

Issues in Language Choice: Focus on the Igbo -English Bilinguals

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Abstract

Many factors determine the choice of a given language in any multilingual situation. Among these factors are socioeconomic status, attitude towards languages, language proficiency, language preference, speech situation, and political factors. This work assesses, using Scotton's Markedness model, the factors that can influence the language choice and maintenance of Igbo speakers, considering the variables of location, age, sex, and occupation, assessing their attitudes and language preference with the resultant effects on them. What formed the data for this study is a questionnaire administered to one hundred (100) young and adult randomly selected Igbo-English bilinguals in Umuahia metropolis and its neighboring rural areas. Data were analyzed using simple percentage. Results show that the location, age, sex and occupation of Igbo speakers greatly influence their language choice in any given domain and established negative attitudes and lack of value for Igbo language by the participants which invariably, gave way for hegemonic spread of the dominant language (English) over the native language. This paper finally calls for revalorization and conscious inter-generational transmission of Igbo language to the young ones to forestall total endangerment, and consequently, extinction.

Keywords: *Language choice, language maintenance, language shift, language attitude, revitalization.*

Introduction

Over two decades, sociolinguists have been concerned about the future of our indigenous languages which preponderant research and qualitative evidences have proved to suffer impending mass extinction (Harmon & Loh, 2010; Austin & Sallabank, 2011). It is evident that the entireties of the world's languages -not just the number, but also the linguistic and cultural diversity they represent are diminishing. While some languages are, to a great degree hit by this linguistic misnomer, others are in robust, taken advantage of the global traits. The status of the world's indigenous languages according to Harmon & Loh (2010) is weighty to global initiatives such as the Convention on Biological Diversity as well as to indigenous communities themselves. It is observed that our indigenous languages are directly or indirectly under trait of the dominant power of English language and since language is a primary repository of human culture and knowledge (Fishman, 1991), there is need for us to play our parts to protect, strengthen, and promote our languages as carriers of our heritage.

In languages-in-contact situation, records show instances where speech communities experience the gradual replacement of one language by another (Dorian, 1981). This linguistic experience is not instant but a gradual process which over time results to socio-political and socio-economic competitive tensions, conflicts and establishment of a dominant culture. Many factors give rise to languages-in contact situation. They include, colonization, migration, globalization, among others. In the case of Igbo speech communities, colonization gave rise to languages in contact situation. Dweik & Qawar (2015) observed three possible linguistic outcomes of prolonged languages in contact: language maintenance, bilingualism or multilingualism and language shift. Researchers have recorded cases where languages-in contact, without conscious effort by the native speakers to maintain their languages resulted to structural transformations related to shift (Tsitsipis, n.d). Arvanitika language (a variety of Tosk, or southern dialect division of Albanian), according Tsitsis has experienced changes due to its contact with the dominant national language, Greek. Also in Mexico, the conditions of the Mexicano (Nahuatl) indigenous language in contact with Mexican Spanish, has given rise to a complex syncretic project. Speakers whose languages are in contact, as a matter of fact, decide which of the languages to choose in interpersonal or other related communicative purposes, and many factors influence the language choice such as socio economic status, gender, age, occupation, rural and urban origin, speakers, place, media, educational attainment, etc (David, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

This study is carried out within the framework of Myer-Scotton's Markedness Model (1993, 1998). Myer Scotton's Markedness is a model that relates to the choice of one linguistic variety over other possible varieties and posits that each language in a multilingual community is associated with particular social roles, which she calls rights-and-obligations (RO) set (Myer-Scotton, p. 4). According to Myer Scotton, as speakers come to recognize the different RO sets possible in their communities, they develop a sense of indexicality

of code choices for these RO sets. Following the model, a speaker who is a socialized member of a multilingual speech community is aware of an underlying set of rules that determine why he should choose a particular variety rather than another to the extent that whether he obeys the rule or not, he is in effect making a statement about the RO set that he chooses to communicate with his addressee. In other words, according to this model, the speaker's choice of any linguistic variety in different domains is motivated by social consequences that (he knows) may result from making those choices.

Myer Scotton's markedness model has underlying rules or what she called "maxims" (Myer-Scotton, 1993. p. 114). They are:

The unmarked-choice maxim: "Make your code choice the unmarked index of the unmarked RO set in talk exchanges when you wish to establish or affirm that RO set"

The marked-choice maxim: "Make a marked code choice which is not the unmarked index of the unmarked RO set in an interaction when you wish to establish a new RO set as unmarked for the current exchange"

Exploratory choice maxim: "When an unmarked choice is not clear, use codeswitching (CS) to make alternative exploratory choices as candidates for an unmarked choice and thereby as an index of an RO set which you favor".

The implication of Myer Scotton's maxims is that the speaker's rights and obligations (RO) completely defines the social meanings of language choice and the causes of alternation. The marked and unmarked distinctions of markedness model are used to explain the social and psychological motivations for making one language choice over another. We found this model relevant because it helps us to relate the choice of one linguistic variety over other possible varieties in Igbo speech community among Igbo bilinguals.

Language choice is a careful selection of word, phrase, clause or sentence of a language within the speaker's linguistic repertoire. No one talks about language choice in a monolingual society. It is a feature of multilingualism or multilingual society like Nigeria. Dweik and Qawar (2015) claim that once a new language is learned, it becomes available as part of a speaker's stylistic repertoire. Language choice is affected by utilitarian considerations. The characterized differences between languages such as prestige, size of speakers, vitality, status, and power are significant factors which often make speakers adjust their language choice patterns during their life time as well as from one generation to the other, along with the speakers' attitudes towards their language. Ansah (2014) for instance, records that domains of language use, activity as well as the language background of participants are the considerations that inform language choice among Larteh English bilinguals (Ghanians) who are faced with multilingual challenges. Language choice is also influenced by dominant languages (Ferrer and Sankoff, 2004), socio-economic, authority, power, and prestigious factors. In a multilingual society as Managan (2004) records, the choice of a dominant language provides people with the prestige and the chance to socialize and gain more economic success. The choice of minority language however has its own advantage, it helps speakers to establish solidarity in interactions (Dweik and Qawar, 2015). In any speech community, where the dominant language is chosen far above the minority or endangered language in more of its communicative activities, or where the speech community witnesses a gradual replacement of its native language by another in their lives, it is regarded as language shift (Laoire, 2007). A progressive and deliberate abandonment of one's language of origin and at the same time, adopting the language of economically and socially dominant language leads to language shift. English language, an exogenous language in Nigeria is a politically and socio-economically mobility language that has exerted negative influence on our indigenous native speakers, leaving us culturally and linguistically colonized. The process of language shift is a gradual one passing from one generation to another. The replaced language in consequence is predisposed to endangerment, if it is not revitalized or put in active use.

Laoire further observes that language revitalization and maintenance are seen as the converse trajectory of, and an antidote to sustained language shift. The speech community must make conscious effort to ensure that the vitality of the moribund or threatened by extinction language is restored by adding new sets of speakers through intergenerational transmission (Spolsky, 1996), adding new functions to the endangered language as well as individual and speech community awareness that positive attitudes can save the language (Laoire, 2008). Language maintenance does not only require the development of language planning activities (Jagodic, 2011), but specific attention to the strategies for the acquisition of new potential speakers within the wider society. Language maintenance is a conscious effort to use one's language not only as a medium of expression but also by communicating in it, protecting it from the influence of the dominant language or other competing languages, as well as passing it on to new potential speakers. The aim of language maintenance is to retain or regain the structural and functional integrity of a threatened language. Many of our indigenous languages have lost their aroma due to socially and economically dominant language, English

synchronized with negative language attitudes. Language attitudes are the feelings people have on their own language variety or the language(s) of others. Ithemere (2006) records that language attitudes assist to perpetuate language choices given that languages are objective. From the behaviorist perspective, attitudes are to be found simply in responses people make to social situations (Fasold, 1984) while attitudes are viewed as an internal, mental state which may give rise to certain forms of behavior, from the mentalist perspective (Appel & Muskyen, 1987). This study makes appeal to behavioral perspective of language attitudes since they are aspects that are observable.

A dominant language, from the examples cited above influences the language choice of a speaker. Phillai (2006) supports this observation when he records that dominant languages can be used in formal and informal domains of communication and help to gain prestige, better economic access in the community, authority and power. With the adverse effects of the dominant languages on the minority and endangered languages, what is the fate or condition of Igbo language in the face of the socially and economically dominant language English. We are inclined to note that Igbo language, following Aikawa in UNESCO (2001) is classified as a definitely endangered language. A definitely endangered language defines a situation where the language is no longer taught to the children as a first language. The youngest speakers are the parents who no longer care to transmit the language to the next generations. Igbo is witnessing decline in intergenerational transmission, and usage of the language is becoming restricted to fewer speakers, domains, and functions. This study concerns with the choice of language an Igbo speaker makes in different domains in the mist of other languages, the type of attitudes Igbo speakers have towards their native language, and the value placed on it that has brought some decline in both the number of its speakers and in the generational transmission.

The aim of this paper is to assess the language that is exclusively or mostly used or chosen among Igbo English bilinguals in the family, among the acquaintances, and professional domains, as well as the factors that affect their choices, bearing in mind the predisposition of Igbo as a definitely endangered language. The study further examines the variables (location, age, sex, and occupation) responsible for or influencing the choice of a particular language within the Igbo speech domains and the attitudes of Igbo speakers towards Igbo language.

Methodology

This study is designed to investigate what affects the language choice and maintenance of Igbo speakers at home, among acquaintances, and at work places. The population of this study is drawn from one hundred Igbo English bilinguals from Umuahia Metropolis and its neighboring rural areas. The respondents comprise both the urban and rural populates, young and adult Igbo speakers, males and females, public servants, as well as business men. We believe that these groups will yield the data necessary for the study. Data were generated through a questionnaire administered to the respondents who were selected using stratified random sampling. The data were collated and annotated through simple percentage and were represented in tables.

Findings

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of Urban and Rural Respondents' Choice of Language in the Family

Location	Mostly Igbo (MI)	Mostly English (ME)	Both	Total
Urban	5 (10%)	20 (40%)	25 (50%)	50
Rural	27 (54%)	12 (24%)	11 (22%)	50

From the table above, a total number of five respondents (10%) use mostly Igbo in their family, fifteen respondents (40%) use mostly English in their family and twenty five respondents (50%) use both Igbo and English in the home. The table further reveals a total frequency of twenty seven respondents (54%) choosing mostly Igbo in the family, twelve respondents (24%) for mostly English and eleven respondents (22%) choosing both Igbo and English.

Table 2: Frequency and Percentage of Young and Adult Igbo Respondents' Choice of Language at Home.

Age	Mostly Igbo	Mostly English	Both	Total
15-40yrs	3(6%)	30 (60%)	17 (34%)	50
41yrs-above	23 (46%)	17 (34%)	10 (20%)	50

Table 2 above reveals a total no of three (6%) respondents within the ages of 15 -40 years who chose to use mostly Igbo at home and in school, thirty respondents (60%) for mostly English, and seventeen respondents (34%) who chose to use both Igbo and English. A total number of twenty three respondents (46%) within

the ages of 41 years and above as the table further reveals choose mostly Igbo at home and work place domains, seventeen (34%) choose English while ten (20%) choose both Igbo and English.

Table 3: Frequency and Percentage of Male and Female Respondents' Choice of Language Among Acquaintances

Sex	Mostly Igbo	Mostly English	Both	Total
Male	21 (41%)	6 (12%)	23 (46%)	50
Female	10 (20%)	25 (50%)	15 (30%)	50

Table 3 above reveals a total no of twenty one (41%) male respondents with the choice of Igbo among acquaintances, seven (12%) with the choice of mostly English among acquaintances, and twenty three (46%) male respondents making a choice of both Igbo and English among acquaintances. Female respondents have a total frequency of ten (20%) with the choice of mostly Igbo among acquaintances, twenty five (50%) with the choice of mostly English among acquaintances, and fifteen (30%) with the choice of both Igbo and English among acquaintances.

Table 4: Showing the frequency and the percentages of public servants and business men respondents' choice of language at work place domains.

Occupation	Mostly Igbo	Mostly English	Both	Total
P/Servant	5 (10%)	30 (60%)	15 (30%)	50
Business Men	26 (52%)	8 (17%)	16 (32%)	50

In table 4, a total no of five (10%) public servant respondents make the choice of mostly Igbo at their work places, thirty (60%) make the choice of mostly English, while fifty (30%) respondents make the choice of both Igbo and English at their work places. Table 4 further reveals that a total number of twenty six (52%) business men respondents however, make the choice of mostly Igbo at the work place, eight (17%) business men respondents make the choice of mostly English while sixteen (32%) make the choice of both Igbo and English.

Table 5: Showing language attitudes of Igbo Respondents towards Igbo

Questions	Igbo%	English%
Which language do you prefer to talking to people?		
All the time	41%	59%
Most of the time	39%	61%
Sometimes	51%	49%
Not at all	64%	37%
Describe how well you speak the languages		
Perfect	36%	54%
Very well	40%	60%
Moderately well	48%	52%
Hardly well	55%	45%
Which language is the major language spoken in your environment	31%	69%

The table above reveals negative responses concerning the use of Igbo at all times and most of the time (39%) as against English that recorded (59% and 61%) respectively.

Discussion

From the foregoing findings, it is evidenced that the choice of Igbo language in the family, among acquaintances, as well as work place domains is greatly influenced by the variables: location, age, sex, and occupation, with age at the top (only 6% percent of young Igbo speakers were able to choose Igbo in the domains considered. The study shows the extent by which Igbo English bilinguals is decreasing, only 6% of the respondents use Igbo at home. Igbo language is marginally maintained in the urban, where only 5% of the respondents choose Igbo at home and other domains. It must be remarked that this study is carried out in Umuahia metropolis (a supposed dominantly Igbo community) where the language should be maintained and put in active use. Igbo language, though a major language in Nigeria is witnessing shift following from this findings. Even in the rural areas where Igbo language should be greatly maintained, table 1 shows only 54% of rural dwellers mostly communicating in the language.

There is a record of negative attitude towards Igbo by the respondents as revealed in table 5, while the majority in response to how well they speak Igbo responded that they hardly speak it well. The overall

responses concerning using Igbo in the family, among acquaintances, and in the work places were very negative. When the respondents were asked why they do not choose Igbo, the majority complained that they were looked down upon among the acquaintances and in work places when they communicate in Igbo. This result aligns with Sapa (2009) who recorded that among South African students, those who take up African languages at University level were perceived by their peers as 'second-grade students'. A reasonable number of the respondents complained they were not fluent in it so they preferred to use the code they have a good command of its use. The family in the Igbo communities, which is supposed to be an indispensable carrier of popular culture and offer limitless possibilities to transfer Igbo language to the young and upcoming generations, as this study further reveals, has experienced some setbacks in this direction. As for English, the results suggest that its prestige and dominance have earned it a preference by Igbo English bilinguals. These results agree with Ferrer & Sankoff (2004) who found out that dominant languages influence the language choice of a speaker, and that the most prestigious language is favored as a major means of communication in various domains even when that language is not indigenous.

Conclusion

The choice of language by Igbo speakers is influenced by different variables like location, age, sex and occupation occasioned by negative attitudes towards Igbo by its native speakers. This study is in keeping with Dweik and Qawar (2015) who found out that the choice of language by Canadian Arabs of Quebec was triggered by factors like preference, attitudes, and purpose. The respondents' negative attitudes stem from the prestige accorded English which has been in contact with it as a result of colonization. This study therefore, calls for revalorization of the Igbo language to forestall serious endangerment and possibly extinction. This can easily be achieved through redevelopment, enhancement, and encouragement of the use of Igbo language at home, and in other domains by Igbo-English bilinguals (Fishman, 1991)

Recommendations

To save Igbo language from its definitely endangered state to the stage, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. Parents and adults must ensure inter-generational transmission of Igbo language to the young ones by exposing, and teaching the language to the children as a first language.
2. Igbo speakers must have protective and positive attitudes towards their native language since language attitudes assist to perpetuate language choices (Ihemere, 2006). Moreover, positive attitudes, action, commitment, and strong acts of will are necessary sacrifices Igbo speakers make adopt to save and revitalize Igbo in order to be culturally and linguistically decolonized.
3. New functions must be added by introducing the language into new domains where it was previously unused or relatively underused, especially in sports, churches, social media, legislation, and among unions.
4. The revalorisation of Igbo language by the speakers and neo-speakers must be encouraged by government, schools and all stakeholders.

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