

REVIVING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES THROUGH TEACHING AND LEARNING- THE CASE OF IGALA LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT: *As important as language is in the existence of man, so it has its attendant issues since human beings exist in numerous linguistic and ethnic groups, the languages of larger groups overriding those of smaller groups for varied reasons. Countries of the world especially in Africa are made up of divergent linguistic and ethnic groups. Most of these multilingual countries have adopted the languages of their colonial masters as official languages. Policies across multilingual African countries have adverse effects on indigenous languages. In Nigeria, the adoption of English as the official language has created lack of interest in the country's over 400 indigenous languages especially the so-called minority languages. Igala, one of the relegated languages needs to be maintained for group identity, interaction, transmission of culture and values, exploration and exploitation of the environment of the Igala people. A majority language in Kogi State, North Central, Nigeria. It is also spoken in other neighbouring States of Kogi. The mother tongue instruction of the National Policy on Education is considered among other recommendations as one way of ensuring the maintenance of Igala.*

KEYWORDS: Ethnic groups, Indigenous languages, Language policy, Mother tongue instruction, Revalorization.

INTRODUCTION

The world over societies exist with divergent ethnic and linguistic groups, therefore most societies are multilingual. In Africa for instance, Orekan (2010:1) citing (ethnologue 2009, on line), states that the African continent has large number of languages, over 2,110, equivalent to 30.5% of the world's linguistic heritage (6, 909 living languages). He observes that several of the African languages communicate over long distances and about a hundred of them are widely used for inter-ethnic communication. Most African languages are alive and well linguistically speaking, and many smaller ones with fewer than 50,000 speakers, are quite stable and do not show reduction in number of speakers. Also, a number of African languages now have a stronger socio-political standing than they did two decades ago and these languages (Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo in Nigeria, Setswana in Botsawana, Kiswahili in Tanzania and Kenya, Wolof in Senegal, Bambara in Mali and Bamileke in Ivory Cost among others) have gained ground against the exogenous languages (the European official languages e.g English and French). This success according to Orekan is due to the great awareness through research and enlightenment going on in Africa, and of the UNESCO funding facilities and the interest of the world linguists and social/scientists in the African linguistic situation.

Most African countries are known to be multilingual. Where they are less multilingual, it is easier to develop a national language policy, and the quicker it is to implement such policy. The few monolingual or bilingual countries in Africa, such as Somalia, Burundi, Rwanda, have found it relatively easy to promote either a single or a few interrelated languages to national status within education.

The preceding situation in some African countries is only a minor exception of the real larger state of linguistic multiplicity. Commenting on multilingualism in Africa, Nkamigbo (2014:3) says, according to the definition of languages and dialects there are between 1,250 and 2,100 languages in Africa. It is a trivial statement to say that monolingual countries are more the exception rather than the rule if we are to adhere to strict criteria. Even in an apparently monolingual setting, the geographical distance (dialects), the social distance (sociolets), the historical distance and other codes and registers will make the situation more complex.

In the linguistic field homogeneity hardly exists than in any or other. Taking an arbitrary threshold of 10 percent as the defining landmark of a monolingual country, only a handful of countries meet this Criterion in Africa. The ones generally cited are Botswana (Language: Setswana) Burundi (Kirundi) Lesotho (Sotho), Madagascar (Malagasy), Mauritius (Creole), Rwanda (Kinyarwanda), Seychelles (Creole), Somalia (Somali), Swaziland (Seswati). The degree of multilingualism varies greatly. About 140 million people (as at 2006) speak around 450 languages in Nigeria, 30 million people in (former) Zaire use 206 languages and Ethiopia has 9) languages for a population of about 45 million. In Cameroon 185 languages are used by 8 million people, giving an average of 50,000 persons per language, 3 million inhabitants of Benin are spread over 58 languages while 2 million Congolese (Congo Brazzaville) have at their disposal 31 languages. On the other hand, Mauritania has four languages, Niger ten.

With a population of about 28 million Tanzania has 120 languages, among them Kiswahili which as a Lingua franca is used by the vast majority of the population. Mali has 12 languages and 90 percent of the population four of them and 60 to 65 percent use only one language, Bamana, as first (L_1) or second (L_2) language. Twenty years ago this percentage was around 40 percent; the increase is due more to the growing numbers of users of Bamana as L_2 rather than the demographic increase of the ethnic Bamana. Burkina Faso has about 60 languages for a population of 9 million half of which is more phone.

In Nigeria, 397 languages out of 410 are 'minority' languages, but the total number of their speakers account for 60 percent of the population. Among them are several languages with more than 1 million speakers, with a few of them having a number of speakers close to 10 million. Similar phenomena are observed elsewhere and compel a departure from numerical muscle as a decisive criterion in language planning.

Even in world terms, a mother tongue of another language with some 200,000 or so speakers is by no means a small language, given the fact that the overall population of the country of its usage may be much greater. Where, as in much of Africa, speakers of a certain language are not dispersed but tend to be restricted to well defined geographical areas, even languages of some 50,000 speakers become significant for the purpose of development and use in national life. By the time one gets down to this level of languages with 50,000 speakers, one has taken into account well over 90 percent of the population of almost any African country (UNESCO, March 1997:3) in Nkamigbo (2014:3).

Multilingualism is never a problem of the African continent alone. It exists in North and South American, Europe etc. A glimpse at how the problem of multilingualism is addressed in other parts of the world is imperative at this juncture. The minority languages are accorded recognition in some countries, for example, in some South American countries; the minority languages are used to some extent in primary education, examples are Guarani in Paraguay and Quechua in Ecuador. In Friesland, in the Northern part of the Netherlands, Frisian is permitted alongside Dutch in administration (Appel and Muysken 1987). Canada is a country jointly inhabited by two major ethnic groups; the English-speaking majority and the French-speaking minority in the Province of Quebec. Because of the numerical strength of the English-speaking Canadians, employment opportunities and the entire labour market is mostly tilted in favour of the English speakers, so much so that the French-speaking Canadians were compelled to acquire ability in English suitable for effective participation in the competition for economic, political and cultural resources of the country. This was to the displeasure of the French-speaking Canadians, and it gave rise to a series of conflicts, especially in Quebec where, according to Rousseau (1993:17) “two thirds of Quebecers speak no English”. They were demanding their linguistic rights not only in their province but also in Canada (Oyetade 2003).

In Nigeria, three principal languages and other languages of state importance are recognized but English occupies the prominent position as the official language, language of education, judiciary and higher commerce. The three major languages are Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, each spoken by more than 40 million speakers. These are followed by languages of local importance, which are equally useful in their respective states. Languages in this category include Edo, Efik, Kanuri, Tiv, Urhobo, Fulfude, Igala, Nupe, Ijo, Isekiri, Ebir, Annang, Gwari, etc. The last category is the languages that are very small and are only useful in their respective communities. These are what some scholars regard as minority languages (Agheyisi 1984). However, for these three groups of languages, Bamgbose (1992) has suggested such terms as *major* for Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo; *minor* for languages that are prominent in each state, and small group languages for others so as to steer clear of the pejorative connotation associated with the term “Minority” languages (Oyetade 2003: 105-106). Over and above these languages, English could be said to be more important. Several arguments have been put up in support of English as regards its role in the national life of Nigeria. The vital roles English performs notwithstanding, Nigeria must realistically confront the problem of ethnicity and cater for the yearning and aspirations of all segments of the nation. The linguistic rights of all citizen should be respected no matter the number of speakers of a language. In this regards, (Adegbiya 1994:4) points out that all languages in a multilingual context whether major or minor, exoglossic or endoglossic should be seen as resources that need to be effectively harnessed for the total national good and that language policies need to respect, support and encourage the mutual harmonious coexistence of all languages, no matter their origins and the political or economic power or numerical strength of their speakers.

Language Planning Ideology:

Tackling problems arising from multilingualism and vital decision making on language policies have been enabled by planning ideologies. Cobarrubias (1983) identified four typical ideologies as: Linguistic assimilation, Linguistic pluralism, Vernacularization and Internationalism. Linguistic assimilation refers to the practice that everyone, regardless of origin learns the dominant language of the state. France is an example of a country where this policy is in practice. The goal is to suppress the minority languages. This usually results in language shift and ultimately language death.

The recognition of more than one language by a state is linguistic pluralism. This can take different forms. Certain territories within a larger society may require more than one language to conduct its affairs. It can be complete or partial, so that all or only some aspects of life can be conducted in more than one language in that society. Examples are countries like Belgium, Singapore, South Africa and Switzerland. Vernacularization is the restoration or elaboration of an indigenous language and its adoption as official language, e.g Hebrew in Israel and tagalog in Philippines. Internationalization is the adoption of a non-indigenous language of wider communication either as an official language or for such purposes as education or trade. This is the situation in most African nations like Nigeria.

Language Policy in Nigeria

In Nigeria, after independence, the readily available language of the colonial master English was adopted as the official language. However, Oyetade (2003:107) is of the view that there has not been a comprehensive language policy for Nigeria as a deliberate and planned exercise. He stresses that indeed, language planning as an organized and systematic pursuit of solutions to language problems has remained largely peripheral to the mainstream of national planning. What can be regarded as a language policy came about in the context of other more centrally defined national concerns, such as the development of a National policy on Education and the drafting of a constitution for the country. It is in connection with these two documents, i.e the National Policy on Education and the constitution of the Federal republic of Nigeria that we can talk about Language policy and Planning in Nigeria. It is entrenched in the 1979 constitution in Section 51 and 91, and also repeated in Section 55 and 95 of the 1999 constitution that:

The business of the House of Assembly shall be conducted in English, but the house may in addition to English conduct the business of the House in one or more other languages spoken in the state as the House may by resolution approve.

The Policy statement referred to as the National Policy on Education come into existence as an official document first published in 1977. It is in this document that the Federal Government for the first time made pronouncement on the teaching and learning of indigenous languages. Before this came to be, series of events took place. The formal western type of education was introduced into the country by Christian missionaries just before the middle of the nineteenth Century. For about four decades after the initial date, both the nature and main thrust of language education in the country were completely left to those missionaries to decide (Taiwo 1980:10; Fafunwa 1974:92).

The well-known belief of most missionaries was that first, the African child was best taught in his native language (Hair 1967:67), and second, that the interests of Christianity would best be served by actually propagating that religion in indigenous languages. The teaching and learning of indigenous languages received much genuine attention in those early days of western type of education in the country. But not everybody liked or approved of the products of such a system of education, quite the contrary; members of the then elite were widely of the view that the people turned out under that system of education were not well enough suited to the job market of those days, whose unsatisfied needs were for persons with training in English rather than in the indigenous languages (Taiwo 1980:11). Commenting on this Awobuluyi (2014:2) notes, influenced perhaps only in part by such views, the governments in the country began as from the early 1980's gradually to intervene in Education of the country with a view to

according English a lot more prominence in it. Over time, the policy succeeded so well that interest in language education in the country shifted substantially away from the indigenous languages towards English. He points out that proof of this was first, pupils and their parents gradually formed the opinion, which is regrettably still widely held even today, that it was financially more rewarding to study English than any of the indigenous languages; second, certification became conditional upon passing English; and, finally, the various governments in the country from the colonial times till well past the attainment of political independence in 1960 rarely felt that they had any duty to promote the study of the indigenous languages whereas they considered themselves obligated to encourage and even enforce the study of English.

After the attainment of political independence in 1960, the wisdom of giving English so much importance in government and education also began gradually to be questioned. Thus, some people felt, and openly canvassed in parliament for English to be replaced as official language by one of our indigenous languages some twenty years after independence (Bamgbose 1976:12-13). Also, Osaji (1979:159) quoting the white paper on the *Udoji Report* indicates that others who were particularly worried by the problem most people in the country actually have in understanding English and communicating well in it, advised that more efforts should be put into teaching of the major indigenous languages to enable them to serve as an alternative to English as official means of communication in government and business. It was as a result of such pressures and suggestions that the Federal Government began to have interest in the teaching and learning of the indigenous languages. The interest in indigenous languages got a constitutional backing when a brand new subsection was written into that portion of the country's 1989 constitution dealing with educational objectives of state policy. It is viz: subsection 19 (4) and declares that "Government shall encourage the learning of indigenous language" in (Awobuluyi 2014:6).

The Need to Maintain Igala Language

The lack of clear cut policy on language in the country is indicative of lack of interest by governments at all levels to promote indigenous languages. The continuous neglect of the local languages could lead to several unfavourable developments which could ultimately result in death of some languages especially the so-called "minority languages" to which Igala belongs. There is a need to put in place measures to reverse the situation. For instance, Agbede, C.U, Abata-Ahura, L.I. Krisagbede, E.C. and Edward, C. (2012:7), opine that revalorization of the indigenous languages is imperative. This they say refers to the new ideology, which brings fresh dimensions to the mother tongue schooling system whereby indigenous languages of ex-colonial states of Africa and Asia are given added impetus in terms of value. It is a kind of deliberate linguistic policy aimed at re-inventing the indigenous languages that hitherto have been relegated to the background by the dominant (Linguicist) language policy and investing them with socioeconomic and political powers, which were originally the exclusive preserve of the ex-colonial masters' languages (English, French, Spanish, etc). A typical case is the implementation of South Africa's post-apartheid policy of 11 official languages. This, according to Benson (2004) can be seen in the context of a continent-wide movement for revalorization of indigenous knowledge now known as the African Renaissance (Alexander 2003), which holds that "cultural freedom and African emancipation cannot be cultivated, expanded or developed" where the languages in which people are "most creative and innovative" are not languages of instruction (Prah 2003:17). The same revalorization exercise has equally caught on in some Latin America and Asian countries as reported by Von Gleich

(2003) and Kosonen (2004) respectively. The essential objective has been to invest local languages with added value and by so doing guarantee their development and practical use in education and other official purposes. This presupposes linguistic and material developments, which require a serious investment of time and resources, along with a commitment for collaboration between linguists, educators and community members. Revalorization involves expansion of language functions as an aspect of corpus planning, which according to Cooper (1989), has three elements; harmonization, which determines the degree to which a range of varieties can be considered one language; standardization, which selects a norm and determines its orthography and grammar; and elaboration or intellectualization, which adapts the language for more abstract forms of expression like those needed for school learning (cited in Agbedo, C.U, Abata-Ahura, L.I. Krisagbedo, E.C. and Edward, (2012 :7)).

Igala language is spoken by a people referred to as Igala. Omachonu, G.S. (2012:8), observes that Igala language belongs to the West Benue-Congo and more precisely one of the ‘Yoruboid’ languages in Nigeria. Other languages in the group are Yoruba and Itsekiri. It is a dominant language in Kogi State spoken by over two million natives in nine Local Government Areas of Kogi East senatorial District, North Central Nigeria. Igalaland is bounded on the eastern side by Idoma land of Benue State, flanked by Anambra and Enugu State on the South and by the rivers Benue and Niger in the north and west respectively. The area is approximately between latitude 6 and 30 and 840 North and Longitude 630 and 740 east and covers an area of about 13,665 square kilometers. The language is equally spoken in some communities outside Kogi State: Ebu in Delta State, Olohi and Ifekwu in Edo State, Ogwurugwu, Ojo, Iga and Asaba in Enugu State, Odokpe, Njam, Inoma, Ala, Igbedo, Onugwa, Ode Igbokenyi and Ila in Anambra State (Omachonu 2012:8).

Igala is the 9th largest ethnic group out of the existing over 300 ethnic groups in Nigeria. It is one of the few ethnic groups that share intimate affinity with the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Aside of that, Igala orthography (alphabetical writings and correct spellings of words) according to Ocheja (2011) is one of the only twenty seven or so orthography recognized by the National Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) of the Federal Ministry of Education out of the over three hundred main languages that exist in Nigeria (Audu, J. 2014:393). As a result of the central position the Igala people occupy in Nigeria, it has been suggested that the Igala language be adopted as the nation’s Lingua franca but because it is a “minority” language, the idea was quickly discarded. Owolabi, D. and Dada, S.M. (2012:1679), observe that the suggestion of a seemingly political neutral language, Igala in the central part of the country has not worked. As a small ethnic and linguistic group located in the central part of the country, it is assumed that the adoption of the language of this group would pose no threat to the major ethnic groups who have always exercise the fear of political domination, if any of the major linguistic groups languages is selected. It is also assumed by the promoters of the language as Nigeria’s national language that the central location of this group will help the language spread to other parts of the country easily and evenly.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) indicates that Teaching and Learning should be carried out in the language of the immediate environment of the child at the early stage of learning. The NPE (2004:10) states that:

*The medium of instruction in Primary School
Shall be in the language of the environment
for the first three years And the language*

*of the immediate environment Shall be taught
as subject.*

It is apparent that the directive here is that education during the first three years of learning in the primary school should be carried out in the mother tongue. For the children of Igala natives spread across nine Local Government Areas of Kogi State and beyond, Igala language is their mother tongue, therefore, education for these children begins in Igala language. Igala language by the pronouncement of the NPE is a language of Education. No language of education should be over looked and allowed to deteriorate and become bastardized the way Igala language is at present.

Igala as a language of education is accentuated by being one of the nine indigenous languages in addition to Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba that has been suggested by the language Development centre to be allowed to feature in the country's formal school system. According to Awobuluhi (2014:7). The country is believed to have four hundred distinct indigenous languages. As each of the languages is by definition a mother tongue, in theory they all qualify to be taught as school subject under the NPE policy on language education in Primary and Junior Secondary Schools. However, because most of them have such small number of speakers, it would not appear at all practical to actually teach them as school subjects. For precisely this reason, according to (Brann 1977:47 cited in Awobuluyi), the former National language Centre, now transformed into the current language Development Centre (LDC) and placed under the Nigerian Education Research and Development Council (NERDC), in 1976 suggested that, in addition: Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, only the following nine of the remaining 387 or so indigenous languages in the country should be allowed to feature in the country's formal school system: Edo, Fulfulde, Ibibio, Idoma, Igala, Ijo, Kanuri, Nupe, and Tiv.

There have been lots of claims that the mother tongue teaching policy is only on paper. This is a result of the neglect and the apparent lack of commitment on the part of the Government to implement and monitor the practice of mother tongue teaching and learning. The situations in the primary and even up to the secondary (especially the public) schools indicate that mother tongue instruction is practiced though haphazardly. In this regard, Alabi, S.A., Adebeye, M.E. and Olatayo, O.F. (2008:29) observe that: "in virtually all our public primary schools, the children do not receive their education in English either at an earlier or later stage, yet the government, teachers and learners engage in a game of proclaiming to the world that English is the medium. The truth is that the teacher teaches himself and/or the children with his own or the children's mother tongue". The situation is not different in public schools in Igala speaking areas of the country. Children enrolling into schools in rural areas know and speak no other language than Igala. Teachers are therefore left with no option than to instruct the children in Igala sometimes beyond the primary school stage. The disturbing issue is that teachers are left to their own devices on how they carry out instruction. There is no aid in any form from the government to improve and enhance the teaching and learning in Igala. The adverse effect of this neglect is that children do not internalize much even in other subjects. This is why Igala is used for instruction even up to the secondary school level. A great number of students finish secondary school with little knowledge in the subjects they have studied and are unable to speak and write good English. The Federal government has turned its back on the mother tongue policy it has put forward. Governments and stakeholders need to have a rethink and rescue instruction in Igala and the learning of Igala as a subject. The functions of language which include the urge to pass information, exchange ideas, cultural values, ethics, norms and mores begin from infancy through adulthood. The language which can perform this function

better cannot be any other one than the mother tongue which is innate to the child and acquired by him out of involuntary desire to communicate and interact with the immediate society. Concept formation, ego-growth and personality development are better given a solid foundation through the mother tongue in order to extirpate 'split personality' and 'ego-Permeability in a child (Macnamara, 1966, Weinreich, 1970). For this reason, Weinreich (1970) concludes that if a child at infancy or childhood is saddled with a second language (L₂), such that its mother tongue is not allowed to take a firm root in the child, such a child will suffer emotional instability, personality clash, and in the extreme, cultural alienation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Language is important to the meaningful existence of the human race. It is used by man as a means of social, cultural transmission as well as a means of knowledge advancement and educational development. These are some of the functions that Igala as a language is capable of performing for its numerous speakers. The language is a source of social and cultural transmission between individuals and from the older to younger generation. The current trend where proficiency in the language lies with the older and dying generation should not be allowed to continue. The younger generation especially the so-called "educated" ones speak a watered-down form of the language. This is made worse by the lack of interest in using the language by the elites. They prefer speaking English and pidgin English to their children instead of Igala. They think that starting their children with English language is following the global trend. For this reason, the earlier attempts at developing the language started by providing the much needed foundation through the establishment of schools, printing presses at Ika, Ejoka and Ojuwo Anyigba, in Kogi state was not appreciated by the people and government as there are no more traces of some of the efforts.

It is pertinent to revive early the efforts made in order to give the teaming Igala children who are hitherto taught haphazardly in the mother tongue the sound foundation they require in early learning. This will go a long way in changing the educational fortune of Igala land. Awoniyi (1982) remarks that as man is the cause transmitter and recipient of his culture, so his mother tongue reflects his culture, personality and the cultural group to which he belongs. A person's mother tongue is therefore, a compendium of what society regards as important and this language provides the means by which he or she can study and understand the value and concern of society.

The existing language policy as pointed out came about as a result of the National Policy on Education. The Federal Government needs to put in place a comprehensive National Policy on language with the revalorization of indigenous languages as a priority. It is an important step towards achieving the country's desire for a National language.

Governments at the state and local levels should ensure the implementation of the mother tongue instruction in early classes of the primary school by providing equipment and aids that will facilitate effective implementation. Readers, text books and teachers handbooks written in Igala for all subjects studied in classes 1-3 need to be developed and made available to teachers for use.

Effective monitoring measures should also be put in place through supervision by the Head teachers and officials of the Education Departments of State and Local Governments.

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