Under Threat of Extinction

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Igbo and Yoruba are among the 3000 indigenous languages that the UNESCO predicts will go extinct in the next 50 years even though some state governments are trying to preserve them

In the next 50 years, no fewer than 3, 000 indigenous languages across the globe may likely go extinct, going by United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, UNESCO, prediction. Vigdis Finnbogadottir, the UNESCO’s Goodwill Ambassador for languages and former president of Iceland, said the number of speakers of these languages kept on dwindling by the day as they were overwhelmed by foreign languages, especially English and French. Finnbogadottir precisely captured the threat when he said, “Everyone loses if one language is lost because a nation and culture lose their memory, and so does the complex tapestry from which the world is woven that makes it an exciting place.”

According to the UNESCO, endangerment of language can be ranked on a continuum, from stability to extinction. The organisation pointed out six degrees of endangerment that can be distinguished with regards to inter-generational language transmission. They include when a language is unsafe, definitely endangered, severally endangered, critically endangered and extinction.

In Nigeria of the three major languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, the most endangered are the last two. Newswatch investigation revealed that, despite the fact that; Igbo and Yoruba are being promoted in schools, colleges and universities, not all parents and guardians from these ethnic groups consciously make enough efforts to teach their children or wards their mother tongues at home. Indeed, many parents find it difficult even to communicate effectively and efficiently in their mother tongues, and, therefore, cannot teach the younger generation their indigenous languages. It is based on this scenario that the UNESCO predicted that some Nigerian indigenous languages, especially, Igbo and Yoruba may face extinction in the next five decades if no effort is made to save them.

Chinyere Ohiri-Aniche, a professor of linguistics and vice-president of Linguistics Association of Nigeria, agreed with the UNESCO’s report, adding that it may be hard for Igbo language to even survive that long as it has fallen short of many indices which make for language animation. According to her, a 2007 study conducted in Imo and Lagos States, inquired into the Igbo Language competence of three age groups, aged 1-5, 6-11 and adults revealed that 70 percent of children between 6-11 years in Imo State and 90 percent of them aged five years and below were unable to speak the language.

In a similar research conducted the same year, 50 percent of parents in Imo State, and 80 percent in Lagos State, spoke mostly English or a mixture of English and Igbo with their children. She pointed out that further universal study of indigenous language competence among children, found alarming number of Igbo children both within and outside Igbo land unable to speak the language. According to her, Igbo language faces extinction since it failed to meet the survival languages indices like absolute number of committed speakers, interaction and social effects between languages. Others are attitudes and politics, nature, type and quality of language, documentation and shift in domain of actual use.

Pita Ejiofor, a professor and former vice chancellor of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, expressed concern over the outcome of the UNESCO’s study. He strongly believed that Igbo language stood the risk of dying earlier than envisaged if serious efforts were not made by the speakers to save it. He argued that the dwindling fortunes of the language was evident in the few number of Igbo films currently in the market despite the great number of Igbo actors in the Nollywood. The university don explained that films and movies are means of sustaining languages.

Chukwuemeka Wogu, minister of labour and productivity, said the recent report by the UNESCO was worrisome and called for prompt attention. At the 2nd International Conference on the extinction of Igbo language in Owerri, last year, Wogu said: “Until the shocking revelation that Igbo language may go into extinction in the next 50 years, most of us had thought that the language enjoyed a high level of scholarship. Igbo language may disappear because some families stopped speaking to their children in their mother tongue.”

On the part of Yoruba language, some speakers of the language, who spoke to Newswatch, said “the greatest tragedy in Yorubaland today is the prevalent trend of speaking only English to children, making it their first language. They are sent to private nursery schools, where they are taught only in English, thus making Yoruba children to value English above all other languages.

Hakeem Adenekan, Ogun State- born entrepreneur, said he felt disappointed that Nigeria’s indigenous languages are no more encouraged or spoken in many homes. Adenekan said he was also worried about the latest trend in some private primary and secondary schools where pupils are no longer taught any of our major languages but are rather taught French, Chinese, Spanish, among others.

“Many Nigerians now prefer to use American accent, even when they can’t write or understand Standard English. Whereas places like Singapore, Japan, Malaysia and China use their indigenous languages to train their children at home and in school. They realise that language is a weapon and use it effectively,”he said.

Akilimali Olade, chief librarian, African Heritage Research Library, Ibadan, said the incursion of English language into the Yoruba lexicon seemed to have done more damage to the language. “What you hear now is a mixture of Yoruba and English, like Kilo happen? Ma worry; Mo understand;’ Kosi problem and so on. Surely this is not Yoruba language that the person is speaking. Foreign culture has brought Nigerian culture to its knees in so many ways. Now a foreign language seeks to kill our own God-given languages, using Nigerians as the executioners,” she said.

According to her, the first problem that will result in not speaking indigenous languages is a change in the child’s behaviour with respect to discipline and respect for his parents and others. “The English-speaking child will never become great in creativity or in leadership in the Nigerian context. He/she can never become the President of Nigeria because it is not possible to have a Nigerian President who cannot speak his Mother-Tongue effectively. These English-speaking children will rudely use English to disrespect all and sundry,” she argued.

However, many state governments, traditional rulers and individuals have embarked on sensitisation programmes to resuscitate the ailing

indigenous languages. Peter Obi, governor of Anambra State, took the first step on May 26, 2010, when he formally launched the Otu Sukwakwa, a group that champions the promotion of Igbo language and culture headed professor Ejiofor. Obi also signed into law a bill “The Igbo Language Usage Enforcement Law 2010,” to enforce the speaking and writing of Igbo and widespread usage of the language among Ndigbo in the state and the Diaspora. The governor also laid the foundation for the N60 million Ogbalu Igbo Language School. The institution is located at Professor Kenneth Dike Central Library, Awka. The law provides that principals of secondary schools in the state, who promote pupils from junior secondary school 111, JSS11, to senior secondary school 1, SS1, without passing Igbo language, are to be removed from their positions and fined N5, 000 for each pupil so promoted. Also, any state or privately owned tertiary institution in the state found not to have established an Igbo language department or make it a mandatory general studies course by September 2011, shall pay a fine of N100,000 for every month in which the offence was committed. The law also banned the administering of corporal punishment to students who speak Igbo in schools in the state. The law also made Igbo language compulsory in all the categories of educational institutions in the state just as English and Mathematics. From the commencement of the law, every Wednesday in every week has been observed as Igbo day and any head of department who finds a staff in western attire in contravention of the provisions of a particular section of the law shall send the staff home to wear Igbo attire. However, the law excludes some professional bodies like judicial officers and nurses whose dress code is bound by the law. Even business of the State House of Assembly is conducted in Igbo. The governor also pledged an annual donation of N200, 000; N250, 000 and N100, 000 to the three best Igbo students in Igbo quiz as well as scholarship to three best students in Igbo language in the West African Examination Council, WAEC, examinations. Imo State government also institutionalised the language in schools in the state. To this end, every teacher in the school system was mandated to designate quality time to use the language in teaching pupils in primary and secondary schools. Speaking during the 2011 Igbozurumee (Suwakwa Igbo) and award ceremony, Cletus Amaraegbu, special adviser to Rochas Okorocha, Imo State governor on Igbo affairs, said several awareness and sensitisation programmes have been put in place to ensure that the aspiration was realised. Samuel Agunwa Ohiri, traditional ruler of Obi Orodo and chairman, Imo State Traditional Rulers Council, told Newswatch that the traditional rulers in the state have also resolved to promote the language in the various communities by interacting with their subjects in Igbo language. “It is a pity that many Igbo families are complacent about the spoken Igbo even in the villages. Even in the South–East governor’s forum, English is the official language. We see it as glamour to show that we are learned. But having realised the blunder, we have contracted more writers that will conceive new alphabets in Igbo that will take care of words in mathematics, physics and other subjects,” he told Newswatch. Ohiri said these measures would give a new lease of life to the dying Igbo cultural values and language. He urged all the states in the South-East to work with all the universities in the zone to have a holistic programme that would make the language a priority and sponsor university scholars to international conferences where they can sensitise the Igbo in the Diaspora of the cultural renaissance going on at home. With regards to Yoruba language, individuals and state governments are working hard to ensure that the UNESCO’s prediction did not come to pass. Adenekan is currently leading a team of 50 Nigerians, including three professors and specialists in the three major indigenous languages in Nigeria: Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa. They have come up with a compilation of traditional folklores and rhymes, which espouse the virtues of honesty, hard work, chastity, citizenship, among others. These compilations are in book and audio-visual forms like compact discs, CD and VCD to re-awake and re-engineer the resolve to revive these languages. “Our children should not only be fed with Barney, Ben10 and other foreign stuff; they should also know about those indigenous rhymes that could build them up morally. To make for easy reading and understanding, these books have illustrations to support the stories. These are rhymes that bring about social and positive values in all our children. It imbues in them virtues of being good citizens, good students and good children,” he explained. Newswatch gathered that Rauf Aregbesola, governor of Osun State, has promptly adopted the book and the audio-visuals for pupils in public primary schools in the state. This, he said, would enable the children to be in love with the Yoruba language. Other governors in the South- West geopolitical zone have also adopted the audio-visuals. The UNESCO has also declared February 21, every year as the International Mother Tongue Day, to promote the use of mother tongues and to help save dying languages. The day also serves as a reminder of the importance of promoting the use of mother tongues in urban communities in Nigeria, where English, the nation’s official language, has literally swallowed most of the local languages.