CLASSIFICATION OF NIGERIAN LANGUAGES BASED ON GREENBERG'S
CLASSIFICATION OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES

Barr. Dr. (Mrs.) B. O. Inegbeboh and Mr. Ukhurebor, A. Roland

Abstract

Africa has a problem of multi-lingualism, and diversification of languages based on the multi-ethnic nature of the continent. The need to determine the number of African languages led some scholars to study, classify and compare the vocabulary and sounds of some of the languages. Many scholars define language variously. Yet, they all see the need and importance of language as a vehicle for communication in any human community. Many African Languages resemble one another in (heir characteristics, Greenberg classifies African languages into four main groups and three of these groups are found in Nigeria. This work, therefore, aims at examining the language situation in Africa; some definitions various scholars have proffered; the classification by another authority, Phillipson; Greenberg's classification of African Languages; and the classification of Nigerian Languages based on Greenberg's classification. The desire to classify Nigerian Languages is due to the fact that Greenberg's work lends to meet n standard of intelligibility. Moreover, it has generated much interest among scholars and other people because it supplies very educative linguistic evidence on immigration, origin, symbolism and social structure in Africa.

Introduction:

The problem of multi-lingualism and the diversification of African languages have attracted scholars especially linguists, sociologist, anthropologists, archaeologists, historians and other interested scholars to study it with a view to finding out the historical origin and development of these diverse languages spoken in the multi-ethnic continent. Unequivocally speaking, Africa is a multi-lingual as well as a multi-ethnic continent. It should be highlighted that linguists are still busy counting the languages spoken in Africa. However, according to Heine, B.(2000), the 1996 edition of ethnologue puts the number of living Languages in Africa at 2,01 I and lists the total number of living languages in the World as 6,500. The number of languages listed for Nigeria is 515. Out of these, 505 are living languages, 2 are second languages without mother tongue speakers, and 8 are extinct.

In order to find out how one language is similar to the other, the classification of these languages becomes imperative. Classification of African languages was an attempt to group related African languages together into their meaningful categories by looking through their historical origins and development. Following this, Joseph Greenberg, for example, did what he termed "mass comparison: According to Kirby, S. (1999),

...... he began to employ a method that systematically compared the vocabulary of languages, word for word and sound for sound. To the extent that if systematic correspondences could be found between two languages, the languages were related. And the more systematic and more frequent those resemblances were, the more closely the languages were related.

Accidental similarities between a word in one language and another diminishes as the number of languages and words and number of vocabulary elements being compared grew larger.

Definition of Language

Looking at the above definitions of language one would find out that they are imprecise as they make use of the terms, 'system', 'arbitrary', 'method', 'communication', 'sound and symbols'. However, let us consider briefly some of the terms involved in the above definitions.

**Language as System:** It should be noted that from the definition, we observe that if a language is not systematic it could not be learned or used consistently. Moreover, all languages have dual systems of sounds and meanings.

**Language as Arbitrary:** It should be pointed out that the term arbitrary in the definition does not mean that everything about language is unpredictable. It means that we cannot predict exactly in advance what a word means just from hearing it, or knowing in advance how nouns will be inflected or whether pronouns will fall into a particular pattern. It should be pointed out that things that are predictable about all languages are called linguistic universals. For example, all languages have nouns and verbs, have devices which allow speakers to make statements, ask questions, give commands or make requests. All languages have consonants and vowels, etc.

**Language as Vocal:** The term vocal in the definition means that the primary medium of language is sound which is produced by exhaled air that comes but from the lungs, passes the vocal cavity, the mouth and the nasal cavity. In fact, writing systems are attempts to capture sounds and meanings on paper.

**Language as Symbol:** The term symbol in the definition refers to the fact that language is a system of words associated with objects, ideas, and actions.

**Language as Human:** The term 'human' in the definition means that the language possessed by human beings is quite different from the communication systems that animals possess. For example, no system of animal communication makes use of the design feature of duality, that is, of concurrent systems or sound and meaning, while few systems of animal communication are known to employ discrete arbitrary signals.

**Language as Communication:** Language has the function of allowing people to say things to one another and express their communication needs. Moreover, language helps in the integration of the society, by allowing people to live, work and play together, tell the truth and sometimes tell a lie, etc.

Language could also be defined as the system of human vocal symbols used for communication. It should be noted that language is a unique means of human communication and it is characteristically symbolic. In a nutshell, language refers to the symbols or vehicle used in the transmission of our culture, values, thoughts etc from persons to persons and from one generation to another.

**Importance of Language**

It should be emphasised that language has always held a central place in the affairs of man - in his education, his art, and his science. In fact, language as a system of human vocal symbols used for communication, is very important in our everyday life.

According to Burling (1970:1) language is so important in our lives, it is hardly surprising that when men have turned to examine their own behaviour, language has always figured among their most lively interest. To travellers, historians, and anthropologists, language has always seemed a convenient way to classify nations and tribes. Philosophers of many persuasions have been concerned with language, and it has been central to the work of many psychologists. Students of literature have carefully examined the medium through which literature is expressed. And these disciplines, however, have examined language within a larger context - as language serves to classify tribes as it bears upon questions of truth, existence, or knowledge, as it related to memory and learning, or as it is need artistically.

Another scholar, Teilanyo (2000) more recently states that, "language is used for communication in general - for everyday conversation and gossip, for reporting history, sports, scientific activities; for commercial advertisement and trading, and for legal and political persuasion.

Hence language is used for informative, emotive, and direct purposes.” Human beings use language to convey meaning. In short, language is used in all fields of human endeavour.

It should be pointed out that each culture develops a language to meet its specific needs. And through language, linguists are able to know the similarities and dissimilarities of one culture with others.
to Bloomfield (1984:311), the comparative method thus, shows us the ancestry of languages in the form of a family - tree, with successive branchings: the points at which branches separate are designated by the word "primitive"; the branches between the points are designated by the prefix pre-, and they represent periods of linguistic change. In other words, language helps anthropologists, sociologists and linguists in contrasting the various cultures which exist in the world.

Moreover each language seems logical to the speakers of that language because it is the least medium to express their culture. That is, all the concepts of culture are expressed through language. Furthermore, language helps us to identify the various existing speech communities. A speech community is a group of people living within the same geographical boundary and speaking the same language. The United States for example, is an American English Speech Community. Nigeria is made up of about 505 speech communities. It should be noted that in socio-linguistics, (the Study of the relationship between language and society as well as the study of the social uses of language) language is used for communication during field work. In other words, language helps the researchers in their study of the various cultural diversity in the course of their field work.

Added to the above, language helps to bring about economic and social reconstruction and integration among members of various linguistic groups brought together under one heterogeneous entity in a multi-lingual society. This is so because language leads to rapport among people that speak the same language in the society. Consequently, there is understanding between the various groups of people that live in that society. Finally, one is easily accepted into a group's fold when one can speak their language. Conversely, language reduces the use of interpreters in the dissemination of information and meanings of a language other than one's own. Language, therefore, is the means of communication between individuals and groups in society; man's actions and behaviours are always reflected in language use.

1963, Greenberg's Classification of African Languages

It should be reiterated that the problem of multi-lingualism and the diversified nature of African Languages gave rise to the need to classify them and hence, the Classification of African Languages was an attempt to group related African Languages into their meaningful categories by looking through their historical origin and development. Many scholars have made attempts to classify the diverse 2011, African languages going by the most recent count into language families. The most prominent of them all was Joseph, H. Greenberg. Greenberg was an Englishman, a Linguist and a Professor of Anthropology who first became internationally famous in the 1950's, for a sensationally famous classification of African Languages. It should be pointed out and emphasised as well that Greenberg was not the first or one of the earliest linguists to look into African Languages, infact. his work was a reaction to other studies.

In 1955, Greenberg attempted an ambiguous classification of African Languages. In his work, Studies in African Linguistics Classification; he tried to group related African Languages together by tracing their historical origin. It should be noted that Greenberg's earlier classifications had been seriously criticised by both African and European Linguists and this led to his other classification with a modification in 1963, titled. Languages of Africa. This work tends to meet a standard of intelligibility as it generates much interest. Greenberg supplied linguistic evidences regarding the processes of migration, origin, symbolism and social structure in African.

To this end, Greenberg in his 1963 work, classified African languages into four main family groups and into several branches or sub-groups as seen below:

1. **Niger- Congo- Kordofanian Family**
   - Benue - Congo branch.
   - West Atlantic branch.
   - East Adamawa branch.
   - Mande branch.
   - Kwa branch.


2. **Afro- Asiatic Family** of (Hamito-Semitic)
   - Arabic branch.
   - Berber branch.
   - * - Chadic branch.

   Amharic branch.
Cushitic branch.

3. **Nilo-Saharan or Sudanic Family**
   - Saharan branch.
   - Songhaic branch.
   - Nilotic branch.
   - Magban branch.
   - Furian.

4. **Khoisan or Click Family**
   - Sondawe branch.
   - Handza branch.

A Map of Africa Showing the Distribution of Africa's Major Language Families (Simplified From Greenberg, 1963)
However, other writers or authorities also put forward their classification similar to that of Greenfaerg’s 1963, classification citing some examples as seen below:

### Another Similar Classification By An Authority, Phillipson

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Main Divisions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFRO-ASIATIC</td>
<td>Semitic, Arabic, Amharic, Gurage, Tigrinya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Berber, Tuareg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cushitic, Somali, Galla, Afar, Beja, Sidamo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chadic, Fali, Hausa.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NILO-SAHARAN</td>
<td>Sudanic, Acholi, Shilluk, Mangbetu, Jie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saharan, Kanuri, Teda, Zaghawa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Songhai, Songhai.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONGO-KORDOFANIAN</td>
<td>West Atlantic, Dyola, Fulani, Temne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mande, Mwa, Mende</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Voltaic, Dogon, Mossi, Talensi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kwa, Akan, Bini, Ibo, Igala, Yoruba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bantu, Gikuyu, Bemba, Shona, Xhosa, Kongo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adamawa-Eastern, Mbaka, Zande</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KHOISAN</td>
<td>South African Khoisan, Ikung, Ikhomani, Nama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sandawe, Sandawe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hadza, Hadza</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Nigerian Languages and Greenberg’s Classification

A recent count of the languages spoken in the African continent reveals that it is 2011, languages and that Nigeria, being a multi-lingual nation with diversified languages has at least 515 languages. Going by 1963, Greenberg’s Classification of African Languages into four main groups -namely, Niger - Congo - Kordofanian, Afro - Asiatic, Nilo - Saharan or Sudanic and the Khoisan or click, Nigeria has three of these main language groups enumerated above other than the Khoisan or click language family group.

If should be highlighted that the following Nigerian Languages of Tiv, Ogoni, Efik, Ibibio, belong to the Benue - Congo branch or sub-group of the Niger - Congo family. Fulfulde belongs to the West Atlantic branch of the Niger - Congo, while the following Nigerian Languages of Idoma, igala, Igbo, Edo, Yoruba, Ijo, Urhobo, belong to the Kwa group of the Niger - Congo - Kordofanian family.

Moreover, the Hausa and Fulani languages belong to the Chadic sub-group or branch of the Afro - Asiatic language Tamils and while the Kanuri language belongs to the Saharan branch of the Nilo - Saharan or Sudanic language family group.

Finally, it should be noted that many of the Nigerian languages other than the ones mentioned above are represented in the three out of the four language families. Only the Khoisan or click language family spoken in the South of Africa is not spoken in Nigeria.

### Characteristics of African Languages

It should be pointed out that African languages have strong resemblances and this phenomenon has impressed linguists and anthropologists. African languages have various characteristics which distinguish them from other non-African languages. Some of these characteristics are as follows:

The languages are tonal, and so could be fluted or drummed which is a characteristics common to languages spoken in the South of Sahara. The drumming aspect has been well developed among the Yoruba while the horning aspect is developed among the Igbos and Edos. A tone language is one which uses differences of pitch to distinguish individual words which in other ways sound the same. For example, ‘Oko’ in Bin! Language means a name for a friend of the same or below one's peer
group, and with a voice remaining on the same pitch meaning canoe or car for transportation and also means a package gift. Also in Bini or Edo language, the word 'Olia' means bush, and with a fall from mid to low pitch means giant needle and a newly married girl. Among the Igbo, 'Okike' symbolises creation and also strength. The above words are the same but it is just the intonation that gives them other meanings.

There is rare use of time adjective construction, while there is frequency of reduplication. For example, 'I am hungry' is expressed as - "I am worried by hunger of water" or "I am being beaten by thirst of water", etc. The frequency of reduplication on the other hand, is used in the form of plural nouns and verbs in some verbal constructions. It is common in the Kwa group of language. For example, henhen" which means to repair is a frequently reduplicated verb in Edo language.

Words frequently end in a vowel or nasal consonants e.g., names. It should be noted that vowels include/a e i o u/and others/and consonants include/b d f p s, z, gb gh fh kp/and so on. There is extensive use of what linguists call Labiovelars. Sounds like /kp, gb, mw, kw/are usually used in the names of people. This feature is common in West Africa and examples of such names are Kwame, Gbemi, Gbubemi, Jkponmwen, Ikponmwosa, etc.

The similarities in idioms and proverbs refer to a common cosmological and philosophical origin. Cosmologically, the Africans see God as the owner of the universe with the other divinities such as the god of iron, god of thunder, goddess of the sea, etc. as His messengers. Therefore, the Africans see relations in their genealogy as the same in the past, present and future.

**Conclusion**

The problem of multi-lingualism and the diversity of African languages as a consequence of the multi-ethnic nature of the African continent, gave rise to the dire need of counting the number of these languages with a view to ascertaining a near accurate figure. This is coupled with the desire to study and classify these languages into their related main groups or families. Following this, the need for study and subsequent classification of African languages generated interest among various scholars and authorities. It should be noted that various studies have been done by many scholars of African and non-African origin and interest groups in an attempt to classify the diverse 2011 African languages going by the recent count into main language groups or families as well as their sub-groups.

Essentially, Joseph Harold Greenberg, an English man of American origin, was the most outstanding due to his sensational classification of African Languages in the 1950's and early 1960's and subsequently became internationally famous. His classification always forms the basis or the foundation on which other scholars and writers build upon till this day. Joseph Greenberg is the founding father of African historical Linguistics.

Furthermore, it is worthy to note that this paper dwells mostly on Greenberg's Classification of African Languages but it shows another popular classification, with a view to making a comparison between them. They appear similar and the writers are of the opinion that there exists no significant, difference between them.

The writers applaud Greenberg’s Classification of African Languages as a classical masterpiece of the time. It has formed the building block of African historical linguistics and it still influences subsequent contributions on the same subject till this day. However, the writers predict that Greenberg's *Classification of African Languages* will continue to generate interest and further researches by other scholars: sociologists, anthropologists, historians. Linguists and others for a long time to come. They should endeavour to exceed Greenberg’s effort and come out with new sensational findings or classifications which would be a legacy to be bequeathed to the present and future generations.

**References**


