

Language Planning and Literacy Development:  
An African Example\*

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1. Introduction

Literacy concerns have existed in Africa since the missionaries and colonialists first introduced Western religion and culture. In fact, the earliest language policies implanted were a result of literacy programs in the native languages. For missionaries, literacy held one common function--conversion and soul-saving. While the spread of Christianity left cultures with divergent language policies, colonial policies as reflected in the educational systems encouraged negative attitudes toward native-language literacy. To be successful, literacy development in cultures sharing this history must deal with: (1) current cultural attitudes toward the native language which have resulted from past colonial policies, and (2) future cultural attitudes toward the functional role of the native language. The conceptual framework for language planning to be used here is based on Prague school language theory (Garvin and Mathiot 1956). This framework holds certain implications for literacy development which will be examined in this paper for one particular ethnic group in Nigeria, the Igbo.

In this paper, the term "literacy" will be treated in two ways: (1) in a cultural sense as a move away from the isolationism of folk culture which relies only on spoken language to carry out its functions, and (2) in a linguistic sense as a beginning degree of language development in which a consistent writing system based on sound linguistic principles is accepted by the cultural community and serves some function in it.

Using Prague school standard language theory as a base, the conceptual framework of Garvin views language standardization as a matter of degree on a continuum which has as its polar points folk speech and standard language. Standard language is defined as "a codified form of a language accepted by and serving as a model to a larger speech community" (Garvin and Mathiot 1956). Three sets of criteria are used to evaluate the degree of standardization: (1) the function of the language in the culture which includes the following functions: unifying, separatist, participatory, prestige, and frame-of-reference; (2) the attitudes of the speech community toward the language which correspond to the functions just mentioned: language loyalty, desire to participate, pride, and awareness of a norm; and (3) the intrinsic structural properties of the language: flexible stability and intellectualization.<sup>1</sup> Literacy development is viewed as an incipient degree

of standard language development in which certain functions, attitudes and structural properties operate to a lesser degree than for standard language.

Interrelated with the linguistic continuum is Robert Redfield's (1962) notion of a cultural continuum ranging from folk culture to urban culture. Redfield's point of reference was an idealized folk culture which included such characteristics as: isolation, homogeneity of members, only oral-based communication, handcraft as opposed to mass production of items, use of tradition to solve problems, kinship-based behavior, and the use of sacred sanctions as opposed to secular sanctions to control moral conduct. In Redfield's framework different aspects of a culture can be examined to determine the degree of urbanization or departure from the folk culture. Since the degree of urbanization is viewed here as closely related to the possible degree of language standardization which can be achieved, both are major variables in literacy development.

For those cultures which share the results of colonialist exploitation, where the colonialist language was imposed for political and economic reasons, certain attitudes toward the native language still prevail today. In Nigeria where English has often received more emphasis than native languages and is given more prestige even at the local level, literacy development will involve changing cultural attitudes and values toward the native language. The importance of the major theoretical variables of language planning mentioned previously can best be illustrated if applied to a cultural group, the Igbo of Nigeria.

The Igbo language is one of over 200 languages spoken in Nigeria and is the ethnic group for over ten per cent of the total population of Nigeria, according to the 1963 Census. The Igbo language is also spoken by many non-native speakers who live and work in the eastern part of Nigeria. The former division into regional administrative units by colonialists established a language pattern within three major regions in Nigeria whereby the language of the majority in each region was used for inter-ethnic communication--Hausa in the Northern Region, Yoruba in the Western Region and Igbo in the Eastern Region. Nigeria is now divided into twelve states. Igbo speakers comprise the sole cultural group of one state, the East Central State.

## 2. Cultural Urbanization

In applying Redfield's notion to the Igbo community, it becomes readily apparent that cultural change may not penetrate equally to all sections of a cultural group or result in the same degree of urbanization for all aspects of a culture. The strong desire for modernization made Igbo culture highly susceptible to the forms of urbanization brought by missionaries in the form of Western education and by colonialists in the philosophy of capitalism and a money-based economy. The characteristics of the culture, e.g. egalitarianism, individually achieved status, and material interest allowed easy assimilation to the Western urban concepts of (1) open-competition in the economic sphere,

which resulted in the struggle for acquisition of money and private property; and (2) the use of education for class mobility, individual achievement, and monetary advancement (Nzimiro 1971:165-179). The realization that monetary advancement could be achieved in the urban centers resulted in a mass migration from agriculturally-oriented rural homelands to urban centers within the Igbo speaking area and all over Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> In the economic sense of urbanization, the Igbos achieved a high degree of urbanization and were often the vanguard of urban economy in many sections of Nigeria.

Despite this degree of urbanization, the Igbo urban dwellers maintained a high degree of folk culture. They upheld ties based on kinship and tradition with their rural local communities by forming Improvement Unions. These unions are still prevalent in urban areas throughout Nigeria and in foreign lands. Their function is to provide a link between rural, folk-like culture and urban culture by welcoming new arrivals and helping them to adjust to the urban environment; by carrying on social functions in the traditional manner; and by solving problems of the members using conventional, folk means. In addition, they also function as a means of improving the rural life of the communities with which the union members identify. Unions provide a means by which the lineage structure and folkways of folk culture can survive and grow in a highly urban environment.

One other aspect of culture which must be treated in any type of language development is the political base involved. Past attempts in literacy development of the Igbo language have not treated this factor of culture well and consequently have not been successful. Traditionally Igbo culture, unlike many other cultural groups in Nigeria, lacked hierarchical centralization in which a top figure exercised political dominance over large areas or populations. Although the political system had a high degree of stability and democracy, it was decidedly decentralized for the culture as a whole. Since the political structure was community-oriented, each village group functioned and valued a high degree of autonomy (Olisa 1971:16-29). During the time of Nigerian independence, centralization was introduced to the political structure in the form of political parties such as the N.C.N.C. (National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons). Today the problem of centralization exists again in the form of a power struggle between provinces. Two particular provinces, Onitsha and Owerri, regard themselves as rivals. While the former group regard themselves as richer and more educated, the latter represent a large majority of the Igbo speaking population. This political aspect of the culture must be dealt with if some degree of standardization of Igbo is to be attained.

### 3. Language Standardization

Fundamental to successful literacy development are a frame-of-reference or norm and an awareness of an established norm. Attempts at achieving acceptance of norms has not been successful in Igbo literacy development. The failure of past attempts may

be due to language planning principles and political means deemed unacceptable to the culture.

The frame-of-reference for literacy includes two basic components: (1) an orthography and (2) an acceptable spoken norm on which it is based. The missionaries were the first to devise an orthography for the Igbo language. The two major groups--Protestants and Catholics--each had their own particular orthography and printed Bibles in it. The primary differences were manifested in the vowels. In the 1900's the Protestant missions adopted a six vowel system, the Old Church Orthography.<sup>3</sup> Later in 1929 Westermann, who was hoping to institute a unified orthography for all West African languages, suggested an eight vowel system in place of a six-vowel one. This system, the New (Africa) Orthography, was accepted by the International Institute of African Languages and Culture and later adopted by Catholic schools. Although this orthography was based on a more sound linguistic description of Igbo, it had the disadvantage of introducing three uncommon graphemes: [ɛ], [θ], and [ɔ]. Each orthography soon became a symbol of religious antagonisms which the missionaries had instilled in the Igbo society. In 1961 the Onwu Commission, appointed by the Eastern Nigerian Government to resolve the orthography problem, produced an eight vowel orthography, which used dots below certain graphemes to distinguish three of the four pairs of contrasting phonemes. Most books printed in Igbo today advertise the Official Onwu Orthography.

While the Onwu Orthography is free from religious attachment and accepted by the culture, it is lacking a stated means of dealing with tone, which often serves a lexico-semantic and grammatical function in Igbo.<sup>4</sup> Currently, tone marking is either left out completely or done according to the system which the writer sets up for himself. A policy regarding tone-marking based on those elements which are ambiguous without the tone needs to be formulated in order to make intelligibility easier for the reader.

The second major impediment to literacy development in the Igbo language has been the absence of a definable spoken dialect or norm which would be acceptable to all members of the culture as the norm. Historically, two attempts have been made to solve this problem--Union Igbo and Central Igbo. Union Igbo was the "Esperanto" of Igboland. It was created by the European missionaries who intended to make the Bible available to all Igbo speakers by artificially synthesizing the vocabulary and sound system of five different dialects into one norm as represented in their Bible. This brainchild of Archdeacon Denis, created in 1913, failed (Westermann 1929:337-351). After carrying out a limited dialect survey, two linguists, Margaret Green and Ida Ward, suggested another norm for Igbo--Central Igbo. This dialect covered all the dialects spoken in the former Old Owerri Province, the most densely populated area in Igboland. Unfortunately, this area was regarded with low prestige by the speakers of the Onitsha dialect where the few printing presses were located. Central Igbo did not become the

norm because of the low prestige attitudes attached to it and also because of the rivalry between the two major provinces. Most books for use in Owerri schools were printed in Onitsha dialect until a few years ago.

Currently attempts are being made to standardize elements in Igbo language. The Society to Promote Igbo Language and Culture [Otu Iwelite Asusu Na Omenala Igbo] led by Mr. F. C. Ogbalu has recently made several specific recommendations on standardization to the Igbo Language Standardization Committee for developing a Common Igbo.<sup>5</sup> Since this attempt to develop an acceptable norm is led by the members of the culture themselves rather than outsiders as in former attempts, it has a better chance of success. Defining a norm will probably become even more important within the next few years, since the 1976 plan for Free-Primary Education will bring millions of youngsters into contact with written Igbo. The fact that primary school teachers are now transferred at frequent intervals to different areas of the state would also seem to increase the need for an acceptable norm.

While the codified norm mentioned above serves an objective function and as a measure of correctness, it must also serve three symbolic functions to some degree: the unifying function, the separatist function, and the prestige function. The frame-of-reference chosen for literacy development must serve as a link between speakers of different dialects of Igbo and thus contribute to uniting them into a single speech community (Garvin and Mathiot 1956). At the same time it must serve to separate this speech community from speakers of other languages. In the Igbo society both of these functions must compete with the participatory function which English offers. English functions as a key to political power, educational achievement, economic mobility in urban centers all over Nigeria, and international participation. In short, English allows participation beyond the rural communities. The desire to participate in both nation-state and the international sphere has resulted in a very low degree of language loyalty to the Igbo language, especially if it is written. Illiteracy is commonly defined as the inability to read and write English. Those most literate in English are often least literate in Igbo. This is primarily due to the over-emphasis of English in the educational system and the under-emphasis of Igbo. Most literary works by Igbo writers are written in English or some variety of it, since the participatory function offers the writers more advantages: they gain a more international reading public, more possibilities to have their works published, and as a result more monetary profit.

In order for literacy development to occur, current attitudes of language loyalty to written Igbo must be changed. This can best happen if aligned with an increase in cultural consciousness and identity. Since the Civil War ended in 1970, there has been an increase in cultural consciousness among the Igbos, more interest in studying Igbo cultural heritage, developing the Igbo language and literature, and concentrating

more efforts on economic development in Igbo areas. The Society to Promote Igbo Language and Culture centered at Alvan Ikoku College, Owerri with branches in all parts of the country has been especially vociferous in promoting Igbo language. Since 1970 the Society has accomplished the following (Ogbalu 1975): (a) prepared an Igbo syllabus for secondary and teacher training colleges; (b) organized annual Seminars and Refresher Courses for teachers on Igbo language; (c) convinced the major universities to offer either Degree Courses or Electives in Igbo; (d) encouraged scholars in Institutes of Higher Learning to write textbooks and literature in Igbo; (e) made recommendations for the development of Common Igbo to the Igbo Language Standardization Committee; and (f) got the Federal Military Government to recognize Igbo as one of three regional languages in Nigeria to be developed into a regional lingua franca.

Igbo speakers in the United States have also taken a step in the direction of culture consciousness as symbolized by a journal published at the State University of New York, New Paltz, New York. This journal, *The Conch*, began as the official organ of the Okigbo Friendship Society with the aim "to help dispel unnecessary ignorance and unacceptable distortions and so contribute towards an improvement of the Igbo image." (*The Conch* 1971). The time is now ripe for a concentrated and organized effort to develop the Igbo language, including literacy development.

Although Igbo functions as a symbol of prestige in the oral media and individual speakers take great pride in their ability to use proverbs accurately, make speeches, and lead dances with a creative use of Igbo, written Igbo has a very low prestige function for the majority, even for the monolingual, non-literate speakers of the language. The cultural attitudes toward written Igbo need to become more positive; pride toward written Igbo needs to be encouraged using all available means so that literacy in Igbo will maintain a higher degree of prestige. An effort was made in the fifties to encourage the development of Igbo literature by offering prizes for novels written in Igbo, such as the Margaret Wrong Prize which produced *Omenuko* by Pita Nwana and *Ala Bingo: Akuko aroro aro* by D. N. Archara, and the Christian Council of Nigeria which awarded first prize to *Ebubedike na Igwekala* by Clifford Ugochukwu (Anafulu 1971:181-204). Formerly, a daily newspaper, *The Eastern Observer*, was published in English and Igbo in Onitsha Province. Currently a quarterly magazine is published almost totally in Igbo, *Qnyora*, and another produced by the Department of Igbo Language and Culture at Alvan Ikoku College, Owerri, will begin in June 1975.

In education, more attempts need to be made to raise the cultural attitude of pride toward the Igbo language. Primary school teachers are a primary channel by which pride toward Igbo language and culture can be increased. Teacher training colleges need to introduce teachers to better methods of teaching Igbo language and literature and also stress the importance of positive attitudes toward the language.

In the Western State, the Experimental Primary School Project, sponsored by the University of Ife, is attempting to foster the attitude of pride toward Yoruba by giving the language a higher prestige function than found in most of the educational system. Yoruba is used as the medium of instruction for six years and English is studied only as a class subject. Since formal education holds a high status in the Igbo community, the only way to change attitudes toward written Igbo may be to change the prestige function in the educational system as the experimental project mentioned previously is attempting to do.

A third set of criteria important to the language standardization continuum include the intrinsic structural properties of intellectualization and flexible stability. Flexible stability as explained by Mathesius of the Prague school refers to stability in codification and flexibility to allow for modification as the culture changes (Garvin and Mathiot 1956). For incipient literacy development, a codified norm must be constructed which includes provisions both for a systematic expansion of the lexicon and a systematic expansion of syntactic possibilities. The Society to Promote Igbo Language and Culture has proposed that English loan words be adapted phonemically to the Igbo sound system as much as possible, e.g. [bolu] for [ball] or [roketi] for [rocket].

The goal of intellectualization as defined by Havránek is "to make possible precise and rigorous statements" (Garvin and Mathiot 1956). For literacy development, some degree of intellectualization will be needed for increased terminological precision. If literacy is aligned with community development and improvement, techniques will be needed for forming lexical items to attach to the new concepts and objects introduced into the culture, e.g. agricultural implements and procedures, disease prevention, etc. New terms will be needed for new workaday technology. Dealing with numbers above one-hundred was cumbersome and difficult in Igbo; at the 1972 Language and Standardization Seminar, the Society to Promote Igbo Language and Culture agreed on an improved numeral system with separate words for one-hundred, one-thousand, one-million and one-billion.

#### 4. Conclusion

Literacy development is an incipient degree of language standardization which is closely linked to the cultural notion of urbanization. This paper has attempted to examine language planning correlates which are vital to successful literacy development by treating one cultural group in Africa. In the theoretical framework used in this paper, literacy development requires a precise notion of the urbanization continuum as it relates to culture and the standardization continuum as it relates to cultural attitudes, language functions, and structural properties of the language.

#### Footnotes

\*I am grateful to Paul Garvin for many discussions on language planning theory.

<sup>1</sup>The criteria for measuring the degree of language standardization are related in the following way:

- |                                      |                          |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| A. Functions                         | B. Attitudes             |
| 1. Frame-of-reference. . .           | 1. Awareness of norm     |
| 2. Unifying and Separatist . . . . . | 2. Language loyalty      |
| vs.                                  |                          |
| 3. Participatory . . . . .           | 3. Desire to participate |
| 4. Prestige . . . . .                | 4. Pride                 |
- C. Intrinsic Structural Properties:
1. Flexible stability
  2. Intellectualization

<sup>2</sup>The growth of urban population in Igbo speaking areas from 1953 (Nzimiro 1971:165-179) and 1970 estimates (*Europe Yearbook: 1974*):

city	1953	1970
Onitsha	76,921	193,793
Aba	57,787	155,720
Port Harcourt	71,634	213,443
Enugu	62,764	164,582

<sup>3</sup>The three different orthographies used for Igbo treated vowels in a variety of ways:

Old Church Orthography 1900's	New/Africa Orthography 1929-1961	Official/Onwu Orthography 1961-present
i	i	i
-	e	i
e	ε	e
a	a	a
u	u	u
-	θ	u
o	o	o
ȯ	o	ȯ

<sup>4</sup>Tone serves to distinguish lexical units which are segmentally identical. For example:

ákwà = clothes	(high-low)
àkwá = egg	(low-high)
àkwa = bridge or bed	(low-low)
ákwa = cry	(high-high)

or

íbú = to carry	(high-downstep)
íbù = to be fat	(high-low)

Tone is the only distinguisher of certain grammatical elements,

e.g. interrogative vs. affirmative where the tonal marking of the pronoun distinguishes between the two:

ó nà abyá = He is coming.  
 ò nà abyá = Is He coming?

<sup>5</sup>The Society has suggested that those elements common to all dialects be accepted as Common Igbo and that this be the foundation for a Standard Igbo. Those lexical units with slightly different pronunciations in vowels or consonants e.g. /okuku/ and /okoko/ should be accepted as Common Igbo. Those units with identical meanings but very different pronunciations should be accepted and employed as synonyms for "enrichment of the vocabulary and avoidance of monotony" (Ogbalu 1975:19-28). Regarding the vowel and consonantal dialectal variants, the Society recommended the following preferences:

Consonants

/h/ for /f/            /b/ for /w/  
 /r/ for /l/            /s/ for /sh/

Vowels

Because of the potential controversial area involved that might set back the attempts to begin a successful standardization of Igbo, the Society has delayed recommendations for the vowels. They did however suggest that verb-roots accept:  
 /a/ ~ /e/    for    /o/ ~ /ɔ/.

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