

LANGUAGE EXTINCTION AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF IGBO

ONYEME, ALEXANDER CHUKWUDI, PhD.
Department of Curriculum and Educational Technology
Federal College of Education (Technical) Umunze, Anambra State
07065083459; onyemerusiugwu@gmail.com

And

ASSIMONYE, ASSUMPTA CHIEDU
Department of Curriculum and Educational Technology
Federal College of Education (Technical) Umunze, Anambra State

Abstract

This paper explored the nexus between language extinction and community development and contended that the curriculum can play a significant role in redeeming the Igbo and its knowledge archive for sustainable community development. Documentary sources were used in the paper to establish that the Igbo is an endangered language with the possibility of going extinct if nothing serious is done to salvage it. Causes of language extinction and consequences of such loss were explored. Chiefly among consequences is loss of vital community knowledge base that links the past with the present and sustains a community. There is hope, however, that endangered languages could be revived through deliberate effort of their owners. This was the case with Hebrew at the beginning of the 19th century. The Igbo as an endangered language, therefore, can be redeemed through the curriculum. The paper therefore recommended, among others, the use of Igbo as language of the curriculum across levels; and compulsory learning of the Igbo in all schools in the Igbo-speaking states and beyond.

Introduction

All over the world, there has been serious concern about endangered languages and the possibility of these languages going into extinction. An endangered language is one that is likely to become extinct soon (Davis, 2009). Reporting the study carried out by Ken Hale of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, it was stated that 3000 of the world's 6000 languages are doomed because no children speak to them (Linden, 2011). Some have put the number of the world's languages at 6900 and predicted that the extinction rates will range from 50 to 90 per cent by the end of 21st century (Nettle and Romaine, 2010). These numbers, however, should be taken with a grain of salt, because information about many languages is scant or outdated, and it is hard to draw a line between languages and dialects (Davis, 2009). Despite this, most linguists

agree that there are well over 5,000 languages in the world. Nigerian languages are put at about 521 (Ikegbunam, 2010). This number includes 510 living languages, two languages without native speakers and 9 extinct languages. There is the fear that some of these local languages, including the Igbo may not survive the end of the century if nothing serious is done to sustain them.

The loss of language is a serious matter. It means that local knowledge base of the community transferred from generation to generation also vanishes with it since, 'individual language groups have specialized vocabularies reflecting native people's unique solutions to the challenges of food gathering, healing and dealing with the elements in their particular ecological niche' (Linden, 2011:52). For every language lost, millions of knowledges, techniques and skills go with it. When people lose their language, they lose the rest of the components of their culture and lose the bridge that links the past and the present, and there is the fear that once lost, it is lost forever.

The Igbo, like many indigenous languages across the world, is endangered even though the population of native speakers is well over 20 million (National Population Commission, 2006; figure projected to 2017 excluding Igbo people in Diaspora and in Delta and Rivers States). Can anything be done to save the Igbo from extinction, re-establish link with local knowledge of yore, and improve the lot of the local communities in the light of some overwhelming threats? Hebrew was a dead language at the beginning of the 19th century. It existed only as a scholarly written language, but with the "strong will" of Israeli Jews, the language was brought back into everyday use (The British Broadcasting Cooperation (BBC), 2016). Now it is undeniably a living breathing language once more. Same was also reported on

the revival of Welsh in the United Kingdom and Maori in New Zealand. Hinged on this, this paper seeks to explore the nature of language extinction and how the endangered Igbo may be salvaged to sustain the local knowledge handed down from the past. The paper has been organized under the following sub-headings:

- Language and Language Extinction.
- Igbo Language as Culture on the Verge of Extinction.
- Causes of Language Extinction.
- Language Extinction and Implication for Community Development.
- Curriculum Remedy for Igbo Language Recovery.
- Recommendations.
- Conclusion.

Language and Language Extinction

Culture is essential for human beings since it is the key for people to identify themselves and fit in the groups. People build their networks and relationships according to those cultural ideas and form different types of groups of people. The lifestyles which a given people and their descendants pass on gradually develop into a cultural heritage. Culture exists anywhere humans exist, and no two cultures are the same; it forms a people's unique way of life (Long-Crowell, 2009).

Sociologists do not agree on the classifications of cultural elements or components. Some have classified culture into four components namely, symbols, language, values, and norms (Long-Crowell, 2009). Others view culture as constituting four major aspects, namely the communication, cognitive, material and behavioral aspects (Onuigbo, 2015; Okoli, 2016). This classification seems broader and accommodative. No matter the difference in the methods of classification, however all the identified elements in the varying classifications are aspects of

culture. Communication components include language and symbols. Through a language, a group of people interact with one another, socially sharing their thoughts, feelings or ideas to the people with same language. A Language forms the core of all cultures throughout society and serves as the living agent of cultural transmission and survival (Okoli, 2016).

The phenomenon of cultural extinction is increasing all over the world. Cultural extinction includes the loss of language, traditions, habits, and customs. Like the various species of animals and plants, languages can become extinct. In different periods of history, some unique languages have disappeared. The death in 2008 of Chief Marie Smith Jones signaled her language's death (Tom, 2009). Among the ranks of languages on the brink of extinction are Lipan Apache language in the United States known to have only two speakers; Totoro language in Colombia with four speakers; and the single Bikya language speaker in Cameroon (Lewis, 2009). Irish language or Gaelic is now facing the danger of extinction because fewer and fewer people are learning how to speak it and using it in daily conversation (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2014).

Extinct languages or those endangered are nonetheless limited to the preceding examples; any language can become endangered and eventually go extinct if the owners pay little regard to its value. With globalization, and dispersion of local people across the globe, there is no doubt that some of Nigeria's indigenous languages including the Igbo considered as one of the major three in Nigeria are endangered and could go extinct in the nearest future if nothing serious is done to control the tide.

Igbo Language as Culture on the Verge of Extinction

The Igbo language is spoken by some groups of people in the eastern part of Nigeria. It is spoken in Enugu, Ebonyi, Anambra, Imo, and Abia States of Nigeria. Other states where Igbo language is spoken include Delta and Rivers States (Umo, 2013). These areas constitute the indigenous homeland of the Igbos. But, the people's natural tendency to innovate and learn new things also constitutes a threat to their language. It has been observed that the attitude of the general public in Igbo speaking areas to Igbo language growth and development is quite low. Attitude means predisposition to act or react. At times, if you say that you are studying Igbo, you become an object of ridicule and caricature. The majority of educated Igbos is never interested in their language and most of them cannot read or write in their dialect (Afigbo, 1975 cited in Umo, 2013).

The Igbo man having been brought up in the colonial system of education and life style has a great interest for foreign language. This reaction of Igbo man gradually spread to influence other aspects of Igbo language and culture. Most students do not have interest in Igbo language as a subject. They are even not allowed to speak Igbo in the class which boosts their poor attitude which the Igbo in general have towards the language. It is a matter of a great regret that teachers and Igbo nationals neglect their mother tongue in schools while they promote and encourage the study of foreign languages.

Among the major ethnic groups in Nigeria (Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba), it is the Igbos who prefer a second language to their mother-tongue (Okoli, 2016). They relish in speaking other people's languages which they learn with ease given their tendency to learn new things, but readily forbid their children to speak their mother tongue. A novelist, Nwaubani recalled:

My parents forbade my local language, Igbo from being spoken in our home when I was a child....My parents chose to speak only English to their children. They also conversed between themselves in English even though they had each grown up speaking Igbo with their own parents and siblings (Nwaubani, 2017: 21).

This situation has readily positioned the Igbo as an endangered language likely to go extinct alongside the vast local knowledge of the community and join the band-wagon of what has been described as ‘the global hemorrhage of indigenous knowledge’ (Linden, 2011: 53).

Causes of Language Extinction

There are legions of reasons why languages become extinct. Outright genocide is one cause of language extinction. For example, when European invaders exterminated the Tasmanians in the early 19th century, an unknown number of languages died as well (Davis, 2009). Far more often, however, languages become extinct when a community finds itself under pressure to integrate with a larger or more powerful group. Sometimes the people learn the outsiders' language in addition to their own; this has happened in Greenland, a territory of Denmark, where Kalaallisut is learned alongside Danish. But often the community is pressured to give up its language and even its ethnic and cultural identity. This has been the case for the ethnic Kurds in Turkey, who are forbidden by law to print or formally teach their language. It has also been the case for younger speakers of Native American languages, who, as recently as the 1960s, were punished for speaking their native languages at boarding schools (Woodbury, 2013).

Languages of colonial conquest and dominant languages of nation-states penetrate into, transform and undermine a minority community's ability to maintain its language, culture and identity in various ways. This has been referred to as linguistic genocide (Skutnabb-Kangas,

2000 cited in Romaine, 2015). Where education does not support or actively prohibits the use of a group's native language, the state in effect moves children from a minority to the dominant group.

Recently, globalization has been pointed as major cause of language extinction. Cultural globalization is defined as the transmission of cultural ideas, values, and meaning across borders (UNESCO, 2016). Cultural globalization also includes media technology, entertainment, and economic institutions. Western countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany are better developed than developing countries, and because of this, many American, British, and/or German cultural ideas and technologies are spreading to the developing world. Some of the most well-known aspects of American culture that can now be found all over the world are fast food chains, Hollywood movies, and social media outlets, and all of these influence younger generations. The new culture is seen as cooler or more than traditional cultures, and many young members, mainly of minority cultures, leave their culture behind to join the mainstream and globalized culture. Such cultural invasion harms the preservation of traditional cultures. As globalization sweeps around the world, small communities come out of their isolation and seek interaction with the wider world. Because of the increasing globalization and cultural invasions, more and more unique cultures are endangered and disappearing. On one side, it helps countries to communicate more and develop faster, but on the other side, it may decrease a country's unique cultural groups, especially for the groups with small populations. A good number of local languages, through this way, may be unhappy casualties.

Language may also become extinct as a result of the people's treatment of their language. An increasing number of communities are giving up their language by their own choice (BBC,

2017). Many believe that their languages have no future and that their children will not acquire a professional qualification if they teach them tribal languages. In such a situation, nothing can be done when the abandonment of a language corresponds to the will of a population. This perhaps best explains the condition of the Igbo language (Umo, 2013). Parents forbid their children to interact in Igbo even when they are within their homes, and relish in their ability to speak the English language fluently. Languages that are not being transmitted to children, or that are being learned by few children, are endangered and likely to become extinct.

Language Extinction and Implication for Community Development

Languages are not simply a collection of words. They are living, breathing organisms holding the connections and associations that define a culture. When a language becomes extinct, other components of culture in which it lived are lost too. One of the worrisome consequences of language loss is the local community knowledge that goes with the loss. Local knowledge are stored in the memories of elders, local healers, midwives, farmers, hunters and fishermen, and transmitted via local languages from generation to generation. When communities are successful in promoting their linguistic and cultural heritage, they are better positioned to claim ownership of their past and future (Lalonde 2006). When a community loses its language, it often loses a great deal of its cultural identity at the same time. This is an impediment to community development.

The loss of one language has consequences much wider than simply losing a vocabulary. Even when archived, a dead language may be missing tone, accent, grammar, syntax and context (Chauvot, 2016). These verbal traits are often used to reflect a speaker's way of thinking as much as the actual choice of words. Losing a language also can mean losing crucial knowledge

about the linguistic group's history, culture, or even knowledge about their local environment. For example, being able to choose different words for plants or even the earth they grow in also provides scientists, botanists and academics with information that might be lost otherwise if these specific descriptions did not have an equivalent word in a more dominant language. Losing a language also can mean losing crucial knowledge about the linguistic group's history, culture, or even knowledge about their local environment (Chauvot, 2016). Much is lost from a scientific point of view as well when a language disappears. A people's history is passed down through its language, so when the language disappears, it may take with it important information about the early history of the community. The loss of human languages also severely limits what linguists can learn about human cognition. By studying what all of the world's languages have in common, linguists can find out what is and is not possible in a human language (Woodbury, 2013). This in turn tells important things about the human mind and how it is that children are able to learn a complex system like language so quickly and easily. The fewer languages there are to study, the less, linguists will be able to learn about the human mind.

Much of the cultural, spiritual, and intellectual life of a people is experienced through language. This ranges from prayers, myths, ceremonies, poetry, oratory, and technical vocabulary to everyday greetings, leave-takings, conversational styles, humor, ways of speaking to children, and terms for habits, behaviors, and emotions (Woodbury, 2013). When a language is lost, all of this must be refashioned in the new language- with different words, sounds, and grammar- if it is to be kept at all. Frequently traditions are abruptly lost in the process and replaced by the cultural habits of the more powerful group. For these reasons, among others, it is

very important to the community itself that its language survives. Preservation of language therefore does matter for community development.

Curriculum Remedy for Igbo Language Recovery

United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization issued ‘Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage’ in order to try and prevent the extinction of cultures (Woodbury, 2013). It acknowledged that both the forces of globalization and modernization can have negative impact on preserving traditional cultures and called on countries to build more awareness about disappearing cultures, especially amongst young people. It also created an “Intangible Heritage” List that includes specific cultural traditions, handicrafts, and histories that are seriously in danger of becoming extinct. This call can only become meaningful if followed up with concrete actions of nations.

There need to be some conscious effort to build in the language of the people into the curriculum at various levels in order to keep the language of the people alive. Curriculum includes the total environment in which education takes place. It embraces not only the students and the teachers but most importantly, the subject, the content and the method of evaluating students to ascertain the level of progress the students have made in line with what they have learnt (Ikegbunam, 2009). As experiences outside the classroom are equally an integral part of the curriculum, the physical and psychological environment or what have been termed extra-curricular activities are also built-in in the curricula of different educational institutions (Ossai, 2015). Language unifies these curricular activities.

The National Policy on Education spells out the status of indigenous language in the formal educational process of the child. The section states that:

In addition to appreciating the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion; and preserving the people's culture, the government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his mother-tongue. In this connection, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (FRN, 2013:10).

However, other policy statements reveal the specific role the mother tongue should play in the process of education in schools. For pre-primary education, the policy states that government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be in the mother-tongue or language of the immediate environment (FRN, 2013:16). And for the primary education and beyond, the policy states: government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the languages of the immediate environment for the first three years in monolingual communities, and at a later stage, English (FRN, 2013:8). Apart from these areas, there is no other mention of indigenous language in the policy. This is rather too limiting.

Indigenous language across the curriculum has been the nucleus of education in many developed countries of the world such as Britain, Germany, and China. The use of indigenous language across levels has made learning meaningful and worthwhile for the citizens of these countries. No other language can help to stimulate, challenge and involve the child socially, intellectually and emotionally in the act of learning than the child's own mother tongue (Aguiyi, 2012 citing Awoniyi (1976). According to the writer, creativity cannot be achieved through a foreign language because creativity does not come through a language foreign to a child. Mother tongue enhances the sense of creativity in a child. The Igbo therefore, should be not just a language of study, but the medium of curricular interactions for the Igbo child across levels.

Recommendations

The paper makes the following recommendations:

1. The responsibility of sustaining a language lies mainly on the people. The Igbo people should therefore take pride in their language to ensure its survival. Parents should encourage the use of Igbo at home.
2. The learning of Igbo should be made compulsory at all levels of our educational institutions especially those located in the Igbo-speaking states of the country.
3. Department of Linguistics and other Nigerian languages in the universities should encourage interdisciplinary approaches with departments such as French, English, German, Russian etc. in the area of translation. These approaches will create great awareness of Igbo language, Culture and Traditions which, in turn, will showcase Igbo scholars and non-Igbo scholars for proper identity.
4. Schools should allow children to interact in their mother tongue while in school. Vernacular should not be outlawed in schools.
5. There is the need to create awareness on the adverse influence of globalization on local cultures. Cultural organizations (age-grades, community-based organizations, etc.) need to advocate the promotion of the Igbo in partnership with information ministries of federal and state governments.
6. The curricula of schools across levels should be based on the language of the local community. This will improve the creativity level of students and make learning meaningful.

Conclusion

Igbo language is endangered; and if nothing serious is done about it, the language may join the league of extinct languages. Loss of a language means loss of other cultural elements including store of knowledge handed down from the past. The knowledge of the local community is vital in linking the past with the present and predicting the future of a people, as well as for sustainable development of the local community. Language loss is therefore a serious issue that needs addressing. The hope however that is endangered language can be revived. The Igbo language can be revived through the use of language in the curriculum across levels. The time to start this effort is now.

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