

UNESCO Prediction of the Igbo Language Death: Facts and Fables

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Towards the end of 2006, the United Nations made a prediction that some minor languages of the world will go extinct in the next 50 years. On this list was the Igbo language spoken in the southeastern Nigeria by over 20 million people. The paper examines how far this UNESCO prediction affects the language and the people and to what extent the prediction is taken to be a fact or a fable given the status of the language, and the people's attitude to their language.

0. Introduction

Igbo language is a member of the Kwa group of languages from the Niger Congo language family according to Joseph Greenberg's 1963 and Bendor-Samuel's 1989 classifications of African languages. Igbo (*Asusu Igbo*), or Igbo proper, is a native language of the Igbo people, an ethnic group primarily located in southeastern Nigeria. There are approximately 20 million speakers that are mostly in Nigeria and are primarily of Igbo descent. Igbo is a national language of Nigeria. We have plenty scholarly works that have bothered on the development of the language and efforts of different scholars towards its development. The study of the history and development of Igbo language has been periodically categorized.

The initial period of Igbo studies was the period of collection and writing down of words to produce wordlists in Freetown Sierra Leone between 1828 and 1857. This was followed by the period of evolution of Onitsha/Isuama Igbo, a period when scanty printed and published works in Igbo began, first abroad and later at home, especially Onitsha. This was between 1857 and 1900. The emergence of Union Igbo from 1900 to 1929 saw the wake of translations from English to Igbo, some of which were published into reading materials. Between 1929 and 1961, Igbo language suffered a terrible setback as a result of orthography controversy. (Nwadike, 2002) However, it was in this period that the first Igbo novel which won an international award was written and published.

1. The Igbo Language Today

Having gone through the rigorous days of early survival, Igbo has come to be as a language of standard status with its many dialects. As language is a dynamic organism which continues to grow, Igbo has gone past the stage of orthography controversy to the stage of efforts geared towards orthography development. Igbo at the earlier developmental stage was faced with a whole lot of problems ranging from multiplicity of dialects with no standard form, orthography controversy; poor attitude of the people towards their language; lack of government assistance; to inadequate human and material resources (Nwadike, 2002: 112). Igbo is widely spoken today in more than five states in Nigeria by a population of over 30million people (Onyegiri, 2005:114). Igbo is also spoken in the Diaspora and all parts of the world where Igbo people are found in clusters.

Igbo is not only spoken by Igbo people it is also taught and learned in the various levels of formal education in the country. "Igbo education was designed in accordance with the

people's world view, their surroundings and immediate circumstances and facilities that were needed for effective co-existence and maintenance of society." (Agu, 1997:35) But today Igbo is designed to fit in the National Language Policy in Education, which provides that a student of Nigerian origin, in addition to English should learn and pass at least one indigenous language as a minimum requirement for admission into the Nigerian Universities, especially in arts related courses. The language is also designed to be part and parcel of the Nigeria's official language policy which is "enshrined as follows in Section 51 and 91 of the 1979 Constitution as follows:

The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made therefore. A House of Assembly may in addition to English conduct the business of the House in one or more languages spoken in the State as the House by resolution may approve. (Quoted from Bamgbose, 1991:117)

1.1 The Standard Igbo – SI

From the multiplicity of dialects, the standard form of the language has been developed. There are over 20 Igbo dialects within which there is apparently a degree of dialect leveling occurring. A standard literary language was developed in 1972 which is claimed to be based on the Owerri (Isuama) and Umuahia (Ohuhu) dialects. According to Crystal (2006), the standard form of any language or dialect is that "prestige variety of language used within a speech community, which cuts across regional differences, providing a unified means of communication, and thus an institutionalized norm which can be used in the mass media, in teaching the language to foreigners and so on."

With the development of the standard Igbo (Igbo Izugbe), plenty literature have emerged in and on the language and there is mutual intelligibility among people from different dialect areas. However, some Igbo indigenes, such as Prof Chinua Achebe and his followers preach against the use of standard Igbo, but this has not stopped the advancement of Igbo Izugbe.

2. UNESCO Prediction of the Igbo Language Death.

Towards the end of 2006, a report of the United Nations in one of the Nigerian dailies had it that Igbo language, among other minor African languages will be extinct by the year 2050. With all these efforts by Igbo people to develop their language, and the struggles that accompanied the establishment of the Igbo language, it is surprising to hear that Igbo is listed among the dying languages of the world. Before we go further into this discussion, let us review the concept of language death or extinction.

2.1 Language Death

Language death is a situation where "a language ceases to be used by a community." (Crystal, 2006) It can be thought of also as a process that affects speech communities where the level of linguistic competence that speakers possess of a given language idiom is decreased. A language's death could occur through any of the following processes:

- Gradual language death
- Bottom-to-top language death

- Radical language death or,
- Linguicide (also known as sudden language death or death by genocide.)

The most common process leading to language death is one in which a community of speakers of one language becomes bilingual in another language, and gradually shift allegiance to the second language until they cease to use their original or heritage language. This is the situation with the Igbo language. Meanwhile, a language is often declared to be dead even before the last native speaker of the language has died. This is the process of gradual death of a language, that which is affecting most African languages that have the English language as a second language.

As language is known to be an index of culture and a mark of people's identity; it is a core aspect of every culture. Without language, there is no heart-to-heart connection between species of any kind. The death of a language amounts to the death of a people's identity and culture, as such people do not fold their hands and watch their identity get eroded.

3. Language Attitude of Igbo People

Attitude, according to Bainbridge (1994:400) is "the positive or negative evaluation of an object with anything, tangible, capable of being the object of an attitude." In that regard, community language attitude denotes "the positive-negative evaluations of individual languages or group of languages, with regard to such dimensions as loyalty, prestige, utility, *cognancy* or aesthetics" (Othmen and Bashir, 2000:449)

Greater percentage of Igbo population, cutting across the elites, the educated, and the bourgeoisies believe that Igbo people show a negative attitude towards their language. It has been established that many Igbo parents living in Nigeria and in the Diaspora prefer their children speaking English to speaking Igbo. It is also an acclaimed truth that the language of discussion in many Igbo town meetings and forums is English and not Igbo. Students of higher learning studying any Igbo related courses like Igbo Linguistics, Igbo Education and so on are usually seen with such a chagrin written all over them in the midst of their mates studying other courses.

Much as it is true that Igbo people show a negative attitude towards Igbo language, some have attributed this to certain factors which include the introduction of Western education, government policy on language and globalization. Let us see briefly how these factors can affect people's attitude towards their language.

3.1 Education

It is believed that education is capable of triggering either a positive or negative attitude toward language. According to Chumbow (1990:63), language is the indispensable medium for the education and training of skilled manpower. Hence, the English language has been the language of education, government administration and trade in Nigeria, therefore, Igbo people have developed a positive attitude towards English to the detriment of their own language. An average literate Igbo person wants to flaunt his or her *mastery* of English language at the expense of Igbo.

3.2 Government Policy on Education

It is a common belief among scholars that when the government of a country makes a language policy which elates one language as the official language of that nation, the given language will definitely attract favourable attitude from the people since it serves as a means of carrying out official functions. This is the case of English language use in Nigeria. It tends to dominate the indigenous languages including Igbo. Nigeria's multilingual status has given English language the privilege of having an edge over and above the indigenous languages in terms of use and function, and Igbo seems to suffer most in this dilemma.

3.3 Globalisation

The concept of globalization has so powerfully penetrated the global economic and political territory that any country that does not measure up its demands is termed underdeveloped and backwards. Globalisation plays a role in determining whether a language thrives or not. It discourages diversity and promotes homogeneity, thereby suggesting the speaking of the same kind of language. On this, Fishman (2001:6) states, "in our day and age, it is definitely the globalisation of pan-western culture (and pop-consumer culture in particular) that is the motto of language shift. And since American dominated globalisation has become the major economic technological and cultural thrust of worldwide modernisation and westernisation, efforts to safeguard threatened languages (and therefore; contextually weaker languages) must oppose the very strongest processes and powers." Igbo people seem to have been forced and deceived by the powers of globalisation to develop a negative attitude towards their language.

The degree of the Igbo language endangerment has been assessed to be between "Definitely Endangered" and "Unsafe". (Odionye & Odionye, 2008:90) The authors define language endangerment as "a condition whereby the socio-economic, political, technological, cultural and religious ecologies have altered to a point where some language species cannot survive in them. And Aikawa in UNESCO (2001) ranks endangerment on a continuum from stability to extinction, as follows:

- (i) **Extinct:** a situation where there is no one who can speak or remember the language.
- (ii) **Critically Endangered:** a situation where the youngest speakers are in the great-grandparents' generation and the language is not used for everyday interactions.
- (iii) **Severely Endangered:** in this case, the language is spoken only by grandparents and other generations, while the parent generation may still understand the language they typically do not speak it to their children among themselves.
- (iv) **Definitely Endangered:** at this stage, the language is no longer learned as the mother tongue by children in the home. The youngest speakers are thus of the parental generation. At this stage, parents may still speak their language to their children, but their children do not typically respond in the language.

- (v) **Unsafe:** most children speak their parental language as their first language but this may be restricted to specific social domains such as the home where children interact with their parents and grandparents. Igbo can be said to still be operating on this stage.

4. Igbo Language Death: Facts and Fables

Several reactions from Igbo indigenes and speakers have continued to trail UNESCO prediction of Igbo language death in the year 2053, both positive and negative. (1) below is a collection of opinions and statements from people in reaction to the prediction. We have gathered these opinions for the purpose of analyses.

- (1)
- (i) "...in spite of all that have happened to the Igbo and their culture, their language has shown a great deal of resilience and vitality, more so in the spoken medium." – Prof. E.N Emenanjo, in *Ahiajoku lecture, 2001*.
- (ii) "Some Igbo parents, especially the literate ones, do not speak Igbo to their children even at home. In some cases, the parents ban their children from using Igbo to communicate among themselves." – C.A. Eme, in *UNIZIK Journal of Arts and Humanities, 2004*.
- (iii) "Many Igbo parents do not want their children to speak Igbo. Once, a mother at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, asked her children to desist from speaking that useless language (Igbo). This class of parents gets offended with teachers who teach Igbo as a subject to the children." – Prof. I.U Nwadike, in *F.C. Ogbalu Memorial Lectures, 2008*.
- (iv) "There may be a dearth of the Igbo language, but I am one of those that believe that the Igbo language will never reach the point of death. However, the dearth of the language poses a great danger to the Igbo mind, the person and the nation." – Mr. Chigbu, in *The Death of Igbo Language, 2008*.
- (v) "Igbo language *ga adigide*. Ok I thank them 4 telling us that Igbo language may go into extinction but I never, and will never believe that... for Igbo speakers, writers and learners keep it up. *Igbo ga adigide, asusu Igbo ga adigide*. Our language our identity. *Asusu anyi eji'm malu anyi*." – Nedu210 in *Re: Igbo Language Might Become Extinct in The Next 50 Years – UNESCO, Jan 2012*.
- (vi) "There is nothing political about this thread. To the waste bin please. Igbo people all over the world has and is still doing a lot in promoting Igbo language and culture yet no one cares about those developments. Only for

- fools to come up all the time to downgrade our efforts.” – Andre Uweh in *Re: Igbo Might Become Extinct in the Next 50 years – UNESCO. Jan 2012.*
- (vii) “Extinct in 50 years *ke*. UNESCO has no other thing to do then. British English will go extinct in 7 years.” – Nchara in *Re: Igbo Language Might Become Extinct in the Next 50 Years – UNESCO. Jan 2012.*
- (viii) “Aren’t you clowns tired of posting this same nonsense all over the place? There’s no truth in this, save for mischief.” – Mbataku2 in *Re; Igbo Language Might Become Extinct in the Next 50 Years – UNESCO. Jan 2012.*

It is important to point out here that some of the above reactions are follow up comments on the sarcastic and ironical advert version of UNESCO prediction of the Igbo language death by Onyekwelu Vincent (2008). He writes thus:

The year is 2053 and the news headline reads: Obituary: the glorious passing away of Igbo Language. With deep heart Ndi-Igbo announce the death of Igbo language after a protracted illness caused by daughters and sons of Igbo land. Igbo language left behind, a multitude of professionals, celebrities, able bodied men and ladies of timber and caliber. The passing away of the highly respected legend and statesman was a sudden death but by negligence of sons and daughters of Ndi-Igbo. Enough of personification! In a recent news update “A few days ago, the OBE TV in London broadcast world news in what they termed ‘THREE MAJOR NIGERIAN LANGUAGES – Hausa, Yoruba & English.’ Previously the three major languages of Nigeria were Igbo, Hausa & Yoruba.”

4.1 The Facts

It is a fact that Igbo people acknowledge that Igbo people exhibit a negative attitude towards their language. This includes both the educated and non-educated population. It is at the same time, a fact that many Igbo scholars have put up selfless efforts towards the development and sustenance of the language. For instance, the popular annual *Ahiajoku* lecture series, usually organized by the government of Imo State in conjunction with other bodies; the popular annual faith-based *Odenigbo* lecture series, organized by the Catholic Archbishop of Owerri. These and many other efforts are in place.

It is a fact that the UNESCO’s prediction itself has awoken Igbo scholars and indigenes towards a greater conscious effort to keep their language alive, as several clarion calls are being made by many Igbo scholars for a positive attitude towards the language. “Love Igbo language and culture; have interest in saving Igbo language: speak Igbo language all the time.” (Odionye & Odionye, 2008:90) “The day the Igbo language dies is the day the word ‘Igbo’ will be no more. Many Igbos are working hard to keep this prophetic ‘dying day’ from coming to pass and we hope it never comes.” (Chigbu, 2008:5)

It is a fact, in fact an irony that those who claim that UNESCO’s prediction is untrue are among those who can neither read nor write Igbo – those who have no scholarly work on Igbo language to their credit – those who boldly but ignorantly murder both Igbo and English language in their speech and writing. The data we have in (5) above reveal

certain obvious grammatical errors on the people's comments. Let us consider the following excerpts:

“Igbo language ga adigide.”*

Igbo ga adigide, asusu Igbo ga adigide.”

Asusu anyi aji’m malu anyi.”*

“Igbo ga-adigide”

*“Igbo ga-adigide, assx Igbo ga-adigide”

“Asusu any ejim malu(ejiri mara) any”

“Igbo people all over the world **has** and **is** still doing a lot in...”

*“Igbo people... have and are still...”

4.2 The Fables

UNESCO prediction of the Igbo language death is a fable to those who do not see it as a possibility. It is a fable to those who do not and have not made any effort to contribute to the further development of the language, yet are not proud to use their language either in speech or in writing.

The prediction of Igbo language death is a fable to those who do not even see the death of the language especially among the younger generation. As such they do not see the need for any call to save or revive the endangered language. Such people despise the Igbo language and yet they have problem with English language. The endangered status of Igbo language is a fable to the average enlightened Igbo parent who wants his or her child to excel in English language and to have little or nothing to do with the Igbo language.

5. Conclusion

We chose to discuss this topic this time and in this paper, believing it is the right time to contribute to several other academic works that have aimed at saving the Igbo language from possible extinction. It is our stand in this paper that although the so called UNESCO prediction includes the Igbo language as among the *dying languages*, Igbo people have not abandoned their language, and may not abandon it. Against the above views of different authors is the fact that people in the rural areas in the core Igbo zones and some urban areas still make use of the language in every day interaction and communication, especially in the market places, the churches and other public places.

The importance of language to human kind cannot be overemphasized. The peoples' language is their primary tool to assess their world, communicate and interact among themselves and at the same time establish their culture and identity. True as this may be, many languages of the world have been recorded dead or extinct at different times, and the usual question: “where were the language users when their language was gradually dying?” well-meaning Igbo indigenes do not want to entertain this question, and so they call on the people to save Igbo language before it goes into extinction.

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