

DESERTIFICATION OF LINGUISTIC ECOLOGY: THE SOUTHEAST EXPERIENCE

O. S. Akujobi¹, Mirian Ucheike²

^{1,2} Department of English Language and Literature,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University,
Awka, Nigeria
os.akujobi@unizik.edu.ng
DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.29105.45929

Abstract

Nigeria is a heterogenous linguistic community endowed with aboriginal languages as well as the English language. Although these languages are influenced by certain environmental factors, some have gained more prominence than others. It has been postulated that some non-prominent languages are likely to be extinct if these environmental indicators are not controlled. This paper therefore examines the extent these environmental factors have affected both the English language and the Igbo language. Questionnaires were used as instruments for data collection and were analyzed using the SPSS data analysis. The findings showed that environmental factors play a role in affecting the use of the English and Igbo languages. The Igbo language was found to be on the verge of extinction while some dialects are being eroded. The Indigenous people of the Southeastern part of Nigeria are encouraged to take responsibility for preserving their native language by changing their actions and inactions towards it, and give attention to their native language in order to ensure its sustainability.

Keywords: Desertification, linguistic ecology, endangerment, dialects.

Introduction

According to Nölle, Fsanoli and Tylén (2020), conceptual construal expressed in language is motivated by structure inherent in the environment. This is why most of the lexical items imbedded in a language are gotten from the surroundings. Suffice it to say that an important marker of an environment is the language because the environment is reflected in the language, as well as in the use of the language by the people in that environment. The environment can be physical (mineral resources, topography, basis of human life or survival) or social (mode of life, human thoughts, religion and so on) and these environments

are constantly intersecting. Sapir (1912) explained that environment acts directly on an individual. No wonder a child who is raised at a border will have an influenced language. That is why language is used to identify where someone is 'coming from'. Also, it is language that carve up or shape the way things are done in an environment and the world at large which is solely based on the users of the language. Garner (2005) explained that "language is not a rule-governed system, but a form of patterned behaviour arising from the needs of human sociality: communication, culture and community"

Nigeria is a linguistic environment with people who speak various languages. There are six geopolitical zones in Nigeria namely: North West, North East, North Central, South West, South East and South South. These zones are not carved out solely based on geographic location but based on similarity in culture as well as languages.

There are many languages spoken in Nigeria and by the virtue of colonization, most Nigerians are bilinguals if not multilinguals, hence, there is a tendency of struggle between the existence of these languages. Some tend to be more prominent than others, some tend to be left out or even forgotten. Just as one of the causes of desertification is the removal of the natural vegetation through over grazing; so also, is desertification of linguistic ecology caused by the removal of languages in a particular environment through some activities. In Nigeria, the languages being 'removed' are apparently not the English language, but the indigenous languages and it is done gradually and unconsciously by its native speakers.

Purpose of study

In Nigeria, language has been a tool to mark various regions as well as ethnic groups. There are about two hundred and fifty (250) ethnic groups and over five hundred and twenty-five (525) native languages spoken with English as the official language (Wikipedia). It turns out that in Nigeria, the whole environment is covered with everything 'English' starting from the signs and billboards on the road to identity. This begs for the question 'what happens to our indigenous languages?' This research is limited to the south-east region of Nigeria, where the Igbo Language is the native language spoken in this area of the country.

This study, therefore, seeks to find out how environmental factors has affected Igbo language and if there are dialects that are being endangered or on the verge

of going into extinction in the south east region of Nigeria. Consequently, this research is driven by the following questions:

- a. Does the environment have any influence on Igbo language?
- b. To what extent is the Igbo language being deserted?

Desertification of linguistic ecology

Linguistic ecology also referred to as language ecology was proposed by Einar Haugen in 1971 and he defined it as the study of the interactions between any given language and its environment.

These interactions can be seen between various languages, speakers of these languages and their sociocultural and economic settings (Wikipedia) thus encompassing both physical and social environment. Harald Haarmann further explained that *demographic, social, political, cultural, mental, interactive linguistics* are the environmental variables to linguistic behavior in an environment and these he said, interact with each other to form ecological system (Hishour, n.d). Also, linguistic ecology looks at environmental issues embedded in sociolinguistics thus exposes one to some issues of language: marginalization, endangerment, variations as well as classifications and perceptions of languages.

Furthermore, desertification literally means the process through which a region becomes a desert from natural changes in climate or by human activity (OED). A desert is regarded to be a barren land which cannot support or produce life. Also, 'desert' as a verb means to forsake or abandon something. Therefore, desertification of linguistic ecology is a process whereby language becomes deserted, abandoned hence it becomes barren, that is, it has no life or does not thrive in a particular environment which is as a result of some activities done by humans or natural factors (Kanu 2021). Desertification of linguistic ecology can be seen as endangerment or extinction. An *endangered* language is a language that is at the risk of falling out of use because it has few surviving speakers and when it loses all its native speakers, it becomes *extinct*.

Aikawa in UNESCO (2001) as cited in Asonye (2013) gave five ranks of language endangerment:

- **Extinct:** a situation where there is no one who can speak or remember the language.
- **Critically Endangered:** a situation where the youngest speakers are in the great grandparents' generation and the language is not used for everyday interactions.
- **Severely Endangered:** In this case, the language is spoken only by grandparents and other generations, while the parent generation may still understand the language, they typically do not speak it to their children.
- **Definitely Endangered:** At this stage, the language is no longer learned as the mother tongue by children in the home. The youngest speakers are of the parental generation. At this stage, parents may still speak their language to their children, but their children do not typically respond in the language.
- **Unsafe:** Most children speak their parental language as their first language, but this may be restricted to specific social domains such as the home where children interact with their parents and grandparents.

Another aspect of linguistic ecology is linguistic diversity which is inherent in linguistic environment such as Nigeria. This phenomenon can be found in the Southeastern part of Nigeria in the form of dialects.

The Southeast experience

The Southeast, formerly known as Eastern Nigeria, came about with the recommendation made by Alex Ekwueme (vice president of Nigeria from 1979 to 1983) following the division of the country into three parts (East - Central State, River State and South - Eastern State) in 1967. It was in 1976 that more states were created (Wikipedia). The southeast is one of the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria, and it is comprised of five states, thus:

- Imo State: this was created in 1976 from the East Central States under the leadership of Murtala Muhammed and 98% of the population speak Igbo. It shares borders with Abia state at the east, Delta state at the west, Anambra state at the north and River state at the south.
- Anambra State: this was first created in 1976 from the East Central State and its capital was

Enugu. However, in 1991, Anambra was separated from Enugu and its capital became Awka.

It shares borders with Enugu at the east, Delta at the west, Imo and River states at the south, Enugu state at the east and Kogi state at the north. 98% of the population speak Igbo.

- Enugu State: this was created in 1991. It shares borders with Ebonyi state at the east, Anambra at the west, Benue at the north east, Kogi state at the north west and Anambra state at the west.
- Abia State: this was created in 1991 from part of Imo state. It shares borders with Akwa Ibom at the east and southeast, Imo and Anambra states at the west, Enugu and Ebonyi states at the north and Rivers state at the south and southwest.
- Ebonyi State: this was created in 1996 from parts of Enugu state (Abakiliki) and Abia

(Afikpo). It shares borders with Cross River state to the east, Abia and Imo state to the South, Enugu state to the west and Benue state to the North.

The Igbo language is the dominant language in the Southeast of Nigeria although there are people in the South South (Delta state and River state) who speak a variant of the Igbo language. There are over 40 million speakers of the Igbo language and in them are various dialects marked by geographic region (Wikipedia). Igbo is used to refer to both the people and to their language.

The five states in the Southeast have English language as their official language but the Igbo language as their dominant native language; however, there are variants of the Igbo language known as the Igbo dialects which is a tool for marking identity as well as environment (regions). For instance, Anambra, Enugu, Abia, Imo and Ebonyi have distinct variants of the Igbo language and within them are small linguistic enclaves which differ in some ways. Note that “a dialect is a variety of a language that is used by one group of persons and has features of vocabulary, grammar or pronunciation distinguishing it from other varieties of same language that are used by others”

(Egwuonwu, 2017). For instance, in Anambra state, there are Onicha dialect, Awka dialect,

Idemili dialect and *etcetera*; in Imo state, there are Owerre dialect, Mbaise dialect *etcetera*; in Enugu state, there are Nsukka dialect, Ozara dialect spoken by people in Nkanu, Nike dialect *etcetera*; in Abia state, there are Ohafia spoken by people of Bende, Arochukwu dialect, Ngwa dialect, Ohuhu dialect spoken by people in Umuahia *etcetera*; in Eboyi state, there are Ezaa dialect, Afikpo dialect *etcetera*.

These dialects depict various environments in Igbo lands and as well as various cultures because every group with their own dialect have their culture which tends to reflect in their language.

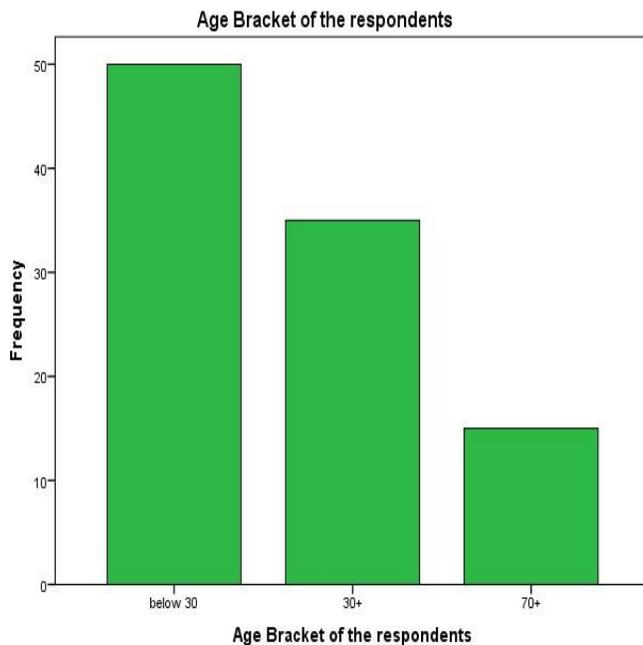
In as much as these dialects may seem to be a cause for segregation, the Igbo people came with a standard dialect or central Igbo which is known as '*Igbo Izugbe*' which would serve as a unifying language for every linguistic environment in the Igbo land. The central Igbo was developed in 1972 based on the Owerre (Isuama) and Umuahia (Ohuhu) dialects though it omits the nasalization and aspiration of these varieties (Wikipedia).

Methodology

Quantitative survey was used, and the population of study was the estimated population of the Southeastern part of Nigeria. Purposive sampling was used in choosing 100 respondents and simple random technique was used to select sample units to represent each state in the Southeast. Structured questionnaires were used to gather data and SPSS was used to analyze data gotten.

Data analysis

Figure 1: Age Bracket of the Respondents



Source: Survey 2021

From Figure 1 above, 50.0% of the respondents fall within the age category of below 30, while 35.0% and 15.0% are within the age bracket of 30 years but less than 70 years and 70 and above respectively and this is shown in bar chart labeled figure 1 above. This implies that respondents can be classified as an active population. In ascertaining the awareness of the existence of central Igbo language about 92.2% said yes they are aware of its existence. In the same regard, 34.0% of those aware of its existence indicated that they communicate with central Igbo at home while 27.2%, 29.1% and 1.9% communicate with their dialect, English and other languages at home respectively. This is also represented in figure 2 below.

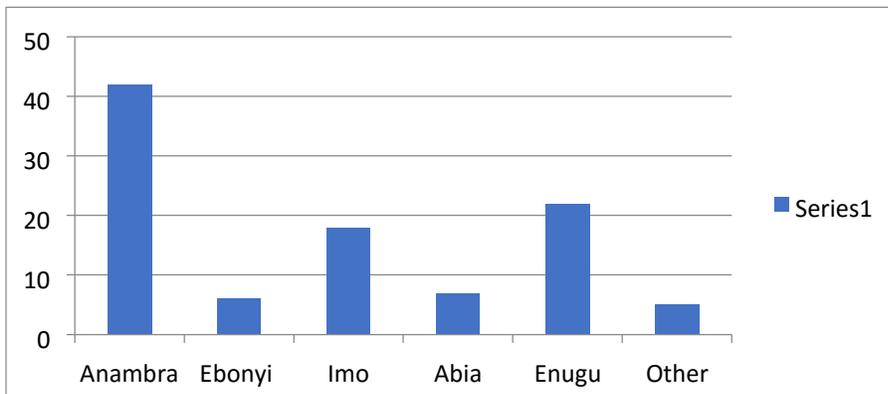


Figure 2: State of Origin

Figure 2 is a stacked column that details the state of origin of the respondents. The survey shows that 42.4%, 6.1%, 18.2%, 7.1 %, 22.2% and 4.0% of our respondents are from Anambra, Ebonyi, Imo, Abia, Enugu and others. The implication of this is that it shows that our study is concentrated in the Igbo speaking region.

Evaluation of Objectives

This study tends to achieve two specific objectives which are:

Objective One: To find the extent to which the environment has affected the Igbo language.

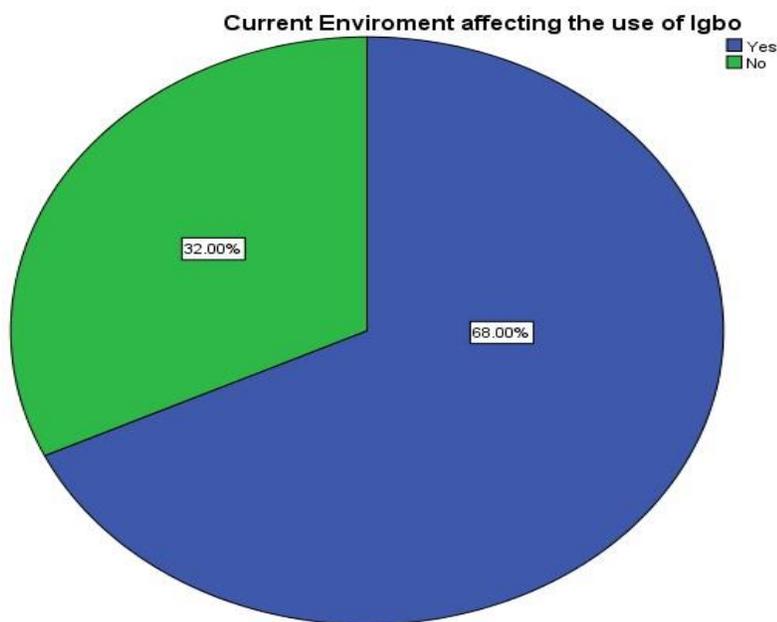
This objective is evaluated using table and pie chart as thus:

Table 2: Current Environment affecting the use of Igbo

Current Environment affecting the use of Igbo				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	68	68.0	68.0	68.0
No	32	32.0	32.0	32.0
Valid Total	100	100.0	100.0	100

Source: Survey 2021

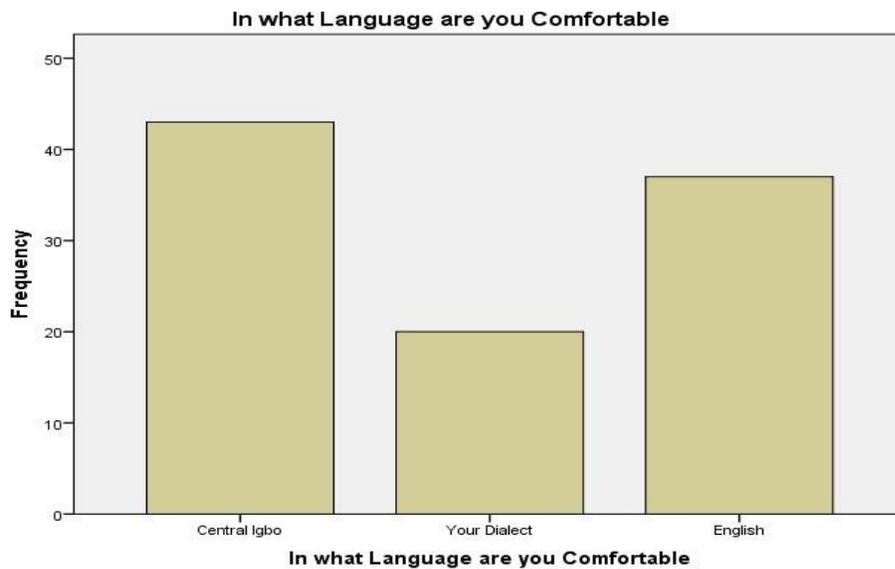
Figure 3 Current Environment affecting the use of Igbo



Source: Survey 2021

In ascertaining if the environment constitutes a factor that militates against the use of Igbo language in the region, table 2 and figure 3 present the views of the respondents and it shows that about 68.0% of the respondents agreed that their current environment has an effect on their use of Igbo language while only about 32.0% of the respondents were not in agreement with the views of others.

Objective Two: To ascertain the extent the Igbo language has been endangered Figure 5: To ascertain the extent the Igbo language has been endangered



Source: Survey 2021

To ascertain the extent at which the Igbo language has been deserted, the study tends to check the comfortability level of the respondents in using the Igbo language. The study revealed that about 43% of the respondents are comfortable in speaking in central Igbo language while 37.0% are comfortable with the use of English and only 20.0% are comfortable with their dialect. This means that Igbo language is still central in communication in the Southeast, but it is on the verge of being deserted with the frequent use of English in our environment while majority of dialects are being deserted.

Findings

From the data gotten the following were realized:

- One of the causes of desertification of linguistic ecology in the Southeast is the linguistic diversity. In the southeast there are many dialects (of which some are not intelligible) which gave rise to the need for a standard dialect. People then turned to the central dialect because there is a need to communicate effectively, hence, deserting their dialects. From the data, few respondents below 30 years are familiar with their dialects and can speak it while the rest rely on the central Igbo.
- There is an over emphasis on the central Igbo. Everybody uses the Central Igbo to the detriment of the various dialects. What is taught in schools are mostly the Central Igbo and the students get home to meet their parents conversing in it as well. They only get to hear of their dialects whenever they travel to the village.
- Majority of the younger generation (below 30 years) do not speak their dialect but the central Igbo which is filled with hybridity as a result of neologism and contacts. Neologism (excessive use of slangs) infused in the language by the younger generation has made the Igbo language lose its originality. These neologisms come up to replace certain words or grammar. For example, people say **narie** instead **gbaa ọsọ**, **udo** instead **a di m mma** *etcetera*.
- Language contact with the English language has affected the Igbo language. The main idea of Haugan in his linguistic ecology is that languages are in a state of equilibrium just as species. They tend to compete with each other, and their very existence depends on each other (Wikipedia). Most respondents rely heavily on the English language, they read and write fluently in it unlike the Igbo language.
- There is a negative attitude of the people towards Igbo language. Most respondents feel comfortable speaking English instead of the Igbo language and they prefer conversing in it as well. Also, the English language has become a class marker. Most respondents assumed speaking English makes one look educated. they do not view the Igbo language as their identity.
- Migration has contributed to the desertification of some dialects in the Southeast. When people leave where their native language is spoken and go places where they encounter other languages, the future of their language seems to be in peril because when languages come in contact

(may be as a result of business transactions), they tend to influence one another. One of the major drives of migration is the need to survive. People tend to move to places where they would find the 'greener pasture'. Now, one of the ways to identify with the host community or environment is through their language. That is why people are tilting towards learning the Chinese Mandarin. This is because it would aid them carry out business transactions in China. In the mega cities such as Onitsha in Anambra state, Nike in Enugu state of the South East are inhabited by non-native speakers and native of a particular dialect ascribed to that city or community. The non-native speakers end up learning the dialect in that community. For instance, a respondent who is from Anambra state but resides in Nike town in Enugu state for over twenty years acknowledge he speaks Nike fluently than his own dialect.

Conclusion

It is every Nigerians' responsibility to preserve his/her native language as an identity. It should not be left in the hands of the government or anyone else. There would not have been English if it was deserted by the British and English language would not have been a global language if the native speakers had abandoned it for another language. The Igbos need to start viewing their language as their identity and their heritage. There is a need to preserve the Igbo language as an indigenous heritage and forestall its extinction. Failure to do so would lead to a perilous fate of the future generation as depicted in the poem:

Sonnet for the Poor and the Young

Little child, what sort of future have you?

Living in clothes given from foreign lands

Dependent on food from a stranger's hands

Will all your life be spent in food queue?

The languages which you speak and learn

Are those of another people's country

You will never know your family

*Why is our culture like so much wood
burned?*

The sins of those long dead and gone;

Why must you suffer because of them?

O colonial men who exploited them,

*The rebels say rise up and take back your
pride How can you, when the disease is
inside?*

(Kenneth Wee, cited in Asif, 2005)

For there to be a future and growth of the Igbo language, the younger generation who are the future of the language need to have a root in the language besides no seed grows or germinates from a branch, it first of all gathers root before sprouting. This can only be done by all the generations putting their hands on deck to '*cure the disease inside*', understand that it is first an identity, then revitalize the deserted ones and progress the language from as little as spelling the native names with the orthography of the Igbo language to speaking and writing it. With this, we hope that Igbo would not be deserted like the Nsibidi which many Igbo have not heard of or seen.

References

- Akindele F. and Adegbite W. (1999). *The sociology and politics of English language in Nigeria: An introduction*. O.A.U Press
- Asif I. S. (2005). Shame: A major cause of language desertion. *Journal of research, faculty of language and Islamic studies*, 8(11). Retrieved April 20, 2021 from, <https://jorurdu.bzu.edu.pk/website/journal/article/5e82584601aab>.
- Asonye E. (2013). UNESCO prediction of the Igbo language death. *Journal of the linguistic association of Nigeria*, vol 16 (1). Retrieved April 24, 2021 from, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/659930>.
- Egwuonwu G. (2017). Arondizogu dialect of the Igbo language: A descriptive approach. *Journal of Nigerian languages and culture*, 17 (1). Retrieved April 20, 2021 from, <https://imsu.edu.ng/oer/publication/65882d69e7913e>.
- Garner M. (2005). Language ecology as linguistic theory. *Kajian linguistic dan sastra*, 17(33). Retrieved April 20, 2021 from, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267545297>

- Hisour. (n.d). *Ecolinguistic*. Retrieved April 23, 2021 from, <https://www.hisour.com/ecolinguistics-49423/amp>.
- Kanu, I. A. (2021). *Sacred Animals as an Igbo-African Ecological Knowledge System*. In I. A. Kanu (Ed.). *African Indigenous Ecological Knowledge Systems: Religion, Philosophy and the Environment* (1-18). Maryland, USA: Association for the Promotion of African Studies. ISBN: 978-978-997-555-6. DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.2.21355.67368](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.21355.67368)
- Kanu, I. A. (2021). *Igbo-African Market Days and the Conservation of the Eco-System*. In I. A. Kanu (Ed.). *African Indigenous Ecological Knowledge Systems: Religion, Philosophy and the Environment* (41-56). Maryland, USA: Association for the Promotion of African Studies. ISBN: 978-978-997-555-6. DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.2.21355.67368](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.21355.67368)
- Kanu, I A. (2021). *Sacred Trees/Plants: The Greening of Igbo-African Religion*. In I. A. Kanu (Ed.). *African Indigenous Ecological Knowledge Systems: Religion, Philosophy and the Environment* (73-96). Maryland, USA: Association for the Promotion of African Studies. ISBN: 978-978-997-555-6. DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.2.21355.67368](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.21355.67368)
- Kanu, I. A. (2021). *African Eco-Philosophy: Nature and Foundations*. In I. A. Kanu (Ed.). *African Eco-Philosophy: Cosmology, Consciousness and the Environment* (1-18). Maryland, USA: Association for the Promotion of African Studies. ISBN: 978-978-997-558-7. DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.2.23033.39526](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.23033.39526)
- Kanu, I. A. (2021). *Ecological Significance of Mmuo Mmiri (Water Spirit) in Igbo Philosophy and Religion*. In I. A. Kanu (Ed.). *African Eco-Philosophy: Cosmology, Consciousness and the Environment* (31-42). Maryland, USA: Association for the Promotion of African Studies. ISBN: 978-978-997-558-7. DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.2.23033.39526](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.23033.39526)
- Nölle J., Fusanoli R. and Tylén M. (2020). Language as shaped by the environment: linguistic construal in collaborative spatial task. *Parlgrare commum*, 6(27). Retrieved April 24, 2021 from <https://doi.org/10.1057/54159>.
- Sapir E. (1912). Language and environment. *American anthropologist*, 14(2) 226 – 242. Retrieved April 20, 2021 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/659930>.
- Ugwu E. (2016). *Ìgbò our mother language*. Kent: Ezeogu publication.