

Global perspectives on multilingualism: Concepts, issues, problems and prospects pertaining to Igbo

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Abstract

This paper studies the global perspectives on multilingualism. It looks into the concepts, issues, problems and prospects as they apply to Igbo, a language spoken in South-Eastern Nigeria. Globalization is producing new ways of thinking about everything including language, and language is implicated in one or more significant ways in every major development that is discussed under the heading of globalization. Multilingualism, an issue that cuts across languages, is the use of more than two languages in a given speech community. A survey of languages spoken in Igboland demonstrates that Igbo speech community is a multilingual one. It is also observed that a major problem of globalization on multilingualism is the dominance of the English language. It is, however, suggested that there is hope of Igbo being used beyond Nigeria due to globalization.

Introduction

Nigeria is a multilingual nation. Igbo is spoken in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states of Nigeria. It is also spoken in some parts of Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers states in the southern region of Nigeria. The 2006 population census shows that there are about 15 million (14, 620, 331) Igbo speakers in the core Igbo states (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states of Nigeria). Multilingualism exists within the core Igbo states. For instance, Igbo, Igala and English are spoken in Anambra state while Igbo, Koring, Erei and English are spoken in Ebonyi state.

Igala is spoken in Anambra state due to a close affinity which exists between Ayamelum people of Anambra and Igala speakers of Kogi state. This is also the case for Erei spoken in Afikpo in Ebonyi state. English and Igbo are spoken in the other states. English is the second language. There are Hausa settlements in some places in Igboland. The Hausa settlement (referred to as Garki) in Ugwuoba, Enugu state is a good example. Igbo native speakers relate with Hausas and in turn, speak the Hausa language. The above-mentioned cases make the Igbo nation a multilingual one.

The dominance of English over Igbo has constituted a major problem. A survey of the languages spoken in Igbo states demonstrates that the co-existence of English and Igbo in Igboland has led to somewhat corrupt forms of the languages. These forms are what different scholars give different terms (See Odumuh, 1987 and Igboanusi, 2002 for example).

Concepts

The term ‘globalization’ is seen as both a misnomer and a euphemism. This implies that globalization needs and produces new channels, networks and practices which are not dependent on geographical proximity rather on language.

Globalization, in relation to language, portends “a global common language” which offers unprecedented possibilities for mutual understanding and thus enables us to find fresh opportunities for international cooperation (Crystal, 1999 in Okwudishu, 2003:3).

What is multilingualism?

The term ‘multilingualism’ refers to an individual speaker who uses more than two languages or to a community of speakers where the use of more than two languages is common. In Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English language, a multilingual person is one “able to speak more than two languages with approximately equal facility.”

Cenoz and Jessner (2004) are of the view that multilingualism is a common phenomenon. It is an act of acquiring and using more than two languages. Learning and using several languages are not exceptional nowadays, and there is a growing need for individuals and societies to be multilingual. Twomey approaches the concept of multilingualism from the internet’s perspective. He sees the term ‘multilingualism’ as being related primarily to two areas: multilingual online content and access to such content by the use of domain names.

Crystal (1999) in Okwudishu (2003) describes multilingualism as an alternative fundamental principal to the concept of ‘shared global language.’ Multilingualism was brought about by the Creator during the diffusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel. Alamu and Iloene (2003) posit that the term ‘multilingualism’ refers to a linguistic state where numerous languages are in use by one individual or in the same nation. They termed the latter ‘societal multilingualism.’ Borka also sees multilingualism as multi-languages. According to him, “the notion of multilingualism goes from a simple non-English interpretation to quite complex conceptions of multi-languages and cross languages aspects.”

Issues

The study of multilingualism is a relatively new but vibrant and expanding field. Multilingualism has received relatively little attention in scientific research and it has often been considered as part of bilingualism and second language acquisition. A debate on language and globalization was held in 2001. The debate/seminar examined a relatively neglected aspect of the current scholarly and political debate on globalization: language. The issue of how far globalization is a force promoting homogeneity (especially “Westernization” or Americanization”) came up. The key question here is whether globalization means “Englishization” or whether it is more likely to lead to an increase in individual and societal multilingualism, and the preservation/revival of currently “endangered” languages.

Multilingualism As The Norm In Africa

No matter whether we wish to separate bilingualism or multilingualism of individuals from sociolinguistic profiles of modern nation-states, multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception in Africa. All experts keep pointing this out untiringly to the less knowledgeable public. We shall concentrate on aspects of multilingualism of the second type, that of sociolinguistic nation-state profile. We shall start by giving some interesting figures about multilingualism in Africa. 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 (sociolects), the historical distance and other codes and registers will make the situation more complex.

Homogeneity is a fiction in the linguistic field more than in any other. Taking an arbitrary threshold of 90 per cent as the defining landmark of a monolingual country, only a handful of countries meets 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 97 languages for a population of about 45 million. Diversity is not the characteristic of giants alone. 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, Mauritanian has four languages, Niger ten.

These figures need to be scrutinized further, and they yield interesting and useful information. 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 use four of them and 60 to 65 per cent use only one language, Bamanan, as first (L1) or second (L2) language. Twenty years ago this percentage was around 40 per cent; the increase is due more to the growing numbers of users of Bamanan as L2 rather than the demographic increase of the ethnic Bamanan. Burkina Faso has about 60 languages for a population of 9 million, half of which is morephone (Speaker of the More language).

The numbers also conceal facts which need to be brought to light for a better understanding of the context and the challenge of multilingualism as a problem. In Nigeria 397 languages out of 410 are 'minority' languages, but the total number of their speakers account for 60 per cent 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 purposes 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 per cent of the population of almost any African country (UNESCO, March 1997:3).

Controversial Issues Regarding Multilingualism

The issues of language and multilingualism have been controversial all over the world throughout the centuries, as both are deeply related to one's cultural and national identity and often provoke conflicts among speakers of different languages (Cretu in <http://www.cmb.md/igf/files/Multilingualism%20communication%20Bridge.doc>).

There are a number of beliefs, prejudices and fallacies concerning mother tongues in multilingual contexts; let me mention the most virulent, some of them by way of recapitulation:

1. Commonly held beliefs and prejudices which have either been proven not to hold true or which refer to technical aspects of the problem which are highly overestimated- as part of the cherished anti- mother tongue folklore in some intellectual quarters:
 - a. that national unity requires official monolingualism;
 - b. that the official language must be an international language;
 - c. that initial mother tongue education is at the expense of the international language, even if only taught in the first two/three years;
 - d. that if children are taught too many languages, they will master none properly;
 - e. that most genetically related mother tongues are basically mutually intelligible dialects;
 - f. that normalization/standardization necessarily creates intra-tribal political problems;
 - g. that mother tongues cannot be modernized;
 - h. that literacy and post-literacy in all or many mother tongues are illusionary for at least these reasons:
 - it is too expensive;
 - there is no material basis for most mother tongues;
 - there are no sufficient human resources (skilled instructors).

2. Some fallacies for linguists and educationists to be aware of, no matter which stand they take, pro- or anti-mother tongues:

- a. *The discrimination fallacy:*
The internalization of ideas of superiority of colonial languages and cultures vs. inferiority of colonized languages and cultures;
- b. *The language-equals-culture fallacy:*
The assumption that language shift means automatic cultural shift;
- c. *The imposition fallacy:*
All mother tongues must be used in education and literacy even if the people don't want it to, based on the belief that literacy in any language automatically presupposes literacy in the mother tongues;
- c. *The objective –of–development fallacy:*
To develop, i.e. modernize a mother tongue is not sufficient nor the prime objective, but rather to develop, educate people and build up their potential to alter their conditions of life (Wolff 1998: 8-9).

Problems

The negative impact of globalization on multilingualism is a more visible phenomenon. A problem of multilingualism rests on the English language dominance. English is the preferred means of communication in business and science. Wurm (1995) in Okwudishu (2003:4) predicts that by the end of the 21st century, some 90 per cent of languages spoken today may disappear. Montviloff (2002) in Okwudishu (2003) warns against the dangers of globalization on language and points out that any loss of language is a disappearance of a pool of knowledge and an impoverishment of our cultural heritage and research capacities since language is a reflection of traditions, thoughts and cultures.

English is still being the dominating language for correspondence and communication over the internet. English is the first language of around 350 million people. Second language and foreign language of more than 750 million, 1-2 billion people have some ability in English. English is also becoming the global lingua franca of aviation, business, diplomacy, higher education, mathematics, science, technology, etc. Hjarvard sees English as the language of globalization. He maintains that the media contribute a lot to the spread of English; every media house uses it for disseminating information and the English used is interfered with the language of the area. He terms the different variations of English by the broadcasters 'medialects'. English is seen as a world language – the language people use whenever they wish to communicate with others outside their own linguistic community.

As English has moved toward paramouncy, the status of the other principal languages has changed. Even though they are spoken by more people today than ever before, they have been demoted, degraded in relation to English. Today French, Spanish, Arabic, German, Russian, etc. more or less have the status of regional languages, national languages that can be used beyond their national frontiers. But they are losing their currency as the language of international communication.

Wolff (2001) observes that German which is spoken by about 100 million people and is the mother tongue of maybe 80 million is no longer an international language to the extent of English.

Arguably, the biggest current threat to linguistic wealth globally is English. The current undeniable status of English poses a challenge to us. Where English is a first language, learning another is less important (Cunningham, 2001).

De Swaan (2001) in Piller and Pavlenko view English as the “hypercentral” language of globalization because it is used and highly prized internationally. In contexts where English is a national language (United States of America, United Kingdom, etc.), it is more than a “majority language” because it has a much wider reach, and in contexts where it is a migrant language it would be inappropriate to pretend that it is just another “minority language” as is of course evidenced by the fact that migrant English speakers are usually not considered migrants at all, but “expatriates”.

The sad and unfair reality behind this aphorism is the negative attitude towards mother tongues, which at the same time favours the international language, and which is based on obvious, superficial rationalizations in an attempt to justify imbalances born of injustices in history and circumstances. Movements for mother tongue rights and (especially) the preservation of endangered languages may be seen as the linguistic instantiation of the kind of ‘green’ politics which defend local diversity against the homogenizing effects of globalization. The western politics of global linguistic diversity is ‘think globally and look locally’ where they maintain the status of their languages against those of the developing nations.

Crystal (2000) sees the effects of globalization on multilingualism as being focused primarily on the major global languages. According to him, 96 per cent of the world’s population speak 4 per cent of the world’s languages. Put another way, 4 per cent speak 96 per cent of the world’s languages. What of these others, which constitute the multitude of tongues used by an inordinately small number of speakers? Their future is less assured. Another striking effect of globalization is language death. While the acts of

imperialistic nations have had a detrimental effect on languages historically – in all areas of the globe – a decided threat to indigenous languages everywhere has been the dominance of the linguistic preference of the conqueror. This has often been underwritten by policy designed to marginalize or eradicate the languages of minority groups. In some cases, genocide has been the order of the day.

Grin (2001) in Piller and Pavlenko carried out a quantitative study of a sample of around 2,000 Swiss residents on the economic value of English in Switzerland. He found out that men who are highly proficient in English reported an average monthly income of CHF7,636 while the average monthly income of women who are highly proficient in English was CHF4,096. He also maintains that promotion in employment is based on one's proficiency in the English language.

The adverse effect of globalization on multilingualism is highly evident in Nigeria. English, being the language of globalization, has almost overshadowed about 450 indigenous languages of Nigeria. Arohunmolase (2006) notes that we do not have capable teachers to teach indigenous languages in schools, colleges of education and universities. In affirmation to the above notion, Onyeche (2002) declares that the English language is the medium of instruction in Ika community. He goes further to say that pupils are forbidden to speak Ika and other Nigerian languages, and they are usually punished when they do so.

In primary schools, most teachers who teach Ika are non-specialists which results in poor teaching of the dialect since they are not skilled enough to teach. This is also the case with the Standard Igbo. Nkamigbo and Eme (2009) observe that Standard Igbo is taught in English in some public schools in Onitsha. Onyeche (2002) and Nkamigbo and Eme (2009) note that English is normally used in the Christian churches in Ika and other Igbo communities respectively. They also point out that English is used in writing by Ika and other Igbo people.

The influence of Igbo on English has resulted in another form of English – Igbo English. Igbo English is characterized by the introduction of the Igbo vowel harmony, vowel reduplication, epenthetic vowels, consonant elision and syllabic structure.

Basically, the linguistic influence of English on Igbo is the large number of vocabulary items which can be traced to loans or loan translation. Some of the loans are so old that they have been internalized by Igbo native speakers. They can hardly be recognized by the average Igbo speaker as having their origins in English. For example, items such as

<i>redio</i>	‘radio’
<i>boolu</i>	‘ball’
<i>peelu</i>	‘pail’
<i>waya</i>	‘wire’
<i>taya</i>	‘tyre’
<i>roba</i>	‘rubber’
<i>lampu</i>	‘lamp’
<i>korota</i>	‘coal tar’
<i>bokeeti</i>	‘bucket’
<i>windo</i>	‘window’
<i>bureedi</i>	‘bread’

etc. as used in Igbo, have been so well integrated into Igbo that they are often thought of as Igbo items.

Prospects

The prospects of globalization on multilingualism rest on the optimal use of African languages as a prerequisite for maximizing African creativity in development activities. The Igbo language will be used in maximizing Igbo creativity since Igbo speakers are found in all parts of the world. The problem of multilingualism and cultural diversity is in its essence a matter of economy and the level of development. Language is a carrier of culture, but it is rarely the driving force behind cultural domination: that is rather political, economic, religious and/or social. With absence of dominating force, an imposed language becomes a potential resource for the advancement of its speakers, the history points to several examples: French in post-Norman England or English in post-colonial India (Borka, p.5).

Our ideas cannot be promoted enough. The need to publicize our goals at all levels, on all fronts cannot be underestimated. There is a need to lobby politicians, reach decision-makers, impact on those responsible for developing policy. In order to promote languages, retain a firm commitment to multilingualism, enable those in lesser developed areas to access adequate education and use of technology, government policy to promote the education and usage of minority languages has to be effective.

Another trap in the desire for effective communication is the belief that if we all speak the same language, we can achieve globalization. This conclusion supports the notion of an international lingua franca, but denies the nature of the human race. Research has taught us that we have a greater appreciation of the differences of others, if we learn their languages and view the world from their perspective. History has also taught us that usage of only

a dominant language could place others in the uncomfortable position of feeling inferior, aggravating negative emotions and discouraging trust and friendship.

With globalization, the world's languages would be revealed. Arohunmolase (2006), accounting for the Yoruba language, opines that the global growth, spread, and the development of the teaching and the learning of Yoruba as a foreign language in the United States of America (USA), Great Britain, Ireland, South America (Brazil and other places), Germany, and all over Europe among others, has helped in no small measure in encouraging many people to study Yoruba L2 in colleges of education in Nigeria. These people know that there is employment opportunities open to them after their graduation, in countries all over the world. Globalization, a recent occurrence that affects the economic, political and cultural changes all over the world has also affected the teaching and learning of Yoruba L2 in our colleges of Education in Nigeria. This could also be the case for Igbo if there would be effective measures to promote the language beyond our country.

Globalization could lead to cultural unity. Arohunmolase (2006) is of the opinion that we can use the linguistic, historical and the cultural evidences in Nigerian languages for our desired national development and unity. If pupils/students in our primary/secondary schools, colleges of education and universities are appropriately taught Nigerian indigenous languages (apart from their mother tongue) as alternate languages, they would know all the things that unite Nigerian languages socially, culturally, linguistically, and historically. It will also enable Nigerian language scholars to be able to exploit the ancestral ties among Nigerian languages so as to show Nigerians that they have a common history.

Summary and Conclusion

The paper has looked into the implication of globalization on multilingualism. It is seen that globalization affects everything including language. A lot of issues were discussed on globalization and multilingualism. A cross examination of the languages of Africa and Igboland in particular shows that Africa and Igboland have a good grasp of multilingualism.

The issue of individual and societal multilingualism is also discussed, though to a small extent. While the former means the use of more than two languages

by an individual, the latter is the existence and use of multi-languages in a given speech community; the degree of proficiency notwithstanding.

One major problem of globalization pointed out is the dominance of English. It overshadows, demotes and degrades other languages which often lead to language death. It is noteworthy that with globalization, the Igbo language would be made known.

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