

WRONG HOME FOUNDATIONAL BACKGROUND: THE BANE OF IGBO LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTENANCE

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ABSTRACT

The home is the first and foremost environment in which a child learns to speak. The language a child listens to at the early formative stage is the one he recognises and learns to speak. Where the home fails to speak a language, the child as well as the language suffers. This paper, therefore, emphasizes the need for parents, who are the child's first teachers, to speak Igbo Language to their children. Again, it posits that parents should facilitate the acquisition of Igbo language by providing and encouraging the use of ICT devices like computers, audio-visuals, films etc for the development and sustenance of Igbo language. It also goes to establish the fact that the parents' refusal to speak this language to their children amounts to depriving the children of their human and linguistic rights; and thus result to producing timid and unbalanced personalities.

1.0 Introduction

Igbo language is the mother tongue of the five states in the South-East zone of Nigeria, and some parts of the Delta and Rivers States in the South-South zones. These five states are Abia, Ebonyi, Anambra and Imo. It is one of the three major languages spoken in Nigeria besides Yoruba and Hausa. This language is placed as one of the top ten languages in Africa and which is spoken by 17 million people. But according to Ohiri-Aniche 2008:10), Igbo has an estimated 20 million speakers from the league of the 90% of the world's language which linguists predict would not survive into the next century (Ohiri-Aniche, Cover Story, 2008:10). The government of Nigeria recognises the importance of Igbo as mother tongue hence adopted it to be used as a medium of instruction in (pre) primary level. The essence of this is to enable the child to identify with the happenings at school via language.

Speaking any language is the bedrock for the survival of such language. Any language not spoken is more or less dead. Ironically, the owners of Igbo language (Ndigbo) are ignorant of the importance of their language. They are not proud of their language and consequently do not speak it as it is wont to be. Amongst the three major languages spoken in Nigeria, Igbo is the least spoken by the owners. As a result, Opara (2009:113) opines:

The Igbo language is... more of less stigmatized and considered an unsuitable medium of instruction in schools or even a subject to be taught. Parents (particularly those in the urban areas) are proud to declare that their children cannot speak, read, let alone write Igbo, which is their indigenous language, undermining the dangers of producing a generation of children cut off from their cultural roots.

The language is perceived by its owners as inferior to English language. This erroneous belief has battered the image of the language and rendered it insignificant among them. At school the language is a "taboo" and is avoided. Again, it is seen as a "language that is often associated with low socio-economic status and lack educational achievement" unlike the English language which to them

“commands prestige and has positive socio-economic connotation (Opara, 2009:113). All this boils down to the fact that Ndigbo do not love or have loyalty for their language. Hence, its fate is hanging, precariously in the air. Another argument that bedeviled Igbo language is that it interferes in the learning of English language. They argue that teaching a child English along side Igbo language would confuse the child and deprive him of a proper command of English. They claim that Igbo language interferes with the teaching of English language especially as it concerns communicating in the L2, English language. But this is not true.

2.0 The Challenges of Igbo Language

The constraint facing Igbo language is not that it does not have a developed orthography, or that it has not been commuted to writing; but the problem is that it is not spoken as it is supposed to. This problem emanates from the home, and this is the greatest undoing of Igbo language. Parents, both literate and illiterate, take pride in speaking English language instead of Igbo language to their children. It is the role of the parents to teach their children how to speak their mother tongue by speaking the language to them. This is very important. In fact, Maduagwu (2008:12) emphasises that “they should make it a rule in their homes that Igbo be spoken....” As their mother tongue it should be the first language for the children to learn. Parents do not speak Igbo language themselves and since the children learn the language by listening to it, it then becomes difficult for them to learn the language. As a result, children find it difficult to speak Igbo let alone write it. The difficulty experienced by children is caused by parents’ inability to impart this skill to them. To ameliorate this problem, parents should play their role effectively.

Due to this foundational problem, most Igbo speakers lack the confidence which the speaking skill should imbibe in them. This is why they cannot speak it fluently.

At the primary school, the teacher who is supposed to teach Igbo language is again the product of this foundational imbalance. He/she finds it difficult to impart the knowledge since he/she is not well-grounded in it. Sometimes, he/she can fall to the temptation to skip it during lessons.

Again, the leaders are also caught in the web of this evil. Ezeife (2008:18) stresses:

Even... members of Ohanaeze Ndigbo that stand as the mouthpiece of Igbo people are not left out in the malaise of the inability to promote the language, as most of them are either ill-at-ease about speaking the language or unable to do so fluently, which seems to put them in a position of playing the ostrich.

Their problem is not far-fetched. They, too, are products of the wrong foundation that emerged from the home. The socio-cultural groups like Aka Ikenga, Mgboko Igbo, Ohanaeze and World Igbo Congress and so on cannot claim to hold their meetings in Igbo language because “many of their members can (not) actually speak Igbo very well and many do not bother to teach their children the language” (Ezeife, 2008:12).

In our different communities, Ndi Eze; who are the custodians of our culture also face the problem of poor home foundation. They grapple with the language when in the truth they are supposed to flow with it. In their palaces, they address their visitors with English because they are not fluent enough. This situation is very unnerving and very disastrous given the fact that they are supposed to “preserve their heritage, promote their culture and prevent their language from dying...” (Maduagwu, 2008:15).

Lending weight to this, Ezeife (2008:16), a prominent Igbo leader says:

We the eyes of Ndigbo should first appreciate our language before others and instill that discipline and love for our language so that we shall be acceptable in the society.

But this declaration could not yield any result since the foundation is already faulty. The Igbos cannot appreciate their language because they have not been correctly exposed to it at the formative period since no importance is attached to it.

Our Ndi Eze should borrow a leaf from the Obas of Yoruba and Emirs from Hausa land, who procure the services of translators while addressing their visitors. To a layman, they may be illiterate men while to them they are promoting and preserving their culture. But an Igbo Eze uses such an opportunity to show how grounded he is in English language. Consequently, the blame that Igbo language is in dire straits should be on the parents whose duty it is to transmit this language to their children. Instead of performing this duty, they strip their children of their linguistic and human rights by denying them knowledge of their mother tongue. Incidentally, the failure of the Igbo (parents) to hand over their ancestral language to their children as well as endow them with an unalloyed identity clearly constitutes a violation of human and linguistic rights of the children. (Ohiri-Aniche, 2008:21). This ignorance on the part of the parents should not be overlooked. They should be made aware of the importance of their role in the preservation of Igbo language. But because they too had a faulty early formation, the problem still remains and lingers.

3.0 Igbo Language in ICT: Implications

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) involves the combination of information and the telecommunication integration in order to allow users get, keep, operate or disseminate information all over the world. ICT aims at the use of computers and other forms of technologies like internet, radio and television (broadcast technologies), video conferencing, telephony, satellite, computer-mediated conferencing etc to generate, store, process, retrieve and disseminate information.

Amongst these devices, computers are widely used in homes. Children access the internet and engage in computer and video games. Parents should provide their children with localized video games; some popular English literature texts localized into cartoons using Igbo language could also be provided. Films acted in Igbo language, Igbo sub-titled audio-visual films, Igbo dubbed films should also be provided to enable their children learn to speak Igbo language fluently. They should also provide English literature translated into Igbo language for their children to read in order to facilitate their acquisition of Igbo language.

4.0 The Way Forward

That the onus of the preservation of the Igbo language rests on the parents is not an over-statement. This is because this will ensure the survival of the generations of Ndigbo. But, since the parents are also the product of the wrong early foundation, now is the right time to correct the mistake made early. Maduagwu (2008:4) posits that:

the parents themselves should start using it (Igbo language)... start making sure (their) children speak it,... start using it in (their) gatherings... start producing things in them, using them in radio,

television, everywhere (they) are in the society... make sure that in every home, they can speak Igbo....

The leaders and prominent Igbo personalities should inculcate the habit of speaking Igbo. They should indicate their interest in Igbo “for its own sake and preserving their heritage” (Maduagwu, 2008:15). Speaking the Igbo language more often will remove any inhibition against it. It may not be easy but with more practice the obstacle may be surmounted. The Ndi Eze are not left out in this crusade too. Being custodians of our culture, they should as a matter of urgency begin to practice speaking Igbo language and taking pride in doing so in this meetings just like their counterparts in Yoruba and Hausa lands. Doing this will make the Igbo language to occupy an enviable position amongst the other major language of Nigeria. Governments in Igbo speaking areas should enforce that schools have qualified Igbo teachers and that pupils/students are allowed to speak Igbo and are spoken to in Igbo. This practice could be extended to higher institutions with the introduction of Igbo language as a general course to be studied by undergraduates. The media has the Herculean task of airing most of their programmes in Igbo. They should create sensitisation campaigns in Igbo language and make it praiseworthy to speak Igbo. The fear that the use of indigenous language at the early stage hampers the learning and acquisition of English should be dismissed completely. Hence, “It is glaring that if we abandon our language and culture, one wonders who will revive and propagate them for us” (Ezeife, 2008:17). The consideration and implementation of these suggestions would foster development and sustenance of Igbo language.

5.0 Conclusion

The bane of Igbo language is that the owners of the language are not proud of it; hence, they relegate it to the background to their own detriment. They tend to forget that this language gives them identity and sense of belonging. Any language not spoken goes into extinction and this will be the fate of Igbo language going by this trend of speaking English language regularly. Ndigbo should not allow Igbo to die a painful death because... “the day Igbo dies, the whole race will disintegrate” (Maduagwu, 2008:15). Again, they should not be more English than the English themselves. Therefore, the home, exemplified by parents has the right to “transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons” (Ohiri-Aniche, 2008:21). Therefore, since ICT involves accessing, storing, retrieving and disseminating of information, it would be of tremendous assistance for the transmission of Igbo language to the future generations yet to come. This is necessitated by the fact that if one does not blow his trumpet, nobody else would.

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