



Revitalizing Endangered African Vernacular Languages: The Case of Igbo Language

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Abstract

African vernacular languages are increasingly endangered owing to urbanisation, globalisation, and the predominance of former colonial languages in education, governance, and the media. The Igbo language of south-eastern Nigeria, once a dynamic vehicle of cultural identity and inter-ethnic communication, is witnessing a steady decline in both everyday usage and intergenerational transmission. This study investigates the forces behind this linguistic erosion and assesses contemporary revitalisation efforts aimed at safeguarding Igbo. Employing a mixed-methods approach that combines sociolinguistic surveys, interviews with educators and community leaders, and analysis of language policy documents, the research identifies the sociocultural, institutional, and attitudinal factors influencing language vitality. The findings indicate that, although public awareness of endangerment is growing, official interventions remain poorly coordinated and inconsistently applied. Nevertheless, community-based initiatives, digital activism, and innovative educational programmes display considerable promise. The paper argues that genuine revitalisation must fuse grassroots participation with policy reform and technological innovation. It concludes that restoring the vitality of Igbo is both a linguistic and cultural imperative, essential to sustaining Africa's plural heritages in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Language Revitalization, Igbo Language, Translation, African Languages, Language Policies, Educational Technologies.

INTRODUCTION

Many African languages, including Igbo, are now threatened with extinction. This trend is partly explained by the lasting impact of colonization, which imposed European languages as languages of instruction, administration, and prestige. In this context, local languages were marginalized, relegated to the domestic sphere, or considered ill-suited to modernity. However, as UNESCO (2003) reminds us, each language carries within it a worldview, a system of knowledge, and a collective memory. The disappearance of a language therefore constitutes an irreparable loss for humanity.

The Igbo language, spoken primarily in southeastern Nigeria, clearly illustrates this problem. Despite its large number of speakers, it is being used less and less among younger generations, in favor of English, the country's official language. This situation raises a crucial question: how can this language be revitalized so that it regains its place in public, educational, cultural, and scientific life?

This article aims to examine the challenges and prospects for revitalizing the Igbo language. It will first analyze the causes of its decline, taking into account the historical, political, and sociolinguistic context. It will then highlight the efforts undertaken by local communities, writers, and educational institutions. Finally, it will argue that translation can play a crucial role in this process by facilitating the transmission of knowledge, enriching the language's lexicon, and strengthening its use in technical and academic fields.

Theoretical and Contextual Framework

The revitalization of minority languages is a major linguistic, cultural, and political challenge in an increasingly globalized world. It falls within an interdisciplinary field that draws on sociolinguistics, language ecology, and language policy.

Concepts of Linguistic Revitalization

Language revitalization refers to all the steps taken to reverse the decline of an endangered language. Fishman (1991) introduced the concept of "Reversing Language Shift (RLS), emphasizing the importance of intergenerational transmission. For him, the survival of a language depends on its daily use within the family and community.

Grenoble and Whaley (2006) define revitalization as "a planned intervention to increase the use of a threatened or dormant language." It can take the form of teaching programs, linguistic documentation, or awareness campaigns.

Challenges of Safeguarding Minority Languages

Linguistic diversity is an intangible heritage of humanity. According to UNESCO (2003), more than 40% of the 7,000 languages spoken in the world are endangered. The loss of a language implies not only the disappearance of a means of communication, but also the erasure of a collective memory, traditional knowledge, and specific worldviews (Harrison, 2007).

In the African context, the safeguarding of minority languages is linked to postcolonial cultural rehabilitation. Alexander (2003) emphasizes the role of African languages in the construction of sovereign postcolonial identities and in the promotion of participatory democracy.

Theoretical Approaches Used

Three main theoretical frameworks inform the analysis of linguistic revitalization:

*Critical sociolinguistics (Bourdieu, 1991): it examines the power relations between dominant and dominated languages, and insists on the need to deconstruct the symbolic hierarchies that devalue vernacular languages.

Linguistic ecology (Haugen, 1972; Mühlhäusler, 2003): this approach considers languages as living organisms that evolve within social, cultural, and political ecosystems. The disappearance of a language is seen as an ecological imbalance. Language policies and language planning (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997): they analyze the mechanisms by which institutions influence the status, corpus and acquisition of languages.

In the case of the Igbo language, these approaches help us understand how colonial legacy, educational policies, social attitudes, and symbolic inequalities have contributed to its decline. They also offer avenues for designing concrete actions for sustainable revitalization.

Introduction to the Igbo Language

Igbo is one of the major African languages spoken in Nigeria, primarily in the southeastern region, including the states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo, as well as parts of Delta and Rivers states. It belongs to the Niger-Congo language family, specifically the Benue -Congo subgroup. According to Emenanjo (1990), Igbo has approximately 25 million native speakers, making it one of the most widely spoken languages in sub-Saharan Africa. Despite this significant number, Igbo faces numerous linguistic, educational, and societal challenges.

Igbo is characterized by a rich dialectal diversity. There are approximately 30 major dialects, which has long posed a challenge to the unification and standardization of the language. Efforts have been made to create a standard Igbo, notably by the Nigerian Institute for Nigerian Languages (NIGNL). Educational Research and Development Council, NERDC), which promotes a standardized version used in education and the media (Mbah & Mbah, 2007).

The modern Igbo alphabet is based on the Latin alphabet and comprises 36 letters, including sounds unique to the language such as / gb /, / kp /, and nasal vowels. Writing was promoted in the 19th century with the arrival of Christian missionaries who produced the first religious texts in Igbo. The language has a complex tonal system with three main tones (high, mid, and low), which play a distinctive role in the meaning of words. For example, the word "akwa" can mean "egg," "crying," "bedding," or "clothing," depending on the tone used.

Igbo is taught in some primary and secondary schools in Nigeria, but its use in higher education remains limited. Outside of academic institutions, it is also present in the media (local

radio and television), literary works, films (particularly Nollywood), and traditional ceremonies. However, its declining use in urban areas, the growing influence of English, and the lack of a strong language policy are jeopardizing its intergenerational transmission.

Factors in the Decline of the Igbo Language

The gradual decline of the Igbo language can be explained by a combination of historical, socio-political, economic, and cultural factors. These factors act synergistically to weaken the transmission, daily use, and prestige of the language in contemporary Nigerian society.

The Colonial Legacy and the Hegemony of English

The introduction of English as the official language and medium of instruction under British colonial rule profoundly altered linguistic dynamics in Nigeria. English became the language of the elite, the administration, formal education, and socioeconomic opportunities. This situation marginalized indigenous languages, relegating them to the domestic and informal sphere (Bamgbose, 1991).

In a postcolonial context, this linguistic hierarchy has become entrenched: English remains the language of power and social mobility, while Igbo is perceived as a "local" language with little economic or academic value. This negative perception contributes to young parents' reluctance to pass the language on to their children.

Urbanization and Social Mobility

Rapid urbanization and migration to cosmopolitan cities have favored the use of lingua francas such as English and Pidgin at the expense of indigenous languages. In urban families, especially those from educated backgrounds, it is common for children not to be fluent in Igbo, even if they understand some passive elements (Obiechina, 1975).

Moreover, in interethnic or multicultural contexts, parents often favour English to avoid any linguistic exclusion and to facilitate the academic and professional success of their children (Egbokhare, 2001).

The Absence of a Proactive Language Policy

Nigeria lacks a coherent and robust national language policy in support of indigenous languages. Although the 1999 Constitution recognizes their cultural value, concrete measures for their promotion remain timid, underfunded, or unevenly implemented. In many schools, Igbo is taught sporadically or is absent from the curriculum, especially outside Igbo-speaking areas (Adegbija, 2004).

Furthermore, the standardization of the language is still incomplete: the coexistence of multiple dialects and the absence of a fully accepted standardized Igbo hinder its widespread academic and media use.

Negative Attitudes and the Crisis of Prestige

The decline of the Igbo language is also linked to ideological factors. The internalization of derogatory discourses about African languages leads some speakers to associate Igbo with rural life, the past, or illiteracy. This "linguistic shame" manifests itself in the refusal to use the language in public, or even in its complete abandonment in favor of English (Igboanusi & Lothar, 2001).

The media, private schools, urban churches, and elitist institutions often contribute to reinforcing these negative attitudes by exclusively favoring English or Pidgin in their communications and services.

Ongoing Revitalization Initiatives

Several initiatives have been launched to address the threat of extinction facing the Igbo language. These efforts come from public institutions, non-governmental organizations, community actors, academics, and artists. They aim to encourage the use of Igbo in education, media, literature, technology, and cultural practices.

Education and Literacy

One of the main avenues for revitalization is through language teaching. In some areas of southeastern Nigeria, Igbo is being introduced as the language of instruction at the primary level, in accordance with the national education policy (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). Textbooks have been produced, and teachers trained to teach in Igbo. However, implementation remains uneven and often depends on the willingness of local authorities.

Media and Technologies

The media plays a vital role in the normalization and dissemination of the language. Several local radio and television stations broadcast programs in Igbo. The rise of social media has also fostered the emergence of digital content (videos, podcasts, blogs) in Igbo, particularly among urban youth. Mobile language learning applications (such as "Speak Igbo" or "Igbo101") have been developed to promote its learning in a fun and engaging way.

Cultural Activism and Literary Production

Writers, poets, and artists are committed to revitalizing Igbo through literary and artistic creation. Novels, plays, songs, and films in Igbo are being produced and distributed both locally and internationally. Nigerian cinema, particularly Nollywood, has seen the emergence of a significant Igbo-language production, contributing to the appreciation of the language and culture.

Language Institutions and Policies

Institutions such as the Igbo Academy (Igbo Studies Association), the Centre for Igbo Language and Culture at the University of Nsukka, and the Nigerian Institute for Nigerian Languages are working on research, standardization, and promotion of the language. However, the lack of a strong and coherent national language policy is a major obstacle to the effectiveness of these efforts (Okolo & Ezikeojiaku, 2017).

Community and Diaspora Initiatives

The Igbo diaspora actively participates in language revitalization through Saturday schools, cultural summer camps, and intergenerational transmission programs. These efforts aim to maintain a linguistic and cultural link between generations, even outside of Nigerian territory (Nwaozuzu, 2008).

These initiatives demonstrate a growing awareness of the urgent need to save the Igbo language. However, their impact often remains limited due to a lack of coordination, resources, and institutional support.

The Role of Translation in Revitalization

Translation plays a strategic role in efforts to revitalize the Igbo language, contributing to its (re)valuation in the spheres of knowledge, education, culture, and communication. As a bridge between languages and cultures, it not only makes foreign content accessible in Igbo, but also disseminates Igbo thought in other languages, thereby strengthening its visibility and legitimacy.

Lexical and Terminological Enrichment

Translation fosters the development of a specialized lexicon in technical, scientific, and administrative fields. This is crucial to demonstrating that Igbo can express the complexity of the contemporary world. Translators and linguists strive to create neologisms adapted to local realities while respecting the morphological structure of the language (Eze, 2014).

Translation of Scholarly and Literary Works

Translating scientific, philosophical, and literary works into Igbo is an important strategy for expanding the written corpus in the language. It allows Igbo to be situated within an intellectual tradition and encourages its use in higher education. Initiatives such as the translation of the Nigerian Constitution or religious texts into Igbo are part of this approach (Ubahakwe, 1991).

Translation Training and Professional Development

Training competent Igbo translators is a crucial lever. Nigerian universities are beginning to integrate local language translation into their curricula, but this practice remains marginal. A more ambitious policy could include translator certification and support for the publication of translated works.

Audiovisual Translation and Digital Media

Film subtitling, dubbing, and the localization of applications in the Igbo language all contribute to strengthening its everyday use. These practices make the language more present and familiar to younger generations, while demonstrating its ability to adapt to digital modernity (Okoye, 2021).

Translation is therefore not simply a technical tool, but a true engine of cultural transformation. It helps to reposition the Igbo language as a language of knowledge, culture and innovation.

Perspectives and Recommendations

The revitalization of the Igbo language cannot be limited to isolated or symbolic initiatives. It requires a multisectoral, integrated, and sustainable approach, mobilizing state, community, educational, and cultural actors. Several avenues can be explored to ensure a significant revival of the language.

Institutionalization and Proactive Language Policies

It is imperative that the Nigerian state fully recognize the status of Igbo as a national language of instruction, administration, and culture. A clear language policy should mandate the use of Igbo in certain public spheres, particularly in primary and secondary schools in Igbo-speaking regions, and in regional public media. This measure would normalize the use of the language in formal settings.

Strengthening Igbo Language Teaching

It is recommended that coherent and progressive curricula in Igbo be developed, from kindergarten to university. This requires the production of modern textbooks, specialized dictionaries, and interactive teaching materials in the language. Initial and ongoing teacher training in Igbo language and literature should also be strengthened (Emenanjo, 2015).

Digitization and Technological Innovation

The development of digital tools such as mobile learning applications, machine translation, adapted keyboards, and platforms for reading or listening in Igbo represents a promising avenue. Given that young people are particularly connected, technology can be a powerful lever for revitalizing the everyday use of the language (Okoye, 2021).

Creation of Research and Documentation Centers

The establishment of linguistic and cultural research institutes specializing in the study, documentation, standardization, and revitalization of Indigenous languages, particularly Igbo, would be crucial. These centers could also play a role in training translators, publishing scholarly material, and promoting cultural awareness.

Systematic Translation of Essential Content

A national translation program should be established to translate laws, health manuals, administrative documents, and literary, scientific, and philosophical works into the Igbo language. This program could be entrusted to multidisciplinary teams of translators, linguists, and experts from various fields to ensure the quality and relevance of the translated content (Igboanusi, 2008).

Sociocultural Awareness

A sustained awareness campaign aimed at changing negative attitudes towards the Igbo language is necessary. It is important to promote a positive image of the language as a vehicle for identity, creativity, and development. Opinion leaders, artists, influencers, and academics have a major role to play in this.

CONCLUSION

The survival of the Igbo language is inextricably linked to political will, community engagement, and intellectual investment. While the diagnosis of its decline is well-established, this should not lead to fatalism. On the contrary, it can serve as a catalyst for developing and implementing concrete revitalization strategies. This article has shown that translation, as a cultural and cognitive practice, can play a catalytic role in this process. It strengthens the use of the language in all areas of life, from education and media to literature and science.

Linguistic revitalization, beyond Igbo, concerns all minority African languages. It is a global issue, touching on the identity, cultural diversity, and intellectual sovereignty of African peoples. It is time for public policies, academic institutions, and local communities to join forces to save this invaluable heritage.

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