
**LANGUAGE AS AN ELEMENT OF HUMAN CULTURES:
RELEVANCE FOR THE TRANSMISSION OF
INDIGENOUS NIGERIAN VALUES**

Bridget O. **DIOKA**,¹ Peter U. **IWUNNA**² &
Ifenyinwa B. **EBUBECHINEKE**¹

¹Centre for Igbo Studies

²Department of Educational Foundations
University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State

Abstract

This paper presents a discussion on language, which stands out among the numerous cultures that are peculiar to human beings alone. It posits humanity as the one unique creature that is imbued with the rare ability to use language in its various forms. The understanding is that only human beings have and share cultures, while the natural ability to use language draws a clear line of distinction between animals and human beings. Based on this understanding therefore, it can only be highlighted that the relevance of this rare human trait can never be exhausted. Through the medium of language use, in its verbal and written formats, trans-generational values are transmitted, with the effect that younger generations learn from the past and become better positioned to maintain a healthier pattern of life that is acceptable to the society. It is therefore the position of this paper that through the medium of language, societies and community members educate and train their younger

generations to tow the right parts to life, and shun the digital era which seems to promote the wrongful use of language, which is being orchestrated by undue intoxication with the technology-driven electronic infrastructures.

Keywords: Culture, Human, Language, Relevance, Transmission, Values.

Introduction

Of all the creatures of God, human beings stand out very distinctly. Their distinctness could be counted in their numbers. Among all, human beings are the only creatures of God that prides a countless compendium of cultures and traditions which they share and celebrate. It is only human beings that have the potentials to be intelligent, as well as the ability to know themselves, chart a course for themselves, attain school education, acquire skills, operate in peace and harmony with friends and neighbours, endowed with the capacity to exercise leadership roles, and raise a family, erect a home, create a habitable environment, and exchange opinions with others, among several others (Iroegbu, 2000).

At that, it is only human beings that have the linguistic abilities to communicate with fellow beings, and be able to convey their feelings, express their fears, air their opinions, conduct social events, and organize themselves amicably. Even at that, it is only human beings that have the natural abilities to use language in their various formats, and most especially at this period in time when numerous technological devices have created numerous platforms that promote wider usage of this human feature. As a human medium of communication and contacts making then, it is not in any doubt, according to Aja (2011), language is traditionally concerned with what is said. The source adds that it is concerned with human utterances, which involve speakers and their speech, or actors and their actions.

None of these rare exploits which distinguish humans from the rest of creation would have been possible without the use of

language. Devoid of language use therefore, it is without a doubt that the world would have remained in darkness, while mere untamed animals would have conquered humanity with their sheer brute force. It is quite arguable then that the world would never be the same if humanity was denied of the ability to deploy the use of language to better himself, respect himself and others, train his family, tame and subdue the rest of creation using his intellectual powers, as well as imbibe the ability to shun evil and rather deliberately choose to be guided by his moral conscience (Ogbuene, 1999; Iroegbu, 2000).

Having made these clarifications, it now becomes relevant to buttress the fact that man is a culture-driven entity. At that, man is synonymous with varieties of cultures. Man's life and existence in a community as a unique creature revolves around the numerous cultures which influence and guide his conducts and activities within and beyond his immediate environments. On the strength of this understanding therefore, it becomes quite eminent that there are hardly any aspects of human life that are not guided and controlled by community-based cultures. It is these cultures that distinguish one community from the other, and separate various ethno-linguistic communities along the lines of the various cultures and traditions which define who they are (Uchendu, 1965; Iroegbu, 2000; Aikipitanyi, Luqman, Oliha, Adesiyan, 2019).

Thus, it needs to be highlighted that language and its usage are exclusive to human beings alone. Through the medium of the human language, effective communication is initiated, with the effect that indigenous values, accepted societal values, as well as the approved traditional practices of different communities in Nigeria, are successfully transferred into the hands of the younger generations - undiluted. The implication is that through the auspices of language, stronger knowledge and awareness of communities' core values are created. The ability to imbibe and retain such knowledge for longer periods becomes feasible. Through the medium of human language therefore, a greater longer-lasting impact is created in the mental psyche of recipients. Devoid of the use of language therefore, the transmission of indigenous values to upcoming generations of Nigerians would have been impossible,

with the effect that the world could have remained perpetually intellectually blinded, lawless, powerless, and morally deaf and dumb. At that, humanity could have remained literally on the same platform with the lower animals on the planet.

It is against this backdrop that this paper therefore examined the quintessential role which language, a crucial aspect of human cultures, plays in the transmission of indigenous values. Its relevance for the proper human development through the transmission of indigenous values to the future generations can never be done without. Denied of access to effective use of language therefore, humanity could be placed on the same strata with mere animals. Regretfully placed on such an unenviable platform, man would have remained cultureless, without values, and unable to educate and inform the younger generations. Through the auspices language use therefore, God was able to distinguish humanity from the rest of creation, which empowers him with the wisdom to transmit indigenous values from one generation to the next.

Conceptualizing Language

It has been accepted that the power and intellectual dispositions to use language in any of its forms is exclusive to humanity alone. On the strength of this understanding, it becomes obvious that languages are useless and meaningless if they are not converted into an effective instrument of communication by human beings. It is human beings that make language meaningful and relevant to societal growth. It is human beings that convert language into instruments of societal growth and community development. This brings us to the question: What is language?

The opinions of a few authors shall guide our understanding of this fundamental concept. Thus, according to Webster's New Explorer Dictionary, this concept refers to the form or style of verbal expression. It adds that this involves the use of words, pronunciation, and methods of combining them into meaningful instruments of communication within a particular community or language group. To that end, language functions as a mark of identity which defines specific human communities anywhere on the planet (Bloomfield, 1970).

Similarly, Brown (2002: 5) concedes language as a 'system of arbitrary conventionalized vocal, written or gestural symbols that enable members of a given community to communicate intelligibly with one another.' The indication here is that through the medium of language, meaningful communications are made. Through the medium of language too, persons can convey useful information to one another, most especially as the fundamental skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing could be deployed in the course of contact making. In the opinion of this author therefore, listening and speaking are categorized as oracy, while the arts of reading and writing are classified as literacy.

Based on these facts, it can only be added that the relevance of language for effective communications and contacts making can never be undermined in any manner or form. Language enhances the quality of communication. Deployment of language re-enforces the quality of any message being conveyed, creates opportunities for better storage of information, and provides quality platform for dialogue among persons.

Language as a Human Culture

It has already been noted that language counts among the numerous cultures which distinguish human beings from the rest of creation. This is an indication that human beings are the only creatures that possess the innate capabilities to deploy the use of language in its various forms to commune with one another, share ideas, express their emotions, engage in forms of education and training, as well as document crucial information for future usage. Through the medium of language therefore, human beings interact with one another and exchange ideas about events and developments around their environments (Uchendu, 1965; Bloomfield, 1970; Ogbuene, 1999; Iroegbu, 2000).

On the strength of these developments, the fact remains quite distinct that only human beings can exhibit these unique traits. Only human beings share the capacity to express their minds through the medium of a language. It is only human beings who possess the natural endowment to communicate their inner feelings

to one another, express the thoughts of their hearts through the medium of language, and deploy services of any of the key skills of language that is accessible to them at any point in time. It can only be underscored that man's ability to use language as a medium of communication distinctly displays the innate intellectual powers that are embedded in his person.

By that, human beings are able to distinguish good from evil, and separate him from engaging in criminal activities that are detrimental to societal growth and community development. These include forms of corruption, economic sabotage, terrorism, kidnapping for ransom, rape, and other heinous crimes which have bedevilled the country at this time. Through the medium of language therefore, man is able and capable of condemning and rejecting evil, as well as deploying the same instrument to transmit those rare indigenous values which guide the activities and conducts of society members (Uchendu, 1965; Arinze, 1982; Iroegbu, 1999).

The fact then remains that without language, human societies might not function effectively. Without language, humanity could become less functional, less interactive, and less intellectual. At that level, the society could find it difficult to survive and function effectively. Only limited levels of interaction could exist among humanity, while the boredom of gestural forms of communication could make life meaningless, and devoid of the beautiful flavours of effective language use.

Relevance of Language

Having arrived at this stage of the discussion, the crucial role played by language in the functionality of the human society shall be discussed under the following subheadings:

Instrument of Cultural Transfers

It is an obvious fact that Nigeria is a multiplicity of cultures and languages. It is a country that is richly endowed with enormous human capacity potentials, and a nation made up of diverse cultural and traditional values. In view of the enormity of distinct languages and countless numbers of cultures and value systems which define

the uniqueness of the nation, the crucial roles played by the distinct languages estimated at about 490, in the traditional day to day activities of their owners can never be underestimated. Language being the fundamental medium of connecting with one's family members, neighbours, friends, and community members plays significant roles (Iwunna, 2011).

This is an indication that through the medium of language, parents, families, communities, elders, churches, local authorities, and educate their members on those values and practices which are accepted and approved by the community. Through the medium of language, these custodians of indigenous values, traditions, and cultures empower their members with adequate knowledge of the 'dos and don'ts' which encourage societal growth, promote community peace, and engender the attitudes of cohesiveness and tolerance of one another. Transmitted through several media, which include family meetings, local community events, cultural activities (such as marriage ceremonies, child naming ceremonies, new yam festivals, wrestling competitions, drama series, forms of art work, ostracizing of offenders and law breakers, as well as expulsion from the land, among others), members are taught to imbibe those indigenous values and traditional norms which encourage peace and upright living within the community (Njoku, 1980; Arinze, 1982; Iwunna, 2010).

As a matter of fact, no Nigerian cultures or human communities accept negative attitudes as their norms. At that, no Nigerian communities promote any kinds of social vices as accepted practices within their domain. Similarly, no worship centres in Nigeria preach acts of injustice, terrorism, kidnapping for ransom, rape of innocent women and girls, and unwarranted destruction of precious lives and economic sources of livelihood. Similarly, no Nigerian cultures accept undue indolence and dependence on the generosity of others as a way of life. Rather, it is the principle of uprightness, hard work, commitment to duties, honesty, service to fatherland, respect for the sanctity of human life, as well as peace and oneness among kits and kin that are propagated. It is on the strength of these indigenous values that Nigerians, irrespective of their religious, cultural, economic, social, and geographical differences are able to

co-exist together as a single nation since its creation by the British colonial government after the historic 1914 amalgamation of the northern and southern territories into a single united nation, known and addressed as Nigeria (Lugard, 1922; Calvocoressi, 1987; Ugwulebo, 2002; Iwunna, 2011; Aikipitanyi *et al.*, 2019).

Medium of Training and Impartation of Skills

Through the medium of language, Nigerians are able to learn new skills, acquire assorted professions, attain formal education, train and re-train for varieties of skills, impart training, share experiences, and transmit knowledge to fellow citizens and community members. Through the media of the various local languages, as well as the English language, Nigerians are able to school together in various educational institutions all over the country. Through the auspices of this essential instrument of human communication, Nigerians from different parts of the country are able to work together, function as employees in the same firm, train for different skills in the same industries, and learn in order to improve their already acquired skills under the same trainers in different locations all over the country.

The obvious indication here is that through the media of the country's numerous languages, in combination with the English language, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Fulani, Nupe, Kanuri, Ibibio, Ijaw, Igala, Jukuns, Chamba, Bwari, Kuje, Isoko, Gwandu, Fakai, Daura, Bini, Itshekiri, just to mention but a few, can work under the same roof, attend the same schools, train under the same trainers, and acquire new skills under the same roof. It is on the strength of this culture of working together, school together, acquiring skills together, and even researching together that Nigeria's richness as a global nation builds her strength. Guided by the powers of such cohesive, non-discriminatory, and strong sense of unity in diversity, the inherent beauty associated with the country's multiplicity of languages build their relevance. Thus, it is quite obvious that the Yoruba man working or schooling in Enugu can speak the Igbo language. The Hausa man trading in Lagos can speak good Yoruba too, even as the Igala man or woman living in Kano can speak the

Hausa language fluently. These are manifestations of the gospel of unity in diversity which the country's multiplicity of languages has been able to propagate (Federal Ministry of Information & Culture, 1997).

Medium of Worship and Supplication to the Ancestors

Nigeria is blessed with three major religions, namely, Christianity, Islam, and the African Traditional Religion. Among these religions, Christianity and Islam are dominant, while a very minority percentage is made up of traditional worshippers. Among them however, one thing is outstanding. All of them commune with God in the various languages used by Nigerians from their various locations. They all pray together in their various languages. They hear and spread the messages of faith in their indigenous languages, and the English language as well. As well too, the worshippers pray to God in their languages -and offer Him their supplications (Iwunna, 2010).

Even for the Traditional Worshippers too, they deploy their various languages when making their supplications to their ancestors and the unseen spirits. In the presentation of such supplications and incantations, the use of language plays significant role too. For them, it is their strong belief that the deployment of this medium of communing with the spirits creates room for improved relationships between them and the gods of their different communities and the unseen ancestors. As well, through the medium of languages, various fetish sacrifices are presented to the ancestors in the course of paying worships, supplications, and homages to the gods and the ancestral world (Sagay, 1970).

Whichever be the case, it must be appreciated that the art of religious worship requires the deployment of languages, which could involve the deployment of the reading, and writing skills. In which case, the country's two major religions require some levels of literacy skills from their adherents. The ability to exhibit these important literacy skills enable the practitioners to read and recite the various texts that are designed for the successful implantation of the faith.

Medium of Communication and Contacts

The ability to convey crucial information, communicate with people through the media of languages, and create meaningful dialogue and interaction among persons, constitutes some of the prominent functions that language plays in the world of humanity. Through the medium of language, commercial activities are initiated among persons of divergent linguistic backgrounds, most especially in Nigeria where countless languages are spoken in an environment that prioritizes English language as the nation's official lingua franca and the world's number one language of communication, commerce, science, technology, and social interaction (Oyeleye, 2015).

Then, it is obvious that language presents the most veritable platform for the conduct and delivery of school education. On the part of learners, language enhances their resilience to learn and excel in their examinations and future professional careers. The implication is that the use of language makes teaching and learning possible. With the use of language too, research activities could be conducted with precision and commitment of professionalism. With the power of language at hand therefore, scientists can document the reports of their discoveries for generations unborn. In which case, language provides the relevant tools required for the personal and professional growth of humanity. Without language therefore, communication and contact with others would be dangerously abridged, while relevant details which require the deployment of various skills of literacy to deliver meaning, would suffer failure. Thus, through the use of language therefore, information, and related messages are delivered to the barest details (Graham & Perin, 2007; Stucky, Kirkwood & Donders, 2014; Cummings & Petscher, 2015).

Thus, with the aid of language, persons can establish contact, send out useful information, impart knowledge, conduct scientific investigations, and disseminate intellectual knowledge. These are indications that there is power in language. By implication, life and living in the world would have been meaningless if humanity was denied of the abilities to deploy language into greater tool of communication, contact, and outreach.

Medium of Moral Implantation

Through the medium of language too, parents, teachers, religious leaders, and community elders provide moral education to their members. Armed with the tools of language, moral-based lessons could be powerfully transplanted into the hands of family members, school children, and church men and women. At that, such persons are taught to resolve to behave properly, live honest lives, relate well with others, avoid negative attitudes that could dent the good image of their families and communities, desist from evil and do good, as well as obey the laws of God and man. These persons are also encouraged to pray fervently without ceasing, and read the Holy Bible or Koran always. Through the medium of language too, they are reminded about the life that exists in heaven or hell at the end of this mortal life, where good people are handsomely rewarded in heaven, or hell, where the wicked and their cohorts are punished eternally (Iwunna, 2010).

The Way Forward

Having arrived at this stage of the discussion, it is considered relevant to make a few suggestions that could buttress the quality of the roles played by Nigeria's indigenous languages towards the transmission of the country's numerous natural values. First and foremost, maximum efforts and resources should be committed in the areas of developing the numerous languages spoken in Nigeria. By that, researchers, educationists, and scientists should be mobilized and fully motivated to embark on this project. The implication is that Nigeria's numerous languages could be developed for use beyond the rudimentary levels of verbal communication at the local community levels. To that end, there is need for literature books to be written in the country's indigenous languages. This would encourage wider readership among Nigerians. Thus, giving the country's numerous languages the opportunities to grow and develop could complement the three major languages (Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa) which have today become major languages of school education in parts of the country.

Conclusion

The importance of language for the enhancement of life, and overall development of human communities can never be underestimated in any way. As a matter of fact, language supports life. Language supports growth and intellectual development. With the aid of language, education for the youth becomes more meaningful and most relevant. It is therefore a clarion call on parents and families to invest more time in teaching their children their mother tongues. It is sad enough to note that children in several Nigerian homes are barred from speaking vernacular at home. Parents devote little or time to teach their young children the indigenous languages they are born into, but instead commit huge amounts of time and money educating them on the use of English language. Unfortunately, such parents fail to appreciate the greater roles which sound knowledge of indigenous languages plays in the proper development of young children. It is therefore important that Nigerian parents begin revert to the use of our indigenous vernaculars at home and other contexts. This could save our precious indigenous languages from going extinct in a short time from now.

References

- Aikipitanyi, H.O., Luqman, A., Oliha, A., & Adesiyani, B. (2019). *Civic education (national value) for primary schools*. Lagos: Rasmed Publications Limited.
- Aja, S.D. (2011). Utterance structures and meanings in Nigerian print media advertisement. In P.O. Ebigbo (Ed.). *Sustainable Human Development Review*, Vol. 3, 5-28.
- Arinze, F.A. (1982). *The impact of Christian education*. Onitsha: Archdiocesan Secretariat.
- Bloomfield, L. (1970). *Language*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Brown, H.D. (2007). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman Inc.
- Calvocoressi, P. (1987). *World politics since 1945*. Essex: Longman Group UK Limited.
- Cummings, K., & Petscher, Y. (Eds.). (2015). *The fluency construct: Curriculum-based measurement concepts and applications*. New York: Springer Science and Business Media.

- Federal Ministry of Information & Culture (1997). *Nigeria official handbook*. Abuja: Blue-Haven Communications & Publishing Co. Ltd.
- Graham, S., & Perin, D. (2007). *Effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high schools: A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York*. New York: Alliance for Excellent Education.
- Iroegbu, P. (2000). *Kpim of personality. Treatise of the human person*. Owerri: EUSTEL Publications (Nigeria).
- Iwunna, P. (2010). Textbook illustrations as tools of educational reinforcement in Catholic primary schools in Igboland, southeast Nigeria (1925-1960). In C. Heinze, & E. Matthes (Eds.) *Das bildschulbuch*. Bad Heilbrunn: Julius Klinkhardt, 219-232.
- Iwunna, P. (2011). *The impact of Catholic school education in Igboland: The impact of the Catholic education*. Saarbrücken: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing GmbH & Co.
- Lugard, F.D. (1922). *The dual mandate in British Tropical Africa*. Edinburgh & London: William Blackwood and Sons.
- Njoku, R.A. (1980). *The advent of the Catholic Church in Nigeria: Its growth in Owerri Diocese*. Owerri: Assumpta Press.
- Ogbuene, C.G. (1999). *The concept of man in Igbo myths*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH.
- Oyeleye, L. (2018). The new linguistic order: A critical examination of the impact of globalization on the English Language. Retrieved on June 4th, 2020, and available at <http://www.ajeduionline.org/ajedui-Oct/13>.
- Sagay, J.O. (1970). *History of the West African peoples: Benin Kingdom and the British invasion*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Ltd.
- Stucky, K. J., Kirkwood, M. W., & Donders, J. (Eds.). (2014). *Clinical neuropsychology study guide and board review*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Uchendu, V.C. (1965). *The Igbo of southeast Nigeria*. ForthWorth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.
- Ugwulebo, E.O. (2002). The blunder of 1914 and religious crises in Nigeria. In T.I. Okere (Ed.). *Religion in a world of change: African Ancestral Religion, Islam, and Christianity*. Owerri: Whelan Research Academy, 325-330.