Chapter 7
Exploring the Impact of Google Igbo in South East Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the impact of Google's search engine on the lives of the native speakers of Igbo, a major language in South East Nigeria. As part of efforts to connect with those who rely on local languages for communication as distinct from their chief language of communication, English, the American company had floated a series of search systems for native speakers around the world, one of which is projected in http://www.google.com.ng/, specifically for Igbo speakers. Google's efforts are commendable because they offer a mechanism against the dearth and death of native languages, particularly for Igbo. Of the three major local languages in Nigeria, Hausa and Yoruba have managed to survive and flourish, while Igbo has been on the decline socially, culturally, and economically as speakers of the language would prefer Nigeria's lingua franca – English. On Google's Igbo website, natives are opportune to browse as well as look up sites on which search queries can be answered in the native language. A study of five age groups of the native speakers was carried out in a panel design to demonstrate the impact Google's efforts have had on the lives of users. Case description was done from five expectation standpoints of the respondents– fundamental, training, conventional, personal, and contextual. According to findings, which correlate in all the perspectives, Google's efforts are amounting to waste of Web resources. This is because visitors to the site often find that queries do not produce tangible results in the Igbo language, thereby making it impossible for the community to access Google, thus calling for re-strategizing not only on the part of Google, but also on the part of those who speak the language.

INTRODUCTION: GOOGLE AND THE INTRODUCTION OF GOOGLE IGBO

Whereas Nigeria has no fewer than 250 cultural areas, it actually stands on a tripod of *Hausa*, *Yoruba,* and *Ibo* – the three largest ethnic groups in the country. The Ibo people speak the Igbo language. The remaining cultures affiliate themselves to the big three in one way or the other. Each of the three groups has a population of well over 20 million and occupies at least five of Nigeria's 36 political subdivisions. Besides that, each of the three giants exercises a considerable influence on the nation's socio-political and economic landscapes. Analysts and formulators of government policies must take into functional cognizance the interests of each of the three groups before turning in any Green or White Paper.

The big sizes of Nigeria's three primary ethnic groups could be adduced as one of the reasons that propelled Google Incorporated, the United States-based search giant, to include them in its local language portfolio, the Igbo version being the latest inclusion. Anyone accessing Google in Nigeria will see the hyperlinks to the home pages of the three sites. Google Yoruba was first noticed in 2006, Hausa in 2008 while the Igbo version is about a year old.

The process of integrating local languages into their product offerings by ICT giants like Microsoft and Google is part of the fulfillment of the Marshall McLuhan's (1967) concept of "the global village", which promotes a world made one or smaller through communication. Internet is the channel through which this objective could be achieved as it gradually develops into a global system of cultures (Mooij, 1997, p.43). Google has expanded beyond Nigerian languages to include such major African languages as Zulu, Swahili and Arab, among many others.

Google's commitment to local languages, alongside its principal form of communication (English), is aimed at deregulating access to the Internet and further enhancing the reality of McLuhan's proposition. This greatly promotes Google's corporate image and, if well managed, has the potential to generate profit for it. Multilingual websites are expensive to maintain and only firms that have the muscle (Samiee, 2001, p.285) can shoulder the financial responsibility involved. Running multilingual sites has also been a response to various studies to determine how Internet-based businesses can expand their horizons. One of these studies is that of Shneiderman, Byrd and Croft (1998, pp.95–98) which suggests ways of building search engine interfaces that could bring a better search experience. However, this report is not really about commercial propensity or viability of Google Igbo. It deals with the impact of Google's search technology on the Ibo people of Nigeria who speak the Igbo language.

Brief About Google Incorporated

Google, which emerged as post-doctoral business outfit, was established in 1996 by Larry Page and Sergey Brin, two alumni from Stanford University, United States. However, their popular domain www.google.com was not uploaded on to the Internet until 1997. The company was formally incorporated in 1998. Google succeeded in indexing about 60 million web pages in 1998 and has since then grown to several billions of pages. Much of the indexing is carried out in English. The simple design of its home page, easy accessibility and a dramatic rise in the number of internet users over the years have worked to Google's advantage as the company continues to grow to become the world's biggest search engine, thereby controlling half of the global search engine business. From a mere $100,000 in 1998, Google has become a billion-dollar corporation, now worth more than $150 billion (*The Economist*, 2006: 13).

Google's diversification into local language search engines is a development in Internet marketing communications, which focuses on how search companies can build their brands, improve their presentation and satisfy their audiences bet-

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