Protection and promotion of indigenous Nigerian languages as utility vessels of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS)

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Abstract

The Nigerian speech communities during the pre-colonial era were indigenous language speaking communities before English became the official language of Nigeria. At present, English has not only become the dominant language in the indigenous communities, but also the medium of instruction in schools and media. Parents in most homes, even take pride to bring up their children as monolingual speakers of English which they believe their children will need to function effectively in school and even beyond. Also, with the ever increasing urbanization and the influx of people of diverse social backgrounds into cities where the Nigerian indigenous languages were once only spoken, the common language of interaction within the neighborhood is also shifting to English (Ohiri-Aniche 2008). The implication of this is that while English is gaining more grounds and speakers, indigenous Nigerian languages are being used in fewer domains and by fewer people, especially children (Anyanwu 2015) thus, reducing the number of active population of speakers of the indigenous Nigerian languages due to the lack of a virile and robust intergenerational transfer of the languages. This kind of situation is gradually leading some indigenous Nigerian languages into becoming moribund, endangered or even extinct. The extinction of the languages is also a disappearance of valuable sources of linguistic and historical information, anthropological links for social reconstruction and interpretation and the disappearance of the indigenous knowledge systems. The present paper therefore, adds to several other studies in highlighting the importance of the indigenous Nigerian languages in the preservation of indigenous cultural heritage

and cultural diversity. It specifically examines how the Nigerian indigenous languages can be protected and promoted as utility vessels of indigenous knowledge systems. The paper notes that this can be achieved by doing a language survey to find out the sociolinguistic facts about the languages, continuous documentation and description of the languages as well developing tools for working on them. The paper concludes by advocating a status reclassification of the languages, the active use of the languages in all spheres of the speech communities where they are spoken and the creation of indigenous Nigerian language databases suitable for archiving.

1.0 Introduction

Language is an extremely important aspect of a community, as well as an important index of identity; and it is used for all communicative functions that a community requires. It also serves as a repository of a people's culture, history, exploits etc. In fact, it is language that differentiates the homo-sapiens from other animals. Language is so important to man that every community should address linguistic issues with the same vigor that infrastructural matters are addressed. Every language has a right to exist no matter the size of the population of its speakers. Linguistic information is sometimes needed to find out something about the history of a people and the lives of the speakers of a particular language. Also linguistic evidence can be relied upon in tracing the history or even the migration pattern of a people. Indeed, losing one's language and aspects of the culture that go with the language, also entails losing the essence of a people.

The 2003 UNESCO Convention on safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage recognizes the importance of indigenous languages as expression of cultural diversity and its connection to indigenous knowledge system and sustainable development. Indigenous languages are languages that are spoken in particular regions by the natives of the region over a long period (UNESO 2003). On the other hand, indigenous

Knowledge System (IKS) refers to the traditional or folk knowledge that is unique to a particular culture. It relates different aspects of the ways of life of such a people (Warren 1991). Speakers of a language share many things, specifically: knowledge, linguistic code, socio-cultural rules, norms, values, etc. These guide the conduct of speech and other channels of communication in their communities.

Indigenous knowledge systems and practices are embedded within indigenous languages and also institutionalized by them. They include the traditional songs, stories, legends, dreams, methods and practices (sometimes preserved in the artefacts of a people). Indigenous languages are thus, the repositories of indigenous knowledge and are also the bedrock upon which indigenous knowledge systems are built, developed and sustained. There is an interface of mutual sustainability between indigenous languages and indigenous knowledge systems. Indigenous knowledge systems are embedded in and disseminated through indigenous languages and indigenous languages are preserved in indigenous knowledge systems (Anyanwu 2015). Indigenous knowledge systems encompass both tacit and explicit knowledge that is held and made use of by people who regard themselves as indigenous to a particular community. It is invested with a sacred quality and systematic unity, supplying the foundation on which the members of a traditional community sense their community's personal identity and ancestral anchorage. It is part and parcel of the culture and history of the local community.

In certain parts of Africa, people's lives are greatly affected by indigenous knowledge, since they rely on it for medicinal and herbal needs, food supply, conflict resolution and spiritual growth. Indigenous knowledge is indeed the cornerstone for the building of the identity and for ensuring coherence of social structures within communities They serve many functions in the community, households and individuals by functioning as a base for the knowledge which helps process information, promote efficient allocation of resources and help in the production methods and decisions of the community in question.

Indigenous knowledge is derived from experiences and observations both from current and past generations with a knowledge base understood by members through production methods, verbal sayings, myths, cultural events which are unique to the community and its environment. The knowledge base provides cultural acceptance and identity and participants relate to all events and experiences from this worldview. As noted by Emery (1997), the totality of what constitute the indigenous knowledge system can be captured thus:

(i) It is practical common sense, based on teachings and experience passed on from generation to generation.
(ii) It is knowing the community; it covers knowledge of the environment and the relationship among things.
(iii) It is holistic; it cannot be compartmentalized and cannot be separated from the people who hold it. It is rooted in the spiritual health, culture and language of the people.
(iv) It is an authority system. It sets out the rules governing the use of resources, respect and obligation to share. It is dynamic, cumulative and stable. It is the truth.
(v) It is a way of life and wisdom in using knowledge in good ways. It is using the heart and the head together. It comes from the spirit in order to survive.
(vi) It gives credibility to people.

As has been noted (e.g. Warren 1991), indigenous knowledge systems are however vulnerable to change since they are mostly stored in people's minds and passed on to succeeding generations by word of mouth rather than in written form. Also certain factors such as development processes, rural/urban migration and changes in population structure as a result of famine, epidemics, displacement or war constitute a threat to indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge system is even under threat from modern technology because even in remote areas the powers that push global or non-local content such as radio and television broadcasting and advertising among others, are much stronger than those

pulling local content together. Protecting the Nigerian Indigenous languages from any form of threat will also guard against the threats towards the indigenous knowledge systems.

1.1 The linguistic situation in Nigeria: An overview

The linguistic situation in Nigeria is rather complicated with a hierarchy of a geo-political structure and ethnic groupings. There is an official dichotomy between major languages (i.e. Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) and the non-major languages (i.e. all others). The three major languages have some kind of a 'national' status, and they enjoy a lot more government patronage from both the Federal and State governments where they are spoken. Perhaps due to this, awareness has been created in communities where these languages are spoken and the communities are more involved in their development. On the other hand, the non-major languages are at different levels of gross underdevelopment. The huge number may not be the only problem responsible for this lack of attention or interest. It may be more a problem of lack of advocacy and inadequate knowledge of the importance of the language of a people to both its speakers and humanity.

The Ethnologue, one of the current references for the languages of the world records 515 languages for Nigeria. Out of these languages, 505 are still living indigenous languages, 8 are extinct while 2 are second languages (Grimes 2000:166). These languages are spoken by about 373 ethnic groups (Otite 2000:14-20). Geopolitically, Nigeria is divided into manageable compartments: six geo-political zones (South South, South East, South West, North East, North Central and North West), and these are further subdivided into 36 States plus a Federal Capital Territory. Nigeria is also further subdivided into 774 Local Government Areas (LGAs). The linguistic situation, given this complex geo-political background is chaotic and many of these languages are getting moribund, endangered and extinct. With the extinction and

disappearance of some of these endangered languages, valuable sources and important links for linguistic, historical, anthropological and even social reconstruction and interpretation are lost. Nigeria is said to have the largest number of threatened languages in Africa (Blench 2012).

Nigeria's official language is English. But in addition to this, and perhaps for the need to break off imperialistic ties, the country has adopted three official regional languages - Hausa, spoken by about 20 million people in the North, Yoruba, spoken by about 19 million in the west, and Igbo, spoken by about 17 million people in a part of the south east. These three languages are regarded as 'major' languages. In addition to these three, there are about 500 other "languages", (some with very small numbers), referred to as non-major languages (Crozier/Blench 1992, Grimes 2001).

Non-major languages in the Nigerian context are languages that are spoken by the non-major ethnic groups, which are by implication not 'major', whereas the 'major' Nigerian languages are Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo as mentioned earlier. Generally, the languages spoken in Nigeria can be, in terms of their vitality ratings, grouped into five: moribund/threatened languages, retreating languages, under-developed languages, developing languages and pidgin. Moribund and threatened languages are languages that are not being used, and as such are not transmitted to the younger generation (Connell 1994). Such languages are threatened and endangered because they are on their way to extinction as a result of lack of use. Retreating languages are those that appear to be dying from a particular area, but are still flourishing in another area. This is particularly obvious at inter-country boundaries. Under-developed languages are those languages without orthographies, written literature and meta-language.

Developing languages are one step above the under-developed languages. They have fairly developed orthographies, and they are in the course of setting a literary tradition, with the instruments put in place for developing a meta-language. Considering the problems which are associated with the writing and acceptance of orthographies as well as the protocols involved in developing a literary tradition and a meta-

language, it is not surprising that the Nigerian indigenous languages are at different levels of under-development.

Unfortunately, with all the efforts that have been put into the development of these languages, not even the 'major' languages have gone beyond the 'developing' stage. We apply these classificatory labels to the indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria with a view to determining their statuses along a developmental scale. Nigeria has more than one-quarter of the languages spoken in Africa, and three of the four language phyla in Africa meet in Nigeria, namely: the Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan and Afro-Asiatic phyla.

The uniqueness of these languages is not appreciated, and they are poorly researched. Much of the work on these languages has been done by foreigners, with funding from abroad. The existing works on these languages are sometimes for this reason not the clear representation of the facts. The *Ethnologue* (www.ethnologue.com), which provides some kind of linguistic data base of 7,105 languages of the world, records 515 languages for Nigeria. Other works from which it apparently draws from have similar figures. Some of these include Crozier & Blench (1992), and more recently Blench (2012), which records 489 languages, with 200 of these severely endangered and 20 moribund languages. In the absence of quality research from within, we have to use these works, even with some of the shortcomings in them. For instance, languages like Leggbo and Lokaa are no longer in Obubra LGA of Cross River State. Rather, Leggbo is in Abi, while Lokaa is in Yakurr. For a publication of 2012, the geo-political information on most of the languages appears extremely outdated.

What this implies is that Nigerian languages are not adequately investigated. When compared with the volume and quality of research on the indigenous languages of Europe, America, Asia and Australia, it appears as though not much is being done on Nigerian languages. Really, from the point of view of the researchers, funders and speakers, the effort being put into the work and use of Nigerian languages is not adequate. Yet, Nigeria is very important to the global linguistic map, as its

languages have very unique features and processes that have universal implications. They have remarkable linguistic heritage, yet they lack support and initiatives in concrete terms.

2.0 Promotion and protection of Nigerian languages for use

The promotion and protection of these languages should begin with their empowerment by the Nigerian government. Empowerment is related to the word 'power' which refers to investment with legal power which gives someone power to act for a particular purpose. This definition of empowerment is in line with power that develops and enables a language to be used for different functions in a sustainable way. So, it is important that power is invested to all Nigerian indigenous languages that they may be used in the home, in the school, in the community, in government, in politics, in science and even in ICT. Beyond contemporary use, they should be 'packaged', as it were, in a form that they can be stored, transmitted and retrieved in both the space of place and the space of flows. There is a rising enthusiasm from some of the indigenous speech communities (Udoh 2014) who are seeking to develop their languages. The local and international research community should take advantage of this and collaborate with them, rather than merely pursuing theory and armchair research.

Given the fact that these languages are at different stages of development, their empowerment by the Nigerian government (Federal, State and Local Government) also involves several stages and they have to be addressed differently, depending on the status and function of a particular language in the Polity. However, such empowerment should be done in a sustainable way, so that these precious languages can be useful today and preserved for the future. Though some attempts have been made to empower the Nigerian languages by the Nigerian government (e.g. the language provisions in the National Policy of Education (NPE, 1977, revised severally), the establishment language departments in the tertiary institutions, the establishment of the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN), more attempts still need to made especially in the areas of developing a strategy for their survey to find out their sociolinguistic facts, document and describe them, codify them

and develop tools for working on them. These strategies are further discussed below in the following sub-sections.

2.1 Language surveys

Language surveys measure people's ability to speak and understand another language, study people's attitudes about different languages, evaluate the differences and similarities in speech communities that speak related languages, assessing the vitality of languages that may be endangered. Basic language surveys need to be done to initiate descriptions of the languages. Language survey results are used for many purposes, especially in making decisions regarding language policies, language classifications, educational programmes, language development work, testing the vitality of the languages, etc. They may be conducted by individuals (like the Language Survey of India, Grierson 2005) and some organizations (the survey and language teaching in East Africa by the Ford Foundation and several surveys across the world by Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) International).

A structure should be put in place by government at all levels to do a systematic survey of the Nigerian languages as to establish what languages are spoken where and by who and also to record the basic sociolinguistics of the speech communities. Such a survey will also capture the geo-political details and dynamics, as well as provide a clearer picture of the vitality of the languages spoken in the 774 LGAs in Nigeria.

2.2 Documentation and description

Following from the language the surveys, there is the need to strategise further, to document and describe the languages. Linguists have always done some form of documentation, as a way of recording linguistic data. Traditionally, from elicitation of data from different aspects of a language, and subsequent analyses, grammars and dictionaries emerge. These constitute some form of documentation. But

in the light of current developments in language studies, a new area of Linguistics has emerged, whose aims are slightly different from the traditional aims of language description. Himmelmann (1998) differentiates between description and documentation. The aim of description is a record of a language with emphasis on abstract elements of language, constructions, underlying rules, etc which form the focus of the elicitation of data, and these precede the analysis. On the other hand, the aim of documentation is basically to record the linguistic behaviour of speakers of a language as exhibited in natural language discourse.

What has emerged out of the documentation of linguistic discourse is Documentary Linguistics, and it conforms with the times in terms of practice, tools and products. It deals with the record and representation of natural discourse. Since discourse is primary in Documentary Linguistics, then both description and analysis are secondary-products of the record of natural discourse which form the documentary corpus. Descriptive and explanatory materials like grammars and dictionaries annotate the documentary corpus. Documentary Linguistics creates texts, such that they can be stored, accessed and shared electronically using very special tools.

There is a current technological revolution going on in information technology. Nigerian cultural heritage must be preserved, shared and passed on. Nigerian languages have to be part of this revolution. There is the need for databases and structures for capacity building in different areas of our civilization. What are the implications of globalization for the preservation of these languages in the light of the current international fight against language death? How can Nigerian languages participate effectively in globalization and yet preserve the unique and diverse indigenous knowledge systems embedded in them? Since globalization involves basically some interaction, it follows therefore that the interaction can be monopolized by some groups involved in the interaction, thus colonizing the activities. On the other hand, the different activities can be shared by the participating members. This sharing implies the empowerment and acquisition of the correct tools of participation. There are two options: either being colonized or

sharing and participating in the activities of the globalization. Which of these two options is preferable? It is therefore necessary to develop the indigenous languages and put in place a structure for their development, so that they can participate in the global linguistic activities.

2.3 Codification of the languages

Codification refers to the standardization and development of a norm or a model for a language regarding both corpus and status planning. Given the Nigerian case, with the languages at different stages of development, there is the need for a strategy to do this in a systematic way. Some languages may need to begin from the documentation stage, some from the orthography stage, while others may need to begin from the expansion and codification stage. Nigerian languages should have spelling systems or orthographies. The orthography of a language refers to the symbols for sounds which are represented individually by letters and collectively by an alphabet. In other words, it is simply the spelling system of a language, where spelling is the method of writing letters for the spoken sounds. The orthography of a language is made up of the letters of the alphabet, rules for spelling, rules for writing tones, rules for punctuation, rules for correct word division, etc. With such orthography, a literary tradition and other forms of empowerment can follow. Currently, there are on-going meta-language projects in the major languages (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) and a few minor languages like Ibibio, where vocabulary is being developed to accommodate new technologies.

2.4 Developing tools of participation in globalization

The Nigerian linguistic scene is rather complicated. The indigenous languages, as noted earlier require different kinds of attention. With the current technological revolution going on, there is the need to develop tools for work on different aspects of these languages. Tools (both software and hardware) are needed for surveys, fieldwork, documentation, archiving, etc. Many of such tools require

interdisciplinary expertise. Many institutions are doing this, such as the Max Planck Institute (www.eva.mpg.de/linguistics.html), Summer Institute of Linguistics (www.sil.org), Electronic Meta-Structure for Endangered Language Data (www.emeld.org/tools/ontology.cfm), etc. These kinds of institutions are needed in Nigeria. It is important to note however that some of these efforts have been made at the University of Uyo (Udoh 2003, 2004; Gibbon, Ekpenyong, Urua 2004, a, b; Urua, Ekpenyong, Gibbon 2012).

3.0 Some recommendations

As has been mentioned earlier, the linguistic picture of Nigeria is rather complicated, and several figures have been given for the number of languages as we have seen. The following recommendations are therefore made to facilitate the empowerment of these precious languages.

3.1 A status reclassification of Nigerian languages

Nigeria has a geopolitical structure, which seems to be working in terms of development in other areas like governance. It has a three-tier structure: national, state (36 states and Federal Capital Territory) and local government (774 LGAs) levels. The entire country is also divided, for ease of management, into six geopolitical zones - South-South, South-East, South-West, North-East, North-Central and North-West Zones. It is therefore proposed here that each L.G.A. should have an L.G.A. language to be chosen at that level, preferably the language spoken in the L.G.A. headquarters. Each State should also have a state language, preferably the language spoken in the state capital. The major languages can remain as 'major', while the label 'minor' is replaced with 'state' and 'LGA' languages as the case may be.

The English language which is currently serving as the national and international language, can continue to function as such. If the focus shifts from it to the indigenous languages at the different levels of administration, and there are visible efforts to develop and use these

languages, the misgivings about the use of another language will be reduced. To be able to do this, there is the need to first of all have a clearer picture of the linguistic situation in the country, so that both corpus and the status planning; which should feed a real language policy (rather than the statements drawn from several documents) should be done.

3.2 Use and relevance of the Nigerian languages to the society

The languages should be used in the home, the communities, in education, in literary works, in ICT, and everywhere. Every Nigerian language is spoken in an area, but every Nigerian language is not relevant to every Nigerian. The languages that appear to have a regional spread should be empowered and encouraged to be used in the media, in government, education, etc., in those areas. The languages that appear to be state languages should be used at the state level in the same way, and the languages that appear to be L.G.A languages should be empowered and be so used. Nigerian languages need to be made relevant to Nigerians. It is the need to use them at different forums that will motivate and attract both funding to language projects and interest in the fate of the languages. If some of the Nigerian languages are used for legislative business (even once in a week as is done in Ogun State House of Assembly every Wednesday with Yoruba), then its inadequacy to cope in terms of terminology will make the law makers look for the linguists to elaborate and expand its vocabulary further.

With conviction to use the language properly, those who have the where-with-all to sponsor such projects will willingly do so. There is also the need to ensure relevance of these languages. For instance, a credit pass in any Nigerian language can be made a requirement for admission to the tertiary level along with English and other subjects. Advocacy will help in this area very much, and it should be explored. It is important that the languages be made relevant in the different communities where they are spoken.

3.3 Description, databases and archiving of Nigerian languages

Nigerian languages need to be described and documented in a systematic way. Such descriptions should be done in line with modern linguistic best practices, and modern frameworks. Most importantly, they should capture important features of the languages with a view to typology as well as adopt a style that the speakers can access.

Grammars, dictionaries, texts, wordlists, lexicons, annotated signals, linguistic descriptions, dictionaries should be created. A good beginning can be the traditional paper databases of wordlists, text corpus, dictionaries and these can further be converted to digital forms so that that they can be stored in the electronic archives. These materials should be as technically accurate as possible, and they should be accessible to the speakers and usable by them. Some Nigerian languages have these, but the description and attempts at documentation are haphazard. There is the need for a more systematic plan. The Open Language Archive Community (OLAC) has several archives of languages of the world but unfortunately not many Nigerian languages have been empowered enough to be shared with the OLAC community.

4.0 Conclusion

Articles 1, 2, 3 and 4 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992), Resolution 47/135 state thus:

Article 1

States shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories, and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity.

Article 2
Persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities … have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, and to use their own language, in private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination.
Article 3
States should take appropriate measures so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or have instruction in their mother tongue.

Article 4
States should, where appropriate, take measures in the field of education, in order to encourage knowledge of the history, traditions, language and culture of the minorities existing within their territory.
Therefore, there is a need to protect the Nigerian indigenous languages from extinction and promote and empower them for use by their speakers in the home, education, governance, ICT and literacy for they are indeed vessels of indigenous knowledge systems of the different communities in the polity. The languages should be protected and safeguarded. They should be preserved and conscious efforts made to preserve them in an attempt to stem the tide of the threatened ones. They should, in the same vein, be actively promoted, supported and empowered for use in all activities of the community.

The languages are useful and beneficial and they can and should perform several functions as they have high utility value. They are vessels that not only hold but also transfer the different knowledge systems of the speakers from one person/group/generation to another. Like botanical ducts in the xylem, which are composed of connected cells that conduct water and mineral nutrients to the rest of plants, indigenous languages contain and transfer the folk knowledge of the communities that speak them to the next person in the community, the next group and the next generation. It is therefore very important that

they should be empowered adequately to be protected and promoted for use.

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