

Languages of wider communication, globalisation and the Igbo language vitality

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Abstract

This paper focuses on languages of wider communication (LWCs), globalization and their effect on the Igbo Language. This study is relevant as present day-to-day interactions among Igbo people both within and outside the Igbo territory reveal that the language is fast losing its vitality. It discusses the relations between globalization and languages of wider communication with a view to demonstrating the factors that have affected the vitality of the Igbo language. The study recommends the awakening of the consciousness of the Igbo people towards making concerted efforts to promote the Igbo language by speaking it and committing resources in developing it to equip it to qualify as a language of wider communication and participate actively in the dynamics of globalization and not become a victim of it.

Introduction

Prior to the 1980s, nationalism, especially among colonized nations of the world, nationhood and territorial integrity are common terms in both national and international relations, law and politics. However, since the 1980s the term, ‘globalization’ has assumed so much importance and prominence in international and national discussion, covering such areas as economic, technological, financial, labor, cultural and environmental progress. Secondly, languages of wider communication are those languages that enjoy a high vitality either at global, continental, sub-regional, national or geo-political regional levels. In order to make themselves globally relevant, Igbo indigenes plunge themselves into learning and speaking languages such as English, French, Yoruba and Hausa at the detriment of their mother-tongue. As a result of the interaction between the forces of Languages of Wider Communication and globalization, Igbo is fast losing its vitality and is migrating towards death. This paper would study these two forces and their implications on Igbo language. The paper would also recommend solutions to the loss of the vitality of the Igbo language.

Globalization

To define globalization, we find the words of Philippe Soubestre (1997:cover page) very useful:

The pace of change in the world seems to have accelerated sharply over the last few years – certainly since the end of the cold war.

Communications have become more rapid, working patterns are changing, markets for goods and services have been transformed and money can be moved freely and instantaneously from one country to another. Globalization is the catch-all word used nowadays to describe what is happening.

Heidegger (1971:165) puts it succinctly thus:

All distance in time and space are shrinking. Man now reaches overnight by planes, places which formerly took weeks and months of travel ... Distant sites of the most ancient cultures are shown on film as if they stood this very moment amidst today's street traffic.

A simplified form therefore of this positive view of *globalization* reveals the following as indices of globalization: an increased rate in the movement of persons, goods and services across national frontiers; an increase in the speed rate of cash flows; greater rate of cultural transfers (hybridization) and influences; development of easily accessible global telecommunications infrastructure; development of global financial system; increase in the presence of multinational companies across nations; increase in the role of international organizations: UNO, NATO, EU, ECOWAS, AU and their various agencies among nations as well as increased plunge into international standards – global best practices.

However, there are negative criticisms on *globalization*. In the words of David Dominique quoted in Oke (2003:4):

It is creating more inequalities in the globe. More than a hundred underdeveloped countries are virtually excluded from development process in spite of globalization. "Free market" ideology of Globalization is exploitative unless all the conditions for competition are fulfilled which is not yet the case – especially with poverty and ignorance reigning in the third world. Globalization may make information available but poor people in poor countries are hindered not only from having access to it but also from making sense out of it. In the way it is being implemented today the bulk of the benefits accrue to a small and privileged minority.

This is simply capitalism and despotism on a global note.

According to David Held and Anthony McGrew (2002), the end of the Second World War and the fall of the Berlin wall marked a great plunge into globalization.

Theories of evolution of human language

Language is the social property which is common to a socio-cultural community that makes it possible for every member of the community to understand one another. These social and cultural roles of language fall within the domain of socio-linguistics, which according to Ndimele (2001:22) studies all aspects of the relationship between language and society.

Language is known to perform a number of functions in human society such as political and cultural functions. Politically, language aggregates its speakers into a governable unit; hence language plays a cohesive role in the political unity of a people. Every political system whether in the pre-colonial system or colonial or post-colonial system is grouped according to the commonness of a given language to a people. Again, people of a common language also share in common cultural practices. But at the background of all these stands the communicative role of language because both in governance and in cultural practices, the people involved must talk with one another. Therefore communication is key to all the roles of language in any given society.

Ndimele (2007:5-6) selects and discusses four theories of the origin of human language. They are:

- (a) The Bow-wow theory which proposes that the earlier humans developed human language through the imitation of the sounds of nature, particularly lower animals.
- (b) The pooh-pooh theory which states that human language came about as the early man expressed sounds of emotion such as anger or a scream when afraid.
- (c) The Grunt theory which claims that human language evolved from the sounds of exertion made by man, such as u-h, aargh, etc.
- (d) The play theory which holds that human language developed through the habit of the early man in which he thought it fun to make sounds while going about his day to day business.

Whichever one is the true story, it is remarkable that human languages evolved on equal basis as a code of a speech community. That a human language or some languages have developed into what is known today as Languages of Wider Communication is a product of certain factors which we are going to consider in this paper.

Languages of wider communication

Emenanjo (2006:40-41) describes languages of wider communication with these words:

In terms of wider spread usage we have:- Languages of wider communication such as English in the world, Hausa in Northern Nigerian and West Africa Kiswahili in East and Central Africa, and Nigerian pidgin in a good part of Southern Nigeria. Such languages are spoken by very large numbers of second languages, non-native speakers across very large land masses such as the states, nations, regions or continents.

Emenanjo classifies languages of wider communication into: major languages such as Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and Nigerian pidgin in Nigeria, national languages such as Kiswahili in Tanzania or Sango in Burkina Faso, regional languages such as Kiswahili in East Africa, and international languages such as English or French in the world.

Languages of wider communication enjoy wider usage frequency in day-to-day conversations among their far flung users with insignificant or no interference of any other

language. Languages of wider communication are also languages of literacy and education among their users. This means that such languages are used in writing books across subjects and disciplines. A language of wider communication is used in teaching in schools, colleges, universities, churches, conferences and seminars. It is also a language of the mass media both radio, television, internet and the print media. It is a language of administration both in secular and sacred settings. Non-speakers of such languages plunge into them because of their high vitality in trade, industry, politics, science, technology and so on.

Factors responsible for the evolution of languages of wider communication

Colonialism/political domination

The back-ground or nucleus of the evolution of languages of wider communication (LWC) is language contact and its subsequent assimilation. These contacts came first of all through colonialism. Whether a people were colonized through conquest or through the Berlin Conference of 1884/5 with its resultant partition of Africa, the language of the colonialists, which is a paramount aspect of a people's culture is imposed on the people. Commenting on the rationalizations the west put at the background of colonialism, which is racial domination, Achebe (2004:195) wrote that both popes and theologians debated on what Africans were believed not to have and not to be:

So these creatures have no soul, no religion, no culture, no history, no human speech, no I.Q. Any wonder that they should be subjugated by those who are endowed by these human gifts.

So, since the colonized (African) have no human speech (code), the language of the colonialists had to be imposed on the colonized through the educational institutions and administration. Supporting this view on the evolution of Hausa as a language of wider communication, Fakuade, Gambo and Bashir (2010:147) write:

Apart from its being the language of commercial and political activities, which are strong factors that enhance the vitality and spread of a language, the Hausa language also became a genuine factor in the political ascendancy of the ruling class (which was Fulani). The ruling class was quick to include this potent weapon of mobilization in the political armoury, and it still remains just as important a factor in the calculus of power relations. If speakers of a minority language wanted to be in the mainstream of the north in the early days of Nigeria's independence, their chances were brighter if they became Islamized or Hausanized.

This accounts for why Claude Truchot (1989:487) affirms that varieties of the French language is found in the francophone nations of the third world countries with its

demographic vitality. Francophone speaks of political dominance of France over other countries on which she imposed her French language and culture.

Missionary factor

When European missionaries settled in their various places of mission in the 18th and 19th centuries, they began to study the indigenous languages of the area. The next thing they did in this regard was to select one language out of many and standardized it by forming its orthography, writing and translating the Bible into it. Brann (1981:5-9) maintains that this was the situation in the standardization of *Ewe* language above all other languages in Togo, *Fante* in Cape Coast and *Twi* in Kumasi. Brann also maintains that it was through language contact and assimilation that pidgins and creoles developed in Liberia and Nigeria. Also the language policies of home governments of the missionaries, who established schools in these colonies, were very instrumental to the indigenes assimilating the languages and cultures of these Europeans: English, French, German, etc. Falk (1997:330) supports this view when he wrote:

Under British jurisdiction in Ghana, the church was obliged to use English language. The Scottish missionaries helped the German-speaking teachers learn English. ... Dahomey became a French territory, and in 1892 the Methodists were obliged to use the French language in their schools.

According to Fakuade, Gambo and Bashir (2010:147-148), this approach was also adopted in making the Hausa language a language of wider communication as this language of the Fulani aborigine was used for Islamization.

Economic factor

Brann (1981:17) reveals that economic factor is very contributory to the evolution of languages of wider communication. This factor could be in forms of external trade or internal trade, since many sub-Saharan African countries had been in trade contact with English, French, Dutch and Italian ventures since the 15th century, before the Berlin Conference. This agrees with the fact that the presence of France in Nigeria dates before Nigeria's colonial history. It is true that the Berlin Conference (1884-85) and the partition of Africa did the work for the large-scale colonization of the African Continent, according to Bandia (2006:9), but history has it that the French Company on the Niger sold out to the British Niger Company at about 1876. The French Company on the Niger was trading on the Niger and in Dahomey (Benin Republic), according to Falk (1997:415-416). During the colonial era, Nigeria was exported palm oil, cocoa, coffee and animal hide to France. As at 1949, UBA (Banque Nationale de Paris-BNP) was doing business on the Nigerian soil. The United Bank for Africa (UBA) gave birth to the International Bank for West Africa (IBWA). In 1974, the first French auto-mobile company, the Peugeot Automobile (PAN) came into Nigeria, followed by SCOA, CFAO, Michelin, United Trading Company (UTC).

Elf and Total are in the oil sector. Dumez and Spibat are in the construction sector. Sona and Consolidated are breweries. Pfizer is in the pharmaceutical sector. Air France is in the aviation sector. Today, French is Nigeria's second official language.

The Igbo language and its vitality

Igbo is the indigenous language of the indigenes of the South Eastern part of Nigeria. Igbo states therefore include: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo in their entirety. Some parts of Delta, Edo and Rivers States, all in the South East Geo-political Zone are also part of the Igbo nation of Nigeria. Day to day interactions among the Igbo people within and outside their native territory show that Igbo language is fast losing its vitality as evidenced in the following realities in the interlocutory use of Igbo among its indigenes:

- (i) educated Igbo indigenes converse mostly in English language;
- (ii) uneducated and fairly educated Igbo people cannot speak Igbo without the interference of English;
- (iii) Igbo families most of whom are either uneducated or fairly educated groom their children domestically in the use of English language for conversation, instead of Igbo, thereby inculcating in their children a love for English and a dislike for Igbo as Igbo is abandoned in conversations;
- (iv) some Igbo parents send their children to Alliance Françaises, French Schools and colleges to learn French in order for them to become international (globalized) people in future;
- (v) the use of Hausa and Yoruba Languages has become common among road transport workers in Igbo land namely: commercial drivers and bus conductors. One notices the abandon of Igbo as these road transport workers say the following either to themselves or to passengers: *Shiga moto* (Hausa), *wale, owa* (Yoruba), etc. It is now common among Igbo people to hear words like *aboki, megard*, etc on Igbo soil;
- (vi) Igbo nursery school pupils, primary school pupils and secondary school students are punished at school, for speaking Igbo on Igbo soil; and
- (vii) traditional features of Igbo customs and traditions are now documented and discussed with English words such as: *oji* (kola nut), *iwa oji* (breaking of kolanut), *okwa/ora-mmanu* (turn-oil), *umunna* (kindred), *mmanyi-ngwo* (palm wine) and so on, just because Igbo villagers want to show that they also are globalized and can express themselves in the world's number one language of wider communication (English). This attitude therefore bears upon lists of requirements for traditional marriages and burial ceremonies.

A critical consideration of the foregoing points shows that there is a high and progressive loss of interest in the use of Igbo language among Igbo nationals which is gradually culminating in the death of the Igbo Language. This trend detracts from the vitality of the

language: an indication that something has to be done before the worst scenario plays out for the Igbo language.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted and discussed the factors of language of wider communication and how this phenomenon relates with globalization. The emerging situation tests the place of the Igbo language in relation with the status of language of wider communication and globalization. By the evident parameters of vitality, the Igbo language is determined to be associated with progressive loss of interest on the part of its speakers. Hence, we recommend the awakening of the consciousness of Igbo people towards making concerted efforts to promoting the Igbo language by speaking it and committing resources to developing it to equip it to qualify as a language of wider communication and participate actively in the dynamics of globalization and not become a victim of it.

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