

WHITHER SPILC?

PAPER PRESENTED AT IGBO SEMINAR, 12TH - 13TH JUNE, 2002  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA

BY

PROFESSOR SAM UZOUCHUKWU, HEAD, DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN AND ASIAN STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS

## CONFERENCE PAPER

### INTRODUCTION

If all these woes are to your delight and fancy, please stay back in your house. If you are, on the other hand, embittered by these woes, attend this seminar....

With the above emotional statement a clarion call, inviting Igbo scholars to the above seminar, was made. It was a very effective device for who will not be embittered by the death of SPILC, a society that had been in existence for over half a century and could boast of the best brains in Igboland as patrons, officials, and members; a society that had such a lofty aim of uplifting the Igbo, their language and culture; a society through which education agencies like WAEC, NERDC reached Igbo scholars and interacted with them in the development of the language? Who will not recall with nostalgia the good old days of the SPILC seminars which at the end of the Civil War became a rallying point for Igbo scholars not only in the area of language but also in other disciplines; the seminar that afforded many Igbo scholars the opportunity to produce academic papers that lifted them to prominence; the seminar that gave birth to numerous publications such as Igbo Language and Culture, Vols. I and II, Recommendations of the Standardization Committee of SPILC, Vols. I and II, and Igbo Metalanguage, Vol. I. That the Igbo scholars allowed SPILC to be in this moribund state speaks volumes of our penchant for not appreciating any time-honoured institution. That the Igbo language is going down the drains before our very eyes portrays us as a people without any

sense of direction. This is so when viewed against the national policy on indigenous languages which makes the three major Nigerian languages, Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba to be in competition with one another so that one of them will eventually emerge as the national language. The sorry state of the Igbo language vis-a-vis other languages is captured in the following observation:

## CONFERENCE PAPER

The most regrettable aspect of the neglect of the Igbo language is that the Igbo elites who should know better are presently presiding over the demise of the language. In no situation is this more apparent than in the death of the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC). Since 1949, under the able leadership of the late F.C. Ogbalu this society has been in the vanguard for promoting Igbo language and culture. This it does through seminars, conferences, workshops organized on annual basis. It has been the recognized body through which the ministries and their parastatals like NERDC, WAEC, Department of Culture etc, interact with the Igbo elites on issues connected with the Igbo language and culture. But with the death of Ogbalu in 1991, we have let the society die, over wrangling for leadership, without any of us raising an eyebrow. It is most painful when it is observed that other societies by other ethnic groups which were formed after SPILC are today waxing stronger in championing the growth of their languages and culture.

Can it be said that the Igbo language is jinxed if all the Igbo from the lowest to the highest are presiding over its death? We rarely speak the language in private or in public; we do not study the language with enthusiasm in schools; we have no newspapers in the language; we do not care for the societies that champion the cause of the language. We have earlier noted that any of the three major languages, in the light of the Nigerian language policy, is to be recognized as a national language depending on the number of speakers. If the Igbo have an aversion for their language, how would they expect other ethnic groups to have an interest in it? If the Igbo are marginalizing their language, would they accuse the others of marginalisation when their language is sidetracked? (Uzochukwu, 2001:9).

### REASONS FOR THE WOES OF SPILC

THE LIBRARY  
UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS  
AKOKA-YABA,  
LAGOS-NIGERIA.

There is no doubt that most of the achievements recorded by SPILC were possible under the selfless leadership of F.C. Ogbalu. It was Ogbalu who, as one of the founding fathers, saw that SPILC never wavered in its



objectives. By numerous speeches, letters, and circulars he engineered members to action; by fully engaging his printing press and transporting the personnel from Onitsha to Nsukka, he made sure that the annual August seminar was held without interruption for about twenty years in spite of lean resources; by personally carrying out the functions of non-challant officials or committees, he kept many activities of SPILC going unhindered. Ironically his taking up so many responsibilities because of the default of some members earned him some opprobrium as rightly noted by Oruchalu (1995:128):

## CONFERENCE PAPER

This state of affairs did not go without some murmuring from some members who ignorantly accused him of monopoly of functions and the society a one-man affair. This double edge accusation tended to weaken members' enthusiasm.

But the fact that Ogbalu's death has caused SPILC to be in the doldrums shows that truly adequate provision was not made for its continuity. True, members were eager to continue with the good work of Ogbalu knowing that this was the most becoming way of preserving his memory. This is gleaned from the records of the meeting of 30th August, 1991:

At that meeting which was well attended by members, it was unanimously agreed that every effort should be made to immortalize the name of our hero by sustaining the life of the SPILC and achieving the objectives which he fought to achieve all through his life. To this end the meeting avowed to consistently continue the SPILC aspirations and programmes, and thereby renamed the SPILC Annual Seminar ... "Chief F.C. Ogbalu Memorial Seminar." Also at that floor the meeting elected a one-time civilian Commissioner for Education in the old Anambra State, Chief Chukwuma Okoye as the acting chairman of SPILC. The election turned out a good result as it chose a person that had been a close associate and friend of the late Chairman. With him, the society should try to explore available avenues for sound existence (Oruchalu, 1995:129-130).

THE LIBRARY  
UNIVERSITY OF  
AKOKA-YABA  
LAGOS-NIGERIA

Now, what has happened to this lofty ideal? What has happened to the proposal vis-a-vis the reality on the ground? As far as the present writer is concerned, one single episode mostly responsible for the present comatose state of SPILC took place at a meeting of SPILC at DMGS, Onitsha,

about the year 1992. Present at the meeting was the acting Chairman of SPILC (mentioned above), his retinue, and invited members. When it was the time for the election of officers, a letter was read from a member who was not even present at the meeting but sent in the letter through a proxy. In that letter, the said member who had worked in close collaboration with Ogbalu for many years as an executive member opined that the election should not be held that day ostensibly because the acting Chairman, whose acting capacity was likely to be made substantive through that election, was not a linguist! This was the shocker. Pray, when did commitment to a cause, when did the burning desire to achieve an objective come to be equated with academic qualification? Was Ogbalu, who piloted the affairs of SPILC for over forty years and devoted the best part of his life to it, a linguist? Was he not an effective leader because of his commitment to the upliftment of the Igbo and their language? Was Dr. S.E. Onwu who chaired the 1961 Committee that gave birth to the Onwu Orthography which ended the orthography controversy that bedevilled Igbo studies for years not a medical doctor who never had a study of linguistics? Why could not the person who made this suggestion take up the leadership of SPILC as he himself is a linguist? Why was he not present at such a crucial meeting to convince members of the viability of his suggestion if he was committed to the cause of SPILC? There is no intention whatever to disparage or cast aspersion on the character of the person concerned; there is no intention to impinge on his right of freedom of expression. He, no doubt, made his suggestion out of personal conviction but any suggestion that led to the present sorry state of SPILC deserves condemnation. There is also no intention to underestimate the need for relevant academic qualification for the holder of such a high office as the chairmanship of SPILC. But anybody, no matter his discipline or qualification, who is an achiever



and committed to the cause of SPILC should be the chairman and should be supported by all. SPILC works with various committees where members can be made to offer their expert knowledge. The Standardization Committee, for instance, can be headed by a linguist, and the Festival Committee can be headed by a member versed in culture, all working under the chairman for the purpose of realizing the objectives of SPILC.

#### THE WAY OUT

## CONFERENCE

All hopes have not been lost for the revival of SPILC and reverting it once again to its pristine position. The fact that there are still some public-spirit people who suggested and sponsored this seminar is a pointer to this optimism. The fact that some groups, whose hopes for the revival of SPILC have been dashed, have formed alternative associations devoted to the upliftment of the Igbo language is a pointer that the nostalgic feeling about the role of SPILC still persists. Scholars from the South West zone of the country, for instance, recently formed such an association and gave it the name, Society for Igbo Language and Culture (SILC) to differentiate it from the moribund SPILC. Ordinarily and following the organizational set-up of SPILC, this body would simply have been a state branch of SPILC carrying out programmes and activities that would enable it implement the objectives of the parent body. The present writer was even appointed one of the patrons of the association but he humbly made the suggestion that the revival of the parent body in Igboland would be the most appropriate thing to do as to accept an appointment in the splinter group would make an appointee look like a king without a kingdom!

It is now left for us to revive and strengthen SPILC by galvanizing the efforts of such enthusiastic groups. It is now incumbent on us to elect at this august gathering a strong executive totally devoted to the upliftment of the Igbo language, to elect a leader capable of carrying the executive and the members along so that the following may be achieved:

1. Reviving the SPILC annual seminar which affords the scholars the opportunity to meet and exchange ideas on Igbo studies and to map out

strategies for enhancing such studies.

- ii. Reorganizing the Standardization Committee of SPILC charged with providing the modalities for writing Igbo. It may be noted that the break in the activities of this committee has halted the condemnation of some Igbo scholars who are in the unwholesome habit of incorporating some supersegmental features of their dialects (such as aspiration and nasalization) into the standard Igbo orthography. It is true that these features are phonemic in some dialects of Igbo but that is no excuse for incorporating them in the orthography which is generally a matter of agreed convention of representation. There must be a distinction in the representation of sound at the phonetic, phonological, and orthographical levels. In Igbo, there are eight vowels and twenty eight consonants at the orthographical level and we should stick to these for the sake of uniformity.

If we allow all the nuances of our various dialects to be reflected in the orthography, there will be absolute confusion. If this practice goes on unchecked, it may once again stir up the hornets' nest in the nature of reopening the orthography controversy.

By way of illustration, [k] in [ikū] 'to knock' and [k<sup>h</sup>] in [ik<sup>h</sup>ū] 'to sow' should simply be represented by /k/; [r] in [ara] ['madness'] and [ɾ] in (aɾa) 'breast' should be represented by /r/. In each of these examples the context will help to show which of the sounds is meant. At times, incorporating these features in the orthographical level may seriously impair intelligibility as is the case in the text of a scholar who writes oghughu akwukwo 'scooping of book' for oḡuḡu akwukwo 'reading of book'! In this case, the digraph gh is confused with g<sup>h</sup>.

CONFERENCE PAPER



iii. Encouraging the Practice of Publishing and Reading Igbo Newspapers.

Of the three major Nigerian Languages, only Igbo has no outstanding newspapers, journal, or magazines published in it. Some years ago, some Igbo newspapers like Ogene, Anyanwu, Udoka were in circulation. Today, these papers are dead because of lack of patronage. In Yoruba and Hausa, the situation is entirely different:

At last count, more than eight publications mostly in Yoruba language adorn the newsstand. These include Alaroye, Ajoro, Akede, Isokan, Alalaye, Yoruba Ronu, Iroyin, Obalonile, among others. In the north are publications like Al-Bashir owned by Kano State Government Al-ahran privately owned, Tauraruwa belonging to Niger State Government and Jagora by Sokoto State Government. But famous among all these newspapers is Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo published by the Zaria-based Gaskiya Corporation since 1939.

THE LIBRARY  
UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS  
AKOKA-YABA  
LAGOS-NIGERIA

Aside of disseminating information at the grassroots level, most newspapers and magazine published in indigenous languages have contributed immensely to the preservation and popularization of the various native languages (Garba, 2001:56).

Many institutions of higher learning have academic journals published entirely in the indigenous languages. This writer's department in the University of Lagos, for instance, has a Yoruba journal, Laangbasa, to which distinguished Yoruba scholars contribute academic papers. Have we anything comparable in institutions in Igboland? In the early 90's an American project which needed contributions in the nature of excerpts from newspapers and journals in entirely indigenous Nigerian languages was aborted for the Igbo contributor owing to the dearth of publications in the Igbo language. Right now, Hausa and Yoruba but not Igbo are studied in some institutions of higher learning in America and Europe. Given the above situation, what are the chances of the Igbo language in being recognized nationally and internationally when compared with Hausa and Yoruba?

iv. Reviving Interaction with Government Agencies.

THE LIBRARY  
UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS  
AKOKA-YABA.  
LAGOS-NIGERIA.

In the active days of SPILC, Igbo scholars were invited to metalanguage workshops organized by NERDC in Oguta, Owerri, Enugu. Through the Igbo scholars' contributions in these workshops, the first volume of Igbo Metalanguage (Okaasusu Igbo) was published (1990). Since then, we have been left behind as the other two major ethnic groups have gone beyond the first volume. More painful is the fact that most government and international agencies charged with the responsibility of developing indigenous languages do not have any Igbo society to relate with, so we are often excluded from the activities of such agencies.

v. Offering Suggestions to Governments of Igbo Speaking Areas.

Lack of interest for the Igbo language starts from the home, through the nursery, primary, secondary, to tertiary institutions, and even throughout life. There is, therefore, the need to enlighten the people to the fact that the Igbo are fast becoming a people without an identity, that Igbo is fast becoming a dead language. SPILC as an organized body stands a chance of offering suggestions to governments in Igbo-speaking areas on steps to be taken to arrest this situation. At the primary level, for instance, a pass in Igbo should be a condition for the award of First School Leaving Certificate; a pass in Igbo in school Certificate/General Certificate of Education should be a prerequisite for getting employment and promotion at the lower cadre of the civil service. At the tertiary level, scholarships and bursaries should be made available to students admitted for Igbo studies. If these steps are taken, the inferiority complex associated with the study of Igbo in tertiary institutions will be a thing of the past.

REFERENCE PAPER



Further more, all governments in Igbo-speaking areas should be made aware of the laudable plan made earlier by SPILC in its heydays and this should be pursued with vigour:

The Society has made plans to build institutions known as, "Institutions of Igbo Studies". Already the Imo State Government has granted nearly two acres of land in Owerri, the state capital to the SPILC for the purpose. It is intended that there should be one in every state of Igboland. (Oruchalu, 1995:124).

#### REFERENCES

THE LIBRARY  
UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS  
AKOKA-YABA.  
LAGOS-NIGERIA.

Garba, K.A. (2001) "Newspapers in Indigenous Languages Grow Muscular" in The Guardian, January 8, Lagos.

Oruchalu, S.U. (1995) "The Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture: A History" in F.C. Ogbalu and the Igbo Language, Univeristy Publishing Company, Onitsha.

Uzochukwu, S. (2001) "The Role of Nigerian Languages and Culture in National Development," Keynote Address, 6th Annual National Conference, Association for Promoting Nigerian Languages and Culture Conference, Imo State Univeristy.

CONFERENCE PAPER