



REVITALIZING ENDANGERED LANGUAGES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The paper explores the challenges to linguistic vitality confronting many minority languages in a heterogeneous society such as Nigeria with over 450 minority languages. The paper discusses the possible underlying issues that could lead to a language becoming endangered because of the attitude of speakers towards such

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and proffer the possible ways in which

INTRODUCTION

Language is a powerful symbol and medium of a group's identity and communication. Thus, much of the group's social activities such as cultural, spiritual and intellectual life are accomplished through their language. Similarly, issues comprising everyday greeting, expression of emotions, ceremonies, technical vocabulary and a horde of others are also experienced through language. By inference, language is very essential to human heritage and existence. This accounts for the over 7000 languages estimated world-wide. Nigeria, being the harbinger of over 500 languages (NERDC 2009) out of the 2011 languages in Africa. Many languages in Nigeria

a language(s) would not be endangered. The peculiar challenges presented by cultural, religious and socio-political practices to language use in a country like Nigeria are highlighted particularly when the society is expected to ensure that languages change to outwit so called majority languages like Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba function. The paper observes that minority languages in Nigeria have become endangered while the continue to flourish.

are endangered, with the likelihood of eventual extinction. This seems to be the lot of the many languages spoken in central Nigeria. While detailed discussion on these languages is done elsewhere in this paper, it is imperative to understand, as some linguists have pointed out, that once a language is endangered, two fundamental strategies to stabilize and rescue the language are evolved. They comprise language documentation and language revitalization. This work explores the challenges facing languages orthography and suggests a road map for safeguarding such languages from endangerment and possible extinction.

The exact number of languages spoken in Nigeria is not quite certain as there are some languages which are yet to be discovered. In fact, what constitutes a language or a dialect has been debated for too long a time by linguists. Hoffman (1974) classifies 396 language families in Nigeria excluding dialects that are recognized while Hansford (1976) recognizes 395 languages in Nigeria. Blench and Dendo (2003) record 550 languages as spoken in Nigeria. Adekunle (1976) classifies the languages of Nigeria into groups according to their functions as medium of communication in the Nigerian context as examined below:

1. **CLASS A** Languages are the major indigenous languages spoken by at least six million native speakers and used widely outside their state of origin by Nigerians whose mother tongues are different. They are Hausa, Igbo and Yorùbá.
2. **CLASS B** Languages are those not much used outside their state of origin but officially recognized and used at the national or federal level as one of the nine major languages. They are Kanuri, Fula, Edo, Efik, Tiv, and Ijaw, etc.

3. CLASS C LANGUAGES are minor languages with no official recognition at the state level. While Adekunle's claims as regards the above classification may be questionable in some respects, especially with reference to Class C languages, It should be acknowledged that the Federal Government of Nigeria (1979) officially recognizes Hausa, Igbo and Yorùbá as tools for the conduct of business in the National Assembly side by side with English. The multilingual character of the Nigerian nation has resulted in its inability to develop a national language that can reflect and integrate the cultural diversities of the nation. This development has placed the English language in a preponderance official life. Though regional languages like Yorùbá, Igbo and Hausa are also recognized by the 1999 constitution as official languages, it is, however, important to emphasize the fact that, English enjoys more prominence among the other languages because while these indigenous languages are restricted to the regions which culturally produced them, English language cuts across cultures, borders and races. Thus, the focus of this paper is on the dwindling fortunes of the minority languages in Nigeria and its progressive systematic displacement by the 'so called' majority languages which include the Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo in Nigeria.

African languages tend to generally thrive better than languages of other continents (Blench 1998; Mous 2003). Yet, there are a number of instances of endangerment as will be presented in a subsequent part of this paper. In these cases, clear paradigms of response toward maintenance are needed. Reports of successful language maintenance and revitalization efforts in Africa are paltry. In this regard, Obiero (2008) argues that while reports on language shift and death in Africa are rife, there are no clear-cut accounts of language revival projects. Indeed, he argues further that on a world wide scale, only Hebrew and some Hawaiian and Maori languages have really been brought back from the brink to become normal mediums of communication in speech communities. This suggests the need for more effective and realistic paradigms of revitalization efforts. This paper is intended to be contribution toward solving this. It proffers a solution that

emphasizes the need to face the reality that language death is a natural element of the ecology of languages and in many instances may be extremely difficult if not impossible to reverse. In this wise, a system that helps to avoid wasting time and effort on trying to revive the use of doomed languages is proposed. This proposal favours the use of technology to archive such languages, while reserving real conservation for struggling languages that still have some reasonable chance of surviving. A method of determining the current condition of the concerned languages is also proposed.

Language Endangerment

The phenomenon of language endangerment has become a factor for public debate world- wide and quite a lot has been written on the issue. Renowned linguists including Krauss (1992), Grenoble and Whaley (1998), Dixon (1998), Hagage (2000) and others have decried the spate and gravity of language endangerment around the world which requires relentless and continued effort to be surmounted. According to Mufwene, in the UNESCO Ad-HOC expert group on endangered languages (2003:1), 'linguistic diversity is being lost at a dramatic speed wherein the native speakers of these languages are losing their cultural heritage'. In like manner, Grenoble's and Whaley's (1988) observe that language endangerment is a process whereby "speakers abandon their native tongue in adaptation to an environment where use of that language is no longer advantageous to them".

An endangered language is a language that is at risk of falling out of use. This situation is determined foremost by the age of its current speakers. From the same encyclopedia, Michael Krauss cited in Adejir (2010:2) informs that languages are regarded as being safe if children will probably be speaking them in 100 years' time, endangered, if children will not be speaking them in 100 years' time and Moribund if children are not speaking it now. Anthony Woodbury views "an endangered language" as one that is likely to become extinct in the near future", and laments the trend whereby a great percent of world languages are "falling out of use and being replaced by others that are more widely used in the region or nation, such as English in the US and Spanish in Mexico". He approximates the next

century as an era of mass extinction for endangered languages unless the current trends are reversed. This is based on the notion that at present, many languages are rarely being learned by new generation of children or by speakers coming into such language communities, thereby making such languages vulnerable to extinction. From the foregoing, we may observe that any language which displays vast characteristics of reduction in its communicative domains due to lack of consistency of usage by its young and adult native speakers, is endangered and may become extinct. This, however, is the linguistic situation which UNESCO (2003:2) warns against since, in its opinion, “a language that is extinct can never be review”. Sociolinguists have posited tripartite criteria for identifying any language as endangered. These comprise (a) the number of speakers currently living, (b) the mean age of native and/or fluent speakers and (c) the percentage of the youngest generation acquiring fluency, with the language in question. Thus, once the criteria listed above have been identified, two basic steps are required – Language documentation and language revitalization to reverse the situation.

Causes of language Endangerment

The causes of language endangerment can be divided into four main categories:

1. Natural catastrophes, famine, disease: for example, Malol, Papua New Guinea (earthquake); Andaman Islands (tsunami)
2. War and genocide, for example, Tasmania (genocide by colonists); Brazilian indigenous peoples (disputes over land and resource); El Salvador (civil war)
3. Overt repression, e.g. for ‘national unity’ (including forcible resettlement): for example, Kurdish, Welsh, Native American languages
4. Cultural/political/economic dominance, for example, Ainu, Manx, Sorbian, Quechua and many others. (Synthesized from Nettle & Romaine 2000; Crystal, 2000) Factors often overlap or occur together. The dividing lines can be difficult to distinguish, for example, in the Americas disease and suppression of Native cultures spread after colonization, and

in Ireland many Irish speakers died or emigrated due to government in action which compounded the effects of the potato blight famine in the nineteenth century. The fourth category, which is the most common, can be further subdivided into five common factors:

- Economic: for example, rural poverty leads to migration to cities and further afield. If the local economy improves, tourism may bring speakers of majority languages
- Cultural dominance by the majority community, for example, education and literature through the majority or state language only; indigenous language and culture may become 'folklorised'
- Political: for example, education policies which ignore or exclude local languages, lack of recognition or political representation, bans on the use of minority languages in public life
- Historical: for example, colonization, boundary disputes, the rise of one group and their language variety to political and cultural dominance
- Attitudinal: for example, minority languages become associated with poverty, illiteracy and hardship, while the dominant language is associated with progress/escape. More recently, there have been many community initiatives to revive or revitalize endangered languages.

Bilingualism and the language situation in Nigeria

Bilingualism is the bane or root cause of language endangerment and death. It is the ability to speak two languages equally well. While multilingualism is the ability to speak three languages well. So, people that have native -like control of two or more languages are bilinguals and multilingual or polyglots. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multilingual nation with over 250 ethnic groups and over 400 endoglossic languages. These 400 indigenous languages are grouped into major and minor languages respectively. Languages like Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo are the major endoglossic languages, also known as the "Big Three". These three are termed detamillionaire languages because they have a minimum of ten million speakers.

Besides the “Big Three”, Nigeria also has many minor languages; nine out of those minor languages are termed “major minor” also known as “millionaire languages” because they have a minimum of one million speakers. They are: Ijaw, Edo, Efik, Fulfulde, Idoma, Igala, Kanuri, Nupe and Tiv respectively. All other native Nigerian languages such as Urhobo, Isoko, Itsekiri, Jukun, Koma etc. are purely minor languages because they have less than a million speakers (Awonusi, 2009: 183-185). Nigeria also has three exoglossic languages which are English (the major exoglossic), French and Arabic (minor exoglossics) respectively. The Nigerian Pidgin which is a hybridization of the English language and Nigerian native languages—70% of English and 30% of native languages -also flourishes in the urban cities and places of economic activities—places that have conglomeration of people from different ethno-linguistic backgrounds.

Nigeria is a linguistic melting point and a place of linguistic Armageddon. Nigerians are bilinguals and multilinguals. English is the lingua franca, second and official language in Nigeria. According to Emenanjo (2010:7), “when all speakers become bilingual, the penalty is death for the weaker language”. The Nigerian Pidgin spoken everywhere by every Nigerian in this country is a severe threat to indigenous Nigerian languages. As Agbegha (2010:281) opines, “the enthronement of Pidgin means the sacrifice of our indigenous languages”. The English language has taken over every domain of languages use in Nigeria. It is used everywhere, including the home to a level that children born and bred in Warri, Port Harcourt, Benin, Sapele, Lagos and Calabar have the Pidgin as their L1. This is a clear indication that the indigenous Nigerian languages will die off in the future.

Possible Solutions

Language documentation As a Process of Language Revitalization/conservation

Language documentation means “the process by which a language is documented in terms of its grammar, its lexicon as well as its oral tradition” including stories, songs, religious texts and a horde of others. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia conceives language documentation as “the process by which a language is documented from a documentary linguistic

perspective". To Himmelmann (1998:166) and Woodbury (2003), language documentation presupposes "the provision of a comprehensive record of the linguistic practices characteristic of a given speech community". From the foregoing, it is evident that language documentation as a procedure for rescuing an endangered language.

Language documentation is one of the key issues in any attempt to preserve a language. It involves assembling a comprehensive record of the elements, characteristics and systems of a language such that there can be standard, credible and citable sources of data on the language. Modern advances in computer technology have made available means of documenting endangered languages fast and efficiently (Russell 1992). In modern times the chief method of studying the system of a language is corpus linguistics, which largely depends on the use of computer programs. Today, there are electronically readable corpora, making it possible to do in seconds the kind of linguistic analysis that would normally take months. Today, it is possible to use computers to generate the corpora of languages and preserve them for posterity. Hundreds of years down the line when such languages may have disappeared as normal means of day to day conversation, their systems can still be understood and subjected to detailed study where the need arises.

A number of benefits arise from this. Computer based programs are now used to write in previously non-written languages, produce dictionaries, and compile digital and hard copy folk literature and history which can remain accessible for ages. Russell (1992) refers to a situation where within two weeks of exposure to computer language tools, five Kom speakers in Cameroon produced a 2,000 word dictionary from a 25,000 word body of literature they wrote in those two weeks.

This is an illustration of the kind of contribution that computer technology has made to language documentation and by extension, archival preservation. As earlier said, even when such languages are long gone from the real world, they can still be with us in the virtual world. People who do not speak those languages would still be able to enjoy their literature and knowledge, still using computers.

Language conservation

Language conservation is the act of preserving, guarding, or protecting a language from death or loss by using it in every domain of language use

by its owners and bequeathing it to their children and documenting it. In other words, it is the act of keeping a language safe from generation to generation. English is the language of the new information age and the prestige-laden attitudinal differential in favor of it poses a severe threat of linguicide on the indigenous languages of Nigeria. English is a predator language and a source of threat to all the Nigerian languages. There will be a linguistic genocide—mass killing of languages—our indigenous languages in Nigeria if something is not done about it. Our indigenous languages should be preserved or protected before they will be consumed by the predator English. The surest way to animate or enliven a language is to bequeath it to the next generation—using the language regularly at home, school, government, church, social functions, market, mass media, work place etc. A language thrives when it is used in every domain of language use. As the saying goes: “Use your language or lose it”. Language preservation must be a collective or communal effort and not individual. Ndimele (2003:353) states: The community and only the community can preserve a living language. If the community surrenders its responsibility to outsiders or even a few persons within the community (such as teachers), the language will die. Language preservation efforts must involve the total community and not just a part of it.

There is the need for government, parents, schools, policy makers, language planners and other stake holders to put in place urgent measures that will arrest this unwelcome situation. The first thing to do is to create cultural awareness and revival with the aim of repositioning minority languages in a way that an average Jaba, Igala, Idoma or Tiv man/woman will be proud of his/her language and also wants to identify with it. This can be done by encouraging people to speak pure mother tongue. The mixing of any minority language with so called majority language by minority language speakers should be discouraged. We should borrow a leaf from the French government who banned the mixing of French language with any other language on her media. We need to concentrate more on the upcoming generation so as not to sell out minority cultures totally to the so called majority languages like the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba language. Also, parents need to go back to the tradition of storytelling to

teach morals and cultural values; they should speak their own language(s) to their children and encourage their children to do the same thereby enhancing their knowledge and confidence in their languages. Parents must instill cultural pride in their children by regularly clothing them in traditional attires which must not follow the once in a year syndrome but parents should let this be seen as part of their children's wardrobe.

Also interesting programs in minority languages that are children and youth-related must be encouraged. Children and youth-focused drama, comedy; music with the active involvement of the target audience; the youths and children must be encouraged. This could gradually displace the cartoon, Nickelodeon and The Disney series which have nearly captured the upcoming generation. Government also needs to actively encourage the preservation of minority languages. It is not enough for our government to put policies in place but they must follow such policies up. Such emphasis that they lay on payment of tax by the citizenry should also be laid on the importance of the mother tongue.

Government can sponsor jingles to create awareness on the importance of the mother tongue; it can also sponsor billboards that will also create awareness with such written in minority languages. Competitions that attract motivations and reward for excellent performance in minority languages at all levels should be encouraged and given wide publicity in order to effect positive impact on other students. Dictionary should be made available online as a resource material, specialist in the language can also teach some minority languages in an interactive manner online. This no doubt will assist sincere and willing students to learn and improve their knowledge of the language. It is disheartening to note that most universities in Nigeria do not have departments where minority languages are studied. This should be looked into and addressed adequately.

Conclusion

The English language, although a European language, has gained an endoglossic status in Nigeria as it has become the L1 of many Nigerians and used in every domain of language use in Nigeria, making Nigeria a cultural satellite of Europe, and thus in a linguistic bondage and mental slavery. The over-embracement of English in Nigeria makes it a linguicide—a

metaphorical language killing chemical or substance, exposing the indigenous languages of Nigeria to endangerment and eventual death if they are not revitalized. All the native Nigerian languages are endangered as none of them is on the Internet and no Nigerian is free from the enthronement of Pidgin due to urbanization.

The death of a language precipitates the death of a people, culture, heritage and the loss of nationality and nationhood. Your language is “you” and losing it implies losing the “you” in “you”, making you an invisible or a hollow man—a slough. A group that loses her language to another reduces herself to the status of a slave. Lambert (1979:186) advises: “We have our unique culture and language and these give us distinctive styles of personality and distinctive modes of thought... Trespassers or potential eroders beware A lack of generational transmission and lack of documentation and audio-visual recording of the language and oral traditions such as songs, stories, proverbs, riddles, festivals etc. are the root causes of language death. Speakers of Nigerian languages should bequeath their languages to their children by speaking it with them always. Nigerian languages should be used in every language domain and they should be studied at school and documented. Nigerians should have the sense of language loyalty and maintenance and have positive attitudes for their indigenous languages. Nigerians who engage in inter-tribal marriages should learn each other’s language and use them at home—never to make their children have the Pidgin or Creole as their L1”.

The onus of developing any language lies on its owners -native speakers. Apart from bequeathing their languages to their children, native speakers should also write books on their languages, teach them, organize courses, seminars, workshops, design curricula, examine and promote their languages to any national and international level. Nigerians should emancipate themselves from mental slavery by using their native languages and keeping them alive. Do not be a language trespasser. Use your language, or lose it! Use it or nobody else will use it for you.

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