

Reversing the Endangerment Trend of Indigenous Nigerian Languages: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

The study examines the challenges and prospects of reversing the endangerment state of indigenous Nigerian languages. It establishes the need to revive an endangered or dead language, but notes that there are challenges that should be considered before embarking on such an enterprise in order to achieve a good result. Some of the identified challenges are: the negative attitude of the people and government towards the languages, lack of self-enhancing opportunities in the use of the languages, the influence of English and the faulty Nigerian political structure. Also, the study considers the prospects of revitalizing the languages by highlighting the experiences and successes recorded by the Hebrew, Welsh and Maori language groups. Finally the study recommends ways of overcoming the identified challenges. These include restructuring Nigerian political system, making the languages more functional by creating self-enhancing opportunities in the use of the languages and engaging interest groups in language advocacy campaigns.

Keywords: *endangerment, indigenous languages, advocacy campaigns*

Introduction

Language plays critical roles in the life of the people as it facilitates social interaction and confers identity on the speakers, hence the need to preserve and sustain the use of a given language. Nigeria has over 500 indigenous languages (Blench, 2011), and there have been concerns about the imminent death of these languages, especially minority ones (Crystal, 2000; Mowarin, 2004; Ohiri-Aniche, 2014). In the past twenty years or thereabout, there have been conscious efforts by linguists and community leaders to bring the issue of language endangerment and death to the fore by raising concerns about the health states of the affected languages, and articulating ways of reversing the ugly trend. (Crystal 2000; Ohiri-Aniche, 2014; Blench, 2011; Mowarin, 2004). The present study aims to contribute to the explanation of the language endangerment phenomenon by examining the challenges and prospects of reversing the endangerment state of affected Nigerian indigenous languages.

Language Endangerment in Nigeria

Language death and endangerment are global phenomena that have far reaching implications on the human heritage and existence. From one corner of the globe to another, there are accounts of language death and endangerment. A language is considered endangered when there is a reasonable evidence that the language may cease to exist in the near future as a result of the language being replaced by another. According to Crystal (2000:121), "endangered languages come to be used progressively less and less throughout the community, with some of the functions they originally performed either dying or gradually being supplanted by other languages" He notes further: "there are many cases in Africa...where an indigenous language has come to be less used in educational, political and other public situations." In order to explain the degrees of endangerment, linguists have evolved yardsticks to explain stages of endangerment. For instance, Wurm (1998:192), explains language endangerment, using five classificatory framework, namely, potentially endangered languages: languages that are socially and economically disadvantaged, under heavy pressure from a larger language and beginning to lose child speakers; endangered languages having few or no children learning the language and the youngest speakers are young adults; seriously endangered languages: have the youngest good speakers age 50 or older; moribund: have only a handful of good speakers left, mostly old; extinct languages: have no speakers left.

Because of the challenges of the paucity of data about the number and health states of worlds' languages, there are no categorical statements about the number of dead and endangered languages. However, there have been estimates and projections. For instance, Whalen and Harrison (2009) keying into the uncertain world of world languages states: "many linguists predict that by 2100 , only half of these languages will still be spoken – a loss of one language every 12 days". Also, citing 1996 Report of the Foundation for Endangered languages, Crystal states:

There is agreement among linguists who have considered the situation that over half of the world languages are moribund, i.e., not effectively being passed on to the next generation . We and our

children, then, are living at the point of human history where, within perhaps two generations, most languages in the world will die out .

Language endangerment manifests differently in different situations, but the baseline remains the dwindling number of speakers of a particular language occasioned by socio– political developments within a community or state. For instance, out of the estimated 6,000 languages, according to Crystal (2000), about 20 are relatively healthy boasting of 96% of the world population. This means that about 5,980 languages have uncertain future because of the scant speakership base. Crystal (2000:18) citing Michael Krauss (1992) observes: “I consider it a plausible calculation that- at the rate things are going - the coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90% of mankind’s language.”

The Nigeria situation is not different from the picture being painted above as most of the indigenous languages are endangered and threatened. Perhaps, worse off because of the general attitudes of the people and the governments at the different levels. This has to do with the negative attitudes of the people towards their languages and the total shut out of these languages from use in the public domain, especially in the conduct of government businesses. Coupled with this, is the lack of enough research in these languages which Blench (2011) notes as follows: “yet its languages remained poorly researched compared with the effort that has gone into the indigenous languages of Europe, the Americans or Australian”. Commenting further on this, he says: “Dictionaries for Igbo and Yoruba tend to recycle the same material with variation in orthography rather than bringing new research to the table. The only dictionary of Nupe was published nearly a century ago”. The languages that are studied as referred to above, in the opinion of the writer, are quite fortunate as many others do not yet have orthographies, not to talk of dictionaries. Even those that have orthographies, and are studied in tertiary institutions are facing shrinking speakership base occasioned by the rampaging influences of English and globalization. According to a survey conducted by Blench (2011), out of about 500 languages “20 are severely endangered and as many as two hundred are threatened”.

Also, judging Nigerian indigenous languages using Wurm’s scale for measuring degrees of endangerment shows that all Nigerian indigenous languages are threatened as the three major languages: Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa, and probably the most secured ones, are endangered going by the features identified at various stages of endangerment (Balogun, 2013). This echoes the view of Ohiri-Aniche (2014), when she stated in a public lecture that more than 400 Nigerian indigenous languages are endangered, while 157 are at the verge of extinction. She attributes the ugly development to past neglect and lack of intergenerational transfer. She also stressed the urgent need to address the situation. Mowarin (2004), studying the endangerment of Urhobo languages, notes the shrinking speakerships of the three constituent languages of Urhobo culture, namely, Urhobo, Okpe and Uvwie. He attributes the state of affair to the impacts of English, Pidgin, non-implementation NPE, and the negative attitude of the people towards their language. He also suggests ways of turning the tides. It is important to observe that the idea of reviving a dead or an ailing language is a noble one, it should be noted that there are challenges, which if not addressed or put in proper perspective, may hinder any effort aimed at reviving or sustaining the use of affected languages. In realization of this, this paper examines such challenges in order to properly situate language revitalization methods and procedures in a Nigerian context.

Challenges

One major challenge to the survival of indigenous languages is the negative attitude of the people towards their language. With the coming of the English into the country and its acceptance and use in virtually all sectors, it has come to be associated with prestige. Coupled with this, is the global influence of English, both as language of international communication and of the media. This has made the people to regard English as a superior language, while regarding theirs as inferior. Commenting on this scenario and its effect, Balogun (2013:72) notes:

We despise it, under value it and repudiate it as if it was criminal to communicate in our mother dialect. Rather, we cherish and appreciate English language foisted on us by our colonial masters over our indigenous language. Even at homes children and kids who are victims of this scorn tend to believe English is far superior, to that which confers in us our natural identity.

Still commenting on the negative attitudes of the people towards indigenous languages, in this case Yoruba, Salawu (2013:109), citing Oyetade (1992) observes:

Many Yoruba in London have a negative attitude towards their mother tongue. In their struggle to acquire English qualification and style of life, they have neglected the use of their own language in pursuit of ‘English English’ which they never learn as English would have wanted them to speak it... Quite a number of parents go to the extreme of discouraging their children from speaking Yoruba

The scenario painted of Yoruba speakers of English in London is not different from other Nigerians who despise their native languages.

No doubt the above attitudinal disposition is of great challenge to any effort towards revitalizing Nigeria languages as nothing productive will be achieved bearing in mind that language survive because the speakers cherish and value it. This echoes the view of Bamgbose (1992:20) when he observes: ...the fate of endangered language may well be in the hands of the owners of the languages themselves and in their will to make it survive.”

Related to the above is the poor attitude of Nigerian government towards Nigerian indigenous languages. This attitude has resulted in deficit language policies and general lack of investment for the sustenance of these languages..The poor attitude has resulted in flawed language policies, be it legislation or others as contained in the Nigerian policy on Education (NPE). For instance, language legislation are construed to negate the very essence of the legislation as it affects the use of Nigerian languages by the insertion of proviso or escape clauses that make it impossible to enforce the provisions affecting the use of indigenous languages. (see sections 55 and 97 of the 1999 constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria, amended). The government attitude to Nigerian languages as observed above is also manifested in the general lack of investment in language development activities as there are no budgetary allocations in both state and national levels for the purpose of language development programmes, except in cases where language is treated as an ancillary in the education and media sectors. This attitude has also resulted in the non-listing of language as a legislative item, either in the exclusive or the concurrent lists.

Also, very important to the study of the challenges of revitalizing Nigerian languages is the general lack of opportunities in the use of the languages. Following the integration of English Language into the Nigeria social structure by the colonialist and their missionary brother, the language assumed a position of importance, assisted by colonial legislative instruments to the neglect of indigenous languages. Commenting on the above, Awonusi (2004:55) notes:

The 1882 Act brought education under government control and reform the curriculum in some ways such as

- The introduction of secular education
- The making of English as the language of instruction in schools
- The relegation of the vernacular language to the background

As could be observed, the 1889 Act laid the foundation for the entrenchment of English and the neglect of indigenous languages, as subsequent Acts and policies were made to further enhance the position of English. Awonusi (2004:60) has this to say about the implantation of English that eventually displaced indigenous languages in the public domain, and thus divested them of opportunities:

This other form of governmental intervention in some years earlier were the establishment of model school e.g, Barewa in the north and King’s college in Lagos where English was used as language of instruction... and introduction of various tests which examined the ability of candidate in English, e.g, Civil service examination, and the London matriculation examination (both had no provision for vernacular language).

No doubt, the gradual displacement of indigenous languages by colonial activities made it possible for the languages to be shut out in critical public domain that would have enhanced their status and promoted their use .Consequently, these languages are divested of opportunities, be it social, economic or political. The absence of opportunities for the enhancement of individual speakers of these indigenous language is a major challenge to their revitalization and preservation. ‘

The faulty political structure and practice of Nigerian Nation is also a major challenge to the revitalization of indigenous languages. The Nigeria political arrangement is centrist in structure and practice, and this makes every activity, including language related issues to gravitate towards the centre. thereby neglecting substantial issues, such as language that would been addressed at the regional or local government levels. The functionality of Nigeria is configured and preserved by English and the ruling elites knows this, therefore the tacit support for the promotion of English language to the detriment of indigenous language. It should be noted that in the first republic when the centre of political activity was in the regions, indigenous languages fared better. For instance, they were used as regional languages and languages of debates in the parliaments. In fact, the languages were very visible in the public domain.

Global impact of English can also be seen as a challenge in the quest of preserving and revitalizing Nigeria indigenous languages. English is the language of international communication via the internet, media, diplomacy and so on. Thus, the perceived prestige and the functional utility have made English a language that is sought after. Therefore for already proficient speakers of this language and beneficiaries of the

opportunities it offers to consider acquiring literacy in their native languages, which holds no opportunities in the present world order, but only as a cultural artifact is an uphill task. This also brings to the fore the need to create opportunities in the use of indigenous languages.

Prospects

Irrespective of the above challenges, there are still great prospects for the revitalization and preservation of indigenous Nigeria languages that are threatened and endangered. As observed earlier language endangerment experience is not peculiar to Nigeria, however the difference is how other communities and nations have managed the trend and restored their respective languages to relative state of health and sustainability. Some of these efforts are discussed to see how the Nigerian society could benefit from such experiences and efforts.

A very striking situation is that of the Hebrew language. After many years of disuse as a result of the destruction of the Hebrew Nation and consequent enslavement of the people, the language was revived in the 20th century with the coming of the modern nation of Israel. According to Reich (2008), the new government guided the process as the Academy of Hebrew language was founded in 1953. During this period additional 4,000 words were created to increase the Hebrew word stock from 8,000 to about 12, 00 words. Also during the period, writers were encouraged to write in Hebrew. As of today, Hebrew language is used in schools, the media and literature. Shohamy (2008) notes that in order to entrenched the language, immigrants are expected to learn Hebrew as quickly as possible in order to gain employment. Language support programmes exist to facilitate learning. Another successful effort in language revival is that of the use of Irish in Belfast. According to Ager (2009), there were only about 36 Irish speaking families in Belfast in 1965. This was a noticeable decline as Irish was widely used before then. As recounted by Ager (2009), the trend changed when a couple established Irish medium primary school in 1971. This singular effort spurred other native speakers who have endured the pains of watching their native languages die, as they send their children to the school. Ager (2009) also says that a second Irish medium primary school was established in 1987, and because of the wide reception, additional two Irish-medium secondary schools were established. Many nurseries and numerous Irish Language evening classes have been established. Because of this seemingly insignificant effort, Ager (2009) observes, has given rise to a new consciousness to the use of the language ,as Irish language based media services are offered in print and electronic media. He specifically mentions the use of Irish in BBC radio service.

Because language death and endangerment are real and pervasive, language revival and revitalization are going on world over. In America where most indigenous languages are moribund or endangered (Whalen and Harrison, 2009; Norris, 1998), there are conscious effort to revive them both by individuals, communities, organisations and governments. Reyhner (1995), mentioned three tribal communities in the United State that took decisions to protect and preserve their languages by making binding declarations. These are Northern Ute tribe, Pascua Yaqui tribe and Pawnes tribe. According is Reyhner (1995), the North Ute tribe, through their Tribal Business Committee in 1984, declares as follows:

The Ute language is a living and vital language that has the ability to match any other in the world for expressiveness and beauty. Our language is capable of lexical expansion into modern conceptual fields, such as politics, economics, mathematics and science.

In like manner, the Pascua Yaqui tribe declares as follows “our ancient language is the foundation of our cultural and spiritual heritage...all aspects of the educational process shall reflect the beauty of our Yaqui language, culture and values.” Rayhner (1995) notes that the Pawnes made their resolution through the establishment of language teaching programme in 1979. The accounts provided above demonstrate the efforts of communities in language rejuvenation and sustenance. Most significant is the consciousness displayed by the communities as their actions demonstrate the awareness that their languages are endangered, and further show the commitments towards revitalizing them.

Closely related, is the effort of the United States government to preserve native American languages. The United State government has passed different laws aimed at assisting the process of revitalizing the Native American languages, for instance, the Native American Languages Act of 1990. According to Rayhner (1995), the Act provides as follows:

The status of the cultures and languages of Native Americans is unique and the United States has the responsibility to act together with Native Americans to ensured the survival of these unique cultures and languages.

The Act also recognizes the rights of Indian tribes and other native American governing bodies to use the native American languages as a medium of instruction in all schools funded by secretary of the interior.

There is also the Native American Programs Act 1974, amended Esther Martinez Native America Languages Research Act to provide financial assistance to eligible applicant for the purpose of promoting the survival and continued vitalities of native languages. Drawing from the above, communities have set up schools. Rayhner (1995) explains that in the state of Arizona, Rockpoint, a community school where reading and writing are first taught in Navajo, and in KG, 2/3 of the instruction is in Navajo, with rest in English was established to promote the Navajo language.

Related to this, is the effort of the Maori of New Zealand to preserve their culture and language. Fleres (1989) observes that the Maoris set up day care centers staffed with Maori elders who speak to the children in Maori languages. Reporting on the progress made, Fleres (1989) notes that the programme that started in 1982, expanded that in 1988, 521 similar centers have been established with 8,000 children. This process helped in resuscitating a dying language as other efforts by the members of the community leveraged on the success of the day care system to develop other language revitalization programmes such as Maori immersion classes for adults that want to improve on their proficiency in the use of the language.

Discussion

The position adopted in this paper is the fact that a language that is endangered or dead does not mean that such a language cannot be revitalized. As indicated, Hebrew language was once dead, but today, it is back to life. It should be noted that it did not just happen by chance. The owners of the language and the government worked hard to see that their once cherished language and the symbol of their humanity did not die by articulating and implementing measures that restored vitality to the language. This, they achieved through lexical expansion, providing and promoting Hebrew learning classes and general investment in the development of the language, coupled with a robust language advocacy campaigns. Experiences of the Maoris and the Welsh are highlighted to advance the view that the death or the endangerment of a language does not mean the end of such a language. It is the view of this writer that Nigerian can borrow from the experiences of such natives and communities to preserve her indigenous languages. However, it is noted that even, when similar approaches and measures are undertaken, there are still challenges which should be well articulated and put in proper perspective to achieve a good result. Some of these challenges include the restructuring of Nigerian political system, lack of self enhancing opportunities in indigenous languages, negative attitudes of the people towards their languages and the rampaging influence of English. It is here observed that the challenges noted are not quick fixes as they do not depend on single individuals and communities. Nigeria is a vast country with distinct groups and languages. This means that the same treatment may not be applied, even when applied, there are bound to be different outcomes. It means that groups must initiate measures that are suitable for their environment. However, there are such challenges that are pervading across the groups. A good example is the impact of the Nigerian structure on the health of indigenous languages as observed earlier.

Recommendations

No doubt, language endangerment is induced by the rampaging influence of English, and as noted, the use of English in Nigeria is also a key challenge to any effort aimed at revitalizing indigenous Nigeria languages. This trend could be addressed, if certain measures are put in place, while indigenous language revitalization procedures are undertaken.

One important factor in this regard is the restructuring of Nigerian political system. The concept of restructuring has been a re-occurring decimal in the past twenty years. Politicians have argued that restructuring is beneficial to the people and environment. According to this line of thought, restructured Nigerian political system will result in ceding more powers to the regions and local governments. Ofcourse, more powers will also result in making more resources available. Indigenous languages could benefit as there could be resources for cultural and language related activities which were hitherto considered probably unimportant. Also, in a regional arrangement, indigenous languages may become more useful as regional governments might adopt indigenous languages as languages of government, especially in monolingual regions like south west, south-east and other parts of the north. Even in multi lingual regions like south-south, north-central, the various languages could also benefit as indigenous people would make demands from their governments that are not too far away. As noted by Anowunsi (2004) during the first republic, when Nigeria had a regional system, indigenous languages were quite visible as they were used in public domains as language of politics and government.

Also, efforts should be made by the government and other interest groups to create opportunities in the use of the indigenous languages. This means that the language should not just be treated as cultural artifacts that are good for the shelves, but should have self enhancing opportunities. For example, the full implementation of the provisions of the National Policy on Education (NPE) that aim to promote, though gradually, the use of indigenous languages in education will give motivation to people to learn the languages, both as languages for academic achievement and economic enhancement. Also jobs that require the use of indigenous languages should be created in all the levels of government. Businesses such as media outlets that utilize indigenous languages should be encouraged and supported. There should also be a sustained advocacy program to bring the danger of language death to the communities as most people are not aware that their languages are dying. They should be made to understand how their actions and inactions endanger their beloved languages. Related to this, is the need for indigenous people to understand that no matter how fluent they may become in L2 or FL, they can never become native speakers. In this regard, they should learn to cherish their language and identity. In this regard, groups such as non-governmental organizations, town unions and community development associations should be encouraged to undertake measures that will promote and foster communal interest in the language development of their various communities.

Conclusion

The argument in this paper is that language revitalization and preservation are worthwhile efforts. This means that programmes and activities geared towards the sustenance of a language should be pursued with utmost vigour. As noted earlier, language is the indexical marker of a race and identity, hence a cultural phenomenon and personality enhancer. However, in order to achieve the noble objective of preserving and sustaining a language, there is need to study the socio-cultural contexts of a language(s) to identify linguistic and non-linguistic factors that are likely to affect the desired outcome. By so doing, the identified factors are properly studied and addressed, if possible, in order to achieve the set goals.

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