

International Journal of Arts and Humanities  
(IJAH)

Bahir Dar- Ethiopia

Vol. 5(1), S/No 16, January, 2016:227-235

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v5i1.18>

---

**The Impact of the English Language on the Development of  
African Ethos: The Igbo Experience**

**Akujobi, O. S.**

Department of English Language and Literature,

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Anambra State, Nigeria

E-mail: [odochiakujobi@yahoo.com](mailto:odochiakujobi@yahoo.com)

**Abstract**

The predominance and relegation of the English and Igbo Languages in discourse respectively have been speculated with a paucity of empirical backup. The need arises therefore for a quantitative assessment of the Impact of the English Language on the development of values (language, dressing and religion) among the Igbos. One hundred structured questionnaires were distributed, collated and analysed. The result showed that English and Igbo languages were spoken at the rate of (6%) and (76%) respectively, and that the English Language had a zero (0) impact on the mode of dressing, while its effect on religion was at the rate of only (6%) among the sampled participants. It is therefore recommended that first language (L1) be emphasized as the language of communication over second language (L2) for an overall communicative competence.

**Key words:** English Language, African Ethos, Igbo Experience,

**Introduction**

Africa as a continent has a population of 400 million people with more than two thousand (2000) languages (Lodhi, 1993). English language for centuries has been

viewed as a major language of communication and the official language of the African Union (AU). Prior to the advent of the colonial masters, Africa had a language of communication and instruction, some revered values, beliefs, religion, dressing etc, that were purely African.

The advent of the colonial masters threatened the existence of the African ethos. English language came with colonialism and imperialism and so is often stigmatised as the language of imperialism or oppression (Phillipson, 1992). The insistence of the absolute dependence on the English Language by the Colonial masters was intentional and this has culminated presently in Africa not being recognised in the world as a major contributor to knowledge. The infringement of this language on the psyche of the African, led to some African leaders choosing English over local languages like in Nigeria. This was done with the intention to ‘de-emphasise ethnicity and build up a sense of nationhood’ (Phillipson, p. 162).

The Indigenous languages were grossly limited in their usage, which grossly affected their development. Some African countries that are Anglophone like Nigeria, Ghana, Namibia, Zambia use English as an official language (L2) but some African countries use the English language as (L1) first language.

The Igbo people are situated mostly in the Southern region of Nigeria, with a minority group in Equatorial Guinea and the language family consists of Niger-Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Niger, YEAI, Igboid, Igbo (Wiki). The Igbo people inhabit the following states in Nigeria: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, Delta and Rivers States. They speak Igbo language and there are 25 million native speakers with varied dialects: Waawa, Enuani, Ngwa, Ohuhu, Onicha, Bonny-Opobo, Olu, Owere (Isuala) et al (Wiki). They constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa.

### **Language**

The impact of the English language on the Igbo language use has been viewed as one of the places that English Language dealt a deadly blow in Nigeria. In African states there is a gross inequality of languages as English language occupies the prestigious position of a national language or official language meant for Indigenous languages while indigenous languages are relegated to the background. Imperialist language policies were formulated to impede the growth of indigenous African languages.

The use of indigenous languages were discouraged, which inadvertently led to the extinction of most indigenous languages. English Language in Nigeria became the language of communication, business, law, employment and instruction in schools. Most elite families preferred their children to learn and speak English more than their local languages, in order to widen their chances of employment after graduation from school. In the Igbo region of Nigeria, the English Language is used throughout the

school life of the child as a medium of instruction in the school. ‘Africa is the only continent where the majority of children start school using a foreign language’ (Quane & Glanz). Nigeria has failed to generate effective language policies to help indigenous languages.

The most challenging realities that most of these states had to grapple with were the prevailing multilingual and multiethnic phenomena. Most of them took a shortcut by adopting an exoglossic language policy, in which the ex-colonial language was adopted as official language and, in some cases, served also as national language. (Batibo 2007, p. 15)

In recent times, some African countries have recognised the important need ‘to recognise indigenous as official languages’ (Chimhundu, 2002) and to firmly plant these indigenous languages, they have formulated policies and promulgated them for public awareness and compliance. In South Africa, eleven (11) languages, including previously marginalised ones are now recognised as official languages (Fisseha, 2009). ‘The Provincial governments can select any of these languages for administrative functions, based on usage, practicality, expense, regional circumstances and the balances of the needs and preferences of the population as a whole or in the province concerned’ (Fisseha 2009, p.130).

There is a similar approach in Ethiopia, which empowered all indigenous languages to be used equally. ‘Every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its culture and to preserve its history’ (FDRE, 1994). Students using English as a Second Language (ESL) or Students using it as a Foreign Language (EFL) experience linguistic difficulties in fluent communications. Some education experts (Stoddart, 1986; Tekeste, 1990) have supported the replacement of Foreign Languages like the English Language with Indigenous Languages.

English Language has affected the life of Igbo language, especially in the expression of African/Igbo literature, where it has been variously argued that this practise demeans the strength of the Igbo story. Should African/ Igbo literature be actually termed such, when it is in English? What could the reader conclude about his identity when he must read it in English to appreciate it? Therefore, there is this undying conflict between African/Igbo and English languages. Does the use of English language actually undermine the message in-built in African/Igbo literature? Chinua Achebe in 1975, in a speech entitled ‘The African Writer and the English Language’ attempted an answer with these word,

Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling.

But for me, there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it (Thiong'o, p. 285).

Gabriel Okara also addressed the conflict of writing African literature in English and opined:

Some may regard this way of writing in English as desecration of the language. This is of course not true. Living languages grow like living things, and English is far from a dead language.....why shouldn't there be a Nigerian or West African English which we can use to express our own ideas, thinking and philosophy in our own way? (Thiong'o, p. 287).

Chinua Achebe corroborates this idea:

I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings (Thiong'o, p. 286).

Achebe and Okara attest to the needlessness of sticking to old ideologies but rather suggest that in order to have a sense of identity, it is important to recognise and understand the infiltration of foreign cultures.

The Igbos presently read and appreciate books and other educational/instructional materials written in English more than those written in Igbo language. Most Igbo people cannot confidently read and write Igbo. Igbo students record a higher failure rate in Basic Studies in Igbo (GS 108), a General Studies course for first years in the University, than the GS 101 and GS 102 which are courses in Use of English.

The movie industry in Nigeria (Nollywood) is equally experiencing the negative impact of the English Language on Igbo language where most movies are made with the English Language and very few with Igbo language. The Nigerian audience prefers movies made with the English Language which showcase the English culture more than the indigenous culture. This continues to affect the Igbo people adversely; their penchant for movies made with the English language grows with an equivalent decline in patronage for the ones made with the Igbo language. This preference unknowingly promotes the loss of their identity. The gradual erosion of the Igbo language can be clearly observed in some satellite televisions, like the DSTV, which has always had a Yoruba channel and a Hausa channel but the Igbo channel that had been conspicuously absent, just began.

### **Religion**

Religion is an institution that expresses belief in a divine power. It is an organised collection of beliefs, cultural systems and worldviews that relate humanity to an order of existence. Religion and language are viewed as the people's way of life. Language and Religion are interrelated and inseparable entities. Language is the major vehicle through which Religion is conveyed to the people. The advent of the missionaries saw to the entrenchment of the English Language, which was used to teach the new converts. English language was institutionalized as a medium of instruction.

The missionaries relentlessly taught their converts with English Language wherever they went. English Language became the language of Christianity and civilization. Christian education became an important medium through which Standard English gained access to the Igbos in the early 19thC.

The entrenchment of the English Language as the language of the Christian Religion in Igbo land affected the values of the people in terms of Religion. All other religions were relegated to the background and the Christian religion, associated with missionaries thrived. The Igbos imbibed a new way of worship. The missionaries' conscious effort to teach the English Language for evangelism and communication made the language a second language for the Igbo's and the Nigerian people in general and depopulated the traditional religious followers.

English Language as the language of information and communication technology was used to spread religion globally. Religious evangelism became easier and faster with the help of communication technology. Religious values were easily transferred from one society to the other and religious proselytization was possible and fast. Information and communication technology enhances globalization of religious and cultural values. 'The internet is a key development in the growth of globalization because globalization has changed the nature of national government, imposing national and international cultures on local cultures. (Omekwu, 2006)

### **Dressing**

Another major impact of the English Language for the Igbo people is on dressing. The coming of the English Language affected socialization processes and values, which led to the commercialisation of the Igbo culture and mode of dressing, due to cultural globalization. Nigerian markets were constantly flooded with foreign clothes. There was a cultural invasion. The Igbos no longer felt fulfilled in their usual way of dressing, inferiority complex set in. Importation of foreign clothes thrived. The Igbos lost their traditional mode of dressing: For women, they tied wrapper on their breasts and used 'Jigida', a special type of strings to cover their waist. The Igbo value system was tampered with and was lost because they were no longer valued in the global market. This led to a cultural clash and the existing values of the Igbos were

undermined, which affected the identity of the Igbo people and finally culminated to ‘ a crisis of cultural confidence, combined with economic uncertainty and crime which global integration often brings’(Akande, 2002).

The English Language is the language of communication, social media and information technology and so is the language of the internet. The internet is a vehicle through which cultural values can be transmitted. Some Indigenous values have been eroded by viewing foreign cultures through the internet. ‘The internet certainly offers the greatest opportunities for cultural exchange...’ (Omekwu, 2003). The ‘sagging’ of trousers is as a result of cultural exchange. People are now shaped by foreign cultures due to globalization, which leads to loss of identity and rapid erosion of the cultural values of the people.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Sapir-Whorf’s theory of Linguistic Relativity, which states that the language we speak influences or impacts our perception of the world, thought, values and experiences.

### Materials and Methods

One hundred (100) participants were conveniently sampled and structured questionnaires were administered to elicit relevant information. The information collated from the questionnaires were analysed along the lines of language, religion and dressing.

### Results

**Table 1:** Frequency Distribution Table of the Effect of English Language on Religion

No. of Respondents		Total
Yes (%)	No. (%)	
6 (6)	94 (94)	100

Table 1 illustrates the frequency distribution table of the Effect of the English Language on Religion. Out of the 100 respondents, 6 affirmed that the English language has an effect on their religion, constituting 6% of the sampled population. 94 disagreed that the English Language has an effect on the choice of the religion accounting for 94% of the sampled population.

**Table 2:** Frequency Distribution Table of the Effect of English Language on Dressing

No. of Respondents		Total
Yes	No	
0	100	100

Table 2 highlights the frequency distribution table of the Effect of the English Language on dressing. Out of the 100 respondents, none affirmed the effect of the English Language on dressing while 100 disagreed that the English Language affects their dressing accounting for 100% of the respondents.

**Table 3:** Frequency Distribution Table of the usage of English and Igbo Languages

Frequency (%)			Total
English (%)	Igbo (%)	Both (%)	
6(6)	76 (76)	18(18)	100

Table 3 models the frequency distribution table of the usage of English and Igbo languages. 6(6%) of the respondents use English as a language of communication at home, 76(76%) use Igbo, while 18(18%) use both as languages of communication.

### Discussion

The study assayed the impact of the English Language on the development of African Ethos. The Igbo Experience. A total of 100 participants were conveniently sampled using questionnaires to elicit relevant information.

The study showed that of the 100 participants evaluated for the Effect of the English language on Religion, 6(6%) affirmed that English Language affected their religion while 94 (94%) disagreed that English Language affected their religion (Table 1). This result contradicts Sapir- Whorf’s theory of Linguistic Relativity, which states that the language we speak influences or impacts our perception of the world, thought, values and experiences. This discrepancy could be attributed to different socio-cultural environment under which the studies were conducted.

An assessment of the impact of the English language on dressing showed that the English Language had a zero (0) impact on the mode of dressing (Table 2). This result also contradicts Sapir- Whorf’s theory of Linguistic Relativity.

An appraisal of the effect of the English language on the usage of Igbo language showed that English language had an insignificant impact on the usage of the Igbo language and so were spoken at the rates of (6%) and (76%) respectively (Table 3). This result also disagrees with Sapir- Whorf's theory of Linguistic Relativity. The contradiction could be as a result of the success of on-going awareness campaigns for the promotion of the Igbo language like 'Otu Subakwa Igbo' which is serving as a change agent in the re-orientation of the Igbos to mitigate the loss of their identity.

This work disapproves Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis of Linguistic Relativity, which states that the language we speak influences or impacts our perception of the world, thought, values and experiences. This work proves the hypothesis false.

### **Conclusion**

This work assessed the Impact of the English Language on the Development of African Ethos, the Igbo Experience under three variables: Language, Religion and Dressing, using Sapir-Whorf theory of Linguistic Relativity.

It showed that English Language had little or no impact on these values. The study showed that among the participants, 6(6%) affirmed that English Language affected their religion while 94 (94%) disagreed that English Language affected their religion. It displayed a zero (0) impact on the mode of dressing. It equally indicated that English and Igbo languages were spoken at the rate of (6%) and (76%) respectively.

The study therefore postulates that language as a system of communication does not significantly influence the native language, religion and dressing of the people speaking the language. That one speaks English does not necessarily mean that one must dress like the white man, worship the god of the white man or throw away his/her native language.

### **Recommendations**

1. The first language (L1) should be emphasized as the language of communication over second language (L2) for an overall communicative competence
2. Change Agents for the rehabilitation and sustenance of the Igbo language like 'Otu Subakwa Igbo' group should be motivated and funded by Igbo states,
3. Enlightenment campaigns such as the Ahiajoku and F.C, Ogbalu Lecture Series should be given adequate publicity to enhance participation.
4. The Igbo people should improve on the use of the Igbo language and develop improved orthographies for words in the language, in order to have every English word appropriately represented in the Igbo language.

### Works Cited

- Akande, Wole. Drawback of Cultural Globalization. 2002. [www.org/globali](http://www.org/globali)
- Batibo, H.M. Language use optimisation as a strategy for national development. In H.Coleman (ed.), *Language and Development in Africa and Beyond: Proceedings of the 7th International Language and Development Conference*, 2007:15-26. Addis Ababa: British Council. Available online at [www.langdevconferences.org](http://www.langdevconferences.org)
- Chimhundu, H. Language Policies in Africa: Final Report of Intergovernmental Conference on Language Policies in Africa, Harare, Zimbabwe, 17-21 March 1997. (Web version edited by Karsten Legère.) Paris: UNESCO. Available online at [http://ocpa.irmo.hr/resources/docs/Harare\\_Language-en.pdf](http://ocpa.irmo.hr/resources/docs/Harare_Language-en.pdf). 2002
- Fisseha, Y.T. A tale of two federations: Comparing language rights regimes in South Africa and Ethiopia. In R.Tsegaye (ed.), *Issues of Federalism in Ethiopia: Towards an Inventory*, 115-160. (Ethiopian Constitutional Law Series Volume 2.) Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2009.
- FDRE (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia). 1994. Constitution. Addis Ababa: FDRE. Article 39(2), 96. Available online at [www.ethiopia.net](http://www.ethiopia.net)
- Sofield, Heather. Postcolonial Identity and the position of English in African Literature. 'Who am I? Negotiation of Identity in a Post-Colonial State' 1999. [www.postcolonialweb-org/.../7.html](http://www.postcolonialweb-org/.../7.html)
- Stoddart, J. 1986. The Use and Study of English in Ethiopian Schools. Unpublished report. Addis Ababa.
- Haile-Michael, A. 1993. Developing a Service English Syllabus to Meet the Academic Demands and Constraints in the Ethiopian University Context. PhD thesis submitted to Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia.
- Omekwu, C.O. African Culture and Libraries: The information Technology Challenges. *Electronic Library*, 24(2), 247-248.
- Quane, A. and Glandz, C. Why and How Africa should invest in African languages and Multilingual Education. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for lifelong learning. 2010.
- Wikipedia. Igbo Language. [www.en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Igbo\\_language](http://www.en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Igbo_language). 31 May, 2015 at 19:19.