

Addressing the Attitude and Perceptions of Igbo Language in the 21st Century

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Abstract: This study examines perceptions on the place of Igbo language in this 21st century. It specifically seeks perceptions on the place of the Igbo language in family socialization, Igbo language education (teaching and learning) and the effect of globalization on the development of the Igbo language. The study adopts a qualitative approach in its methodology involving Focus Group discussions (FGD) and Key Informant Interviews (KII). The study sampled 20 informants selected from language teachers and educators in three universities in the south-eastern Nigeria. The study found out that perceptions pointed towards poor placement of the Igbo language in family socialization as the English language has taken over the role in most Igbo families. It was also discovered that teaching and learning of the Igbo language has been done in a manner that short-changes the Igbo language and that globalization has seen the Igbo language take a second fiddle in driving technology. The study concludes that the Igbo languages not in its rightful place in the 21st century largely driven by technology and recommends among others family language planning among the Igbo as one of ways of restoring the place of the Igbo language in the 21st century.

Key words: Language • Igbo • Perception • Survival • 21st century

INTRODUCTION

Language is one of the most fundamental aspects of human behaviour and the development of language into a refined instrument of expression and communication is one of man's greatest achievements [1, 2] also states that language is a distinctively human system of communication based on oral and written symbols. It consists of vocal sounds to which meanings have been assigned by cultural conventions, supplemented by various paralinguistic cues. Thus language is not only an aspect of human behaviour and communication having written and oral forms which must follow a culturally assigned pattern. Little wonder then, language is described as an aspect of people's culture. Language cannot be learnt without the people's culture as it is the only clue that exposes the learner to the paralinguistic cues of the language. Language is a medium of expression with which human beings as social groups co-operate. This as well depicts that if there is no language, the identity of a group of people could be difficult to be defined.

Igbo is the principal native language of the Igbo people, an ethnic group of southeastern Nigeria. The language has approximately 24 million speakers [3] who live mostly in Nigeria and are primarily of Igbo descent. Igbo is written in Latin script, which was introduced by British colonialists. Igbo has over 20 dialects [4] though dialect leveling appears to be occurring. Related Igboid languages such as Ika, Ikwerre and Ogba are sometimes considered dialects of Igbo; the most divergent of these is Ekpeye. Igbo is also a recognized minority language of Equatorial Guinea. It is of language family Niger-Congo. The language is spoken in Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Abia, Ebonyi States and parts of Rivers and Delta States.

Language is an ethnic identity. Most human activities make use of language. Man is not complete without language. This statement is affirmed by [5] thus:

Language is the key to the heart of the people. If we lose the key, we lose the people. If we treasure the key and keep it safe, it will unlock the door to untold riches, riches that cannot be guessed it from the other side of the door.

The import of the statement above is that with the growing use of foreign languages in Nigeria such as the English language, there is need for indigenous languages in Nigeria to identify their place and maintain such places. Also, the concept of globalization calls for attention on whether indigenous languages have identified their places in the global world. It is questioned whether globalization is same as westernization due to the overbearing influence of the American culture and indeed foreign languages and cultures on indigenous languages and cultures in Nigeria and some developing climes. The global world is a technology-driven world [6] hence language is a vital tool for climes to wield some power and influence. It therefore means that only languages that have developed in terms of their teaching and learning among other areas can effectively play in the global world.

From the foregoing therefore, this study examines perceptions on the place of the Igbo language in terms of family socialization, teaching and learning and globalization which has become the driving force of the 21st century.

Brief on Igbo Language Development: Issues: A brief account of the early study of Igbo is necessary to acknowledge the contributions made by early missionaries as well as to trace the beginning of the problems related to the language. The trans-Atlantic slave trade, which involved the shipment of thousands of black Africans to Europe and the Americas, was one factor motivating the early study of West African languages in general and Igbo in particular. One of the greatest problems encountered during this trade was that of communication between European slave dealers, African middlemen and slaves. To solve this problem, slave dealers needed either to learn the language of the slaves or to teach the slaves a European language. Europeans tended to focus on learning African languages for two main reasons. First, learning an African language from slaves would enable Europeans to directly deal at coastlines instead of having to rely entirely on the services of middlemen. Second, apart from the confidence produced by knowing the language of African customers and slaves, Europeans reasoned that knowing the language of the slaves would help slave masters to keep slaves in check, particularly in the event of possible plans for mutiny. Any study of Igbo should make mention of G. C. A. Oldendorp, a German pastor of the Moravian Brethren, who visited the West Indies in 1766-1767 to collect materials for a history of the Brethren's Caribbean

mission. Oldendorp became interested in the slave population he encountered and wrote about their African origins and languages [7] reported that of Oldendorp's 28 brief vocabularies of African languages (published in Germany in 1777), two were Igbo and titled 'Ibo' and 'Kalabari'. Ex-slaves also played an important role, particularly Olaudah Equiano, an Igbo ex-slave who, in England, transcribed some Igbo words in his 1790 autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vasa The African*. Hannah Kilham collected the vocabularies of several African languages, including Igbo. Up to this point, all efforts toward developing the Igbo language had taken place outside Igboland. The first study of Igbo within Igboland was conducted by Edwin Norris (assistant secretary to the Royal Asiatic Society) during Macgregor Laird's Niger expeditions of 1841 and 1845. The published account of the expeditions included a list of 70 Igbo words. While Norris prepared his guide to languages of the Niger, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) arranged to send two missionary-linguists on the expedition. The two men selected were J. F. Schon, a German missionary and Samuel Crowther, an African school teacher, both mission staff in Freetown. Schon had previously been studying a Sierra Leonean language and, with his new task in mind he began to study Igbo and Hausa while still in Sierra Leone. By 1840, he had collected a vocabulary of 1,600 Igbo words and had translated a few Bible prayers. Later that year, as the expedition sailed up the Niger through Igboland, Schon attempted to communicate in Igbo. He was greatly disappointed to learn that the dialect he had spent so much time learning in Sierra Leone differed greatly from the dialect generally used in Igboland. His greatest shock came in Abo, where he read a prepared Igbo address to the Abo chief. Unable to comprehend Schon's pronunciation and intonation, the chief became bored and interrupted the reading. Schon's problems were related to his failure to realize that Igbo had several dialects and, more importantly, that the Isuama Igbo he had learned in Freetown was a pidgin Igbo that was spoken in Sierra Leone but not understood in Igboland. Schon was so disappointed at this setback that he abandoned the study of Igbo for Hausa and only resumed its study 20 years later. Schon's frustrating experiences with Igbo dialects were only the beginning of the setbacks that occurred in relation to this language. Following discussions with Baikie, Crowther wrote to CMS authorities recommending that a mission be instituted on the Niger, with

headquarters at Onitsha in Igboland. The recommendation was accepted, probably for two reasons. Consequently, Crowther was instructed to prepare for a mission to Igboland. He quickly sent for Simon Jonas (who had served as an interpreter during the 1841 and 1845 expeditions) and the pair then spent some time in Lagos to study Igbo. On July 26, 1857, the mission arrived at Onitsha after a brief stopover at Abo. The CMS mission consisted of Crowther, a number of Igbo-speaking catechists from Freetown, including Simon Jonas who was to serve as interpreter and Rev. J. C. Taylor. Taylor was born in Sierra Leone of Igbo parents who did not speak the same dialects; he was, however, familiar with Isuama Igbo. While Crowther and Baikie continued up the Niger, they left Taylor, who specifically was ordained for the Onitsha mission, to organize the headquarters. Taylor had only limited knowledge of Igbo, so he traveled to England to learn the language from Schon. This constituted another setback for the language; Schon was probably still only familiar with Isuama Igbo. However, after studying for several months with Schon, Taylor began to publish in Igbo.

Union Igbo: The early Niger mission failed (as a result of several factors unrelated to this study) and was subsequently reformed under the guidance of a new group of highly committed and more productive missionaries, particularly Englishmen H. H. Dobinson and J. J. Dennis. They conducted linguistic exercises and translated many works. By the beginning of the 20th century the increasing number of Igbo Christians produced an urgent need to translate the Bible into Igbo, as the majority of Igbo Christians did not understand English. Rev. T. Dennis imposed what he called 'Union Igbo,' an amalgam of features from various Igbo dialects including Onitsha, Bonny, Unwana, Arochukwu and Owerri. It was published in London in 1913 and was adopted for the translation of the Bible in spite of strong opposition because it was not spoken anywhere in Igboland. Union Igbo was also used for translations of other books including the Hymn Book and the Prayer Book.

Although Union Igbo was used until 1941 when Ida Ward introduced Central Igbo, it was continually subjected to criticism and controversy, which delayed the language's development.

Central Igbo: The Central Igbo dialect was introduced in 1941 and was a product of Ida Ward's research, which was conducted to:

Examine a number of Igbo dialects from the point of view of sound usage and constructions in order to find out if there is a dialect which would be used as a literary medium for African writers and for school publications, which would be acceptable over a considerable area of the Ibo country which might form the basis of a growing 'standard' Igbo [8].

[9] aptly summarized the problems with Central Igbo:

Central Igbo was a living phenomenon fed by contiguous dialects. But it was the handiwork of manipulation by Ida Ward. The permutation and combination involved was artificial. Again the tendency of some of the dialects to substitute for Central (a part for the whole) as well as the attempts at hijack by different speakers (and missionaries) of the component parts made Central Igbo suspect in the eyes of the other Igbo groups who did not want to identify with it especially immediately after the Biafran experience when short-lived local linguistic independence was the consuming vogue.

Although the central dialect was introduced with good intentions, it added to the confusion and frustration of writers, who were unsure of an authentic dialect in which to write. Before the central dialect was introduced, the CMS had used both Union Igbo and the Owerri dialect to translate religious documents and to produce school texts, respectively. The Roman Catholic Mission, on the other hand, was using the Onitsha dialect to produce both religious materials and school texts.

[10] observed that the introduction of Union Igbo was not necessarily based on the goal of improving the language; it ensured that the Bible was translated in only one variety of Igbo, which was more economical than publishing the Bible in more than one dialect. Dennis also obstructed or halted any further publishing of the Bible in Isuama Igbo or in any other dialect; for instance, Dennis and his backer Bishop Tugwell frustrated attempts by the Niger Delta Pastorate to publish their own translation of the Bible. Although Union Igbo was used until 1941 when Ida Ward introduced Central Igbo, it was continually subjected to criticism and controversy, which delayed the language's development.

Perceptions on the Place of the Igbo Language in Family Socialization in the 21st Century: Preventing the extinction of Igbo Language going by its declining level of acceptability amongst the Igbo people. It is

disheartening to see a language that is supposed to be an insignia, a trademark and a common identity amongst the Igbo people rather than being proudly flaunted is treated with so much scorn and disdain. We seem to have jettisoned the intergenerational transmission of the Igbo language in exchange for western trends, which include the English language with its obvious linguistic threats. The forecast of the UNESCO on the possible extinction of Igbo language in the next 50 years is becoming widely accepted by the Igbo people both home and abroad. An Igbo woman living in America has this to say: "Yes, I agree. A lot of our families do speak English to our kids including myself. Charity begins at home. Especially we that live in the western world have adhered to the society we are in and speak English to our kids. Look at the Yoruba people in America, they speak Yoruba to their kids and teach them their culture. I have just started speaking Igbo to my kids. God help us". This is a proof that Igbo people are the cause of the decline of Igbo language development.

The Language Attitude of the Igbo People: [11] defines attitude as "the positive or negative evaluation of an object with anything, tangible or intangible, capable of being the object of an attitude". [12] while quoting Johnson [13] opines that community language attitudes denote the positive-negative evaluations of individual languages or group of languages, with regard to such dimensions as loyalty, prestige, utility, cognancy or aesthetics. For [14] language attitude can be overt or covert. The Igbo people portray negative attitudes toward their language [15], [16]. In support of the above statement, [17] says: Some Igbo parents, especially the literate ones, do not speak Igbo to their children even at home. In some cases, the parents ban their children from using Igbo to communicate among themselves. She went further to say that such parents do not feel ashamed to tell anybody that cares to listen that their children do not understand/speak Igbo. In fact, they feel elated at their children's achievement- mastering the 'prestigious' English language and dawning the 'awkward' Igbo language. Most Igbo parents do not take delight in transferring Igbo to their children. It is in line with this that [18] observes that: Many Igbo parents do not want their children to speak Igbo. Once, a mother at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, asked her children to desist from speaking that useless language (Igbo). This class of parents gets offended with teachers who teach Igbo as a subject to the children. Igbo language cannot be more important than its speakers' value on it. In other words, it

is the speakers of Igbo language, (that is the Igbo people), that can determine how important Igbo language becomes. If they have a positive attitude toward their language, Igbo will be important and vice versa. There are certain factors that cause Igbo people to have negative attitude toward their language. Some of these factors include among others: Education: Education can trigger off either positive or negative attitudes toward language(s). According to [19], language is the indispensable medium for the education and training of skilled. Based on the above statement, because English language is the language of education, government, trade, etc. in Nigeria, Igbo people develop favourable attitude toward English language. Igbo people abandon the use of Igbo language from primary school to higher institution because the language of instruction is English language. By so doing, their love for Igbo language dies gradually.

Perceptions on the Igbo Language Education (Teaching and Learning) in the 21st Century:

The problem associated in teaching and learning and teaching of Igbo language can be summarized thus: (i) lack of appropriate philosophy for the course; (ii) inadequate academic staff; (iii) not having enough courses that will expose students to the phonology and orthography of the language. Despite all these cogs on the wheel of the course there is light at the end of the tunnel. This is because, as Igbo language is one of the three major Nigerian languages, there is a great prospect that students of this department will be gainfully employed. This will be a healthy tonic for other students to go in for the course. Equally, there is a bright future for the department as the course of study need only a slight review and as such the curriculum of Igbo language is just a spring-board and a veritable tool for any other.

Language is a distinctively human system of communication based on oral and written symbols. It is the vehicle through which people's culture is transmitted. It is an extremely important aspect of a community. It is an index of identity which serves as a repository of a people's culture, industry and exploits. It is language that differentiates the Homo sapiens from other animals. The most effective engine of a people's culture is their mother tongue. Indigenous languages are treasures of our culture and self-identity. In other words, it is the indicator of history and self- identification [19]. Mother tongue is an indispensable cultural legacy with which all forms of human interactions are carried out. According to [20] it is the key to the heart of the people. If we lose the key, we lose the people. If we treasure the key and keep it safe, it will unlock the door to wealth or affluence.

One of the greatest challenges in the optimal utilization of indigenous languages is that many do not have orthographies and those that are available are not well developed for literary use. Many indigenous languages are becoming moribund and are on their way to extinction, as a result of lack of use. Causes of endangerment, according to [21], range from conquest, lack of relevance, political domination, trade and negative attitude of some elites to enforce multilingualism. The negative attitude of the speakers has struck the death knell of their indigenous languages. The first sure sign of self-colonization is when one does not know enough of one's language [22]. According to [15], there is serious desertification and deforestation in the linguistic landscape of northern region. There are cases of language death caused by what [8] calls suicide through over borrowing from prestigious languages, or murder through language policy. Something drastic has to be done to safeguard the endangered languages. Language documentation is the panacea to language death. It is incontrovertible that the loss or death of some indigenous languages is an irretrievable loss of the peoples' collective wisdom that is people's cultures, traditional occupations, medicine, technology and terminologies. The richness of any nation, or any civilization, is a function of its language and culture. New Horizons in Language Development. The development of indigenous languages in Nigeria is facing a lot of challenges, among which are lack of knowledge of the exact number of indigenous languages in Nigeria, haphazard research, inadequate funding of research, inadequate facilities, the intangibility of language, the ideological argument against the number of indigenous languages as evidence of disunity and epileptic utilities. Hope is however not lost, because there is a way forward. It is therefore suggested that National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) and Linguistic Association of Nigeria (LAN), together with the departments of Linguistics and Nigerian languages in our universities, should work out best practices for the documentation of Nigerian languages. There is the need for government, NGOs, international bodies like UNESCO, UNICEF, the mass media and the speaker communities to fund language research so that our indigenous languages will serve as a veritable tool for national development. Political contests depend on the use of language, as in violent or abusive language. Indigenous language is a good language of persuasion. Songs are composed in abusive diction to denigrate people and their ideals. Campaign language is a social mask for hiding party's selfish motives. The umbrella as

an emblem is a sign language. These symbols communicate deep meaning. The umbrella symbolically represents the provision of shade or shelter for protection against adverse weather conditions, poverty and material deprivation [11]. Political speeches, slogans and emblems are expected to be goal-directed. If and when the business of the National Assembly is conducted in indigenous languages, national development will be accelerated. Indigenous Languages and Technological Development. Language is a vehicle of thought and the expression of culture. It expresses a people's way of life, their perception of things and their world view. This embodies their ideals and innovations which embrace respects for technological and scientific innovations [4]. Science and Technology can be acquired and better understood through the indigenous languages. For indigenous languages to be used for teaching and learning science and technology these MTs need to be developed in terms of their orthographies, spelling and vocabulary, including syntax and translation through the use of lexicographic strategies and the linguistic indigenization policy of borrowing, coinage, semantic extension.

Metalinguage; Metalinguage study or metalinguistics is a branch of linguistic study that deals with the relation of language to other areas of a person's culturally determined behavior such as the study of gestures, facial expression, voice quality, mannerism and other aspects of speech event that are not linguistically structured. Metalinguage is the language used to discuss or describe other languages. Language used in describing some technical terms and vocabulary of English is called metalinguage. Metalinguage according [4] is designed to take care of medical and scientific terms in English and other international languages which we do not know their equivalents in Nigerian languages. For instance, the NERDC's sponsored vocabulary of primary science and mathematics in nine Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Edo, Efik, Fulfulde, Izon, Kanuri and Tiv) is a clear demonstration of the capacity of Nigerian indigenous languages as tools for the development of science and technology.

The official language of Nigeria, English, the former colonial language, was chosen to facilitate the cultural and linguistic unity of the country. The major languages spoken in Nigeria are Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Fulfulde, Kanuri, Ibibio. Igbo language is spoken in Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo States and parts of Delta and Rivers States. The constitution and national policy in education recognized three major languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, only Igbo was being threatened by extinction.

UNESCO report on endangered indigenous languages says the Igbo language faces risk of possible extinction in the next 50 years if nothing is done to revive the language. Some people do not think it is an overstatement to refer to Igbo language as being endangered and facing threats of extinction.

Government Policy on Language: It is observed that when the government of a country formulates a language policy which recognizes one language as the official language of that nation, the given language will definitely attract favourable attitudes from the people since it serves as a means of carrying out official functions. This kind of policy favours one language against the other. This is the cause of English language use in Nigeria. It dominates the indigenous language which includes the Igbo language.

Perceptions on the Effect of Globalization on the Development of the Igbo Language in the 21st Century: Globalization is a powerful thrust in the current world politics and it is an important factor in determining whether or not a language thrives. Globalization indirectly discourages diversity and encourages homogenization. Invariably, it suggests speaking the same kind of language, which English is that language [7]. "In our day and age, it is definitely the globalization of pan-western culture (and pop-consumer culture in particular) that is the motto of language shift. And since American dominated globalization (she) has become the major economic technological and cultural thrust of worldwide modernization and westernization, efforts to safeguard threatened languages (and therefore; contextually weaker language) must oppose the very strongest processes and powers. Because Igbo people live in a globalize world, they are forced to the effect of globalization. Despite the above factors that cause people to have positive attitude toward a foreign language and negative attitude toward their language, Igbo people do not value their language. This is confirmed by the existence of other indigenous languages in Nigeria, like Yoruba and Hausa that face the same factors yet cherishing their languages.

Recommendations: In the face of the dying Igbo language, it will be a sin to do nothing. Igbo language will surely die unless we do something about it. The future generation will not forgive us if we allow Igbo language to die. The time to do something is now. We can save the Igbo language from extinction if we do the following:

- ▶ Have interest in speaking Igbo language at all time
- ▶ Encourage the younger generation to learn Igbo language
- ▶ Provide scholarships for students and teachers of Igbo Language.
- ▶ Use Igbo language in media: radio, television and newspapers.
- ▶ Make Igbo language a compulsory subject for admission into higher institution in Igboland.
- ▶ Pass a bill to encourage the use of Igbo language in governance in Igboland.
- ▶ Encourage the reading of Igbo written materials at churches, schools, homes, etc.

Language is very important to man. We make use of language almost at all times even when we think or dream. Language should not be allowed to die since it is very important to man. If other languages in the past can die, Igbo language can die if nothing is done. When the above recommendations and more are implemented, Igbo language will be saved from extinction its perception on the place in this 21st century will not be regrettable.

On the part of Igbo people, they should be aware that Igbo traditional heritage is world heritage, because world civilization started in Igbo land. As such they should prepare themselves for the new surge of interest in Igbo language and culture that will see Igbo citizens at home and abroad around the world being called upon to teach and share aspects of this heritage (tangible and intangible) with other citizens of the world. Government and relevant institutions in Nigeria and Igbo land on the other hand must sponsor cultural research, for that is where the future lies. With what has been said, it is obvious that the perception on the place of Igbo language in the 21st Century can be quantified at this time.

CONCLUSION

In Nigerian society, the fact that most people especially the young ones finds it difficult to express themselves in their native language is an open secret. The use of foreign language, according to [18], leads to cultural disorientation and split national consciousness. According to [20], for a country like Nigeria to move forward and compete favourably with developing countries, priority should be given to indigenous languages. The learning of Igbo language at any level (L1 or L2) is thus a welcome development. This is because it will not only help in the actualization of one of the injunctions of the National policy on Education

(FRN, 2004) which stipulates that pupils and students should learn one of the three major Nigerian languages (Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa), other than their own but also that it will go ahead to cement the unity of the country. Effort should however be made to see that the curricular and extra-curricular activities meant for the learners are revised at intervals.

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