

Book Review

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Book: *Commissioned and Inspired Works on some Vital Aspects of Linguistics*
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The book, *Commissioned & Inspired Works on some Vital Aspects of Linguistics* is the last colossal academic accomplishment of Prof. Okon Etim Akpan Essien, FMLAN, FNAL, OON, who, though earned his professorship way back in 1985, continued to be productive, thereby gingering the younger generation to excel in the field. This book of 278 pages is a mélange of applied and core linguistic papers. It is built from a selection of papers which, according to the author, had been commissioned by the following bodies: The University of Calabar for the inaugural lecture in 2003, The Association of Nigerian Languages Teachers (ANLAT) for the keynote in 2005, The Nigerian Academy of Letters (NAL) for its Annual Lecture in 2006, and the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Uyo in collaboration with the Department of Classical and Vernacular Languages of the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, for the Syntax-phonology keynote in 2006. The variety of audiences for which the different articles were written and the time span of five years from the oldest to the most recent of the articles bespeak the variety of foci of the issues addressed in the book. The wide range of topics and issues covered launch the reader not only to the author's academic passion, social linguistic advocacy, philosophy, depth of knowledge and dexterity, but also reflect the direction, vigour and quality of research being undertaken by other contemporary Africanist linguists.

Professor Essien attributed the making of this volume to "happenstance". While he was in the process of packing up his things upon retirement from the University of Calabar, he came upon the five unpublished papers and it occurred to him that he could put them into a single book in order to make them more accessible to a wider reading public of academics and scholars, who value academic articles highly but tend not to have much access to them locally as desired. The book is made up of six chapters and each chapter is further broken down into numbered sections for easy accessibility of content. Chapter 1 serves as a general introduction to the collection. It contains preliminary remarks and the author's reasons for publishing the book. The chapter summarises and discusses pertinent issues around Nigerian languages as tools of empowerment and their importance in literacy and nation building. The chapter also presents vital information about African linguistics, establishing in particular the inextricable link between syntax and phonology in African linguistics. Chapter 2 focuses on language and power in its different ramifications, while Chapter 3 delves into the classification of Nigerian languages and the various initiatives that have been undertaken to empower major Nigerian languages. Chapter 4 revisits the syntax-phonology interface in African linguistics in a more exhaustive manner with a particular focus on the role of tone. Chapter 5 addresses the issues of literacy in national languages as vital in nation building, while Chapter 6 takes the reader into core linguistics to explore and illustrate from a variety of examples from different languages 'the interaction of syntax in tense phonology in African languages' (p.6). In the following paragraphs, Chapter 2 to Chapter 6 will be further reviewed, and an appraisal of the merits and demerits (if any) of the collection will be made.

Chapter 2 of *Vital Aspects* is entitled 'Language and Power'. The context of the paper was the University of Calabar's Inaugural Lecture of 2003. The author describes this particular paper as 'probably the most spiritually inspired academic work I have ever written' (p.3). Understandably so, he sets out in the preamble, replete with biblical references, to show that God spoke the 'Word' into being, that Jesus was the 'Word' and the word was 'Power'. Apart from dedicating a whole section of Chapter 1 to language and religion wherein he sees in the endowment of man by God with a Universal Grammar an intertwining of the spiritual and the biological (p.41), the author unreservedly references selected verses of the Bible to establish a link between God's purpose and the use of language by man. Verses cited include Proverbs 12:18, Prov. 13:3, Prov. 18:21a, Genesis 2:19-20. This goes to buttress the fact that the author's algebraic equation of language and power (p.10) is truly inspired. Professor Essien's originality of thought emerges in his definition of language: "Language is a system of structural arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which human beings make meaning and communicate and interact with each other in a community. Put more simply, language is a system of rules and

principles in which sound, structure and meaning are integrated for communication” (p.16).

A run-down of the attributes of language such as the arbitrariness existing between sounds and what they signify and its being “the quintessence of man’s behaviour” ends with a list of the virtuous as well as ignominious things language communication can achieve such as to cheat, deceive, lie, mislead, misinform, misdirect, deride, insult, and antagonize” (p. 18). The chapter touches on a variety of issues, but none in an in-depth manner. For example, it provides that linguistically/generally there are four language families represented in Nigeria: Chadic, Nilo-Saharan, Semitic and Niger-Congo. But perhaps it is the variety of roles that the author assumes in this chapter that gives it its substance. For example, Essien pitches himself as the peace-maker and conscience joggler when he states, “Most of us in this country are at least distant cousins. When we war against each other, as we once did - and are doing now and then in the name of ethnic or state origin - may we never blame it on our languages: the fault, dear Nigerians is not in our languages, but in ourselves, our greed, our acquisitive instincts and our selfishness” (p.22).

Essien’s conscientising mission sees him cautioning that in hospitals there should be no Dr. Mkpka (‘Death’) or Dr Udi (‘Grave’) or otherwise, medics should not be called without their professional titles in front of patients as this may actually exacerbate patients illness. He cautions our tendency at communicating in a rather insensitive manner: “Need I caution on some of the rude and emotionally-charged memos/letters we write to colleagues and authorities now and again? They hurt, they hurt” (p. 39). The treatment of neurolinguistics as a subsection in the chapter affords an opportunity for the author to call for action: “In any case, Mr. Chairman, isn’t it time that we established an Institute of Speech Pathology, where neuro-surgeons, speech pathologists, neuro-linguists and descriptive linguists could work together for the linguistically impaired or disordered children of this country who number in millions?” (p.27). In treating language and empowerment he extends the thoughts of prominent scholars, as in the following example: “When a prominent linguist, Allen, says that he who controls language controls history, he was partially right. But I would like to say that he who controls language controls history, power and destiny” (p.43).

Essien bemoans the fact that some minority languages may die, with the blessing of some Nigerian linguists, and reminds the reader that “When your language dies, your people also die as a people with a distinct culture and heritage” (p.48). A good chunk of the advocacy in this collection is for the revitalization of both minority and majority languages for which the author outlines a number of strategies to achieve as well as

provide related reference works to the subjects (p.51). His conclusion on this subject is unequivocal: “Therefore, nothing, nothing whatever should be done by any person, group, or authority, wittingly to weaken or disempower anybody’s or community’s language, the vital highway between God and man” (p.53). Chapter 3 treats the subject of Nigerian languages and empowerment. The author gives a brief classification of Nigerian languages, pointing out that in the past all classifications had been done by Western linguists who emphasised differences instead of similarities in Nigerian languages, thus presenting a faulty picture of the number of languages in the country. To him then, the number of Nigerian languages is still to be determined (p. 57). In a departure from previous approaches that emphasised differences, he instead draws out the ‘commonness’ in Nigerian languages (pp.58-60) and goes on to advocate for a rise in the number of ‘major languages’ since being a major language is the criterion to gain government’s attention (p. 62).

Essien’s major concern has been that all Nigerian languages are at risk of dying, including the major ones, and the way to achieve their survival ‘is for them to be used in all forms of communication that modern society requires’ (p. 62). To continue neglecting our own languages while pitching English ahead is ‘tantamount to the genocide of our God-given gifts together with their invaluable heritages’ (p.71). The neglect is suffered by Nigerian languages in all social spheres including homes, churches, the media, the movie industry and in education at all levels including the university level where, for instance, students at the University of Uyo reading Ibibio or Efik are often ridiculed as ‘*mbio una se enam*’ “those who lack what to study” (p.64). The author derides the current moribund nature of institutions which were set up to cater for the ‘systematic development, promotion and empowerment of Nigerian languages for use in education’ (p. 69), and recommends radical and immediate action as the only means to solve the problem. The solution should see all universities ‘start a language elaboration or enrichment programme in at least a Nigerian language leading to the development of a metalanguage for each language’ (p. 72), and national associations such as the Linguistic Association of Nigeria (LAN) and the Association for the Promotion of Nigerian Languages providing co-ordination and workshop sessions. This way, a sizeable number of languages would be subjected to empowerment.

The author reminds the reader how the French language has been developed over the centuries by the *Academie Française* established in 1635, and advocates that Nigerian institutions follow this example with systematic support from the government. A number of specific recommendations buttress Essien’s call for action. One of such equipollent bilingualism for Nigerian children (p.74) while deriding the mentality

whereby Nigerian parents who grew up bilingual deprive their children of the same opportunity for fear they will be ‘contaminated’ by their mother tongue.

Essien equally recommends the implementation of all policy provisions in the *National Policy on Education* (NPE). Others include the mandatory use of mother tongues in all vital areas of national life from which they have been excluded, the teaching of a mother tongue in every nursery school in the country, formalisation of the use of the mother tongues in offices: such as Ibibio in Akwa Ibom, Efik in Cross River and Igbo in Anambra. He calls for Nigerian writers such as Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe to write in their mother tongues of as teachers of Nigerian languages. His vehemence in his regard is not surprising as he had been at the forefront of mother-tongue advocacy for over three decades. Strangely enough, Essien does not suggest that the existing works of prominent Nigerian writers be translated into local languages. Chapter 4, as earlier mentioned, treats in a more in-depth manner the syntax-phonology interface in African languages. The fundamental premise on which this chapter is built is that in grammar, and more so in the grammar of African languages, there is an inextricable integration between syntax and phonology which needs to be given fuller attention by linguists. Tone in African languages, for example, ‘as a contrastive pitch serves a lexical function in much the same way as a consonant or vowel does’ (p. 85) in addition to performing a grammatical function, as in Ibibio, Igbo, the Fante variety of Akan among others (p. 87-89). Making references to his earlier works, the author systematically proves that homonymy is a common feature of Ibibio morphology (p.92-93). A further analysis of what he refers to as a curious interplay between tense (or tense/aspect and focus as per Hyman and Watters (1984, p.233), in contrast to what is regarded as ‘syntactic intervention in phonology’ by leads him to conclude unequivocally that the former approaches the question of conditioning tenses from a semantic point of view, while the latter addresses the question ‘from the view point of the interplay between syntax and phonology’ (100). This chapter is a tip of the iceberg of what awaits the reader in chapter six.

Chapter 5 is a lecture on the crucial question of the role of literacy in nation building otherwise known as national development. No nation has thrived and passed down its heritage without making use of a language in which written records are stored. After considering a number of definitions of language, appreciating their merits and shortcomings, the author’s own contribution to what constitutes language is highlighted using the definition he had used earlier in Chapter 2 (p.6). In what Essien refers to as the biology and power of language, he buttresses Chomsky’s (1981) and Lenneberg’s (1967) postulation of an innate biological basis for language, an exclusively human endowment, and the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) of the 1960s and universal grammar (UG)

in recent times as the successors of these evolving views. The cerebral cortex of the human brain contains the grey matter which is home to higher intellectual functions such as language (p.110). Language impairment results if there is damage to this area of the brain. Language seen as power emanates from the fact that humans conceptualise the world through language, whether when conscious or dreaming (p. 111). Fry (1979) reminds us that ‘speech is the mirror of the soul: as a man speaks, so is he’; while Chomsky (1972) has stated that “language is a mirror of the mind”. Language is so powerful a tool that any country that toys with it toys with that which has made nations great (p.112).

The chapter goes on to define literacy, seeing it as the ability to read and write and carry out numeracy in a given language. Literacy in a language comes with numerous social, cultural, political and economic advantages, and pitches the written language above languages that are oral (p.113-116). Ibibio has the advantage in this sphere because it was written over three decades ago. A worrying thing, however, is the question of whether the educated, the literate in our society, those who have the privilege of wilting language, can live up to the ‘national ethos, values and integrity’ that it takes to build a nation (p. 117). Essien leaves the question hanging, probably because the answer is obvious. Chapter 6 entitled “Introduction to African Linguistics”, which is an amalgam of core and non-core linguistics is a University of Sao Paulo lecture, of over a hundred and twenty pages, which by virtue of size and content could be a separate book on its own. The chapter sets out with Lyon’s (1968) definition of linguistics and expands into the fundamentals of the discipline as a science. As a pure science, linguists from totally different backgrounds working independently on a linguistic phenomenon on a given language, using different methods, have arrived at the same conclusion. The *terra incognita* that is African linguistics had contributed to enrich linguistic theory which for a long time was dominated by a Eurocentric approach. Just as there is American linguistics, Chinese linguistics, and so on, there is no doubt that there is African linguistics.

The study of African linguistics dates back to the 17th century according to Clements (2000, p.123) when Fr. Giacinto Bisciotta published a grammar of Kikongo in Rome, and thereafter a number of publications in the 18th and 19th and early 20th centuries on different African languages emerged (cf. Alexandre, 1967). As at today, works on African languages have been greatly enhanced by advances in linguistic theory. In the quest to understand the universal properties of the human language faculty, specific approaches have been developed to analyse certain categories in African languages, such as tense, aspect, mood (TAM).The chapter expands on African linguistics with focus on the core levels of language structure, that is, “phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics

as well as the non-core areas of sociolinguistics, historical/comparative linguistics, history, ethnology and naming as both a linguistic and cultural enterprise” (p. 135).

At the level of phonology a common picture of phonemes or segmental units of African languages according to Clements (2000:125) are given. As an example of phonemes particular to African languages, implosives are characterized and described exhaustively as per Ladefoged (1975:123). Labio-velar stops are identified, described as well as other characteristics of African phonology such as consonant clusters and clicks.

With regard to vowel processes, there is a focus on vowel harmony, an important peculiarity of African and Chinese languages as well as the role of tone as a lexical and grammatical property. Among the tonal phenomena that African languages exhibit are downdrift, downstep with examples drawn from the Efik-Ibibio-Annang cluster, and the use of tone and intonation, hitherto overlooked in the phonology of African languages. After looking closely at the morphosyntax of African languages, and establishing commonalities in them the Lecture moves on to ideophones, which tend to be found exclusively in African languages, such as the Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan and Chadic languages but not in Khoisan languages (p.168). Ideophones are anomalous phonologically and function semantically to intensify a situation, an act, descriptions, sounds, emotions, senses, movement, etc. in a rather economic and vivid manner (p. 169). For example in Ibibio:

ódùó dzìm
'It fell dzìm (heavily)'

Ndikop kpùùb
'Suddenly, I heard a heavy sound “kpùùb”'

Essien points out that because European languages do not have ideophones, it is sometimes challenging to translate them into these languages. The rest of the book is dedicated to an extensive treatment of the syntax of African languages – extensive because it delves into many languages to illustrate linguistic phenomena such as units, simple sentences, cross referencing of NPs with VPs, commands and questions, serial construction, relative clauses, pronominal systems, parts of speech, inflections, syntactic conditioning of tenses, verbal extensions, argument and structure of verbs as well as stative and non-stative verbs. The wide scope of areas covered means that no language is actually dissected in detail, with the reason being that it is an introductory course. The last part of *Commission and Inspired* is dedicated to a review of the classification of African languages. Early speculations about African languages were that languages under

study had resulted from a mixture of characteristics of one language and the characteristics of another language. The mixed language hypothesis held sway until Greenberg's (1963) publication, *The languages of Africa*.

Greenberg's classification of African languages was based on cognacy. This gave rise to some major language families/phyla which are Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Kordofanian and Khoisan (p.214). A run-down of the defining characteristics of each language phylum is given (p.214-233). Post Greenberg classification involves major modifications on this classification with some languages reclassified, while 'Niger-Kordofanian' was dumped and Niger-Congo was adopted for the phylum (p.234). This section could have been enhanced if the author suggested a lexically-based phylogenetic method of classification, which engenders safer and greater sophisticated interpretation of results (cf. Hillis & Bull, 1993; Forster & Renfrew, 2006) over the traditional lexicostatistical analysis; even as we cannot wilt the overall importance of historical reconstruction through the comparative method. The book concludes with an outline of the major features that characterise a number of languages under the post-Greenberg classification (p.235-256). Nonetheless, this chapter is a "must read" for scholars of African languages and linguistics.

The book is remarkable in its treatment of quite a rich diversity of issues pertaining to the different subfields of linguistics, both core and peripheral. Whether in the Applied or core linguistic papers, the author has tried to bring to the understanding of the reader, how language works - divinely, biologically, linguistically, physically, socially, culturally, politically, and economically. The author portrays language as a powerful tool in the entire human spectrum. There is an interrelatedness in some of the papers, which necessarily means some issues are repeated or emphasised. However, the reader is saved from being bored over the seeming repetitions because of the lively and engaging approach of the author. Essien might have put together this collection as an after-thought, but the field of African Linguistics, and Nigerian Linguistics-related issues would have been the poorer without the publication of *Commissioned and Inspired works on some vital aspects of Linguistics*. Reading this book will broaden the scope of one's knowledge of linguistics as an academic discipline which is both scientific and humanistic. Okon Essien has, in the chapter sequence, told his readers what he intended to tell them (judging from chapter 1), succeeded to tell them what he proposed to tell them. However, it seems that he has not, eventually, told them what he told them (in chapters 1 – 6), as the book has no summary and conclusion. Additionally, there is no unity on the issues discussed, a point the author honestly confesses (p.1). Though there are ample references of the several works cited, if a post author (mortem) edition occurs, paying finer attention to the references section, especially, would be more helpful (for

example: absence of some page number citations of Essien (1983) quoted on p. 12; Chomsky & Halle 1968 quoted on p. 14; Cameron (1990) quoted on p. 15 and Skutnabb-Kangas (1990) quoted on p. 44, Heine & Nurse (2000, p. 3) rather than (2003, p. 3), omission of Clements (2000) cited on p.131. Also, no provision of index, which would assist in locating specific subjects, could vitiate part of the quality of the book. All the same, with the freshness with which the author presents his facts, persuasive reason and the depth of penetrating analysis, we assume anyone can find in *the book* something inspiring, relevant and intriguing, from a perspective one might not have otherwise come across or be familiar with. Scholars in the discipline of linguistics, and in particular, African linguistics should be inspired and challenged (by the contents of this volume) to do more for African languages and in African Linguistics. Research (and publication) in African Linguistics as an autonomous scientific discipline has attracted the focus of prominent Africanist specialists in the last 100 years, especially. Chapter 6 of Essien's book is one of the latest contribution to this exciting ground breaking discipline.

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