

## THE ACQUISITION OF FRENCH LANGUAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS IGBO LANGUAGE & CULTURE: A CASE STUDY OF UMUAHIA, ABIA STATE, NIGERIA

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### Abstract

The effective learning of a foreign language and its accompanying culture often depends on the level of acceptance it receives from the community. While the French language by its nature seems appealing to the system and environment of learning by its nature, is generally appealing to academic and cultural learning environments, it can still encounter resistance in new sociolinguistic settings. Umuahia prominent a city in Igbo land has also made some marks especially in the development of French language and culture in Nigeria. Therefore, the paper tries to measure the level of receptivity of French as a foreign language in the face of Igbo language and culture in Umuahia, the capital of Abia State. The research would do this with a holistic appraisal of the gains and losses encountered in the trajectory of French language learning in this part of Nigeria. Umuahia has been a key city in the history of Igbo land especially right from the days of the old Imo State of Nigeria. So the Impact of teaching and learning of French in some of the educational institutions of the State like: Abia State University, Uturu, Abia State Polytechnic, Aba, Federal Polytechnic Unwana and others must have left some multiplying effects in the Abia State society. With this instrument of measurement, the paper finds out finally the level of interference posed by French as a foreign language on Igbo language spoken in Umuahia. The research also tries to proffer solution to these findings especially the negative ones

**Keywords:** Acquisition, Measurement, Effects, Receptivity & Interference

### Introduction

The learning of French by Igbo speakers presents unique challenges and opportunities, firstly due to linguistic and cultural differences. Language and culture are means of communication through which human beings interact and exchange ideas, information and messages to one another. The human language is an invaluable tool that helps them express themselves through speaking and writing.

### Literature Review

According to Ndimele (2001:1): " language is a semiotic system because it entails the use of certain agreed upon symbols or signals to convey meaning from one person to another with a given speech community". Igbo language as one of the major dialects in Nigeria has stood the taste of time. This is because Igbo as a language has long been saved from being enlisted as one of the endangered languages of the world.

The paper agrees with the assertion of Ojetunde (2013:252) that: " language is an interesting phenomenon that has been bestowed on humans. It is a means by which man expresses his ideas and gives meaning to his existence". Igbo language had served served as the only means of communication around Igbo land which Umuahia in Abia State has part been of. All these have been in place before the advent of some intruding foreign languages like French and her culture. Moreover, Babatunde (2002:1) posits that language is the expression of culture, the depository of culture, and crucial model of culture transmission. This is why children easily learn everything about their culture alongside their language from infancy. Igbo children usually acquire Igbo language first if it is the language spoken being their parents or those that brought them up from cradle. Subsequently, a Second, third or even fourth language is learnt at later age depending on degree of competence.

Igbo language is predominantly spoken by the people of the south eastern part of Nigeria. The Igbos are popularly known for their industrious nature. Most of them love trading although a good number believes so much in formal education. According to translate swift certified translation experts:

Approximately 40 million people across southeastern Nigeria speak Igbo. Most linguists believe the language emerged around 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. Unlike its neighbors that belong to the Afro-asiatic family, Igbo boasts of a distinct lineage. It stems from the Niger-Congo family, a vast language group suggesting Igbo's ancient roots lie elsewhere in Africa. Theories suggest Igbo speakers migrated into their current southeastern homeland, bringing their unique language with them

The Igbos remarkably boast of a collection of around 30 dialects. A part from these dialects, the Standard Igbo, also known as Central Igbo stands out. This central Igbo which also serves as Igbo language of teaching and learning, is a literary and educational dialect based on the Owerri and Umuahia dialects. It is the most widely understood dialect of Igbo language. Most other dialects share a high degree of mutual intelligibility. However, some have diverged more due to geographical separation and historical encounters. For instance, Central Igbo dialects spoken around Enugu might show influences from neighboring Benue-Congo languages like Igala, while Eastern dialects closer to Abia might have traces of contact with Cross River languages. This rich tapestry of dialects reflects the adaptability of Igbo and its role as a bridge between cultures.

According to Onuora in her *The Origin and evolution of Igbo language & culture over the generations*:

The language and culture of a people are the same. Before the advent of colonial rule and western civilization per se, the Igbo had existed with full civilization. It is a familiar expression that language is found in culture and culture is found in language, and it is these distinct cultural and linguistic features that distinguish the Igbo as one of the progenitors of African civilization. The origin and evolution of the Igbo language and culture over the generations can be problematic if it does not take cognizance of the periodization from the age of oralness to the period the language was reduced into writing.

That means that Igbo language cannot be separated from the culture. The Igbos are supposed to stick to their culture especially in the face of other languages of the world like French. Learning and teaching of French as a foreign language should have been given a second class status just as the Hausas usually do. They don't allow unnecessary influence on themselves especially as regards their language. The coming of French language in Abia state led to the establishment of the Department of French and Translation studies in Abia state university Uturu and since then, the department has been championing the dissemination of the language and culture in the entire state and beyond. One of the major contributions of this Department of French in the university is in the area of training and mentoring of language teachers who in turn go back state owned primary and secondary schools to teach French language and culture. Indeed the arrival of French language in Umuahia has led to the neglect of Igbo language and culture. Most times, the speaking of Igbo language is left in the hands of village folks who are not qualified to handle the development of the indigenous language. With the introduction of French in Abia state just like every other part of Eastern Nigeria, a lot of people think that showing much interest in Igbo language makes one appear local. But that is not supposed to be because one's language and culture represent his or her life. The history of the people of Abia state can never be complete without a touch on their language and culture. It is worthy to note that France just like her British counterpart in entering into Igbo land still came with colonial mentality (Master/servant relationship). The foundation on which this kind of relationship between French and Igbo languages were built was established during the missionary era. This is confirmed by Eluwa et. al.(1988) in their witeup titled "*The European explorers and the Christian Missionaries*" :

Enduring Christian missionary activities began in the Nigerian area as in other parts of West Africa in the nineteenth century. And this time, the initiative was taken by protestant churches in Europe and America. Their advance was the result of a new religious and moral awakening which began to sweep through their countries towards the close of the eighteenth century (184).

### **Summary / Findings**

Generally, learning French in Umuahia which is one of the major cities of Igbo land presents some advantages and disadvantages. One of the major problems to encounter is the mother tongue interference. Again, the position of French as a foreign language in Nigeria, compared to English might lead to less exposure and practice opportunities, impacting motivation and fluency. Limited qualified teachers and resources especially in rural areas like Umuahia in Abia State can create obstacles in learning of French.

Igbo land is primarily English-speaking and French is not popularly spoken and used in daily life. This lack of immersion and real-world application can hinder fluency in the language and make it challenging to maintain the motivation. Many institutions in Igbo land especially in Umuahia lack adequate French language learning materials, qualified teachers, and modern technological facilities and impacting the quality of teaching.

Given the attitudes of some Igbo parents in Umuahia towards French language, their children perceive the language as less relevant to the future of their children. According to Obinna (2016), some learners may develop a fear of learning a foreign

language in general, which can be a significant barrier to French language acquisition. Again, as the dominant language of education and commerce in Nigeria, English often receives more attention and resources, potentially overshadowing the importance of French.

This is one of the major weaknesses of French language learning in Igbo land especially places like Umuahia, the capital of Abia state of Nigeria. According to Ndukuba in her article titled *French language and National Development: The case of Nigeria*:

French is a language of development. Alongside the OIF (organisation internationale de la francophonie), it supports the development of the network centres for French as a foreign language in Africa (Recflea) currently operating in Togo, Benin, Ghana and Nigeria. It also contributes to initiatives to facilitate the co-existence of French and national languages. French is the second official language in Nigeria since 1996 when the then head of state General Sani Abacha declared it so. It is surprising that not many Nigerians are aware of this. Some Nigerians feel that a second official language is not necessary.

### **Conclusion**

In view of the numerous advantages of learning a second foreign language like French, the research encourages the people of Umuahia in Abia state of Nigeria to embrace French as a second international language and learn to manage it with their indigenous language (Igbo). A lot of issues are connected with the learning of a new language but they are always surmountable depending on how serious the learner is. The Igbos are known for their escapades abroad, so they are expected to equip themselves with all the necessary tools needed for exploits and one of these tools is language. French language occupies a very important position on the globe and as such remains a very widely spoken and influential language. It is an official language in 29 countries and is spoken on five continents. It is also a working language of major international organizations like the United Nations and the European Union. According to Okeke (2000):

Looking at the total number of speakers, French is the sixth most spoken language in the world, following English, Mandarin Chinese, Hindi, Spanish, and Arabic, according to Babel. It is the 16<sup>th</sup> most natively spoken language. Officially, it is an official language in 29 independent nations. French language is spoken in numerous countries across Africa, Europe, North America, South America and parts of Asia, making it one of the most geographically widespread languages. It is also one of the most studied languages globally, second only to English. Forecasts suggest that the number of French speakers will continue to grow, particularly in Africa by 2050.

### **Recommendations**

By implication, if the inhabitants of Umuahia can embrace French language especially for the numerous benefits it holds for them, it will help promote developments in the area. It will also help their young people who travel into places where French is spoken to prosper better. The research encourages the indigenous people of Umuahia to really embrace French for her future generation. There is a great future in French language especially for countries like Nigeria that is surrounded by French speaking countries like: Benin Republic, Niger, Tchad, and others. Proficiency in French opens up new economic opportunities, especially in the areas of trade, tourism and international relationships. Igbo leaders should encourage the learning of the language as to encourage multilingualism and promote linguistic diversity. The learning of French language in Southeastern Nigeria is driven by policy and some institutional efforts. Based on this, challenges connected to linguistic interference and fluency are supposed to be addressed with the help of some pedagogical approaches with much emphasis on linguistic diversity.

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