



THE PATTERNS OF ENDANGERMENT OF THE IGBO LANGUAGE: IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE EDUCATION, DOCUMENTATION AND PRESERVATION

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Abstract: The assertion that the Igbo language is endangered is almost a cliché. UNESCO made this declaration after applying a carefully developed language endangerment indices on many languages of the world, African and Nigerian languages including the Igbo language. One of the factors that endangers a language is lack of intergenerational transfer. Where the older generation is not able to transfer their language to the succeeding generation, language endangerment sets in. Extinction is the point of no recovery for an endangered language. Before extinction occurs, the language would first of all experience levels of endangerment. Language endangerment is usually a gradual occurrence. In the case of the Igbo language of the South-East Nigeria, there are observable threats of endangerment. The language of home, play and recreation among peers and children, worship in churches, instruction at schools and of course, the language of dispute/quarrels is far from the Igbo language. Against this background, the Igbo children of the south-East Nigeria, can rarely categorize their world, name objects, express emotions/agreements/disagreements etc. or embrace literacy in their language. Yet, many native speakers doubt that their language is endangered let alone going extinct. To prove to both the native speakers and language scholars the world over that the Igbo language is endangered and may actually suffer extinction, this study is designed to establish the patterns of endangerment of the Igbo language of the South-East Nigeria. The study also intends to proffer sustainable solutions that would facilitate usage, teaching, documentation, revitalization and preservation of Igbo language. The study was empirical, using survey design. The sample was multi stage purposive sampling technique. Instrument for data collection was oral interviews analyzed quantitatively using frequency counts, simple percentage as well as qualitative analyses. Results show five patterns of language endangerment vis: extrinsic/observable culture loss, intrinsic/construct culture loss, codemixing Igbo/English, substituting Igbo nouns and verbs with their English equivalents, anglicizing Igbo verbs to achieve Engliibo, lexicon loss and evolving naming culture resulting in heritage name loss. The paper concludes with recommendations to the parents, native speakers, language educators, linguists.

Keywords: Language endangerment, language education, documentation, revitalization, preservation and Igbo language

Introduction

Language is an important part of any society, because it enables people to communicate and express themselves. It is not only a tool for communication but also a vehicle through which the culture, value, norms and mores of a people are transmitted. Language is also one of the most enduring artifacts of culture. It serves as an important element of human identity and evaluation of traditional societies and therefore plays a

crucial role in the overall human and social existence (Obioma 2010). The world's spoken languages today are estimated to be 6,000 (UNESCO 2007, Ethnologue 2007). Nigeria alone is endowed with more than 500 indigenous languages (NERDC, 2008). This makes the linguistic situation in Nigeria a peculiar one. These Nigerian indigenous languages are spoken as mother tongues in the communities where they exist as well as serve other numerous purposes beyond their existence. Some

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of the languages are vastly developed and as such function in the domains of education, media, commerce, legislation and of course some are Lingua Franca across societies and linguistic borders. Igbo is one of the most developed Nigerian languages. It is established in the global context that most of the world's languages are threatened with extinction within a couple of generations. There is the prediction that 80% of the 6,000 languages spoken worldwide would die by 2050. Given this prediction and the observed scenario, African linguists and language scholars have continued to query and worry about the status of many African languages (Igbo language) inclusive. There are predictions about the extinction of many Nigerian indigenous languages. A language goes extinct when the speakers stop to use them in the different pragmatic domains where languages are tools for communication such as Social-cultural, educational, religious and political contexts etc. Again, language heads towards her grave when younger ones are not conversant or fluent in it.

However, languages do not go extinct suddenly. Language extinction is preceded by endangerment. An endangered language is a language that is at risk of falling out of use as speakers die out or shift to speaking another language. The issue of language endangerments is a serious one that has drawn the attention of linguists, scholars in language education as well as language planners over the decade. It is not peculiar to Nigerian languages, not in the least peculiar to the Igbo language. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2007), out of the estimated 6,000 languages spoken worldwide today, half of the world's population speaks the 8 most common. While more than 3000 languages are spoken by fewer than 10,000 people each. This is corroborated by Ethnologue (2007) which estimated that 417 languages of the world are on the verge of extinction.

Many years after UNESCO and Ethnologue's reports respectively, revitalization was far-fetched. Hence, Ohiri-Aniche (2014) in her study disclosed that about 400 Nigerian indigenous languages are endangered; some have already become extinct while about 152 are in the verge of being

extinct. She traced the reasons for the endangerment and extinction of Nigerian indigenous languages to past neglect and denigration as well as the languages not being handed over to the children in homes and in schools among other factors. Her further researches show that on the average, 25% of Nigerian children below 11 years are unable to speak their parent's indigenous language. A situation if not checked will put many more Nigerian languages in extinction in two to three generations from now.

The Igbo language, one of the national languages in Nigeria is among the Nigerian indigenous languages queried with near extinction. UNESCO, over a decade ago classified Ìgbò among the endangered languages. In this study, three pertinent questions would be addressed viz- is the Igbo language really endangered? What are the patterns of its endangerment? What are the implications of the realities of the first two questions to the different stakeholders in Igbo studies?

Is the Igbo Language really endangered?

A critical look at the trends of language attitude and usage among the Ìgbò shows that three among the indices of language endangerment highlighted by UNESCO are evident in the case the Ìgbò. One, the Ìgbò parents do not speak the language to their children. Therefore, the younger generation are losing fluency and may fail to transfer the language to their children. So, it is at risk of dying with older generation. Two, the Ìgbò migrate a lot. When children are relocated to non Ìgbò community, they tend to drop the Ìgbò language and pick the language of their host community. Three, sometimes, a people may give up their language for whatever reason (Cantoni, 1996). This is also true of the Igbo. Regrettably, Ohiri-Aniche (2008), observed that Ìgbò children, apart from their zeal in English language, also prefer to speak other indigenous languages like Hausa and Yoruba to speaking Ìgbò. Thus, the Ìgbò language is dying because of the social perception of the owners. Hence, the Ìgbò language is severely endangered.

What are the Patterns of Igbo language Endangerment?

Many Igbo native speakers think it is an over statement, the assertion that the Igbo language is endangered and would imminently suffer extinction. They try to debunk this notion by



reason of the population of the Igbo across the globe. They also ponder the kind of plague that would have the capacity of shutting up spontaneously, the mouths of a living people to the point of reducing their language to the rank of a dead language of a living people. How ridiculous! It is important however, to reiterate and reemphasize here that language endangerment takes a process and manifests in different forms with different languages and communities. It may be gradual, slow but dangerously steady and deadly for any language specie if no intervention is provided. In what follows, some patterns of Igbo language loss and endangerment are identified.

a. Extrinsic/Observable Culture loss and Igbo Language Endangerment

Language cares, nurtures and transmits the cultures of a people. Language endangerment can emanate from intentional and unconscious deactivation of certain aspects of the cultures of the people, evolution of a new culture and allied sociolinguistic variables. Culture loss is multifaceted. It involves deactivation of physical/observable and construct/linguistic cultures. Physical and observable cultures abound in the Igbo society. Every Igbo community or society has rich cultural identities and resources. They take the form of festivities, shrine/deity worships, dances, competitions etc. These carry indigenous knowledge and very rich language resources in addition to their recreational and creative values. The A gbachaa E kuru Nwa dance of Obekwesu, O p̄r̄u Iche dance of Ụm̄ueleghe, the Obizi Ovuokwu ritual festival, all in Ngwa-Igbo; the Ahu festival of Uturu-Igbo, the Iri Ji festival of the Ohaia/Bende-Igbo, the masquerades to mention but a few, are prominent must watch festivals that draw participants within and beyond the Igbo communities. These festivals have their registers known and used by members of the immediate and neighbouring communities. Many of these cultures are in most parts of the Igbo land now unpopular and no longer practiced for whatever reasons. These cultures have veritable linguistic values, lexemes and aphorisms like idioms, proverbs, anecdotes etc. that characterize them. Deactivation of these

aspects of Igbo culture gets frozen and render moribund the linguistic resources they carry. Consequent upon their deactivation, the registers of these cultures are neither known nor used by the young generation. They are endangered and fading into extinction. Thus, Igbo language is likened to a living plant withered branches that yield its fruits no more. How unhealthy!

b. Intrinsic/Construct Culture loss and Igbo Language Endangerment

Turning to constructs and intrinsic Cultures of the Igbo, a lot of harm is taking place. The era of folklore and folktales are gone among the Igbo. Those genres of oral literature that impacted moral, emotional, intellectual and psychological wits on the children have been completely withheld. Those stories of the tortoise and other animal characters, the romance stories of gigantic characters in the wonder lands that instilled fear, courage and impacted discipline and integrity among children have been trashed. The literary devices; riddles, idioms, proverbs and anecdotes that sharpen the wits and intellects of the Igbo child, distinguished scholarships and produced orators are drowned. Those folksongs with rhythmic refrains that endeared children to their parents, grandparents and to even their parents' worst enemies have vanished. The ballads that told beautiful and pathetic stories in songs, the lullabies that soothed a weeping child to sleep, the satire songs that purged the Igbo society of ills, the myths and legends that told our history and world views, the masquerades and dances that represented our dramas/movies, the dirges that reassured our safety, the enchantments and incantations that bridged the gaps between the living and the dead are all trashed and gone with their respective rich linguistic resources and values. The young generation is losing out in totality. Without the stories, where are the values? Without the Igbo orature, the lips of the Igbo are sealed, their language fades away and sorely endangered. Data 1 and 2 below buttress the construct culture losses:



Data 1, Table 1. Showing Responses of a Sample Of 15 Children for Oral Legend Story of Ngwa/Ọhụhụ Origin

Task	Number of respondents and %N=15	Remarks
Narrate the Ngwa/Ọhụhụ origin legend in the standard Igbo or in any dialect of Igbo	3 (19.8%)	Made attempt juggling between the standard and dialect form. A lot of time and energy were spent struggling to fetch the appropriate vocabulary. Stopped half way
	5 (33%)	Asked to be allowed to tell the legend in English after much struggle code mixing. Still had little or no details of the story
	7 (46.2%)	Could neither tell the story in any form of Igbo language nor in the English

In an interview with 15 Ngwa-Igbo children ages 9-13, where they were requested to give in Igbo language or any dialect, an oral rendition of the popular legend of Ngwa/Ọhụhụ origin. 3 representing 19.8% of the children attempted it in Igbo language, 5 representing 33% struggled with code mixing

English/Igbo while 7 representing 46.2 % of the respondents couldn't try even when the condition was relaxed and they allowed to respond in English. This is a sign of lexical and vocabulary loss and lack of native speakers' competence.

Using another sample of 10 children ages 10-12 a test on the ability to tell folktales was presented. They were requested give a folktale each.

Data 2, Table 2. Showing responses of the respondents on folktales

Task	Number of respondents and % N=10	Remarks
Give one folktale in the standard Igbo or in any dialect of Igbo	3 (30%)	Code-mixed Igbo/English the story of the Tortoise and his marriage to the princess, why the Tortoise has rough shell and how death entered the world respectively.
	4 (40%)	had no stories to tell
	3 (30%)	declined because they could not start their stories in any form of Igbo at all

Data 2. 3 children (30%) managed to render in code –mixed Igbo/English the story of the Tortoise and his marriage to the princess, why the Tortoise has rough shell and how death entered the world respectively. 4 (40%) out of the sample had no stories to tell while the last 3 (30%) declined because they could not start their stories in any form of Igbo at all.

Drawing inference from data 1 and 2 above, it is evident that the Igbo children are scarcely exposed to Igbo oral literature

and therefore lack the necessary vocabulary to express life generally in Igbo let alone in the literary domain.

c. Evolving Language Culture and Igbo Language Endangerment

There are evolving trends in the Igbo language usage that deviate from the original mode. The Igbo of nowadays hardly use their language pragmatically. Where they do, the domains of use are selective. Before now, the Igbo believed in the adage, “Okwa mba na-achị n’olu n’olu” (‘Okwa’, a bird species, sings



differently at different community/environments) meaning, ‘different strokes for different folks.’ Following this adage, the Igbo people of the ancient generations did not struggle to speak the standard form at formal occasions but took pride in using their dialects especially when they meet one another in a foreign land. The situation has changed. A new culture has evolved. Initially, it was thought to be stylish, the pattern of the elites, the ‘been to’ and non-native speakers’ version. Over the years, the pattern has been entrenched as a new speaking culture cutting across almost, if not all categories of the Igbo native speakers. The new speaking culture is code-mixing

Igbo/English which is characterized by substitution of Igbo nominal and verbal categories with their English equivalents in Igbo utterances and conversations among the Igbo (See Data 3, table 3). The other variant of the evolving language culture is anglicizing the verb forms in Igbo utterances. This has dominated the utterances of children, youths, elites, literate, non-literate and of course non-native speakers of Igbo. Data 4, table 4 below buttress the evolving speech pattern of anglicizing the verbal categories in Igbo utterances.

Data 3, Table 3. Showing substitution of Igbo noun forms with the English equivalents

S/N	Evolving Language Culture	Correct Version	English Glossary
1	Adj m hungry	Aguu na-agu m	I am hungry
2	Adj m thirsty	Akpiri na-akpo m nku	I am thirsty
3	E nweghi m chance	E nweghi m efe/ohere	I don’t have chance
4	Achoghi m trouble	Achoghi m nsogbu	I don’t want trouble
5	I nweghi problem	I nweghi nsogbu	You have no problem
6	Choro m cash	Choro m ego	Find/give me some cash
7	O nwere weight	O di anu/aro	It has weight He is influential (figurative use)
8	Kpoo ya call	Kpoo ya n’ekwenti	Give him a (phone) call
9	O dighi affordable	O di oke onu	It is not affordable/it is expensive
10	Achoghi m noise	Achoghi m mkpotu	I don’t want noise
11	Adj m shocked	O juru m anya	I was shocked

A close look at sentences 1-11 shows evidence with verbal and nominal categories of the utterances replaced with their English equivalents.



Data 4, table 4. Showing Anglicized verb forms in Igbo utterances

S/N	Anglicized sentence examples	Correct sentence version	English glossary
1	E miisirĩ m gi	Owu gi erielā m/Ī kọla m ụkọ n’anya	I have missed you.
2	Ī ma na a loọrụ m gi?	Ī ma na ahụrụ m gi n’anya?	Do you know that I love you?
3	Ọ na-echeesi m	Ọ na-achụ m	He/she/it is chasing me (figurative)
4	Achọrọ m ideposit ego	Achọrọ m ikwūnye ego	I want to deposit money
5	A Achọrọ m iwithdraw ego	Achọrọ m idoro ego	I want to withdraw money
6	Sụbmitituru m akwukwo m	Nyeruturu m akwukwo m	Submit my paper/book/document for me (please)
7	Arrangea room a	Hazie ime ụlọ a/ kpakọọ ụlọ a onu	Arrange this room
8	Countu ego a	Guo ego a	Count/confirm this money
9	Biko, toleratja ha	Biko, nagide ha	Please, tolerate them
10	Markja okwu m!	Detuo okwu m/rjba okwu m ama!	Mark my word!

Looking at the few examples in data 3 and 4 above, one would pleasantly describe it as speaking style. Yes, it may have started as a linguistic style but now it is beyond style. The crucial question is, what will happen to these Igbo anglicized words and the words readily substituted with English words over time? The answer is clear. They are endangered and would at some point disappear completely.

d. Lexical Loss and Igbo Language Endangerment

To buttress the above trend of endangerment, the first 15 children sampled earlier for data 1 were put to further test. They were read a list of 30 words (nouns) in English and requested to name the objects in the standard Igbo or dialectal forms. The list is presented below.



Data 5. Showing responses of 15 respondents in naming of 30 objects in Igbo

S/N	Name of Object in English	Name of Object in Igbo Language/Dialect	frequency of Responses	Correct	Remarks
1	Bread/Biscuit	Achicha	0		No idea
2	rice	Osikapa	10		Thought for a while
3	onions	Ayo/alibasa(loop words)	3		Gave English version
4	Pineapple	Nkugbo (Ngwa/Igbo)	0		No idea
5	orange	Epe/oroma	4		Faint knowledge
6	Pawpaw	Okpuaru(Ngwa/Igbo)	0		Gave English version
7	cup	Iko	3		Not familiar
8	knife	Mma	15		Familiar
9	Fork	Ngugu (Ngwa/Igbo)	0		No idea
10	kitchen	Usekwu	5		Gave English version
11	parlour	Ovu (Ngwa/Igbo)			No idea
12	Corridor/balcony	Mgbe (Ngwa/Igbo)	0		No idea
13	back yard	Mkpu/azu ulo	6		Gave English version
14	toilet	Otikpiri/laanu/mpochi	0		Were shy
15	Bed	Akwa	0		Wasted much time
16	Comb	Mbo/mvuvu	5		Gave English version
17	eyeglasses	Enyoanya/nnyoanya	7		Gave English version
18	Mirror	Enyo/nnyo	7		Gave English version
19	ring	Ola (aka)	2		Gave English version
20	Beads	Mgbaji/aka	3		Gave English version
21	Umbrella	Ncheanwu/mbalaari	5		Managed to respond
22	cockroach	Ochicha	15		No stress
23	Mosquitoes	Anwunta	15		Well known
24	Butterfly	Urumbuba	0		no idea
25	solder ants	Ijere	6		With difficulty
26	black ants	Agbisi	15		Spontaneous response



27	toad	Awo	12	Fairly easy
28	frog	Akiri	0	No idea
29	lizard	Ngwere	15	Seamless response
30	gecko	Ncheke	8	With difficulty

Although some of the respondents got a few names correct, their responses were not spontaneous. They had to take unbearable time to think or reason out their responses, made several incorrect attempts and in some cases ended with descriptive representation of some of the concepts. For concepts like toilet, parlor, butterfly, frog, bread/biscuit, fork, pineapple, pawpaw and bed, they gave no Igbo names. The implication is that these Igbo concepts are rarely used for and by the children and as such the English words come readily to their minds in their daily conversations. The Igbo names for many of these concepts are obsolete, endangered and in most cases, lost.

e. Evolving Naming Culture, Heritage Names Loss and Igbo Language Endangerment

Names are important aspects of the culture of a people. In Igbo community of the South-East Nigeria, names tell a lot of stories like history, origin, place of birth, relationships and bloodlines, in addition to circumstances surrounding a birth. Hence, there are names that are considered typical Igbo/heritage names.

Why striving to understudy other forms of endangerment of the Igbo language and culture, it was discovered an entrenched evolving naming culture that culminates in a paradigm shift

from the naming trends of the Igbo. The precolonial naming culture of the Igbo was Igbo first name vs. Igbo last name (Egwuonwu Onwueje, Chinedu Nweke, Adamma Njoku) etc. The colonial era introduced christened first names vs. Igbo last names (John Onwueje, Stephen Nweke, Clara Uchendu) etc. Today, the regular occurrence is christened names all through for the Igbo children (John Stephen, Prosper John, James Godwin) etc. Even wives in this dispensation have refused to take their husbands' Igbo/heritage surnames and have gone ahead to bear their christen names vs. their husband's christen names as surnames (Clara James, Victoria Goodluck, Sandra Benson) etc. Thus, the Igbo heritage names (a significant mark of identity and origins) are also endangered.

Going further in establishing the endangerment of Igbo names, a sample of 10 Ngwa-Igbo young spinsters and 10 newly married Ngwa-Igbo young women selected to test their dispositions towards taking Ngwa cultural pet names christened on Ngwa young married women as they are inducted into their new matrimonial homes and kindred.

Data 6, Table 6 Showing Frequency of Disposition to take Native Matrimonial Pet Names by Spinsters and Newly Married Women

S/N	Pet Names	English Glossary	Frequency of Acceptance
1	Obidiya	Her husband's heart	8
2	Ikodiya	Her husband's concubine	0
3	Ahudiya	Her husband's body	0
4	Nwannediya	Her husband's sister	3
5	Enyidiya/Ugadiya	Her husband's friend	3
6	Qmasiridiya	Her husband's friend	2
7	Ogbodiya	Her husband's choice	0
8	Okwerekediya	Her husband's namesake	0
9	Adakurudi	Submissive wife (to the husband)	0
10	Ngwaahụ	Her husband's companion/warmth	0
		Her husband's splendour	0



Though these names are romantic in nature, running through the list on table 6, none of the respondents was eager to bear any of the names. Items ,4,5 & 6 where a few respondents responded positively, it was more or less an after-thought responses. In fact, the looks in their eye spelt embarrassment that a young wife is expected to take such names in this modern dispensation. They considered it primitive for anybody to bear such native names in the contemporary times. Again, such names are endangered and getting lost by the day.

Implications of the Patterns of Endangerment of the Igbo Language and Conclusion

Notice that this study is not centered on endangerment literature or concept. All that have been established so far is the fact that the Igbo language is experiencing endangerment of one pattern/form or the other and would require conscious preservation and revitalization efforts from the native speakers, linguists and language experts.

Language preservation is the effort to prevent languages from becoming unknown. When a language dies out, future generations lose a vital part of the culture that is necessary to completely understand it. This makes language a vulnerable aspect of cultural heritage, and it becomes extremely imperative to preserve it. When a language dies, the knowledge of and ability to understand the culture of who spoke it is threatened because the teachings, customs, oral traditions and other heritage and indigenous knowledge are no longer transmitted among native speakers (UNESCO, 2007). The implication of the pattern of endangerment experienced in the Igbo language is that, over time, the vocabulary to deploy or dispense the different functions of language (communicative, informative, descriptive, directive expressive, phatic, creative, aesthetic, ideation) etc. would be lost and readily replaced by the English equivalents even in all interlocutions involving the Igbo. This would bring to the Igbo, the dangerous status of ‘the dead voice of a living people or a living people with no voice’. To forestall this imminent loss, all stakeholders must

make intentional efforts to speak, teach, document, revitalize and preserve the Igbo language.

Recommendations

The need to save the Igbo language from its endangered status and imminent extinction requires intentional efforts and preservation strategy. Many approaches to language preservation have been proposed by language endangerment researchers. Following the scope of this study, the following are recommended:

1. One of the strongest means of preserving a language is by intergenerational transfer. In achieving this, children are the most veritable catchment group. Languages easily die if the younger generations do not speak them at all or fluently. In the case of the Igbo language, it has already been established that there is little or no conscious intergenerational transfer (Ohiri-Aniche, 2014, Ikonne, 2019). This calls for urgent efforts by the parents in getting their children speak and use their native language for different purposes. ‘Speak your language or loose it’ remains a strong advocacy for language preservation. Once the intergenerational transfer of the Igbo language is achieved, the Igbo language will be preserved.
2. Play is as ethical to the child as work is to the adults. An average child loves play and all other recreation activities. Children love to tell and listen to stories. They love to dance and watch dances. They love to sing and to listen to songs. Many children love to read and write if properly guided. All these are the realities of children’s literature. Children’s literature in Igbo should be intentionally and consciously developed to match the readability levels of the Igbo children. In doing this, beautiful characters should be created with the endangered heritage names to popularize the Igbo native names.
3. There is the need to generate wordlists in Igbo. Linguists and experts in language documentation



should generate wordlists of endangered concepts and moribund words in Igbo for the purpose of preservation of the language.

4. Language educators should intentionally practice vocabulary building with the learners. The obsolete and endangered concepts and Igbo lexical items generated in the wordlists should be frequently introduced and applied in recognizable contexts that will enhance usage and transfer of knowledge by the children. They can be used in practicing composition and comprehension exercises.
5. Authors of Igbo texts should endeavor to provide English glossaries of unfamiliar, obsolete and culture-specific lexical items including pictorials. Characters in the English Primers and literatures books should also be assigned Igbo heritage names.

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