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

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ABSTRACT

Languages 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 countries where 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.
KEYWORDS: Language Documentation, Development, Indigenous Language, Multilingual Nation, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Language is a system of communication, which according to popular belief is as old as creation itself. It is the principal means by which human beings exert control over a wide range of phenomena within the speech community they belong to.

To O'Grandy, Dobrovoisky and Aronoff (IMDM), language may be defined to capture many different areas of life: a system of communication, a medium for thought, a vehicle for literary expression, a social institution, a factor in nation building etc. It therefore means that, with language, man can control his environment and contribute to his total wellbeing, as well as his society.

From inception, the country Nigeria has been struggling with the problem of communication gap, which arose as a result of multi-culturalism and multilingualism. Since then, the nation has been identified with different linguistic related problems which may be political, economic, educational, developmental problems etc, yet nothing is done about it. This is because Nigerian leaders have always failed to recognized the importance of indigenous languages in nation building. This paper is therefore made to stress the need to look into the language problems in Nigeria, with a view to recognizing the fact that language is not just a mean of communication; but a vehicle of economic success, and a way of seeing the world.

Language Documentation: Why it is important and how it is done

One of the important needs of human beings is the desire to preserve the memory of the most meaningful achievement of their lives and to pass on the knowledge about their times, cultures and civilizations to the next generations. Over the centuries, people have developed various ways of transmitting knowledge from

generation to generation based on oral tradition (oral culture) and written texts. As a result of this, it is possible in this generation to track and explore even quite distant history, as well as the history of languages.

An exception in the sounds of language, since it was impossible to preserve the sound of speech of our ancestors until the second half of the IM[th] century, when the first recording of a human voice that one can listen to was recorded. This is very young, compared to the most ancient documents, dating back to many centuries in the past.

Language documentation, also known as documentary linguistics, is the subfield of linguistics that deals with creating multi-purpose records of language through audio and video recording of speakers and signers, with annotation, translation, preservation, distribution of the resulting materials (elpublishing ›docs).

It aims to describe the grammar and use of human languages as well as providing a comprehensive record of the linguistic practices characteristic of a given speech community for both posterity and revitalization. Also, language documentation is important since it provides a firmer foundation. Also, language documentation is important since it provides a firmer foundation for linguistic analysis in creating a citable set of materials in the language on which claims about the structure of the language can be used (**WIKIPEDIA**). The reasons why endangered languages are documented are further explained in the following:

 I. To preserve human cultural heritage in general.
 II. To keep memory of the facts important for the local communities, families, individuals.
 III. To better illustrate linguistic theories with real-life observations of languages in use.
 v. To study language contact (Seifart (IIOII).

The importance of language documentation cannot be over emphasized, since it is of great benefit to the language itself, the speech community and the researchers. This is evident in the overall aim of language documentation, which is to record the linguistic behaviour and knowledge found in a particular speech community for the purpose of preserving and promoting language, and to make such document accessible to others in a standard format. Language documentation takes care of every aspect of life within the speech community. This what marks the difference between language documentation and language description which only takes care of the abstract elements of language.

In the words of Annamelia (IIOOIII), in Etim (IIOIIII), when a language is documented, something more is made available beside the form of the language to the user of the document through the interpretation of it. It is the knowledge of the social system mediated by the language, the cultural value signified in the language and the cognitive pattern of interpretation of the social and natural environment codified in the language. Concerning the methodological procedure of language documentation (how it is done), see page D and M.

Nigerian Indigenous Languages

Nigeria's linguistic diversity is a microcosm of much of Africa as a whole, and the country has language from the three major African families, Afro-asiatic, Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo.

An indigenous language is a language which is native to a particular region (group of people), and spoken by indigenous people, often reduced to the status of a minority language. This language is usually from a linguistically distinct community

that has settle in the area for many generations, such languages are deeply rooted in the culture and tradition of the speakers.

Etim (IIOIII) sees Nigerian languages as those languages that are spoken in Nigeria, which are native to Nigeria and spoken within the Nigerian different geo-political zones.

Nigeria is a nation has many languages and it is difficult to really determine exactly, how many languages we have in the country. Different authors have come up with their various numbers, ranging from IIXO to LOO, most of them having Nigerian origin, while others are foreign language adopted into the country for various purposes.

The Nigerian Multilingual Situation

Multilingualism is a phenomenon that results form a situation where people belonging to the same geographical society speak different languages. Within this society there exist small speech communities are connected to a central body. This phenomenon is prevalent 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/ethical groups. This is witnessed in Yoruba, Edo, Ibibio etc. With this kind of complex ethic groupings, Nigeria is faced with languages 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.

Although language is an important aspect of life, it has become very problematic in Nigeria. 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 (IMMM:II) 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 dominion Languages. Twelve states were later created in IMLC and this brought liberty to such minority languages as Efik, Edo, Kanuri, Ijo and Fulfulde which were dominated by the major languages (Udondata, IIOOD).

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 (IIOOO) presents five hundred and fifteen (XIX) languages including English and Arabic. Babajide (IIOOI) project four hundred (VOO) native languages; Ifionu (IMMIII) presents more than two hundred and fifty (IIXO) indigenous languages etc.

With this level of complexity, there is bound to be a problem. The actual problem with this nature of multilingualism is that member 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 speakers of other languages works against national unity, which is 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 potential we can tap from our languages. 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 (1100D) 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 the blessings nature intended it to be.

To achieve development, Nigeria has to go back to the root of the problem which is 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 need now is to document and empower the various indigenous languages and put them to use in the nation building.

Why Documentation and Development of Indigenous Nigeria Languages are Necessary

Although the deplorable condition of the indigenous Nigerian languages has been made the focus of discussions in most linguistic conferences, 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 of development, Essien (1100III:III) 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 the procrastination and failure. Considering the various benefits 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 that 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.

This Kind of Research Needed for Nigerian Indigenous Languages

Linguists have long being 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 of the collaboration, 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 has always presented formats of 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.

Documentary linguistics deals with multimedia data which are stored in achieves. 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 is 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 (Himmelmann, IMMD). 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 the data assembled in language documentation should be amendable to a broad variety of further analysis and use. 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) *Content with the Language Community*
- The profit by the language community has to be ascertained
- Ethical requirement of field-based investigations are somewhat complex since there four 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 transcription, translation and commentary

(e) *Archiving*
- The annotation data at this point is presented for public consumption/publicity accessible storage (achieving)

(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 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 and 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 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 out multilingualism if it is well managed.

Although many people believe that the language issue in Nigeria is too sensitive to be attacked in such a complex multilingual 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 use 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.

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