

**OVERCOMING THE SCARE OF LANGUAGE EXTINCTION: A CASE FOR  
THE IGALA LANGUAGE.**

**BY**

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**IGALA STUDIES: EXPLORATION AND REDISCOVERY.**

## **Abstract**

*The threat of languages going into extinction is gaining grounds world wide and languages of the world are responding to this phenomenon. The Igala language cannot pay deaf ears where others with well codified and standardized orthographies are scrambling in response. This paper in recognition of this global threat looks at the Igala language, her prospects in relation to what can be done and suggests a blending of the Igala Language along with the English language in all the areas where it is being used today. Some linguistic variables like bilingualism, code switching, code mixing, borrowing, and diglossia when harnessed will intentionally legitimize the Igala language so that her admixture with the English language in our educational sector (teaching, learning and research) and political life will enable man realize himself fully in his quest to contribute to National Transformation.*

## **Introduction**

It has been said times without number and widely believed that when a language is not being fully utilized to its maximum capacity, its chances of going into extinction becomes very high. So much is the threat that many languages of the world have begun to scramble in response to this global phenomenon and many languages have been rejuvenated into active use in the areas where the English language had all along enjoyed wider and unprecedented patronage.

Paramount among the world agencies that are campaigning for this awareness is the United Nations Educational and Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO) which early this year convened a mother tongue day and organized talks aimed at guiding against language extinction while soliciting for its use in order to ginger positive progress politically.

It observed that a situation where parents no longer brought up their children to appreciate their indigenous mother tongues but taught them foreign languages in the bid to discourage the use of vernacular was seriously detrimental to their future and breaking down the bedrock and foundation of every linguistic formation that the child will eventually begin to construct.

Since every language carries with it the totality of the ways of life of a people, the preservation of our cultures can never be successful where the English language, a colonial legacy is preferred over our own indigenous mother tongues.

In the words of Omoniyi (2013), the only way to end poverty, ignorance, disease and backwardness is by investing in our indigenous languages. Little or not at all do people realize that every language (including the Igala language) has a context of indigeneity as does the languages of the United Nation's security council and the highbrow ones in which other political, social, legal and religious issues of the world

are carried out. This in essence means that the so called English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Latin, Russian and Mandarin are all indigenous to certain regions of the world.

These languages convey the folklores, mores of an ethno-linguistic group and so, there is a need to revise and re-envision our conceptualization of our indigenous languages and in this particular sense, the Igala language.

### **Conceptual Framework**

A critical look at the way the national language policy in Nigeria is crated, it creates a diglossic situation in which the English language privileges over our indigenous language even in clear situations where it is inadequate in expressing our world views culturally. Ibileye (2000) shares this view when he summed up that “any language that will serve the communicative need of any group of people must embody their cultural history and their present cultural realities”.

It will appear that we (Africans, Nigerians and Igala’s alike) have mis-interpreted ourselves by placing the foreign languages over and above our indigenous mother tongues even when the legislations meant it in our favour. The National Policy on Education provides that;

*government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and at a later stage, English*

With this admixture of the Igala and English language provided in the curriculum of the school, bilingualism has been utilized in laying a sound linguistic background for the learner which if properly harnessed guarantees a sound mind required to contribute to national transformation. But we seem to all on our own

scuttle this effort by wanting our children and wards to speak the queens English even better than the queen's children. Halliday (1965) had stated

*that after a period of intensive study of language as an idealized philosophical construct, linguists have come round to taking accounts of the fact that people talk to each other in order to solve purely internal problems of its own history and culture. Language has had to be taken out of its glass case, dusted and put back in a living environment into a context of situation...*

Like what is happening today, the Igala language has got to receive the attention it requires, being brought out of its glass case, dusted" and being put to use especially in a way that it corroborates the provision of the National policy on Education. We are in the era of deployment of the means of communication which ensures the most effective communication.

All the contexts in which communication takes place: (where speaker and listener share mutual intelligibility, where the nomenclature of the subject of discussion is forgotten or outrightly absent, where it enhances the flow of the communication) are cogent reasons for the utilization of our indigenous languages so that the language does not become moribund or go into extinction.

### **Bilingualism.**

Bilingualism is the situation of use of more than one language by an individual or a community. To Bloomfield (1993:133) bilingualism concerns the native-like control of two or more languages, the ability of a speaker to produce update meaningful utterances in the other language.

One very important factor about the bilingual person as considered by Akindele and Adegbite (1992:27) is the capacity to sustain two different codes of communication at the same time.

The problem however with this generation of Igala Scholars is the ignorance about this advantage and then the attempt to wholesomely adopt the foreign tongue and use it even when it does not enhance effectiveness in communication on some culturally and politically based concepts.

Kachru (1983:36) is equally of the same opinion with Akindele and Adegbite because to him, "the indigenous language provides the English language with an extended context of situation within which such literatures may be interpreted and understood.

#### **Code switching and Code mixing.**

Code switching and code mixing equally play vital roles in understanding this subject matter. Code switching refers to a situation in which a speaker changes from one language (especially the one in which communication first began) to another. It is a voluntary action by the speaker who has more than one language at his disposal and chooses any at a given time to achieve a specific goal. In selecting these languages, it is borne in mind that one best enhances the communication he has entered into.

Pride and Holmes (1972:42) define code switching as "what happens in a situation where several codes are available to a speaker, he manipulates them in many subtle ways in trying to harangue or convince his audience, choosing a particular form of phrase in a particular language to drive home one point, switching languages and turning to another portion of his audience to make another".

It can be clearly seen here as an organized behaviour which requires a set of registers from the codes available to the user of language. Whereas a change from the indigenous to the English is usually or predominantly the case, this research is postulating that certain situations certainly require a change from the English to the indigenous language and in this particular context the Igala language because it

enhances the handling of specific matters. While code switching strictly concerns the outright change of code for formal issues, code mixing is an admixture of the lexical items of the languages at the disposal of the user at any point in time.

Code mixing happens more often unconsciously because of the availability of these codes or absence of a nomenclature on the subject matter. It is much easier to borrow an existing term from another language than to make one up. The need to quote, call a name in a particular language triggers language mixing.

For example, an Igala teacher should feel free to mention the name “Otogbo” (referring to this big flowing gown worn in Africa) in a lecture on dress code because the subject matter lacks an existing nomenclature in the English language.

#### **Borrowing.**

No language of the world is self-sufficient. It is normal therefore to see languages borrowing lexical items to complement wherever users have found themselves, Weinreich (1953:80) opined that “when two or more languages having distinctive phonological, lexical and grammatical systems come in contact, they are bound to influence each other”.

There are so many experiences that may crop up today that English language may lack the viability to sustain it, in this context therefore, a resort to the indigenous language will readily become an option. The argument above is to the point that when there is a clear case of inadequacy that a language suffers from time to time (and they always do) the need to rely on another to aid effective communication should be celebrated. So linguistic borrowing which results from a sociolinguistic situation like this mentioned is a healthy trend which brings with it language growth and development and enhances our quest for national transformation.

## **Diglossia**

Diglossia is another concept that arises in a situation where two or more languages exist and are recognized for use within a community. According to Ferguson (1972:245) diglossia is a relatively stable language situation in which in addition to the primary dialects of the language of a community, there is a divergent, highly codified, superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of literature... and not used for ordinary conversation.

The problem with us however is the attachment we have had to the provisions of a diglossic situation. Our preference for the foreign language at the expense of our indigenous languages. Division of roles between and among languages should rather be a function of which enhances communication and not of legislation. Today, many states of the federation have taken this radical move by injecting their indigenous languages in some (but not all) of their public programmes.

This researcher is very sure that with meetings of this type, we are gradually converging on the awareness that anything short of the medium that will serve our communicative needs, our cultural history and our present cultural realities is not acceptable. When this happens, we can at least tap our chest and say that our present cultural realities are achieved because language and culture go hand in hand.

## **Emerging Issues.**

As it stands now, the facts for bilingualism, code switching, code mixing, borrowing and diglossia are clear manifestations of the threat to language extinction which the Igala language may face and which the Igala race is responding to. Suffice it to say that notable Igala sons and daughters have in their own way made efforts at projecting the Igala language in learning and research.



In December 2012, the Tai Solarin University of Education (TASUED) convened a lecture where Professor Tope Omoniyi serving as a guest lecturer spoke on the need for the intelligentsia to consider the relevance of language of political renewal and economic regeneration. To him, the political and economic quagmire that Nigeria has been facing requires a solution that must include a language dimension.

Early this year the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) equally convened a mother tongues day where issues concerning the need to bring children up in the mastery and use of their mother tongue were raised and discussed.

Today, the Kogi State College of Education is convening another gathering; an Igala studies conference tagged Exploration and Rediscovery. This paper is of the opinion that with all of these efforts and commensurate response from resource persons this dream has received positive attention and will continue to gain relevance. It is on record that this school has a department of Igala studies and a lot has been done before now by the crop of committed resource persons. Worthy of particular mention is Dr. Abbah, Ruth L. in “Ukoche Igala Arone Arone mela”. Her handling of the text from chapter I Basic Igala Alphabets to the ninth chapter Ewn Ekaluka is so well composed that when utilized will bring about this desired Exploration and Rediscovery.

Equally worthy of mention is the effort of Ademù Adedotenwojo Idama in his “Ekaluka” which deals with all the intricacies of counting in Igala. This is equally complimentary to that of Dr. Abbah earlier mentioned. Another worthwhile effort in the area of scholarship is the work of Emmy I. U. Idegu in “Omodoko”.

“Omodoko” creatively chronicles the Igala nation in her struggle for freedom between the Benin and Jukun dynasties and her successes. Idegu has in his own way

contributed immensely to the projection of the Igala nation as far as her prowess extends historically, culturally and politically.

The latest effort came from Dr. Tom A. Miachi in his "The Incarnate Being Phenomenon in African Culture. Anthropological Perspectives on the Igala of North-Central Nigeria. To be very candid, the work projects the Igala nation anthropologically, archeologically, psychologically, sociologically, linguistically, culturally and religiously. Infact, it is a compendium and I consider it an appropriate feat in the light of what we are doing here.

This researcher equally has something in the offing titled JUST A FRIEND, a play crafted in outings as opposed to others in movements, situations, atmospheres and the conventional Acts and scenes. Ninety percent of its characterization, plot, setting is Igala and it is meant to project the Igala nation in another dimension. These are just a tip of the iceberg because there are far more efforts by some other notable Igala personalities that I do not know nor can mention.

## **Conclusion**

This paper had set out to reiterate the threat of languages going into extinction and what the Igala language needs to do to overcome this scare. We had looked at basic concepts in sociolinguistics and what basic facts they hold for our present situation.

The efforts so far indicate that at no point was this threat a new thing neither has a deaf ear been paid to it. However, a lot more needs to be done to fully launch into this exploration and rediscovery if the Igala nation must be party to the national transformation agenda of this country in particular and the world at large and if the Igala language must not go into extinction.

## **Recommendation**

1. The Igala nation must respond more definitely to this phenomenon by ensuring the teaching of this language to her young ones at the primary school level.
2. Whatever requires to be done should be done to ensure a transfer of the values and structure of the Igala nation and language.
3. This type of forum should be sustained to hammer down this reality and for solutions to be discussed and handed down.

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