

LINGUISTIC LABOURS OF THE CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES ON THE NIGER: IMPLICATIONS FOR IGBO STUDIES

Introduction

The history of the early study of most Nigerian languages that belonged to the Niger-Kordofanian phylum is closely connected with the advent of Christian missions in Nigeria. In this connection, Igbo is hardly an exception.¹ Nonetheless, the study of Igbo could be said to have commenced in earnest following the arrival of Christian missionaries from Sierra Leone at Onitsha in 1857.² The abolition of slave trade that facilitated the return of ex-slaves to Africa paved the way for the concentration of freed Igbo slaves in Sierra Leone, Fernando Po, Liberia, and The Gambia. Although freed, the ex-slaves' quest for a final reunion with their kith and kins in Igboland intensified especially after the Aku (i.e the Yoruba ex-slaves in Sierra Leone) had successfully sponsored a mission to Egba. The Church Missionary Society (CMS), according to Tasié (1977), responded to an Igbo lobby and founded its Niger mission in 1857 headed by Rev. Samuel Ajayi Crowther. The establishment of the Niger Mission was seen by the Igbo ex-slaves in Sierra Leone as a realization of an age-long dream, hence their collective decision to resign their appointments as labourers, interpreters, and teachers and return home to participate in the missionary activities on the Niger. The linguistic aspect of these missionary activities, (which included dictionary compilations, primers, collection of oral literature, translations of Christian literature, European classics etc) we assume, laid a substantial base for the commencement of Igbo studies. Although the linguistic activities of the Christian missionaries on the Niger form the thrust of our discussion here, we recognize the government's contributions (no matter how negligible)³ especially in the significant areas of orthography and translation.

Linguistic Labours

Following Nwadike's (2002) historical account of the development of Igbo as a written language, Igbo studies spanned two significant periods- the Sierra Leone studies (1828-1857) and Onitsha studies (1857-1929). According to Nwadike (P.27), "Sierra Leone Studies of Igbo covered a period of about thirty years from 1828, when the first word-list in Igbo appeared in Freetown, to 1857, when such studies shifted to Igboland". The end of the Sierra Leone era marked the beginning of the Onitsha Studies era during which the venue of Igbo studies shifted from Freetown, Sierra Leone to Onitsha Nigeria. The Isuama studies period, notes Nwadike (2002:26), "...was mainly characterized by wordlist collection, translation of sacred tracts and the preparation of liturgical materials."

It is to be stated from the onset that the collection of Igbo wordlists provided a propitious basis on which subsequent linguistic enterprises anchored. The publication of primers, religious and literary texts as well as dictionary compilations became feasible in the light of the rich harvest of vocabulary items that had been documented. Viewed from a historical perspective, the first missionary enterprise in Igbo of linguistic significance was undertaken by Rev. Samuel Ajai Crowther and Rev. J.F. Schon, both of the Church Missionary Society. As missionaries on the staff of CMS in Freetown, both Schon and Crowther contributed immensely to the development of Igbo. For instance, in 1840, Rev. Schon disclosed to the Mission authorities that he had collected 1600 lexical items in Igbo and translated some prayers into Igbo. Thereafter in 1852 and 1859, Rev. Schon, according to Bamgbose (1982:36), published *Isuama Ibo Primer* and *Isuama Ibo Catechism* respectively, both modeled after Isuama Igbo, that is a variety of Igbo developed by ex-slaves in Sierra Leone for purposes of inter-personal communication activities. He followed these up later in 1861 with the publication of *Oku Ibo: the Grammatical Elements of the Igbo Language and Vocabulary of the Ibo Language*. The first work of real importance in the area of grammar, according to Emenyonu (1978:22) was published by Rev. S. A. Crowther. This was his *Isuama Ibo Primer*

of 1857 that remained the classic in the CMS primary schools and has survived in contemporary times as *Azu Ndu* after not less than three revisions and expansions. Crowther's associate and the titular head of the Igbo mission on the Niger, John C. Taylor, also published *Ibo Prayer Book* and revised Crowther's *Primer* in 1860. Within this period, Smart and W. Carow published *Igbo Primer*. Equally of note were J. Spencer's *Ibo grammar* and *Elementary Grammar of Ibo* (1892). The latter was revised in 1908 and enlarged in 1916 by Rev. T.J. Dennis. This, in the opinion of Onuoha (1986:4), was done to provide enough grammar lessons for schools. In 1899, A. Ganot came out with a book, *Grammaire Ibo*.

The linguistic enterprises of the missionaries in such areas as dictionary compilation and translations were no less significant and rewarding. The first Igbo dictionary was published by Crowther in 1882 with an English-Ibo supplement by Schon in 1883. In spite of the obvious shortcomings of the Isuama dialect-based book, it provided a useful guide in the course of translations. Emenyonu (1978:27) claims that nothing was attempted in the way of a dictionary until about 1926 when an Ibo-English Dictionary of 306 foolscap pages was issued by L. Portman, but Emenanjo (1985:27), on the contrary, observes that a trilingual dictionary, *English-Ibo-French Dictionary* was published by A. Ganot in 1904. This book proved a useful companion not only to the native speakers but also to the English and French-speaking learners of Igbo as a second language. Later in 1907, Rev. Zappa's collection contained in his book, *Essai de Dictionnaire Francaias-Ika*, a French-Ika Igbo dictionary, was published. In 1913, the government anthropologist, Northcote Thomas published an *English-Ibo and Ibo-English Dictionary*. Translation of Christian literature works, Bible and European classics formed the bulk of the missionaries' linguistic activities on the Niger. In this respect, Taylor's works are of remarkable importance. His journal published in 1859 contains many references to his translation work in Igbo. This preceded *Isuama Ibo Sermon*, a composition of Christian literature published in 1860. According to Tasie (1977:62), Taylor also translated portions of the New Testament, the liturgy, a primer for Igbo at Akassa in the Niger Delta, *Dr. Watt's First*

Catechism, some prayers and hymns, all in Isuama Igbo. As Hair (1967) and Emenanjo (1985) variously observe, the last decade of Crowther's Niger Mission witnessed a flurry of linguistic activity. It was the period of conferences, memos and seminal linguistic works on Igbo. The works, as listed by Hair (1967:102-105), were mostly made up of religious texts- catechisms, sermons, primers, prayer books, hymnals, biblical translations, and grammars.

Of all the translation attempts of the missionaries, the *Union Igbo Bible* written in a modified Lepsius alphabet was the most remarkable. Archdeacon T.J. Dennis was highly instrumental to the production of the Union Igbo, which commenced shortly after his first visit to Egbu in 1905. Thereafter in 1906, the translation committee, consisting of Rev. Dennis, T.D. Anyaegbunam and A. Onyeabo, finally settled in Owerri. The production was completed in 1910 at a cost of about two hundred pounds sterling. The translation of the Bible paved way for the translation of other European classics into Igbo. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* was translated into Igbo as *Ije Nke Onye Kraist* by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. Extracts from such works as *The Arabian Knights* and *Tales from Shakespeare* were also translated. The same is true of *Grim's Fairy Tales* as *Akuko Ifo Grim Koro* by Dick Ogan. Other works produced by Dennis and his translation committee included *Palmer's Catechism*, *Union Hymnal*, and *Reader*, among others. The missionaries made significant forays into Igbo oral literature. In his preface to *Oku Igbo*, Schon, according to Emenyonu (1978:24), commented on Taylor's misguided linguistic efforts noting that Taylor "...ought first of all to have collected native literature of stories, proverbs, and sayings from the lips of intelligent natives, have analysed them grammatically and then have addressed themselves to the work of translating the Scriptures." It was, however, remarkable that instruction to later missionaries in the field began to include a change that they collect folk tales, proverbs, riddles, and sayings in the native language. This provided the impetus for the collection of oral narratives and other oral performances. In 1859, Taylor published his first and only known collection of proverbs and a catechism, as appendix to a book co-

authored by him and Rev. Crowther titled *The Gospel on the Bank of the Niger*. Also in 1907, Zappa collected oral literature seen as an aid to the missionaries in the work of evangelization and in the education of the natives through artistic forms familiar to them.

It seems from the foregoing that of all the missionaries that swarmed on the Niger in their evangelization bid, the missionaries of the CMS extraction played the most prominent role in the Igbo studies. This is, however, without prejudice to the significant inroads into Igbo language made by the Methodist Mission, especially in the setting up of Methodist Institute Uzuakoli in 1923. A good number of the products such as Rev. Dr. E. Igwe, K. Achinivu, and J. Iroagonachi made useful contributions to the development of Igbo studies. Equally of note were the contributions of M.N. Green, Ida Ward, J. Ahamba, B.Nwachukwu and J. Carnochan. Unlike the CMS Niger Mission, the Catholic enterprise in Igbo, as Emenanjo (1985:24) observes, was largely flat-footed. Nonetheless, the positive impact of the RCM on the Igbo language began to be felt, albeit pitifully, after what Emenanjo recognizes as the era of intolerance, that is 1885-1926. The era of tolerance witnessed the production in Onicha dialect of catechisms, hymns, primers and Readers like the Six Book Igbo Kwenu series, *Mbido Onu Ogugu Igbo Books 1&2*.

Implications for Igbo Studies

In spite of the numerous problems⁴ encountered by the missionaries, their linguistic labours provided the tonic that stimulated interest in Igbo studies. This tonic derived essentially from the intense linguistic activity that was the hallmark of Crowther's and Dennis's eras in the Niger Mission. Emenanjo notes that the Crowther era witnessed the reduction of Igbo into writing, the beginnings of the search for a standard pan-Igbo dialect through language conferences and texts, the beginning of Igbo lexicography, serious grammatical studies, creative Igbo works, the beginning of collection of orature and the centrality of Igbo in the educational process. The post-Dennis era witnessed the resolution of the orthography controversy, the beginning of serious collection of Igbo folklores, the training of manpower in the Igbo language, the

language assistants' programme at the School of Oriental and African Studies, SOAS. Despite the initial anti-Igbo sentiments among the purveyors of catholic mission in Nigeria⁵, the greatest and most lasting contributions of the catholic mission to Igbo, notes Emenanjo (p.35), is the sustained promotion of neo-central Igbo and ecumenism in writing as well as the promotion and use of Igbo texts. In his review of the contributions of the missionaries to the development of written Igbo literature, Obiechina (1969:11) notes how the introduction of an alphabetic script by the Christian missionaries led to the development of written literature in English-speaking West African languages. This was particularly true of Igbo. Most of the leading Igbo writers, Obiechina further observes, have been products of mission schools and since these writers have through their writings pointed to the highlights and ideals of the Igbo culture, one can say that the missionaries indirectly helped to give Igbo cultural identity and to preserve it. He concludes "...the missionaries by adapting the West African vernaculars to the western script and through the use of diacritics to mark tonal inflexions have made a permanent contribution of the greatest importance to the study of African linguistics." Emenyonu (p.26) expressed a similar view when he noted that some of the early writers in Igbo owed both the tool for creating the literature and its inspiration to their mission education and their writings. This, in a way, reflects their gratitude to the missionaries. Some of the earliest Igbo writers were products of the mission schools and the effect of their mission education is evident in the large number of biblical quotations, allusions, Christian imagery and vocabulary in their works.

In the light of the foregoing, the significant impact of the missionaries' linguistic labours on the Igbo language can hardly be gainsaid. All the same, this is not to suggest that the missionaries' intervention in Igbo language studies was not without significant blemishes and pitfalls. In the first instance, the imposition of western values and Christian beliefs on the Igbo people tended to exert considerable corrosive impact on their cultural and linguistic framework. As a result, the language became a malleable tool in the

hands of the missionaries who took relish in anglicizing it. The adoption of the phonotactic rules of Germanic languages, especially English, in writing some Igbo proper nouns appeared to be one of the cardinal objectives of the Anglicization crusade of the Christian missionaries. The impact of this linguistic imperialism is evident in such lexical items as Awkunanaw(Okunano), Enugu(Elugwu), Awka(Oka), Owerri(Owere), Onitsha(Onicha), Orlu(Olu), Afikpo(Ehugbo) Abakaliki(Abakeleke), Orji(Oji) Okafor(Okafo) etc. Furthermore, the Union Igbo, which was understood as an amalgam of four 'mainstream' Igbo dialects inexplicably took no cognizance of other equally mainstream dialects of Igbo such as Ika, Nsuka, Oka, Enugwu and Abakeleke, among others. The arbitrary selection of the so-called leading dialects imposed unnecessary task on the speakers of the dialects outside the synthetic Union Igbo as they strove labouriously to learn the new "Esperanto" in order to read and understand the new Igbo Bible. Worse still, Union Igbo was not restricted to the specific area of religious texts but was designed to serve as a medium of creative writing in Igbo. Apart from the cognitive constraints suffered by the Christians who were non-speakers of the Union Igbo, pupils in the mission schools, who had literary creativity but were non-speakers of 'Union Igbo', were denied access to aesthetic use of the language. The unjustifiable restriction of scriptural, liturgical, and literary writings to the extremely exclusive ambit of Union Igbo not only crippled vocabulary expansion of the language but also lent extra verve to erroneous and often times misleading interpretations of terms in the course of translations. Even when it was obvious that the dialects that constituted the Union Igbo contraption were not truly representative of the Igbo language, the missionaries restricted themselves to the scant vocabulary, hence the tendency to dismiss Igbo as a language lacking in rich vocabulary. Given this false perception of Igbo, the condition of terminological exactness in the event of translation could only be sought within the narrow confines of the Union Igbo. Sometimes, the appropriateness of certain lexical items of the Union Igbo freely used by the missionaries in their translation hardly derived from their semantic sameness. The

missionaries demonstrated this typical crass linguistic ignorance when they erroneously translated 'ekwensu', the Igbo word for 'god of justice' as 'devil' or 'Satan'. Recourse to flagrant borrowings from English became the attractive alternative once the Union Igbo was deemed to have fallen short of meeting the terminological needs of the translators. This probably explains the preponderance of borrowed items in the language that could have easily been sourced from other dialects outside the Union Igbo. Although Emenanjo thinks otherwise⁶, the proliferation of Igbo orthography, which took on the coloration of religious rivalry between the CMS and RCM⁷ had everything but salutary effect on Igbo studies. As Ugonna (1979:33) observes, "...each orthography became a symbol of religious solidarity and a compromise was regarded as a doctrinal submission and a catastrophic sectarian defeat..." All in all, the foregoing does not rubbish in its entirety the positive impact of the missionaries' pioneering efforts at directing the searchlight on Igbo studies.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to examine the linguistic landmarks in Igbo studies as recorded by the Christian missionaries, in the course of their evangelical mission on the Niger. In this connection, we took ample cognizance of the pioneering role of the CMS, which was later complemented by the RCM. However, as emergency 'linguists' treading on an unfamiliar turf, the missionaries hardly resisted the allurements of armchair theorizing and untutored contraption that left bleeding scars on the Igbo language. Consequently, the language, which was prostrated by the ravenous heat, is apparently yearning to be divested of the vestiges of the missionaries' convoluted linguistic engineering. The foregoing challenges the collective endeavours of Igbo linguists and scholars generally to a renewed sort of moral conviction and intellectual rearmament to throw off the yoke and defreeze the thick fog of linguistic imperialism foisted on the Igbo language by the adventurous missionaries. Perhaps, in this way, the language will owe gratitude to the missionaries without remaining tied to the apron strings of English language.

Notes

- 1 It is to be noted however that collections of Igbo wordlists by such scholars as G. Oldendorp (1777), Olauda Equiano (1789), H. Kilham (1828), Hugh Crow (1837), Edwin Noriss (1841), Koelle (1854) among others suggest that Igbo language studies had begun earlier before the arrival of the missionaries in Nigeria.
- 2 Emenanjo (1985) notes the arrival on the Niger first in 1841 and later in 1857 of the CMS agents Rev. Ajayi Crowther and his associate J.C. Taylor and the commencement of their linguistic activities.
- 3 The fortunes of Igbo language as Emenanjo (1985) observes have with the colonial government passed through a period of indifference (1849-1903), outright antagonism (1903-1925), passive acquiescence (1926-1959) and active patronage (1977-now).
- 4 Lack of proper linguistic training on the part of the missionaries, multiplicity of dialects, rivalry among the competing religious sects inter alia, militated against the linguistic labours of the missionaries.
- 5 The tenure of the pathologically anti-Igbo Irish Missionary Father Shanahan as the Vicar General at Onitsha between 1905-1934 portended an ominous period for Igbo language in the hands of the Catholics.
- 6 Emenanjo posits that the orthography controversy, which was an aftermath of the 1926 Education Code was a blessing in disguise as it gingered catholic involvement in writing, printing and publishing Igbo texts, encouraged more aggressive literary activities on the part of the Protestants and led to the birth of the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture.
- 7 In 1929, R.F.C. Adams introduced a new Igbo Orthography based on the International African Institute's recommended orthography for Africa. The CMS held fast to the Mission or Old Orthography while the Catholic Mission adopted Africa Script, variously called 'Catholic Orthography', 'Ida-Ward Orthography', 'New Orthography'.

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