SUSTAINABILITY OF INDIGENOUS NIGERIAN LANGUAGES IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD: THE IGBO LANGUAGE IN FOCUS

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Abstract

Globalization, which involves interdependence of nations around the world is a term used to describe how trade and technology have made the world to become more connected. Business, trade and commerce have become international and most of the business organizations are reaching out to people in different parts of the world including Africa. These business organizations need a medium through which they market their goods and services to people from various linguistic communities. The indigenous people who also have the need to transact business with the international community equally require a language that would bridge the communication gap between them and their business partners. Thus, learning and usage of the English and other dominant languages becomes inevitable in the lives of the indigenous people. The reason behind this is that English language has taken a prominent position in Nigeria and the world at large. It is the language of international organizations, language of the internet and language of global trade and industries. This implies that English language is seen as a language of opportunities because the knowledge gives one greater access to wider opportunities across the globe. In the light of this, the paper examined how crave for the English language has shifted the minds of the indigenous people away from their own languages. Effects of this on the development of indigenous languages as well as their implications for the sustainability of indigenous languages in today's globalized world are also discussed and the way forward highlighted.

Keywords: Globalization, Indigenous Language, Sustainability, Igbo Language.

Introduction

Language is the major means of communication among homo sapiens. It is an indispensable tool that enables humans to exchange views, ideas and opinions among themselves. As an important aspect of human characteristics, language has been defined by different authors. According to Simurka (2013), language is a channel through which the culture and beliefs of a society is expressed. The ways of life and uniqueness of every society is preserved and propagated through language. Corroborating this, Abari, Oyetola and Okunuga (2020) assert that language is the most essential vehicle for actualizing education and the transmission and sustenance of customs and traditions through generations. This is true because without language, it would be very difficult for people to interact and pass on their cultural heritage to younger generations.

Despite the fact that language is common among humans, it varies from society to society. Thus, thousands of languages exist across the globe, each of which embodies the cultures, traditions,

and world views of a people that speaks them. It can therefore be inferred that languages are markers of identity. They are important symbols of belonging, enabling different groups of people to know what ethnic groups they belong to, and what common heritages they share Kiplangat (2008). Furthermore, Kiplangat (2003) opined that a lost language is a lost culture, and a lost culture is invaluable knowledge lost. Hence, when a people's language is taken away from them, they lose their identity. This means that without an indigenous language, people would lose their cultural identity and most probably their origin. A people without identity is without roots; and a people without roots is dead, (Nwadike, 2008). The author further stated that the easiest way to conquer a people is through their language especially by making them to believe that their language is inferior to a dominant one.

English Dominance on the Indigenous Nigerian Languages

Prior to the advent of colonization, Nigeria subsisted as a vast region of various ethnic groups, with divergent historical, linguistic, and cultural configurations conveyed in traditional socio-political, educational and religious structures (Ogunmodimu, 2015). However, the arrival of the British merchants and Christian missionaries in Nigeria in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, introduced English language in the country. Nigeria was later colonized by the British, which led to imposition of the English language on Nigerians. The 1946 constitution of colonial administration first made English language the official language of Nigeria as it was the language of colonial administration (Lawal, 2006).

On regaining independence in 1960, English was still adopted as the official language for the country. The Nigerian constitution approves the use of English language at the National and State Houses of Assembly alongside any of the three major Nigerian languages of Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba or language of the state in question only when adequate arrangements have been made to their use. Thus, English is largely used by government functionaries in carrying out instructions and functions in government offices (Oluikpe, 2021).

The multilingual nature of the Nigerian state has further bolstered the influence of English to become cultivated, vigorous and hegemonic. It has spread aggressively breaking every ethnic and language barrier. Bamgbose (2019) observes that English is the unifying force that binds members of different ethnicities together in Nigeria. The wide spread of English has led to its usage in schools, law courts, media, trade and creative sectors. English is also utilized for religious communication, especially in the Christendom. There is hardly anywhere in Nigeria

that you will not find someone who can speak English, at least the Pidgin or Broken variant, (Ekpe, 2020). With this much dominance, English is gradually becoming the language of families in Nigeria.

Although the family social institution serves as the last frontier for the retention and passage of indigenous languages, many families no longer live up to this expectation. Thus, many Nigerian languages are losing the fight with the English language due to inter-ethnic marriages, urban migration and lack of consciousness stemming from colonial mindset, (Nzeaka and Ehondor, 2021). In retrospect Nwobodo (2020) opined those Nigerian indigenous languages had been brutally bruised by colonialism. The author argues that one of the tragic effects of colonialism was the near decimation of African languages. Thus, the indigenous languages of the people, which preserve their cultures and give them their identity, were subsumed by the language of the colonial masters, which carries within it, their cultures, customs and traditions. This had rippling effects, such as the sense of inferiority it bestowed on Nigerians, which made many Nigerians unwilling to identify with their native languages. It is always easy to woo a conquered people to believe that everything about them including their language is inferior to that of their conqueror. Supporting the above view, Roy-Campbell (2019) avers that the low level of development of most African languages during the colonial era suggested to many Africans that their languages were not capable of serving as vehicles for advanced knowledge. With this mindset, many Nigerians are lured or compelled to embrace and promote the English language against their own indigenous languages. The implication is that these indigenous languages gradually become endangered.

The Place of Igbo Language in the Face of Indigenous Language Endangerment

A language is designated as endangered when it faces imminent obsolescence. A major catalyst for language endangerment is language shift; which is a sociolinguistic phenomenon whereby a linguistic community abandons its indigenous language in favour of a new language. Typically, this evolution transpires gradually, moving across several generations and is caused by a combination of cultural, socio-economic and political factors. A central driver of language shift stems from socio-economic factors, wherein communities adopt a dominant language perceived to offer greater economic benefits, improved educational access, enhanced career opportunities, and pathways to upward social mobility (Abtahian & Quinn, 2019; Bocale, 2019; Frydman, 2019; Vangsnes, 2022). Invariably, because of the socio-economic status of the English language in Nigeria as the language of greater opportunities, the Igbo people with their entrepreneurial

mindset embrace it with vigor and reverence thereby relegating their own native language to the background (Adriosh and Ozge, 2016). Thus, position of embrace could be attributed. Furthermore, as earlier observed by the prestige attached to the English language robs the indigenous languages their place of honour, especially the Igbo language. That is why some Igbo parents are seen insisting that they do not want their children/wards to learn Igbo language because to them, it has no economic values (Ojikpo, 2014).

Again, language shift may be instigated by government policies concerning the development and utilization of languages within public domains such as education, media and governmental institutions. In this regard, Oluikpe (2021) opines that whenever a government makes a policy that disproportionately favours a particular language, speakers of other languages are often compelled to adopt the favoured dominant language to facilitate their access to governmental services. Ajepe and Ademowo (2016) posit that the blind glorification of the English language by Nigerian elites, as well as the defective National Policy on Language, have conspired to undermine the indigenous languages and rob them of their importance. For instance, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2014) stipulates that government shall develop the orthography of more Nigerian languages. This policy is a mere paper work because its implementation is in doubt. Similarly, Obiegbu (2016) observes that only 60 Nigerian languages have been codified to an extent while over 80 percent of them have no standard orthography. Furthermore, making English language the language of instruction from primary school as well as making it a prerequisite for gaining admission into institutions of higher learning is a policy that encourages language shift towards the English language. This impacts the survival and vitality of the Igbo and other indigenous languages in Nigeria.

A language is considered to have high level of vitality when it is effectively transmitted as a mother tongue to subsequent generations. In this regard, UNESCO (2013) highlights some pivotal indicators that can be used as benchmarks to determine the vitality of a language ranging from the number of active speakers, the degree of generational transmission, and the breath of usage across different societal domains. These benchmarks no doubt provide a structured approach that helps one to understand the severity of threat faced by indigenous Nigerian languages in general and Igbo language in particular.

The transmission of language across generations is viewed as a major indicator of a language's vitality. A language is said to have diminished intergenerational transmission when it ceases to be transferred from one generation to another. It is no longer news that many Igbo parents take

pride in announcing that their children do not understand Igbo language let alone speaking it. To such people, parents who speak Igbo to their wards are primitive and less educated ones. This contributes to a decline in the number of native speakers of the Igbo language among the younger generations. This seem to have made also that the language to be categorized as being endangered, (Ekeke, 2018). The United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organizations' (UNESCO) language cataloguing model show four stages of language endangerment, (Roche, 2022). The first stage is vulnerable stage. According to this model, a language may be considered to be vulnerable when it has been passed to the children, but they only speak it in homes or similar places. A language becomes endangered in a situation where offsprings do not speak their native language in the family or at home. Going further, a language is said to be severely endangered when only grandparents and the elderly speak it. The final stage is when a language is critically endangered. This represents a state where those who understand the language are grandparents or older ones, and the language is not regularly used. After this last stage of endangerment, a language can go extinct when the last recognized speakers are dead.

Numerous instances can be found of languages considered to be vigorously endangered or at risk of extinction, (Lewis, Sandilos, Hammer, Sawyer, and Méndez, 2016). Interestingly, the language extinction risk is not peculiar to Africa or Nigeria. A number of languages across the globe are recognized as endangered (UNESCO, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022; Nanduri & Bonsignore, 2023). Nigeria's specific number of endangered languages is difficult to determine. However, Ekele (2018) opines that Igbo, one of Nigeria's major indigenous languages, is considered more endangered than even some lesser-known languages in Nigeria. Many scholars have examined the deterioration of the Igbo language in family communication from varying perspectives. Babalobi (2020) affirms that the family plays the most significant role in transmitting a language from one generation to another. Families are therefore indicted as the principal culprits in the transference of the Igbo language. Similarly, Oguejiofor, as cited in Onwudiwe (2016), observes that some Igbo families take pride in banning their children from speaking their language, thereby denying them the benefits of the philosophy and thought of Igbo culture. Obviously, the sustenance of a language is fundamentally dependent upon its usage within the familial context. However, a collective reluctance among Igbo parents to impart their native language on their children and wards considerably diminishes the prospects for its sustainability. No wonder some researchers like Oluikpe (2021) and Lupke (2015) observe that over 28 percent of Nigeria's indigenous languages are considered at risk of extinction. This condition is worsened by an evolutionary trend called globalization.

Indigenous Nigerian Languages and Globalization

An indigenous language is a language native to a specific region and spoken by indigenous people. it carries their knowledge, culture and identity. In the Nigerian context, the indigenous languages are the various native languages spoken in Nigeria. These languages are aboriginal to the people. Examples are the three major Nigerian languages-Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, which are national in outlook. They perform recognized linguistic functions in the country. Others include Ijaw, Nupe, Edo, Efik, Fulfude, Ibibio and Itsekiri among others. Most of them play linguistic roles limited to the locality in which they are spoken, and are consequently recognized mainly by those to which they are first languages. Dandaura (2017) notes that there are about 520 indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria. Only very few of these languages have written forms, yet they are vital for preserving cultural heritage, transmitting knowledge and maintaining the identity of indigenous Nigerians. Despite these important roles of the indigenous languages, their sustainability has been threatened by a universal phenomenon known as globalization.

Globalization is the set of processes that contributes to the relationship between societies and individuals around the world. According to Ahmadu (2013), globalization refers to the process of the intensification of economic, political, social and cultural relations across international boundaries. This agrees with Obiagwu and Mbamalu (2010) who define globalization as a process of bringing together different nations of the world under a global village with socio-politico and economic-cultural interaction, integration, diffusion and give and take facilitated by information flow, and perhaps for the enhancement of the global world. This phenomenon enables people to share a lot of things in common irrespective of their geographical locations. There are three major types of globalization namely: economic globalization, political globalization and cultural globalization, (Olufemi, 2022). Economic globalization refers to the increasing interconnectedness of the world's economies while political globalization is used to describe how (political) events in one country affect events in another country.

Cultural globalization on the other hand is a situation where people from all over the world are enjoying the same entertainments, cuisines, habits and language. It is the interpenetration of cultures which as a result make many nations adopt principles, beliefs, and costumes of other nations, losing their unique culture and languages to a globalized-supra culture and language. Obiefuna and Kanu (2017) opines that a global language will lead to an increased mutual

understanding of the world among members of the global village. This mutual understanding will serve as a leeway to the advent of universalization, homogenization, integration and centralization, and form a strong foundation upon which the world as a village would exist. In other words, researchers that are defenders of globalization, see it as the peak of human progress and unity for all nations (Obiefuna & Kanu, 2017). In its quest for unity, globalization tries to converge a previously divergent world, turning it into what is now known as a 'global village'. To strengthen this unity, it necessitates the adoption of universal linguistic codes, predominantly manifesting in the adoption of major world language(s). As such, the less powerful nations like Nigeria will always be sidelined for the language of big powers. The preeminence of global languages often leads to the marginalization or extinction of numerous indigenous languages.

Historically, indigenous languages have always been at risk of going into extinction, but the trend seems to be accelerating at an alarming rate due to increased globalization. Globalization of media, technology and culture has resulted in the dominance of a few languages over others. Crystal (2003) observes that English language has infiltrated global communication channels to such an extent that it frequently marginalizes local languages, especially within the domains of commerce, digital content and education. Corroborating this, Olufemi (2022) remarks that English has developed as a global lingua franca for business and trade, and a common language for global communication. This often results in languages with smaller speakers or reduced economic clout being abandoned in favour of the English language. This has serious implications on the survival and sustainability of the indigenous languages.

Strategies for Sustaining Indigenous Nigerian Languages

Indigenous languages are not only methods of communication, but also extensive and complex systems of knowledge that have developed over millennia. They are central to the identity of indigenous peoples, the preservation of their cultures, world views and visions as well as an expression of self-determination. When indigenous languages are under threat, so too are indigenous peoples themselves. It is therefore very important that all hands must be on deck to safeguard the indigenous Nigerian languages from the clutches of extinction. To that end, this paper highlights some strategies that would be applied for the sustainability of the indigenous Nigerian languages. They include: mother tongue education, cultural promotion and media representation, documentation of the indigenous languages and legal and policy frameworks.

Mother Tongue Education

One of the most effective means of sustaining indigenous Nigerian languages in a globalized world is by using them as medium of instruction starting from homes. The family is the birth place of culture (language), where it is nurtured and developed (Obiefuna and Kanu, 2017). It is therefore expedient that parents must prioritize teaching their indigenous language to their children as matter of primary right and responsibilities irrespective of where they find themselves. The overemphasis on the international language has made most young people "dead" to their local languages. Thus, the indigenous language should be used both at home and in schools, especially at the primary and secondary education levels. This is the formative years of the students and at this age, if their native language, the language in which they think and which equally reflects their reality is used in teaching them there is a great chance of improved learning. Studies by Adetuyi and Jegede (2016) have shown that an educational system that adeptly incorporates indigenous languages amplifies language proficiency and overall enhanced academic performance among learners. In view of this, UNESCO (2013) advocates for mother tongue-based bilingual or multilingual education as an important factor for inclusion and qualitative education. This approach not only facilitates language revival and sustainability, but also enhances students' educational performance through the cognitive and cultural benefits derived from bi- or multilingualism. Cummins (1986) Theory of Linguistic Interdependence posits that proficiency in a mother tongue significantly improves the learning of subsequent languages, thereby highlighting the importance of cultivating strong first-language literacy skills.

When children are taught in their mother tongue, it deepens their confidence in their language. However, in most African countries, the English language is the main medium of instruction. Nyati-Saleshando (2016) maintains that the common model across the continent is the restrictive use of African languages in education. Even when language policies are positive towards indigenous languages, practice tends to favour English teaching and official use. This is not the only issue. In many private schools, students are often punished for speaking their mother tongue, which is labeled vernacular. This makes learners who cannot speak the English language fluently appear to be underachieving. This attitude bestows the status of inferiority on the indigenous languages; and stamps in the minds of the children the idea that their language has no inherent worth. Against this backdrop, this paper argues that encouraging mother tongue education especially at the formative years of the learners would help in revitalizing and sustaining the indigenous Nigerian languages in the face threats of globalization. According to May (2012), successful language revitalization initiative can be achieved by employing immersive and bilingual approaches, wherein the mother tongue is the primary medium of

instruction across all academic subjects. This underscores the utility of the indigenous languages in both academic and professional arena, thereby elevating their perceived value and utility to the public.

Cultural promotion and media representation

Another way by which globalization has impacted negatively on the indigenous languages is through cultural assimilation. This is a process wherein individuals from one cultural milieu adopt the belief systems and behavioral norms of other people. This frequently results in the attrition of distinctive aspects of indigenous cultures. Amutan and Ching (2020) contends that globalization promotes cultural homogenization, thereby reducing desirability and utility of the indigenous languages. Educational systems further accelerate cultural assimilation through language policies. King (2018) maintains that when educational instruction is conducted predominantly in a dominant language like English, students from minority language backgrounds are often coerced into adopting it, at the expense of their native languages. This not only undermines their linguistic competence but also erodes their cultural identity.

Sequel to the above, this paper contends that organizing social activities with cultural undertone such as literary readings, theatrical performances, and festivals could be effective in promoting and preserving indigenous languages in Nigeria. Cultural events have long been instrumental in reinforcing linguistic identity, particularly in minority language contexts. For instance, Cunliffe and Huws (2021), argue that digital and live cultural expressions, such as the Eisteddfod festival, serve as powerful platforms for normalizing the use of Welsh in public domains. Similarly, Jones (2019) notes that cultural initiatives not only celebrate Welsh heritage but also actively encourage intergenerational transmission of the language through community engagement. They instilled a sense of pride and a feeling of ownership among Welsh speakers. This could be adopted and replicated in Nigerian situation to salvage the indigenous languages.

Furthermore, cultural contents could be incorporated into school curriculums. It makes learning more relevant to students' lives and as well facilitates the application of indigenous languages in educational contexts. This strategy is not merely beneficial in preserving indigenous languages but also instrumental in enabling students to acquire a profound understanding and appreciation of their cultural heritage (Cindi & Mosimege, 2023). This will eventually influence public perception of the younger generation about their native languages. Puzey (2012) argues that positive representations can elevate the prestige of indigenous languages, encouraging both

native speakers and potential learners to adopt them more enthusiastically. Conversely, negative or stereotypical portrayals can reinforce prejudices and deter people from engaging with or learning the indigenous languages.

Again, the pervasive influence of media is another factor that encourages cultural assimilation. According to Olukpo (2021), the media makes the English language appear to be indispensable for social integration and personal advancement. Most often, the media contents are produced and disseminated in the English language. Thus, cultural assimilation not only leads to language loss but also the erasure of cultural identities linked to the people. To avert this, the promotion of the cultural heritage associated with the indigenous languages, coupled with their robust presence across diverse media forms, is desirable for safeguarding their linguistic vitality. Elevated visibility, which could be achieved through media representation or cultural manifestations, can enhance the prestige of indigenous languages within society, as well as influence the frequency of their usage, especially among the youths. Modern media platforms such as the Internet, television, and radio serve as potent catalysts for fostering linguistic diversity. For instance, the creation of digital content that features and is delivered in indigenous languages will not only expand their audience reach but also potentially connects them to a global audience.

Documentation of the indigenous languages

Nigerian languages are primarily in the oral form. The fact that only very few of them have orthography, is a major concern about their chances of survival in a global world. This buttresses the need for government and concerned individuals to make concerted effort to ensure the codification of more if not all the indigenous languages in Nigeria. When these languages have written codes, it would be easy to document them for preservation and transmission to future generations. Interestingly, today's technological environment offers unprecedented tools and opportunities for the documentation, daily usage, and pedagogy of languages. Online dictionaries, language learning applications, and expansive digital resources provide globally accessible platforms that are instrumental in this regard. Austin and Sallabank (2011) emphasize the pivotal role of technology in documenting endangered languages, highlighting the important function of digital databases and archives in preserving linguistic data that might otherwise be irretrievably lost.

In this twenty first century, any language that lacks support from prevalent applications, commonly utilized software, or online services is significantly disadvantaged. Supporting this

assertion, **Warschauer (2003**) contends that while technology can serve as a lifeline for indigenous languages, providing them a platform for survival, the absence of such technological support can lead not only to a competitive disadvantage but also to the potential extinction of these languages. Thus, technological resources are crucial not only for facilitating access to content in native languages but also for documenting and archiving these languages that are at risk of extinction. This underscores the urgent need for integrating Igbo and other endangered languages into the digital space to ensure their continuity.

Legal frameworks

Legal and policy frameworks are crucial in ensuring the sustainability of indigenous Nigerian languages. In this regard, Nigerian government has made several language policies concerning the position of the indigenous languages in the education sector. For instance, Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2014) stipulates that every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment alongside one of the three major Nigerian languages-Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. It further states that the medium of instruction in the primary school shall be language of the immediate environment, for the first three years. From the fourth year, when English has become the medium of instruction, the language of the environment shall be taught as a subject. At secondary school level, language of the environment shall be taught as first language (L1) while one of the major Nigerian languages shall be taught as a second language (L2). In other words, it was expected that every child should learn two indigenous languages in the secondary school. Unfortunately, these policy statements were never seriously implemented.

Worst still, the latest edition of the National Policy on Education adjusted the language policy to the detriment of the indigenous languages. According to National Policy on Education every child shall be taught in the language of the immediate community (LIC) or mother tongue for the first four years of basic education which is 0-4 years (FRN, 2014). This language is also expected to be used in the first three years of primary education, but only in monolingual communities. This implies that the usage of LIC in the primary school is now conditional. Again, the three major Nigerian languages are no longer core subjects at senior secondary level of education. On the contrary, the English language has remained a core subject at all levels of education in Nigeria. This underscores the degree of importance attached to it. The Nigerian constitution which is the highest legislative document in the country also acknowledges English as the country's official language. It is clearly evidenced that Nigerian policy has continued to favour the English language against the indigenous languages.

This paper therefore argues that policies that adequately integrate indigenous languages into educational curricula are crucial for their revitalization. Krauss (2012) asserts that legal status is important in averting language extinction. The author maintains that without such legal backing, indigenous languages are unlikely to receive the requisite support for their survival. It is therefore believed that if Nigerian government legitimizes the use of indigenous languages in official contexts and gives them their desirable position in the educational environments, it would substantially elevate their prestige and enhance their sustainability.

Conclusion

Globalization has extensively contributed to making life easier for man especially through the advancement in Science and Technology. It has also continued to pull the distant poles of the world together to the extent that the world is now referred to as a global village. This is a great advancement because people can interact and share a lot of things together from different parts of the world. Despite all the benefits emanating from globalization, it is being faulted for its move to establish a global language, as the major channel of encounter in the global village. This would result in linguistic extinction among the indigenous people. Given the indispensable role of language amongst people, as a vehicle that carries their identity, cultures, values and traditions, from one generation to the next, the move for a global language will have adverse consequences, especially for languages of developing countries like Nigeria. This is because they do not yet have the political and economic strength to call the shots in the global village. As such, this paper articulated some strategies that would be helpful for sustainability of indigenous Nigerian languages in the globalized world.

Recommendations

Based on the forgoing discussion, the following suggestions are made;

1. Our values should be re-shaped through sound educational system by better training and reorientation.
2. Our school curriculum should be re-shaped to fall into local needs.
3. Government should make language policies that would promote the use of the indigenous languages in the public arena.
4. Policy implementation, monitoring and control should be paramount in Nigerian education system.

5. Relative languages should be upheld in classroom instructions. Above all, emphasis should be laid on the teaching of our indigenous languages as also a unifying factor in our ultimately informal and formal sector.

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