

## **DIALECT COMMUNITIES AND LANGUAGE VITALITY: THE CASE OF IGBO**

**C. U. C. Ugorji**

Department of Linguistics and African Languages

University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria

E-mail valugo222@yahoo.com

The universal norm is neither monolingualism nor monoculturism but multilingualism and multiculturalism or cultural and political pluralism; and as there is a symbiotic relationship between human language and culture so is there between '(sub)languages' or dialects and subcultures; and what affects a language and its culture(s) also affects its varieties (dialects) and its subcultures. Dialects, like languages, are viewed as peoples' heritage. A concern for dialects and the people who speak them as well as the (sub)cultures they express is ethical and an imperative in the new world democracy.

The paper builds on the assumptions of 'Egalitarian Multilingualism' suggested in Emenanjo (2002), and proposes 'Dialect Vitality' as a democratic solution to conflicts, suspicion or violence emanating from dialect or language diversities, using the Igbo experience as a case study.

Dans une société on ne trouve normalement ni un monolinguisme pur ni un monoculturalisme pur, mais plutôt un multilinguisme ainsi qu'un multiculturalisme, ou encore un pluralisme culturel et politique. Et de même qu'il existe une symbiose entre langue et culture humaines, il en existe également une entre (sous) langue, ou dialecte, et sousculture; et ce qui influe sur une langue et sa/ses culture(s) influe aussi sur ses variantes (ou dialectes) et ses sous-cultures. Les dialectes, comme les langues, sont considérés héritage d'un peuple. Une préoccupation pour les dialectes et pour ceux qui les parlent, ainsi que pour les (sous)cultures qu'ils expriment, est morale, et obligatoire dans la démocratie du monde moderne.

La présente communication se base sur les hypothèses du 'multilinguisme égalitaire' proposé par Emenanjo (2002) et offre une 'vitalité dialectale' comme solution démocratique aux conflits, soupçons et violences qui émanent des diversités de dialectes ou de langues. L'expérience igbo sert de base pour cette étude.

### 0. INTRODUCTION

Emenanjo (2002:3) in a recent paper on language policies and cultural Identities demands that

Language policies must be democratic enough to accommodate all cultural diversities, all linguistic varieties and all repertoires identified in any nation.

He proposes "Egalitarian Multilingualism" as a solution to linguistic diversities, by which he endorses a policy of integration rather than assimilation in the spirit of the new world democratic order and respect for the linguistic rights of persons and communities, predicated on the symbiotic relationship between language and culture.

In this paper, I provide an extension of the tenets of "Egalitarian Multilingualism" into dialectology, proposing "Dialect Vitality" as a democratic solution to dialect conflicts, using the dialect conflicts in Igbo as a case study. It is assumed, in line with Emenanjo (2002), that the norm is neither monolingualism nor monoculturism, but multilingualism and multiculturalism or cultural and political pluralism; and that as there is a symbiotic relationship between human language and culture, so is there between (sub)languages or dialects and subcultures; and whatever affects a language and its culture(s) also affects its varieties (dialects) and its subcultures. Thus dialects, like languages, are peoples' heritage. The main concern of the "Dialect Vitality Option" is for the dialects and the people who speak them as well as the

(sub)cultures they express. The purpose is to preserve the linguistic rights of people, stem conflicts, loss of language or dialect and cultures, by suggesting sociolinguistic justice which encapsulates balanced language planning and radical socio-political actions. By this, it is hoped that people integration could be achieved (even) in dialect diversity. Although the focus on dialects is uncommon in political linguistics, it is none the less intriguing to investigate inter-dialectal and subcultural levels as we undertake to do in this work.

Dialects are viewed here simply as varieties of a language. Such varieties may be social or regional. It is the latter that is meant in this article. The differences between regional varieties and the so-called standard varieties include that the latter have benefited from standardisation while the former has not (see Emenanjo 1995, 2002, Wolff 2000, Trudgill 1974). In the Igbo case discussed in this paper, the standard(ized) variety is the educated variety whose forms lean heavily on items from the Central regional dialects and Onitsha, but may not easily be discretely delimited in terms of any geographical core.

### 1. THE IGBO DIALECT CONFLICT: AN OVERVIEW

The multidialectal Igbo language has numerous linguistic groups which are all-time restive and calling for serious attention, integration and empowerment. Indicators to this follow below. First, I recall a hot debate in which we were engrossed during the recent Ogbalu Foundation Seminar held at the University of Nigeria in June 2002. It was about the adequacy or otherwise of the present Igbo official orthography. Dr. B. M. Mba who sat close to me grumbled aloud, "My dialect is not represented"—by which he lent his support to the inadequacy of the orthography. Others complained of the inability of the orthography to enable preservation of records in some dialects vis-à-vis others. In another development, Dr. M. K. C. Uwajeh (personal communication) recounted the 'trauma' one of his uncles went through while trying to learn Igbo (standard Igbo) to enable him to earn a pass in a certificate examination. They speak a variety of western Igbo and feel that learning the standard variety was little short of learning another language. Generally, students from that dialect background tend to shy from studying Igbo in schools for similar reasons.

Ogbo (1984:103) articulates a bitter plight which is presented below: "We have to admit that in and outside the schools, the Central Igbo language is a foreign language to all Igbos west of the River Niger, and in the old Onitsha, Awka and Udi districts. To all students of these areas the Central Igbo is a cruel imposition...". With all its emotions, however, the foregoing represents an undue exaggeration as it seems implicit with unintelligibility, but Emenanjo (1995) reports a high degree of intelligibility among the various dialects. All the same, the need for sociolinguistic justice remains and cannot any longer be overlooked, as these cases show.

In an angry criticism against Emenanjo's review of Aka Weta, Achebe (1984:94) refers to standard Igbo as a "straitjacket", and as an "instrument of torture" for poets who write; and concludes that the "tragedy of Igbo is to have been saddled one generation after another with egoistic school men who have been concerned not to study the language but to steer it into tracks of their particular pet illusion. That, and not dialects, has been at the heart of our long black out". This represents both a resent-

ment for language planning efforts and for the outcome of such in Igboland, i.e. the standard dialect. Such dissatisfaction with language planning efforts prevailed against the language development for more than seventy years (cf. Uwalaka 2001), as it centred around the prejudices and preferences for one orthography system over another and crippled the development of Igbo and creative works and publications in the language (see also Onwuejeogwu 2002). Most passionate, perhaps, is the submission of the late Professor Armstrong (in Uwalaka 2001) as he noted that writing Olu, Owerri and Ohuhu in Onitsha sound systems suggested by the Catholic orthography may be regarded as an abstraction and as such would hamper the writing of literature and poetry, as most poetic subtleties would be lost.

In the spirit of democracy, two facts stand clear among others, namely:

1. that dialect loyalty is real, hence the outcries; and
2. that dialect communities and (their) elites are restive about perceived deprivations or exclusion.

Thus, we can no longer gloss over the feelings of (fellow) citizens who have strong emotional attachments to the dialects they speak. Dialects, like languages, are as one could see a people's heritage and instruments for the expression of (sub)cultures as well as markers of self-image and group identity (cf. Emenanjo 2002). We should therefore recognise the negative feelings against Central Igbo or its successor(s), the feelings of oppression or complaints of imposition, among others, and try to address them with democratic solutions. Moreover, since some dialect communities feel oppressed by those who seem to have some advantage via the development of Standard Igbo, it implies that such are left with no choice but to lose pride and shift from their ancestral dialects. Such lack of pride in a speaker's dialectal heritage may lead to linguistic attrition and/or amount to loss of speakers' general linguistic heritage, and loss of linguistic diversity at a high rate across human society (see Mufwene 2002). A recognition for social-political and linguistic independence is an imperative in the new world democracy, especially as such issues were crucial to the break-up of the federated units of the USSR, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia (cf. Emenanjo 2002) and the cruel massacre of the East Timorese by the Indonesian army (Lutz 1995). The "Dialect Vitality" option, we suggest here, promises to provide the needed citizens' personal and collective linguistic rights, among others.

## 2. PREVIOUS EXPERIMENTS

The earliest attempt at Igbo literacy was the conception of protestant missionaries and the Igbo ex-slaves resettled in Sierra Leone. Their effort led to the emergence of the Isuama Igbo, an Igbo-based pidgin which was rather foreign to the Igbo homeland and was therefore rejected.

Next was an attempt to create an Igbo variety that might command wide acceptance, the Union Igbo, which tried to build a synthesis, as it were, of non-contiguous Bonny, Owerri, Onitsha, Arochukwu and Unwana dialects. Again this multi-dialect amalgam created by the protestant mission with its base at Egbu (Owerri) failed to resolve the dialect diversity problem in Igboland, as it was said to be an Esperanto of a sort (cf. Achebe 1971, cited in Uwalaka 2001; Capo 1990); even though it survives in the protestant Bible and liturgy now as a religious register, and is very much intelli-

gible to its user-community (see Uwalaka 2001). The quest to evolve a 'pan-Igbo' dialect or a standard Igbo dialect was pursued by Ida Ward and others who adopted the Central Igbo dialect; that is, the dialect(s) of the area geographically central to the Igbo nation. It represented implicitly an attempt at resolving the dialect conflicts by adopting the variants which seemed naturally evolving, to become pan-Igbo dialect(s) to serve literacy needs, among others. This attempt seemed particularly more promising because both the Northern and the border dialects show much more affinity to the Central dialects than to the Onitsha dialect, which was the only possible rival, being promoted by the Roman Mission which had settled at Onitsha by the nineteenth century. This dialect had the advantage of dispensing with (the notion of) dialect abstractions or creation of artificial dialects to evolve a standard dialect.

The greatest opposition to the central Igbo experiment came from the Roman Mission which adopted the Onitsha dialect; and the fact that the Onitsha variety was phonologically less complex than the central dialect gave it a greater advantage, as it was easier to deal with the Onitsha dialect than the central dialect. But as Armstrong (cited in Uwalaka 2001) argues, having to write Olu, Owerre, and Ohuhu dialects in the greatly simplified Onitsha dialect would result in much ambiguity and loss of po-

Uwalaka (2001), among others, notes that the conflicts have deep political underpinnings, since even the religious considerations that seem further to complicate the controversies are not in themselves apolitical. Yet not much is done to evolve political solutions to match. Since the conflicts or suspicions against one dialect or one orthography and another are not often linguistic, solutions to them might as well not be purely linguistic. "Dialect Vitality" thus suggests a democratic option to the problems, as it considers both the linguistic and the political parts to the problem and provides for the individual and collective rights of dialect speakers and preserves the respective subcultures.

### 3. THE DIALECT VITALITY OPTION

This solution builds on the assumptions of two recent postulations for world languages: "Egalitarian Multilingualism", as presented in Emenanjo (2002); and the "Language Zones Option" of Uwajeh (2003). It extends their democratic principles into dialectology in the resolution of inter-dialectal suspicion, conflicts, marginalisation or violence.

I expound this option through two areas of language processing namely, status planning and corpus planning.

#### 3.1 STATUS PLANNING

Languages within nation states are assigned certain roles or status relative to the communication needs of the populace, usually by the political class; and such roles are coded in the language policy of the state or its constitution or both, among others. Such policies may generally promote or 'impose' one variety or language above others, discourage or prevent the use of one language among others; and the preferred language or variety is thereby associated with prestige. Status planning is thus a political action, and not a linguistic one as such. It has implications for the esteem of linguistic groups, the linguistic rights of minorities, and speakers of major varieties. Also language policies are usually directed towards certain ideologies of governments. These include linguistic assimilation, pluralism, internationalism or vernacularisation (see Wolff 2000). Here, what is essential is integration, which is achieved through due recognition of the equality of linguistic varieties and respect for the rights of dialect communities and general human dignity. The position of this paper then, requires that inter-dialectal levels should no longer be ignored, but should be considered along with the entire business of language processing or management. As Emenanjo (2002:3) demands, "Language policies must be democratic enough to accommodate all the cultural diversities, all linguistic varieties and all the repertoires identified in any nation".

The Nigeria national language policy contained in a number of government documents including the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1977, 1981; the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1979, 1999; the Cultural Policy for Nigeria, 1976, etc.; assigns Igbo the status of a national language, alongside Yoruba and Hausa. It is a mother tongue (L<sub>1</sub>) and/or Language Of Immediate Community (LIC), and serves as language of early literacy in its relevant domain, from pre-primary to

Junior primary levels, and non-formal education as well as L<sub>2</sub>. English remains the official language. This policy has been extensively criticised for its inadequacy and/or inexcusable flaws, lack of political will among others (See Bamgbose 2001, Uwajeh 2003, Jibril 1990, Emenanjo 2002, among others).

In presenting the tenets of the Dialect Vitality option, I shall be more concerned with what is relevant to Dialect Vitality, while also assuming the provision of the National Policy as given wherever it contains an advantage for my viewpoint. The following steps are suggested:

### **3.1.1 Literacy and Education**

The Language of Immediate Community (LIC) should be the variety or dialect that has optimal influence in a given community, not standard Igbo, except in urban cities and towns with larger population of variant dialect speakers. Let us illustrate this with a sample of communities: In Aboh Mbaise and Ezinihite where the Mbaise dialect has optimal influence, the Mbaise dialect plays the role of LIC required for early education. But in Enyigugu Mbaise it may not be necessary to insist on the Mbaise dialect just for political reasons, since they generally have the Owerre dialect there as a dialect that has optimal influence. In Aba urban, the standard Igbo plays the role of LIC but outside the urban city the Ngwa dialect assumes the role, and so on. The standard dialect continues beyond early literacy. People who drop out of school about the junior primary level would, by this proposal, have become literate in their own dialects while those who continue beyond this level would be literate in both their own (respective) dialects and the standard dialect. This is the spirit in bidialectalism in education (see Trudgill 1974, Mmadike 2000), which is analogous to bilingualism in education: the main advantage being that the child learns more quickly through his dialect than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium (see UNESCO 1953, cited in Mmadike 2000).

Recommended texts may be written in the standard dialect, except for literature texts, which may or not be written in standard dialect. Teachers in rural or local areas may adapt such to the relevant dialect of their pupils. This implies that teacher (re-)training programmes would include courses in comparative Igbo dialectology; and the posting of teachers to schools should take into account dialect competence, particularly for rural schools. Students who opt for Igbo at tertiary levels may be given special grants and ready job offers.

At the secondary school level where the policy provides for Igbo as L<sub>2</sub> to non-Igbo speaking children, the standard Igbo assumes the role of L<sub>2</sub>, not any other dialect.

### **3.1.2 Administration**

The standard dialect or the dialect that has optimal influence becomes the language of local government administration. A local government chairman, for instance, addresses his staff in Standard Igbo, the local council meeting involving councillors is conducted in the standard dialect or the dialect of optimal influence. At the state level, the standard dialect is used, and translations are provided in English for non-Igbo residents, like Federal government civil servants in the state. Accordingly, states and local governments and other employers within the Igbo nation should require a credit pass

in O level or whichever relevant levels for job opportunities within their jurisdiction. Those already employed should be given a reasonable time duration within which to obtain a credit pass in Igbo language or literature, or face sanctions which may include delay or denial of promotion, etc. Such is already being done for English, to the detriment of our national languages. Admission requirements for tertiary schools would also require a credit pass in Igbo or any other national language, especially for candidates seeking admission into social sciences and humanities. Compliance would count for patriotism. In this way, standard Igbo would naturally become the language of the judiciary, at least at the lower courts.

Village meetings and/or *Ogbako Umunna*, *Nzuko Umuada* which are usually conducted in the regional dialects, could also be documented in the same dialects in which they are conducted and read in the same.

### 3.1.3 National Integration

Since national languages are both for national culture and integration, it should be obligated on industries, firms, government agencies, etc., operating in Igboland to write signposts, notices, etc., in Igbo; such that, as one approaches the Igbo area, such materials suggest both the culture and the Igbo people to him. This is pragmatic enough to make visitors to Igboland want to learn Igbo. The variety required for this may be the standard variety only. Again, facile compliance may count for patriotism.

The political actions suggested here are quite easily achievable at state levels, as the constitution assigns state governments and the federal government concurrent jurisdiction over language policies (see also Bamgbose 2001). The linguistic action that complements this for dialect vitality to be realisable is presented under corpus planning, below.

## 3.2 CORPUS PLANNING

Corpus planning or linguistic planning is an internal planning (as against status planning which is external) and is directed towards establishing orthography, spelling and writing norms, norms for grammar as well as lexical expansion. What I consider crucial for the present purpose is orthography expansion, by which I suggest that dialects should be empowered for participatory literacy by permitting literacy in the dialects. For this, no new orthography may be expedient, notwithstanding any socio-political preferences and coercion and/or engineering as in the Ikwere experiment. What is essential for effective integration is to maintain the current Igbo orthography but expand it to include features that distinguish given regional dialects, as illustrated below for Mbieri, Owere, Nsuka and other dialect communities. In this way, what is written can retain psycho-phonetic reality in the estimates of the natives of the dialect from which its oral form or so is drawn. To illustrate this, take an Mbieri form like /**ɔ̃rú**/ 'work', which contrasts with /**ɔrú**/ 'injury', written in the present orthography. To say the least, reading this material back to the native speaker suggests ambiguity to his intuition; but beyond this, he may fail to recognise the material as a linguistic property of his own dialect community. But introducing a letter or diacritic for con-

trastive nasality into the orthography would very much contribute to the vitality of the dialect and to literacy in the dialect.

Similarly, the inclusion of a letter for the ingressive **t**—perhaps **ṭ**—for Oweré dialects; **ə** and **ǎ** for the schwa in the Northern dialects; **sw** for the whistle fricative in Nsuka and other dialects in Ebonyi; **^** **˘** for contour tones and rules for vowel glides in some border dialects especially, like Ikwo and the western dialects (to mention a few) (see Nwachukwu 1983, Ohiri-Aniche 1985, Ugorji 2002, etc.); would enhance the vitality of dialects and facilitate literacy in them. As shown above, what is expedient is simply an expanded or more comprehensive orthography and writing rules, which would enable or enhance literacy in the dialects. This is coupled with assigning of roles to each dialect in its own domain. In this conception, all languages and all dialects are in principle equal but only differ in terms of their differences in roles and domains of use. This makes it possible, for instance, for oral literature created in a regional dialect to be written in that dialect; that created in the standard dialect, to be documented in the standard dialect; and they should respectively be adaptable or transmittable from one dialect to another in the direction of pedagogic preferences or the like.

#### 4. THE CASE FOR THE “DIALECT VITALITY OPTION”

The thinking behind the adoption of a child’s mother tongue as a medium of instruction in early literacy is, first, that he learns more quickly through an already familiar linguistic medium than through an unfamiliar one; the Ife six year project is a case in point—see Elugbe (1990:14). Moreover, the child is saved the problem of grappling with two ‘unknowns’ at the same time, as he would be torn between learning a new language and acquiring the knowledge which the language purports.

Secondly, the child’s mother tongue or language of immediate community is assumed to be the language most natural to the child, the medium of his early socialisation, expressing of needs, affections and experiences, as it also conditions the child’s world view. Thirdly, his personality is created as it were in his mother tongue and his sense of identity is relative to his mother tongue. To displace him from this medium would mean his being culturally dispossessed and alienated (cf. Oyelaran 1990), by which violence is inflicted on him both sociologically and psychologically. Politically, it is a violation of his linguistic and cultural rights. Following the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (1996: see Emenanjo 1999) such medium is part of the inalienable and non-negotiable possession and rights of those who own them as God’s gifts. The position adopted in this paper is that the varieties that best meet this expectation in multi-dialectal settings is the child’s regional dialect or, if you like, the dialect of the immediate community (DIC).

Accordingly, language planning and development would incorporate strategies that empower dialects to achieve basic literacy needs which include developing appropriate comprehensive orthography of the language in such a way that even most rural dialects can be written, as well as assigning roles to all dialects of a language. Such roles may include being used for early literacy, day-to-day interaction needs as well as being used as language of the lower courts (e.g. Customary Courts) among others.

Following these, Dialect Vitality promises to stem dialect suspicion, conflicts or marginalisation and foster integration of dialect communities across the globe. It also enables orature (oral literature) to be harnessed from rural communities with all peculiar subtleties intact. Invariably, the standard variety gets further enriched by contributions from hitherto less accessible regional varieties. Altogether, language and dialect attrition, cultural and linguistic shift are checked.

Implicit in this solution is language use or performance (Williamson 1999, Uwajeh 2003). The onus lies on language or dialect communities to keep their language or dialect alive. It is quite important to write a language and so preserve information for posterity, but it is more important to speak or use a language or a dialect. Sanskrit, Classical Greek and Latin have rich literacy traditions, but are today dead because people no longer speak or use them. Children should be taught to speak their dialects so that as parents and older people age and die, the dialect, as already handed over, continues.

This is the spirit of "Egalitarian Multilingualism" (Emenanjo 2002) and "Language Zones Solution" (Uwajeh 2003), as endorsed in Bilingualism in Education (Trudgill 1974) and Bidialectalism in Education (Crowley 1968, in Mmadike (2000); and proved in Nigeria by the Ife six year project. Chumbow (1990) also reports the success of similar projects in Philippines, Mexico, Canada and so on. The section that follows next outlines some possible applications.

## 5. APPLICATION TO OTHER LANGUAGE COMMUNITIES

It is believed that the reality of human language is a factor of dialects or lects which include regional dialects, social dialects or sociolects essentially, and idiolects, given that multilingualism or multidialectalism as multiculturalism is the norm. It is of socio-cultural importance to maintain them. The Igbo experience is one case where the Dialect Vitality solution is shown to be productive, especially in handling suspicion or marginalisation and promoting the socio-cultural and linguistic affinities of individuals and communities to the dialects or languages they speak. The point assumed is that this framework is relevant and applies across human languages and communities. What follows advances this assumption of its universal applicability, though in an outline, since my primary preoccupation is with the framework as discussed; and I have demonstrated this using the Igbo experience.

In Yoruba, for instance, where the dialect question is already settled, the alphabet is yet to be settled, since those in Yoruba oral poetry drawing texts from various dialects have problems with the current orthography because of the one-dialect basis (Capo 1990:17). A comprehensive orthography should rather be developed for Yoruba by expanding the current one to incorporate more signs or symbols to enable literacy in the dialects, just as in the standard one. In a dialect of Hausa for instance, the standard Hausa /tāfi/ 'go' is pronounced /tāhi/. It should be the case therefore that an orthography developed for Hausa should contain letters for /f/ and /h/, all things being equal, to enable literacy in both varieties in the interest of citizens who own the dialects as a cultural heritage and to preserve linguistic diversity. Also Gbe, spoken in Togo, Ghana, Benin and Nigeria could benefit from this framework, as well as Efik-Ibibio dialect suspicion or conflict. The minority languages of Sokoto need not

become moribund because of the heavy dominance of Hausa, but should be empowered as suggested by permitting literacy in them and assigning them roles in their respective domains, while Hausa and English have semi-official and official roles respectively. Thus education policy implementation for the state need not be predicated on the existence of Hausa and English only (cf. Ndukwe 1990). Also the suspicion against assimilation or imperialism by more powerful linguistic groups associated with Polish, Greek and French in Quebec (Ndukwe 1990) could be handled using this democratic solution.

## 6. CONCLUSION

So far, I have tried to show how we can possibly resolve conflicts, suspicion or violence emanating from dialect diversities by building on the assumptions of "Egalitarian Multilingualism" and the "Language Zones Solution", etc., in our so-called "Dialect Vitality" option. The Igbo experience of several decades provided a case in point. This option is as vital as it is democratic, recognising the linguistic and cultural rights of citizens as part of their inalienable rights. In this conception therefore, each language variety is as important as any other, including the standardised variety. Differences only occur at the level of domains of use or roles.

Dialects like languages represent the vital socio-cultural properties of individuals and communities, which constitute essential parts of the inalienable rights of their speakers and should not be wished away, but assigned roles and empowered as suggested, to preserve both the dialects and the (sub)cultures they express. As it is natural, linguistic diversity is functional and sustains biodiversity. Let all languages and their varieties and peoples live! It is envisaged that the vitalisation of dialects would further enrich the more developed (standard) varieties with a wider stock of wisdom and cultural values, increase communicative ability across dialects, enhance cooperation of dialect communities and facilitate exchange of (sub)cultural peculiarities and nuances, as well as promoting democratic citizenship. I suggest that as Europe celebrates linguistic diversity annually, other nations and continents should join; and dialect diversity should be accorded overt or deliberate recognition in such celebrations.

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