

Sustaining Indigenous Languages and Culture Through Literature

Flavian-Obasi, Jacqueline N.

Department of Languages, Yaba College of Technology, Yaba, Lagos

&

Obiyor, Bethel C.

Department of Languages, Yaba College of Technology, Yaba, Lagos

Abstract

There is no doubt that the status of English as a second language in the Nigerian social space was defined from the perspective of functionality right from the outset of its introduction. Apart from its official language status, the English language has assumed a mediatory role in bridging inter-ethnic relationships above the diverse ethnicities in Nigeria while inadvertently strangling the growth of Nigeria's indigenous languages. Part of the efforts at sustaining and resuscitating the indigenous languages has been to develop literatures in them and /or include texts from these languages in literatures written in English. There are literary works in some of Nigeria's indigenous languages, but these are limited when compared to the number of literature in English. In this paper, we seek to investigate how the cultural elements of the Igbo language are fused and re-created in Adichie's collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck*. Adichie has used the English language as a medium for giving zest to her narratives, thereby redefining or rather amplifying the role of the language as a bearer of the burden of her socio-cultural experiences. We rely on Giles and Johnson's Ethnolinguistic identity theory (1987) and pragmatics to ascertain how literature re-echoes cultural revival through the interplay of languages.

Keywords: Language, Culture, Literature, Pragmatics, Ethnolinguistic

Introduction

Since its introduction into Nigeria, the English language with its status of a second language (L2) has no doubt been playing several roles in the nation. One factor that has further enhanced its enviable status is Nigeria's linguistic multilingual nature. Nigeria is credited with about over four hundred (400) indigenous languages (Benson et al, 2014) spoken throughout its geographical and social space. The English language continues to occupy an irreplaceable position to the detriment of the indigenous languages and cultures in Nigeria. The indigenous languages in Nigeria have been relegated to the second position and as such become developmentally deprived. As the second language, English is the official language, the language of education, of social and inter-ethnic relationship among others. In fact, English is used across all sectors of the polity, in all states and in both formal and informal domains. It has become a household language in Nigeria. The English language unlike the indigenous languages is not struggling for recognition rather; it has become an essential commodity being sought after by the generality of the people. The development of the English language and the underdevelopment of the indigenous languages is indeed worrisome, and if things are left as they presently are, the indigenous languages could go into extinction. Gradually but steadily, Nigerian languages and cultures are being eroded and replaced by the English language and foreign cultures. Just recently, one of the finest films produced and directed by a Nigerian was dropped after being nominated for an Oscar award in the category of indigenous movie simply because it was dominated by English. Language and culture as generally known define a people and are the custodian of a people's values. Nigeria as a country is losing its value. The replacement of her

culture and core cultural values should be a matter of concern to every patriotic Nigerian. There are literatures in some indigenous languages especially in the three major Nigerian languages but these are not enough and have not been encouraged to really develop. The literary writers in these languages have not been motivated to continue to produce such literature through inclusion in the educational planning and implementation. This has affected the number of literatures in the indigenous languages. The number of people interested in reading such literary works is constantly decreasing. There is need to save the indigenous languages and culture and devise the means of resuscitating them. In this paper, we argue that literature in English, can, among other things, serve as a viable tool for preserving and developing Nigeria's indigenous languages, in this case, Igbo. The English language, according to Achebe, "should be subjected to different kinds of uses" including the development of the indigenous languages in Nigeria. We investigate Adichie's use of language in her collection of short story, *The Thing Around your Neck*, and explicate how literature in English can be utilized as a platform for the sustenance of Nigerian indigenous languages and cultures.

Objectives

This paper seeks to perform the following objectives:

To explain how literature in English can aid in preserving and developing the Igbo Language.

To identify instances of Igbo usage in the literary narrative of Chimamanda Adichie

Language as a means of Communication

Finegan (2004:7) explains that the fundamental function of every language system is to link meaning to expression, that is, to provide verbal expressions for thoughts and feelings. In as much as we agree with Finegan on this very basic function of language, we also know that language performs more functions than mere expression of thoughts and feelings. Ani (2012: 110) claims that the appeal of language lies in its ability to meet the needs of man for self-expression and for communication of his experience to the world. The indispensability of language with regard to socialization and other forms of human relationship and development has never been in doubt. The functionality of the human society is mostly dependent on language as it is a tool for effective communication among humans. There is hardly any area of life which can function effectively without reliance on language. In other words, language has the ability to meet the various needs of man from communicating to self to communicating one's ideas, opinions, creativity, inventions and experiences to others. Olaife (2014) made a submission on the position of language in national development. He proposes that government and individuals of any human society should endeavor to prioritize language and ensure its preservation. This is because language among other things spurs national development. One very important attribute of language as highlighted in the definitions above is its ability to 'express identity'. This unique function of language to some extent explains why people are named and identified by the language they speak. For instance, an English man speaks English, an Igbo man, Igbo and a person from Yoruba land is said to be Yoruba. Agwu (2016) asserts that language as a form of identity can undeniably be used to promote cross cultural activities. Language is part of a people's culture and culture encapsulates the language of a people. For the Igbo people of South Eastern Nigeria, there is a saying that "ezi aha ka ego" which means that good name is more important than wealth. It is a saying that embodies the value the Igbo places on integrity and honesty. In the present dispensation, is that saying still relevant? Does the present generation still value 'integrity' and 'honesty' above wealth? Is the present generation aware of the above saying of the Igbo? According to Emeka-Nwobia (2015), language "holds the power to maintain national and cultural identity"

and every nation should endeavour to see that her languages are preserved irrespective of civilization and globalization. The loss of a people's language has grave consequences for its speakers. It is a loss of identity and cultural values which are tied to the language. Benson et al (2014) observe that language is a key driver to meaningful development and as such, should not be allowed to die or disappear.

The Danger of Language Endangerment

UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (2003) submits that the vitality of language is dependent on its ability to be transferred from generation to generation. Once the transference of a language is being threatened, then such a language heads towards endangerment. Language endangerment, according to the UNESCO document, is a situation in which a human language is at the risk of becoming extinct. It explains that a language is endangered when the number of speakers continues to decline and such language being replaced by other language(s). According to UNESCO report on Language endangerment, there are six parameters used for measuring language endangerment in relation to intergenerational language transmission. According to the report, a language is 'safe' if it is spoken by all generations and there is no sign of linguistic threat from any other language. In this situation, the intergeneration transmission seems uninterrupted. A language is 'stable yet threatened' if it is spoken in most contexts by all generations with unbroken intergenerational transmission in the midst of multilingualism where one or more dominant languages has taken over certain important communication contexts. A language is considered 'unsafe' if the language is not used as a first language by most children or certain families of the community but rather restricts the language to specific social domains. A language is "definitely endangered" if it is no longer learned as the mother tongue by children at home, the youngest speakers being the parental generation. At this point, parents may still be speaking their language to their children but the children respond in another dominant language. A "severely endangered" language is spoken only by grandparents and older generations while the parent generation may still understand the language. Since the parents only understand but not speak the language, they do not speak it to their children. A "critically endangered" language is spoken by only the great grand parental generation and is not used for everyday interactions. An "extinct" language does no longer have speakers. Such a language, even though it may have existed, has no one who remembers it or uses it. (UNESCO, 2003:4)

From the above classification from UNESCO, it is obvious that all languages in Nigeria are at risk of endangerment because according to the report, even the 'safe' language could become extinct at any point. There is, therefore, the need to preserve the indigenous languages in Nigeria in order to sustain the already endangered languages from vanishing completely. Literature has been identified as a viable form for sustaining and preserving Nigerian languages so as to continue the intergenerational transmission of these languages even in the written form to avoid complete or total loss. The loss of language is the loss of identity, culture and values. It is quite sad that the values of Nigeria in the different ethnic groups are being eroded because of cultural alienation and linguistic disaffection. There is urgent need for our cultural values to be re-enkindled in the minds of the present and next generation if we still want to exist as distinct ethnic groups in one nation. This is where we need literature in both English and our indigenous languages to bear the burden of enlivening our languages and cultural inheritance.

How Does Literature Help?

Mayhead (1965) asserts that literature has, over the centuries, been known for employing language as its medium of storytelling. This highlights the inextricable relationship between language and literature. Adejimiola and Ojuolape (2013) corroborate this claim by observing that language is a tool by which

literature establishes an experience while literature serves as a tool through which language propagates itself. Egudu's definition of literature as a mode or method of expression establishes the fact of the viability of language in literary endeavor. The inventiveness and aestheticism employed in the use of language in literary works distinguish it as a subject or course of study. The content of literature becomes secondary as far as Egudu is concerned since the same subject matter can equally be treated in other subjects. Another important fact about literature according to Egudu is that it is an art with a number of facets of which drama, prose and poetry are the major ones (1979, 1-3). Most times, literary works are rooted in definite cultural beliefs, values and practices of a society. For instance, reading Achebe's novels especially his trilogy: *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), and *Arrow of God* (1964) brings the reader closer to the cultural values and practices of the Igbo people of the south Eastern part of Nigeria. This further accentuates the claim of Mayhead on the ability of literature to preserve language. Any of the genres of literature could serve the purpose of sustaining and or documenting the Nigerian indigenous languages which are already endangered.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, Ethnolinguistic Identity theory is considered the appropriate theory for the explication and analysis of data generated from Adichie's collection of short stories. Giles and Johnson's consider ethnolinguistic identity theory (1987) as a social psychological approach to language maintenance. The proponents feel that language maintenance theory would be enriched by a social psychological input rather than only sociological perspective which used to be the case. They argue that ethnolinguistic identity theory can provide a valuable new direction for furthering our understanding of the variables and mechanisms involved in the maintenance of an ethnic language in different social settings.

The theory which originally addresses the issue of who uses what language, why and when in interethnic encounters, was concerned specifically with why some members of a group accentuate their ethnolinguistic characteristics (dialect, language) when conversing with an outgroup of speakers while some others attenuate their linguistic distinctiveness in similar situation. It is believed that ethnolinguistic identity theory has value in fostering the understanding of when individuals maintain or sacrifice their ethnolinguistic identity in the short term of social interaction as well as in the longer terms of group retaining or relinquishing their language as a communicative code. The reformulated ethnolinguistic identity theory draws heavily on "social identity theory" of Tajfel and Turner (1979) which asserts that your social identity is dependent on how you perceive yourself as a member of a group, either positive, or negative.

Five major propositions relating to ethnolinguistic identity theory as presented by Giles and Johnson form the hypotheses of their study. The theory claims that people will define an encounter in interethnic terms and strive for a positive identity by accentuating their in-group speech style to the extent that they:

1. Identify themselves subjectively and strongly as members of a group which considers language an important symbol of their identity
2. Make insecure social comparisons with the out-group
3. Perceive their own group's vitality to be high
4. Perceive their in-group boundaries to be hard and closed
5. To identify strongly with few other social categories.

They contend that ethnic minority groups experiencing such a psychological climate would not only be very likely to maintain their ethnolinguistic identity and diverge from an out-group speaker, but would

also be less disposed to acquiring native like proficiency in the dominant group's tongue and be extremely keen to maintain use of the ethnic tongue within the family context and beyond and expand the energies in this direction.

Methodology

The data for this study were derived from Chimamanda Adichie's collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, which is made up of twelve (12) short stories. The choice of Adichie's literary narrative is based on the consideration that her prose work meets the objective of the study as the stories contain instances of the use of Igbo texts at both the sentential and word level. Adichie was chosen because she belongs to the new generation of writers whose work should support the course of preserving our indigenous languages. The data are subjected to pragmatic interpretation in order to make it easier to understand the meaning of the expressions. Our choice of short stories was determined by their relevance to the objectives of the study and based on the judgment of the researchers. In all, because of certain unavoidable constraints such as time and the nature of the research, the excerpts for analysis were limited to only twenty.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Twenty excerpts are generated from the short stories and are exposed to pragmatic interpretation to enable the reader understand the context and the meaning of the Igbo expressions weaved into the tapestry of the literary narratives. The discussion reveals according to the postulations of Giles and Johnson, whether Adichie is maintaining her language or not.

s/no	Textual extract	Speech act	Implicature	Possible interpretation
1.	Oh! Oh! Chi m egb uo m! (4)	Declaratives	Exclaiming	I'm finished.
2.	Ekwuzikwana! (9)	Expressive	Exclaiming	This is unbelievable
3.	Tiny kwalikwata lived inside the cracks and their bites were vicious... (12)	Assertive	Stating	Tiny bed bugs live inside ...
4.	Nekwa ya! Watch out! (17)	Commissive	Stating	See
5.	Chi m ooh ! why did you cut your hair (29)	Expressive	Exclaiming	My God!
6	Darling, Kedu? (30)	Directive	Asking	Darling, how are you?
7	Adanna and Okey kwanu? (30)	Directive	Asking	How are Adanna and Okey?
8	She was the Ada , after all... (31)	Assertive	Stating	She is the first daughter, after all.
9	Do you want me to use the spinach or the dried onugbo madam? (33)	Assertive	Stating	... yam pottage mixed with leafy vegetable
10	Rapuba . Nothing (41)	Declarative	Stating	Do not bother
11.	O joka! (58)	Expressive	Stating	It is really bad.
12	...he came with his relatives for mgbalu (58)	Assertive	Stating	... for a condolence visit
13	Remember what it was like schooling in Oyibo land in the fifties? (68)	Expressive	Asking	'Europe'

14	Tufia ! What kind of foolishness is that? (80)	Expressive	exclaiming	Abomination
15	The officer had examined my foodstuffs as if they were spiders, her gloved fingers poking the water bags of ground egusi and dried onugbo and uziza seeds , until she seized my uziza seeds (168)	Declarative	Stating	
16	Ike agwum (168)	Commissive	Stating	I became tired.
17	Ezi okwu ? All that?(169)	Expressive	Asking	Really ?
18	We raise you as our own and then we find you an ezigbo di ! (170)	Assertive	Stating	... we find a good husband for you
19	O di mma. (172)	Declarative	Accepting	It is all right
20	Biko , don't they have a lift instead? (177)	Expressive	Asking	Please...

Discussion

From the table where we have outlined the textual extracts from *The Thing Around Your Neck*, we can identify that the Igbo linguistic or cultural elements found in the stories are in varying forms. There are some instances of transference of whole sentences in Igbo language and insertion of Igbo lexical items in the texts. Some of the sentences include:

- i. O di mma (172)
- ii. ii. Ike agwu m (168)
- iii. iii. Eziokwu? (169, 171).
- iv. iv. Oh! Oh! Chim egbuo m! (4)
- v. v. Ekwuzikwana! (9).
- vi. Vi. Ojoka (58).

Some of these expressions are imperative, interrogative and declarative sentences. The sentences are mostly very short simple expressions as indicated in the examples above. The use of sparse and short Igbo expressions in the stories could connote Adichie's inadequate knowledge of her indigenous language.

There are instances of phrases such as *ji akwukwo* (32), *ezigbo di* (170). Lexical items deployed in the stories include: *Biko* (177), *uziza*(168), *Onugbo* (33), *mgbalu*(58), *nwanne* (116), *garri* (116), *kwalikwata* (17). Both Igbo linguistic expressions and lexical items appear side by side with English equivalents which she provided in the stories. Some of these texts perform speech functions such as: declaratives as in items 10 'Rapuba', 15 The officer had examined my foodstuffs as if they were spiders, her gloved fingers poking the water bags of ground **egusi** and dried **onugbo** and **uziza** seeds , until she seized my **uziza** seeds(168) and 19 'O di mma'.(172). Some of the texts are expressive, commissive and assertive as indicated on the table above. The texts yield the pragmatic function of informing, stating, asking, exclaiming and others as indicated on the table.

By interspersing her short stories with Igbo lexical items and expressions, we can state unequivocally that Adichie is trying to maintain her Igbo language. Although, English is her medium of expression, she maintains contact with her ethnicity by interjecting her English expressions with Igbo. Sacrificing her

language means writing every word in English but she did not do that because she knows what that means. The Igbo language is an endangered specie already and so she tries to keep it from dying.

Summary of Findings and Conclusion

The interjection of Igbo texts in the stories in the *Thing Around Your Neck* is an indication that Chimamanda Adichie is connected to her root. Her style of writing is different from that of her predecessors from the same linguistic background like Achebe and others in his generation whose works are filled with Igbo cultural experiences written in both Igbo and English. Even though her use of Igbo words and expressions are quite scanty, she tries to provide the English equivalent.

In “**Cell One**”, Adichie supplied the translation equivalent of 'Chi m egbuo m' – my God has killed me. Her translation equivalent does not capture the exact meaning of the exclamation which is used when something terrible or unimaginable has happened. The character, my mother, used that exclamation when her son confessed to burgling their house, stealing his mother's jewelries and pawning them to the Hausa traders in Enugu at a ridiculously low price. In the same story, “Ekwuzikwana”! translated to 'Don't say that again!' was exclaimed by Nnamabia's mother when she learnt that her son, Nnamabia, has been arrested by the police along with some cult boys. The translation is mild as against the true import of the exclamation. It is used to express shock or disbelief. There are two shocking revelations: the arrest of her son and the possibility of her son being a cult member since he was arrested along with cult boys.

Apart from translating the Igbo texts especially those in sentence forms, Adichie blends the Igbo terms to read well with English expressions in the stories. For instance, In “**The Arrangers of Marriage**” we find expressions such as:

'**Biko**, don't they have a lift? (177).

'We raise you as our own and then we find you an **ezigbo di!** A doctor in America! (170).

'When you come back to visit, you will be speaking **supri-supri** like Americans'(171).

'The official has examined my foodstuffs as if they were spiders, her gloved fingers poking at the waterproof bags of ground egusi and dried onugbo leaves and uziza seeds, until she seized my uziza seeds (168). Food items such as egusi, onugbo, uziza are some of the cultural items deployed in the stories.

The phenomenon of blending of Igbo text, presented in italics, in English expressions in Adichie's stories is rather creative and reads fluently such that one may mistake such Igbo words as English. That is an evidence of code mixing which is prevalent in bilingual/multilingual situations as is inherent in Nigeria. Adichie could have done more by incorporating more Igbo linguistic texts and expressions if she considers Igbo language endangered and has seen the need for its proper documentation. In certain places in the texts, one could find expressions such as:

- i. “The war took Zik” I said in Igbo.(68)
- ii. “Ebere is no longer with us; it has been three years,” I said in Igbo(66).
- iii. “Do we not call retirement in Igbo 'resting of old age’” (71). It would have been more inventive if she had actually written those in Igbo instead of reporting them the way she did in her stories. Works of Achebe, Ekwensi, Ola Rotimi and others of earlier generation of writers contributed more in documenting Nigeria's indigenous languages. Today's literary writers should emulate these earlier writers so that these languages and cultures will still remain even while we are gone. English should indeed be made to carry the weight of our experience and that includes helping us to preserve our

languages and cultures.

It is obvious that Adichie accentuates the ethnolinguistic characteristics of her ethnic group, Igbo in order to maintain her language and identity.

Conclusion

Following the explanations provided by UNESCO on endangered languages as highlighted earlier, there is an urgent need for Nigerian languages to be transmitted from generation to generation and documented for learning and reference purposes. Adichie in her writings, even as sparse as it is, tries to transmit Igbo to the next generation. The first generation of Nigerian writers such as Achebe, Chukwuemeka Ike among others have maintained the Igbo language in their various novels. It is in line with “subjecting the English language to different kinds of uses” including the maintenance of the Igbo language. This, though a herculean task, is a laudable project that can be achieved through the following suggestions:

1. Literary writers in Nigerian Languages should be encouraged to continue in order to keep the language alive. This can be done by enforcing the teaching of these indigenous languages in both primary and secondary schools.
2. Literatures in indigenous languages in the different genres should be read every term in the schools and colleges. Literatures in English whose contents and forms reflect the cultural values of the people should be recommended to be read for major examinations like the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board and West African Examination Council.
3. Language associations and government should partner and organize workshops, seminars and conferences on the need for the development of our indigenous languages right from the family.
4. And finally, literary writers of English expression in Nigeria should pay heed to the suggestion of Achebe by making the English language 'bear the burden of saving our languages from disappearing and document it for generational use and references'. These writers should ensure that they retain some indigenous words and expressions in their writings as seen in the works of Achebe, Soyinka, Chukwuemeka Ike, Adichie, among other writers.

References

- Adichie, C. N. (2009). *The Thing Around Your Neck*. Lagos: Kachifo Limited.
- Agwu, Patience Uzoma (2016). "Language: A Vehicle for Sustainable Development in the 21st Century" In *Humanity and Sciences Journal*. 11(1): 08-12.
- Amuseghan, S. A. and Momoh, A. O. (2013). "Enhancing Students' Performance in English Language through Literature in English in the Secondary Schools" In *Academic Journals*. Vol.8 (24) 2241-2248
- Ani, K. J (2012). "UNESCO Prediction on the Extinction of Igbo Language in 2025: Analysing Societal violence and New transformative Strategies" In: *Developing Country Studies*, 2 (8) 110-118.
- Benson, O.V; Anyalebechi, L.I and Ariole I. (2017). "Promoting Indigenous Languages in Nigeria: Issues and Challenges for the Library and Information Professionals" In *Library, Philosophy and Practice (e-Journal)*, 1472.
- Egudu, R.N (1975) *The Study of Poetry*. Ibadan: University Press Limited.
- Emeka-Nwobia, N.U (2015). "The Place of Indigenous Languages in National Development" *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*. 5 (1): 112-116.
- Finegan E. (2004). *Language: Its Structure and Use*. (4th Edition). USA: Thomson and Wadsworth.
- Giles, H. and P. Johnson (1987) *Ethnolinguistic Identify Theory: A Social Psychological Approach*. *Int'l J: Soc. Lang.* 68 (1987), pp. 69-99: Amsterdam, Mouton de Gruyter
- Mayhead, R (1965) *Understanding Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Olaifa, T. P (2014). "Language Preservation and Development: the Role of the Library" In *Journal of Library and Information Sciences*, 2(1) 23-28.
- Tajfel, H, and Turner, J.C (1979) *An Integrative theory of Intergroup conflict*. In the *Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, W.C. Austin and S. Worchel (eds), 33-53. Monterey: Brook/Cole.
- UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on endangered Languages (2013). *Language Vitality and Endangerment*. International Expert Meeting on UNESCO Programme Safeguarding of Endangered Languages: Paris.