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**You Are “Dead” Without Your Language: Allaying
the Fears That the Igbo Language Will
Go into Extinction**

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Abstract

The introduction of the English language by the Colonial Masters as a facilitating agent of colonialism produced multifarious challenges to African vernacular languages. It not only dwarfed and dominated the local languages but also introduced other variants of itself in a bid to have direct communication with Africans. Through its influence, the pidgin variety of English and what some language scholars call Engli-Igbo (code-mixing) emerged in Igbo language community. The effect of this is the steady suppression, and deterioration of the Igbo language. The situation has come to a height where Igbo leaders and elder statesmen express fears that the Igbo language would go into extinction within a foreseeable future. However, the previous efforts of late Mazi F.C. Ogbalu and his defunct Society For the Promotion of Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC); the present tremendous efforts

of Prof. Pita Ejiofo and his “Otu Subakwa Igbo,” the renewed efforts of Anglican and Catholic Churches in using the Igbo language to conduct church services and singing competitions; the inclusion of Igbo language as a school subject in the West African School Certificate, General Certificate in Education and National Examinations Commission; the introduction of the Igbo language as a General Studies Course in tertiary institutions in the South-East States of Nigeria; the study of the Igbo language in universities to a doctoral degree level and the incentive of employing many graduates of Igbo language in schools and other sectors, are enough prospects that the Igbo language will not go into extinction in the foreseeable future, in spite of all odds.

Introduction

In the world over, what really distinguishes a group of people and makes them unique and autonomous is not colour but culture. While some scholars define culture simply as the way a people do their things, others in the majority perceive culture as the totality of the way of life of a given people. However, the most comprehensive definition of culture is the perception of culture as what people *Do*, what they *Have* and what they *Think*. Time and space will not permit me to go into detailed analysis of the various definitions of culture. But, what is important to note is that, without language, culture cannot exist because language gives expressions to what people do, names to what people have and expressions to what people think (their philosophy of life). To this extent, language becomes an indispensable vehicle used in the transmission of culture from generation to another. And a member of any ethnic group or nationality or race that is not able to speak his vernacular language or mother tongue (L1), automatically loses his identity as a bona fide member of that ethnic group or race. Once this happens, the victim becomes linguistically dead as a true member of his language group.

The Colonial Masters were so much aware of the power of language in the colonization process that they introduced the English language to the Anglophone colonies and did everything possible to teach,

promote and sustain the language at the expense of local vernacular languages. Through its rude interference, many African indigenous languages suffered neglect, suppression and retrogression. This happened because “colonial mentality” made people to perceive the English language as a status symbol, language of elites, the highly educated and respected, the most enlightened and leaders of today and tomorrow.

For example, CL Innes, in commenting on Chinua Achebe’s appreciation of the power of language in *Things Fall Apart* opined:

Achebe’s keen awareness of the possibilities of language and his craftsmanship are revealed in the varying idioms and techniques of his later fiction as well as in his first novel, which recreates through language a nineteenth century Ibo society. *Things Fall Apart* is an illustration of the creative power of language. The language which gives a world substance, which crystallizes, it can also be a conservative force which protects that world from change (111).

Innes, in this excerpt, praises Chinua Achebe for his dexterity in the use and manipulation of language in what Innes calls “English in the vernacular language” or African vernacular English.

Therefore, based on the aforementioned power of language, the English language dealt heavy blow on African indigenous languages but the Igbo language suffered the heaviest blow from the English language. This, was perhaps, as a result of the Republican nature of the Igbo man, who mixes up easily with other people, imitates freely, adapts and acclimatizes easily in all kinds of environments. In this manner, he the (Igbo man) deeply embraced, learnt, and spoke the English language in all circumstances and situations to the detriment of his mother tongue. The situation became so bad when serious efforts were made by educated Igbo men and women to hammer the final nail on the coffin housing the remains of the Igbo language.

Efforts to Suppress the Igbo Language in the Past

In not so distant past, conscious efforts were made by some parents, classroom teachers, some members of the society and class prefects in some Nigerian secondary schools not only to suppress the Igbo language but if possible, to kill the language completely. For example, the English language was at the point under review made the sole means of communication in schools and colleges. School debates were regularly organized to encourage the learners to think and speak in the English language and good prizes were given to the best speakers of the language. On the other hand, class prefects, and hostel spies were nominated to write the names of unfortunate students who spoke Igbo language in the classroom, hostels, bathrooms, churches and playgrounds. Any student caught in the “deadly act” of speaking Igbo would face physical punishment such as flogging, hard labour or the payment of fine or both. This was discouraging enough. Similarly, students who opted to choose Igbo language as a core undergraduate course were openly discouraged on the grounds that the subject has no academic prestige. In addition, the few teachers who opted to teach Igbo language were heavily mocked because they were involved in the teaching of “Igbo – Igbo Bk.” That is, the teachers were lowly rated, and Igbo graduates were without any job prospects in relation to courses like law, medicine, pharmacy and engineering among others.

The Present Challengers Facing The Igbo Language

It is pertinent to note that the problems acting as hitches to the growth and development of the English language are far from being solved. The language is facing some challenges which are however, not insurmountable.

For instance, some parents, especially green illiterates and semi-literate ones still prevent their little children from speaking the Igbo Language. They erroneously believe that if their children speak the English language, it would give the impression that they belong to the elite group, such parents proudly but ignorantly announce to their visitors, “my children does not hear Igbo Language.” A critical study

of the above statement clearly shows that it neither possesses grammatical order nor semantic relevance.

Furthermore, Nigerian films are hardly acted in the Igbo language even though Igbo actors and actresses pioneered the film industry in Nigeria in the film entitled *Living in Bondage*. Most of the actors and actresses in films that have complete Igbo setting and themes, dress in Igbo costumes but speak the English language even during traditional marriages and the over flogged “palace themes” (Royalty). In these Igbo – English films, kola nut prayers are said in the English language.

To support the view and the picture painted above, Prof. Pita Ejiofo, the Founder and National President of OTU SUBAKWA IGBO, expressed the fears above in a paper he presented in a conference entitled: “Regaining the Lost Values of the Igbo.” In the said paper, Pita Ejiofo raised the following worrisome and relevant questions about the future of the Igbo language:

What is the position of the Igbo language today? Is the insinuation that the Igbo language would go into extinction true? If it is true, what tangible efforts are being made to prevent it? Do our children in developed towns and cities know how to speak the Igbo language? Or will the present crop of parents be the last generation to speak the Igbo which their own parents taught them? Any success without succession is indeed a colossal failure. Is Igbo language still written by people? How many people in the hall have ever written any letter in the Igbo language or received a letter written in the language? (9) (Translation Mine).

All these questions point to the fact that the Igbo are the ones neglecting their language which is their major identity as a distinct people. Pita Ejiofor gave example with the total neglect of the Igbo language by Igbo members of the Nollywood. In his argument, while Igbo actors and actresses were the pioneers in local movies production

through a film: *Living in Bondage*, research by the UNESCO to know the language often used in the production of films in Nigeria, in 2006, revealed a frightening figure to any patriotic Igbo, as far as films in Igbo language were concerned. The research shows that out of one thousand, nine hundred films produced in the country within the period, forty four percent (44%) were in the English language, thirty one percent (31%) were Yoruba; twenty four percent (24%) were in Yoruba whereas only one percent (1%) was produced in the Igbo language. A worrisome figure indeed! In a similar vein, films approved by the National and Video Censors Board revealed that out of the two hundred and thirty four films it approved for public consumption, ninety eight (98) were in Hausa, ninety four (94) were in Yoruba, thirty one (31) were in English, eleven in Edo/Benin group of languages while none was produced in the Igbo language. This, also, is not encouraging at all.

Another obvious challenge is that Newspapers, Sports Magazines and addresses at public events are hardly written and read in the Igbo language. Even the popular handset short text messages are hardly written in the language.

In view of the not too encouraging pictures painted above concerning our dear mother tongue – the Igbo language any patriotic Igbo man, woman and youth should be compelled to think and convinced that the Igbo language, will, in no distant time, go into extinction. In the subsequent part of this paper, efforts would be made to allay this fear, which may in itself cause a great harm to the growth and development of the language.

Previous Efforts Aimed at Sustaining the Growth and Development of the Igbo Language

It is pertinent to mention in this paper that at no time had the Igbo language been left without defenders and advocates, who insisted not only on the speaking but also on the writing of the language by its owners. For example, O.R Dathorne, a critic of African literature

commented on and commended the efforts of early missionaries in developing the Igbo language. In his words:

Besides the oral sources, the *Bible* and Bunyans *Prigrim's Progress* which were usually the earliest books translated into the vernacular languages (Igbo language inclusive) and thus provided examples of writing, had the greatest influence on indigenous literature. Between 1930 – 1931, the books that were in the greatest demand were Bibles, hymn books and catechisms (12).

The excerpt shows that in the earliest of time, the churches under the auspices of Church Missionary Society (CMS), through their translations of Christian books into vernacular languages such as the Igbo language, had been in the business of encouraging the development vernacular languages. Dathorne, in stressing the efforts of the churches and some individuals to ensure the growth of the Igbo language observed:

The first important Igbo writer was Pita Nwana whose short novel *OMENUKO* won first prize in a competition organized by international institute of African languages and culture in 1933 and was first published two years later (11).

So in line with Peter of the Biblical fame on whose shoulders the mantle of the leadership of the early Christian church was laid by Jesus Christ, in like manner God has been using "Peters" such as Peter Nwana and Peter Ejiofo to sustain the growth and development of the Igbo language.

In addition, the efforts of late Mazi F.C Ogbalu and his *Society for the Promotion of Igbo Language and Culture* were not in vain as many grammar books and novels in the vernacular were written in response to the clarion call by the above society. It was during this period that the current Igbo numerals of Nari, (hundred) Puku (thousand) Nde

(million) and Njeri (billion) were invented by Igbo researchers and scholars.

In his own view, C.L. Innes, argues that although Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is written in the English language, but Achebe's predominant use of Igbo idioms and proverbs (some in the vernacular and some in transliterations) goes a long way to show the author's interest in promoting the Igbo language and culture through his renowned novel as early as 1958, when the novel was first published. According to Innes:

The language used by the narrators is also closely related to the speech of the Ibo characters who are the center of the novel. Expressions and proverbs used by Okonkwo, Obierika and others are echoed by the narrator, and thus the identity of the narrator as spokesman for the Ibo community is emphasized. At the same time, the dialogue seasoned with proverbs – the palm oil with which words are eaten (113).

Inne's argument is that a critical reader of *Things Fall Apart* will appreciate the beauty, density and profundity of not only the Igbo language but also a substantial part of Igbo culture. So Achebe, in the novel, obviously promoted the Igbo language and culture.

Present Efforts to Sustain the Growth and Development of the Igbo Language

There are a number of purposeful efforts and activities by groups, individuals and corporate bodies aimed at sustaining the Igbo language as a major ethnic language in Nigeria

The first group of people that comes to mind are the leaders of Anglican and Catholic Churches in the South East. The churches sustain the Igbo language by conducting church services, announcements and singing competitions in the Igbo language. The Bible, hymn books and catechisms are written in the vernacular language. Supporting the view expressed above, David Jowitt said:

In this language (Igbo) there is now a well-established tradition of scholarly activity, which in some cases goes back far into the ninetieth century... The foundations for much of this work were often laid by Christian missionaries because of the need to translate the Bible into MT of potential converts (9 – 10).

Another tangible, tremendous and result-oriented effort to sustain the growth and development of the Igbo language in speech and orthography are the one by a retired university administrator, Prof. Pita Ejiofo through the “Otu Subakwa Igbo.” The group organizes meetings, workshops, conferences, debates, competitions on the use of Igbo proverbs, production of flyers, cassettes and making announcements in various churches, all aimed at promoting the speaking and writing of the Igbo language. The group has even carried its campaign to Igbo people in diaspora.

It is also an inconvertible fact that presently, radio, television news is broadcast in the Igbo language in the five Igbo speaking states of Nigeria. Similarly, announcements for meetings, advertisements, burials, weddings and new yam festivals are often made in the language. Through these activities, the language is sustained. Supporting the above view, Jowitt said “One important sign of the prominence of a language is its use in news broadcasting at state level.” (10).

In addition, Igbo language, through the efforts and wisdom of National curriculum planners, is one of the major ethnic languages that are studied in the first two years of pupils’ stay in the primary school. It is also a core subject in the West African School Certification, General Certification and National Examinations Commission Examinations. David Jowitt also recognized these efforts as steps in the right direction towards sustaining vernacular languages such as the Igbo language when he said:

Indigenous languages (Igbo inclusive) have gained ground in the school curriculum in recent years. The

National Policy on Education (1977) stipulates that the MT (mother tongue) should be used as the medium of instruction in the first two years of primary school, and the attainment of basic literacy in the MT is officially encouraged... The National Policy on Education requires that at junior secondary level one of the three main languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) be studied in addition to the MT (10).

From the excerpt, it is clear that Nigerian Curriculum, Planners are very much aware of the importance of mother tongues to diverse Nigerians who are conveniently united by the English language that breaks the barriers of language differences. The onus is on the individual owners of the mother tongues to sustain and promote their in the midst of stiff competition with other ethnic languages and the “almighty” English language.

In addition, the fact that traditional marriage ceremonies in the five Eastern States are proudly conducted in the vernacular is a true testimonial that the Igbo language would not die. As far as marriages are part of our traditional culture and in so far as kolanuts are given the sole linguistic preference during these ceremonies, there is hope for the Igbo language in this part of the world. While the Yoruba produce kolanuts, Hausa eat kolanuts and the Igbo celebrate kolanuts in the Igbo language, irrespective of the time, location and the make-up of the audience to any ceremonies, our fears that the Igbo language would die should be allayed. It is important to note that the Igbo view the kolanut as a unique gift to them, particularly the ones popularly called Igbo kolanuts which yield between three to eight lobes. These kolanuts are not held together with any gummy substance and so symbolically, the Igbo see klanuts as symbol of unity and a great means of communicating with God, the creator. To this extent, kolanuts are used during ceremonies to promote the use, growth and development of the Igbo language.

Furthermore, the study of the Igbo language in Nigerian tertiary institutions such as colleges of Education, polytechnics and

universities and the award of first degrees, master’s and doctoral degrees in the Igbo language in some Nigerian Universities is one of the efforts and programmes to preserve and protect the Igbo language.

Similar to the above effort is the recent introduction of the Igbo language as one of the compulsory General Studies courses in tertiary institutions in the South East. At this rate, the Igbo obviously competes with the English and French languages which are the real threats to the Igbo language. Through the introduction, the young people of Igbo origin who truly abhor the speaking and dread the writing of the Igbo language are compelled to tinker with the language. The planners of our school curriculum deserve sincere commendation for the singular act of making the Igbo language a General Studies Course (GS) in some of our tertiary institutions.

Furthermore, the use of the Igbo language for general entertainment by prominent comedians of Igbo extraction such as Uche Ogbuagu, Dede One Day and others goes a long way to prove that some young people in Igbo land are still interested in the use and preservation of the Igbo language. In addition to using these jokes in Igbo for comic purposes, the comedians use them to educate, criticize, admonish, regulate, inform and indict the listeners of all ages. The efforts of the Igbo comedians in promoting the use, growth and development of the Igbo language must never go unnoticed and unacknowledged by well meaning people in Igbo land.

Similarly, the fact that radio and television commentaries on issues such as new yam festivals, burial biographies, silver and diamond jubilees by couples, town union development efforts and strides, church histories and synod hosting among other issues, are written and read in the Igbo languages go a long way to reduce the fears that the Igbo language would go into extinction.

The above is in addition to the educational programmes of some radio and television stations in Igbo language to teach the young and the old, the Igbo language in speech and in writing. Worthy of mention is the efforts at Anambra Broadcasting Co-operation (ABS) in the

teaching of the Igbo language through radio broadcast and telecast. The interest and dexterity of Mrs. Nkiru Meludu of ABS in the programmes deserve some genuine commendation.

No doubt, the governments' genuine efforts to create job opportunities for graduates in the Igbo language, is one of the sure ways of attracting the young people not only to speak and write the language but also to study it for the purposes of teaching others the language.

In addition to the aforementioned programmes, the efforts of some patriotic and illustrious sons of Igbo nation towards the promotion and sustenance of the speaking and writing of the Igbo language are noticeable and commendable. For instance, Mr. Godwin Ezeemo, in association with Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) Anambra State Chapter, organized a National Conference tagged "Regaining the Lost Values of the Igbo," held at Paktonian Hotel, Awka, Anambra State between 7th – 11th May, 2012. The aim of the conference was to create awareness of Igbo culture in general and the language in particular as a member of the endangered species of languages and to suggest practical means of sustaining the culture through the Igbo language and regaining the lost aspects of the Igbo cultural heritage. Eminent scholars like Prof. Pita Ejiofo presented exciting and thought provoking lectures that clearly pointed out the lost aspects of the Igbo culture, and suggested ways of arresting further drift of the Igbo language and culture. These efforts are steps in the right direction.

Suggestions for Further Sustenance Programmes for the Igbo Language

The efforts of some illustrious sons and daughters of the Igbo in diaspora, especially in the United States of America (USA) towards the promotion and sustenance of the Igbo language and culture through International Annual Conferences on Igbo cultural values are positive steps. Those behind these noble patriotic gestures should sustain the programme and add more activities to further bring Igbo language and culture into national and international limelight.

Again, essay competitions at primary and secondary school levels in the South East should be organized and handsome rewards given to the best essayists as an incentive for more interest in the language.

Similarly, oral debates on polemical issues could be organized for students at junior and senior secondary school levels within the school, between and among schools and local government levels respectively. Winners of such competitions should be well rewarded.

(d) In addition, a specific competition on the use of *Igbo Proverbs* could be organized for students and other adult members of the Igbo society to stress not only the speaking of the language but also the importance of understanding the language at connotative and deep structure levels.

Finally, the churches can further help by organizing the practical recitation of Biblical portions such as the Beatitudes in Mathew Chapter 5 verses 1 – 12, some short Psalms of David and Ecc ----- of Solomon that contain wise sayings. The winners of these competitions could be handsomely rewarded through financial and material donations by affluent members of the churches.

Conclusion

There are a number of genuine reasons for any patriotic Igbo to be concerned and worried about the future of the Igbo language in Nigeria, particularly with the undue emphasis often laid on the speaking and writing of the English language in the federation in general and Igbo land in particular. However, there are serious programmes mapped out by patriotic Igbo men and women, groups such as Otu Subakwa Igbo (and I will add, Debekwa Igbo) ably led by Oka Mmuta Pita Ejiofo, the mass media (radio and television), curriculum planners, and some churches to promote and sustain the speaking, writing and teaching of the Igbo language in Nigeria. These efforts and programmes are strong and genuine enough to allay the fear that the Igbo language would, in no distant time, go into sudden eclipse and eventual extinction.

Note: *A Paper Presented at a Colloquium: “Sustaining the Igbo Language and Literature in the 21st Century,” Organized in Honour of Prof. Pita Ejiofo, by Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) Anambra State Chapter from 11th to 13th November, 2013.*

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