IJAW LANGUAGE, THE EXTINCTION FACTOR AND POSSIBILITIES OF CONSERVATION IN SOUTH-SOUTH NIGERIA

By

Ikiyei, Philip Kuro (Ph.D),
And
Orupou, Arthur Ebibolou (B.Ed, Ma. Lit),

Abstract:

Language is a tool with which thoughts are represented and communicated. A process through which thoughts, are established as well as elaborated. Human existence without communication would have been meaningless. It is language that sets humans apart from the rest of the animal kingdoms. To jettison one's indigenous language is to say the least a fundamental step towards losing one's identity. Language in a sense is the true symbol of our credibility. Language is the first instrument of communication that leads to understanding, understanding leads to knowledge and knowledge leads to success. Language is life. The paper highlighted the threat of extinction which the Ijaw language is grappling within today's globalized world. It illustrates how gradually and unannounced, the Ijaw language is unfortunately not being spoken even by the Ijaw peoples themselves either at home, school, churches, official circles and at social functions. The paper is a clarion call on what needs to be done to revive and maintain the Ijaw language. Some practical methods such as the re-introduction of the language in schools and a total re-orientation of the elitists' mindset and attitude towards the Ijaw language are proffered as remedies from this endangered stage.

Introduction

Language is a means of communication among a group of people. Eze (2011) defined language as a form of expression which is generally conceived as an arbitrary set of codes used for communication. It is a means by which an ethnic group could be easily identified. Ani (2012) cited Azikwe (2007) as stating that language is the systematic articulation of sounds by humans in an organized manner and used by a group of humans for the purposes of communication. Different social animals have different ways of making facts, news, opinions, request and feelings known to members of their group. Communication is the process of expressing ideas, and feelings of a giving people, under the methods of disseminating information, speech is said to be the fastest means of communication between people.

Among the Ijaw (Ijo; Izon) people of the Niger Delta in South-South Nigeria (i.e Bayelsa, Rivers, Edo, Delta Ondo and some parts of Akwa Ibom State); the common language is the Ijaw (Izon). The Ijaw language is a distinct and unique language with little dialectic differences among its various ethnic clans. The Ijaw language had evolved for centuries and passed on from generation to generation.

In recent times however, like most other minority languages, Ijaw language appears to be spoken only by a small number of people, although according to the Wikipedia
encyclopedia, the Ijaws are estimated to be over ten million people. The Ijaw language is without doubt one of the languages being threatened by extinction. A simple look at the average Ijo elite parent reveals that they no longer encourage their children or wards to speak the Ijaw language at home. In the schools, primary, post-primary or tertiary, too the subject called vernacular is no longer taught.

The place of mother tongue in the upbringing of children has been thrown to the winds. Language affects the way we think or perceive our reality. Fabunmi and Salawu (2005), state that only 600 of the 6,000 or so languages in the world are safe from the threat of extinction.

They maintained that the Nigerian situation is quite alarming because both population and language endangerment complement each other. Children given birth to by two Ijaw parents could no longer speak the mother tongue.

Most young people are proud to tell others that they cannot even understand the Ijaw language when spoken to. Without language, the identity and culture of the ethnic group is dead. According to Baldeh (1993:3), language is the hand maid of culture, the two are inseparable. What this implies therefore is that for the Ijaw culture to stand the test of time, the Ijaw language must remain strong and be spoken often.

Ani (2012) stated that beyond facilitating the communication of experiences, language also enhance man’s cognitive abilities and function if it must be for the permanent relevance and survival through the ages. Ani opined that most languages facing extinction lack that capacity to fulfill the needs of man in an age of breath-taking science and technology, when every man and woman want to be part of the advances and prosperity. Both Ani (2012) and Fabunmi and Salawu (2005) had queried globalization and modern day systematic neo-colonialism where economically more advanced and powerful languages dominate other languages.

This trend is worrisome, as most Ijaw people cannot speak their mother tongue but are happily speaking borrowed languages of other tribe’s especially English language and some other Nigerian languages.

In this respect, family secrets and conversations can no longer be kept especially in public places where there is the need for privacy. Again, there is the need to note that language is an essential ingredient in the preservation of a people’s culture and heritage. Once the language of a group of people faces extinction, that group is most likely to be phased-out. The Ijaw language requires an urgent revival now for posterity to exonerate our generation.

Conceptual Framework

The researchers are relying on two central theories that may help to explain why the Ijaw language could be considered among the world’s languages facing extinction.

The first theory is that of Amano (2015) which postulates that thriving economies are the biggest factor in the disappearance of minority languages. Amino, argued that as economies develop, one language often comes to dominate a nations political and educational spheres. People are forced to adopt the dominant language or risk being left out in the cold-economically and politically. This theoretical position is explained largely
in the works of Fabunmi and Salawu (2005) when they argued that the use of information technology and the general technological advancements had made the World a Global Village. The major language dominating the Information Technology age is English language. For one to be current and consistent with modern trends, he or she needs to flow (go along) with the English Language. This they described as Global Information Capitalism. Our languages would remain endangered as long as they are not promoted and utilized by the dominating economies.

The second theory is that presented by Ani (2012) called the cultural marginalization theory of language. Ani cited Austin and Sallabank, (2011). The cultural marginalization theory posits that indigenous populations frequently go for the other peoples' languages in order to achieve higher social status. The adoption of such cultural and linguistic traits may come as a result of colonialism, conquest or invasion. Austin and Sallabank concluded that this is the most common cause of language endangerment.

Specifically, this theory maintains that when people gradually neglect and refuse to promote official and unofficial communication dynamics in their own language, consciously or unconsciously, they are culturally marginalizing their language. Come to face it, if indeed language is to be objectively used as a means of identification, most Ijaw people might probably fail the screening exercise. There is indeed an urgent need for the renewal/restoration of the Ijaw language without any further delay. The warnings, by Amano that languages are now rapidly being lost at a rate of extinctions exceeding the well known catastrophic loss of biodiversity, should be a clarion call for all Ijaw people of good will to try and promote the language at official and non official interactions.

In an attempt to categorize levels at which languages could gradually vanish, Wurm (1998) had recognized a five level model of language status. These levels are: (i) Potentially endangered (ii) Endangered (iii) Seriously endangered (iv) Moribund and (v) Extinct. The Ijaw language by all standards may be either described as seriously endangered or at the moribund level. A common place where language of a group is commonly used is the market. Go to the Swali market in Yenagoa the Bayelsa State capital, Igbo might be the most used language apart from English. This is a wakeup call.

Areas of identifiable neglect

❖ Home based neglect

As earlier mentioned, most Ijaw parents do not want their children to learn, speak or write in Ijaw language. This challenge is especially with the elite class. Parents hardly consider the Ijaw language as a necessary language that their children should speak. At home either English or Pidgin English had been identified as the language of communication. To portray the level of modernity, some parents even ban their children from speaking their mother tongue. The implication of the above situation is that the elite had created within themselves a divided personality.

Fabunmi and Salawu (2005) describe such elite as 'cosmopolitan nativists', fighting very hard to eschew their nativity and at the same time fighting very hard to be adopted into
the cosmopolitan order. This elite class regards their speaking of English as a symbol of the promotion of their social structure.

As paradoxically as it may sound, Fabunmi and Salawu maintained that one reason why our language had not gone completely extinct is due to the level of illiteracy in Nigeria. Illiteracy had helped to keep our language from extinction since the literate ones had jettisoned our native tongue.

Research had however proven that a child’s language serves the purpose of accessing the basic material and psychological needs. The significance of mother tongue according to Fafunwa is that in order to enable a child to develop curiosity, manipulative ability, industry, mechanical comprehension etc, more easily, the mother tongue remains the most natural way to learn (Bamgbose; Banjo and Thomas, 1995:16).

❖ School based neglect

Due to the lack of attention given to Ijaw language education, there is the dearth of manpower in our schools at all levels. Today, we can count may be only a hand full of graduates in Ijaw language. Teachers in Ijaw are not available. A lot of candidates might apply to study English and literary studies but how many candidates would willingly apply to study Ijaw? It is not surprising that most of the students studying Ijaw language at the Niger Delta University Study Centre are either retired civil servants or those planning to retire. Students who opt to study Ijaw language are considered inferior or lack intelligence. A major challenge in the schools today is the prohibition of students from speaking vernacular. Children who speak the native language do it with caution as they could be punished for speaking their mother tongue within the school premises. The behavior of the school authorities with due respect had helped to disorganize and disorient pupils from their ancestral and historical roots (language). It was Krauss (1992:40 who warned that “languages” which are no longer being learned as a mother tongue by children are moribund.\textsuperscript{1} we may not be regarded as sounding pessimistic by cautioning that the Ijaw language will become moribund, in few years if deliberate attempts are not made for its conservation. The importance of language to any society is the fact that it expresses one’s identify, serves as a repository history; establishes nation’s ancestry; lineages or descents; there by contributing to the sum knowledge of mankind.

❖ The Church and the Ijaw Language/Culture

The essence of religious propagation is to get more converts to the faith. The language of the people is a sure instrument to pass the message easily to the people. However, in most of the Pentecostal churches today, English is now the common language used. Interpreters are no longer used in most of the churches. Our traditional marriages are considered as not complete except “white wedding or church blessings” are added to it. Do the English people also practice ours? We need to go back to our roots. We are made to understand that God understands all languages including Ijaw. The Izon Bible project needs the support of all. Our songs, dances, our folktale and our mode of dressings, our common delicacies and proverbs, are our own way of telling who we are. We have made all of these moribund in the name of Christianity.
Inconsistency in the Nigerian Educational Policy

The Nigerian National Educational Policies are very laudable. The challenge in most cases is with the implementation of the policies. For instance, the Nigerian National Education Policy (1977) stipulates that children be taught in their mother tongue or the language of their immediate communities in the first three years of the primary school system. This policy has never been fully implemented in most schools either due to lack of language teachers or frequent changes in government. Experts in the UNESCO had found that the best medium for teaching a child is the mother tongue. Bamgbose (1973) submits that psychologically it is the system of meaningful signs that works automatically in children’s minds for expression and understanding. Educationally, mother tongue helps children learn faster than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium. Again, it is a government policy that all students must not only offer English language compulsorily in our school certificate examinations but obtain a credit pass in it in order to secure admission into the universities. This compulsion, make and gives English language a serious domineering edge over and above all recognized indigenous Nigerian languages.

This is a clear method of outright sale of our languages thereby creating a conducive environment for their geometric decline and endangerment. Some top government functionaries are very angry when the Ijaw language is used as the medium of communication in their offices. This trend requires be queried and possibly cautioned.

Cosmopolitan Communities Impact on our language

Another threat to the Ijaw language facing extinction is the multidimensional varieties of languages in our vicinity and our seemingly been more interested for the languages of others. It is like an added value to those who communicate fluently with other languages. Drive in a Taxi around Yenagoa with other Ijaw passenger. They will prefer to stop the drivers to alight saying “Mon Bole O” which literally means (I want to alight), instead of “Ikoro mo” or Koro-teighi”. Amano (2015) viewed that as economies develop, one language often comes to dominate a nation’s political and educational spheres.

The scholar submitted further that everyone has a right to choose the language they speak, but preserving dying languages is important to maintain human cultural diversity in an increasingly globalized world. Amino advised that rather than learn another person’s language, people could become bilingual. He submitted that research had found that children who speak more than one language have multiple advantages in education, cognition and social interaction.

Globalization and the Ijaw Language

The Ijaw language is at serious risk in view of the world being considered as a Global village. The global Information Technology or IT had made some languages far more superior and advanced than others. English language is the main linguistic method used in the internet in Nigeria. Fabunmi and Salawu say’s IT is mediating human interaction, so it is becoming impossible to communicate in Ijaw language at that global level. The world is moving at a very fast pace. The Ijaw language is left behind to die through the radical expansion of the English Language. Most of the vocabulary in the Ijaw dialect is today extinct due to the shifting trend in the advancement of technology.
Language is the backbone of a people’s culture. Only a few of today’s teenagers can count and do computation with the Ijaw language. We are fast losing our Ijaw registers and names for diseases, animals, plants, and other natural habits, flora and fauna.

Possibilities of Conservation: The way forward.

To resuscitate the language from dying, Fabunmi and Salawu (2005) had recommended that the language must be maintained. Again the Ijaw man or woman especially the elite must have a positive attitudinal re-orientation by de-emphasizing the belief that English language represent a sort of social class. Parents should encourage their children and young ones to speak and possibly write in Ijaw language.

The use of Ijaw language to write in both offices and schools would help to preserve it. Writing is one of the most important activities of a literate society and it has incalculable influence on humanity because it is a common instrument for dissemination of knowledge (Otagburagu, 1997). As a people, conscious efforts must be made to use the language at home and in our neighborhoods. This way, the Ijaw language will be revitalized and language loyalty will be enhanced.

Furthermore, the media must be encouraged to come up with programmes to promote the Ijaw language. Programme coverage should not be limited only to the reading of the “News” in Ijaw language but be extended to transmitting radio and television plays, soap operas, as well as organizing major academic/educational programmes with the sole objective of popularizing the Ijaw language. In this respect, there is the need to give additional support to the efforts of Mrs. Tarilayefa Keme-kiou (a.k.a) “Country woman” for continually promoting the Ijaw language in Radio Bayelsa through her presentations.

Government should establish language sections in all research centres. These research centres will facilitate the dissemination of the research results in the local languages, especially in agricultural researches meant for peasant farmers in remote areas. Language experts in Ijaw needs to be trained and employed to enforce the security network throughout the country. Fabunmi and Salawu (2005) had argued that because of the September II episode, the American government is now seriously interested in understanding all the languages of the world.

The Ministries of Culture, Tourism and information in the various Ijaw speaking states should also support the media in revitalizing the language and culture. Children today do not know what is called Egene-sei (a typical traditional/cultural dance with varieties in different communities). The ministries have a role to mobilize the Ijaw man to identify with our cultural practices such as the Omou-aru (war boat regatta). A conscious effort must be made to correct the impression that every native custom and culture is devilish, primitive and anti-Christianity.

Most significantly, government can come up with language policy in our institutions of learning. Compulsory use of the Ijaw language in both primary and secondary schools in all Ijaw speaking states will be very remarkable.

The governments can consciously begin to open Ijaw language research centres and institutes. Ijaw language archives or language museums should be established with the major objective of gathering aspects of the language that are gradually eroding away.
Prince-Education (2009) had maintained that languages are facing extinction because generations of their speakers have failed to breath-life into them either through technological inventions, creative activities (including composition for songs) or even social activities. The point must be made that an interdisciplinary approach be made for academics in linguistics, educational psychologist and curriculum development experts to work hand in hand to revive the Ijaw language. If Professor Kay Williamson (a Scottish academic) could do so much to develop, preserve our language and culture, what about us?

Conclusion

It behoves on all, the elite, the Governments and the society at large to promote the Ijaw language, if we must heal or recover it from dying. Without the language, we will all lose our identity as a people. This will be a great tragedy if we allow our language to die off. If that happens, that means we have no more identity.

Recommendations

To change the trend means to make Ijaw language compulsory in schools. Write books in different subjects with Ijaw language including textbooks in the sciences. This way, the lessons would no longer be alien to the students.

- Take steps to document the Ijaw language.
- Revitalize the use of the language at home, schools and offices
- Maintain the language
- Encourage its use in all religious programmes
- Carryout further studies to strengthen the use of the language.
- Fund researches with the aim of promoting the resurrection of the Ijaw language.

References

Amano T. (2015). Thriving economies are the biggest factor in the disappearance of minority languages and conservation should focus on the most developed countries where languages are vanishing the fastest, finds a new study. Available at www.camiac.uk/research/new/economic-success-drives-language-extinction.


