

DOCUMENTATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN A MULTILINGUAL NATION: THE NIGERIA EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Language documentation and language development have become the focus of many academic researchers in the recent years. In Nigeria, language development, especially the indigenous languages has been plagued by the linguistic condition of the country arising from the multi-ethnic and multicultural situation of the nation. The national language policy itself appears too weak to foster development and promotion of the indigenous languages. Even the three major indigenous languages (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) that had new status in the 1979 constitution were not developed to the extent of meeting with the demands of their new status. Other developed countries were developed with their own indigenous languages whereas in Nigeria, the case is different. This paper therefore addresses the language situation in Nigeria and the need for Government - funded documentation projects on indigenous Nigerian languages.

Language is a system of communication which helps members of a community to share their thoughts and ideas as well as exert control over a wide range of phenomena in the society. Language serves as an important moderator of human consciousness and actions. This unique human possession is seen to be one of the greatest gifts from God because of the facilitator role it plays in human existence.

Language is primarily a system of symbols for the expression of thoughts and feelings either orally or written.

O. Grady, Dobrovolsky and Aronoff (1989), language means many things a system of communication, a medium for thought, a vehicle

for literary expression, a social institution, a factor in nation building.

According to Essien (2003), we need it for communication in all its ramifications, positively to teach, explain, inform, argue, direct, praise, pray, preserve, plan, please etc. and even negatively, to antagonize, cheat, lie, deceive, deride, mislead, misinform, displease etc. Infact, the importance of language cannot be over emphasized since no human activity can be envisaged without language. Man is thus given a sense of purpose and direction as well as assigned responsibilities that enables him contribute to his total well being and that of the larger society.

In Nigeria, there is a tremendous gap in communication between the Nigerian ethnic groups as a result of the diverse tongues of the Nigerian populace. As a multilingual nation, with about 515 languages (Grimes 2000, in Urua 2007), Nigeria has been identified with different problems which take their root from the linguistic problems of the country. Such problems may be economic, educational, socio-political and other developmental problems in the country.

Language Documentation

Documentary linguistics is a new area of linguistic study motivated by the need to record the world's endangered languages. It has to do with the documentation of languages. Woodbury (2003) sees it as being concerned with the making and keeping of records of languages of the world and their patterns of

use. The main aim of language documentation therefore is to preserve and promote local languages and cultures, and to make such documentation accessible to others in a standard format.

Documentary linguistics deals with huge multi-media data which are stored in archives. This area of linguistic study encourages researchers to collect a wide range of linguistic data in real communicative situations. It also encourages collaborations among researchers from different fields of endeavour.

This kind of documentation is different from the nature of documentation of languages as regards content and form, which depends on its proposed use and the perceived users. It is otherwise called language description. Himmelmann (1998) differentiates between language description and language documentation. The aim of language documentation, in the sense of Himmelmann is to have a comprehensive record of the linguistic behaviour and traditions of a particular speech community, while the aim of language description is to record a language with emphasis on abstract elements, constructions and underlying rules governing such constructions.

Language documentation has the advantage of the new technology; this makes it possible to have multimedia documentation with sound and image that make the work authentic. In language documentation, the researchers may decide to make the text open ended. This creates room for later additions to be made with ease, either by other researchers or the same linguist.

Nigerian Indigenous Languages

Indigenous languages are those languages which are native to particular groups of speakers. They are languages which are deeply rooted in the culture and tradition of the speakers. The Nigerian indigenous languages therefore are those languages which are native to Nigerians and spoken within the Nigerian different geo-

political zones. Elugbe (1990) sees Nigerian indigenous languages as those languages that are spoken in Nigeria, which are part of indigenous culture and have definite location(s) in any part of Nigeria.

As earlier noted, Nigeria has an approximate number of 515 languages. Most of them have Nigerian origin while some do not. For the purpose of this paper, we will categorize Nigerian languages as given by Umoh (2004). It is given thus:

(a) All languages and dialects spoken within the confines of Nigeria which belong to the three major language Phyla using Greenberg's classification of African languages. Viz.

Niger	-	Kordofonian
Nib	-	Saharan, and
Afro	-	Asiatic

These languages are therefore mother tongues and indigenous to Nigeria, for example, Ibibio, Hausa, Igbo, Birom, Nupe, Yoruba etc.

(b) A second language by the virtue of adoption which came as a result of history and which has been extensively used in the country like languages in (a) above. The examples here are English with its cognates (broken and Pidgin English), and French. See national policy on Education (1998).

(c) Foreign languages which are in limited use for political, commercial, and academic purposes e.g. Spanish, German, etc.

Multilingualism is a phenomenon that results from a situation where people belonging to the same geographical society speak different languages. Within this society there exist small speech communities each with its own language of communication and the different speech communities are connected to a central body. This phenomenon is prevalent

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in many countries of the world including Nigeria.

Multiplicity of languages is a common characteristic in Nigeria. Within prominent ethnic groups, there are mutually unintelligible languages and dialects which belong to the same linguistic/ethnic groups. This is witnessed in Yoruba, Edo, Ibibio etc. With this kind of complex ethnic groupings, Nigeria is faced with language problems which result in the absence of a common indigenous language of communication among the various linguistic groups. This in turn leads to discrimination, political and social antagonism, and disintegration, whereas among groups sharing a common linguistic background, unity, loyalty, alliance etc are found.

The Nigerian Multilingual Situation

Although language is an important aspect of life, it has become very problematic in the Nigerian situation. Linguistic diversity is one of the major attributes of Nigeria and ethnic diversions are often considered along linguistic lines. In consideration of this fact, Elugbe (1999:11) posits as follows; “it is assumed that the existence of many languages means the existence of many basically antagonistic ethnic nationalities trying to form a nation”.

The division of Nigeria into the Northern and southern protectorates by Lord Lugard coincided with the Christian south and Muslim North, with Hausa and Yoruba as their dominant languages. Twelve states were later created in 1967 and this brought liberty to such minority languages as Efik, Edo, Kanuri, Ijo and Fululde which were dominated by the major languages (Udondata, 2008).

Generally, Nigeria is a complex nation, showing linguistic, ethnic, religious and educational complexity. For religion, Nigeria has Christianity, Islam, African traditional religion and various cults. Educationally, the country is a meeting point for Arabic, traditional and western philosophies.

Multilingualism is not only peculiar to Nigeria, other nations of the world such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Mexico, Ghana, etc, have experienced it. What is peculiar to the Nigerian situation is that the actual number of languages spoken in the country is not ascertained. Different authors present different figures. Examples: Grimes (2000) presents five hundred and fifteen (515) languages including English and Arabic. Babajide (2001) projects four hundred (400) native languages; Ifionu (1993) presents more than two hundred and fifty (250) indigenous languages etc.

With this level of complexity there is bound to be problems. The real problem with this nature of multilingualism is that the members of one culture usually assume that their way of doing things, understanding the world around them, their language, are the best. The consequence is that the major groups will always suspect and regard others as inferior. This negative attitude towards others who speak other languages works against national unity, necessary for development. It is therefore not surprising that because of lack of peaceful co-existence, Nigeria as a multilingual nation has been less politically, socially and economically developed.

Ethnic rivalry and tension close our eyes to the rich potentials we can tap from our language. The minority languages and their speakers are often neglected. The national language policies and minority language development are often given less attention. Considering the problems of multilingualism in Nigeria, Udondata (2008) posits thus:

Minority languages are neglected. Governments and those in power do nothing to remedy the situation. Speakers of such languages are manipulated and discriminated against. Language then becomes a tool for political and educational aspirations. What matters is what you speak and not who you are.

Multilingualism becomes a curse and not the blessing nature intended it to be.

To achieve development, Nigeria has to go back to the root of the problem which is the deplorable situation of the indigenous languages. Languages are not supposed to be “major” or “minor”. Every natural language has characteristics that identify it as a language. We must admit that every language is unique with peculiarities in structure and in use. What is needed now is to document and empower the various indigenous languages and put them to use in nation building.

Table showing some of the countries which have developed with their mother tongue or the languages over which their citizens have complete mastery (adopted from Essien 2003).

Here it is observed that even small nations like Bulgaria, Czech and Slovak Republics developed with their native languages. Japan is a classic example of an Asian nation which has developed with its own indigenous languages. China, India and Pakistan which are classified as developing countries are developing with their own languages of Chinese, Hindi and Urdu respectively. These countries and others, even the Arab world and Israel who are making impact globally, are doing so primarily with their own respective indigenous languages.

In Nigeria, development in all its facets economical, political, educational etc, has been marred by the linguistic confusion arising from our timid language policy. Even the three major Nigerian languages that had new status in the 1979 Constitution were not well developed to meet with the demands of their new status. It happened to be merely cosmetic, since the three languages were hardly used in national Assembly.

What we have discussed so far is that other developed nations prepared their indigenous language and made them rich enough for participation in national development, whereas in

Nigeria, the reverse is the order. The question now is how do we carry the uneducated citizens along?

Need for the Documentation and Development of Indigenous Nigerian Languages

Although the deplorable situation of Nigerian languages and great potentials of these languages have been affirmed, very little has been done to rectify the situation. It is now a general knowledge that the Nigeria indigenous languages have been neglected and marginalized with a consequent loss of status and relevance. It is also generally known that the development of a nation and its people cannot be properly done with a language outside the people’s culture and traditions. For a foreign language to be used, the people must be well proficient in that language. On the language of development, Essien (2003:31) opines thus: “n. if a nation does not and cannot have complete mastery of the language of its own development; this is a serious problem for development”.

Plans have always been made to utilize the indigenous Nigerian languages to achieve developmental goals, but such plans have always met with procrastination and failure. Considering the various benefits of language to the speakers - a tool for preserving the peoples cultural heritage and traditions; a mark for group identity, social cohesion and integration; a vehicle for transmission of the indigenous culture, history, wisdom and experiences to future generations etc, considering also the literacy rate in Nigeria which is very low, and evident that a great number of Nigerians cannot speak, read or write English language well, it is now very important that the various indigenous Nigerian languages be documented and developed. This kind of linguistic research will boast the languages and make them rich

enough for participation in national development.

The Kind of Research Needed for Nigerian Indigenous Languages

Linguists have long been engaged in recording and describing languages. This is evident in the monograph series and journals in which texts, dictionaries, grammars, vocabularies etc. have been published.

Recording a little known language comprises two activities. The first activity is the collection, transcription and translation of primary data while the second activity is the descriptive analysis of the data. The two activities represent two different fields of linguistic study which are the documentary linguistics and descriptive linguistics, and their products are language documentation and language description respectively.

Documentary linguistics and descriptive linguistics are closely related areas of linguistics which have in recent years been considered as two separate fields of linguistic study. Descriptive linguistics had always presented formats for describing languages until the last two decades when documentary linguistics came to limelight.

Documentary linguistics is a new area of linguistic study motivated by the need to record the world's endangered languages. It has to do with the documentation of languages within the context of language endangerment.

Woodbury (2003) sees documentary linguistics as being concerned with the making and keeping of records of languages of the world and their patterns of use. The main aim of language documentation is to provide a comprehensive record of the linguistic practices and traditions characteristic of a given speech community and to present it in a standard format (Himmelman, 1998).

Documentary linguistics deals with multimedia data which are stored in archives.

This area of linguistic research encourages researchers to collect a wide range of linguistic data in real communicative situation. It encourages collaboration among researcher. Language documentation has the advantage of the new technology which makes it possible to have multimedia documentation with sound and image that makes the work authentic. This kind of documentation is different from what is obtainable in language description.

For the purpose of this paper, we are interested in language documentation as a research area and an activity needed for the empowerment and promotion of the Nigerian indigenous languages. In working on developmental projects in languages, the following methodological procedure may be adopted.

The Basic Format of Language Documentation

First and foremost, let us consider what constitute content and presentational format of language documentation.

The basic content in language documentation is determined by the purpose of such documentation which is to document the linguistic behaviour and knowledge, found in a given speech community.

Linguistic behaviour is manifest in communicative events and communicative event is intended to cover the whole range of linguistic behaviour, from a single cry of pain or surprise to the most elaborate and lengthy ritual (Himmelman, 1998). It is meant to emphasize a holistic view of linguistic behaviour which includes the location and posture of the communicating parties, gesture, artifacts present, etc.

The presentational format is determined, by the fact that the data assembled in language documentation should be amenable to a broad variety of further analysis and uses. These two features distinguish language document from the traditional text collections

which contain narrative text and document verbal behaviour.

The Methodological and Technical Issues Involved in a Low-Level Language Documentation Project

These are explained under the following sub-headings:

(a) *Source of Data*

- Language documentation is a field research
- In language documentation, the researcher goes to the field to get the data.

(b) *Contact with the Language Community*

- The profit by the language community has to be ascertained.
- Ethical requirements of field-based investigations are somewhat complex since there are many groups and individuals participating in field work.

Technical Issues

(c) *Data Collection Technique*

- Decisions about which data to collect or include in the documentation should be taken.
- The actual recording of the data
- The corpus
- Metadata

(d) *Data Annotation*

- Here we have the transcription, translation and commentary

(e) *Archiving*

- The annotated data at this point is presented for public consumption/publicly accessible storage (archiving)

(f) *Tools*

These include the software and the hardware tools

- *Software Tools*

These are computer programmes which are recommended for the linguistic documentation projects. Examples include toolbox, praat etc.

- *Hardware Tools*

These are the physical tools used alongside with the software in recording, analyzing and storing the documented primary data. They include:

- Data recorder - this is a storage medium for digital audio recordings.
- Digital video, audio and photo camera for Mini DVD tapes.

These are used for the recording of the primary linguistic data in its natural form.

- CD - Compact Disc
 - CD/RW - Compact Disc Rewritable
 - DVD - (Digital Versatile Disc) used as a storage medium mostly for video recordings.
 - CD/DVD Burners
 - Blank CD/DVD
 - Laptop with spare batteries Cables to link up the equipment
 - Portable loud speaker
 - Flash disc drive for storage of data and backups.
 - Full functioning computer system
- Writing materials.

Recommendation

Based on the above discussion, this paper presents the following recommendations:

- ▶ The language policy in Nigeria should be reviewed.
- ▶ Government and individuals should appreciate our multilingualism as a natural endowment, explore and exploit it for maximum benefits.
- ▶ The government, state and federal, should embark on serious language engineering projects. This could be done by creating a forum where all Nigerian Linguistic experts would come together to think on how to develop the languages.

Conclusion

This paper calls on Nigerians to be conscious of the benefits and potentials we may tap from our multi-lingualism if it is well managed.

Although many people believe that the language issue in Nigeria is too sensitive to be tackled in such a complex nation with languages and ethnic diversity, there is a conviction that if at least all the major languages representing all the ethnic groups in Nigeria are developed and used in schools as medium of teaching and learning as well as school subjects, there will be a remarkable improvement in the educational system of the country. This in turn will impact on the development of the nation as well as maintaining peace and unity in the country.

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