

Revitalizing the Endangered Languages of Nigeria through Competitive Championship: A Case of the Igbo Language

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Abstract

The spate with which Nigerian languages are endangered is very worrisome. The Igbo language particularly is considered seriously endangered due to lack of strong language loyalty on the part of its speakers, despite being taught in the pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. There have been a lot of efforts geared towards proffering a remedy for revitalizing the Igbo language to achieve sustainable development. However, all efforts to achieve this have always heat the rock. It is on this note, therefore, that the present study tilts towards proffering a practical and workable solution in form of competitive championship to revitalizing the imperiled language of “Ndi Igbo”. The paper examines how competitive championship of language can be mustered to revive the endangered language of the Igbo people for greater vitality and sustainable development.

Keywords: *Revitalization, endangerment, language loyalty, competitive championship.*

Introduction

The speed with which foreign languages are gaining ground in Nigeria constitute a threat of endangerment and extinction of the indigenous Nigerian languages. These borrowed languages are considered anathema and a bane of the Nigeria language disappearance. Obviously when a language is endangered, its speakers are also endangered because; humanity loses not only cultural wealth but also important indigenous languages. Igbo language is unarguably one of those endangered languages spoken by about 25 million people. It is the principal native language of South Eastern Nigeria and it has over 20 different dialects. It is also recognized as a minority language in Equatorial Guinea. However, the language is one of the many tribal languages that UNESCO predicted in 2012 would become extinct by 2025 if nothing is done to salvage their fast decline use.

Uwechia (2016), rightly asked if this prediction is a genuine warning to be taken seriously or another dooms day prophesies that will never come to pass? From all indications, it is possible that this prediction may happen. According to him:

.....Ndigbo has been described as a stoic, remarkable, ubiquitous and progressive tribe. They are egalitarian, resourceful, resilient and adventurous and can be found in every nook and corner of the world, from the pinnacles of major global industries to the leadership of the command structure of the United State of America military. Academically and intellectually, they are well-endowed and celebrated at all levels of the world’s ivory towers, league schools and centers of excellence. And they are one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa. But this important sub-group will soon have no distinct indigenous language if the UNESCO’s prediction comes true.

As it is always the case, the demise of a people’s language herald and precedes the extinction of the group. So how did this supposedly very successful and important tribe fall into this dilemma and how can the trend be reversed? Before, delving into the crux of the study by way of providing answers to the questions raised above, it is pertinent to recall that some other previously successful groups or tribes (like the maya) noted for their enviable level of architectural and city development, had indeed gone extinct, although from different causation, just to affirm that the frightening UNESCO prediction for Igbo language can become a reality and not an empty threat. Certainly, the declining use of the Igbo language can be traced to the beginning of British colonization and the subjugation of Igbo culture and language to English culture. But the most effective of these tools were the deadly and damaging combination of religion and education. Through these two tools, the colonizers successfully indoctrinated ‘Ndigbo’ to despise their cultural heritage as primitive and satanic, and to convert the colonizers way of lives as the ultimate form of civilization and godliness. Admittedly, whilst there are certain aspects of the culture that need reform, the same goes for the received English culture. For instance, it is a well known fact that religious leaders compel Igbo parents to choose only English baptismal names for their infants and enforce such names as their first name;

consequently relegating the child's original and primary Igbo name to middle name as if there is something wrong with Igbo names. Majority of the English names are taken because they are either the name of a Christian saint or a noble English gentleman or even to denote a wish (e.g. Goodluck) which have no real connection with the child. Unlike English names, there is a real meaning behind every Igbo name, because it captures the circumstances of a child's birth and consequently reflects his true personality.

As a direct consequence of colonization, the English language was upheld as the official language of Nigeria, which covered all Igbo speaking people in eastern and parts of south –south Nigeria. English is used today at all levels of education and for transacting all government businesses, relegating Igbo and all other indigenous languages to the background. Most primary and secondary schools do not offer Igbo language as a school subject on their curriculum thereby setting the stage for the early and slow death of the language. Speaking “vernacular” in classes at most schools is a punishable offence. At the university level, undergraduates in Igbo departments, are scoffed, derided as unproductive and on graduation, earn lower salary than English graduates, thus, scaring off future progressives. English way of life, subsequently, becomes the trend and imitating the colonizers’ accent becomes an obsession and a mark of upwards mobility, which separates Igbo elites from the poor and uneducated tribesmen. The funny aspect of it is that, the English accent has also been infiltrated into the Igbo language by the so called elites in a bid to anglicise the language and put the last nail on the burial coffin of the Igbo language. This worrisome malady has seriously put the Igbo language into threat of extinction, hence, the need for a strong lasting solution to revive, resurrect, and re-invigorate the language, this is the goal of the present study.

Objective of the Study

According to UNESCO’s (2007) meeting on endangered languages in sub-saharan Africa held at Addis Ababa, there are three basic pronged approaches to pressuring and revitalizing endangered or threatened languages, they are;

- a. preparatory work in form of socio-linguistic surveys, defining the current situation of the language to be studied and determining the safeguarding measures to be adopted.
- b. data collection to study the phonology, morphology and syntax of the language and
- c. preparation of language materials (orthography guides, reading and writing manuals, teachers guides, word lists, small dictionaries, grammar)

These and several other approaches have been tested with the Igbo language, still, the language is under threat of extinction. This study therefore, attempts to examine the use of competitive championship in reviving the language with a view to preserving it for posterity.

Methodology

The research methodology used is purely from secondary sources of works as observed in soccer competition.

Review of Literature

Here, the paper examines what is available in the literature for revitalizing an endangered language. To effectively handle this, the section will review scholars' contributions on language endangerment and language revitalization.

Language Endangerment

No language willingly chooses an endangerment status for itself or willingly places itself on the threatened list, or knowingly commits linguistic *hara-kiri*. Hence, the concept of language endangerment has attracted a deluge of definitions from linguists and non-linguists in the renewed interests in the grim fate of endangered languages. In the opinion of Elugbe&Udoh (2006) in Agbedo (2011,p.72), endangered languages are languages that are threatened by extinction because they are not passed on to a younger generation. For Fakuade (1999), the most obvious definition is by the number of speakers. A language with fewer speakers as Fakuade claims, is more likely to be endangered in comparison with a language with a larger population of speakers. Bamgbose (1993) adopts the language loyalty criterion for defining the concept. According to him, “where loyalty is not strong, it is short step to language shift and eventual language death” In their opinion, Breninger, Henine and Sommer (1991:25), claim a figure of five hundred speakers qualifies as cut-off mark for endangerment. However, Bamgbose (1993:19) notes Fakuade (1999:59) in Agbedo (2011:72) faults the figure on the basis of approximation, since as he puts it, ‘There are languages spoken by thousands of speakers which are nevertheless endangered, while some languages with fewer speakers manage to resist

the threat of endangerment because of strong language loyalty.' Hale (1992) in defining the concept adopts the criterion of the incidence of domination by more powerful language. Wurm (2003) in UNESCO'S Atlas of the world's languages in Danger of Disappearing classifies language endangerment into five;

Potentially endangered: when children of a cultural area start preferring the dominant language and learn the obsolescing language imperfectly. In this case, the language starts to lose child speakers. **Endangered:** if the youngest speakers are adults and there are no or very few child speakers. **Seriously endangered:** when the youngest speakers are middle-aged or past middle age. **Terminally endangered or moribund:** if there are only a few speakers left. **Dead/Extinct:** When there are no speakers left at all.

According to Usman (2014,p.52) quoting UNESCO, "a language is endangered when its speakers cease to use it, use it in fewer and fewer domains, use fewer of its registers and speaking styles, and/stop passing it on to the next generation". No single factor determines whether a language is endangered. An endangered language may therefore become extinct when its speakers disappear or switch to another, usually more populous or powerful language. So far, the concept of language endangerment could be likened to the proverbial elephant and the blind kingdom, in which each blind man describes the elephant according to where or the part each of them touched. In other words, several criteria have been used by scholars to capture the concept of language endangerment or endangered languages. Scholars like Elugbe and Udo, Agbedo used the criterion of not being transferred to younger generation, Fakuade used the criterion of numbers of speakers, while Bamgbose adopts the language loyalty criterion, Hale uses the criterion of dominance by powerful languages. Since all these criteria contribute in one form or the other to language endangerment, the present study therefore aligns with the above scholars. However, the study sees language endangerment as a compound word coined by linguists to vividly capture a situation where there is corresponding damage or threat to a particular language, either deliberate or unintentional.

Language Revitalization

Language revitalization on the other hand, as Agbedo (2011) posits, is the rescue of a dying language. According to him there have been successful language revitalization in the past, where languages in decline have recovered. He further argues that it may sound untenable to affirm that the prestige of a language and the self-esteem of its speakers play a pivotal role in revitalization, but it has been proven again and again. According to Redish (2001) Navajo, for instance, was in steep decline until the 40's when the language, once deemed worthless, was used by the Navajo code Talkers to stymie the Germans and Japanese in World War II. As Redish (2001) further observes, with Navajo's validity as a real, complex and useful language suddenly nationally acknowledged, its usage shut up and today this language, once on the brink of extinction is in good health. And by inspiring the younger generations to take an interest and pride in their ancestral languages and by providing the means for them to learn it, there is the possibility of reversing the downward linguistic trends. He therefore, sees language revitalization as attempts to preserve endangered languages.

Arguing on why languages are endangered, Manajemi (2003) says that the major enemies to endangered culture and languages are new communication technologies and transportation and that globalization does not necessarily negate communication in local or natural languages. He challenges language speakers to adapt to globalization which has become an imperative for survival. Another scholar who shares this line of thought is Agwuele (2010) who argues that, it is pointless trying to save endangered languages in a globalized setting. She maintains that there is no need safeguarding a language that lacks functionalism. In this sense, a language that does not serve its speakers well in the sense of not functionally guaranteeing them the ability to survive, either, socially, politically, economically, etc. (especially in a globalized world) can be rejected for another by the speakers. When they do, their rejected language should not be saved. Form the points of Monajemi (2003) and Agwuele (2010), we can say that there are schools of thoughts on the revitalization of endangered languages, that is scholars in favour of revitalizing endangered languages and those that Onadipe Shalom (2015) calls the anti-revitalization group. Be that as it may, the present work favours the revitalization of endangered languages. According to Caronel-Molina (2011), language revitalization involves the restoration or strengthening of a particular language in regions where they prevailed before being displaced by other, more powerful and prestigious languages. For Caronel-Molina, language revitalization has much to do with languages that are no longer used in everyday communication, as well as with those that are restricted to use only in certain contexts (Hinton 2001). Language revitalization can involve teaching, developing, cultivating, strengthening and disseminating a language to make it a vital instrument of communication in daily life, in other words, restoring and strengthening its pragmatic functions in various spheres of the society.

Furthermore, Caronel-Molina is of the opinion that language revitalization is also related to language policy and planning and their respective categories: status-planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning. Therefore, this process must be approached from multiple fonts, taking into account the social networks that intertwine home, school, and community (cf Fishman 2001). It also involves restoring language use and reversing language shift. The scenario painted by Coronel –Molina above best describes the Igbo language situation. In a bid to make the Igbo language viable for sustainable development, Igbo linguists have done tremendous work in standardizing and modifying the language, and enacting different policies to sustain and keep the language alive. However, due to lack of policy implementation on the part of our government, all efforts to preserve the language have hit the rock as its speakers now prefer to speak English and other foreign languages. Worse still, a lot of Igbo speakers are so proficient in the Hausa and Yoruba languages so much so that one could lose a bet if one argues their origin. However, all hope is not lost as the present work recommends a tentative revival method that, if implemented, will restore strengthen and revitalize the language.

Hence, the present paper sees Igbo language as being endangered owing to the fact that the language, though spoken in about seven states in Nigeria with a population of about 25 million people is not the L1 of many speakers. This is because so many children of Igbo parents only acquire the language as a second language. Similarly, the language, despite being taught in schools and colleges as a school subject has no strict penal code to making sure that the language is sustained and regulated. Again, the multiplicity of the Igbo dialects have made it impossible for the language to gain wider prestige as each dialect speaker tends to be only interested in speaking and preserving his own dialect rather than the general Igbo, even among linguists, they have all gone dialectal in their researches.

It therefore follows that, since the Igbo language which is supposed to be a first language of many have turned to be the other way round, the paper then advocates that the speakers of the Igbo language, especially the young ones should be adequately motivated through the use of competitive championship.

Competitive Campionshipship

In this, we examine the use of competitive championship in form of language games to chart a way for reviving the Igbo Language. The use of games can be powerful language revitalizing tool. On the surface, the aim of competitive championship games is for participants to use the language, during this game play they also use the language to persuade and negotiate their way to desired results. These processes involve the productive and receptive skills simultaneously. Championship oriented competitions are also motivating, because it introduces an element of competition into a language-building activities. This provides valuable impetus to a purposeful use of language (Prasad 2003). In other words, these activities create a meaningful context for language use. The competitive ambiance also makes learners concentrate and think intensively during the learning process, which enhances unconscious acquisition of inputs. Most students who have experienced game-oriented activities hold positive attitudes towards them (Uberman 1998). An action research conducted by Huyen and Nga (2003), students said that they liked the relaxed atmosphere, the competitiveness and the motivation that games brought to the classroom. On the effectiveness of games, teachers in Huyen and Nga's (2003) reported that action research, reported that their students seem to learn more quickly and retain the learned materials better in a stress-free and comfortable environment.

From the foregoing, the benefits of using competitive championship in language revival and learning can be summed up in nine points: are learner centered, promote communicative competence, create a meaningful context language use, increase learning motivation, reduce leaning anxiety, integrate various linguistic skills, encourage creative and spontaneous use of language, construct a cooperative learning environment and foster participatory attitudes of the participants.

Theoretical Framework

This research is anchored on reward. Kirpatrick (1978) maintains that reward is something given in return for service or work done or for good behavior. Ekpiken (1991) confirms that reward could also be something offered, given or obtained in return for work or service or good action or behavior. It acts to serve as reinforcement, thus Chauhan (1978) stipulates that for a reward to serve as reinforcement, it has to be immediate, frequent and proportional to the response. Deighton (1971) concludes that reward or reinforcement is an essential part of learning. An effective method of training or reviving the mind for life is through reward or reinforcement. According to Denga (1988), it is necessary for teachers and parents to reward good efforts of an individual so that such desired habits are repeated or sustained. For instance, if

affection and attention (reward) is given each time a desired behaviour is enacted, the person would continue this activity and other positive activities. In a competitive sport championship, due to the reward attached to it, sports men and women are always working hard to emerge victorious in all competition. It is out of this that rewards for victories after competitive language championship is adopted as a practical step towards revitalizing the endangered Igbo language. Hence, the championship will be orally based as participants' competence and performance are paramount for this unavoidable revival to take place.

Data Presentation/Discussions

Table 1: Participating states and their LGA

S/N	Abia State	Anambra State	Ebonyi State	Enugu State	Imo State
1	Aba North	Anambra East	Abakaliki	Aninri	AbohMbaise
2	Aba South	Anambra West	Afikpo South	Awgu	AhiazuMbaise
3	Arochukwu	Anaocha	Afikpo North	Enugu East	Owerri West
4	Bende	Awka North	Ezza North	Enugu North	EhimeMbano
5	Ikwuano	Ayamelum	Ezza South	Enugu South	EzinihitteeMbaise
6	IsialaNgwa North	Dunukofia	Ishielu	Ezeagu	Ideato South
7	IsialaNgwa South	Ekwusigo	Ikwo	Igbo Eiti	Ideato South
8	Isiukwuato	Idemili North	Ohaukwu	Igbo Eze North	Ihitte/Uboma
9	Obi Ngwa	Idemili South	Ebonyi	Igbo Eze North	Ikeduru
10	Ohafia	Ihiala	Ivo	Isi Uzo	IsialaMbano
11	OsiomaNgwa	Njikoka	Onicha	Nkanu East	Isu
12	Ugwunagbo	Nnewi North	Ohaozara	Nkanu West	Onu Imo
13	Ukwa East	Nnewi South	Izzi	Nsukka	Mbaitoli
14	Ukwa west	Ogbaru		Oji River	Mgbidi
15	Umuahia North	Onitsha North		Udenu	NgorOkpala
16	Umuahia South	Onitsha South		Udi	Njaba
17	Umunneochi	Orumba North		Uzouwani	Nkwere
18		Orumba South			Nwangele
19		Oyi			Obowo
20		Aguata			Oguta
21		Awka South			Ohaji/Egbema
22					Okigwe
23					Owerri North
24					Orlu
25					Orsu
26					Oru east
27					Oru west
No of slots	3	3	3	3	4

Table 2-Seeded LGA's

	ABIA	ANAMBRA	EBONYI	ENUGU	IMO
1	Aba North	Anambra East	Afikpo North	Aninri	Orsu
2	Aba South	Anambra West	Afikpo South	Awgu	Orlu
3	Arochukwu	Anocha	Izzi	Udi	Okigwe
4					Njaba

Table 3-Round of Sixteen

Group A	GROUP B	GROUP C	GROUP D
Aba North	Aba South	Orsu	Anambra East
Afikpo North	Anambra West	Arochukwu	Afikpo South
Aninri	Izzi	Awgu	Orlu
Njaba	Udi	Anocha	Okigwe

In charting a way for the revitalization of the already endangered language of 'Ndi Igbo', we have presented the above competitive option that should be adopted, promoted and funded by the society for promoting Igbo language and culture (SPILC), Igbo Studies Association (ISA), Linguistic Association of Nigeria (LAN), Non-Governmental Organization, the State Government of the Igbo speaking states, and private individuals. These bodies should toll the line of the competitive mechanism in form of quiz or debate

from the grass roots down to the cities., these competitions will be categorized into primary, secondary and tertiary categories just as we have under 17,21 and senior national teams in soccer.

From the data presented above, each local government in the South eastern states will constitute a local league of the junior, senior and tertiary categories respectively. Winners in the local league will represent the local government at the state level. The local government that tops the table, the 1st and 2nd runner –up respectively will represent the state at the zonal level. The sixteen selected local government will be seeded four – four in a pot made up of group A-D. As paired in table 4, group A will engage members of group C while group B will engage members of group D. At the end of the tournament, the overall best becomes the winners, the 1st and 2nd runner –up will also have to be selected and adequate and handsome rewards given.

It is the believe of the researchers of this study that when this is harmoniously achieved, it will not only raise the interest of speakers of the language but the youth will embrace it thereby reviving the language to attain sustainable development.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Insights from the study of revitalizing the endangered languages of Nigeria portend great implication on the survival of Igbo language. The lack of language loyalty on the part of its speakers have also hindered the development of the language despite being taught in the primary, secondary and tertiary institutions and being spoken by almost 25 million speakers, the rate with which the language is endangered is still worrisome and calls for serious attention towards revitalizing the language to compete with global best practices with other world languages. To this end, the following are our recommendations for the revitalization of the language. Igbo teachers at all levels should be encouraged, for any revival to take place, the revivalist must first be revived. There should be an active use of the Igbo language especially in the home domains. Parents should ensure the inter-generational transfer of the mother-tongue so as to avoid extinction. The choice of all English names by parents should be avoided as some of these names have made the bearers look and sound like foreigners in their own country and speech communities. The Igbo speakers should be ready to exhibit some form of language loyalty. The Igbo language will not stand a chance of survival or empowerment unless its speakers have developed a robust plan and mechanism for revitalizing the language. In order to revive the already endangered language of ‘Ndi Igbo’, this present research advocates the use of 'competitive championship' to increase and attract the language owners towards sustaining their own language for greater vitality. It is the believe of the researchers that when this is done, other speakers of the Igbo language who abinitio had claimed not to be of the Igbo origin, may, for political reasons or oil, one day clamour to join the league due to its success.

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