

**LANGUAGE AS AN AGENT OF SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION: PREFERENCE OF THE
ENGLISH LANGUAGE TO THE INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

There is always a positive and negative tendency in every growth. As a writer once said, the growth of water is at the expense of fire and vice versa. The more complex a society becomes, the more socially and technologically advanced it gets and the more communication problems it is confronted inescapably with. It is no longer a story that the language of the Igbo nation is rapidly tilting towards extinction. An average Igbo family prefers borrowed languages to its own Igbo language. It is not a story to hear that it is becoming a taboo to hear Igbo language in many Igbo families. This study x-rays language as an agent of societal transformation, using the Igbo language as a case study. The introductory section, the definition of bilingualism and some of the causes of underutilization of Igbo language are also carefully examined.

**INTRODUCTION:
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWOCK**

The study is based on the rationale of Greenberg (1971), who summarizes that “language is the prerequisite for the accumulation and transmission of other cultural traits – such fundamental aspects of culture as organized political life, legal system, religion and science etc. this can be exemplified in the degree of respect for elders in Igbo speaking community which is well pronounced. A young person who shakes hands with an elderly person will bow down and stretch out his two hands if the elderly person first stretches out his own hand. The reverse is the case in native English speaking countries, and this has become a custom in Igbo land. A young person can now only stretch out his hand first to shake hand with an elderly person but also can put his hands in his pocket while talking to an elderly person. He can even put on a face cap while talking to a chief or a title holder.

It must be stressed that no study on the culture would be complete without a cursory look at the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. This Hypothesis has been a source of stimulation and inspiration for anthropologists since the 1920s and 1930s. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf seem to have focused on language being culture-bound. It can therefore be said that the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis focuses on the effect of language on society. It is claimed that a speaker’s native language sets up a series of categories which act as a kind of grid through which he perceives the world and these constrain the way in which he categorizes and conceptualizes different phenomenon.

In essence, a language can affect a society by influencing or even controlling the world view of its speakers. This hypothesis is also concerned with the possibility that man’s view of his environment may be conditioned by his language. Culture, according to Lyons, determines language, and then the language determines over view of reality. By and large, since the people within a cultural environment own and use the language, it is expected that language cannot function meaningfully outside the context of the culture that produces it.

In the new nations of Africa, diglossia is extremely widespread. Ferguson (1972) defines diglossia as,

A relatively stable language situation in which in addition to the primary dialect of the language of a community, there is a divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex). Superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of a written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education

and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation.

But Akindele and Adegbija (1999) criticize this definition. They believe that it is too narrow for our situation of language use. They now define diglossia in a wider sense as “the assignment of roles to different varieties of languages which exist side by side in a bi/multilingual society”.

Thus, instead of trying to cope with hundreds of local languages and dialects as instruments of government, education, industrialization, etc. most African nations have decided to assign all of them equally to their respective home, family and neighbourhood domains and to utilize a single major European language (usually English or French) for all more formal occasions.

Das-Gupta (1974) states that the diglossian situation in which a single society recognizes two or more languages as its own, with each having its own functionally exclusive domain needs not be lamented on. After all, language makes it possible for humans to think together, feel together and act together. For those who know a language, words may establish similar preferences and words may be the cue for similar behaviour. To know a language is to have a common ground upon which to meet others.

In-so-far as we support the opinion of authors, we wish to point out that the emergence of foreign language that led to the underutilization of local language has done at least one good to us. Without the emergence of foreign language, it would have been difficult for Nigeria with multi-linguistics to establish effective means of communication since no Nigerian language has national intelligibility. Almost every state of the Federation has more than ten languages and dialects. And we have over four hundred languages in Nigeria. But notwithstanding, Igbo language should be promoted as an indigenous language in line with foreign language that serves majorly as a medium of communication in Nigeria.

To drive home this logistic statement, Ogbu (1988) is a good attestation that history shows that any progressive society cannot barricade itself against cultural change especially in the modern era of science and technology.

BILINGUALISM

It is pertinent to know what it is like being brought up a bilingual. Who is a bilingual? Three types of bilingual are identified in Weinreich's typology: Co-ordinate, compound, and subordinate bilingualism.

The Co-ordinate Bilingual is the type of bilingual who acquired the two languages in such a way that their practices can be said to be equivalent to native speaker efforts in the languages. In other words, he would perform like a first language speaker in both languages at all levels. He has grammatical and communicative competence in the two languages and will not speak the languages with a foreign accent. A person with Igbo ascent, who has acquired both English and Igbo, such that you would consider him an Englishman when he speaks and Igboman as well when he speaks Igbo, is a representative of this type. In other words, this person is a perfect bilingual. Such people are few and far between, if there are any at all. The acquisition of a first language is known to affect our ability to learn a second language. The Language Acquisition Device is said to shut out other languages once it has been used to acquire a first language, resulting in difficulty with any other language.

The compound bilingual is another kind of bilingual according to Weinreich in which the two languages seem sourced from the same reference point. This type does not function as a native speaker of either of the two languages that he speaks. In this case, the languages involved are so integrated at a deep level of organization that one language is equated more or less with the other. In what context is this possible? Children have the habit, if exposed to two languages abinitio of behaving like this where their effort tends to be as a result of both languages operating at the same time. Usually, the one used more often eventually drives the other one who is proficient in his first language and acquires the second and the third as the case may be. Perhaps such a person is the more common type of bilingual, particularly in areas where second languages are required for purpose of education, commerce or politics. Such a bilingual may acquire Igbo as a child, and be made to learn English when he goes to school. The nature of the human being is such that cognition takes place with the linguistic tools available to him, whereas externalizing what is conceived, in the case of this bilingual may be required to be done in the second language. The subordinate bilingual then uses one language as a support for the other. By this, is meant his ability to conceive in one language, the dominant one and usually his first, and then respond using the second language where it is demanded.

The need to examine at least one other model is necessary, if not for any other thing, at least to show that it is an impossible task to define specifically who is a bilingual or what the concept itself means. Haugen

(1953) decided that Bilingualism can be seen also from three perspectives based on the use to which the 'other' language is put. He identifies Supplementary, Complementary and Relative Bilingualism.

The Supplementary Bilingualism Situation is said to exist where the second language is used for occasional needs, such as travel purposes or simply to be able to read the language. This has been described in some cases as language for special purposes and has its own strategies for learning and teaching of it.

The Complementary Situation is consequent on the need of the individual for another language that will perform a complementary function to the first in the life of the speaker. This is akin to second language situation where the individual requires that other language for advancement, education, etc, in the society.

The Relative Bilingualism occurs where the second language gradually takes over all the functions of the first language and fulfils all the communicative needs of the speaker.

Infant Bilingualism is another aspect which involves the simultaneous acquisition of two languages by the child whose parents speak a language different from what his peers speak. He will learn both languages at the same time and operate reasonably well in both. An adult has an even more difficult task learning a second language. He gets easily frustrated when he discovers that meaning mechanisms differ and since he is better suited to solving intellectual problems, he finds that language is not as logic as he would like to think and he may be frustrated out of learning the language unless the motivation to learn it is very strong. Thus, the time at which a second language is learnt sometimes determines the type of bilingual we are likely to have.

UNDERUTILIZATION OF IGBO LANGUAGE

The Igbo people are of the Negroid race, but their language has a lot of diversity in dialect. In most extreme, the dialects of some are diverse from others and temptation has been to regard them as languages different from Igbo. For instance, if an "Ntezi" person of Ebonyi State speaks his dialect, you wouldn't believe that he is speaking Igbo at all, and you hardly understand anything. This issue of dialect diversity creates unhealthy atmosphere such that when the Igbo people of different dialects meet, there is the feeling that we are not of the same extraction. In the bid to avoid embarrassment and achieve communication situation, speakers tend to codeswitch or leave their language entirely for another language of convenience such as English language.

From this Ogbu (1974) observes that Igbo language varied a great deal to the extent that in the past, it was difficult for people from the extreme parts to understand one another.

Language Communication was not easy because of these increasing variations which one notices as one move further away from ones locality to another. These variations have led some researchers to contend that even what we call different dialects is as a matter of fact different language. One can easily observe the difference among the following dialects of the Igbo –Ikwere, Izzi, Ezza, Nsukka, Owerri and Ohaozara etc. these dialects although they are varieties of the Igbo language, are not understandable by other Igbo speakers. One of the major problems that Igbo language has is that some believe that some dialects are inferior or superior to others. An 'Anambrarian' believes that 'Owerri' is inferior to his dialect. Also within Ebonyi State, an 'Ohaozara' man believes too that his dialect is better than the other, no word is more beautiful than the other or is primitive while the other is civilized. Ogbahe (1994) adds that all the dialects of the Igbo are Igbo and no one should deride or cast aspersions on another speaking dialect different from his or introducing vocabularies or concepts. In 'Owerri' for instance, 'yesterday' is "Echi" or "Echigaraaga" and tomorrow is also "Echi".

Ogbu (1974) states that Igbo language is underutilized as a medium of communication because the Igbos are yet to realize the importance of their language. Everybody in the world believes that language is dynamic.

Rogers (1965)

Language is constantly changing in sounds, syntax and vocabularies, no sound remained constant.

The history of communication of individual word is constantly affected by the influence of sound change. This in turn creates a morphological or grammatical disparity, leading the way to morphological change while it also occurs in vocabulary and in syntax constitution.

The Igbo language is not peculiar to change. The subsequent changes in language made some people to say that the Igbo language is not complete. It should be believed that no language is singularly complete in the world as regards vocabulary. In fact, even the most speculated developed language of the world

borrowed from other languages to make up its vocabulary. Yet, on the other critical side, it would be seen that the Igbo language has more chances of being complete than any language in the world. This is to say, a word particularly lacking in dialect could be found in others and therefore could enlarge its vocabulary through intra-dialectal variants.

Emenanjo (1980) writes that in the concrete matter of precision, Igbo language underutilization did not start from the blues. It is an accumulation of events of yester-years and today which is spurring events of now and tomorrow. This is because despite the scattered settlement of the Igbo before colonization, practically every village was independent and so great was the isolation of each small community the inhabitants of neighbouring villages speak entirely different dialect. Burns (1967) stated that Igbo within scattered isolated communities maintained a virile communication with their dialects. No historian or socio-linguist has ever disproved this fact, that the Igbo maintains a virile communication link with their dialects.

2.3 CAUSES OF UNDERUTILIZATION OF IGBO LANGUAGE

The Igbo encounter with Europeans seriously affected the development and the usage of the Igbo language. Achebe (1982) states: -

The historical facts of the Igbo encounter with the Europeans, shows that the Europeans were interested in developing a language for administration, commerce and religious propaganda and therefore were bothered on bringing up natives that can speak English at the expense of Igbo language.

The European administrators did not care about the Igbo language and were content with administering that area in English language, through district interpreters and court clerks trained for the purpose of easy governance of the people.

whitemen administration contributed greatly to underutilization of Igbo language (1974). They established clans, divisions and provinces, and thereby gave a measure of integration to the hitherto widely scattered and in connected communities. This adversely influenced the various dialects, and sub-dialects – very often people from the rural communities were ashamed to speak their unadulterated dialects when they come to complain to the whitemen.

This was just the beginning of a trend that will dogmatize Igbo language. It was as a result of this same administrative purpose, that the Igbo of various dialects met only to realize diversity in their dialects. This diversity which Ogbalu F.C. called “unadulterad” has led to the massive cravings for English and other language.

Afigbo (1981) supports the above when he says that the Europeans did a lot of work academically to the development of Igbo language. Yet, this work of theirs is also one of the problems facing Igbo language. Most of their books were not accepted by the Igbos, it promoted sectional interest which narrowed the development of the language. By 1936, therefore, the systematic study of the Igbo language was about a hundred years old. Yet Miss Green M.M could in that year say with justified pessimism and much cogency that “a bird’s eye view of the present Igbo linguistics situation is not an inspiring aspect”. It is believed that Igbo language is the most difficult West African language, on account of its complicated dialectal variations, its richness in prefixes and suffixes and its intonations. Even through these Europeans have left nothing to be admired, the Igbos had had appreciation for their language, they would have discarded the European ideas. But the Igbos have accepted with good faith what was left for them by the Europeans. Every society is what the people in it make it. Afigbo (1984) asserts the above when he said, If the Igbos have been on guard in their culture and language, they would have cultivated a new idea and believe in their language. Socially, administratively, educationally, Igbo language is still where the Europeans left it.

That is, their impression has continued to becloud our impression. And this has been more on the part of the educated, which is transferred to the entire society. Hence, the educated Igbo failed their language even more than the Europeans political service did. In fact, it could be said that the Igbo language is one of those aspects of Igbo life and culture which came to be completely overwhelmed by British imperialism. The Igbo resisted the Europeans politically, economically and socially but allowed their language to fall prey to the English language. The plain truth seems to be that the overwhelming majority of the educated Igbo never seem

interested in their language, and most of them cannot even write or read their own dialects in any script without tears.

Afigbo maintained that “this is the ironical aspect that Igbos cannot divest their language and accept it proudly as theirs, but have proudly succumbed to other languages”. And this had bedeviled Igbo language socially, administratively and educationally and it is now underutilized.

FINDINGS OF LINGUISTIC RESEARCHERS

Some linguistic researchers have summarily stated among other things the causes of underutilization of Igbo language. These include lack of human and material resources in the Igbo people, multiplicity of dialects, attitude of the Igbos towards their mother tongue, orthographic controversies, lack of patronage and government and its language policy. This policy will be treated in phase two.

(A) Lack of human and material resources.

Obinna (2000) wrote that while Igbo language remarkably lacks nine workable language policy, it is also lacking in human and material resources. This inability to have a clear-cut policy which should have enabled in the planning for its development, has crippled every effort being made. This is because there is no official body that comes to the aid of the language academic efforts. And this endangered the procreation of Igbo language.

Adamana (2001) opined that this problem is chain-reactive, starting from the lack of interest of the Igbos in their language which gave rise to lack of patronage and incentive to Igbo literary writers. This leads to lack of sufficient human resources both in teaching and writing of the Igbo language literature.

(B) Multiplicity of dialects.

As have been pointed out, the varieties of Igbo dialects seriously affected the development of the language. This is because every community claims her dialect is superior to others. Afigbo (1982) stated that Igbo language consists of many dialects, as such every community has its dialect to preserve at the expense of a pan-Igbo language. For example, there are Onitsha dialect, Owerri dialect, Abakaliki, Ohaozara, Nsukka and Udi dialects etc, each claims to be superior to other dialects of the Igbo language. Each upholds its dialect, considering it to be equal, if not superior, to even the Igbo language.

Afigbo added, this obsession of preservation of fragmented dialect at the expense of pan-Igbo language has made it impossible for vocabulary enhancements. If the Igbos had left the confrontation over dialects, and has used the zonal for the quest of preservation of individual dialects for the updating of the language itself, one would have seen that the divergent dialects would have been a good vocabulary enlarging sources.

(C) Attitude of the Igbos towards their mother tongue.

Abba (2001) noted that inferiority complex suffers Igbos in the use of their language. The Igbo people feel proud speaking other languages, such as English, French, Hausa and Yoruba and feel shy speaking their local language or dialects. The greatest problem facing Igbo language is the Igbo man's attitude towards his language. An Igbo person will dress and express himself or herself outside Igbo culture and language. You will hardly see an Igbo person who makes a statement in Igbo without switching. But one undeniable truth is that no matter what an Igbo man will do or the length he goes in speaking English, French, Hausa or Yoruba, he will remain an Igbo man down to his grave. Our attitude towards our language is the major factors to its underutilization. It is almost anathema to hear one speak Igbo in any of our tertiary institutions. The few students who opted for such course like linguistic Igbo are disregarded by colleagues. They regard such students of the Igbo language as unintelligent and inferior group of students.

The attitude of the Igbo people towards their language effects the teaching and learning of the language in all levels of education. Students shy away from their career choice on Igbo language because people and even their parents will look down on them and see them as lazy and unintelligent students. Those who decide to make Igbo a career do not feel proud to claim wholeheartedly to be Igbo students. The Igbo language is as good as any other language. It requires an intelligent and brilliant student to study and perform well in it. A dull student will hardly do so well in Igbo just like in English language, French and any other course you can think of.

Nneka (2002) states that it is a matter of great regret that Igbo teachers and educational counselors in both primary and post primary do not encourage their students to study and make Igbo a career choice. Igbo people neglect their mother tongue in school, while they promote and encourage the study of foreign languages, and even compel their pupils and students to study and speak them. Worst still is the instruction given to students by some heads of schools that no student should speak Igbo while in school. It has contributed tremendously to the killing and underutilization of the language.

(D). Orthography Controversies.

Onwora (2001) pointed out that orthographic disputes which went on from 1929 to 1961 interrupted the growth of the Igbo language resulted to its underutilization. So many efforts made to resolve the orthography disputes which include the inauguration of the Onwu Committee that is called the Onwu Orthography on June, 1954. The committee, on its meeting to settle the dispute reported, The Igbo orthography issues have been issues that will be settled only if all the regional governments have accepted a recommendation of a committee which was appointed to probe the disputes.

The report of Onwu orthography Committee was not accepted by the majority of the language academics. Before the disputes could be resolved, much must be done on the Igbo language. There were little literature in Igbo and those available had orthographic discrepancy.

(E). Lack of interest or patronage on Igbo language literature.

Okoro (2000) observes that Igbo literature or textbooks written in Igbo language are poorly demanded. This poor demand discourages authors in the language and they do not write regularly. It is one thing for books to be written; but another thing to get peoples' patronage, or to get them read or purchase them. The extent books are published in a particular language helps promote its survival and usage. Many Igbo textbooks and Newspapers are out of market and as a result the authors are forced to close down. This plays no small role in the underutilization of Igbo language as a medium of communication. This cause of the underutilization of the Igbo language has been seriously undermined. The effect has also reached every nook and cranny of the Igbo socio-economic activities.

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