

Code-mixing among the Igbo speakers and the possible Solution

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Abstract

The aim of this work is to determine why majority of Igbo language speakers code-mix while verbally communicating with others in the Igbo language. This work analyses the effects of this syndrome on the Igbo language and proposes solutions to preserve this linguistic richness. We intend to put forward perspectives and recommendations for the future of this language in the face of code-mixing in a globalized world, where the survival of indigenous languages often depends on their ability to adapt while remaining faithful to their roots.

Keywords: *Code-mixing, hybrid expression, linguistic phenomenon, indigenous languages, faithful to their roots*

Introduction

In Igbo-land, south-east of Nigeria, the Igbo language, the third most widely spoken language in the country and one of the six languages promoted to the status of national languages, has a rich oral and written history. Until recently, it has remained the sole language of communication and instruction in the lower grades of primary school, particularly in rural areas. The Igbo, whose territory is densely populated, are the most educated ethnic group in Nigeria, with more than 90% of them enrolled at the primary level. The majority of children attend secondary school up to GCE Advanced level, and the inability of the numerous universities in the Igbo cultural area to meet the high regional demand has led many young people to pursue their studies in the Diaspora – a trend toward mobility that goes hand in hand with the erosion of language practice.

Emenanjo (1999) emphasizes that the Igbo language is faced with change related to modernity, where English dominates the fields of education, business and the media. According to him, this has led to a reduction in the everyday use of the Igbo language and the increasing adoption of code-mixing – a concept that refers to the alternation or combination of words, expressions or

phrases belonging to different languages in the same speech. Among the Igbos, this often takes the form of alternating between English and Igbo, resulting in a dialectal hybrid frequently referred to as *Engliigbo* or sometimes *Igbolish*, as exemplified by the following statements::

Alaịkịka m ifu this kind of thing.
(*I really love observing this kind of thing.*)

I ga-eje to that place ma i mee travel?
(*Will you go there when you travel?*)

Amagị m ihe i miniri by ụdị ihe i na-ekwu every time.
(*I don't know what you mean by always saying this.*)

Afuru m the girl yesterday mgbe o na-azu rice.
(*I saw the girl yesterday while she was purchasing rice.*)

In our study, we observed that this trend is not prevalent with speakers of other indigenous languages such as Yoruba or Hausa, or even among our neighboring francophone neighbours of Benin and Cameroun when using their indigenous languages. This tendency among the Igbo, although involuntary, diminishes the richness of the Igbo lexicon. Our objective in this work is to consider the study in its sociolinguistic context and to justify its importance. We analyse the effects of this phenomenon on the Igbo language and propose solutions to preserve this linguistic richness, in accordance with Bamgbose's (1991) call for "a proactive revitalisation of endangered African languages."

Code-mixing poses a threat to linguistic identity and the excessive use of English in informal settings in the country; it contributes to the weakening of the mother tongue and cultural identity of young people. Indeed, the young Igbo, who frequently switch between English and Igbo risk losing their deep connection to their language of origin. Since language is intimately linked to culture and values, the practice of code-mixing can lead to a loss of identity markers.

The impact of this phenomenon on identity manifests itself in the increasing dominance of English, which becomes a marker of social status. Those who favour English over Igbo may be perceived as more modern or more educated, which reinforces the marginalisation of the Igbo language in social and professional spheres. According to Okafor (2010), English, with its strong connotations of prestige, is slowly suppressing local languages such as Igbo, creating a generational divide.

Code-mixing is not simply a consequence of the internal dynamics of the language, but also results from several societal, cultural, and technological factors. We will examine the major factors that promote code-mixing among Igbo speakers

Globalisation

Globalisation has played a decisive role in the adoption of code-mixing among young Igbo. English, as an international language, has become the dominant language in many sectors, including education, business, and politics. According to Adegbija (2004), English is now the language of international communication, creating pressure on speakers of local languages such as Igbo to foster fluency in this language.

The dominance of English has reinforced the idea that to succeed in modern society, it is necessary to speak English, leading many Igbo to mix the two languages in their daily speech. This phenomenon remains particularly evident among young people.

Social media and modern technology have also fostered code-mixing. The influence of English is well pronounced on digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, where young people interact primarily in English. According to Okoro (2013), the Igbo youths are often exposed to a global digital environment, where English is the dominant language,

which pushes them to incorporate English words into their daily speech. The mass media, particularly television and radio also contribute to the spread of English among Igbo speakers. The English language broadcasts are widely consumed, and young people, often influenced by these media, are beginning to adopt English terms in their everyday vocabulary. This further facilitates code-mixing, as young people are confronted with a linguistic environment where English occupies a predominant space.

Social and cultural pressures

Social and cultural pressures also play a crucial role in the proliferation of code-mixing. The desire to integrate into social circles considered more modern or more educated pushes many young people to adopt English, sometimes to the detriment of their own languages. This phenomenon is reinforced by the stigmatisation of certain languages as “less prestigious” in certain contexts. According to Nwoye (2005), the use of English is often perceived as a sign of sophistication while the exclusive use of Igbo can be considered backward, especially in urban environments. Furthermore, parents, in an effort to ensure their children’s success in the modern world often encourage the learning of English at the expense of the local languages. This pressure is also reflected in the education system, where English is the language in the classroom. This linguistic hierarchy, which places English at the top, contributes to code-mixing among young people.

Social and cultural consequences of code-mixing among Igbo speakers

The phenomenon of code-mixing is not limited to linguistic effects, but also extends to significant social and cultural impacts. We examine the various consequences of code-mixing on social cohesion, intergenerational relations, cultural preservation and its influence on younger generations. Code-mixing has a profound effect on social cohesion within Igbo communities. The excessive introduction of English into daily communication can create a divide between the younger and older generations. As Obi (2011) points out, this linguistic divide leads to growing misunderstanding between generations, as younger people adopt linguistic patterns that seem more modern to them, while older people remain attached to a more traditional language. This social divide can result in a disconnection between young people and the community’s traditional values. Young people, influenced by Anglophone culture may have less interest in cultural practices and customs associated with the Igbo language, threatening the preservation of local culture and traditions.

One of the most worrying effects of code-mixing is the threat it poses to the Igbo culture. Language is intimately linked to culture, as it conveys ancestral stories, customs, and values. The widespread use of English, and code-mixing in particular, hinders the transmission of this cultural richness. According to Nnaji (2016):

Igbo is not just a language of communication, it is also a vehicle for the people’s traditions and beliefs. This has a direct impact on how young people perceive and understand their cultural heritage. The abbreviation or omission of certain traditional words in everyday conversations can lead to a loss of connection with history and ancestral practices.

Influence on youth identity

Code-mixing plays a major role in shaping the identity of Igbo youths, particularly in a context where they are often confronted with external influences such as globalisation, English medium

education, and the media. The use of English in social interaction can reinforce a sense of modern, urban identity, often to the detriment of Igbo and its values. As Akpoveta (2014) explains, young Igbo speakers who code-mix are likely to see their identities as partially Anglicised, due to the omnipresence of English on their daily lives. Language and culture are overshadowed by broader global influences.

Code-mixing can also affect interpersonal relationships within families and communities. In homes where parents primarily speak Igbo and children mix English with Igbo, misunderstandings can arise. Children may not understand fundamental aspects of their culture or feel disconnected from traditional family practices. In a broader context, excessive code-mixing can also lead to a reduction in linguistic conviviality in social gatherings, where pure Igbo is favoured. This can lead to a loss of dialogue between young people and older people, who prefer to express themselves in a more authentic Igbo.

Possible solutions to the phenomenon of code-mixing among Igbo speakers

Code-mixing among the Igbo speakers presents several consequences for the preservation of the language and culture. However, the solutions can be implemented to limit its impacts while allowing harmonious interaction between the languages. We explore possible strategies to reduce the phenomenon of code-mixing while preserving the Igbo language and encouraging linguistic co-existence that respects cultural values.

Strengthening education

One of the most effective solutions to combat code-mixing is to strengthen the teaching of the Igbo language both in schools and at homes. It is essential that children learn Igbo from a young age, not only as a mother tongue, but also as a means of communicating in formal settings. According to Eze (2012), formal and informal teaching of the Igbo language in schools and at home can curb the excessive use of English by giving young people a solid linguistic foundation in their mother tongue.

It is necessary for teachers to incorporate Igbo teaching techniques that highlight its distinctive features and expressive potential. The introduction of textbooks and curricula that encourage the use of Igbo in various contexts, such as business, politics, and science, could also help strengthen the language and combat its marginalization relative to English.

Promoting Cultural and traditional practices

The Igbo language is intrinsically linked to ancestral cultural practices and traditions. One solution to combat code-mixing is to promote these cultural practices, including ceremonies, festivals, dances and music while introducing young people to these practices.

The media play a vital role in the spread and normalisation of languages in society. To limit the phenomenon of code-mixing, the media, particularly television, radio, and digital platforms, must promote the use of Igbo in various contexts. According to Onuoha (2015), the Igbo language must be promoted in media productions, such as films programs and music, to demonstrate its richness and usefulness in contemporary society.

Local radio and television stations can offer educational programs, series, and shows in Igbo to encourage its use in modern contexts. Furthermore, young Igbo people must be encouraged to

use their language in their social media interactions, with awareness campaigns on the importance of preserving the Igbo language in an increasingly globalised world.

Practical activities through cultural schools, summer camps or community workshops can strengthen their connection to the language and their culture. Exposing young people to cultural events, where the use of Igbo is central can instill in them a sense of belonging and pride in their language. According to Uzoegwu (2017), transmitting culture through languages is a powerful way to strengthen linguistic identity and reduce the influence of foreign languages such as English on younger generations.

Collaboration between governments and communities

Governments must play a key role in implementing language policies that promote the use of Igbo in all aspects of social, economic and political life. A law mandating the use of Igbo in local administrative transactions as well as in interactions with public authorities could help strengthen its place in society. It is also essential to establish incentives to local businesses to use Igbo in their internal and external communications. The creation of scholarships and funds for linguistic research on Igbo as well as for the creation of cultural content would also be a way for governments and institutions to actively support the language.

Encouraging the use of Igbo in public and institutional spaces

Government and private institutions can also play a crucial role in encouraging the Igbo language in official documents, businesses, and public spaces. For example, the use of Igbo in local governments, on road signs, and in official documents could help increase its visibility and prestige. Furthermore, the introduction of Igbo into university curricula, not only as a subject but also as a medium of instruction in certain disciplines, can promote its status and encourage its use among students. This would demonstrate that Igbo can coexist with other modern languages without being subordinate to any.

Raising awareness of the importance of language preservation

It is essential to raise the awareness of the importance of preserving the Igbo language. Awareness campaigns, conducted through schools, the media and community forums, can help educate speakers about the dangers of excessive code-mixing and the need to preserve the purity of the language for future generations. These campaigns must emphasise that the language is a fundamental pillar of Igbo identity and culture and that its decline will result in a significant loss of cultural heritage.

Perspectives for the future of the Igbo language in the face of code-mixing

Language evolution is inevitable and Igbo is no exception. However, it is important to recognise that code-mixing should not necessarily be seen as a threat, but as a natural phenomenon of linguistic adaptation.

According to Okwudili (2018), a living language is one that is evolving. Code-mixing can be seen as an aspect of this evolution provided that the base language remains protected and continues to serve as the primary means of communication and identity.

Thus, rather than systematically oppose code-mixing, it is appropriate to encourage an evolution of Igbo that integrates external influences while preserving its specificities. For example, strategies can be put in place to enrich the Igbo language with English words while remaining faithful to its grammatical and syntactic structure.

Educational and cultural institutions play a central role in preserving languages in the face of code-mixing. Schools and universities must play an active role in offering appropriate programs to teach the language not only as an academic subject, but also as a tool for everyday communication. The implementation of Igbo language competitions, cultural activities, and language workshops in schools would be beneficial in encouraging its use among young people. Furthermore, universities could introduce courses and degrees in Igbo language teaching and learning and must also intensify their efforts to educate young people about the importance of the language and culture. Festivals, traditional ceremonies and film productions in Igbo can promote the use of the language in a modern and dynamic setting.

Role of digital media in promoting the Igbo language

Digital and social media platforms are powerful tools for reaching younger generations. Content creators, whether bloggers, influencers, or video producers, should use Igbo in their productions, incorporating elements of modern culture to attract young people. Creating digital contents in Igbo, such as podcasts, YouTube videos, and blogs, can help maintain interest in the language while allowing it to diversify. Mobile apps and educational games in Igbo could also be another avenue to explore to make language learning more engaging and interactive. The creation of digital dictionaries and glossaries for Igbo, as well as online transaction tools, could also help strengthen the use of the language in a globalized context.

Collaboration between governments and communities

Government must play a very prominent role in implementing language policies that promote the use of Igbo in aspects of social, economic and political life. A law mandating the use of Igbo in local administrative transactions, as well as in interactions with public authorities, could help strengthen its pace in society. It is also essential to establish incentives to encourage local businesses to use Igbo in their internal and external communications. The creation of scholarships and funds for linguistic research on Igbo, as well as for the creation of cultural content, could also be a way for governments and institutions to actively support the language.

Encourage the use of the Igbo language internationally

Another approach is to encourage the teaching and dissemination of the Igbo language internationally. The Igbo Diaspora, particularly in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other countries, can play a crucial role in promoting the language. Educational programs aimed at teaching Igbo to children in the universities, both national and overseas, could help to strengthen the language's position on the global stage. Schools and universities must play an active role by offering appropriate programs to teach the language not only as an academic subject, but also as a tool for everyday communication.

Practical recommendations

- **Youth Outreach:** Organize awareness campaigns in schools and through social media to inform young people about the benefits of using Igbo language.
- **Teacher Training:** Implement training programs for teachers to enable them to teach Igbo language in a modern and engaging way.
- **Government support:** Develop language policies that promote the use of Igbo in public administration and education.
- **Digital resource development:** Create apps, websites, and educational games in Igbo to make learning more interactive and engaging.

Conclusion

Code-mixing, though a natural phenomenon in a globalised society, poses risks to the preservation of a language and the culture. However, by implementing solutions such as improving language education, promoting the language in the media, promoting cultural practices and creating awareness of the importance of the language, it is possible to limit the impact of code-mixing and preserve the richness of such language for future generations.

Strategically, code-mixing can be seen as a constantly evolving linguistic dynamic. However, to ensure the future of the Igbo language and culture, it is crucial to strike a balance between modernization and the preservation of traditional values. Through concerted efforts between families, educational institutions, the media, and governments, it is possible to promote the Igbo language while welcoming external influences in a constructive and enriching manner.

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Annex A: Questionnaire

Questionnaire on the use of code-mixing among Igbo speakers

Instructions: This questionnaire is aimed at collecting information on the frequency and context of applying code-mixing among Igbo speakers. Kindly respond honestly to the questions. Answers will be treated as confidential.

How old are you?

- Less than 18 years
- 18-30 years
- 31-45 years
- 46 years and above

2. Where do you live?

- In urban area
 - In rural area
- 3. **In what situations do you use English with Igbo?**
 - At home
 - At school
 - At the work place
 - With social networks
 - Others (indicate) : _____
- 4. **With what frequency do you code-mix Igbo with English in your daily conversations?**
 - Very frequently
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
- 5. **Do you thin code-mixing constitutes a problem for the Igbo language?**
 - Yes
 - No
 - Not sure
- 6. **What do you think are the reasons for code-mixing among young Igbo speakers?**
 - Influence of the media
 - Need for modernity
 - Ease of communication
 - Others (indicate) : _____
- 7. **Do you agree with the idea that code-mixing could endanger the preservation of Igbo language?**
 - Yes
 - No
 - Not sure
- 8. **What efforts do you think should be made to encourage the exclusive use of Igbo language in daily conversations?**

Individual answer : _____

Annex B : Interview

Interview with an Igbo speaking respondent

Participant: Mr. Chijioke Okafor, 30 years, student and part-time worker

Question: You stated that you use English and Igbo in your conversations. How do you feel about that?

Response: Yes, I usually use English and Igbo, mostly with my friends and at my work place. At home, it is easier to use Igbo, but once I am with friends, it is quite often a mixture of the two. English seems more modern and sometimes some words in Igbo are a bit too long or difficult to pronounce,

Question: Do you think that this phenomenon affects the Igbo language and what remedy do you suggest?

Response: I believe so, because if we continue this way, the younger generation will really not know how to speak the Igbo language correctly. Even me, sometimes I discover that I speak better English than Igbo despite the latter being my mother tongue. I suggest a vigorous campaign of sensitization on the promotion of the Igbo language which will involve the government, the media, educational institutions and collaboration with local and international organizations.

Annex C: Results of the Study

Table 1: Distribution of responses from participants to the Questionnaire

Question	Responses Percentage (%)	
Age of participants		
Less than 18 years	5	10%
18-30 years	25	50%
31-45 years	15	30%
46 years and above	5	10%
Place of Residence		
Urban area	35	70%
Rural area	15	30%
Frequency of code-mixing		
Very frequently	20	40%
Sometimes	15	30%
Rarely	10	20%
Never	5	10%
Perception of code-mixing in Igbo		
Yes	25	50%

Question	Responses Percentage (%)	
No	15	30%
Not sure	10	20%

Graphs

Graph 1: Distribution of speakers age-wise

Graph representing the age bracket of participants of the study with majority of them belonging to the 18-30 year bracket.

Graph 2: Frequency of code-mixing in conversations

Graph illustrating the frequency of utilisation of code-mixing among the respondents with a preponderance of those who frequently mixing the two languages.