

APOLOGIA FOR THE INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE IN AFRICA

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It is said that today we live in globalized world. This is understood to mean, among other things, that what happens in one part of the globe affects people in other parts of the planet. Thus a social or political upheaval in the Middle East affects the price of petrol in North America, just as a sectarian violent attack in Borno State of Nigeria affects the price of fresh tomatoes in Nsukka, Enugu State of Nigeria. That is globalization in the economic domain. In the domain of language and culture, however, globalization seems to imply the survival of the fittest, since it appears to favor the propagation and spread of some language and culture to the detriment of others. In this globalization perspective, the strong or international languages of the world tend to expand and grow while the weak or local languages tend to shrink and may eventually die off. The possibility of eventual disappearance of the local indigenous languages, particularly in Africa, may appear to be a rather far flung pessimistic view of the future of those languages, with the aggressive spread and the determined rooting of colonial languages on the African soil. Many indigenous African languages are now really endangered species. Notable among these languages is the Igbo language for, as a language expert, Ikechukwu Aloysius Orjinta in *Factors for the Igbo Leadership Vacuum and the Igbo Vandalization of her Elites using Chinualumogu Achebe's Case as a Case Study* (2013:3), has observed, "Many of our (Igbo) children today can hardly speak Igbo or make a complete sentence in Igbo language." That is an indisputable sign of a language in danger of eventual disappearance.

Language Personality and Human Identity

Language has been described as a symbolic system by which man communicates and shares experiences with fellow men and women. It enables human beings to build a human society and create a uniquely human culture. As Lawton (1978) puts it, language is "the uniquely human attribute which enables people to learn, think relatively and change their social environment." Language is also said to be a repository of knowledge in a culture and about a culture and a people. It is therefore considered as the mirror of culture, because it "reflects a crystallized thought and life pattern of a people."

Sapir (1929) has noted the close relationship between language and ethnicity. "Human beings", he says, do not live in the objective world alone or alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society.

It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. . . we see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretations". It is further said that languages relate first and foremost to particular cultures. Each language represents and reflects the speakers and the cultures it encodes; hence a language is a granary of the world-view of its speakers. A particular language best encodes and expresses the being of its speakers, their indigenous belief systems, socio-cultural, political and economic values.

Rayed Afzal has equally underscored the intimate relationship and mutual influence between language and human identity. "The selection of language tools used to express thought reflects the priorities of a person or, for that matter a nation. The way language is acquired and then used can make a tremendous difference in the success (or failure) of a person or nation. The quality and quantity of language is a barometer of the intellectual health of a people".

It can be said, therefore, that the indigenous language of a people forms part of the people's being and identity. This, in my opinion, explains why no people or nation has developed or built an authentic valuable and enduring culture using a foreign or imposed language. All the great nations and cultures of the world, from the earliest recorded history to the present, have achieved their greatness and their stature in their own language. Ancient Rome had its language, Latin; the Greeks had their Greek, the Persians had their Persian. In our day, the English have their English, the French have their French, the Germans have their German, the Chinese their Chinese, the Americans their American, the Japanese their Japanese, the Italians their Italian etc. In a case such as India where a colonial language, English, was imposed, vibrant indigenous languages, Hindi, and Tamil Nadu have reasserted themselves and are relegating the use of the colonial language to a subordinate position in the intellectual and cultural life of the people. It might be said, therefore, that a people or a nation cannot be optimally creative, optimally original in thought and reflexion using an imposed language, be it in the Humanities or in the Sciences. A man of Letters or a man of Science who excels in his pursuits using a foreign or imposed language would certainly have been a much greater success if he operated, reflected and created in his indigenous language or mother tongue.

When a native speaker of English or French, for example, says of an African writer in English or French, that he, the African writer, handles the language (English or French) like a native speaker, what that native speaker means is that such an African writer, no matter how good he is in that language is not, in any consideration, a native speaker of the language. This can be likened to the reaction of an Arts

connoisseur who examines what looks like two identical copies of the Mona Lisa and then says of one of the copies: this is an excellent imitation, but it is not the original.

Language Development and Expansion

A language, as a socio-cultural and human phenomenon, is capable of growth and change in structure and vocabulary and even of profound metamorphosis into other languages. Thus Latin, the language of ancient Rome, became the *lingua franca* of the ancient Roman Empire and in contact with the socio-cultural and linguistic situations in various parts of the Roman Empire evolved into French, Spanish, Italian, Romanian, Portuguese and other Romance languages of today. In its original form and structure, Latin is considered today as a “dead language” because it has ceased to be a language of daily use, but is confined to the pages of written texts.

Every living language in daily use is capable of enrichment and, therefore, capable of serving as a language of culture, of science and technology. In contact with other languages and cultures, and through the process of borrowing, of mutations and adaptations, a language can enrich both its structure and vocabulary to cope with the demands and challenges of new realities; hence the appearance in living languages of neologisms and new forms of expressions which are either borrowed from other languages or even coined from existing forms in the languages itself.

Language growth and expansion are closely linked to the growth and expansion of peoples in the world, particularly through economic, political and cultural activities. The expansion and growth of certain European languages in other parts of the world resulted from European voyages of discovery, commercial enterprises, territorial conquests and colonization. Language expansion can occur under various forms such as implantation, importation, superimposition and cultural radiance and influence. By implantation, a language is implanted on a foreign soil and becomes the mother tongue of the majority of the inhabitants of the area. This is the case of the English language in North America and of French in Quebec.

By importation, a foreign language is introduced into an area, generally through minority groups of immigrants who subsequently constitute linguistic clusters. The language thus imported becomes one of the local languages of the area. In the United States of America, for example, one finds today clusters of Spanish-speaking, Chinese-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking Americans.

The superimposition of one language on another, or on others, occurs through conquest, domination and colonization. The superimposed language becomes the language of the ruling class and, therefore, the language of culture, administration, education, commerce and politics. This is the case of English in Nigeria and in what has come to be known as Anglophone West Africa, and of French in what is today called Francophone Africa and of Portuguese in Lusophone Africa.

In the case of cultural radiance and influence, a language is studied outside its geographical boundaries because of the richness of the culture which it vehicles or because of religious reasons. Thus French is studied outside its natural and political

boundaries because of the radiance and the prestige of the French culture in Arts and Science, the advantages that accrue from the knowledge of the language in the world and the status of French as an international language. In the same way Arabic is studied and adopted in Moslem areas of the world as the language of the Islamic religion.

The superimposed European languages in Africa, resulting from European conquests and colonization, enjoy in their respective areas the prestige of the language of the elite. In fact, so profound has been the influence of those colonial languages on Africa that today, as Ali Mazrui and Teshom Wagaw (p.229) rightly observed, whole sections of the continent are identified by the language of the former colonial power. We refer, for example, to French-speaking and English-speaking West Africa. Mazrui and Wagwa came to the conclusion that "it was Western languages rather than Christianity which, in the end, turned out to be the most important transmission belt of values and ideas". Africa appears to have so helplessly accepted those values and cultures and so completely that more than half a century after the attainment of political liberation as Mazrui rightly notes, the African elite is still defined in terms of the mastery of the colonial language; competence in the relevant imperial language still constitutes in part, credential for leadership and the basis for influence, qualification for election into the legislature and participation in the executive branch of the legislature, in part, on the command of the relevant colonial language; and employment in the modern sector of the economy is still linked to knowledge of the colonial language and European style of education. In the majority of African countries, according to Mazrui and Wagaw, "it is inconceivable that the President should be a person who knows only native languages and is not, at the same time, a pretender to European linguistic competence".

Whatever may be the real and the imagined advantages for Africa of the adoption of the colonial languages, there are inherent problems and contradictions in such a linguistic situation. Language is not just an instrument for communication; it encapsulates and vehicles the ideology and world view of a people and a culture. In European ideology and world view, for example, it has been noted that black colour is systematically attributed negative values. In the English language, as has often been noted, one speaks of a black leg as a traitor, a black sheep as a never-do-well, a black eye as a cause of discredit, a black list as a list of undesirables, a black mail as a cowardly and ignoble act. If, as Frantz Fanon says, to speak and to adopt a language means to assume a culture and support the weight of a civilization, one wonders how black and African nations and people should assume cultures and support the weight of civilizations which are nourished by and embedded in a world view that projects them in absolute negativity. Furthermore, colonial languages in Africa are the languages of the elite minority. It is estimated that less than twenty percent of the population of any African country, even at the present moment, has access to the colonial language in use in that country. The adoption of such a language as a

medium of intellectual exchange blocks access to knowledge for the vast majority of the people since those who lack the language are excluded from positions with the potential for upward mobility. It is evident that a language situation which bars the vast majority of the people from effective participation in the economic, political and cultural life of the nation cannot favour genuine and rapid development. For effective development to be achieved, says Prah (1993) in Bodomo Adams (1999), each citizen should have the opportunity to contribute optimally to the general welfare effort and should feel unhampered and uninhibited in the pursuit of those activities which he chooses freely out of other options. Prah puts the language situation in African development in sharp focus:

“the dilemma in Africa with regards to language and development is that ... the elite which is entrusted with the leadership in the development endeavour is created in, and trapped by the culture of Western society, and favors the reproduction of entire Western images in African development. The elite in effect see Africa from outside; in as far as the African mind is concerned. It is estranged from the culture of the masses, but realizes almost as an afterthought that development as a simple replication of Western experience is “mission impossible”.

Since development implies the harnessing of human and material resources for sustainable transformation and improvement of the quality of human life and environment, the contention is that such development is not realizable as long as Africa neglects its indigenous languages and clings to foreign and colonial languages as “savior languages.”

The Dutch psychiatrist Hilbert Kuik quoted by Prah (1993) made an illuminating remark in this regard”

“...when people speak of developing countries they immediately think of economic backwardness. To deal with that, projects are conceived and technicians and money sent. When the projects fail, blame is put on the social and cultural practices of the people... only rarely do people from the donor countries) realize that the language barrier is the culprit which prevents new ideas from taking root... the fact that the inherited colonial official languages, French and English, operate more as inhibiting than facilitating factor, is a point which in my estimation is poorly appreciated by both the local governmental authorities and the international agencies”

It has also been noted that the uncritical adoption of the colonial language in teaching the African child tends to isolate the child from his/her social context and native environment. The consequence of this, says Abdou Moumouni (pp65-66) is that the child is constantly grappling with two different worlds: the world of the school made artificial by the use of a foreign language, and the natural world of the family and the

community in which the mother tongue is the ordinary medium of communication. This, according to Moumouni, could lead to a permanent psychological cleavage, intellectually divided loyalties and a feeling of alienation with its consequent complexes and inability to identify with the social environment and values of the child's native culture. Consciously or unconsciously, adds Moumouni, the myth of the "superiority" of the foreign culture, backed up by the preference for the foreign language in education, is gradually internalized by the child. Such an alienated child would be incapable, as an adult, to appreciate and identify with not only the culture of his people, but also their problems and aspirations, and, therefore, incapable of contributing to their realization. Such a situation, adds Ansre (p5) "has a subtle way of warping the minds, attitudes and aspirations of even the most noble mind in a society and of preventing him from appreciating and realizing the full potentialities of the indigenous language"

It is in order to avert such an unfortunate development that African governments have been repeatedly called upon to adopt measures and policies to promote indigenous languages and to deemphasize colonial languages in education. From the 1959 Second World Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in Rome to the 1977 Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture in Lagos, the calls and the demands have been insistently made that "African Governments should adopt as a matter of necessity one indigenous language or another as a medium of instruction at all levels of education" because, it is recognized and admitted that a people cannot attain its optimal potentialities and achieve optimal development and progress through the medium of a foreign or imposed language and culture.

Language Dispositions and Development

Experts in the psychology of language learning and language development have identified two types of language dispositions or language skills each of which plays a specific role in human and societal development. These are known as the Basic Interpersonal Communication Skill (BICS) and the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).

The Basic Interpersonal Communication Skill (BICS) or disposition according to the experts, manifests in verbal or written form, especially in the expression of human feelings and emotions, in debates and arguments on topics and issues, in the facility and proficiency in the use of language to convince, persuade or entertain. The areas of predilection of this language disposition are the Humanities and the Social Sciences in general and literature in particular.

The Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), on the other hand, is said to be manifested in the area of the sciences. It is the language disposition which favours scientific thinking, analysis of scientific data and formulation of scientific hypotheses and theories. CALP is not potent in the expression of feelings or of beauty of language as in poetry or other literary genres. Its area of predilection is said to be logical thinking, deductive reasoning and figures.

The two language dispositions are recognized to be necessary for a proper balance in a human society. Thanks to the Basic Interpersonal Communication Skill human beings can express joy, beauty and common interest and ideals; and thanks to the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, endowed individuals carry on scientific researches and make scientific discoveries without which our world would not be as safe and comfortable as we have it today..

According to Rayed Afzal, societies and cultures in which the CALP skill or disposition predominates show a far greater evidence of scientific and technological progress and development than societies and cultures with a predominance of the Basic Interpersonal Communication Skill.

Indigenous African languages, as we observe, lend themselves to a richness of expression in reflexions on lived experiences, in proverbs and wise saying; they are rich in devices for storytelling and narration of historical and heroic deeds of ancestors, in witty sayings and humours. Indeed, indigenous African languages appear generally to be the languages of the Basic Interpersonal Communication Skill. There is, however, not much evidence of the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency disposition which favours the scientific thought. One might be tempted to relate this language disposition to the general African developmental situation. One might even be tempted to relate it also to the known predilection of African leaders and elite to make beautifully crafted and worded developmental plans which are rarely translated into concrete achievements for material progress.

In this age of Science and Technology, one might also be tempted to relate the growing indifference to and lack of regard for the indigenous language on the part of the African elite of today to the perceived inability of the indigenous languages to serve the needs and respond to the challenges of scientific thought and expression. Should we, then, abandon our mother tongues or discard them because, in their present stages, they do not serve us appropriately in the pursuit and expression of scientific thought? That would be another dimension of a second identity tragedy.

Love of the Mother Tongue: The French Example

According to the French language expert, Vincent Onyema Okeke (p.36), "France considers her language as a very vital aspect of her proper existence and through it France has been able to project her intellectual, cultural and quite a number of other legacies across the world. She puts in everything (financial resources, material investments, personnel etc) in this promotion. As a result everything French, be it industrial ventures, diplomatic representations in any part of the world, strives to maintain this policy. Nigeria has a lot to learn from the progressive manner in which France tackles her language policy in our country given the fact that since 1977 when Nigeria's National Language Policy was promulgated, no tangible success has been achieved."

The French do, indeed, love their language and demonstrate that love in action, perhaps more than any other people or nation. For the ordinary French person, his language or mother tongue or indigenous language is considered, as Monique Elungu (p.99) puts it, “une langue noble, glorieux témoin d’un sommet de civilisation” (A noble language and a glorious evidence of civilization at its zenith) France pursues a deliberate and focused policy of French language and culture expansion. The result is that French is used as official language in over forty-seven countries and studied in many more across the globe, especially by young people, who cherish it as a language of culture. Among the official institutions and organs established for the promotion of the language one must mention the prestigious and time-honoured Academie Francaise. Others are the Alliance Française, Le Haut Conseil de la Francophonie, la Federation Internationale des Professeurs de Français, Les Services Cultures des Ambassades de France, Le Centre National de Documentation Pédagogique, French Language Centres, French Pilot Schools, National Associations of Teachers of French in various countries; and, in Nigeria, we also have the French Language Village in Badagry. All these institutions and organs have the same objective and pursue the same policy of promoting the French language, with the active financial and material support of the French government. This ensures that in competition with other international languages, French enjoys a privileged and ever-expanding position of strength as an international language and a language of culture.

The Igbo and their Language

There is an Igbo ethnic nationality with a population of over fifty million people which is only slightly less than that of France. But unlike the French, the Igbo appear to have manifest contempt for their mother tongue, the Igbo language. Rev. Fr. Dr. Orjinta (2013:5), in a troubled reflexion on the attitude of the Igbo to what is Igbo, asks: “why does the Igbo soul loathe that which is his own?” Chinua Achebe, the Igbo sage and incomparable African writer in English tells us of “the inclination of the Igbo to jettison his tradition (including his history) if he sees personal advancement accruing from such abandonment” (p.37). One might add that even when there is no manifest tangible advantage, the Igbo has no qualms to express contempt for what is his own. The Igbo have coined such adjectives as Igbotic for whatever is perceived as crude, unrefined or inelegant; Igbo made for any product of inferior quality or suspicious origin, even if such a product is made in Kano or Ibadan. The Igbo elite, especially young mothers, make extra efforts to ensure that their children do not speak Igbo even in the home. To speak Igbo is to be Igbotic. According to M.C. Onukawa (p.137) “a good percentage of the Igbo including those who can read and write) are illiterate in the Igbo language. For such people, (particularly the elite) it does not matter how one speaks or writes Igbo so long as he (sic) communicates (but they feel dejected each time they commit an error in English). Onukawa adds that the ignorance of the Igbo of their own language, and the

distortion of the grammar of the language amounts to a betrayal that retards the development of the nation since language is incontestably an indispensable tool in all facets of national development. Such a bewildering attitude towards one's mother tongue is cause for concern especially in the case of the indigenous language in Africa.

One could recall here the famous poem on patriotism "innominatus" by the Scottish poet, Sir Walter Scott, who wonders if there exists a person without love for his fatherland, and one may add, for his mother tongue.

Breathes there the man with soul so dead,
Who never to himself hath said,
"This is my own, my native land!"
Whose heart hath never within him burned?
As home his footsteps he hath turned
From wandering on a foreign strand?

For "my native land" read "my native tongue"; for "his footsteps" read "his mother tongue" and for "foreign strand" read "foreign and imposed tongue."

In spite of the glorious work and efforts of the late F.C. Ogbalu who deserves to be canonized as the patron saint for the promotion of Igbo language and the spirited efforts of the Society for the Promotion of Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC), the Igbo remain generally indifferent to the cause of their indigenous language. Says Ikechukwu Aloysius Orjinta (2013:14) "The Igbo cherishes to speak other languages fluently even when he can hardly make a full sentence in Igbo language." This shows clearly in the fact that even the *Ohaneze ndi Igbo* which is supposed to be an apex pan-Igbo cultural organization conducts its meetings and discussions in English. In our universities, departments of Igbo teach Igbo in English and academic theses and dissertations on Igbo language and culture are presented and defended in English or French but never in Igbo. Even Professors of Igbo language at the universities deliver their Inaugural Lectures in English. Similarly even the Society for the Promotion of Igbo Language and Culture holds its conferences and debates in English and believes that is an effective and practical way to promote the Igbo language.

Igbo is one of the three major languages of Nigeria, in the company of Hausa and Yoruba, recognized in the Nigerian National Language Policy. It is an approved subject on the school syllabus for public examinations. It is an approved area of research and study in many Nigerian Universities. The problem of the Igbo language is not, therefore, in official status and recognition. It is in the bewildering reluctance of the Igbo to speak and promote his mother tongue. There is need, therefore, for a deep sensitization and conscientization of the Igbo soul so that he can appreciate what is his own, so that he can love and speak his mother tongue just as the Hausa love and speak Hausa, the Yoruba love and speak Yoruba and the French love and speak French.

CONCLUSION

International or colonial languages have come to stay in Africa. They have a role to play for Africa in a globalized world. They may be considered as indispensable tools in international communications and exchanges. However, they must be recognized for what they are: foreign languages and, as such, cannot be the languages that favour and promote the creativity and originality of the African mind. The indigenous language, on the other hand, is the umbilical cord that provides the essential ingredients for the flowering of the creative thinking and the originality that promote development in the Humanities and the Sciences. One of the challenges of the Humanities in the twenty first century is, in my opinion, to make a convincing case for the indigenous languages in Africa which hold the key for authentic and African-bred thought and measures for African development.

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