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### Igbo as an Endangered Language

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**Chukwuma Azuonye**

## **IGBO AS AN ENDANGERED LANGUAGE**

### **Introduction**

**T**HE QUESTION HAS SOMETIMES been posed if Igbo, one of the three major languages of Nigeria, is an endangered language.<sup>(1)</sup> At first sight, this question would appear to be grossly misplaced, since the survival of the language seems to be well guaranteed by its status both as one of the three main indigenous languages of Nigeria and one of the major languages of literature, education, and commerce in Africa. Furthermore, with its well over 20 million native speakers who live in one of the most densely populated areas of the world with an exceptionally high fertility rate and a traditional world view and culture that promote the raising of large families, it would appear that there are insufficient grounds to place Igbo within the domain of the so-called “safe” languages, to use a term established by *The UNESCO Red Book on Endangered Languages* (1995) and endorsed by the most active operators in the field of endangered languages, including the Summer Institute of Linguistics, the Foundation on Endangered Languages, and several of the individual scholars whose names appear in the list of references below.

*The UNESCO Red Book*, was commissioned in 1995 in an effort to spotlight the crisis of language endangerment across the world. It categorizes the languages of the world into six major groups, namely: “extinct”, “nearly extinct”, “seriously endangered”, “endangered”, “potentially endangered”, and “not endangered” or “safe”. While “extinct” and “nearly extinct” refer to languages which have completely or nearly gone out of use or for which there are either only a few or no living speakers, the criteria for defining “seriously endangered”, “endangered” or “potentially endangered” languages vis-a-vis the “safe” or the “non-endangered” seem to be more nebulous. By and large, *The Red Book* seems to rely mainly on a number of fairly standardized

environmental, historical, socio-psychological and socio-linguistic factors, as they apply to minority languages. Among these factors are: genocide, endemic warfare, disease, bilingualism, hegemonic pressure, restrictive language policy, language shift, and reduced speaker (especially child) competence in the language. Although some attention is currently being paid to what Nigerian linguist, Ayo Bamgbose (1993), describes as “deprived Languages”, which include majority languages which “are deprived in not being used for important functions’ (Bamgbose, in Brenzinger, 1997: 8-9), neither *The UNESCO Red Book* nor the mainstream scholarship has made any serious attempt to apply the factors commonly invoked in determining what constitutes an endangered language to apparently “safe” majority languages.

The organizing argument of the present paper is that Igbo exemplifies the unacknowledged wisdom that neither official nor majority status can shield a language from endangerment or death if that language exists in an environment in which native speaker competence and generational transmission of the codes of the language have been decisively undermined by such socio-psychological, political and historical factors as colonial mentality and consequent language shift, often glorified as “receptivity to change” (Ottenberg, 1968, 1971). As will be shown presently, the major symptoms indicating how seriously the Igbo language is currently in danger of dying are ultimately related to this factor.

But first, let us review the literature and examine the extent to which the conventional criteria used in determining what constitutes languages endangerment may or may not apply to Igbo. Thereafter, an attempt will be made to explore the value, possibilities, and challenges of an urgent salvage program to revitalize, stabilize and ensure the survival of the language.

### **Igbo and the UNESCO Red Book**

The problem of language endangerment and death was not seriously addressed by scholars, policy makers and international organizations until the early 1990's. As summed up by Woodfield and Brickley (1995: 1-2) in their Report on a seminar held at the University of Bristol on April 21st 1995 on the

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1 Originally presented at the Seminar on the Problems and Methodology for the Preservation of the Igbo Language, at the Nicon-Noga Hotel, Abuja, under the Auspices of the World Bank Igbo Language Fund, 2002.

## conservation of endangered languages:

In 1994 and 1995, the public woke up to the fact that the number of languages spoken around the world is currently in sharp decline. The cultural, ethical, political and evolutionary implications are not generally understood. Nor have they been addressed sufficiently by experts. This seminar was intended to help raise the level of consciousness of the issue amongst academics and lay persons in the UK. The problem was officially addressed in 1992 by UNESCO, when its affiliate CIPSH (Conseil International de la Philosophie et des Sciences Humaines) announced a project to compile a 'Red Book' on Endangered Languages. A Clearing House and Data Bank Centre was eventually set up under the direction of Prof. S. Tsuchida at the University of Tokyo. An interim progress report is due later this year [1995]. A periodically updated record of the world's languages is published by the Summer Institute of Linguistics. *Ethnologue: Guide to the World's Languages* is currently in its 12th edition (ed. Barbara Grimes). Recent collections on the topic include: *Endangered Languages* (1991) (ed) R. H. Robins and E. M. Uhlenbeck (Berg), and *Investigating Obsolescence: Studies in Language Contraction and Obsolescence* (1989) (ed) Nancy Dorian (Cambridge University Press). *The Atlas of the World's Languages* edited by C. Moseley and R.E.Asher (1994) incorporates 'time of contact' maps for the Americas and Australia showing the indigenous languages that were spoken when European colonizers arrived. These are juxtaposed with inset maps charting the current distribution of languages. By comparing the two sets of maps the reader can see the degree to which native languages have been usurped. Various learned societies have conducted symposia on language extinction. In February 1995 the meeting of the American Association of the Advancement of Science attracted world-wide attention when Prof. Michael Krauss predicted that up to 95% of the world's 6,000 languages would be extinct or moribund by the end of the next century, and Prof. Leanne Hinton reported that Northern Pomo, one of the 50 native languages of California, had become extinct with the death of its last speaker three weeks prior to the meeting. The Internet has helped to increase dramatically the flow of information about who is doing what in this field.

Distinguishing, as mentioned above, six major categories of world languages, the *UNESCO RED BOOK* itself offers the following definitions:

- (i) *extinct languages*, i.e. other than ancient ones (languages that have completely gone out of use);
- (ii) *nearly extinct languages* with maximally tens of

So far as the neglect of majority languages is concerned, there is little or no difference between this and several other more partial lists of the

speakers, all elderly; (iii) *seriously endangered languages* with a more substantial number of speakers but practically without children among them; (iv) *endangered languages* with some children speakers at least in part of their range but decreasingly so; (v) *potentially endangered languages* with a large number of children speakers but without an official or prestigious status; (vi) *not endangered languages* with safe transmission of language to new generations.

These and other contingent definitions have been applied by several scholars to various regions of the world and out of these have emerged various lists of endangered languages for Europe, Africa, North Asia, South Asia, Australasia, and North and South America. But the general assumption is that "endangered languages are [invariably those] spoken by minority communities" (Woodbury, 2002: 3), as in the following list from Africa:

Aasáx; Agara?iwa; Ahlo; Ajawa; Ake; Akie; Alagwa; Amdang; Animere; Argobba; Azer; Ba-lian; Ba-kakani; Baga languages; Baga Mboteni; Banta; Bapëng; Basa-Kontagora; Bati; Bayso; Bedik; Beeke; Berti; Bete; Beygo; Birgid; Bir(r); Bobe; Bodo; Bom (Bulom); Bonek; Bong'o Boni; Boro; Buga; Burji; Burunge; Buso; Cara ; Chamo; **Coptic**; Cua; Dahalo; Dama; Danisi; Degere; Deti; Dongo Ko; Dulbu; Dungi; Ega; **Egyptian Nubian**; Ehobe Belon; El Higeirat; Eliri; Elmolo; Fumu; Gafat; Galke; Gamo; Gana; Ganjule; Gatame; **Ge'ez**; Gidicho; Gomba; Guaniche; Gubi; Gule; Gusilay; Gwara; Gweno; Gyem; Haal; Hadza; Hamba; Haraza; Holma; Homa; Isuwu; Izora; Jelkuna; Jimi; Ju; Kakolo; Kande; Karon; Kasanga; Kazibati; Kiballo; Kidie; Lafofa; Kimanteny; Kinare; Kinuku; Kiong; Kir; Kobiana; Kole; Kooki; Kora; Kore; Kpan; Kreish; Krim (Bulom); Ktpai; Kua; Kudu; Kupto; Kwadi; Kw'adza; Kwegu; Kwisi; Lehar; Ligbi; Lorkoti; Lufu; Lughya ya zamani; Luri; Mampoko; Mangas; Mbondo; Mbong; Mbulungish; **Meirotic**; Mmani (Bulom); Mongoba; Muskum; Nagumi; Napore; Naro; Ndam of Dik; Nege; Ngbee; Ngbinda; Nimbari; Ningi; Nyang'i; Old Mfengu; Omo-Murle; Omotik; Ongamo; Palar; Poko; Putai; Santrokofi; Sarwa; Segeju; Seki; Shabo; Shanga; Shau; Shen; Sherbro (Bulom); ShiChopi; Shirawa; Si; Singa; So; Suba; Taura; Tenet; Terik; Tijanji; Togoyo; Ts'ixa; Tsua; Tyanga; Ware; Wetu; Weyto; Xamtanga; Yaaku; Yashi; Yei; Zaramo; Zenaga; Ziriya; !Xóô; !Xú; /Anda; /Ui; /Xaise; /=Haba; //Ana; //Ani (Heineand Brenzinger, 1997).

endangered languages of Africa (Brenzinger, 1997; Summer Institute of Linguistics, 2000; *Ethnologue*, 2000; and Abdulaziz, Akililu, Appleyard, Banti,

Badejo, Bamgbose, Batibo, Blench, Connell, Dobronravín, Frajzyngier, Hayward, Haruna, LÈbikaza, Leyevv, Kastenholz, Moto, Newman, Sure, Tusco, Urua, Vossen, Williamson, and Zygmunt, in Brenzinger, 1997). Yet, when closely examined, it seems quite clear that the key determinants of language endangerment and death in *The UNESCO Red Book* are by no means restricted to these or similar minority languages of Africa or elsewhere. As will be shown presently, the five basic parameters applied in designating “the present state” of several languages as “endangered” or “seriously endangered”, for example, in *The UNESCO Red Book on Endangered Languages: Europe* (Salminen, 1999), apply very much to Igbo. These parameters are: (1) the number children speakers; (2) the mean age of youngest speakers; (3) distribution of speakers by sex; (4) the total number of speakers, members of the ethnic group; and (5) degree of speakers' competence. Using these parameters, South Samí and Lule Samí (two related Scandinavian minority languages), for example, are both designated as “seriously endangered”, as follows:

1. **SOUTH SAMÍ:** Present state of the language: **SERIOUSLY ENDANGERED**

(a) children speakers: **very few children learn the language, and probably none of them become active users** (b) mean age of youngest speakers: ( c) distribution by sex: (d) total number of speakers, members of the ethnic group: a few hundred speakers, **many of whom prefer Scandinavian (Swedish-Norwegian), out of a much larger ethnic population** (e) degree of speakers' competence: most speakers are likely to mix Scandinavian elements in their speech (Salminen, 1999: 1).

2. **LULE SAMÍ:** Present state of the language: **SERIOUSLY ENDANGERED**

(a) children speakers: **a small number of children learn the language, but very few of them become active users** (b) mean age of youngest speakers: ( c) distribution by sex: (d) total number of speakers, members of the ethnic group: maximum 2,000 speakers (e) degree of speakers' competence: **younger speakers may be less competent and prefer Scandinavian**

Even from a cursory glance, it is evident that—apart from the number of speakers—the key parameters used in determining endangerment (reduced speaker competence; decreasing number of child speakers, and overall language shift including

(Swedish-Norwegian) (Salminen, 1999: 3).

By the same token Karelian (proper; variants, Karjala: spoken in Finland, the Russian Federation, and northern Karelian Republic) and Olonetsian (spoken Finland, the Russian Federation, and southwestern Karelian Republic) are designated as “endangered” or “seriously endangered), as follows:

1. **Karelian (proper):** Present state of the language: **ENDANGERED** [in the Russian Federation; **SERIOUSLY ENDANGERED** in Finland]

(a) children speakers: in Finland: none; on the Russian side, **a number of children learn the language, but probably all of them become more fluent in Russian and may not become active users of Karelian** (b) mean age of youngest speakers: ( c) distribution by sex: (d) total number of speakers, members of the ethnic group: a few thousand speakers in Finland; the Russian Federation: possibly approx. 35,000 speakers, cf. combined 62,542 speakers in the 1989 Soviet census for Karelian, Olonetsian, and Ludian (the figure may actually be too low, because many speakers outside the Republic might not have been enumerated as such); there are more Karelian speakers in the Tver' area than in Karelian Republic (e) degree of speakers' competence: **generally competent, though some speakers in the Russian Federation mix the language with Russian elements, and speakers in Finland are use mostly Finnish** (Salminen, 1999: 10).

2. **Olonetsian:** Present state of the language: **ENDANGERED** [in the Russian Federation; **SERIOUSLY ENDANGERED** in Finland]

(a) children speakers: in Finland: none; on the Russian side, **a few children learn the language, but most if not all of them become more fluent in Russian and may not become active users of Olonetsian** (b) mean age of youngest speakers: ( c) distribution by sex: (d) total number of speakers, members of the ethnic group: Finland: a few thousand speakers; the Russian Federation: possibly approx. 25,000 speakers (e) degree of speakers' competence: **generally competent, though some speakers in the Russian Federation mix the language with Russian elements, and speakers in Finland are use mostly Finnish** (Salminen, 1999: 11).

varying degrees code-switching or code-mixing) are by no means limited to minority languages such as South Samí, Lule Samí, Karelian, and Olonetsian. Anyone familiar with the literature on Igbo language habits and linguistic consciousness in the post-

colonial era (Manfredi, 1991), will easily recognize that these same problems are as much an important concern for the survival of Igbo as for many other African majority languages caught in the grips of post colonial bilingualism coupled with pressures to assimilate into the linguistic and cultural legacy of the erstwhile colonial regimes; and far more than other major languages in the same situation, Igbo seems far more “deprived” (to use Bamgbose’s terminology) by reason of its speakers’ exceptionally strong “receptivity to change” which from the very early days of colonialism has been extremely deleterious to its culture.

In the next section, I will show how, despite its official and majority status, the Igbo language is indeed seriously endangered not only by the factors identified in *The UNESCO Red Book* but several other factors related to the phenomenon of “language deprivation” described above.

### **Symptoms of Igbo Language Endangerment**

Moseley (1995: 2) makes a distinction between “external” and “internal” factors “that affect the fortunes of a language over time.” He identifies the following among the more important external factors: “location, distribution, status, the presence or absence of norms, public services and official contacts, education, media, and cultural use.” Taken together with internal factors such as those outlined in the foregoing section, twelve symptoms thrust themselves rather forcefully as indications that Igbo is a very seriously endangered language. These symptoms are: (1) reduced speaker competence; (2) rapidly decreasing child competence; (3) repressive language policies in colonial boarding schools; (4) intense code-switching and code-mixing coupled with an unbridled language shift; (5) assimilation into new languages such as pidgins and Creoles; (6) the depletion of the population of monolingual elderly

2. *Rapidly Decreasing Child Competence.* The bilingual environment in which English has established itself as the language of opportunity and upward social mobility has created an increasingly large body of new homes in which parents unwittingly speak more English than Igbo to their children. As a matter of fact, Igbo is often not spoken at all in such homes. Some parents even go so far as to specifically forbid visitors from speaking Igbo to

speakers; (7) the marginalization of deep dialects by the standardization movement; (8) linguistic politics and language fragmentation; (9) the foisting of toxic metalinguistic instruments on the language; (10) the rapid loss of the idioms of the language; (11) the disappearance of rhetorical forms such as proverbs which have over the generations been the mainstay of the language’s communication and aesthetic logistics; and (12) the loss of major and minor genres of oral literature in the language. All these are ultimately related to patterns of “receptivity to change” manifested in the extraordinary Igbo capacity, not merely to adapt to, but in fact to lose their cultural identity, in every new environment of culture contact. A case in point, to be discussed briefly is the practical absence of visible and tangible Igbo linguistic and cultural survivals in the Americas and the Caribbean as opposed to the extraordinarily high visibility of, for example, Yoruba linguistic and cultural survivals.

1. *Reduced Speaker Competence and Performance.* Igbo epitomizes the syndrome in the literature on language endangerment which can be described as reduced speaker competence. *Competence* is, in Chomskian linguistics, the innate ability to master the grammar of any natural language to which an individual is exposed, especially from birth; *performance*, on the other hand, is the individual’s actual use of the language in given contexts of situation. Ordinarily, performance includes errors of speech and like slurs or failures to reproduce what one actually knows of his language in real life speech acts. With impaired competence, performance is generally far more erratic. The social context of Igbo today is one in which speaker competence is impaired *ab initio* from the home. This state of affairs has drastic consequences for child competence and inter-generational transmission of Igbo language proficiency.

their children. With unalloyed pride in her eyes and Anglicized intonation, a parent at the university of Nigeria has in fact been heard to tell a visitor who was trying to speak Igbo to her children, “O no no no no! Leave them alone. They don’t speak *Ibo!*” (Personal communication). It is indeed a statistically verifiable fact that, like the “seriously endangered” or simply “endangered languages” of listed above from *The UNESCO Red Book* for Europe “a number of

children learn the language [in this case, Igbo], but probably all of them become more fluent in [English] and may not become active users of [Igbo}” . In the light of this, it seems necessary that as many Igbo language scholars as possible use as many different quantitative methods as possible to generate graphs which will show how serious this trend really is and what they forebode for the future. Igbo language experts should therefore take seriously the oft-repeated statement in studies of language endangerment that “languages that are not being transmitted to children, or that are being learned by few children, are endangered and likely to become extinct” (Woodbury, 2001). Can we afford to ignore the warning signs as they pertain to Igbo?

3. *The Tyranny of English and Repressive Vernacular Policies in Colonial Boarding Schools.* Throughout the colonial era, the British, in collaboration with Christian missionary school authorities, rigorously enforced policies which greatly limited or, in many instances, completely banned the use of the so-called “vernacular” languages in boarding schools throughout Nigeria. For the colonial government and the missionaries, the indigenous languages were only relevant at the primary levels of education. They were seen mainly as the foundation upon which the higher values of European civilization could be built. Primary schools were therefore divided into junior and senior primaries. At the junior primary level, widely known in Igboland as *Qta Akara*, instruction was mainly in the mother tongue which the child brought with him from home. Through the mother tongue, the child was gradually inducted into English using the *Oxford English Reader for Junior Primary Schools, Books 1 and 2*. Thereafter, at the senior primary level (Standards 1 to 6), the child was systematically introduced to reading and comprehensive exercises of increasing complexity in the *Oxford English Reader for Senior Primary Schools, Books 1-6*, and by the time he gets to Book 6 he would have attained a reasonably high degree of competence in English. At the senior primary level, mother tongue instruction is systematically reduced to zero by the time the child

4. *Code-Mixing, Code-Switching and Language Shift.* While code-mixing and code-switching involves the involuntary mixture of elements from one’s mother tongue with those of one or more other

reaches Standard Six.

Admission into a secondary school was seen as a privileged induction into the supreme source of the white man’s power, a world in which (but for a few mission schools (like Methodist College Ozuakoli, D. M. G. S. Onicha, and St. Augustine’s College Nkwerre), there was no place for African languages. At this level, English was not just compulsory; if you failed English in your final Cambridge West African School Certificate Examination, you failed the whole Exam. As a matter of fact, there were countless stories of exceptionally brilliant boys and girls who earned straight A’s in seven or eight subjects, including science, mathematics, and additional mathematics and yet failed the examination by reason of earning an F in English. Coupled with the rule banning the use of the vernacular on campus, it is perhaps not surprising that, after five to seven years of boarding school, many students of the hey day of this tyranny of English left school completely habituated into speaking English to everyone, including their parents. Although a stop was put to the tyranny of English in boarding schools shortly after Nigeria’s independence in 1960, the damage had been done. A whole generation of mother-tongue deprived men and women had been reared, who were to be looked upon as role-models not only by members of their immediate families but of the wider communities to which they belonged. As would be expected, their influence of successive generations, even long after the ending of the boarding school system, has been painfully deleterious. In Igboland, the fetishization of English seems in fact to have preceded the boarding school system. Thus, shortly after his father sends him to join the missionaries in Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* (1984: 46), Oduche is discovered as he dreams “of the day when he could speak the language of the white man, just as their teacher, Mr. Molokwu, had spoken with Mr. Holt when he had visited their church.” Boarding school would simply turn a child with this kind of sensibility into a thoroughgoing Zip-coon. And it did so in a most vicious way.

languages, language shift is more often a voluntary preference of, and switch to, a more prestigious language over one’s mother tongue, although the process can sometimes be involuntary as well. The

literature on language endangerment reveals a great deal of concern over code-mixing, code-switching and language shift as major causes or antecedents to language death (Bergsland, 1998; Brenzinger, 1991, 1992; Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer, 1998; Dorian 1977; Dow, 1987-88; Dressler, 1981; Fishman, 1991; Grenoble and Whaly, 1998; Hill, 1978; Kindell, 1994; McConvell, 1991; Sandefur, 1985; Woodbury, Dooh, and Wurm, 1991). With reference to intense and unbridled language shift in 33 North American native languages, which were at one time considered relatively safer than others, Woodbury (2001: 3) asserts that, in fact

most of these are threatened as well because their speakers live near other communities where the children speak English. And all native North American groups are under pressure to give up their native languages and use English instead. The younger generation feels the pressure especially strongly; television and movies often send a message that discourages the maintenance of community values, inviting young viewers to join a more glamorous and more commercialized world that has no apparent connection to their native community and its elders and traditions.

Language shift is a phenomenon that is well-known to Igbo speakers. As already noted, it is indicated when most people interviewed share a negative attitude towards their own languages and express the wish that their children be integrated into a more prestigious speech community (see, for example, Herman Batibo, on /Xaise and Shuakwe speakers in Botswana, in Brenzinger, 1997: 1). A concomitant of post-colonial bilingualism and language policy which favors the colonial language (in the Igbo case, English) as the language of opportunity and upward social mobility, language shift involves the gradual increase in the non-native linguistic elements in the idiolects of active speakers of a language along with a parallel decrease in native linguistic elements. It involves both the phenomena of “code-mixing” and “code-switching” manifested in the hybrid lect commonly called “Engliigbo” or sometimes “Igbolish”, illustrated by the following phrases

5. *Assimilation into New Languages—Pidgins*

noted in the speech of some of my personal friends and family members at Nsukka and in Boston:

1. A **laikika** m **ifu** **this kind of thing**.  
*I very much like to see this kind of thing.*
2. **I** ya-eje **to that place** ma I **travulua?**  
*Will you go to that place when you travel?*
3. **Please**, mee **something** maka **that problem before** ya-erie **your head**.  
*Please, do something about that problem before it eats your head.*
4. **I don't know** ihe **imiiniri** by **udị** ihe a **ina-ekwu every time every time**.  
*I don't know what you mean by this kind of thing you say repeatedly every time.*
5. **Ooo-lo! That's not good at all, at all; alaikighi** m ya **at all**.  
*Ooo-no! That's not good at all; I don't like it at all.*
6. M lechaa **all these things** na-eme anya, ya-adi m ka m **breakie to pieces**.  
*When I look at all these things happening, I feel like breaking into pieces.*

Given the widely noted effect of code-mixing and language shift in the death of languages, it seems that the study and constant monitoring of this deadly trend so far as Igbo is concerned should at this time be seen by all concerned as one of the main priority areas in any agenda for Igbo language studies in the twenty-first century and beyond. We need to pay particular attention to the effect of these phenomena on traditional idiomatic and rhetorical modes of communication in Igbo.

*and Creoles*. As we know from the existing

theories on the subject, over time, code-mixing and language shift can result in the transformation of “deprived languages” like Igbo into Pidgins, and ultimately Creoles, based on the prestige language to which its speakers have been forced to shift (Asante, 1996; Bamgbose, 1993; Brenzinger and Dimmedad, 1997; Brenzinger, 1998; Holm, 1988, 1989; Hymes, 1981; Myers-Scotton, 1992; Sandefur, 1985; and Whiteley, 1960). While Pidgin is a hybrid language spoken alongside one’s mother tongue, Creole is a pidgin which survives as a speech community’s mother tongue after the death of their original native language? Will there be a time when an English-based Igbo Pidgin, and subsequently Creole, will displace Igbo as we know it today as the mother tongue of a future generations of would-have-been Igbo speakers? The answer is unfortunately yes! Something exactly like that has in fact happened before—in the Caribbean (Azuonye, 2002d).

In an excellent model presented by Molefi Kete Asante (1996:) code-mixing is described as the first stage in the pidginization and creolization processes that led to the evolution of Black English or *Ebonics* from the Niger-Congo languages of West and Central Africa (including Igbo). Linguistic data from the Caribbean which I have been analyzing (Azuonye, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, and forthcoming) suggest that Igbo was once spoken in the region, especially in Jamaica and Barbados. But over the last 200 years or so, and unlike Yoruba and other more resilient African languages, the language gradually became extinct through the processes of code-mixing and code-switching. However, a few Igbo lexical survivals and extensive instresses of Igbo folk idiom on thousands of recently recorded phrases from the Caribbean, betray the fact that Igbo may once have flowed from the tongues of several of the earliest black inhabitants of the islands. The Caribbean expressions in question were sent to me in 1982 by Professor Allsopp of

the University of West Indies at Kingston through Ayo Banjo of the University of Ibadan.

In my analysis (Azuonye, 2002d), I found, first of all, clear evidence of direct morpheme-for-morpheme or word-for-word transliteration of Igbo idioms into modern Caribbean speech patterns, e.g.: “eye-water”, for “tears” (*ányá-mmírí*), “mouth-water”, for “saliva” (*ónú-mmírí*) and “big eye”, for “gluttony; selfishness” (*ányá úkwú*). Other examples include: “his head isn’t... good” for “mental imbalance” (*ísí ád\_ghí yá mm\_*), and “bad bowels” for diarrhoea, esp. in infants (*áfó\_ójó\_*). Some other phrases are reminiscent of the poignancy of Ezeulu’s pragmatic admonition to his son, Oduche, in *Arrow of God*, to go and join the mission school “and be my eye there....” (Achebe, 1964: ) They pulsate not only with the rhythm of Igbo syntax but nuances of Igbo folk belief: e.g.

1. “somebody do him so” (“bring some apparently unexplained sickness upon you by means of witchcraft”), *ó (w)\_mmádù mèrè yà yá*;
2. “she was *able with* him (cope with somebody; be equal to, a match for somebody). *ó kwèrè yá nà yá*;
3. “he was *sweet with* her (somebody; have an amorous friendship with somebody), *yá nà yá nà-àtù*; 4. *I(t)’s not sick (h)e sick, I(t)’s lazy he lazy* (emphasizing the sense of the adjective; actually/really + adj.), *ò wúgh\_órìà kà ó nà-àrìà, ó (w)\_úmé\_gw\_nà-émé y\_*.

In many other phrases, the interest lies not so much in the semantic and syntactic parallels between the Caribbean phrase and its potential Igbo equivalents but in the world view and cultural norms which they reflect. These sociolinguistic dimensions are of special interest in helping to locate the provenance of the Caribbean expressions in Igbo culture. For instance, the phrase “eye-cut” in the Caribbean sentence, “The child *cut her eye* at the teacher” has been interpreted by Allsopp as referring to a situation in which a person “looks rudely at another; then closes his eyes and/or turns the face away as if ‘cutting’ the person out of his sight”. This is a common folk of folk gesture



among the Igbo. Described as *ígbabì ányá* or *írà ányá*, it is considered an extreme form of

My analysis concludes with the following statement: “A more extensive investigation along the same lines as those initiated by Allsopp and others need to be carried through, not only in the Caribbean but also on the American mainland. It is however important to note that, in carrying out this investigation, the matching of Igbo and Caribbean or Black American idioms, no matter how persuasive the results may be, cannot produce conclusive evidence of Igbo presence in any particular area or among any particular population sample. Studies of mother-tongue interference in various African Englishes and comparative studies of the West African resources of Ebonics have revealed identical syntactic patterns which can easily be re-translated into many different African languages of the same family. It will, therefore, not at all be surprising if the Caribbean phrases for which we have found Igbo equivalents in the present paper turn out to be translatable, with equal fidelity into one or other languages spoken by West Africans who share identical world views and mythologies” (Azuonye, 2002d)

But whatever may be the conclusion of such studies, our interest in the survival of Igbo in the Caribbean or the American mainland, remains the Igbo language itself. By reason perhaps of the uncompromising Igbo receptivity to change, the language appears to have disappeared completely in the islands except for a few isolated lexical survivals such as the words *édè* or *édò* for cocoyam and *bèkéè* or *buckra* for the white man. Also of significance are a few other words which seem to be Igbo derivatives, e.g. *obeah* (pronounced *óbìà*), possibly from *dìbìà* = *dí-óbìà*, in Jamaica, for magical healing and *Agwe*, possibly from *Ágwù*, in Haiti, for the water deity of possession and spirit mediumship

If it is any comfort to imagine a glorious future when Igbo would be transformed into one

insolent behavior usually from the young towards their elders.

(Azuonye, 2002b). Of some particular interest is the word *obeah*. As I have argued in my reflections on its meaning (Azuonye, 2002b), the etymology of *dìbìà* remains obscure until we relate it to the concept of *óbìà* (visitor; in this case, unwelcome visitors or evil forces which visit and take possession of the individual and afflict him and which must be exorcized to restore the individual back to health). In this sense, therefore, *dìbìà* yields its meaning *dí-óbìà* (master or controller of visiting forces), an obscured sense which the Caribbean derivative, *obeah* seems to supply. It is also of interest to note that we have a stock of personal names (e.g. *Anosiér* for *Ánòzìé*, in Haiti), which, despite their transformations in their new English and French phonological environments, reveal themselves as traces of the Igbo presence in the region (Azuonye, 2002a and forthcoming). But all these notwithstanding, the language itself (though now an integral part of several Caribbean Creoles) has become completely extinct in the Caribbean largely perhaps owing to attitudes to their language which can still observe in modern Igbo usage today.

The phenomenon is comparable to, but by no means exactly the same as, the processes that led to the extinction of the ancient Greek, Latin, and other ancient European languages as described in Woodbury (2001). As Woodbury notes, these languages “are considered dead because they are no longer spoken in the form in which we find them in ancient writings. But they weren’t abruptly replaced by other languages.; instead, ancient Greek slowly evolved into modern Greek, and Latin slowly evolved into modern Italian, Spanish, French, Romanian and other languages. In the same way, Old English of Chaucer’s day is no longer spoken, but it has evolved into modern English.”

or more modern languages like the above European examples, then we may be justified in

doing nothing about current trends in the language. We can look forward happily to the day when our children will be able to study ancient Igbo as the root of the future modern Igbo. But if, as is clearly the case, the social contexts and circumstances are completely different, especially with the new global system in which English and other global languages seem assured of continued world dominance, it is imperative that measures be taken at least to document the Igbo language as it currently exists before it disappears into new languages which will have no guaranteed place in the future global community.

6. *Depletion of the Population of Monolingual Elderly Speakers.* A major determinant of language endangerment is the depletion of the population of its monolingual elderly speakers. This fact is frequently reiterated in the literature (Woodbury, 2001; Cahill, 2001; Brenzinger and Dimmedaal, 1997; Brenzinger, 1992, 1997, 1998; Hartman, 1994; Knab, 1980; Kindall, 1994; Matsumara, 1998; Salminen, 1999; Hans-Jungen, 1999; and Sommer, 1992). Igbo language experts should undertake projects to investigate this matter thoroughly, using various statistical instruments to generate graphs on the prevalent trends in each autonomous community and dialect area. The tape-recording of formal and informal speech events over time, especially from elderly speakers above the age of 50, both literate and non-literate, rural and urban, peasant and elite, rich and poor, will reveal how dangerous the trend really is. The perceived depletion of monolingual speakers of Igbo is often cited by those who have asked the question: Is Igbo an endangered language? While awaiting the result of controlled field investigation of the matter, the overriding impression in the few available studies and from fears and concerns

*Isuama Igbo* was a quaint dialect of Igbo spoken by Igbo repatriates like John Christopher Taylor from Sierra Leone which was promoted,

spontaneously expressed by many an Igbo cultural nationalist is that in the very near future there will hardly be an adult speaker of the language, both in the rural and urban areas, who can speak the language without doing what is generally associated with language death—“mixing the language with [English] elements”, as in the “seriously endangered” languages of Europe listed above (cf. Salminen, 1999).

7. *Marginalization of Igbo Dialects by the Standardization Movement.* As early as the first contact of the Igbo with missionary linguists in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (from 1857), the language has been under intense pressure to dispense with its dialects in favor of a standard literary *koiné*. Since then the vitality of the language has been grossly deracinated by the creation of various artificial, ostensibly unifying common lects, beginning with *Isuama* Igbo in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hair, 1972: 69-99; Azuonye, 1992) followed by *Union* Igbo, created early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as part of “the linguistic labors” of the Christian evangelists in their efforts to translated the Bible into Igbo (Tasie, 1977; Azuonye, 1992; Achebe, 1979). Then came the Central Igbo of the hey day of British colonial education in Igbo land (Ward, 1941), followed by the present day Literary Standard whose origins and development go back to the establishment of the Official (Onwu) orthography in 1961 and subsequent efforts of the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture through its Standardization Committee and various Metalanguage Workshops (see Emenanjo, 1982, 1985; Nwachukwu, 1983, and Ogbalu, 1974, 1982). While the “common” Igbo movements have set up the grand illusion that standardization is synonymous with language survival and vitality through literature and education, the opposite seems to be the case.

much to his own personal embarrassment by the Rev. T. J. Schon of the Niger Mission based at Onitsha. Used in the translation of biblical

literature and in the production of the earliest primers in Igbo, it was soon to be discovered that it was not only a form of broken Igbo but a dialect that was practically incomprehensible to native speakers both in the Igbo heartland and in its periphery (Hair, 1972: 66-99; Azuonye, 1992). *Isuama* never succeeded in promoting literacy in Igbo!

*Union Igbo* was rightly rejected by all and sundry for what it really is: an artificial Igbo Esperanto created from four Igbo dialects (Unwana, Owerri, Onitsha, and Isuama) in workshops organized by Church Missionary Society linguists for the sole purpose of translating the Bible into Igbo as *Bible Nso* (Tasie, 1977). While it is true that the stilted language and incongruities of this “union Igbo” Bible continues to appeal to many in the same way as the archaic idiom of King James 1 “authorized version” of the English Bible continues to appeal to many English readers, what Achebe (1979) describes as “the bane of union” is today so well known that there is today no single advocate of any further work in “Union” Igbo. Like its predecessor, Union Igbo failed woefully to sustain any significant literacy in Igbo. Our interest in “union Igbo” is now purely archival and only relevant to the study of factors contributing to the marginalization and the current death throes of Igbo dialects

*Central Igbo*, as described in Ward’s *Igbo Dialects and the Development of a Common Language* (1941), was a dialect arbitrarily chosen from the central Igbo area and promoted as a common language by protestant mission schools and the British colonial educational authorities through the agency of Education Boards, Adult Education Departments, and Translation and Literature Bureaux.. The project failed, not least because of the non-compliance of Catholic mission schools which preferred

The most incisive comments on the deleterious impact of the standardization movement on the survival of natural Igbo speech

Onitsha Igbo by reason of the perceived simplicity and urban dominance of the dialect and its growing prestige as a unifying language of commerce and social mobility outside the classroom across Igbo land (Omenka, 1986)..Again, like its predecessors, Central Igbo failed to sustain any significant literacy in Igbo.

Although the new “Literary Standard Igbo” has been promoted as a compromise Igbo, building upon “central Igbo” but drawing freely from the lexical, semantic, grammatical and other elements of as many Igbo dialects as possible (Ogbalu, 1974, 1982, Emenanjo, 1982, 1985; and Nwachukwu, 1983), it is in reality a classroom Igbo which is actually spoken by no one, existing only in scholarly writings and works of literature consumed exclusively by a captive clientele of students and teachers working for examinations. Its use in the media (Radio, Television and the Press), though apparently popular, remains confusing to both monolingual speakers of deep Igbo dialects and urban semi-competent speakers. By and large, no significant literacy in Igbo has been fostered by this so-called literary standard Igbo.

A parallel to the fate of the Igbo dialects under the stranglehold of the ongoing standardization movement is provided by Koyra, one of the “small languages...spoken by a mountain community surrounded by Oromo-speaking plains-dwellers” in Ethiopia. Hayward (1995: 3-4) makes the important observation that this minority language “is not particularly threatened by Oromo” (a majority language. “The greatest threat is that it will be usurped by standardization, that is by leveling down the fifteen languages in its group to a single common denominator.” Any standardization movement that does not allow for dialectal diversity is a recipe for language starvation and ultimate death.

forms have been provided by Manfredi (1991). According to Manfredi, central to the deleterious effects of the standardization processes is the

high level of conflict and fragmentation they have created in the “Igbo consciousness”. Maintaining throughout that “Standard Igbo is little used in formal education and the public sphere” (Manfredi, 1991: 3), he goes on to lay the blame on the divisive politics of rival Christian missionaries operating in Igbo land:

In mass literacy in English, Igbo speakers surpass the rest of Nigeria, but mother tongue literacy in the Igbo area reached an impasse early in this century from which it has never recovered. As Ogbalu (1974: 10) puts it, “...the period from 1929 to 1961 was a blank period in Igbo literary history.” Ekechi 1972 shows that this situation was the fruit of missionary rivalry which created a number of functional polarities. The language of scriptural pseudo-literacy (“Union” Igbo, taught by Anglicans, cf. Achebe, 1976) was opposed to that of secular practical literacy (English, taught by Catholics) and both of these were distinct from the language of oral commerce (“Waterside” Onicha, employed by Catholics and clerks) (Manfredi, 1991; 27).

Until the standard language question is finally settled in favor of a natural spoken dialect of Igbo rather than divisive and arbitrarily chosen or created *koinés*, literacy in Igbo will remain stunted and the language itself will continue to be impoverished and deprived. The need for such a settlement will shortly be addressed as one of the major recommendations of the present paper, under the rubric of language revitalization and maintenance.

8. *Language Politics and Igbo Linguistic Fragmentation*. Related to the divisions created by the standardization movement is another invidious form of language fragmentation, in this case arising from the “Igbo” idea—the notion that certain local varieties of natural Igbo (such as Izi, Ikwere, and Ika) previously regarded as dialects of the language—are in fact distinct languages of their own. albeit related to Igbo, hence the application of the term “Igbo” to them. Although Manfredi tacitly endorses the Igbo idea, hence his article, “Igbo” (1989), he has been most vocal in his criticism of scholar-politicians like Kay Williamson of the University of Port Harcourt who have used

questionable linguistic methods (in this case, lexicostatistics) to create divisions in the already fragmented Igbo linguistic consciousness (Manfredi, 1991: 27):

By the end of the (Nigerian civil) war, Williamson’s River State Readers Project had made common cause with apocalyptic Pentecostal missionaries in promoting linguistic separatism in peripheral Igbo communities. The new boundaries were legitimized, in turn, by Williamson’s (1973a) Lower-Niger hypothesis, which divided the Igbo periphery into a half-dozen “languages”, based on lexicostatistics—a discredited, shortcut method of classification which computes lexical coherence from rough translations of an English wordlist.

Manfredi (1991: 27) then goes on to ask: “Why is linguistic fragmentation so important in the politics of this region? It is often commonsensically suggested that the historic absence of a single predominant state explain a high level of linguistic diversity in the Igbo areas (e.g. Meek, 1937: 1). But when has state power ever successfully blocked linguistic change? A more plausible assumption is that the founders of written Igbo had no prestige dialect comparable to Standard Yoruba which is based on the dialect of imperial Oyo (cf. Ajayi 1965).”

There is of course no simple answer to Manfredi’s questions. What we know for certain is that so long as the existing forms of linguistic fragmentation persist, so long will Igbo language development suffer as its speakers pursue conflicting goals and fail to make a common cause in dealing with the external and internal forces which are currently undermining the language. Manfredi is right in stating that “The blockage of Igbo literacy reflects 150 years’ politicization of the Igbo lexicon by state and missionary projects, and Igbo speakers’ resistance to these” (Manfredi, 1991: 3). It however remains to be seen if this alleged “Igbo speakers’ resistance” can override the decisions and policies that are undermining the unity and stability of their language.

9. *Foisting of Toxic Arm Chair Metalinguistic Instruments on the Language.* The increasing use of neologisms recently coined in metalanguage workshops has greatly added to the confusion in the Igbo lexicon. My mother (Madam Hannah Azuonye, 74) once asked me, “What is this thing called *Máhadùm*?” *Máhadùm* (lit. “know them all”) is an ill-advised coinage for “university” which I strongly opposed at the Oguta metalanguage workshop where it was coined. My mother (a 1944 graduate of Ovim Girls’ School) had no difficulty understanding the sentence, *nwa m no na yùníváś\_t\_*” (my son is in the **university**), but she did have problems figuring out what was meant by “*nwa m no na Máh\_dùm*”. But she was not alone. Stark illiterate women who were present during our conversion were equally baffled by the expression. One of them asked, “*Máhadùm ónwà á là-ákà ùkà yá, ò bùdù ásùsù ndé mmám sà ò bù híé ndé ékpéré Àlábùkà* (This Mahadum being talked about, is it the language of spirits or a thing of the Moslems). *Máhadùm* may well have now established itself as the Igbo word for “university” in the minds of many an Igbo listener to the electronic media; but, in reality its effect—like that of many similar neologisms in *Okaasusu Igbo* or *Igbo Metalanguage* (Emenanjo, Ugorji, and Umeh, 1990)—is that of undermining the innate creative processes in Igbo lexis, including its capacity to assimilate loan words into its lexical-semantic repertoire. Despite its media usage, the ordinary Igbo speaker is more likely to say *nwa m no na yùníváś\_t\_*” (my son is in the university) rather than *nwa m no na máhadùm*,” (my son is in the *máhadùm*). Igbo language itself knows when and how to assimilate loan words. Perhaps a more timely study of the speech of monolingual speakers of deep Igbo dialects would have led to a more appropriate Igbo word

10. *Rapid Loss of Idiomatic Expressions in the Language.* In the environment of scholarly

for the idea of the “university” (one that is in line with the rules of Igbo lexical formation), just as some Aguleri Igbo speakers (Obiora Udechukwu, personal communication) have created Igbo words for two, three, or four storeyed buildings—*okwuliibua*, *okwuliito*, *okwuliino*, et—without pandering to alienating neologisms. If we document the language, we can always find the terms we need to describe all human experiences, old and new.

Than Chinua Achebe, no other Igbo writer or linguist has been as eloquent and determined in fighting the cause of preserving Igbo dialects through literature. This crusade is the basis of his dialect anthology of Igbo poetry, *Aka Weta* (1982), edited with Obiora Udechukwu. Achebe’s position is reflected in the very title of the anthology, *Aka Weta*, from the proverb, *aka weta, aka weta, o ju onu* (One hand brings, another hand brings, it fills the mouth). His argument is that it is only by writing in the dialects they know best can modern Igbo writers, like their oral traditional counterparts, preserve the idiomatic nuances and other deep structure features of the language in a way that is glaringly impossible through the so-called literary standard Igbo. While apologists for literary standard Igbo like Emenanjo (1984) and Ugonna (forthcoming) went immediately on the attack, the basic premises of Achebe’s position remains unassailable (Anyaeibunam, forthcoming). The death of deep dialects is tantamount to the death of idiomatic expressions, rhetorical expressions and oral literary genres which are at the very soul of the language. Without them, what remains is nothing but lifeless linguistic chaff. No appeals to the idea that modern Igbo cannot afford a *glossolalia* can offer any valid compensation to the irretrievable loss of idioms, rhetoric expressions and oral literary genres.

obsession with literary standards and metalanguage instruments, Igbo is rapidly losing

the idioms that are the soul of the language. In the little town of Okigwe where I grew up in the 1950's, idioms were commonly on the lips of my parents and other adults around us. Advice as well as rebukes were rendered less stressful by being cast in sparkling idioms such as *ire guta oku agba a whuwuoro ya* (lit. tongue fetches fire, the jaw fans blows it up for him), a cautionary idiom often used in situations where a child is so uncontrollably talkative that it is feared that he may give away a family secret. And there are euphemistic idioms which make for politeness in everyday discourse, e.g. *ka mje hu onye agwo tara* (lit. let me go and see a person bitten by a snake), in lieu of the grossness of statements like, "let me go and shit". With reference to Igbo, idioms have been described as "the right words in the right place" (Carnochan and Iwuchukwu, 1963). They give each language its distinctive and for the most part untranslatable poetic flavor. Thus, Cahill (2001: 1) writes, with reference to what is lost when a dying language begins to lose its idioms:

Each language is uniquely rich. In English "letting the cat out of the bag" is an idiom meaning "telling something that is supposed to be a secret." A word-for-word translation into another language does not communicate that meaning at all. Likewise, the Spanish "dar gato pur liebre" literally means, "to give a cat for a rabbit." But as an idiom, it means to deceive someone else about the quality of something. Each language has unique idioms, vocabulary and expressions of world view.

Where now are the glittering Igbo idioms of every day speech, of gossip and abuse and of praise and censure and of endearment and private homilies from parents to children? Tied up as they are with the natural dialects of Igbo, they are fast disappearing as the dialects become marginalized. But already extinct or near-extinct are a whole corpus of special idioms which served as the secret languages or specialized argots of various groups within Igbo culture. Among these are the *Òlu* argot of the Nri kingdom and hegemony (Onwuejeogwu, 1980);

Manfredi, 1991: 27-29; 264-268), *Nsibidi* of the Aro oligarchy (MacGreggor 1909; Elphinstone, 1911, Jeffreys, 1912; Kalu 1980), and *Asusu Mmonwu* of the central Igbo *Ojionu* masquerade societies (Ugonna, 1976). Other specialized (in this case graphic or written) idioms include *uri-ala* among the Ngwa (Afigbo, 1982) and, most spectacularly, the Umuleri syllabary, otherwise known as the Nwagu Aneke Igbo script (Nwoga, 1992; Azuonye, 1992).

Manfred's (1991: 264) discussion of the *Òlu* argot of the Nri, provides, as the author claims, an "illustration of the general mechanism by which etymology affects consciousness, namely the strategic role of lexical symbolism. In turn discussion of *Òlu* raises the wider issue of how Nri hegemony was sustained by the manipulation of a lexically based symbolic code." Described by Onwuejeogwu (1980) as "A secret language...developed and used only by Nri men so that information could pass between the political elite in the Nri palace and the Nri men outside," Manfredi (1991; 268) glosses *Òlu* as "neck", adding that "by extension" it refers to the vocal vibration of the larynx. The specialized meaning 'secret language' reflects a symbolic opposition with other body part terms, as these denote different aspects of speech. For example, *àgba* 'jaw' can non-literally refer to pronunciation: the phrase *àgba élú* 'low jaw' and *àgbá àla* 'high jaw' may be used to label unfamiliar intonation patterns. *Ólú* implicitly contrasts with *úrho* 'tongue' (*Ònichá íle*, *Ówéré íre*, *Ògbakiri*, *lúlô*, *Èhwúdà ídô*), as the latter is represented in domestic ritual." He then offers some examples of *Òlu* sentences which he says were recorded in a unique pre-arranged meeting with "an elderly *ichi*-titleholder at his Nri home". "There materials," he says, "exemplify the basic principle by which *Òlu* is related to the ordinary system of language" (Manfredi (1991; 269). Of these examples, he focuses his discussion on the two quoted below:

**Áboligó me-tú-lu Otòmólu, Chí-nwù-fé, ò na-amá-kwa ónwé yà?**  
 (The man who is nearby, observe him, is he comprehending [what we are doing]?)

**Chí-nwù-fé nà ife e jì emé èjé-enú**  
 [name] Imper Comp thing pro hold doing going-up  
 (Observe what is done by way of tricks)

Based on the theory that “idioms”, as opposed to games, are the predominant feature of socially restricted slangs and argots, Manfredi (1991: 269), parses the above-quoted *Òlu* sentences as follows:

In the above sample of *Òlu*, there are three types of idioms — three levels of semantic noncompositionality. At the upper extreme of idiomacity, names replace ordinary NPs and predicates. For example, **Áboligó** and **Akpolum** stand for *onye* ‘person’ and *manya* ‘wine’, while **Chí-nwù-fé** (literally ‘Daylight shines out’) and **me-tú Otòmólu** (literally ‘touch Otòmólu’) substitute for *ne-lu anya* ‘watch out’ and *dị nso* ‘to be nearby’, respectively.

How do these substitutions qualify as idioms, and of what type? Before the recording, the *Òlu* speaker offered that there were metaphorical relationship between the names and their ordinary idiomatic interpretations. He said that **múta-ufu** was the name of a very tall person, so that its interpretation ‘depth [of understanding]’ is not completely arbitrary. To be sure, this limited degree of semantic motivation does not dispense with the need for rote learning of the substitutions, but such iconicity as does exist might aid a(n) Nri person learning the system, and such knowledge would still be difficult for a non-Nri person to obtain. Even if the non-initiate knew the named individuals, this would not help very much in

11. *Rapid Disappearance of Rhetorical Forms Such as Proverbs*. Practically every African language has a repertoire of proverbs extolling the centrality of proverbs in the aesthetics and rhetoric of its speech acts. Thus, for the Igbo, *ilu bu mmanu e ji eri okwu* or as Chinua Achebe puts it in *Things Fall Apart*, “Among the Igbo, the art of conversation is well regarded, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.” Earlier, in his Preface to Whiteley (1964), Achebe dismisses mere proverb collection as irrelevant vis-a-vis the preservation or recording of live situations of context in which proverbs flourish, such as the orations which he deftly recreates for his

[name].Rel touch-ØAsp [name] [name].Imper 3sg.Q  
 Prog-know-also self 3sg.Gen  
 deciphering *Òlu* sentences, since there is no deterministic path from personal characteristics to idiomatic meanings.

The path from ‘a tall man’ to ‘depth of understanding’ might be folk etymology. Lexical coinage from proper-names is rare in ordinary language; examples cluster in the fields of politics and technology, more metonymic (e.g. *angstrom*, *chauvinism*, *reaganomics*, *sandwich*, *watt* — all entities named after their originators) than metaphoric (*quisling*...). I made no effort to confirm all the speaker’s claimed metaphoric links for the first class of *Òlu* idioms. However, two of them are independently confirmed by oral history.

Similar parsing may be extended to other categories of Igbo specialized idioms like spoken, as opposed to written *Nsibidi*, which like *Òlu* is said to employ metaphoric substitutions in addition to a whole range of other conceits, which like the phenomenon of *signifying* in African-American language (a probable offshoot of *Nsibidi*) comprises expressions cast in forms that conceal their meanings or real intentions often by dint of multiple significations. Thus, in my home town (Isuikwuato, Abia State), *Nsibiri* (local variant of *Nsibidi*) is apt to be understood as “clever conceit” or “conspiratorial expression”. No wonder the Aro also used *Nsibidi* in their infamous slave deals.

characters in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964). Today, only very few monolingual adult deep dialect speakers in remote villages are sufficiently well-versed in proverb usage as to be able to engage in serious conversation or oratorical speeches of the kind which Achebe recreates in his novels. Until recently, the inculturation process in Igbo upbringing included story-telling sessions which commonly featured flying with proverbs (a type of verbal dueling involving competition in proverb remembrance). In the absence of such processes, there is hardly any surviving traditional means of insuring the continuity of the primary vehicle of Igbo rhetoric and verbal

aesthetics. Igbo without its proverbs in active use is no longer Igbo. No appeal to the realities of language change or transformation can offer any valid compensation or mitigate the impact of such a loss on the vitality and survival of the language.

10. *Loss of Major and Minor Forms of Oral Literary Expression.* Proverbs belong to a large repertoire of Igbo oral literary forms generally known as *ilu*, a supergenre which also includes such major forms as parables, fables, allegories, and analogical rhetorical devices such as similes, metaphors, etc. Together with riddles (*agwugwa* or *gwam-gwam-gwam*), tonue-twisters (*okwu-ntuhi*) and oratory (*okwu-nka*), they constitute a large body of disappearing oral literary genres which may be described as rhetorical forms. Other forms which are also rapidly disappearing are Poetry and Song; the Folktale and Storytelling Events, as well as Drama and Theater (Azuonye, 1992). Underlying the rapid disappearance of these forms are the ineluctable forces of modernism, postmodernism and globalization. Added to these are economic pressures and the post-colonial phenomenon of Igbo suicidal “receptivity to change”.

Two brief anecdotes from my field work in collecting Igbo oral traditions may help to illustrate some of the sociopsychological dimensions of the death of oral literatures. In 1971, when I started recording the oral epics of the Ohafia Igbo, I met a young singer of tales named Egwu Kaalu of the Asaga village-group, whose rending of the legend of Nne Mgbaafo (the story of the brave women warrior who goes to battle to search for her lost husband) struck me as distinctive both in its content and style. When, five years later, I traveled all the way from London to make fuller recordings of his

Perhaps, what the above discussion of the symptoms of Igbo language endangerment really reveals is that, apart from the ten global languages which boast hundreds of millions of

compositions and to study his aesthetic, no amount of inducement would persuade him to perform. He had got a respectable job as a bricklayer in a construction project at Ohafia. He proudly sent a message to me stating, “*enwe’ m time ibu abu*” (I have no ime to sing songs). For him, therefore, what he saw as an upward social and economic status had reduced an age-long art, for which most of his people are justly proud, into an embarrassing waste of time. Another anecdote relates to my field work with Obiora Udechukwu at Aguleri in 1984 where we collected monumental oral epic performances, each of which took several days to perform. We were almost discouraged when we encountered some stone-wall of indifference at the beginning of our search, including one woman on hearing our us enquire about *it̄a* (story-telling), wondered incredulously about our sanity: “people are busy searching where to pull up some cassava with which to feed the children and you people are busy talking of *it̄a*.” For her, economic survival, in these hard times, was far more important than the child-play of mere story-telling.

Although there is hardly anything peculiar in the responses of either Egwu Kaalu of Asaga or the anonymous woman of Aguleri, the iconoclasm which they epitomize is particularly intense in modern Igbo cultural behavior. Coupled with the death of poets, singers, storytellers, orators, and masked players in various Igbo communities and the absence of new recruits into the traditional processes of apprenticeship and training for these roles, it is only a matter of time before the oral literary genres, which constitute the primary vehicles for the preservation of the aesthetic forms of Igbo in all its vitality will disappear for good.

speakers across the world (Mandarin Chinese, 726,000,000; English, 427,000,000; Spanish, 266,000,000; Hindi, 182,000,000; Arabic, 181,000,000; Portuguese, 165,000,000;



Bengali, 162,000,000; Russian, 158,000,000; Japanese, 124,000,000; and German, 121,000,000), practically all other languages of the world are in the grips of imminent death. The projection made by several scholars that more than 95% of the languages of the world will fall out of use with the next 100 years (Woodfield and Brickley, 1995), seems to be a better approach to the problem of language endangerment than the exclusive focus on minority language with a few surviving elderly monolingual speakers. The symptoms of death in majority languages with official status like Igbo are no less worthy of salvage or revitalization efforts as those of the small minority languages.

### Strategies for Salvaging and Revitalizing the Igbo Language

Although the strategies for salvaging and revitalizing the Igbo language from imminent death seem clearly evident from the foregoing analysis of the multifarious symptoms of its endangerment, it seems in order to consider here the position of the Summer Institute of Linguistics which “has traditionally been involved with what are now called endangered languages.” According to a SIL position paper (Kindell, 1994: 1), “Currently there are several options for involvement with endangered languages. The choice depends on national and institutional philosophy, local opinion, and resources available.” The paper then goes on to outline three options:

1. **Do nothing**; accept changes in language use as normal. Such a philosophy would perhaps reflect Edwards' (1985:86) assertion that it is natural for language use to change, and 'more reasonable to consider group and individual identity altering... than it is to see the abandonment of original or static positions as decay or loss'.
2. **Document the language** (or enable other linguists to do so), recording as much data as possible. For example, Sarah Gudschinsky's (1974) work with the last known speaker of Ofaié, during 1958 and 1959, provided valuable linguistic information about the composition of The reasons for wishing to keep as full a record as possible (including audio and video samples, texts,

the Gê language family. The arguments for being involved in such documentation include the safeguarding of linguistic diversity, contributing to a knowledge base for language universals, and the western idea that knowledge in and of itself is valuable. There are some ethical questions, however. One is motivation: all too often the creation of a linguistic market. Another concerns the rights of indigenous people to their languages; many want at least collaborative research, better yet to be trained to do the linguistic research themselves; others would allow only research with direct benefit to the community.

3. **Attempt some sort of language salvage, revitalization, or maintenance program**, including language development strategies such as literacy, education, literature production, translation, etc. There are certain problems in prioritizing needs for such intervention: should we even attempt to save languages from extinction? include even the smallest groups? consider cost efficiency and the number of people who might be benefitted? We have no end of case histories showing both failure and success of various types of intervention programs, some describing carefully researched contributing factors. But basically, what keeps a language alive is its social function; the only people who can stop a language from shrinking or dying are the speakers of that language.

Needless to say—and, as indeed implied or explicitly stated in the above statements of symptoms of Igbo language endangerment—Igbo stands to benefit from the judicious application of a combination of the second and third options. We cannot afford the **do-nothing** option.

1. *Documenting the Language*. Although the need for documenting every language (even if it is not endangered) seems so obvious, it seems necessary as part of the present discourse to remind ourselves of this need. Two complementary statements from Woodbury (2001) and Woodfield and Brickley (1995), may suffice in establishing this need, especially with regard to endangered languages, like Igbo. According to Woodfield and Brickley, in their report on the Bristol Conference on the Conservation of Endangered Languages (1995: 6):

stories, and songs) are impersonal scientific and cultural reasons based upon the recognition that these languages

and their products are treasure-troves of information. We have a duty to posterity to gather and protect this information, bearing in mind that it has the potential to be tapped in countless ways that we cannot now foresee.

By the same token, Woodbury (2001: 3) writes, spotlighting the loss of social identity that goes with language loss:

When a community loses its language, it often loses a great deal of its cultural identity at the same time. Although language loss may be voluntary or involuntary, it always involves pressure of some kind, and it is often felt as a loss of social identity or as a symbol of defeat....language is a powerful symbol of a group's identity. Much of the cultural, spiritual and intellectual life of a people is experienced through language. This ranges from prayers, myths, ceremonies, poetry, oratory and technical vocabulary to everyday greetings, leave-takings, conversational styles, humor, ways of speaking to children, and terms for habits, behaviors, and emotions. When a language is lost all of this must be refashioned in the new language—with different words, sounds and grammar—if it is to be kept at all. Frequently, traditions are abruptly lost in the process and replaced by the cultural habits of the more powerful group. For these reasons, among others, it is often very important to the community that its language survive..Much is lost from a scientific point of view as well when a language disappears. A people's history is passed down through its language, so when it disappears, it may take with it important information about the early history of the community. The loss of human languages also severely limits what linguists can learn about human cognition. By studying what all the world's languages have in common, we can find out what is and isn't possible in human language.

Finally, Moseley (1995: 2) stresses the fact that “each language is a unique repository of the accumulated thoughts and experiences of a community,” and identifies “two major tasks for the future: to establish a trans-national mechanism for monitoring changes in the distribution of languages, and to assemble speedily a corpus of material on each language.”

So far Igbo is concerned, the task before us now is four-fold:

The first is to *document all forms and manifestations of the language which have already become extinct*. Since these forms may no longer exist in any active form in any dialect

The third is to *document evidence of Igbo*

or community, a search through as many public archives and personal collections across the world would need to be mounted immediately. We know, for instance, that the phonograph records from which the Igbo texts presented by Thomas (1912-13) in his six-volume ethnographic survey of the Igbo are preserved in the Pitts-Rivers Museum at Oxford and in the Horniman Museum in London. By the same token, the private collections of such early colonial anthropologists and linguists as Talbot, Meek, Jeffreys, Ward, Green, Carnochan, among many others, may yield valuable information about early forms of the language and about idioms, rhetorical forms and oral literary genres, some of which may have disappeared for good. In short, all old recordings from all available sources should be searched for, retrieved, mastered, transcribed, edited and preserved in readily accessible format..

The second is to *document all dying forms and manifestations of the language from surviving monolingual speakers of the language* before they disappear for good. This task should be pursued as an urgent salvage ethnography project. Feelers should be sent out immediately to locate such monolingual speakers in all autonomous communities in the Igbo culture area. Data bases should be developed. The agenda should include spoken or written argots or specialized idioms like *Olu*, *Asusu-Mmonwu*, *Uri-Ala*, and *Nsibidi*, in addition, of course, to all oral genres. This would involve mobilizing educated locals (teachers, students, civil servants, etc.) and working in close collaboration with Schools, Churches, Local Governments and various local organizations. A campaign, mobilizing the popular media and traditional modes of communication, should be mounted to educate the Igbo public about urgency and value of the task.

*linguistic presence in hybrid languages (pidgins*

*and creaoles*) within and outside Nigeria. The agenda would include actual lexical survivals or cognates in the Caribbean and the Americas (Azuonye, 2002b and 2002d), personal and place names, as those reported in Azuonye (2002a and forthcoming), and names of divinities and related customary rituals, such as *Agwe* (= *Agwu*) in Haiti (see Azuonye 2002b). But more importantly, this level of documentation will focus of expressions in various pidgins and Creoles which bear the unmistakable imprint of Igbo idiom or meaning-patterns (e.g. those collected in Jamaica by Professor Allsopp and analyzed in Azuonye, 2002d). There is an opportunity here for linkages with Caribbean and American universities and other research

For the success of the documentation project, a number of collaborative and infrastructural prerequisites need to be set up immediately. First of all, all local and state governments in the Igbo culture area (Abia, Anambra, Delta, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, Port Harcourt) must be lobbied to recognize the need to set up Igbo Language Boards and to place Igbo language endangerment and any future salvage operations in the highest priority list of fundable items in its capital and recurrent budgets. Secondly, every state government in the Igbo area should establish a center for Igbo studies or (with reference to Imo and Abia states) identify closely with any such centers that already exist in institutions within their areas of jurisdiction. Thirdly, local governments should establish the position of Igbo Language Officer to coordinate local efforts at language documentation as well as to all implement mandates for language revitalization. Fourthly, centers for Igbo studies and relevant departments in various universities and colleges in the Igbo culture area should establish collaborative research projects with their counterparts with and outside Nigeria in pursuit of the diasporic aspects of the language documentation effort. Fifthly, legislation should be enacted by state governments making it

institutions. Apart from its other potential value to the understanding of the creaolization and pidginization processes, the documentation may yield surprises, as in my study the Igbo word, *dibia*, in relation to its Caribbean survival, *obeah* (Azuonye, 2002b).

Finally, our most important task is to *document all aspects of modern Igbo usage*, monitoring its current processes of decay by reason of reduced speaker (especially child)competence, code-mixing and code-switching, language shift, etc. In due course, with the launching of successful language salvage, revitalization and maintenance programs, the emphasis may shift to that of monitoring opposite trends.

mandatory for all popular media operating in the Igbo culture area (Radio, Television, Recording Companies) to deposit copies of all Igbo language productions in the nearest center for Igbo studies. Sixthly, the activities of all Igbo language organizations (Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture and the Igbo Language Association) and individual scholars should be re-prioritized to reflect the new concern for Igbo language endangerment and survival. The existing habit of generating ideal linguistic data from native speaker competencies and building theories upon them should give way to more empirical scholarship based on documented evidence regarding current trends and what they forebode for the language. Seventhly, a network of collaborations and linkages should be established with all organizations, institutions and agencies with Nigeria which are concerned with language endangerment issues, especially the Centre for Language Endangerment in Jos (see Eno Abasi Urua, in Brenzinger, 1997: 8). Eighthly, it is absolutely important to establish immediately two supporting serials (a quarterly newsletter and a monthly organ, *Collected Igbo Texts*, featuring edited transcriptions of materials collected in the course of documenting the

language, as they become available. Ninthly, a website should be created with a worldwide network of links to the well over 60,000 Internet resources on language endangerment and rescue. Finally, there must be collaboration with concerned international organizations such as the International Clearing House for Endangered Languages, Foundation for Endangered Languages, yourDictionary.com — Endangered Languages Repository, the Endangered Languages Fund, the UNESCO, the World Bank, etc (for the websites of these organizations, enter keyword: “endangered languages”).

2. *Salvage, Revitalization and Maintenance Programs.* We are on a more slippery ground so far as the setting up programs to salvage, revitalize or maintain the stability of Igbo is concerned. As a matter of fact, the first major international conference on the endangered languages of Africa (Brenzinger, 1997) specifically recommends that “priority must be given to documentation rather than to language revival programs.” Thus Abdulaziz (Brenzinger, 1997: 7) seems to have spoken the minds of the participants when he asserted that “to rescue languages as spoken media...cannot be a main concern of linguists.” If, however, we do discover that we can embark on a preemptive rescue program for Igbo, we shall be faced with at least four major sets of challenges, namely: (1) building a consensus on the very need for the rescue effort itself; (2) rebuilding speaker competence and bases for inter-generational transmission of spoken Igbo; (3) selecting and actively promoting a natural dialect of Igbo as a literary standard, (4) enforcing the teaching and learning of Igbo at all levels of the educational system, (5) embarking on massive translation projects and offering incentives for the production of literature in the new literary standard; (6) maintaining linguistic diversity and enriching the resources of Igbo literature and

*Mgbe bèkèè aka abighi.* adv. phr. When the White person

metalinguage by allowing as many surviving dialects as possible to flourish side by side the literary standard; (7) creating public consciousness of the Igbo heritage; and (8) setting up an agency similar to the French Academy to monitor and devise effective systems to promote the vitality of the language and protect it against any threats to its future stability.

*Building Consensus on the Need for the Rescue Effort itself* Any language rescue program requires, first of all, some form of consensus that the effort itself is desirable. The great majority of specialists on language death and revitalization strongly believe that getting such a consensus is an extremely difficult task. The situation would be made worse, in the Igbo case, by the Igbo people’s fabled “receptivity to change”, which for the most part, is really an euphemism for ingrained colonial mentality, manifested in what may be called a *bèkèè wú ágbàrà*, or the-white-man-is-wonderful, syndrome that has deeply infected the very language and values of the people. To take just a few random examples from the idiolects of a few Igbo speakers monitored at Nsukka (from the mid-1980's to early 1990's), the tag (*bekee*) seems almost always to signify beauty, goodness, sophistication and excellence (Azuonye, 2002c):

*Ada-bèkèè.* n. White person’s daughter. Pretty little girl; lovely little girl.

*Ala Bèkèè.* n. White person’s land. Supreme comfort; splendor; unimaginable glamor.

*Amirika.* n; adj; interj. America. Beautiful; wonderful; same as Bekee.

*Bèkèè.* n., adj. White person. Modern; new; better; classy; sophisticated; wonderful; ingenious.

*Bèkèè kariri mmadu.* n. phr. The White person is more than human.

*Bèkèè n’onwe ya.* n. phr.; fig. White person himself. The very image of sophistication.

*Bèkèè wú ágbàrà.* n. phr. The White person is wonderful. An expression of extreme admiration.

*Ime bèkèè.* v. phr. To act like a white person. To be sophisticated.

had not yet come.

*Nwaanyi-bèkéè*. n. White woman. Fashionable or sophisticated woman; modern woman.  
*Okporo-bèkéè*. N. White person's road. Well-built road; Macadamized road; modern roadway.  
*Oyibo!* Interj. White person! How beautiful! How sophisticated!  
*Uwa-bèkéè*. n. White person's world. Comfortable or classy lifestyle. (Azuonye, 2002c).

By contrast, the terms “igbo”, “igbo made”, or “igbotic” evoke in the Igbo mind images of inherent “crudeness”, “backwardness”, “inferiority” and the like.

It seems clear, from the foregoing, that before we can build a consensus for any salvage and revitalization program for Igbo, we must first fight and defeat the *bèkéè wú ágbàrà* mentality. As Woodfield and Brickley (1995: 6) rightly remind us, “Language revival often requires a level of activism and protest in order to upset the *status quo*.” The lure of English is so deep-seated that Igbo people are most unlikely to give it all up overnight. A complicating factor is religious fundamentalism. We are all witnesses to the brazen foolishness with which a “born-again” Governor of Imo State attempted to decree the internationally acclaimed *Ahiajoku* lecture series out of existence simply because he saw it as a rankly pagan ritual, totally unbecoming of a modern, Christian state. But even more invidious are the economic and social prestige associated with the English language. English has long been accepted in the innermost recesses of the Igbo psyche as the sole gateway to better jobs and better positions in society. With the pressure of the ever-narrowing global village and the ever-growing power of the Internet and its English-based hyper-language, any program of all-out Igbonization will be a difficult monster to destroy. Our first task therefore is to launch a campaign for decolonizing the Igbo mind before beginning any salvage program. We cannot just take off, as we have done with metalanguage, to introduce any salvage program without first carrying the people for whom it is intended with us. We are

reminded here of the caveat in the Summer Institute of Linguistics position paper, which at this stage is worth repeating: “We have no end of case histories showing both failure and success of various types of intervention programs, some describing carefully researched contributing factors. But basically, what keeps a language alive is its social function; the only people who can stop a language from shrinking or dying are the speakers of that language.”

The good news for Igbo is that there is ample evidence of some remarkable successes in language salvage, revitalization and maintenance efforts (Bar-Adon, 1978; Dorian, 1987; Harris, 1994; Hartman and Henderson, 1994; Siencyn, 1995; Wynne-Jones, 1995; and Woodbury, 2001). These include successful prior mental decolonization or cultural nationalist efforts to prepare the people for the programs. The best case scenarios include the revival of Hebrew after centuries of its extinction as a modern language in active use (Bar-Adon, 1978) and the revitalization of Maori languages after several generations of near-extinction (Hartman and Henderson, 1994; and Woodbury, 2001). Given these success stories and the possibility of building a consensus for such a program for Igbo—which for now is only a seriously endangered language—should not be too difficult.

Seven other key steps seem critical:

*Rebuilding Speaker Competence from the Ground Up*. A good model to follow, once a consensus has been built, is the Moari “language nests”. As described by Woodbury (2002: 3):

In New Zealand, Maori communities established nursery schools [called *kohanga reo*, ‘language nests’] staffed by elders and conducted entirely in Maori. There and in Alaska, Hawaii and elsewhere, this model is being extended to primary and in some cases secondary school. And in California, younger adults have become language apprentices to older adult speakers in communities where only a few older speakers are still living.

Such language nests have continued to yield spectacular successes in nurturing a new generation of competent child speakers, thus ensuring a future generation of competent adult speakers who will in turn, hopefully, rear another generation of competent child speakers.

An illusion has been created that mother tongue education will become a reality with the manufacture of metalanguage instruments and the production of teachers versed in them. Far from that. There is no evidence that standard Igbo or neo-central Igbo, call it what you will, holds any charm for anyone other than its captive clientele of pupils seeking to pass their JAMB examinations or students seeking to earn certificates or degrees for the sole purpose of obtaining jobs where they will soon resume their fetishization of English as the gateway to economic and social uppity. Only through a natural form of Igbo (best of all a dialect or a natural standard language) can a lifelong love of the language be fostered. Well-managed language nests seem to be our best hope for fostering such a life-long commitment to Igbo. This is perhaps where sharp divisions are most likely to arise. What would be the source of recruitment of the elders who would staff such Igbo language nests? Would they need to be specially trained for their jobs (i.e. certified in one way or another) or would they simply be allowed to come to their jobs with nothing more than folk wisdom and experience? At any rate, if

*Choosing a Natural Variety of Igbo as Standard Igbo.* Nowhere in the world have esperantoes, no matter how well designed, successfully survived as the standard language of literature, culture or commerce of any people. The most virile and active standard languages are dialects which by reason of factors such as prestige, simplicity, urbanity, hegemony, colonialism, religion, widespread spoken or literary use, active commercial use, etc, establishes itself over others as a common language. We know this to be true of standard

the Igbo language nests are to be conducted entirely in Igbo, in what variety of Igbo (dialect or standard Igbo) would it be done and how can we insure (given the present decadent state of the dialects and the high level of illiteracy in the existing standard language).that these elders are fully competent to serve as linguistic role-models to the children under their care? These are important questions which need to be carefully considered in workshop situations before embarking upon the option. But it is important to assume *a priori* that Igbo dialects are headed in the long run for extinction under the inexorable sweep of modernism and the transformation of rural communities by commerce and industry. However, for the time being, it is expected that children in rural areas will be nested by elders competent in their home town dialects while children in urban areas or cosmopolitan areas like college or university campuses will be nested by elders competent in standard Igbo. This leads us to the next step, namely the need for a thorough reappraisal of what standard Igbo really is or should be. As already hinted, our best option here seems to be to reject the existing artificial and alienating literary standard Igbo in which only a few pupils and their teachers are versed (but hardly speak) in favor of a natural variety of Igbo, best of all one which is already widely used as a common language of commerce or social communication. But is there really such a variety of Igbo?

English, French, Chinese, Japanese, and (closer home) Yoruba. None of the different forms of literary standard Igbo (from Isuama in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Union Igbo (in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), Central Igbo (in the middle of the century), to the Standard Igbo of today meets any of these criteria. Unlike standard Yoruba, which is the dialect of imperial Oyo, none of these so-called standards is a natural language. There are either artificial creations or bowdlerized forms of natural languages. It is perhaps not entirely true that “the founders of

written Igbo” were forced to create artificial literary standards, because they “had no prestige dialect comparable to Standard Yoruba which is based on the dialect of imperial Yoruba” Manfredi 1991: 27, citing Ajayi 1965). Nor does the fact that Nri kingdom and hegemony which controlled religion, trade and tribute throughout Igbo land for centuries failed to impose its dialect as standard Igbo tell us anything one way or another about the potential of one Igbo dialect or another emerging as a standard language. We know that the Nri did not impose their language by choice, being a non-military or colonialist emporium more interested in covert operations for which their secret language, *Ólu*, seems to have served them very well (Onwuejeogwu, 1980). The key problem throughout the twenty-first century and the antecedent half-century, from the arrival of the Anglican mission (CMS) on the Niger, has been the divisive rivalries and misdirected enthusiasm which seem to have blinded missionaries, governments, and contemporary Igbo language experts from recognizing an accepting the fact that a spoken standard Igbo (“waterside” Onicha) has been in existence and has served commerce and social communication well for a hundred years or even more.

Why then has Onicha not been recognized as standard Igbo, even if we follow Manfredi (1991: 27) in downgrading it to merely “the language of oral commerce ...employed by Catholics and clerks” Perhaps, part of the problem is local ethnocentrism—the notorious centrifugal tendency in Igbo culture which deigns each of the nearly five hundred small autonomous communities (*mba*) that make up Igbo land to see itself as an autonomous

The continued promotion and use of an artificial literary standard against the reality of the widespread practical use of the Onicha dialect throughout Igboland, is an exercise in futility. Once a sensible decision has been arrived at, all other facets of the future salvage

republican polity with its own unique *omenaani* or *omenaala* (sacred charter or constitution), deities, laws, and cultural identity manifested in a distinct speech form (*asusu*). In such a situation, accepting another man’s *asusu* as standard language would be tantamount to loss of cultural identity and the ultimate defeat, even if what is entailed is merely formalizing a *fait accompli*, for the reality is that, everywhere outside these autonomous communities, Onicha is the one dialect of Igbo which most Igbo-speaking people (no matter their native dialects) are most likely to speak to one another in a wide range of social situations. Because of its association with the largest market in West Africa, it is the language of commerce. Its structural simplicity and phonological raciness have both insured that it is the choice language for urban children and non-Igbo learners of the language. Through its widespread use by the Catholic Church, it has long enjoyed the patronage of the largest single religious community in Igboland, both as a liturgical lect and a language of literature. Above all, despite the fact that it is called Onicha dialect, Waterside Onicha is phonologically and in other ways different from Mainland Onicha (Enuani Onicha) dialect in which, for example the heavier /v/ sound is preferred to “Waterside” Onicha’s sweeter /f/. Thus, an Enuani Onicha woman would say, *Avulenu biko b̄ia weta avele ove ka e welu kunyelu Arinze ove* (Avulefu please bring the soup plate to be used in dishing out soup fot Arinze, a “Waterside” Onicha urban speaker would say, *Afulenu biko b̄ia weta efele ofe ka e welu kunyelu Arinze ofe*. “Waterside” Onicha is thus hardly an ethnic dialect and hence undeserving of any kind of ethnocentric bias.

operations will focus on Onicha. It will be continually fed by the dialects and its metalanguage will comprise sensible loan words, words with specialized meanings from other dialects, and neologisms generated in accordance with the rules of lexical formation in

the language, much of it taken from the documentation of the language. New books will be written in the dialect while others will be translated from the artificial *koines* and from other dialects of Igbo or foreign languages. No attempts should be made to suppress the dialects in favor of the new Onicha standard. The dialects will disappear on their own in due course as Onicha grows in strength and draws from them.

*Making Igbo Compulsory at all Levels of the Education System.* One of the most important articles of the “Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literature (Asmara, 2000: 2) is that “All African children have the inalienable right to attend school and learn their mother tongues. Every effort should be made to develop African languages at all levels.” This declaration should be embraced by Igbo language planners. Once Onicha has taken its due place as the Igbo literary standard its vitality and growth should be enhanced by persuading all state governments to enact legislation making it a compulsory subject at all levels of the education system. At the post-secondary level, Igbo should make a common cause with the other eleven official languages of Nigeria to be established as a compulsory general education course at the university level. As a corollary to this the language nest option, earlier discussed, can be extended to primary and even secondary schools, as has been done among aboriginal language groups in Australasia

*Maintaining Linguistic Diversity and Enriching Igbo Linguistic Resources.* It may be necessary to continue the work of the Igbo metalanguage workshops, but no longer in the spirit of prescriptive and arbitrary coinages but by way of searching documented language repositories and current usage both in the new standard format and the surviving dialects for actual Igbo words which either answer to the semantic range of new terms desired or whose meaning can be expanded or narrowed to be able to do so. While loan words will always remain a

and the Americas (Woodbury, 2001).

*Translation Projects and Incentives Literary Production the New Standard Igbo.* One of the ways in which the British colonial government in collaboration with the Christian missionaries promoted the growth of Central Igbo, following the recommendations of Ida Ward (1941) was by setting up Igbo Literature and Translation Bureaux. These agencies commissioned and coordinated the translation of a wide diversity of texts from English and other languages into Igbo. They also instigated the publication of primers and other reading materials in Igbo for various levels of the primary school system. They also created incentives in the form of literary competitions and literary prizes for original works in Igbo which could be used as supplementary readers in primary schools, a trend which began with the Africa-wide competition which in Igbo land resulted in the composition and publication of Pita Nwana’s *Omenuko* and D. N. Achara’s *Ala Bingo*, both in 1933. Finally, these Bureaux were often linked with, or served as Adult Education Agencies, developing and promoting the use of highly pedagogically effective adult literacy manuals. A leaf can be borrowed from these activities in the development of literature in the new Standard Igbo. Part of the agenda of the new Igbo renaissance would include the translation of works in past and present day standard Igbo into the new standard.

viable option, all alienating neologisms like *mahadum* and coinages which do not answer to the lexical rules and idiomatic structure of the new standard language or the dialects should be avoided. Allowing as many surviving dialects as possible to flourish side by side the literary standard will ensure the continuing vitality of the standard language, serving as they surely will as inexhaustible sources of replenishment for its lexicon. As soon as possible, a multi-volume standard Igbo dictionary on the scale of the Oxford English Dictionary should be embarked



upon.

*Creating Public Consciousness of their Igbo Heritage.* It would by no means be ethnocentric for all broadcasts on radio and television in the Igbo culture area to be made mandatorily in Igbo, with a few spots for English programming or national news from the national capital. By the same token, the official state newspapers in the Igbo speaking areas of the country should mandatorily be published in Igbo. Furthermore, Igbo should be the primary language of road signs, sign posts, street names, and hotel menus should be Igbo, even if sub-titles in English are provided in smaller letters. Finally, an *authenticity* program should be linked to the agenda for creating public consciousness of their Igbo heritage. English or Anglicized place names or spellings should be exorcized and replaced with authentic Igbo names, e.g. Onicha for Onitsha, Ahaba for Asaga, Enugwu for Enugu, Okunaano for Awkunwanaw, Oka for Awka; Ogwu for Agwu, Akaigwe for Okigwe (or Okigwi), Ehugbo for Afikpo, Omaahia for Umuahia, Ozuakoli for Uzuakoli, Ovum for Ovim, and so on. The authenticity drive should encourage individuals to replace their meaningless or alienating foreign names in favor of Igbo names. The same with place names. Why should there be a “Maryland” near Enugwu? Why Port Harcourt? Why not the indigenous name, “Igweqcha”? And as part of the new Igbo consciousness movement, personal and official correspondence in Igbo should be promoted. I was highly impressed some years ago when I walked into the office of my wife’s gynaecologist at the University College Hospital and noticed that this internationally reputed

In conclusion, it seems fairly evident, from the foregoing that, though Igbo is the language of a demographic majority and one of the twelve official languages of Nigeria, and despite its 20 million speakers and a culture and world view that promote fecundity and the raising of large families, it is in fact one of the seriously

professor of obs and gyny had been reading a Yoruba novel for pleasure. Will there be a time when such a member of the Igbo elite who is not in the arts and humanities business can be caught reading Pita Nwana’s *omenuko* or Ubesie’s *Juo Obinna*? Such a feat may well be pulled off by a well-coordinated Igbo Heritage Consciousness Campaign.

*Setting Up an Igbo Standards Board.* Finally, to keep promote the vitality of the language and protect it against any threats to its future stability, in the long run, we need to set up an agency similar to the French Academy, possibly under the name “Igbo Standards Board”. This will not be a standardization board, prescribing and enforcing language policies. It will rather be a standards monitoring and protection agency, a watch dog to ensure that all signs of language endangerment in the future are quickly spotted and speedily attended to. It will be charged with ensuring that language documentation efforts are continued unabatedly and that language maintenance mandates are enforced by all concerned. It will serve as a clearing house for all language planning or engineering initiatives maintain an Igbo language development fund, fund research and creative incentive awards, organize annual conferences, maintain the standard Igbo dictionary and related lexicon projects, coordinate the activities of the centers of Igbo studies and of Igbo language organizations, and maintain data bases on all aspects of the Igbo language both at home and in the diaspora.

## Conclusion

endangered languages of the world. Its endangerment is largely a function of colonial mentality manifested in the so-called receptivity to change that often means loss of identity in every new situation of culture contact. The most pronounced symptoms of the death of the language include reduced speaker competence,

the vernacular restriction policies in colonial boarding schools, fragmentation of the language consciousness by divisive sectarian and ideological politics, rapidly decreasing child competence, intense and unbridled language shift, assimilation into new languages such as pidgins and Creoles, depletion of the population of monolingual elderly speakers, marginalization of the dialects by the Union and Standard Igbo movements, rapid loss of idiomatic expressions in the language, rapid disappearance of rhetorical forms such as proverbs which have over the generations been the mainstay of the language's communication and aesthetic logistics, the loss of major and minor forms of oral literary expression, and most recently the foisting of toxic metalinguistic instruments on the language. Given the present trends in code-switching or code-mixing and overall language shift in favor of English, it is only a matter of time before the language either develops into an English-based pidgin or creole (as in the Caribbean) or disappears altogether. It is therefore absolutely important to document all forms and manifestations of the language, both formal and informal, together with their special argots, rhetorical expressions and oral literary genres, before they disappear for good. Such an urgent salvage ethnography project will involve a wide network of collaboration between individual scholars, organizations, institutions and governments within and outside the Igbo culture area. The involvement of international organizations, especially those devoted to the problems of language endangerment is mandatory. Beyond documenting the language, a salvage effort may be attempted. But here nothing can be guaranteed. The starting point is the building of a consensus, preceded by a massive campaign for the decolonizing the mind. Language nests modeled on the Moari Literature." Paper submitted in absentia at the Conference in Honor of F. C. Ogbalu, Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

example may be attempted. But it bids fair to resuscitate the dialect vs standard language question. But the question must be faced anew, especially towards arriving at a better conception of what a standard language really is or should be. The choice of a natural language, like the Onicha dialect, as the Igbo literary standard promises to provide a framework for language stability which will in the years to come be enriched by materials both from living and documented dialects.

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