Language loyalty itself prevents language shift..." (ii).

3. **Socio-linguistic Readiness for Literacy in Igbo**
   - Igbo children should be serious with learning of Igbo in schools
   - Parents should teach Igbo children how to read and write Igbo at home
   - Parents should read Igbo stories and fables to Igbo children at home
   - Parents should provide their children learner-friendly Igbo books such as Igbo Oral Literature, Books I, II, and III by Ifeoma Onyemelukwe. These teach the children and even adult learners Igbo Lullabies, Songs and Games and Riddles or Gwa m ,Gwa m, Gwa m.
   - The Igbo language should have a place in all of the Departments of Languages and Nigerian and African Languages and Cultures
   - Igbo should be taught not only as L_1 but also as L_2
   - School authorities should make provision of adequate infrastructural facilities and instructional materials and funding in Igbo Departments

4. **Development of Igbo to become a language of science and technology through more thorough work on its metalanguage.**

5. **Sensitizing the public especially here in the North to the availability of Igbo language teaching in Federal Colleges of Education, Zaria and Kano so as to help elevate its teaching to L_2 status.**

Conclusion

All hands on deck to do all that is needful to avert the impending extinction of the Igbo language from Planet earth. This paper is a clarion call for speedy and effective action from all and sundry, both young and old so as to bring the Igbo language out of its present endangered state. Preserving the Igbo language is tantamount to preserving the Igbo nation. The implementation of all the recommendations proffered in this write-up will help all stakeholders achieve this noble goal.

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