

THE NOTION OF IGBO LANGUAGE AMONG THE IGBO PEOPLE OF TWENTY FIRST CENTURY: GREAT TREASURE IN EARTHENWARE POT

By

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Abstract

This paper is about the notion of Igbo language among the Igbo people: Treasure in earthenware pot. Treasures are preserved in secured places because of how important they are in the eyes and minds of their owners. Earthenware pot is so fragile that no normal human being can put and preserve an important thing in it. Here the researchers call to mind and draw the attention of the Igbo people on the role of Igbo language among the Igbo people and how to preserve the wonderful heritage. Igbo language stands as the pillar of Igbo unity, identity and security. Unfortunately, the twenty-first century Igbo people are losing this consciousness and are losing interest in Igbo language. This paper will be guided by ethnolinguistic identity theory. The researchers show the evidence of Igbo language as the possible factor for unity, identity and security of Igbo people, Igbo language as treasure in earthenware pot, the fear of Igbo language going into extinction, the place of the Igbo language among the Igbo people in diaspora, call for parental responsibility in Igbo language acquisition and the need to promote the Igbo language in the face of globalization.

Keywords: Language, Igbo language, Igbo People, Treasure, Earthenware Pot.

Introduction

One cannot discuss African ideology, identity, human security and peace building in Africa outside African languages. Language is the heart of human existence, because it influences everything one does since human beings think in their respective languages. Igbo language is one of the major languages in Africa. It is the language of the people who occupy the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. They are equally in Diaspora in different parts of the world. Igbo language and culture are mixed in the sense that Igbo culture is expressed through Igbo language, and Igbo style of living is exceptional. That is why when one sees an Igbo, one would be able to recognize through he/her behaviour. Besides, since language is one of the major barrier makers, Igbo language has a lot of role to play among the Igbo people with regard to identity, unity and security of the Igbo race. There is the need for Igbo people to be identified from the Igbo language in moments of crisis. Esoteric part of the language would be used to identify, unify, and secure the Igbo from harmful people. The history of Igbo race

has shown that the life, identity, unity and security of Igbo people are hanged on Igbo language. This is because Igbo language serves not only as the language of communication among the Igbo people, but also it serves as Igbo identity. As such, to lose Igbo language is to lose Igbo as a nation. This comes to mean that Igbo language is a great treasure for Igbo race; a great treasure that should be guarded and safeguarded by all.

This paper is geared towards addressing the problem of twenty-first century Igbo people and their language; indicating how Igbo language serves as the force uniting and protecting Igbo people where ever they found themselves. Language is one of the strongest unifying factor. There are different towns in Igbo land and different cultural communities with different beliefs and practices. On the side of the civil governance, many states have been carved out of Igbo land. This led to disintegration of Igbo geographical make-up. As such, it is only language that is left to keep the Igbo race together and identify them at each point in time. However, it is quite disheartening that the rate at which Igbo people decline from the use of Igbo language is increasing at air-craft speed rate in twenty-first century. English language, which came as auxiliary language to the language of the land, is gradually taking the position of the mother tongue. A lot of Igbo people, especially those in Diaspora cannot boast of making a correct sentence in Igbo language. This is a serious matter, because if not for anything, it poses a great challenge to the identity, unity and security of the Igbo people. A lot of people had researched and written on the need for the Igbo people to embrace and be proud of the Igbo language. However, there had not been one on this topic. That is why it is important to embark on this research in order to fill the gap left by previous researchers and to draw the attention of the Igbo people to the danger of neglecting their God-given language. Furthermore the paper will look into the evidence of Igbo language as the possible factor for unity, identity and security of Igbo people; Igbo language as treasure in earthenware pot; the fear of Igbo language going into extinction; the place of the Igbo language among the Igbo people in Diaspora; call for parental responsibility in Igbo language acquisition; and the need to promote the Igbo language in the face of globalization.

Conceptual Studies

In order to do justice to this paper, there are some basic concepts relating to this paper that need to be looked into to see how other authors had viewed them. They are language, Igbo language and Igbo People.

Language

Language is variously understood from different perspectives. However, they point at the same meaning. The following authors have viewed it differently.

Hauser and Fitch (2003) define language as a system of communication that enables humans to exchange verbal or symbolic utterances. Their definition emphasizes the social function of language. People in society use language to interact among themselves and to express their intentions. It means that a language must have vocabularies which are signs relating to different meanings.

Campbell (2004) gave a definition of language as a formal system of signs governed by grammatical rules of combination of utterances to communicate meaning. This shows that language is meant to pass message. Every statement in a language is meant to communicate

something. So, language is a close structural system which consists of rules relating a particular sign to a particular meaning. It means that Campbell is stressing the fact that every language differs from the other through different signs that means different things.

Furthermore, Tasky (2007) defines language as a formal system of signs governed by grammatical rules of combination of signs to communicate meaning. In this definition, Tasky makes it clear that human language has some ingredients that come together in order to make an utterance meaningful. The signs must be generally accepted by the group that owns and speaks that language. As such, language is a generally accepted mode of communication.

In addition, Anagbogu, Mbah and Eme (2010) define language as means which human beings have devised for communicating ideas, feelings, emotions, desires, etc. through complex vocal or written symbols.

Umezi (2022) defines language as the recognized and unified means of communication by the people of common ancestral origin despite division in their cultural practices. This definition presents language as the umbrella covering different cultures. As such, many cultures can co-exist in one linguistic setting.

Igbo Language

Although Igbo share the same feature with other languages of the world, it may be viewed differently from different authors.

Umezi (2021) defines Igbo language as 'Kwa' language spoken by Igbo people as their mother tongue. This definition captures the group of language where Igbo language belongs.

Besides, Umezi (2022) defines Igbo language is one of the 'Kwa' languages spoken by the Igbo people, and stands as their common unifying language. This definition resembles that of Umezi (2021), but the second definition added the unifying function of Igbo language as a feature that is very fundamental.

As it concerns this work, the author defines Igbo language as the language of the people who occupy the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. This definition is geared towards drawing the attention of the Igbo people to the fact that they are the fundamental owners of Igbo language; other people who speak Igbo language are just partners.

Igbo People

There are varied definitions and explanations given to Igbo people by different authors for a better understanding of the people by themselves and the people of other parts of the world. The following are some of them:

Ugochukwu (2019) defines Igbo people as those from Anambra, Imo, Abia, Enugu, Ebonyi, and some part of Delta, Akwa Ibom, and Rivers whose fatherland is Igbo. From every indication, Ugochukwu draws her definition from that of Onwuejeogu (1981). The definition summarizes the land boundaries of Igbo nation. For Nwadike (2002) defines Igbo people and Igbo language together. According to him, Igbo stands for the people of Igbo origin; second, it shows the boundaries of Igbo nation; third, it stands for the language spoken by the Igbo people. From his definition, Igbo people are those born of Igbo blood, no matter their place of domicile; Igbo land stands for the land occupied by

the Igbo people, and Igbo language is the language spoken by the Igbo people as their mother tongue.

In addition, Umezi (2021) defines Igbo people as those whose parents are of Igbo origin, not minding their place of domicile. He went along to define Igbo language as 'Kwa' language spoken by Igbo people as their mother tongue.

Theoretical Framework

This paper will be guided by ethnolinguistic identity theory. This theory was propounded by Howard Giles and Patricia Johnson in 1981 in their work, "The role of language in ethnic group relations." The theory holds that language is the major sign of group attachment and identity. It posits that people use communication accommodation strategies including verbal and nonverbal convergence to or divergence from their communication partner in order to emphasize affiliation or disaffiliation respectively.

The choice of this theory lies on the unifying role of Igbo language among the Igbo people. It stresses the fact that if Igbo people loses Igbo language, they will lose their unity and identity. This will make them porous and vulnerable to enemies from other languages of the world.

Empirical Studies

Some researchers had conducted researches in the related fields. For the progress of this work, there is the need to look at some of the works related to this topic. This will give a clearer view of this work.

Basden (1921) in his work, "Among the Ibo People" researched on the life of the Igbo people during the early colonial era. The findings of his research proved that the life and identity of the Igbo people was tied to the Igbo language. This is because the Igbo language then had not encountered any language contamination as the case of twenty-first century experience. Basden's work resembled this study because both are speaking about the Igbo people and their language; however, they differ greatly from each other, because as Basden's was a neutral study of the life of the Igbo people, this work is geared towards calling the attention of the Igbo people on the need to protect and preserve their language as a great treasure.

Ogbalu (1981) in his research on the life of the Igbo people, "Ndu ndi Igbo" stressed the position of Igbo language as the pivot of Igbo activities. It resembles this research because both of them focused on the life and identity of Igbo people. They equally differ as Ogbalu's research based on the life of Igbo people in general, this research based on the notion of Igbo language among the Igbo people of twenty-first century. As such, Ogbalu's work did not solve the problem of this research.

Ejiofor (2006) in his work, "Ibeku ndi Igbo maka asusu Igbo", carried out a research on the dilapidating state of Igbo language and the call for urgent attention to save Igbo language from getting into extinction. In his research, he compared the Igbo language with other major languages in Nigeria. The outcome of his research shows that other languages like Hausa and Yoruba languages are making much progress; while Igbo language is going back and heading towards extinction. Ejiofor's work is related to this work as both of them are calling the attention of Igbo people and the lovers of Igbo language to think home, protect and prevent

the Igbo language from going into extinction. They differ in the sense that Ejiofor's work was comparing the Igbo language with other ethnic languages of the Nation, Nigeria, this work centers on the notion of Igbo language among the twenty-first century Igbo people and the need to water the seed of Igbo language planted by the founders and developers of Igbo language.

In the same vein, Ugochukwu (2020), in her research on Igbo language amidst globalization: the way forward, remarks that globalization has come to stay. It is promoting some languages and culture and at the same time terminating some languages and culture. She therefore advises that it is the duty of Igbo people to promote the Igbo language in order to survive the blowing wind of globalization. She further noted that some individuals of Igbo origin had helped in their various capacities in building the Igbo language to the present stage. The present generation is being called upon to continue from where they stopped. Ugochukwu's research is very good. It is of great help to lovers of Igbo language to work round the clock to pursue the course for the development and promotion of Igbo language to fit with the key languages of the world. Her research resembles this research because both of them are working out the way to develop Igbo language. However, they differ from each other because Ugochukwu's research centers on the way forward for survival of Igbo language in the era of globalization; whereas this research focuses on how to change the notion of Igbo language among the Igbo people of twenty-first century.

In addition, Umezi (2022), in his research on how the Igbo language serves as the culture that unites the Igbo people, observed that Igbo language is not only the language of communication among the Igbo people and other speakers of Igbo language, it also serves as the rope that ties the Igbo people together. His research resembles this paper because both of them are treating Igbo language as the pillar of unity, identity and security of Igbo people. At the same time his research differs from this because he anchored on the Igbo language as the culture that unites the Igbo people; where this paper focuses on the notion of Igbo language among the Igbo people of twenty-First Century. As such, Umezi's work did not solve the problem of this work.

Evidence of Igbo Language as the Possible Factor for Unity, Identity and Security of Igbo People

Language is not just a tool for communication; it is more than that. In fact it is the window through which a group of people see the world at large, and through which the world see them. In the words of Fulgence 2003:14 'A language is more than just a tool of communication... it is a channel of values, traditions and cultures. A language is a whole way of looking at reality of life.' This statement tries to give the true picture of a language and its influence on the users. According to him, language is the reality and life of the people that owns and speaks the language. It means that people cannot do anything outside their language.

Native language is more powerful and influential than foreign languages. There are some expressions, deep feelings and strong sentiments that are hard to express in a language other than the native language. It unites the speakers more than any other language.

Igbo is one of the largest tribes in Nigeria, even in West Africa, and one of the most populated. They occupy the South eastern part of Nigeria as their native land, some of them are living in different parts of the world. There are many unifying factors among the Igbo people; but these factors bring about unity in diversity. They unite some Igbos and separate them from other Igbos. These factors range from cultures, traditions, political affiliations and philosophy etc. There are different communities that made up the Igbo land and these communities have different cultures and traditions. These cultures and traditions separate one community from the other. From political point of view, the Igbos belong to different political parties with different political ideologies. Each political party tries to protect and promote the interest of her members. They equally differ from one another in many aspects. Furthermore, counting from religious perspectives, the Igbo people belong to different religious groups. These divisions unite as well as separate the Igbo people.

By and large, the only possible tie that can unite and protect the Igbos whole and entire is the Igbo language, because the language is used in cultures and traditions, religion and politics etc. it is the major language of communication and interaction among the Igbo people.

Igbo Language as Treasure in Earthenware Pot

The place where one puts a property determines how one values the property. A treasure is precious to the owner and earthenware pot is so fragile that safety of anything in it is not guaranteed. The picture of Igbo language being a treasure in earthenware pot in the twenty-first century x-rays the level at which the present Igbo people value their language, which is a great natural treasure where their culture and identity are hanged.

Going through the history of life and identity of Igbo people, Igbo language has been so outstanding as the pillar of unity, identity, and security of the Igbo people. In precolonial era, before the advent of colonial masters, Igbo language was the major and only language of Igbo people. So the language did not coexist with any other language. As such, it stood as the symbol of Igbo people. It was not only the language of communication, but it also stood as Igbo identity. Early foreign researchers like Basden (1921) observed and noted that Igbo life and identity were tied to the Igbo language and culture. Besides, Isichei (1976) rightly observed that the early colonial masters recognized the Igbo language as the pillar holding the life and identity of Igbo people. This made the early colonial masters to spend time to study the life of the Igbo people.

Furthermore, love of Igbo language by the Igbo people led the colonial masters into developing and upgrading the Igbo language to a written language. The early Igbo orthography was developed by foreigners. This was an effort to develop Igbo language in order to be able to compete with other languages of the world in the field of communication. As such, they gave life to Igbo language by elevating it from the level of only spoken language to the level of written language.

However, the zeal for learning and developing Igbo language to coexist and compete with other languages of the world started to dwindle when Igbo people lost conscious of their origin, identity and the goal of their existence as a nation. They began to embrace other languages of the world. Introduction of English language to coexist with Igbo language was a strategy, by the British colonial masters, to propagate and spread the English language

which is their native language. English language was introduced into school system as the language of learning. With this development, the attention of some Igbo people started shifting to the foreign language; there by making room for English language to swallow Igbo language which is the language of the land.

Fear of Igbo Language going into Extinction

When eggs are packed in earthenware pot, safety is not guaranteed. The life of every language is hanged on the number of the speakers of that language. This explains in part why frequent communication in a language prolongs its vitality. One of the characteristics of language is that language has life and it can die. Call back to some classical languages of the world like Hebrew, Greek and Latin. These now serve as language of reference, whereas, they were the mothers of world prominent languages of today. Any language that does not develop and increase in its vocabularies and number of speakers is endangered and on the risk of extinction.

The state of Igbo language in the twenty-first century is not something to write home about. Ejiolor (2006) cried out at the rate of decline on the number of people that value and speak Igbo language in comparison with other languages of the world. He calls on the Igbo people all over the world to embrace and speak the Igbo language.

Linguists of other languages of the world are researching day and night working round the clock to improve the vocabularies and other aspects of their language, Igbo linguists and other lovers of Igbo language are spending such time preaching and advocating ways to convince the Igbo people to love and speak their language. This is an indication of a great fear and danger of Igbo language heading towards the doom of extinction if proper care is not taken. As such, there is the need to wake up.

Call for Parental Responsibility in Igbo Language Acquisition

Having established the fact that Igbo language is the major factor that unites the Igbo people all over the world, there is need for every Igbo person, especially parents, to see to daily usage of the language at home and anywhere one finds oneself. This is to promote and develop the language.

The Igbo people have to open and shine their eyes. In Nigeria, the use of English language, the language of our colonial masters, serves as the official language for public interaction. The unalloyed fact is that since the onset of colonialism in Nigeria and in Africa in general, the introduction of the languages of the colonial masters had adverse effect on the indigenous African languages. In Nigeria, the presence of English language is a severe threat to the ethnic languages in Nigeria. The colonial masters imposed their language, English, on the indigenes and that becomes the official language of the nation. This attitude made the indigenous languages a domestic language. As such, the domain of communication of these local languages remained at the immediate local communities of their users with little or no chance to use them beyond.

The trick is that the colonial masters made English language the medium for instruction in schools just to promote their own language and make the governance easy for them. The amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorate in Nigeria in 1914 which gave birth to

the nation of Nigeria brought different ethnic groups together. So in order to survive, there is need for a common language. That gave room to English language being the official language in Nigeria.

However, English language becoming the national language in Nigeria does not mean the death of different ethnic languages. As such, other ethnic groups in Nigeria like Hausa and Yoruba are making effort at all levels to promote their indigenous languages. So the Igbo language should not be left behind. Parents as well as every other person in Igbo land should join hands together to promote the Igbo language at all levels in order to enhance the unity and security of the Igbo people and their language.

Family is the foundation school one attends. Every Learning that seeks sustenance starts from the family. Early childhood language learning starts from home with the mother tongue. However, it is quite disheartening that some Igbo people, especially those in Diaspora, do not understand the Igbo language let alone speaking it fluently. This is an indication that the people in question do not have solid Igbo linguistic foundation from their various homes; and it is a clear manifestation of parental irresponsibility on the child's language acquisition process. It breeds the eyes to see some Igbo parents speaking English language to their children at home even at tender age. What do such parents want the child to become? There are basic things children should learn at home and those they should learn in the school. Laying solid foundation of the Igbo language for children at home will go a long way to cushion them to withstand the effects of the English language as the national language and be able to survive in midst of the two languages. Learning Igbo language at home and English language in school will help the child to balance and perfect in both languages. So parents should see it as a great challenge and mandate to speak the Igbo language for their children at home, in order to help in the promotion of the language.

The Place of Igbo Language among the Igbo People in Diaspora

Igbo people live in different parts of the globe. In fact, there is no part of the world where there is no Igbo blood. These Igbo people are divided by different ideologies originating from different pedagogies and experiences. The only uniting factor in them is the Igbo language. As Ejiofor (2006) rightly pointed out that Igbos in Diaspora should make Igbo language daily conversation language because that is the only uniting factor among them. He gave example with other tribes in Nigeria like Hausa and Yoruba in Diaspora. According to him, once these people stay together, the only language they use is the unadulterated local language.

However, on the other hand, it is quite unfortunate that Igbo language which supposed to be a unifying language among the Igbo people in Diaspora receives little or no attention by the Igbo people themselves. Most of the Igbo people living overseas or even those living in other parts of Nigeria outside Igbo geographical area do not value the language. Such people prefer speaking English language which is the national language and teaching them to their children. Some of them even do send their children to schools where Igbo language is mentioned at all. Nevertheless, some parents of Igbo origin both those living in Igbo land and those in Diaspora are putting in more effort in training their children in Igbo language. There have been records of parents living overseas who make their homes Igbo language speaking family. In the sense that their children are well grounded in Igbo language despite the fact they may not have

visited Igbo land in their life. However, the number in this category is very few, which is not encouraging to say the least.

The Need to Promote Igbo Language in the Face of Globalization

No language is greater than the other; every language is equal. This is based on the fact that a common idea can be expressed in different languages and they pass the same meaning. However, the rate at which a language grows or declines depends on the rate of importance attached to that language. This is weighed by the way the language is being used in daily communications. Ndimele (2005) rightly observed that the fortunes of a language is tied to the fortunes of its speakers. When people become important and place value on their language, the language becomes important; and people of other languages will try to learn the language for different reasons. For any language to grow and develop, the owners and speakers of that language have to pass sleepless night, and add ingredients to their language for it to be attractive. English language, for example, is so powerful today is because of the effort put in by the owners in all round development and promotion of the language.

Igbo people are all over the world and in different sections of life. Mind-set is the first step to greatness. If the Igbo people value Igbo language and put in effort in its growth and expansion, it will grow and pass the other global languages like English, Chinese, French, German, Italian, etc. since every language can serve as means of communication, depending on the volume of the vocabulary of the language involved, Igbo language has the chance to grow.

There is need to promote the Igbo language through its constant usage and building of vocabularies. It can serve as the official language of instruction in schools. All it needs is to formulate and develop different vocabularies for every term like scientific terms and others. It has to be noted that for any language to thrive and survive globally in this era of globalization, such language has to be language of the internet. English language, for example, is one of the most prominent languages in the world of today. This is because it a language of the internet. Information on major events and discoveries in science and technology is available in it. Based on this fact, there is a great need for the Igbo people to love their language and put in more effort to promote and expand it. From what is happening now, it is quit unfortunate that the English language is becoming a predator language to the Igbo language. So if care is not taken, it may swallow Igbo language in Igbo land. So Globalization is the moment of struggle for survival among different languages of the world. Therefore, Igbo people have to bear this in mind in order to stand on their feet to fight for the survival and expansion of Igbo language.

Conclusion

At the end of this work, the writers have fulfilled the purpose of their work. They were able to establish the fact that Igbo language stands as the pillar holding the unity, identity and security of the Igbo people. Despite the place of Igbo language among the Igbo people, the Igbo people of twenty-first century have strayed and preserved such great treasure in earthenware pot, where its security is not guaranteed. Such, the authors have called on every person of Igbo origin and the lovers of Igbo language to rise, defend and preserve the Igbo language in the face of globalization. As such, all hands have to be on deck to see that Igbo

language is given its proper place among the Igbo people of twenty-first century and those coming after them.

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