

**THE ROLES OF IGBO LANGUAGE IN CULTURE, EDUCATION, ECONOMY,  
COMMUNICATION AND POLITICS**

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**Abstract**

*This paper looked at the roles of Igbo language in cultural, educational, economical, communicational and political ideologies. The paper looked critically at each of the above and came out with a convincing role which Igbo language plays. Fishman's (1991) model of intergenerational transmission was adopted for the study. The study recommended the effective use of Igbo language in Igbo culture which will lead to the development of all facets of life in Igbo culture. It concluded that communication which other factors are embedded must be encouraged and transmitted to the young generations by the adults.*

**Keywords: Culture, Role, Politics, Economy, Education, Communication.**

**INTRODUCTION**

Language is a system of human expression by means of sounds, signs, words and sentence structures for the purpose of communication. This means that a particular language is capable of being manifested through its sounds, sign or graphically if its orthography has been agreed upon by members of the society (i.e. the language group. Dom-Anyanwu, 2006:1).

Language is an arbitrary set of vocal codes used for communication ((Ikekeonwu, 2009:5).

Language can be classified according to the function it performs, either as first language (L<sub>1</sub>) or second language (L<sub>2</sub>). While first language (L<sub>1</sub>) is the language of the child's immediate environment which the child acquires, second language (L<sub>2</sub>) is a language learned in addition to the first language. It is officially learned in a formal setting (school). In most cases, it is the language of the commerce, politics, government, etc.

Language means an aspect of culture that conveys the cultural universals of the society. It is a human characteristic that differentiates man from lower animals (Ihedioha, 2016).

Udoh (2017:13) sees language as a human system of communication used by a community or country. It is an extremely important aspect of a community and an important index of identity. In the views of Akmajian et al (2012:483), human language is seen as "an intricate system of abstract units, structures and rules, used in a powerful system of communication". Having seen some general definitions of human language which Igbo language shares, it will then be pertinent to say that there are many languages in the world which Igbo language is one of them and which is the main concern of this write-up.

**Igbo Language Definitions**

Igbo language is one of the three major Nigerian Languages that is highly regarded and respected. Igbo is a natural language with an estimated number of over twenty million native speakers most of whom are located in the following states in Nigeria; Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, parts of Delta, parts of Cross River and Rivers States.

Igbo language belongs to the New Benue Congo (NBC) sub-family of the Niger Congo language family. Igbo language was committed to writing in the 19th century courtesy of the efforts of expatriate missionaries. Though the light of literacy showed on Igbo language through the missionaries, it is also known that the darkness that engulfed Igbo literacy development had its roots ironically in the activities of some expatriate missionaries and their rather overzealous convert (Dom-Anyanwu, 2016:39).

Two divergent orthographies emerged for the propagation of missionary tracts, Bibles and primers. One's denominational inclination to a large extent dictated the one to buy and read out of the two. It is now history that the onwu orthography, adopted in 1962 brought the era of competing Igbo orthographies to an end. The Onwu orthography is currently used in standard Igbo literary works for schools from primary to tertiary institutions.

### **Nature of Igbo Language**

Just like other human Languages, Igbo language has natures. By nature here we mean these qualities that are inherent in Igbo language. These include;

- (i) **Igbo language is primarily a human phenomenon.** This is clear because while there are various means of communication such as animal language, computer language, etc, the fact still remains that Igbo language is particularly restricted to human beings.
- (ii) **Igbo language is creative:** Human beings create and recreate, change and expand linguistic forms and structures, to achieve divers aims and functions. This is done in Igbo language through formation processes such as affixation and suffixation.
- (iii) **Igbo language has a pattern.** The sounds of Igbo language is organized in a way that for any meaning to be made, the vowel and consonant must be combined. For example, B/ia, R/ie, gb/aa, etc.
- (iv) **Igbo language is not inherent.** No Igbo child is born with a language. At birth, the child's brain is plain and clean like a blank state without any language. It is the environment into which the child is born that furnishes the child the language he/she acquires. No wonder a child born by Igbo parents in Paris speaks French as his mother tongue instead of Igbo language which is the language of his parents.
- (v) **Igbo language enables thought.** The nature of Igbo language does not end in knowing the sounds and symbols of the language alone, it also enables thought, thus, we think in our first language (L<sub>1</sub>). This simply means that without language thinking will not be humanly possible. (Dom-Anyanwu, 2006:3-9).
- (vi) **Igbo language is dynamic.** This simply means that Igbo language is not static, it changes. The changing nature of Igbo language makes it grow. In support of this, he has this to say, as new words are formed to cater for new ideas or inventions, so do some words become obsolete and find their way out of the language. This also shows that Igbo language is an open system because of its nature to accept changes, creates and recreates any given line.
- (vii) **Igbo language is phatic communion.** It bounds the speakers

Having seen the meaning of language generally and Igbo language in particular, let us look at the roles Igbo language plays in culture, education, economy, communication and political ideologies.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study adopted Fishman's 1991 model of intergenerational transmission. The intergenerational transmission expresses the dynamic nature of intergenerational transmission in the areas of Igbo language. This paper tried to look at the crucial nature of the model to the practice and survival of Igbo language in the aspects of culture, communication, economy, education and politics. Fishman believes that intergenerational transmission of Igbo language from the adults to the young ones or even from parents to their children is the key to keeping Igbo language alive which leads to the various roles the language can play for the users. This is because for the language to play different roles in the Igbo cultural milieu, it must be well used and accepted by the owners as their identity. In support of the above, Fishman (2002) opines that a language is simultaneously indexical of both the material and non-material properties of its traditionally associated culture, symbolic of that culture and easily politicalised and completely part of any culture. As important aspect of culture and important tool for economic, educational, communicational and political growth of any given society, Igbo language should be preserved through generational transmission

## **IGBO LANGUAGE AND CULTURE**

Culture is the total way of life of a group of people or society. It is a social heritage of a given society involving their dos and don'ts, values and morals, belief, arts, tools, crafts, food, greetings, and even their professions. We have material and non-material culture.

Material culture includes; tools, arts, artifacts and crafts while non-material culture includes; ideas, values, philosophy, music, festivals, ceremonies, music, dance, drama and religion (Yusuf, 2010:15-25).

Language itself is part of culture. It can be seen that language, culture and society have strong links and cannot be separated from one another.

### **Characteristics of Culture**

Igbo language therefore cannot be separated from Igbo culture, the two work hand in hand.

Igbo language is the vehicle of Igbo culture. It is a medium of expression for Igbo entity. It is essential to the identity of Igbo individuals and groups as well as their peaceful co-existence just as other languages and cultures. In support of the above claims, Bangbose (2014) opines that language is the major vehicle of a people's culture

Igbo language is the carrier of Igbo culture to buttress the issue of Igbo culture, Obahiniagbon (2010: 84-92) maintains that language serves as a cultural identity to groups of people. Through Igbo language, Igbo social behavior, norms and values are transmitted from generation to generation. Apart from being a means of communication, Igbo language is also a means of identity.

## **IGBO LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION**

Education is the process of imparting knowledge, skill and judgment. It is facts, ideas and skills that have been learned, either formally or informally.

Education is critical and significant in the development of any society. It is partly about primary socialization, partly about the processes of imparting knowledge and skills, and essentially about the preservation as well as extension of knowledge for progress and development. It is also about culture sustenance and reproduction.

Education is not just about literacy and numeracy. It is about value-formation, value-orientation and remuneration. It is about creating the basis for self-generating and self-sustaining development, predicated on an appropriately defined societal value-orientation (Attahiru, 2009:9).

Education whether formal, informal or non-formal is carried out through a medium which is language. Igbo language plays an important role in the education of Igbo people at large and Nigeria in general. Traditional education in Igbo land can never be over emphasized because of its numerous benefits. The acts of apprenticeship to other formal learning are done through the medium of Igbo language. In the modern world today, Igbo language is playing a great role in education (formal). Through the language, we have lecturers in different institution both at national and international levels. Now we teach Igbo language literature and education using Igbo language. We have actors and actresses in the film industries, in the media, we are not lacking. Igbo language has played and is still playing great roles in education. Education generally is better done in the child's mother tongue. This has been confirmed by nations like, China, India and even Japan. Therefore, when an Igbo child is educated using Igbo language as a medium of instruction, the child learns better. Nelson Mandela once remarked: if you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head but "if you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart" (Haruna 2017:6). The unparalleled influence of Igbo language in Nigerian educational enterprise cannot be over-emphasized. An amiable evidence of this is the official inclusion of Igbo language as one of the three major Nigerian languages which should be studied in Nigerian secondary schools as both First Nigerian Language (NL) and as Second Nigerian Language (NL<sub>2</sub>) (FRN 2014:8).

## **THE ROLE OF IGBO LANGUAGE IN ECONOMY**

The word economy is of Greek origin which means "Household Management"

An economy encompasses all activities related to production, consumption and trade of goods and services in an area.

The economy of a particular region or country is governed by its culture, laws, history and geography among other factors, and it evolves one to necessity.

Traditionally, the Igbo people are known with farming and trading among other things. Old in days, for an Igbo man to be seen as a wealthy man, he must have many farmland, a good number of children, plenty bans of yam, or he must be a great hunter. The proceeds of farming and hunting are sold to make money.

The Igbo have a unique form of apprenticeship in which either a male or female will spend time with another family and learn a skill for one/or two years skills like carpentry, gold smiting and others. All these are done using Igbo language as a medium of communication as most Igbo people are into trading. This they carry out nationally and internationally, thereby promoting Igbo language which is their language. Most of their customers were forced to learn Igbo language in order to communicate with these traders.

The Igbo boy novel is one of the simplest ways the Igbo young boys work as apprentice in business while learning how it works and the secrets of the business. This takes 5-7 years and the boy will be settled by the Oga (masters) to start his own business. All these trainings are done using Igbo language as a channel of communication.

Igbo language plays a vital role in commercial activities. The Igbo man is known in the whole world as a business man. Their success in commerce has brought lots of economic boom in Nigeria in terms of industries and other developments generally.

The Igbo man's business thoughts and brain works are carried out by him using Igbo language as the mother tongue/first language. In other words, we think in our first language. In the film industries, language also play vital role. One can see some movies acted in Igbo language thereby promoting the language as well as developing the nation economically. Arts and Crafts in Igbo Land also generate a lot of income for the nation. Shoe making and selling at Ariaria Aba as well as the mechanic market and workshops at Nkwọ Nnewi, all in Igbo Land are carried out in Igbo language. All these are sources of income in Nigeria and are possible through the use of Igbo language.

That Nigeria is known internationally is as a result of Igbo business men's success. This success made it possible for some white men to force themselves in learning Igbo language in order to communicate with the Igbo business men. In Yoruba markets especially in Lagos, some non-Igbo indigenes also try in speaking Igbo language in order to communicate with the Igbos. One can see a Yoruba meat seller saying "Bia anu mara mma" and so on. We have teachers, Doctors, professors who studied Igbo Language in Schools of Higher learning and are also teaching Igbo language, Literature and culture in schools thereby contributing to the economic development of the nation. In our media also, we have Igbo staff who cast news in Igbo language. In the medical line, Igbo language is also used by the Doctors to communicate with patients in Igbo land, thereby making progress in their career as well as helping the national economy to grow.

In Nigeria today, everyone wants to go to obodo Oyibo for greener pasture. To get America Visa in Nigeria, one needs to go for an interview which Igbo language is one of the medium of communication. The role of Igbo language in economy can never be over emphasized.

### **IGBO LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION**

One of the important roles of Igbo language is communication. Igbo language helps for effective interpersonal interactions. Through interaction with family members, peer groups, siblings, aunts, and uncles, children in Igbo culture learn communication competence or how to use Igbo language appropriately and strategically in social situations. In support of this, Holmes (2013:37) opines that "we adapt our talk to suit our audience". Igbo language helps children in Igbo culture, learn to ask questions, give orders, express their thoughts, apologise and tell stories. It helps them learn social routines, terms of politeness and ways to address others, especially elders. Igbo language helps children understand how to initiate, maintain and conclude conversations, as well as take turns, provide and respond effectively to feedback and stay on topics. The Igbo children learn to be sensitive to their audience and to the situations in which they are communicating. For instance in making requests in Igbo language, the children learn many ways of making polite requests using Igbo language. Like other cultures, Igbo culture is averse to rudeness when making request irrespective of the nature of the request. The addresser uses plea words to make the appeal to the addressee. Examples:

- *Biko nyere m aka*

- *Nnaa, biko nyere m aka.*
- *Nyere m aka, biko*
- *Nne gi anwula, nyere m aka.*

All these mean, please help me.

The word *biko/doo/nne gi anwula* are the primary words used to make requests in Igbo when the children learned using Igbo language. These words are used to cushion the effect of the original order.

Another instance is in giving orders and instructions. This involves asking others to do something. Sometimes, it involves issuing commands or directives to other people.

The implication of this is that power structures are evoked but in Igbo culture, the imperative is employed. The Igbo language formed the imperative through the process of vowel harmonizing suffix to the verb root.

Examples:

<i>Nodu ala</i>	-	sit down
<i>Mechie onu</i>	-	close your mouth
<i>Gee nti</i>	-	Listen
<i>Rie nri</i>	-	Eat
<i>Gbaa egwu</i>	-	Dance
<i>Kuọ aka-</i>	-	Clap
<i>Guo egwu</i>	-	Sing
<i>Ria elu</i>	-	Climb
<i>Kwuo okwu</i>	-	Talk

The above forms can be used by adults to address children and subordinates respectively. Children cannot use them to address elders and senior respectively because it will sound rude.

In that case, the following imperative forms are often used for direct orders:

<i>Ka anyi nu ihe</i>	-	Allow us hear
<i>Biko ka anyi nu ihe</i>	-	Please allow us hear
<i>Biko gee m nti</i>	-	please listen to me.
<i>Biko nodu ala</i>	-	Please sit down
<i>Ewela iwe, nye, anyi ohere</i>	-	Do not be angry give us

The plea forms are attached to soften the order and instruction and perhaps turn the order into requests for the sake of politeness.

The Igbo language also teaches the children how to ask questions. Thus: An elder can ask a younger one: *Ebee ka i gara?* Where did you go to?

But a younger person cannot ask the same question the way the elder asked it rather, the younger person will say: *Nna anyi ukwu, oteela ahubeghi m gi.*

Our father, it has been long have not seen you.

Igbo language plays a lot of roles in communication generally in Igbo culture. In essence, all other roles of Igbo language are embedded into communication because without communication, other roles will not be possible. Igbo language therefore plays a lot of roles in the life of an Igbo man and even in the lives of others outside Igbo cultures.

### **THE ROLE OF IGBO LANGUAGE IN POLITICS**

Politics is a methodology and activities associated with running a government, an organisation, or a movement.

Politics can also be seen as practice and theory of influencing other people as in government. When we talk of politics, we are looking at leadership. Leadership is a dynamic process in which an individual behaves in a certain manner, thereby influencing others to follow (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia). Politics is the activities, actions, and policies that are used to gain and hold power in a government or to influence a government. When we talk of politics, we look at the people and their leaders. There will be no politics without the citizens and as such there will be no political activities without a given society and language to reach out to the people especially at the grass root level. In other words politics does not occur in a vacuum. In essence, for political system to flourish in Igbo land it requires the use of Igbo language for its cultivation, survival and blossoming. For politics to flourish and be entrenched, its norms, tenets and practices must be

couched in cultural idioms and proverbs that are indigenous to the people (Onwuemenam, 2018:98). This is to enable everyone understand what the policies are all about. During elections the politicians are seen in different cultural attires and even learn to make one or two utterances in the language of the people visited. This among other things is because language binds people together. This goes a long way in convincing/deceiving the masses with his electioneering promises.

Igbo language plays a great role in politics. Political manifestations are possible in Igbo land to Igbo people through the use of Igbo language. During elections, the politicians use all sorts of begging, sweet words, proverbs, idioms in relating to the people to bring his discussion home to the grass root thereby convincing/deceiving them in voting him in. All these are done using Igbo language. Igbo language is a powerful instrument/tool for political success in Igbo land in particular and in Nigeria in general.

### **CONCLUSION**

The role of Igbo language in culture, education, economy, communication and politics cannot be overemphasized. The roles Igbo language play had made Igbo language and culture known in Igbo land, Nigeria as a whole and in the whole world. Indeed, language is power.

Igbo language is the language of all. That the Igbo mara is known all over the world also means that Igbo language is known all over the world. The role of Igbo language in economy cannot be over emphasized both locally, nationally and internationally. Some people from different countries especially India, U.S.A., Turkey, Dubai and others speak Igbo language because of their encounter and contacts with the Igbo businessmen. The Igbo culture which is all over the world today is as a result of the impact of Igbo language. Politically also, some white men can fluently speak Igbo language because of their political interest which cannot be 100% successful without Igbo men and their language in overseas. This they do by visiting the Igbo associations where they (the politicians) force themselves to learn and speak Igbo because they appreciate one of the features of Igbo language as a unifying factor as well as a factor that binds the speakers together.

Though Igbo language has all the above discussed roles, it is still pertinent for the Igbo people themselves to encourage the learning and speaking of Igbo language. The Igbo politicians and business men should encourage the learning and speaking of Igbo language by giving the teachers of Igbo language grants for research in Igbo language and culture. Parents should encourage their children to speak Igbo language. They (parents) should try as much as possible to teach their children the culture of Igbo people for better identification. The elites should also put their one's identity matters a lot. They should also encourage the learning of Igbo language by encouraging their children and wards in learning and speaking Igbo language. Looking at the numerous roles of Igbo language, we (the Igbo) should not allow Igbo language to go into extinction. Ease or west, home is the best.

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