

Attrition of Igbo Indigenous Wives' Given Pet Names: Implications for the Igbo Language Endangerment

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Abstract : Language attrition describes the non-pathological decrease in language that had previously been acquired by an individual. It can affect some aspects of a language use or all aspects of a language use. The Igbo language, (despite its status as one of the major Nigerian languages) based on recent studies is fast losing its population of first generation speakers and therefore, increasingly becoming endangered and may be heading to extinction as warned by UNESCO if there are no conscious efforts to reverse the situation. The present paper, which contributes to the Igbo endangerment studies, examines the attrition of an aspect of the Igbo language use and practice: the indigenous Igbo wives' pet names. It surveys the level of attrition of indigenous Igbo wives' pet names; names which Igbo married men christen their wives upon marriage. The wives' pet names under investigation here are specifically those which a husband traditionally christens his wife to reflect the intimate marital bond between them and also to extol his wife as an integral part of him. These pet names morphologically, are always suffixed with the compound morpheme diya which is translated as 'her husband' as in enyidiya 'her husband's friend', obidiya 'her husband's heart', ahudiya 'her husband's body', ugwudiya 'her husband's honour', etc. The data for the study were collected through questionnaire, and oral interview from 300 male and 100 female respondents of different age groups who are married, indigenous Igbo speakers and are resident in the study areas (two Local Government Areas from two different Senatorial Zones in Abia and Imo States, south-eastern, Nigeria). Findings from the study show almost a total attrition of the Igbo indigenous wives' pet names under study across the different age groups. For the respondents within the age group of 25-54 years, there is no more christening and bearing of the indigenous Igbo wives' pet names by men and women respectively. This age group gives and bears pet names which the group members feel are contemporary and in line with modernity. This is a piece of evidence that the Igbo indigenous pet names' use and practice are no longer part of the lifestyle of this group of respondents and therefore, they cannot transmit such names to their own children. For the respondents within the age group of 55-74 years, the indigenous Igbo wives' pet names are also fading fast with less than 20% retention within the age group of 65-74 years with very few traces within the group of 55-64 years. These findings are further evidence that this aspect of Igbo language use and culture is severely threatened and may be on the verge of being lost. The loss of this aspect of the Igbo language or any aspect of the language has huge implications for the gradual and steady endangerment of the language as predicted by UNESCO.

Keywords : attrition, endangerment, practice, Igbo

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