

IGBO NATIVE SPEAKERS ATTITUDES: A CATALYST TO ITS ENDANGERMENT

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Abstract

This paper is of the opinion that the carefree attitude of the native speakers of Igbo language is a catalyst to its endangerment. To prove this claim, the paper examines among other things those antagonizing attitudes of the native speakers of Igbo to the language and their impending danger to the language. The paper enumerated categories of native speaker. Besides, a lot of literature reviewed on language endangerment and death were examined. Accusing fingers were mostly pointed to the attitudes of native speakers as a catalyst to its endangerment. Again, those aspects of Igbo language and culture mostly affected by this menace were also critically looked into.

Language scholars, among them in the mainstream is Idudhe (2002) are of the opinion that a language lives only as there are people who speak it and use it as their native tongue and that the greatness of a language lies only in the one given to it by its native speakers.

The main lesson learnt from Idudhe's view is that it is the native speakers of Igbo that can make it survive any threat of endangerment through their absolute loyalty to it in promoting the speaking and writing of it. But when the contrary is the case, the language suffers absolute neglect and disloyalty which will inturn result to its serious endangerment.

The Igbo Language

The language belongs to the Igbo; a tribe located in the eastern part of Nigeria. Apart from being spoken mostly in the eastern part, of Nigeria, the language belongs to the Kwa family of the Niger-Congo phylum of African Languages. Historical linguistics has not up to the time of this study located any other speech community that has the native speakership of Igbo language apart from all Igbo tribes all over Nigeria irrespective of the geographical locations.

Igbo language is regarded as one of the three major languages in Nigeria in addition to the Hausa and Yoruba languages. It is a language of the mass communication in both print and electronic media at the national level and Igbo states levels, it is also used as a language of formal instruction and a curriculum subject in the primary, post-primary and tertiary levels. It has a standard orthography and a body of literature. Infact, the Igbo language occupies a privileged place within the entire range of African studies. As earlier pointed out, it has wider population of native speakers found in all strata of lives.

Categories of Native Speakers

For the purpose of this study, the native speakers of Igbo are categorized as follows:

Rural Native Speakers

These are the groups of native speakers who reside at the speech community, born and bred there without having the opportunity of staying outside the speech community through out their life time. These groups of people have the natural native speakership intuition of the language.

Urban Native Speakers

These particular groups of native speakers are the direct opposite of the former. They have the native speakership intuition of the language but reside outstand the speech community. Their contact with their L2 adulterates or affects the naturality of their L1. This is to say that their L2 in a question of time valorizes at their L1 cognitive disadvantages. This in turn spells a doom on the language.

Non-educated Native Speakers

These are the group of native speakers that have never had any formal education. They have the native speakership intuition of the language but unconsciously because they are not literate in any form

Educated Native Speakers

These groups of native speakers are direct opposite of non-educated native speakers. They have formal education outside the domain of the language study and as such cannot make any professional contribution in the promotion of the language.

Non-Language Scholars

These are the group of native speakers that have no formal education of the language. These groups learnt the language socially as native speakers but not in the school.

Language Scholars Native Speakers

These groups of native speakers have the native speakership intuition of the language as well as formal education of the language. The fate of the language mostly lies in them because they promote the teaching and learning of the language; codify and standardize the language.

Negative Speakers in Business and Other Private Ventures:

These groups have the native speakership intuition of the language but are not steady at the speech community due to their occupational mobility. They are tourists who prefer their commercial languages to their L1 which they use in their commercial activities in their host communities. Greater percentage of Igbo speakers falls within this category and that is why the language suffers acute disloyalty and marginalization which inturn leads to its endangerment.

Native Speakers in Public Services

Synonymous to the former are these group of native speakers. They quite have native speakership intuition of the language but their occupational mobility could not allow them to be steady in the speech community hence they prefer the languages of their host communities to their L1. Second to the greatest population of native speakers falls within this category. This also has its own impending doom on the survival of the language.

Attitudes of Native Speakers to Igbo

Chima (2004:3) is of the view that , “no matter how populous the speakers of a language are, language can go into oblivion following a number of factors, the chief being the attitudes of the speakers.

Brenzinger (1995:93) has earlier noted this when he opined that “ even Yoruba with 20 million speakers, has been called ‘deprived’ because of the way it has been dominated by English in higher education”.

In the opinion of Alaba (2002), language communities should take genuine pride in their own traditional languages. In the case of the Igbo language, there is a big contrary to the opinion of Alaba. The fact remains that Igbo native speakers show fragrant disloyalty and disrespect to the language. They exhibit negative attitudes to the language such as the following:-

- i. Treatment of the language with contempt,
- ii. Taking the language to be inferior.
- iii. Feeling ashamed to be identified with the language.
- iv. Fear of marginalization in political and civil service appointments instigate some negative attitudes to the language.
- v. Inability to invest in the language by the people’s government and highly-placed individuals.
- vi. Lack of incentives and sponsorship from the government in the study of the language.
- vii. Lack of interest to study the language.
- viii. Using the foreign languages and other Nigerian languages to swindle the existence and growth of Igbo language.
- ix. Attachment of more premiums to the languages of their host speech communities by Igbo travelers and business people,

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- x. More accessibility of foreign languages to clergies and gospel preachers of Igbo extraction.
- xi. Pursuit of foreign languages like English, French and other European languages in educational curricula at the expense of Igbo by language scholars of Igbo extraction.

Effects of Native Speakers Attitudes on the Languages:

According to Colin Cherry, “Language makes a hard mistress and we are all her slaves”. To support this claim, Adekunle (1990:240) noted that “the intricate social relevance, deep cultural involvement, and human relatedness of language as the basis of social action could be seen in its role in inter-personal and inter-group cooperation”.

The lesson adduced from these claims is that language is universally recognized as a powerful index of culture and identity. Therefore, an abuse of Igbo language in this regard automatically leads to an abuse of Igbo culture and identity.

In effect, Igbo language suffers acute neglect from the Igbo because of their superiority complex and their quest for travelling outside the speech communities which makes them attach more premiums to foreign things than local things including their local language.

This view receives the support of Kuju (1999) who opined that in many parts of the world, languages disappear because the young who are in contact with the outside world have embraced the view that the traditional ways are illegitimate and irrelevant.

Bamgbose (1999:22) also noted this by submitting that the “endangerment languages come to be used progressively less and less throughout the community, with some of the functions they originally performed; either dying out or gradually being supplanted by other languages ...” here, Bamgbose’s position is a replica to Igbo language situation for it is little or not seriously used in any of the linguistic domain be it administration, education, mass media, judiciary and other public situations because its roles have been taken over by English. Any language that is found in this category is described as being “Deprived”. But in the case of Igbo, it is not only deprived but rather it is seriously endangered.

Aspects of Igbo Studies Most Affected

As earlier highlight by Chima (2004 b & c), the level of development and growth of Igbo is low. This is measured by the way some aspects of Igbo ways of life are phasing out. Among the few recorded ones are folktales, riddles and jokes, tongue twister, slangs, ornamentations, moonlight adventure, aesthetic and cooking systems, indoor games and outdoor games like wrestling, etc.

It is equally disheartening to note that many Igbo words like names of persons and places are still anglicized up to date without severe reactions from Igbo linguists and proponents either through public enlightenments, legislation or any workable punitive measure while many nations within and outside Africa have sanctioned this act of barbarism to one's language as earlier reported by Chima (2004 b). Besides there are still all over Igbo lands on sign posts names spelt in English forms like Awka , Awkawnawnaw, Agwu, Abakaliki, Owerri, Enugu, Oguta, Orlu, Ordunze, Nwuchay, Ibusa, Itshekiri, Ijaw; to mention but few . here the writer is of the view that if there were acute protection of the language, those anglicized Igbo names since ages ought to have been corrected and rewritten in original standard Igbo orthography and in Igbo forms. This shows that there is fragrant disloyalty to Igbo language by the owners reinforced by negative attitudes which is in turn a catalyst to its endangerment.

Conclusion

This paper has been able to examine the negative attitudes of native speakers of Igbo to the language and their disastrous effects to the language. Categories of native speakers were enumerated while some aspects of Igbo studies mostly affected were also mentioned.

All the above, it has been revealed that Igbo language is seriously endangered and accusing fingers were pointed mostly to the attitudes of native speakers among other factors.

Recommendation

All hope is not lost with regard to the reactivation of Igbo language and culture. Something must be done and is being done to ensure that Igbo language is revamped and giving a global recognition. And to actualize this, all hands of the native speakers must be on deck. Bamgbose (1993:29) is of the opinion that, when all is said and done the fate of an endangered language, may well lie in the hands of the owners of the language themselves and the will to make it survive.

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