

Preservation and Strengthening of Igbo Language through Nigerian Video Films: Case Study of Zeb Ejiro's Nneka the Pretty Serpent and Sunday Nnajiude's Ode Eshi¹

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Abstract

Production of video films in Nigeria have risen fast to become a vital and dynamic medium of entertainment and education. Evident is its palpable capacity to enhance the preservation and strengthening of Nigeria's advantages in her socio-cultural diversity. Hence, the view that the boom in Nigeria film industry, popularly referred to as Nollywood has provided a robust platform to encourage the propagation of Nigerian indigenous language appeal. In line with this thinking, this study illuminates on the factors capable of hindering or enhancing the strengthening as well as the preservation of Igbo language through Nigerian video films. To this end, this study adopts case reference analytical method, which involves interpretive and descriptive approach to selected case study. To situate this study within unambiguous theoretical perspective, this study adopts Albert Bandura's 'Social Learning Theory'. Hence, our hypothesis is that a properly structured and sustained conscious application of Nigerian video films as a medium of strengthening of the appeal in Nigerian indigenous languages such as Igbo would significantly enhance the preservation.

Keywords: Igbo Language, Nigerian Video Films, Nollywood, Preservation, Strengthening

1. Introduction: Thematic Synopsis and Review of Relevant Perspectives

Language according to Ifeanyi Odiye and Ifeoma Odiye is part of ethnic identity, therefore "it should be handled seriously" because "the people who lose their language have lost their identity" (86). This places language as that medium through which people express their culture, as well as share and propagate thoughts, knowledge, feelings, emotions, and convictions. In line with this view, Odiye and Odiye observe that "language is an indispensable tool for human communication and national development" thus, "most human activities make use of language" and supposedly "man is not complete without language" (86). Echoing the above sentiment Taye Olaifa contends that "there is hardly any human activity that does not make use of language" therefore, "there can never be development in a society without language" (23). Clearly, Olaifa is of the view that every human society is expected to accord a very high priority to language to assure its preservation and appeal because of its enormous importance. Similarly, Julie Amberg and Deborah Vause observe that language "reflect both the individual characteristics of a person, as well as, the beliefs and practices of his or her community" (1). Furthering, Amberg and Vause observe that language is foremost, a means of communication, and communication almost always takes place within some sort of social context (2). Hence, they are of the view that an effective communication requires an understanding and recognition of the connections between a language and the people who use it (Amberg and Vause, 2). They argue that social context is a major factor that drives our language choices, and in their view:

We make decisions every day, or have decisions made about us by other people, based on the language we use. We frequently evaluate a person's education, socioeconomic level, background, honesty, friendliness, and numerous other qualities by how that person speaks. And when we want to make a particular impression on someone else, we consciously choose our language, just as we choose our hair styles or clothing (Amberg and Vause, 3).

Again they maintain that "language is integrally intertwined with our notions of who we are on both the personal and the broader societal levels" (Amberg and Vause, 3). Thus, they contend that "when we use language, we communicate our individual thoughts, as well as the cultural beliefs and practices of the communities of which we are a part: our families, social groups, and other associations" (Amberg and Vause, 3). Assessing the flagging state of Igbo language, Chukwuma Azuonye observes that, though Igbo is the language of a demographic majority, and one of the twelve official languages of Nigeria, it has suffered significant decline (64). Azuonye maintains that though Igbo language projects culture and worldview which promote fecundity and

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the raising of large families, it is one of the seriously endangered languages of the world (64). Azuonye again, contends that Igbo language “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” (64). In line with Azuonye’s perspective, we add that the most manifest pointers, suggesting the gradual demise of a language, includes the declining speaker competence, and the lack of appeal to converse and communicate through it, especially by the youth, who are ancestrally indigenous to that language. This situation Azuonye observes, in reference to the declining speaker competence of majority of Igbo speakers could be linked to:

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 meta-linguistic instruments on the language (65).

In accord with Azuonye’s position on the flagging state of Igbo language, Frederick Chidozie Ogbalu affirms that “[...] the period from 1929 to 1961 was a blank period in Igbo literary history” (10). This according to Victor Manfredi resulted from the divisive politics of rival Christian missionaries operating in Igbo land in the colonial era, which encouraged an impasse early in this century from which the Igbo language has never recovered (21). Manfredi’s position is that “the blockage of Igbo literacy reflects 150 years’ politicization of the Igbo lexicon by state and missionary projects” (3). The supposition of the scholarly works reviewed for this study is that the advent of colonialism in Africa and Nigeria precisely, marked the beginning of the dwindling and nose-diving fortunes of indigenous Nigerian languages. The coming of the British and English speaking missionaries in large numbers to the southern part of Nigeria as from 1842 brought up the question of a language to adopt for communication between the indigenous population and the guest. Consequently, the education Ordinances and Codes of 1882, 1896, 1918 and 1926 were enacted for English language to be used internally for training of the badly needed man power to man the fledging government and religious services of both the colonial masters and their missionary counterparts (Obinna, 2010). Overtime, this policy succeeded so well that interest in language education in the country shifted substantially away from the indigenous languages towards English, the language of the masters. Proof of this was that, first, pupils and their parents gradually, formed the opinion, which is regrettably still widely held even today, that it was financially more rewarding to study English than any of the indigenous languages; second, certification became conditional upon passing English; and finally, the various governments in the country from the colonial times till Nigeria’s attainment of political independence in 1960, rarely felt that they had any duty to promote the study of the indigenous languages, whereas they considered themselves obligated to encourage and even enforce the study of English (Awobuliyi, 1996). Thus, the vernacular/indigenous languages including Igbo which is the focal point of this study were rejected and relegated to the background. Hence, the UNESCO report on endangered indigenous languages (as cited in Odinye and Odinye) says that “the Igbo language faces the risk of extinction in the next 50 years if nothing is done to revive the language”. Based on this statement, it becomes necessary that all media be employed to salvage the language including video films.

Hence, among other efforts being championed by concerned groups and individuals towards reversing the dwindling fortunes of Igbo language, the efforts of Nigerian filmmakers within Nollywood industry have continued to receive significant scholarly attention. In a brief overview of Nollywood, we summarize by noting that the Nigerian film industry dates back to late 1960s. Nonetheless, it was in the 1990s that Nollywood began its rise to recognition all over the world (Giwa, 1). Thus, before this time, filmmaking was largely propelled pre-1960s by government owned television stations which were first established by regional governments and subsequently by most of the Nigerian federating states. The steady growth of film industry in Nigeria was largely at this period propelled by the law that limits and regulates foreign programme content in Nigerian television telecast (Asogwa, et al 2015). Consequently, this law invariably paved way for the local popular theatre to contribute towards television content in cities such as Lagos to fill the void occasioned by the reduced foreign content as necessitated by the law. This reality propelled a good number of stakeholders to earnestly begin the packaging and distribution process of the existing local popular theatre productions in film format (Asogwa, et al 2015). This process gradually grew into an informal filmmaking and selling business in major commercial cities in Nigeria. Subsequently, as the Nigerian government began to appreciate the birth of a new industry, provisions were made to sponsor some the practitioners to take technical film courses in America and Europe in a bid to further the growth of the industry through enhanced local content. However, whereas the returnee trainees began to include their input towards the growth of the filmmaking, the effect of market liberalization began to stifle the modest gains recorded in the drive to build an indigenous filmmaking industry. Consequently, government owned media outfits began to witness a steep decline in government subvention, because recession has begun to

take effect on the entire Nigerian TV industry, which resulted in retrenchments and reduced attempts to make more films. This hard-time brought about the search for a cost effective medium of filmmaking, thus the shift from celluloid to reversal film stock and subsequently video tapes. It was in this period, that the resolve by an Igbo business man Kenneth Nnebue to experiment in filmmaking with video recorder and video tapes, resulted in a widely acclaimed as well as successful Nollywood trailblazing home-video, *Living in Bondage* in 1992. Nnebue's effort became an instant hit and Nigerian filmmaking took a new turn to greatness, which contributed in no small measure towards the emergence of the brand Nollywood. Worthy of note, Nnebue experimented in *Living in Bondage* with Igbo language as the medium of expression, and this leads us to briefly examine the factors that theoretically instigate the preference of one language over others in filmmaking. There are supposedly factors that propels the choice of a given language over the other in the making of films, just as there are crucial reasons why in any given situation people choose to communicate in a given language amongst others. Thus, this study looks at two major factors which could be viewed as the key reasons why Nigerian filmmakers may decide to make their films in a specific language, particularly Igbo language. These factors are conscious business minded driven calculations to produce films which are targeted at specific consumers who are in the least drawn to Nigerian films made in languages other than Igbo, and secondly, conscious effort to contribute towards the drive to enhance the strengthening and preservation of Igbo language. In this regard, this study analyzes how the two Nollywood films selected for this study, subsumes these factors mentioned above. Likewise, we shall examine the contexts of the realities which hinder the optimal achievement of the apparent gains of the conscious drive indicated above. To locate clearly this study's focused contexts and point of views; we attempt to contextualize the defining theme of this study 'language preservation and strengthening' by underpinning our analytical nuances and thematic trajectories through an exploratory review of Albert Bandura's social learning theory.

1.2. Brief Synopsis of Case Study and Theoretical Point-of-View

In line with Albert Bandura's social learning theory which focuses on human thought processes, the perspective on social cognitive theory indicates that individuals learn from observation and that learning is enhanced significantly if an individual identifies substantially with role model with whom he identify. Looking at Albert Bandura's social learning theory, we can infer that the core ingredient of his postulation "places special emphasis on the important roles played by vicarious, symbolic, and self-regulating process" in human learning dynamics (2). Thus Bandura contends that "man's superior cognitive capacity is another factor that determines, not only how he will be affected by his experiences, but the future direction his actions may take" (2). Consequently, Bandura's conceptualization on his social learning theory explains human actions as well as behaviour in terms of continuous inter-dependent interaction between cognitive and environmental influences. In relation to language learning process, Bandura's theory suggests that "in the social learning system, new pattern of behaviour can be acquired through direct experience or by observing the behaviour of others" (3). Furthering, Bandura observes that "within the framework of social learning theory, reinforcement primarily serves informative and incentive functions, although it also has response strengthening capabilities" (3). In relation to this study, the emphasis on adoption of Igbo language in video film productions becomes cultural projection or representation which is intended to have a positive impact on the target audience. This is supposedly intended to ultimately propel the strengthening and preservation of the language over time. This study employs case reference analysis as its preferred analytical approach. In doing this, the researchers adhered to relevance and content in selecting the films for this study.

The case study, Zeb Ejiro's *Nneka the Pretty Serpent* is about a woman who had delay in child bearing and as a result of desperation consults the river goddess for help, at which point she makes a pledge to dedicate the child that will result from the benevolence of the goddess to the goddess. Afterwards, she gave birth to a girl, and named her Nneka. This child grew up, exhibiting mystic powers which she channelled towards destructive tendencies. This results to the loss of the entire household of Chief Ogbonna, ruining of Tony and other killings she orchestrated in a bid to fulfil her evil propensity. This continued until the moment of truth caught up with her. In the selected film *Ode- Eshi* directed by Sunday Nnajiude, focus is on the life of Ekpechi, a treacherous wicked and cruel man who acquires mystical powers for self protection as well as to harm humans that he so desires. Motivated by jealousy and greed, Ekpechi mystically terminates the lives of many individuals in the community as well as rendering many incapacitated. Thus, any one that stood up to him becomes a target of immediate elimination. In his treachery and diabolical intent, he is projected as extreme, exemplified when his children became affected, he felt no qualms in eliminating his wife for the fear of been exposed. His ungodly acts came to a halt when he encounters the priest through his biggest antagonist, his niece and that day marked the end of his existence.

1.3. Igbo Language in Nigerian Video Films and its Question

Although the producers of the selected films made an appreciable attempt at the use of Igbo language in these

productions, which is to say that one could identify some of the challenges of the use of Igbo language in them. Firstly, both films appeared over dependent on English words for sentence formation and completion. This often is referred to as “Engligbo” which the actors indulge in mostly in both films. In *Nneka the Pretty Serpent*, in the scene where Nneka was on call to Chief Ogbonna, she said: “*anyway Chief Ogbonna, adirom interested na lunch gi.*” This expression is translated in English as “anyway Chief Ogbonna, I’m not interested in your lunch.” In another scene, where Chief Ogbonna’s wife was confronting her husband over his affair with Nneka, she said: “*Ya odim ka m were gi skwizie.*” This expression, translated in English is, “I feel like squeezing you.” Similarly, in *Ode-Eshi*, this manner of expression is pervasive. Ekpechi in the scene where he was accosted by Aguma over his treacherous acts on his late brother’s family said: “*Aguma bu late entry.*” This expression translated in English is, ‘Aguma is late entry.’ Ekpechi’s threat to Aguma in the same scene led to fisticuffs which caused Aguma to lose his footwear and in a bid to retrieve it he said: “*Nyem slippers m.*” This translated in English is, ‘Give me my slippers’. In the meeting called by the council of village elders which sanctioned Ekpechi, he said: “*Ndi nze na ozo, nalum one thousand.*” This translated in English reads, ‘The Nze and Ozo council collected one thousand from me.’ In addition, non adoption and inconsistency in the use of central Igbo (Igbo *izugbe*) by the actors in their dialogue is another challenge that is quite obvious in the films under study. Even though this reflects the multiplicity of dialects in Igbo language, which goes a long way to help other viewers of Igbo extraction who may be estranged to these dialects to get acquainted with them, there is need to create a clearly defined direction and purpose for language use in any film production. If the adoption of Igbo language in a production is to showcase the diversity of dialects, the multi-dialectic use can be permitted but when otherwise, it goes a long way to deny the film the necessary cohesion and appeal. In both films, there is evident pervasive random and rampant application of multiple Igbo language dialects. Chinyere in *Ode-Eshi* delivers her dialogue in the Owerri dialect throughout the film whereas her mother, her uncle Ekpechi and brother conversed in Onitsha dialect. Again this challenge is also noticeable in the speeches during the village council meeting in *Ode-Eshi* where Ude delivers his dialogue in a different dialect which is not the same with that of Ekpechi who were by the plot of the film supposed to have originated from and domicile in the same village. Furthermore, faulty sub-titling which apparently occur because of incorrect translation no doubt takes away significant shine from the entire film. Thus, strengthening and preservation of Igbo language through video films goes beyond making films in Igbo language for mainly Igbo audience only. Rather it involves making such films for wider audience who arguably depend on the sub-title to flow with the message of such films. Again, in both films, there are incidents of delayed sub-titling. An example of these occurrences is the instance in *Nneka the Pretty Serpent* in the scene where Chief Ogbonna’s wife said: ‘*si n’ebe a puo*’ and the sub-title came moments later when the scene was about to be concluded. Another evident challenge is the unhealthy and unnecessary adoption of alien concepts above local ones or heritage in making of local language based films. This is what Chinua Achebe (1972) refers to as a ‘crisis of the soul’. Lamenting Achebe thinks that though ‘we have been subjected’, equally ‘we have subjected ourselves too to this period during which we have accepted everything local or native as inferior.’ Thus the problem of magnification and adoption of alien concepts above local ones has led to the relegation of indigenous languages such as Igbo language. Again, the lack of space for translators trained in Igbo language in Nollywood is a challenge. Hence, there is insufficient or complete absence of expert translators who would naturally be saddled with the job of brushing-up the actors on proper Igbo language speaking skills as well as contributing as expert guide to the copy editors, who shoulder the responsibility of proof-reading of the film scripts and the infusing of sub-title in the films.

1.4. The Way Forward and Conclusion

Illuminating on the reasons for the deliberate effort towards language preservation Azuonye reflects that “the question has sometimes been posed if Igbo, one of the three major languages of Nigeria, is an endangered language” (41). In response to this Azuonye explains that:

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. (41)

However, Azuonye notes that the realities of dislocation and adulteration of Igbo language to the point that its purity and originality appears to diminish are the focal points of concern, hence he explains:

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 (51).

Though Azuonye’s plausibility is noteworthy, his observation that Igbo language is undergoing forced syncretism as a result of some influences such as globalization, colonial and neo-colonial pressures can be viewed from other perspectives. Thus, it is reasonable to note that what is happening to Igbo language can be attributable to the concept of language evolution, which regardless of the fervent intervention is inevitable. Again, the realities of human intermingling, migration and marriages, in line with this study’s perspective on the

concept of language evolution, will inevitably encourage in varying degrees the conscious inclusions and assimilation of shades and nuances of bits and pieces of other dialects and languages into Igbo language. Thus the focus should be on methodology and processes of preserving and enhancing and not debate on the pristine essence of Igbo language.

The development and strengthening of Igbo language through video films can be done successfully only when video film producers of Igbo origin begin to set their priorities right. Those interested in producing in English should do so, while some who are interested in making films in Igbo language should do so tenaciously with devotion and dedication in order to leave a strong language legacy for the up-coming generation. Nigerian film producers interested in making films in Igbo language are encouraged to have a change of mindset whereby they begin to magnify their own local heritage appropriately. This will make the language heritage appealing to the up-coming generations who will be left with no other option than to adopt it as well. The dependency on English language for sentence formation and completion in films of Igbo language as a medium of expression can be addressed by the employment of well trained Igbo language scholars as language assistants. These individuals will be saddled with the responsibility of brushing up the language skills of the actors who are found to be deficient in use of Igbo language by taking them through pre-production language classes. Again, these Igbo language experts will assist the script writers and the editing crew. Also expert Igbo language translators should be employed to tackle the apparent inconsistency in the application of Igbo language dialectics in the delivery of dialogues by the characters. Again, the state governments (especially those of the south-east) need to do everything possible within their reach to create an enabling environment that will discourage the alienation of proper Igbo language application in Igbo language films. This can be achieved through facilitation of adequate research grants and funds to these film practitioners for the development of local content, while film producers should be funded to produce top quality films in Igbo language. The funding of productions by both government and private sectors targeted towards development and strengthening of Igbo language will not only encourage these producers to continue, but it will wipe out the risk of not being able to recover money invested in such laudable ventures. The problem of viability can be solved through good sub-title in these movies as interpretable device for general understanding of a wider audience. This calls for proper and careful work to be done in the aspect of sub-titling as the audience members of other ethnic origins may overtime begin to take interest in learning Igbo language through watching these video films. When such occurs and become frequent, it becomes an added value to the course of strengthening and preservation of the language beyond the ethnic boundaries. This study has established that Nigerian video films can be used as tools for strengthening and preservation of Igbo language which is reflected in the study of the video films used for analysis. This study pin-point nuances of efforts required and encumbrances that beset the use of Igbo language in Nigeria video films. The purpose of highlighting the challenges is not to deny the progress, which would be an intellectual incongruity; rather the aim is to lay the basis for further and future progress in the use of video films as medium of preserving and strengthening Igbo language. This is because as a reference media, video films render the language accessible to all class of viewers and as an educational material for the younger generation especially those in Diaspora.

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