

HOW COLONIALISM UNDERDEVELOPED NIGERIAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES-----Arinze Agbanusi

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Introduction

Language is the system of communication either by writing, speech, sound or sign. Like humans, the brutes communicate among themselves and even with humans. However, one distinctive feature of human communication is that it usually involves the use of verbal language which betrays a high level of rationality. Since verbal language is peculiar to man, it is an exclusive human activity. In any case, language is a very important element in human life. In fact, without communication, human life would be meaningless. Hence communication is involved in every aspect of life. 'Culture' is said to be the totality of a people's way of life but language is the pivot on which the wheel of 'culture' revolves. Hence, language is a crucial index of 'culture.' The implication is that language is very important in the life of any individual or human collectivity. It is often said that knowledge is power. Both formal and informal education through which knowledge is imparted, are piloted in one language or another.

In other words, education involves teaching and learning, both of which are invariably done in language. Hence, language is a veritable instrument for knowledge acquisition. According to Francis Bacon, knowledge is power. That is, the power for social progress or national development. This implies that language is an inevitable tool for national development. Chumbow (1990:63) stresses the same view in these words:

The relation between language and national development should be obvious from the fact that since education is crucial in the training of manpower for national development and the language medium is crucial in the educational process, it follows that language is important and in fact vital to national development as well.

Considering the link between language and knowledge, the importance of language cannot be over-emphasized. In Nigeria, English is the official language. By implication, it is the accepted language for education, other formal events and commerce. However, academic research and historical experience have betrayed the fact that more effective communication is achieved with the use of the mother-tongue, especially in childhood education. In other words, there is the propensity for better comprehension when the mother-tongue is used to teach. It is estimated that there are over two hundred and fifty indigenous languages in Nigeria. But unfortunately, these indigenous languages are not as viable as the English language. It is rather ironical that majority of the native

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speakers or the actual owners of these indigenous languages cannot read, write and speak them with the same level of proficiency with which they read, write and speak the English language. This phenomenon is most manifest in the south-eastern part of the country inhabited by the Igbo people. Many children and youths from the area (especially, those not based at home) cannot read, write and speak the Igbo language fluently. Worse still, some cannot read, write or speak it at all. This paper traces the origin of this problem to the colonial days and recommends ways of arresting the ugly trend.

The origin of the problem

After the British colonized Nigeria, they introduced into it the British culture embodied in their religion, education and technology. The English language constitutes an integral part of British education. Language, being what it is, the British saw theirs as a veritable tool for this transfer of culture. Hence, they felt the need to promote it at the expense of the existing local languages. The Nigerian indigenous languages were suppressed alongside other aspects of the Nigerian traditional culture. A lot of obnoxious impressions were propagated against Nigerian culture generally. Virtually, everything about it was erroneously depicted as fetish or derogatory (Rodney,1972). This had the adverse effect of dwindling interest in Nigerian indigenous languages.

Secondly, there was the factor of the tantalizing products of the European science and technology which accompanied British occupation of Nigeria. Most European-made goods and equipment were seen to be better than the locally made ones. For example, those whose water pots broke on the way to the stream learnt that the use of gallons was preferable. Hence, the preference for these European products by many Nigerians led to greater demand for them among the populace. As a result, the acceptability for anything British kept rising. With time, it became the vogue to use British products, to do things the British way and to speak the language of the British people. This phenomenon has persisted over the years and has these days taken an ugly dimension, culminating in the impression that everything local is inferior while everything European is superior. Hence, for many Nigerians today, communicating in any Nigerian indigenous language translates to not being well educated or civilized.

The highlight of this bad situation was made when the British colonial government made the passing of English in written and oral examinations a compulsory requirement for children aspiring to go into college. Passing English in oral and written examinations was also part of the requirements for oversea scholarships and for securing well-paid jobs. Narrating the Igbo experience of this situation, Ejiiofor (2002:130) writes:

The first Igbos who could read, write and speak English, were given “the kingdom, power and glory”. Only those who passed English in written and oral examinations went to colleges and “overseas” and returned to prestigious employment. Our people reacted accordingly. In the most literal way, the old order of Igbo speaking was totally changed, giving place to the new order of speaking in English.

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Another way in which the colonial masters underdeveloped Nigerian indigenous languages was by the fact that they transliterated many words of the local languages. Names of persons and towns were spelt in ways contrary to the linguistic or phonetic rules of the languages in question. These words were, so to say, spelt in English. In other words, they were spelt in line with the English linguistic rules. In Igbo language, for example, the word 'Nsukka' should rather be written as 'Nsuka'. In Igbo linguistics, two same consonants are not placed together, as one is always already enough to produce the intended sound. In the case of 'Enugu', the *g* should be replaced with *gw* to achieve the proper sound, in accordance with Igbo writing rules. Hence, the word Enugu should be written as Enugwu. Some other wrongly spelt words are displayed below:

Incorrect forms	Correct forms
Onitsha	Onicha
Owerri	Owere
Awka	Oka
Offor	Ofo
Okafor	Okafo
Awkunanaw	Okunano
Amawbia	Amaobia

The effects of the underdevelopment of Nigerian indigenous languages

One of the effects of the underdevelopment of Nigerian indigenous languages is its negative impact on learning. Even though English is the official language in Nigeria, it is a second language to the Nigerian people. Meanwhile, historical experience as well as academic research has shown that learning is most effective in a child's first language which, in most cases, is the mother tongue. The failure of earlier educators in Nigeria to observe this cardinal rule has had more than its fair share as a contributory factor to the failing standard of education in the country.

The dwindling of the value of the Nigerian indigenous languages has brought about a situation where some youths and children, especially those not resident in their native places, have had to face some kind of alienation whenever they have reason to be home. This phenomenon is most common among Igbo youths and children. Due to many years of loss of contact with their native homes, they cannot read, write or speak their native language fluently. This phenomenon makes them feel alienated from their people.

Moreover, the underdevelopment of the indigenous languages usually leads to some kind of communication gap between some children and their grandparents. For instance, in Igbo-land, many grand parents of some children who stay 'abroad' with their immediate parents have faced a situation where they can only have little or even no communication with these children. This is because such children cannot speak their native language which their grandparents understand neither can their grandparents speak or understand the English language. No wonder ETUCE in Ezeani (2005:23) stresses the fact that it is the right of every child to learn his or her mother-tongue:

Everyone has the right to maintain his or her cultural identity.

Languages are a crucial part of every culture. This underlies the

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right of every child to learn his or her mother-tongue, including when the mother-tongue is not the majority language of the society.

Another set-back resulting from the underdevelopment of Nigerian indigenous languages is in the area of commerce. It hinders the pace of trade which situation is inimical to national development. Communication is vital to trade. In a situation where, for instance, an uneducated Hausa sells a certain product in Igbo land, communication will be difficult if an uneducated Igbo comes to buy from him. The only remedy in such a situation would be if either of them understands the other's language, which is not always the case, owing to the underdevelopment of Nigerian indigenous languages.

Recommendations

Language, being the most important index of culture, is crucial to every people who have it. It is the most prominent aspect of culture. It is a hall-mark of identity. Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, in Laitin (1992), in his Independence Day Speech, draws attention to the importance of fostering and living one's culture. He declares: "I believe that a culture is the spirit and essence of any nation. A country which lacks its own culture is no more than a collection of people without the spirit that makes them a nation."

In a similar vein, Hussein, in Jones and Ozog (1993), states that "language is the soul of a race, so people should master English or any other language but should not allow any of these second languages to master them". This underscores the need to recommend ways of resuscitating the dwindling Nigerian indigenous languages, especially the Igbo language, which is obviously the most affected among the three languages which form the linguistic tripod on which the nation rests (others being Hausa and Yoruba).

The federal government should do more in the area of culture, where language belongs, using its officials to correct the erroneous impressions which had been created about Nigerian culture in general, and Nigerian indigenous languages, in particular. This is important because, as the saying goes, propaganda can make a fool of a genius or a genius of a fool. Governments of Igbo states should do more by using their offices to transform the very horrible mind-set of many Igbo people who treat the Igbo language with levity. This is a fight Igbo people must embark on with all sense of seriousness, in order to make-up for the linguistic mistake of their fore-fathers who can be, figuratively, said to have swallowed too much of the Eurocentric pill, unlike their Hausa and Yoruba counterparts.

Moreover, the governments of the affected states should offer the opportunity for scholarship to candidates desirous to study the affected languages in the university or any other tertiary institution where such courses are offered. More importantly, graduates of such local languages should be offered tantalizing jobs which will serve as an encouragement or enticement for more people to opt to study them. In addition, well-to-do members of the Igbo society should support their state-governments in providing

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scholarship and job opportunities to those willing to study the indigenous language of the state.

Lastly, the Houses of Assembly of the affected states should make laws that will help protect the indigenous languages. For instance, there should be a reversion to the correct spellings of the transliterated Igbo names of places and persons. All stakeholders in language matters in each state should be involved.

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