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Is Igbo an endangered language?

HERBERT IGBOANUSI

Abstract

Igbo is one of Nigeria's three major languages, with Hausa and Yoruba being the other two. It is spoken by a population of between 20 and 25 million people. Igbo is taught, learnt and examined in Igbo as a first language from the primary school level to the tertiary level of education. Books on diverse subjects (including literary works) have been written in the language. In recent times, however, several developments (such as dwindling interest in the language as a first language, declining population of students who apply to take degree or certificate programmes in the language, non-accreditation of the language by the National Universities Commission (NUC) in some universities, and language attitude problems) have prompted some researchers to associate the Igbo situation with language endangerment. The present study sets out to investigate the true position of the Igbo language with respect to language endangerment.

Introduction

Research in language endangerment has received commendable attention. The recent rising interest in the subject is aimed at drawing the attention of linguists and policy makers to the potential loss of valuable linguistic and cultural resources around the world (Bradley and Bradley 2002; Brenzinger 1992, 1998; Crystal 2000; Dalby 2002; Mufwene 2004; Mühlhäusler 1996; Nettle and Romaine 2000; Phillipson 2003; Skutnab-Kangas 2000).

In Nigeria, most studies on language endangerment have concentrated on the threats to minority languages either by the major ones or by English (see Adegbija 1998; Dawulung 1999; Igboanusi and Peter 2004; Kuju 1999; Schaefer and Egbokhare 1999; Ugwuoke 1999). However, declining interest, pride and prestige in most Nigerian languages has

rekindled our worries about language endangerment, particularly for some languages classified as ‘major’.

With regard to Igbo, some scholars have drawn attention to the fact that Igbo is a language in danger. For instance, Kuju (1999: 55) makes the following observation:

It is not only the so-called minority or small languages that are endangered in Nigeria. Even the rich also cry. Of late, there has been an increasing outcry by concerned Igbo indigenes that the Igbo language is registering fewer and fewer speakers. The phenomenon is noticeable even among the Igbo resident in Igbo towns and cities where ordinarily, Igbo should be the chief means of communication.

Again, according to the popular Igbo playwright Anelechi Chukuezi, as cited in Kuju (1999: 55):

What is happening is that the English language is fast displacing Igbo as a means of communication to the point of extinction. And the Igbo are not bothered. Most mothers have abandoned teaching their children the language.

Anelechi Chukuezi’s position is corroborated by the findings of Ohiri-Aniche (1997), which are also cited in Adegbija (1998) and which result from a study carried out in 1990. In this study, Ohiri-Aniche reports that among the primary and secondary school children investigated in five states in Nigeria, an increasing number of them are becoming non-speakers of local languages. Her study shows that among the junior secondary school (JSS) students in five Nigerian states, the percentage shown in the table did not speak the local languages of their parents.

Table 1. *Percentage of JSS students not speaking their local languages.*

Lagos State (Yoruba)	Imo State (Igbo)	Kano State (Hausa)	Gongola State (Minority languages)	Rivers State (Minority languages)	Average (Nigerian languages)
2%	8%	1%	8%	14%	7%

The table above shows that Rivers (a minority language state) has the highest population of JSS students not speaking their mother tongue (14 percent) followed by Igbo represented by Imo (8 percent) and Gongola (another minority language state) with 8 percent. This means that among the major languages, Igbo has the highest percentage of JSS students not speaking their local languages. It is now more than fourteen years

since that study was carried out, and if repeated today, the figure will be much higher, particularly because of the rising tendency for parents to enroll their children in private schools which often encourage the use of only English (see Igboanusi 2002) and largely because of the increasing practice by parents of introducing English to their children as the first (and often the only) language, which is based on the erroneous notion that early exposure to the English language leads to better performance in the language.

As Igboanusi and Peter (2005: 66–67) have rightly observed, the threat of Igbo is further compounded by the ‘splitting’ of the language, particularly in Rivers state, into what has erroneously been regarded as the Igboid group of languages (Williamson 1987; Williamson and Blench 2000). Before the Nigerian civil war (1967–1970), the majority of the Rivers’ ‘languages’ were identified as dialects of Igbo. But for some political reasons and reasons that have to do with loss of prestige formally associated with Igbo before their defeat in the war, speakers of these varieties of Igbo in a bid to achieve political autonomy declared linguistic autonomy. The effect of the civil war not only checked the spread of Igbo beyond its geographical base, but it also has an obvious psychological impact on many first language users of the language who have continued to associate the language with low status in comparison with English and Hausa and Yoruba (the two other major languages).

The true position of Igbo is that there is a decline in the level of interest in the language, particularly among the younger generation so that the rate of acquisition of the language by children indicates a downward trend. The attitude of its speakers towards the language is unfavourable. This negative attitude has affected the number of students who apply to read Igbo as a degree or certificate course in tertiary institutions. The result of a declining student intake for Igbo courses has forced some universities and colleges of education to abandon the Igbo programme. In addition, the level of the English language impact on Igbo is very threatening. These are all danger signs.

Categories of language endangerment

Some previous studies have looked at different categories of language situations in order to determine the levels of endangerment. For example, Crystal (2000: 20) identifies three language situations – safe, endangered or extinct. If we apply Crystal’s classification, we may be tempted to say that Igbo is endangered since it is neither completely safe nor extinct.

In his own study, Kincade (1991: 160–163) uses five levels of language situation to assess the degree of language endangerment – viable languages, viable but small languages, endangered languages, nearly extinct

languages, and extinct languages. He observes that endangered languages are spoken by enough people to make survival a possibility, but only in favourable circumstances and with increased community support. Viable languages, according to Kincade, have population bases that are so sufficiently large and thriving that no threat to long-term survival is likely. Following Kincade's classification, Igbo may be said to be a viable language. But it has to be pointed out here that size of population alone is not an accurate measure of endangerment (cf. Yamamoto 1997: 12). This is because a language may have a small population of speakers who are passionately loyal to their language while another language may have a relatively large population with a large number of speakers losing interest in the language. Of course, the point has to be made that the larger the size of users of a language, the better its chances of survival. Certainly, a language with a smaller number of speakers is in a more dangerous a situation than a language with a large base of speakers (cf. Norris 1998: 3). Yet, languages with large numbers of speakers can be in danger, as is the case in parts of West Africa (see Crystal 2000: 13).

In a similar manner, Wurm (2003) distinguishes five levels of language endangerment – (1) Potentially endangered languages, i. e. if the children start preferring the dominant language; (2) Endangered, i. e. if the youngest speakers are young adults and only very few child speakers; (3) Seriously endangered, i. e. if the youngest speakers are middle-aged or past middle age; (4) Terminally endangered or moribund, i. e. if there are only a few elderly speakers left; and (5) Dead, i. e. where there are no speakers left. Igbo may be said to be potentially endangered if the present circumstances of the language continue to degenerate in the face of the continuing dominance of English.

The need for an examination of the categories of endangerment discussed above is to locate the position of Igbo in respect of language endangerment. Following on from above, we can assert that Igbo is threatened primarily by the corrosive effects of the dominance of English in Nigeria (see also Tables 1, 2 and 3 as well as the discussion that follows them). Suffice it to note here that the nature of endangerment in the case of Igbo does not threaten the very life of the language; it threatens to erode the prestige of the language as well as its functional roles. The functions of Igbo which are endangered essentially because of the overbearing impact of English include its roles in education, the written medium (e. g. the writing of newspapers and magazines), entertainment and even as a preferred language for oral communication in a variety of contexts.

Loss of functions

In Nigeria, it is generally believed that English is the preferred language for written domains while the indigenous languages are preferred for

Table 2. Preferred language for spoken and written domains.

		M_TONGUE					Row Total
		Yoruba	Hausa	Igbo	Northern minority	Southern minority	
		1	2	3	4	5	
Hausa	spoken	1.5	62.4		17.2		16.3
	written	1.0	51.5		2.5		11.1
Igbo	–		.5	37.0		1.5	7.8
	–			8.5		1.5	2.0
Yoruba	–	36.3		.5	1.0	.5	7.7
	–	9.5	1.0		.5	1.0	2.4
English	–	58.2	34.7	56.5	74.2	65.8	57.8
	–	88.6	45.5	91.5	96.5	95.5	83.4
Pidgin	–	3.5	.5	6.0	3.5	26.1	7.9
	–	1.0				1.5	.5
Arabic	–	.5	2.0		4.0		1.3
	–		2.0		.5		.5
Rivers dialects	–					6.0	1.2
	–					.5	.1
Column		201	202	200	198	199	1000
Total		20.1	20.2	20.0	19.8	19.9	100.0

oral communication. In an earlier study¹ carried out by Igboanusi and Peter (2005), it is shown that Igbo is losing this domain to English.

A look at Table 2 above shows that while Hausa has high preference rating by its MT respondents as a spoken language (62.4 percent) and written language (51.5 percent), Igbo and Yoruba appear to have been replaced by English in both the oral and written domains. For example, while the preference ratings of Igbo respondents for English were 56.5 percent for oral communication and 91.5 percent for written communication, Yoruba MT respondents had a 58.2 percent rating for English in oral communication and 88.6 percent for English in written communication.

Similarly, in Nigeria, entertainment can take place in English, Nigerian Pidgin, and the indigenous languages. Nonetheless, the assessment level for the preferred language of entertainment (as shown in Table 3 below) is high for Hausa (70.3 percent for films and 62.9 percent for music) and average for Yoruba (44.8 percent for films and 50.7 percent for music). Surprisingly, Igbo MT respondents had a low preference value for their language for entertainment (39 percent for films and 36 percent for mu-

sic). The higher preference level of the Igbo respondents for English is an indication of the Igbo penchant for foreign ways of life and the encroaching effects of new value systems (Brenzinger 1997: 277) on Igbo.

Table 3. *Preferred language for entertainment.*

		M_TONGUE					
		Yoruba	Hausa	Igbo	Northern minority	Southern minority	Row Total
		1	2	3	4	5	
Hausa	films	1.0	70.3		13.1	.5	17.1
	music	.5	62.9	.5	12.6	1.5	15.7
Igbo	–	1.5	1.5	39.0	2.0	18.1	12.4
	–	2.0	.5	36.0	.5	7.5	9.3
Yoruba	–	44.8		.5	.5	1.0	9.4
	–	50.7	1.0	2.0	.5	2.5	11.4
English	–	47.5	24.3	55.5	69.2	68.3	52.9
	–	42.3	34.2	59.5	78.3	75.9	57.9
Pidgin	–	5.0	2.0	5.0	12.6	12.1	7.3
	–	3.5	.5	2.0	1.5	3.0	2.1
Arabic	–		2.0		2.5		.9
	–	1.0	1.0		6.6		1.7
Column		201	202	200	198	199	1000
Total		20.1	20.2	20.0	19.8	19.9	100.0

Table 4 below illustrates the overbearing effects of English as a preferred media language for Igbo speakers. While Hausa MT respondents have a higher preference rating for Hausa as a media language, i. e. as a preferred language both for listening to radio/watching television programmes and for reading newspapers and magazines (55.9 percent and 51 percent, respectively), Igbo MT speakers have a low preference value for their language for listening to radio/watching television programmes (23.5 percent) and for reading newspapers and magazines (13.0 percent). On the contrary, Igbo MT speakers have the highest preference rating for English as the preferred media language. One consequence of the preference for English as a media language by Igbo MT speakers is the fact that while several newspapers and magazines are published in both the Yoruba and Hausa languages, Igbo has virtually no newspaper or magazine published in the language (except the recently founded news-magazine, *Nzisa*, which is published by the Catholic Archdiocese of Owerri, with primary religious interest).

Table 4. Preferred media language.

		M_TONGUE					
		Yoruba	Hausa	Igbo	Northern minority	Southern minority	Row Total
		1	2	3	4	5	
Hausa	radio/TV	1.5	55.9	0.5	3.0	0.5	12.4
	Paper/Magazine	0.5	51.0		6.6	0.5	11.8
Igbo	–	0.5		23.5		1.5	5.1
	–			13.0		1.0	2.8
Yoruba	–	36.8	1.0	0.5		1.0	7.9
	–	15.9	0.5			1.0	3.5
English	–	54.7	41.1	73.5	93.9	89.4	0.4
	–	79.1	46.0	83.5	90.9	91.5	78.1
Pidgin	–	6.5	1.0	2.0	2.0	5.5	3.4
	–	4.0	1.5	3.5	2.0	6.0	3.4
Arabic	–		1.0		1.0		0.4
	–	0.5	1.0		0.5		0.4
Rivers dialects						2.0	0.4
Column		201	202	200	198	199	1000
Total		20.1	20.2	20.0	19.8	19.9	100.0

As Tables 2, 3 and 4 show, although the dominance of English in Nigeria is affecting other Nigerian languages – both major and minor, it has affected Igbo more than the other two major languages, i. e. Hausa and Yoruba. Our findings indicate that Igbo is gradually losing some of the functions which it originally performed, to English. Good reviews of language endangerment associated with the spread and dominance of English are contained in Brutt-Griffler (2004) and Wolf and Igboanusi (2004).

The dominance of English and the low value with which Igbo is rated are the bane of the Igbo language. This development, in turn, leads to the trend to bring up children as monolingual speakers of English, which Ohiri-Aniche (1997: 75) blames for killing many Nigerian languages. Problems associated with the negative attitude towards Igbo are also closely linked with the dominance of English and its status as the preferred language in Nigeria (cf. Babajide 2001: Oyetade 2001).

Conclusion

The purpose of the present study is not to predict the prospect of Igbo losing more child speakers and therefore getting more endangered; it is

to draw attention to a potentially serious crisis so that a concerted effort could be made to avert the crisis from degenerating. Although Igbo is encountering losses, these are, however, ‘non-life-threatening losses’ (cf. Fishman 1998: 2). These losses in turn lead to shift of domains, which often reduces the prestige attached to the language. What is to be done is to identify all the functional roles of Igbo which are endangered, and accelerate effort at reversing the trend.

For example, individuals and states within the Southeast² should be encouraged to establish and publish newspapers in Igbo. The provision of the National Policy on Education³ and the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria⁴ should be enforced. Also, there should be an enlightenment campaign to inform the younger ones that those who disown their languages for other ones do not enjoy any privilege; and on the contrary, such a habit attracts indignation. The spirit behind the establishment of both the *Ahiajoku* Lecture and the *Odenigbo* Lecture⁵ is a positive sign of language loyalty, but this is hardly enough.

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Notes

1. The tables used here are drawn from Igboanusi and Peter (2005), and they result from language use questionnaires, which assessed respondents’ language preference. The questionnaires were designed to be answered by a randomly selected group of 200 persons in each of these five states – Abia (Igbo), Katsina (Hausa), Oyo (Yoruba), Plateau (Northern minority language speakers), and Rivers (Southern minority language speakers).
2. Southeast is one of the six geo-political divisions of Nigeria, comprising all the core-Igbo states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo.
3. The provision of the National Policy on Education 1977 (revised in 1981 and 1998) requires that every child should learn one of the three major languages in addition to his/her own language.
4. The entrenchment of a clause in the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria for the use of the three major languages in the National Assembly (with the aid of simultaneous interpretation, and the use of ‘legislative terminology’ specially

prepared for this purpose by the former National Language Centre) in addition to English, when adequate arrangements have been made for their use. Following the entrenchment of this clause in the Constitution, some states in the Hausa language- and Yoruba language-speaking areas have started experimenting with the use of their languages in the State Houses of Assembly. Igbo-speaking states are expected to join this experimentation.

5. Ahajajoku and Odenigbo Lectures are held annually in Owerri to rejuvenate interest in socio-cultural problems of the Igbo.

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