African Languages, Translation and Expansion of Language Functions: The Case of Igbo

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Abstract

Like many native African languages caught up in the arbitrary national boundaries which are the legacy of colonialism, Igbo was not allowed much space to restructure and update itself for effective engagement with the new and greatly widened world opened up by colonialism; instead it came under pressure from the language of the colonial power, which inserted itself as the language of out-group activities, keeping the vernacular out of this sphere. Since independence, there have been demands for some of these African languages for space to participate in official roles. In Nigeria, Igbo is recognized as one of the major languages, but this seems not to have improved its fortunes. With more and more of the middle classes bringing up their children to speak mainly English, there is increasing fear that the vernacular may die out eventually and various forms of advocacy are making their voices heard to try and stop the trend and save the language. In this paper, it is argued that advocacy merely will not change the situation and that there is need to work towards growing the language to enable it take on additional functions than the existing in-group ones. Translation is identified as a very important language grower which has not been made much use of since the close of the colonial era; and where the occasional translation has taken place, it has worked under self-imposed constraints which have slowed down the modernization of the language and growth in its vocabulary.

Introduction

Swahili is probably the only native African language that is serving its community effectively, holding it together as a trans-national community and sustaining both in-group and out-group functions, although it stands for some of those who use it as a power language, so that its success is at the cost of someone's vernacular. Some others like Hausa which are also in active and wide-ranging use are not able to achieve their full potential because of the existence of other powerful players in the linguistic space. Most of the other languages are experiencing something of a decline and shrinkage of their share of this linguistic space. In this paper, we shall explore the potential of translation for a language aspiring to expand its functions beyond what may be needed for bare survival. We shall be focusing on the Igbo language of

Nigeria as a case in point on the premise that its career and prospects bear similarities to many others in the African continent.

Background

The future of the Igbo language is a constant source of worry for researchers in the language, policy makers, and educational planners. The threat is mainly from the power language, English, which was introduced in the Igbo cultural region by the agency of colonial expansion during the second half of the 19th century. This language had the advantage to itself since it was backed up by the power structure, which also introduced and supervised an educational system based on English. The language was both taught as a principal subject and served as the medium of instruction for all other subjects. It may even have served in some cases for the teaching of Igbo when this language was introduced in the educational curriculum. Igbo was further disadvantaged in being incorporated into a nation where, statistically, its speakers comprised a minority of the overall population. Actually, the political architecture of Nigeria, whether deliberately or inadvertently was crafted in such a way that no single language group comprised a majority of the overall population. So there was no question of imposing one of the local languages as a lingua franca. Igbo, of course, had an additional disadvantage which hampered its development; namely it did not have a written script and so the colonists did not accord it the same level of respect and recognition they accorded Arabic and Hausa in the region and environments where these functioned.

Resistance to the power language is better organized and concerted in a place like the Republic of Ireland, where there is only one local language, Gaelic. The government itself is able to lead and push the cause of this language, prescribing its use for official purposes and for public information, as in street signs and advertisements – important in maintaining everyday awareness of the language. Gaelic is not only fully supported in the schools, but there are schools designated in different parts of the country where Gaelic is both taught and the medium of instruction for many subjects. As well as this, there is a Gaeltacht area, where Gaelic is designated for exclusive use for all language functions.

The lack of a local lingua franca serving the entire country was in effect the argument brought up by Nigerian literary intellectuals in order to excuse Nigeria from the debate raised in an academic conference by Obi Wali in 1961 as to the authenticity of an *African* literature published in non-African languages. Nigeria, one of the most productive literary cultures in Africa, and Obi Wali's home country did not have one local language all the culture

workers could agree on. So English was confirmed as both the lingua franca and the literary language of the nation. Nigeria over its hundred years of existence as a nation has been generating its own history and culture by mediation of the default language, English.

The language debate, however, has not been laid to rest nor has gone away. It has continued to return in slightly altered forms. In recent times, for instance, it has been inserted into the discourse and problematics of development, with the narrative that language is the bedrock of development and that development will not take place based on a language that is not one's own, there being no historical precedent for such a case. Without showing exactly how language comes into play to power development, Japan, China, and India are cited as ready examples. However, considering the histories of nations and languages in the West, it seems necessary first of all to determine at what stage a language becomes one's own. It is known that some modern European languages became national languages by gradually spreading over the territory that subsequently became the nation, and presumably substituting local tongues in the process. Parisian French spread in this way to become the language of France. It went on during the centuries that followed to become 'the polite language of Western Europe', including England (Fletcher 2002: 19). Today English may be thought of as the *polite* language of the world; at any rate, during the past one hundred years, it has become confirmed as the official language of many more countries than those of ethnic English populations and the favourite language to add for much of the rest of the world. As a factor of development, if such is the case, South Asian English may have a lot more to do with the developmental thrust of India than Hindi. Two other BRICS economies, Brazil and South Africa, are like India in not having the kind of language that would satisfy the demands of the native language advocacy.

Recently, alarms have been going up in various places that Igbo might die out as a language, and that something had to be done to save it. Whether or not this language survives has everything to do with the survival of the Igbo as a people. The causes of this agitation are firstly, widespread code mixing among not only the elite, but also the uneducated, with many in the adult population having difficulty sustaining an Igbo conversation that does not feature English words and phrases in-between, a linguistic strategy 'widely used in multilingual speech communities all over the world' (Schendl and Wright 2011: 15). Secondly, since the decades following the Civil War (1967-1970), more and more families are bringing up their children to speak only or mainly English. This is not necessarily 'hatred' of the language as has been

suggested by some, but it is certainly true that many of the young generation with this background who do speak Igbo from time to time do not produce some of the Igbo sounds. The final [e] in words like *Okoye, Ugoye* which is same as English short /ɛ/, as in 'yes', are realized as a diphthong /ei/ as in 'able'. English short /ɛ/ does not occur in word-final positions. These young Igbo speakers apparently raise the vowel to diphthongal /ei/ to compensate for the following consonant, which is usually associated with the short *ɛ*.

Language Change

One has to bear in mind of course, that language change is also taking place; and one way this could be registered is that what is for one reason or another, such as linguistic interactions in a multi-language social environment, experienced as a difficult sound will be reduced by lenition, till the lenified form becomes the new norm. This is the so-called 'Principle of Least Effort' (Labov 2010: 371). Language change is one element that Igbo – and African – linguists seem not to have been paying attention to. But it is a process that goes on inevitably with language use over time and is usually accelerated by the sharing of language functions and struggle for space in multi-language environments.

Igbo is experiencing language change – which is some kind of progress; and this should be monitored and studied. But the linguists should also decide what their role is: whether to guide and shape this language change, as they have tried to do in the past, or like the functionalists to document and explain the changes. It is a decision between linguistic purity on the one hand, and on the other, linguistic *realism*, perhaps.

Fafunwa is endlessly quoted that a child learns most effectively in his/her mother tongue. This has led naturally to demands to exploit Igbo as a medium of instruction, but for what subjects, and at what levels? Beyond Igbo itself, it is hard to see this language in its present form serving as a medium of instruction. The language lacks the capacity, not having the concepts in use in a great many of the subjects. But it can grow the capacity to do so in an enabling environment. Languages do restructure and develop, which happens by putting the language to work. The advocacy for use of Igbo in every environment possible, or dedicating one day in the week for this purpose, as briefly happened in one Igbo-speaking State is relevant because it involves putting the language to work. This will undoubtedly help, but what seems to be really needed is in Michel Foucault's terms, 'to fabricate a language, and to fabricate it well' (*The Order of Things* 69).

This comment comes as part of Foucault's examination of the changes which the modern European languages underwent in order to move from the Renaissance and its modes of representation to what he calls the 'Classical Age', beginning in the early seventeenth century. This was the age of science. The language which had sustained the kinds of discourse prevalent in the Renaissance had to give way to one which was suitable 'as an instrument of analysis and combination ... the language of calculation' (69). The key event that marked the transition from the Renaissance to the language of description, according to Julia Kristeva, was the emergence of the *sign*, where previously there had been the 'civilization of the symbol':

> The sign that was outlined through these mutations retained the fundamental characteristic of the symbol: irreducibility of terms, that is, in the case of the sign, of the referent to the signified, of the signified to the signifier, and, in addition, all the 'units' of the signifying structure itself. The ideologeme of the sign is therefore, in a general way, like the ideologeme of the symbol: the sign is dualist, hierarchical, and hierarchizing. A difference between the sign and the symbol can, however, be seen vertically as well as horizontally: within its vertical function, the sign refers back to entities both of lesser scope and more concretized than those of the symbol. They are reified universals become objects in the strongest sense of the word. Put into a relationship within the structure of sign, the entity (phenomenon) under consideration is, at the same time, transcendentalized and elevated to the level of theological unity. The semiotic practice of the sign thus assimilates the metaphysics of the symbol and projects it onto the 'immediately perceptible.' The 'immediately perceptible,' valorized in this way, is then transformed into an objectivity – the reigning law of discourse in the civilization of the sign (40).

Representation by symbols and representation by signs are alike in being referential, but whereas the symbol represented universals in an asymmetrical relationship, the sign dealt with 'universals become objects', yielding 'the immediately perceptible'. The sign's referent, therefore is limited in scope. With this, description could be more or less exact. Science as a body of knowledge became possible with the emergence of the sign.

Five centuries previously, the language that was finally to differentiate itself from the Germanic tongue of the Scandinavian invaders of Romano Britain had emerged. That is the English language. Old English, that is West Saxon, was to undergo at this time radical restructuring under pressure from the then power language, Norman French and the language of learning which

had helped to shape French itself and was also enduring in England by the agency of the Latin Church. It is noted, however, that

> the English which triumphed was in fact English-French: English was enabled to triumph partly because it had now largely absorbed the French. For the first one hundred or one hundred and fifty years, it seems, the two languages remained for the most part pretty clearly distinct, but in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries English, abandoning its first aloofness, rapidly took into itself a large part of the French (originally Latin) vocabulary; and under the influence of the French it carried much farther the process of dropping its own comparatively complicated grammatical inflections — a process which had already gained much momentum even before the Conquest. This absorption of the French was most fortunate for English. To the Anglo–Saxon vocabulary — vigorous, but harsh, limited in extent, and lacking in fine discriminations and power of abstract expression, was now added nearly the whole wealth of French, with its fullness, flexibility, and grace. As a direct consequence the resulting language, modern English, is the richest and most varied instrument of expression ever developed at any time by any race (Fletcher 19).

English has proved to be one of the most adaptable languages of the world; and this no doubt has much to do with its survival and the expansion of its domain. Openness to influence and ready receptiveness of elements from other languages to fill up what is lacking in itself comprise the vital force internal to this language whereby its ability to describe and represent and construct is probably unequalled of all languages. There is no reason why other languages like Igbo anxious for their survival could not take advantage of the strategies which have been used to such great effect by the English language. Linguistic loans are never paid back, as Beard (2004: 90) notes, and borrowing is without strings, even while competing for space.

Language Functions

The link which the native language advocates are trying to establish between language and development could have the effect of diverting from the real issues. Development and the chances of its occurring in the future depend more on the standard and quality of education than on anything else. If the argument is that the standard is not high enough because the language is not the appropriate one, and if the appropriate one is the mother tongue, then the answer is to expand the functions of the mother tongue and build up its capacity for the delivery of the kind of education needed. The task is a big one: Michel Foucault speaks of *fabricating* a language. The history of the modern

languages being used for best practices in education has been a history of assisted and accelerated language change.

But the native language advocates are right in their presupposition about language that it is the most important of human possessions and enters into everything that man does; as Ingold puts it (in Phipps 2007: 173), man's 'practical engagement in the world' is by and large a function of language. The language functions which operate as a subtext in this discussion are: thought and community formation, representational functions, culture and cultural productions, and acquisition and processing of knowledge. They are the functions which a vibrant language fosters and reinforces, which ensure that human life, beyond the biological functions is sustained and productive. This dimension of human life is dependent on thought, which is inextricably intertwined with language. Von Humboldt had made the point long ago:

> Man lives with his objects chiefly – in fact, since his feeling and acting depend on his perceptions, one may say exclusively – as language presents them to him. By the same process whereby he spins language out of his own being, he ensnares himself in it: and each language draws a magic circle round the people to which it belongs, a circle from which there is no escape save by stepping out of it into another (quoted in Cassirer 9).

It is an exclusively human possession; and Humboldt's practice above shows, the positing of language is at the same time the co-positing of the individual human being and community of humans. It is this language that forms 'the people to which it belongs' into a community, held together in a 'magic circle'. At the individual level, there is a ceaseless exchange between the outer world and the individual's 'own being' by means of language. Representation, which may take the form of art may result from this; at the wider social level, culture. And there are art forms and humane cultural productions which seem to be favoured by specific languages. Asked about the origin of philosophy in a roundtable discussion, Derrida had this to say:

> well, philosophy has only one origin, a single pure origin that is its foundation, its institution, through a number of grounding concepts which are linked to Greek language, and we have to keep this in memory and go constantly back to Greece and back to this Greek origin (7)

It is not 'the Greeks' or Greek culture or civilization as might be expected, but the language. A similar point is made about German and modern philosophy:

> Much could be written about the language of Heidegger's thinking. It has created its own style, as always happens with an original thinker.... The style is the thinking itself. It comes out of the German language and partakes of that language's genius.

> Schelling and Hegel spoke proudly of the natural fitness of the German language for philosophy; and in Heidegger's writings, increasingly with their chronological advance, we have a vivid example of this aptitude (Hofstadter xv-xvi).

A case of that sort made between English and literature is alluded to by Fletcher above. Other languages may have similar qualities and proclivities; hence it is thought that cultural and linguistic diversity is a good thing in itself. However, although philosophy has its origin in the Greek language, it is thought by some that that form of the language referred to by Derrida could not support modern philosophy because this philosophy requires 'conceptual resources the Greek world never dreamed of' (Margolis 2). It would need to have been updating and growing with the times: that is the only way to keep up with change. And in fact, one of the indicators of vitality for a living language is this ceaseless updating, which is not obviously contrived in the way of a *deus ex machina.* The language is simply *put to work*, in the course of which it may *exceed* itself. Engaging of language to the point of exceeding itself is something philosophy has always done in the Western tradition. Even German which has been cited as having a special facility with philosophy continues to task itself, striving to achieve new feats of ideation. Here is Heidegger on the nature of the work of art:

> But why is the setting up of a work an erecting that consecrates and praises? Because the work, in its work-being, demands it. How is it that the work comes to demand such a setting up? Because it itself, in its own work-being, is something that sets up. What does the work, as work, set up? Towering up within itself, the work opens up a world and keeps it abidingly in force.
>
> To be a work means to set up a world....
>
> The world is not the mere collection of the countable or uncountable, familiar and unfamiliar things that are just there. But neither is it a merely imagined framework added by our representation to the sum of such given things. The *world worlds,* and is more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm in which we believe ourselves to be at home. World is never an object that stands before us and can be seen. World is the ever-nonobjective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse keep us transported into Being. Wherever those decisions of our history that relate to our very being are made, are taken up and abandoned by us, go unrecognized and are rediscovered by new inquiry, there the world worlds. A stone is worldless. Plant and animal likewise have no world; but they belong to the covert throng of a surrounding into which they are linked (2001: 43).

Erect, consecrate, and *praise* occur here in the intransitive form, which is extremely rare. But the movement of language here supports the oddity. *Workbeing, worlding, worldless* and *ever-nonobjective* are obviously neologisms and mark the way in which the language of this philosophical work is hard at work in the task of engendering new thoughts, new knowables: its very unfolding in the engendering of thought. This language is thinking itself; and it is obvious that it is not ready-made for the task here. No language is ready-made for such tasks. But every language has the potential for any kind of language function, which is realized only by that language being putting to work – or as Heidegger might say, setting *itself* to work. Equally, no language has a special advantage in this regard. In being put to work and setting itself to work, there is something of trial and error, something of experimentation, of tentative moves that may be dropped or confirmed ultimately as convention. Philosophy is one of the disciplines that tasks language in this way to produce new forms, but its new forms tend to require very long periods of gestation before becoming conventional and part of everyday language.

Things like *in essence, per se, ab initio* became very common in newspaper reportage for some time in Nigeria and therefrom into everyday use. Then something of a loss of interest occurred, especially with *per se* and *ab initio*, resulting in a drop in frequency of use. Literature, for example in forms sometimes called 'poetic license', also tasks language, extending its possibilities. So also journalism and other human preoccupations where the currency is mainly language. The debates about the survival of local languages have tended to be purely theoretical and in most cases conducted in English. In these debates, English is what is unintentionally put to work, producing new sentences and sometimes giving the words a new twist. The language which is the subject of the advocacy is meanwhile kept far away from the work scene, protected in honourable mention from time to time in the debate. Many African problems that are debated publicly frequently end up nestling within a 'circle of words' (Pilley 1939. Web).

Translation

The language function which puts language most persistently and fruitfully to work is translation. The English language has used this function to maximal effect. The direct aim is to produce every significant document of civilization and human intellectual endeavour from all over the world and in any language and make it available in English. The dividends to the language are limitless. Discussing the translation of literature, Walter Benjamin has this to say,

> just as the tenor and significance of the great works of literature undergo a complete transformation over the centuries, the mother tongue of the translator is transformed as well. While a poet's words endure in his own language, even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and eventually to be absorbed by its renewal. Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own (73).

Growth, transformation, yes, the birth or rebirth of the target language may well encapsulate the multi-dimensional significance of translation. In this process, and more immediately, the target language is faced with unfamiliar meanings. In the following, for example, we have a pair of English words addressing one French word occurring in Derrida's *Of Grammatology:*

> Spacing as writing is the becoming-absent and the becomingunconscious of the subject. By the movement of its drift/derivation *[dérive]* the emancipation of the sign constitutes in return the desire of presence. That becoming—or that drift/derivation—does not befall the subject which would choose it or would passively let itself be drawn along by it (69).

Jacques Derrida's *dérive* here is not equivalent to the English 'drift' or to the English 'derivation', but to both simultaneously. These are two words that could conceivably be heard as echoing each other, as if they had some common source, and had only *drifted* apart from each other over time. But they are in fact derived from two different sources. *Drift* is Old English *drifan* ('to drive', Klein 230), while *derive* is from Latin *derivare,* ('to change the course of a river', Klein 204). It is apparently in French that the two words *derive* from the same source: *dérive* is French for 'drift, adrift, afloat', while *dériver* is 'to derive'. There is a play on those two words in the French, which the translator is at pains here to bring out. And there is a sense in which that which is *derived* may subsequently go *adrift*, taking on a life of its own. This captures exactly the history of the modern languages. French is a Romance language insofar as having been derived from Latin, has taken a life of its own, has gone adrift. That is also the case with English, derived from West-Saxon.

English has also continued to grow its word power by borrowing. Very often these new words have been encountered and incorporated in the process of translation. Beard here illustrates with a few examples:

> English is a frequent borrower of words, with nouns and adjectives being the most frequent categories, adverbs and pronouns the least. Often a word has an anglicised spelling

> based upon how the word was heard. So, for example, from Arabic we have 'alcohol', 'alcove', 'assassin', from Hindi 'bungalow', 'dungaree', 'shampoo' (2004: 90).

With regard to the growth and development of Igbo, no greater service has been recorded than that of the Christian missionaries. First of all, they developed and began the process of refining the orthography of Igbo. This was the first fruit of their educational effort. They had started the first schools in Igboland on the principle that *if you want to learn a new language, go to the children*. This is Bishop Shanahan's account of his first school in Nigeria. He had come all the way from Ireland to Nigeria for the purpose of evangelization, but the first assignment he had got from Father Lejeune who was heading the mission was brick-making for the building of a mission house. Then he is posted to Ogboli (Onitsha Inland Town), where he had to make up his lodgings and settle in; and then he was asking himself:

> But the evangelization? Ah, there was the difficulty. The first step was to learn sufficient Ibo for carrying on a conversation. This I did by spending my day trying to get different villagers to talk to me. Before long it became apparent that the children were the safest teachers. Their initial shyness gone, they began to cluster around 'willingly, enjoying my attempts to speak to them. Later, they helped me to rig up the mud hovel we dignified by the name of 'school,' and when Father Lejeune had sent on some slates and pencils – with a few spare sheets to make 'trousers' for my youngsters – we had our first day's class with fifteen little lads between the ages of six and twelve. Afterwards the numbers gradually increased, and at the end of the year, there was quite a goodly number under instruction for Baptism (Holy Ghost Fathers 26).

It was probably by the *accident* of this school that Bishop Shanahan learned the use of the school for evangelization. The original interest was to learn the Igbo language from the children so as to be able to proclaim the gospel to the adults. But the learning of the language was not complete for the missionaries without working out an orthography for it. The first Igbo Catechism, for example, had letters like ɛ, ŋ, ɔ, ɵ. The 1951 Edition of the Igbo Hymnal still had these sounds, but *Tshukwu* of the old Catechism had been updated to *Cukwu*. It will be further updated to the present *Chukwu*. In the hymnal, 'ngị' was *nge*; 'kene' was *kɛnɛ;* 'nwuliba' was *ŋɵleba;* 'nzopụta' was *nzɔpɵta.* Ŋ was to change briefly to /ñ/ before it resolved to /nw/, which the missionary translations reserved to words like *nwɵca* ('cleansing') – in current usage '*ngh*ụcha'.

Some key Christian names like *Jesus Christ* and *Mary,* were reduced in Igbo orthography by the Catholic missionaries to *Jesu Kristi* and *Maria* from

Latin instead of English: they had noticed resemblances between some Igbo sounds and Latin. Similarly, *grace* was reduced to Igbo as *grasea; Eucharist* to *eukaristia; Baptism* first to *Baptisma*, but to be shortened to *Baptizm.* In like manner, English borrowing often passes the loan words through different kinds of adjustments to ease them into the language. There is, for instance,

> The incorporation of definite articles into borrowed forms, such as *alcohol* <Arabic *al koh'l* or Sp. *alcalde* 'mayor' <Arabic *al qadi* 'the judge,' which [some treat] as a subtype of clippings (Brinton 53).

The discouragement of borrowing from other languages by the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC) inevitably slows the development of Igbo as an effective language for practical engagement with a fast-changing world, which is endlessly churning out new forms of experience, new products and processes, and new knowledge objects.

The missionary translators, of course, were often challenged with problems which were less linguistic than theological in nature. They found *muo* (which they understood as 'spirit'), to be a core concept in Igbo traditional religion that they called *paganism.* It seemed to permeate every aspect of Igbo religion. But *spirit* is also a Christian concept, which could not be done away with. The fear was that a simple translation of 'spirit' as *muo* might confuse the converts. So *muo* was redefined for Christian use in the Catechism as 'a living being which is inaccessible to the senses'. Words like 'Holy Spirit' could then be rendered in Igbo using *muo;* and the early form was *Mɵɔ Nsɔ;* 'angel' was *Mɵɔ'zi* or *Mɵɔ-ɔma* or *Mɵɔ-nma.* Concepts like 'Christian', 'heaven' also presented difficulties. *Enigwe* ('heaven') which was first written as *ɛnuigwɛ* was probably modelled on 'above the firmament' (Gen 1.7), while *Christian* required a real mental effort resulting in a word-phrase *onye/ndi otu Kristi* ('companion/companions of Christ'). *Ndi otu Kritsti* has not shortened in line with the linguistic principle that 'words become better as they become shorter' (Labov 2010), but has remained a word-phrase. These are just a few examples of the words with which the missionary effort at translation enriched the Igbo language. Their texts are also probably useful in studying sound changes in Igbo during the last one century.

Now there exists a canon of correctness of spelling. It was not so in the early twentieth century, when translation was simultaneously transcription, and depended on what the translator *heard* or thought he heard. Shanahan's reflections above show there was a difference between what he heard and tried to reproduce in speech and what the children who taught him were saying. The children heard this difference distinctly. It is therefore not possible to

know in the case of *nwɵca* and *ngh*ụcha, for instance, whether the variance is a function of what the transcribers (thought they) heard or whether we are dealing with a dialectal difference; for the Catholic missionaries were familiar with and transcribed Onitsha Igbo, whereas the Igbo Bible (*Baịbụl Nsọ)*, is in Central Igbo. Along with the Igbo sounds and the history of language change, there is much in the work of the missionaries that should be of great interest to Igbo lexicography yet to be carefully collected and collated.

The successors of the missionaries, the Christian churches, have continued the work of translation, and like their predecessors have done so only to the extent that it serves their needs. Their most important contribution in this regard, apart from revising and updating the translations of the missionaries, is *Baịbụl Nsọ*, which has revealed new problems in translation. In the oral tradition handed on from missionary times, for instance, 'the Son of Man' (Greek: *ho huios tou anthropou)* is simply (and presumably in faithfulness to *Filius hominis* of the Latin Vulgate in which the article plays hardly any part, just like Igbo), rendered as *Nwa nke Madu*. In this oral tradition, Ezekiel's phrase 'Son of man' is indistinguishable from the Christological title, 'the Son of Man'. There is here what Steiner calls 'resistant difficulty':

> The delineation of 'resistant difficulty', the endeavour to situate precisely and convey intact the 'otherness' of the original, plays against 'elective affinity', against immediate grasp and domestication. In perfunctory translation these two currents diverge. There is no shaping tension between them, and paraphrase attempts to mask the gap. Good translation, on the contrary, can be defined as that in which the dialectic of impenetrability and ingress, of intractable alienness and felt 'athomeness' remains unresolved, but expressive. Out of the tension of resistance and affinity, a tension directly proportional to the proximity of the two languages and historical communities, grows the elucidative strangeness of the great translation (405).

These translators have substituted *Nwa nke Madu ahụ,* which may leave the sense of 'that Son of Man', the deictic adjectival *ahụ* locating him in the whole context of the Gospels.

The new Igbo Bible (*Baịbụl Nsọ),* makes big compromises, of course, for lack of the appropriate words. For instance, in translating Phil. 2.7: 'but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave' (Greek: *alla heauton eken*ō*sen morphen doulou lab*ō*n*). 'Emptied himself' (*heauton eken*ō*sen)* proves difficult to render in Igbo with any measure of faithfulness to the original. The following is substituted: *O buturu onwe ya ala* ('he brought himself low'). Similarly, 'form' (*morphen)* is difficult in the context and the whole participial phrase 'taking the

form of a slave' is rendered, *were onwe ya n'ọnọdụ odibo* ('taking/placing himself in the condition of a servant'). The task in hand has disclosed gaps in the Igbo repertoire. A language like English might borrow from the original or from another language which may have already started the process of domesticating the borrowing to fill the gaps. Other strategies are loan translations and word coinages, while the missionaries sometimes substituted analogous constructions in their translations. This Bible attempts a solution, or rather *voids* the problem by circumlocution, leaving only 'the merely moral sense of a humble bending down to humanity' (Pannenberg 310). As a result, the Igbo reader who has no contact with the original would never get the sense of the expenditure of energy and the voiding or turning of the self inside out (Riessen 128), involved in the source text and the substitution of another *form*. For the translation has only the sense of human 'self-abasement', and very little of the 'self-emptying' underscored in John Paul II's *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (n.22), for the very important fact that it surpasses human capacity. It equally fails to convey the implicature of 'humiliation' associated to the incarnation (Cullmann 1963: 76-77), which is part of the contribution of *morphen doulou labōn*. It is as if the personality itself is untouched, but only submits to the role of 'a figure at the opposite pole of the power structure' (Oakes 2001: 134).

The following is probably more interpretive than translative, but it seems to me to be more expressive than the strategy of voiding the problem:

> *O kpochapụrụ n'onwe ya ihe ojiri bụrụ onye ọ bụ, were ihe dị oke ala, dịka nwa-obi na-aghọrọ ohu, nyejupụta onwe ya.*

But the passage is important enough to try something more radical; for as Riessen sums up, kenosis

> is a strange movement, in which dispossession and possession of the self go together. What seems a moment of extreme alienation (the self is no longer with itself, it is there entirely "for the other") is at once the highest form of authenticity (2007: 97).

The text's sense of extreme alienation of self will be more sharply brought out in:

> *ọ bara na mbibi bukwa ngabiga a kpọrọ kenosisi, narazia n'onwe ya ihe dị oke ala, dịka nwa-obi na-aghọrọ ohu.*

Not to take away from the significant service done to the Igbo language by confronting it with experiences, teachings, ideas and habits of thought, and also modes of being foreign to its world view, it must nevertheless be observed that this massive translation effort has not done as much as it could to grow the Igbo stock of words. Real growth requires of Igbo to get over its shyness of borrowing; with this it may become possible to assess its translations in terms

of 'the dialectic of impenetrability and ingress, of intractable alienness and felt 'at-homeness' [which in the translation] remains unresolved, but expressive'.

Conclusion

A power language is necessarily expansive and local languages confronted by one of these is always under severe stress. At the present time English may be called the world's power language. The time of its expansion by imposition is long past. But it retains official status in many more countries of the world than any other language. It has continued to expand as the favourite additive language. As a result of all this the incentive to roll it back where it had been imposed is low. This is the case even in Ireland where it was first imposed outside the island itself, despite official policy to promote and diversify the use of the Gaelic language. In Nigeria where it was first an imposed language, it is not only consolidating, but expanding into domains that were previously under the secure control of the local languages. This is the lived reality especially in Igbo language area, which is why the local language advocacy has heightened its tone of concern. Protected by political and economic necessity, the near exclusive role of English in Nigeria for official and educational purposes is not likely to change soon. Therefore there is no question of rolling back the area of control of the power language. What seems necessary is to strengthen the mother tongue so that it can firmly hold its ground, namely the in-group language functions it currently performs – or some of them, at least; for with affiliation to traditional religion in decline, more and more of the ritual functions previously enacted in the mother tongue are receding into a past domain. But this has been more than compensated by the growth of the mainstream Christian churches which have proved themselves so far to be serious protagonists for the mother tongue in its translations, catechesis, hymnology and proclamation of the word.

It is perfectly possible to expand the functions of African native languages with significant populations of speakers. But it will not be achieved by advocacy alone. It is essential to learn from the experiences and strategies other languages have employed in building up their capacities. As a power language, English poses a direct threat to Igbo, but Igbo and similar mother tongues under pressure can learn from the power languages to defend their domains and strengthen themselves for expanded functions. These vernaculars have to be put to work in the written medium, including serious literature, and have to be prepared to borrow from any handy sources to grow their repertoires. Literature's facility for defining words in context is very helpful in domesticating new coinages and borrowings. The availability of

serious literature can certainly help in expanding the role of Igbo in education; on the other hand, world literature and other kinds of intellectual work in Igbo translation, particularly poetic and philosophical texts which empower words by challenging them with unaccustomed tasks will directly help to improve the agility and flexibility of Igbo itself as a language of advanced thought as well as help in the *teaching* of Igbo. Translation is one activity that puts a language seriously to work, resulting in the production of new forms, particularly new words of the noun class. And studying these translations as *literature* will ensure that these new forms are imbibed and reproduced with minimal effort. An established culture of translation should also help to launch the mother tongue into the modern production and consumption systems, for example by ensuring that the manuals of machinery, household and other consumer products have versions in the local languages where these goods are on offer.

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