

NIGERIAN LANGUAGES AND IT'S ENDANGERMENT: A WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

This paper examines the phenomenon of language endangerment and the way it impacts upon the non-major (minority) languages in Nigeria. It proposes ways to avert such endangerment. It tries to find out how many of these languages in Nigeria are endangered or deprived or dying. Effort is made to establish what causes language endangerment: like strife, language disloyalty, migration, natural disaster, diseases/epidemics, lack of orthography, lack of written literature, economic and political reasons, and obnoxious language policies which permit exclusion. The paper tries to provide answers to pertinent questions relating to endangerment: for example should any language for whatever reason be allowed to go extinct in a multilingual/ multicultural State like Nigeria? What are the consequences of such death to the country? The paper finally suggests what should be done to avert the endangerment of minority languages.

Introduction

It is not possible to say exactly what the number of languages in Nigeria is at present. The difficulty to this arises from the fact that more and more Nigerian languages are being discovered presently. The available figures, which are found in literature, are intelligent guesses. Coleman (1958) and Tiffen (1968) both cited by Ugwuoke (1999) put the number of indigenous languages at two hundred and fifty (250) and one hundred and fifty (150) respectively. Hansford et al, in 1976 put it at three hundred and ninety four (394). Bamgbose (1993) put it at four hundred (400). Many reasons have been given why it is not possible to give the exact number of languages in the country. Emenanjo (1995) has listed the reasons in the following order:

- i. The many definitions of languages
- ii. The many variables in the actual identification and exact 'location of languages
- iii. The complex, complicated and very difficult terrain in the Niger- Delta, lower Cross River basin, the lower Bernie basin and the central Plateau regions' considered as the real mosaic of diverse areas with the highest mathematical coefficient of linguistic diversity in the whole world.
- iv. The phenomenon on language shift and languages death - (Emananjo and Bleambo, 1999)
- v. The evaluation or emergence of wider communication in parts of Nigeria
- vi. The creation of states with the concomitant ethno-linguistic nationalism.

In Nigeria, a multilingual and multicultural state, only three of these four to five hundred languages are regarded as major languages, the remaining lots are tagged minority languages.

The term language endangerment refers to languages whose survival is questionable. In the World Atlas of languages, there are six thousand, five hundred and twenty eight languages spoken by six and half billion people. Kraus' (1992) was the first to point out that as many as half of world languages may be moribund. According to him, the coming century will witness either the death or doom of ninety percent of mankind's language. It is said that at least a language dies somewhere in the world every two weeks.

With this frightening discovery, one will start to ask what will happen to the Nigerian indigenous languages, especially the majority of them that have not develop above the oral form. Some pertinent questions arise in relation to the concept of language endangerment especially in a multilingual country like Nigeria. One of these questions is whether any language should be allowed to die, considering that a language represents a group of human beings. In allowing a language to die, not the same as allowing a cultural group, an ethnic tribe to go extinct? Is there nothing that can be done to save a particular language from dying? What in the

first place are the causes of this death? All these questions beg for answers and they will form the crux of this paper.

When is a language endangered?

The usual definition of an endangered language is the consideration of the numerical strength of its speakers. A language that has a large population of speakers is considered safe in the hands of endangerment, whereas any language whose speakers are less than five thousand (5000) people is considered endangered. (Brenzinger, 1991).

Emenanjo (1999) has gone further to list preconditions for endangerment to include geographical location within a bilingual/multilingual multicultural milieu, absence of language loyalty - where, in speech communities, native speakers are threatened because their intergenerational continuity is proceeding negatively with fewer and fewer users (speakers, readers and even understanders) or uses by every generation (Fishman, 1991), absence of ethno-linguistic vitality and of sociolinguistic readiness for literacy and numeracy, a skewed non-democratic national language policy which does not recognize in a pluralistic polity the imperative of cultural pluralism, multilingualism for all languages, assigning specific roles to specific languages and multilingual education, absence of vibrant milieu for informal but intimate intergenerational usage and language transmission context within the confines of the home, family and neighborhood, the imperatives of the enthronement of democracy as in a Language of Wider Communication (LWC) which becomes the language of education., the work place, mass media, government, business and, services and upward mobility: the death of the family in the modern interactive society and the pluralisation of value in modern societies.

In all intents and purposes, it is not good to allow any particular language to go into extinction. Language, it has always been said, is human. The language spoken by a group of people represents the personality of such speakers. That language is their life since they communicate in it, think in it, and express their culture in it. Language plays an all-important part in the life of people. It serves not only as a means of communication but also as a symbol of group identity and solidarity. It is the surest way through which people can retain and safeguard knowledge, wisdom and the authentic cultures inherited from their ancestors, as well as hand them over to generation after them (Kuju., 1995).

Like all living things, a language also depends on its environment to survive. When it is deprived of its natural habitat by a predator tongue (a more powerful language), it is consumed and the result is extinction. Emenanjo (1995) summarized the relationship existing between language and environment thus:

‘A cause-and-effect or stimulus-response relationship exists between language and environment. A robust environment begets arid propagates a robust language. A deficient, deprived, dislocated and distressed environment begets, encourages and sustains a language that is in danger of disappearing’.

Man, speech and community are interrelated in the nature of the Catholic trinity. If language X is first and foremost, and perhaps, only meaningful in community X, then first and foremost, the onus of using, speaking, reading and writing and the over all development of such language resides very squarely on members of that community X. (Essien. 1991)

In Nigeria, all indigenous languages have been grouped into two: Major languages are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba and the non-major languages (the minority languages) include the remaining three hundred and eighty seven (387) languages or more. However, in 1990, a reclassification was made by Emenanjo when he raised the number of the major languages to eleven to include in addition to the big three, some developing languages like; Edo, Efiko, Fulfulde, Igala, Izon, Kanuri, Nupe and TIV. These languages are characterized by well established orthographies, standard written varieties, long traditions of writing and varied corpora of written literature; sophisticated and dynamic metalanguage. All other indigenous languages not included in the first group are referred to as non-major languages and are characterized by the absence of standardized orthographies, standard varieties, written literature and metalanguage. The term minor languages is used to reflect the underdeveloped category. These, are languages that are spoken by small number of people, some of them located in remote villages. Some of these non-major languages are Alago, Ikpeshi, Kiong, Miya,

Pero, Turkwan, Ubagbara and Zarma etc. by current knowledge, there are about 390 members of this group and they have relatively lower status, as aptly captured in the quotation below:

Generally, then while all languages are apparently equal, it does seem that in terms of national and official functionality, at least, some are more equal than others (Adegbija, 1994).

Going by the opinion of Brenzinger, Heine and Sommer (1991) cited by Ugwuoke (1999) in his 'Nigerian Languages in Danger of Disappearing', any language that has less than five thousand speakers should be termed as an endangered language. Ugwuoke listed about one hundred and fifty two (152) of such endangered languages in Nigeria.

Some of them are:

LANGUAGES	STATES	LGA	POPULATION OF SPEAKERS
Abanyom	Cross River	Ikom	3,850
Aduge	Kwara	Oyun	1,904
Ake (Akaye) (Alice)	Nasarrawa	Lafia	454
Baa (Nywaa BAA	Adamawa	Lamurde, Gyakan and	1000
Bali	Adamawa	KWA Towns, Densa	1000
Baya	Taraba	Mambilla	200
Chokobi	Plateau	Jos (Jet District)	425
Emhalhe	Edo	Akoko and Edo	839
Dendi	Kebbi	Argungu and Bagudo	839
Tumi	Kaduna	Saminaka	635
Yashi	Nassarawa	Akwanga	400
Tsabo	Gombe & Adamawa	Kaltungo	2000
Odut	Cross River	Latnurde Odukpani.	700
Manga	Bauchi	Bauchi	180
Luri	Bauchi	Bauchi	30

The above table indicates that majority of the endangered languages in Nigeria are located in the North East States, the Middle Belt, South -South States and some in the North-West States. Although, the population of speakers of these languages is quite negligible when considered alongside the three major Nigerian indigenous languages and the eight developing indigenous languages, yet they satisfy crucial needs in the lives of people who own and use them that they should not be allowed to die. In contemporary world today, multilingual nations harness the various languages existing in their societies to achieve stronger and United States. The argument that multilingualism creates room for disunity and conflicts has for long been jettisoned. Rifts and conflicts are not caused -by the number of languages a country but by oppression, domination and denials of opportunities to minority groups who speak minority languages by the majority groups. Apart from this, deprivations in all its ramifications and the politics of exclusion occasion strife in a multilingual state. (Halle: 1992).

The second pertinent question to ask is if the death of any particular language in a multilingual Nigeria will amount to any advantage for the country. Some people have argued that there is no point for government to waste time and scarce resources on a language spoken by just a hundred or two hundred people, a language that cannot be used in administration, education, politics etc. As plausible as these arguments may seem, it thus appear that the proponents have forgotten that what indirectly they are asking for is to exterminate the ethnic/cultural group that owns the language because they are few. The owners of endangered languages in a multilingual state have inalienable right to speak and use those languages. Consequently, it is important for each linguistic community to nurture and develop its language and guard against its disappearance or potential death.

The Way Forward

All over the world, multilingual nations abound. In these states, major and non-major languages live side by side. For obvious reasons, each language has a function, which it performs in the country. This is what good language planning and policy does for a multilingual nation.

Naturally, endangered languages have right to survive and this nonnegotiable inalienable right has been included in the Charter of Linguistic Human Rights. Article 24 of this Charter states as follows:

‘All Language communities have the right to decide to what extent their language is to be present as a vehicular language and as an object of study, at levels of education within their territory... (Bamgbose, 2003).

In addition, Article 48 states inter alia:

1. All language-communities have the right to use their language with full legal validity in economic transactions of all types, such as the sale and purchase of goods and services, banking, insurance, job contracts and other.
2. No clause in such private acts can exclude or restrict the use of a language in the territory to which it is specific.
3. All language communities to have documents required for the performance of the above-mentioned operations at their disposal, their own language. Such documents include forms, cheques, contracts invoices, receipts, delivery notes, order forms and others”.

The various articles of the Charter of Linguistics Human Rights notwithstanding, and as most favourable as they appear, the future of the endangered languages remains significantly in the hand of the speakers. As Williamson quoted in Ndimele (2000) states:

“for a minority language (endangered language) to establish itself effectively as a written language, there has to be cooperation between the speakers, who alone have the emotional commitment to develop their language, and various agencies who can help them”.

The same sentiment is opined by Bamgbose (1993) when he stated thus:

When all is said and done, the fate of an endangered Language may well lie in the hands of the owners of the language themselves and their will to make it survive.

Efforts towards ensuring the survival of endangered languages must of necessity begin with the owners of those languages. They should speak and use their languages or they lose it. It should be made clear that if they allow their languages to die, they also die with it because it is their languages that have placed them on the world map as a distinct tribal unit. The provision of the charter of Linguistic Human Rights notwithstanding, one political or economic reason may prevent the government from implementing it. The centre for Endangered Languages in Jos, in one of her workshops cautioned that in a multilingual nation, the death of any language is an ill wind that blow no one good. It stated thus:

“Language is the key to the heart to a people. If we lose The key, we lose the people. A lost language is a lost tribe; A lost tribe is a lost culture. A lost culture is a lost civilization. A lost civilization is invaluable knowledge lost., the whole vast archive of knowledge and’ expertise... will be consigned to oblivion”.

There are languages whose situations are quite pathetic. There is virtually little or nothing to be done to salvage them from extinction. However, efforts should be made towards the documentation of such languages before they finally die. The value of such an exercise is that they could be placed on shelves of archives and in museums where they could be consulted for research purposes.

Language Empowerment

Language empowerment is the strongest weapon to use in averting endangerment. Language empowerment is language “development superimposed on a sustained ideology to reversing language sift (cf Emenanjo). It rests on two complementary planks- absolute commitment and pragmatism” since all languages are not equal in terms of status, social function; educational viability and needs especially in a plurilingual and pluricultural police noticed in multilingual states. The socio-linguistic framework of language empowerment is language planning, maintenance and management. In a multilingual Nigeria, all language planning must ensure that the existing languages co-exist in a stable environment each with specific role assigned to

it since all languages never perform the same roles in a multilingual polity the politics of exclusion should be discouraged.

Language is a medium of communication and an instrument of a people's perception of reality, the essential symbol of group identity and solidarity, the essential embodiment of a people's cultural identity. It is in the light of the above features that language planners in a multilingual Nigeria need to try as much as possible to carry the various languages along. Languages in themselves do not exclude it is people who do Language policy is one mechanism for locating languages within social structures so that language determines who has access to political power and economic resources.

Language policy is one mechanism by which dominant groups establish hegemony in language use. It follows therefore that the making of language policies becomes the pursuit of power and members of society who are the most powerful exert the most influence to gain the benefits and privileges (Cooper 1989). This has the effect of not only empowering the elite but also empowering their languages as well for as Webb (1991) aptly pointed out individuals who are educationally economically and militarily/politically superior are rewarded with access to the best goods and services rights and privileges, and the most power and prestige. One consequence of this is that the languages they speak are similarly differentiated with some of the languages becoming instruments of power and the others powerless (Crystal 1990).

Considering the mechanism of exclusion, the challenge is to devise a means of empowerment and participation for disadvantaged groups such as minorities, illiterate immigrants children forced to learn foreign languages and all others who are as a result of restrictive language policies. This implies the empowerment of languages which have been marginalized, stigmatized or dominated by the powerful influence of another language. Measures are proposed on language development, adoption of second language norms, use in education, incentives and use in expanded domains/ participatory democracy (Bamgbose, 2003).

Indigenous languages and their knowledge disappear when natives are forced to abandon their environment. Languages also disappear because the young who are in contact with the outside world have embraced the view that traditional ways are illegitimate and irrelevant. Political decisions force ethnic groups to move or split. Economic prospects attract younger members away from the villages; new diseases take their toll and natural disaster do same. Consequently, they reduce the numbers of speakers of a language.

In Nigeria, the English Language, a foreign language has dwarfed the indigenous languages thus displacing the three major languages to a state in which they have become subordinates to it. It is now the official language of the country. In the Northern states of Nigeria, the Hausa language 'has also dominated the several non-major languages that about 80% of the entire Northern populations speak, think and dress in Hausa.

In the South-East and South-South States, Pidgin (adulterated form of English) has tremendous influence on Igbo-one of the three major languages and on Efiki, Urhobo, Isekiri, Edo, Izon, Esan, etc. to some of the people in these areas, Pidgin is the language they know. It is the language in which the average individual youngster there transacts his most intimate activities and therefore, the language most associated with the individual's personality.

Pidgin is indeed gradually and unconsciously replacing their languages which may die out in the not too distant future except there is a conscious and well planned strategy to halt the unfortunate trend. In fact, it is not only the non-major (minority) languages that are endangered in Nigeria. Of late, there has been an increasing outcry by concerned Igbo indigenes that their language is registering fewer and fewer speakers. The phenomenon is noticeable even among the Igbo residents in Igbo towns and cities where ordinarily, Igbo should be the chief means of communication.

One other way of ensuring that a language does not die is to have it transmitted to the younger children. This is best done by making it possible for initial literacy to be acquired in the language. Here, the Federal State and Local Governments should ensure the strict implementation of the section of the National policy on Education that deals with languages. Effort should be made to devise orthographies for the many minority languages still in the oral form so that they too can be reduced to the written form, a language becomes endangered when the speakers, who are the owners, do not care about its survival. Unless the speakers of

these endangered languages wake up to the problem, they stand to lose their languages to other more powerful ones.

Conclusion

Nigeria is a multilingual state with as many languages as between four hundred and four hundred and fifty. Out of this number, only few of them are quoted by the World Atlas of languages as world languages. These include:

Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Fulfulde, Izon, Igala, Nupe, Kanuri, Edo, Bilk and Tiv. The rest are endangered languages whose speakers are not more than five thousand people.

However, some of the endangered languages could survive the threat if the owners give them enough loyalty by speaking and using them. Linguists and language expert outside the owners of the language could help to design orthographies for these languages.

The various languages in the country could be harnessed, so that they can guarantee a stronger united nation. No language deserves death because it represents a cultural ethnic group. A country that loses some of its language loses part of her civilization. It is in the light of the above that these endangered, languages should be empowered through the process of pragmatic language policies. This is because when these languages are empowered, their speakers (i.e. owners) are also empowered to have access to political power and economic resources. To save endangered languages, the politics of exclusion should be avoided. The strategies of language empowerment are a starting point for reducing the burden of inequality and exclusion which has been the lot of the disadvantaged in our societies (cf. Bamgbose).

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