Endangered tongues: Issues in contexts

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Abstract

Language endangerment is a serious concern to which linguists and language planners have turned their attention to in the last decade. On account of different reasons speakers of some languages are spurred into using another language in preference to theirs. This paper examines language endangerment as an issue which affects a wide variety of languages of the world especially African languages and Nigerian languages in particular. It identifies the meaning of language endangerment and associates it with language shift. Then, it puts across the stages involved in language endangerment .It goes further to identify the root causes of language endangerment, weighs the causes with the current socio- political, economic and global issues and attempts to answer a nagging question: can endangered languages be shielded from extinction? If yes, in what ways? And if no, why? Then, finally the aftermaths of language endangerment are examined and suggestions made on how endangered language can be revitalized.

1.0 Introduction

Language endangerment can be defined as a condition whereby the socio-economic, political, technological, cultural and religious ecologies have altered to a point where some language species cannot survive or thrive in them. Thus we talk about language endangerment more or less in the way that ecologists speak of species endangerment. There are parts of the world in which the local physical ecology has changed to the point where some species cannot thrive in them. A host of native Americans no longer speak their ancestral languages but use only English in the United States, French in Quebec, Spanish or Portuguese in Latin America. The situation is however different in a way in Africa. Swahili was spoken primarily on the coast of East Africa, but now it has become the national and official language of Tanzania. It has also become the national language of the eastern part of the Republic of Congo and even the national language in parts of Kenya. In these places it functions as what we call a lingua franca. The people forget the traditional ethnic allegiances which were associated with specific ethnic languages and speak just Swahili, alternating it with French or English. In those kinds of settings, we say that the indigenous ethnic languages other then Swahili are endangered.

In Nigeria, the language of power, prestige and instruction is the English language. This is mainly because the language was that of the colonialists. Even before the amalgamation of the three political blocks into a nation, Nigeria, trade existed between the Europeans and the following: coastal dwellers in Warri, Delta State, Lagos State, Rivers State and a few other littoral states. English was mainly the language of commerce in these areas. As a result, a hybrid language was born out of the contact between the English language and the various ethnic languages. This equally accounts for the great variety of Pidgin English spoken at the different quarters. The birth of Pidgin English language and the strong presence of English language suppressed the use of the other ethnic languages. The nature of Pidgin English enhanced its use by a great number of people of Nigeria. Pidgin English has no laid-down grammatical rules which must be observed by its speakers. On account of this even illiterates easily acquire Pidgin English. So Pidgin English and the English language are preferred as the media of politics, commerce, education etc.

Language shift can be treated in association with language endangerment. Even though the two nominal groups are lexically different, they are semantically similar. Language shift can be defined as a process by which speakers of one language begin to use a second language more frequently until they eventually use only the second language. A language is endangered when it is on the path towards extinction. A language is in danger when its speakers cease to use it in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains and cease to pass it on from one generation to the next.

According to Aikawa in UNESCO (2001), endangerment can be ranked on a continuum, from stability to extinction. Six degrees of endangerment may be distinguished with regards to intergenerational language transmission. They are (safe, stable yet threatened), unsafe, definitely endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered, and extinct.

Safe (5): the language is spoken by all generations. The intergenerational transmission of the language is uninterrupted.

Stable yet threatened (5-): the language is spoken in most contexts by all generations with unbroken intergenerational transmission, yet multilingualism in the native language and one or more dominant language(s) has usurped certain important communication funtions. Aikawa UNESCO (2001) however, observed that such multilingualism alone is not necessarily a threat to languages. This claim negates Mowarin's (2004) claim that the Urhobo language in Urhobo culture which is polyglossic is

open to social networks, on account of which the surrounding indigenous languages such as Bini in the North, Itsekiri in the West and Ijaw in the South, Isoko and Ukwani in the East enveloped them. The product of such language interactions is multilingualism and it is evident in these areas. Urhobo is one of the minority languages spoken in Delta State, Nigeria. In consonance with Aikawa's observation, that multilingualism alone is not necessarily a threat to languages, we trace the endangerment of the Urhobo language to some other factors such as pidginization, urbanization of the Warri axis in Delta State, the non- standardized nature of the language and the strong presence of English language in the region. The case of Urhobo can serve as an index to so many other ethnic minority languages in Nigeria such as Efik, Ibibio, Ukwani, etc.

Unsafe (4): most children speak their parental language as their first language, but this may be restricted to specific social domains (such as the home where children interact with their parents and grandparents).The languages of most migrant groups in Nigeria fall into this category. When the groups migrate from their cultural environment to a new one, social pressures cause them to learn the languages of their new neighbours. The children of the migrants acquire the language of their new environments as lingua franca, but communicate with the parents at home with their aboriginal language. A typical migrant group in Nigeria is the Igbo people. In order to have a feel and sustain their cultural heritage, they usually travel during festival periods such as the New Yam Festival, Easter and Christmas periods to spend a few weeks or days in their cultural domains. Therefore, the system of livelihood may be a factor in language use.

Definitely endangered (3): the language is not learnt as the mother tongue by children in the home. The youngest speakers are thus of the parental generation. At this stage, parents may still speak their language to their children, but their children do not typically respond in the language.

Severely endangered (2): the language is spoken only by grandparents and other generations; while the parent generation may still understand the language they typically do not speak it to their children or among themselves.

Critically endangered (1): the youngest speakers are in the great-grandparents' generation, and the language is not used for everyday interactions. These older people often remember only part of the language, and so they do not use it on a regular basis, since there are a few people left to speak with.

Extinct (O): there is no one who can speak or remember the language.

Table 1: Degrees of endangerment

Degree of endangerment	Grade	Speaker population
Safe	5	The language is used by all age groups including children
Unsafe	4	The language is used by some children in all domains. It is used by all children in limited domains
Definitely endangered	3	The language is used mostly by the parental generation and upwards.
Severely endangered	2	The language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and upwards.
Critically endangered	1	The language is known to very few speaker of great-grandparent generation.
Extinct	0	There is no speaker left

2.0 Causes of language endangerment

Several factors have been identified as the causes of language attrition or endangerment.

i. Parental influence

Linguists are aware that a language becoming extinct does not necessarily mean that the people who spoke it have all died. Speakers may shift to a different language over one or more generations. Linguists have seldom interpreted the process of language attrition and death first as the result of adaptive responses of speakers to changing political and socio-economic conditions around them. Perhaps guided by a conservative idea of culture, they capitalized on the price that the affected populations had to pay in losing their ancestral heritage. They have given little attention to what the population have gained, or just hoped to accomplish in the changing socio-economic conditions they experienced. According to Grenoble and Whaley, (1998:22), "speakers abandon their native tongue in adaptation to an environment where use of that language is no longer advantageous to

them. In essence language shift occurs partly, because of the presumed profit which parents envisage in a particular language over the other. Children recognize this fact, too. Therefore, since the English language is given influencial functions in Nigeria, such as political, economic and commercial, educational and cultural functions, it seriously endangers the other ethnic languages. Wolf and Igboanusi; (2004:9) stipulate that in Nigeria, "English has undergone and continues to undergo a process of cultural adaptation and hybridity and thus cannot be considered as culturally alienating". Bamgbose, (2005:22) however is not quite optimistic about the cultural adaptation and hybridity of English in Nigerian language ecology. So he argues that good governance cannot be achieved except laws are made at all levels of government in the language in which the masses can interact maximally. Otherwise governance will only be accessible to the educated elites, excluding majority of citizens, thereby making nonsense of participatory democracy. Bamgbose's viewpoint arose from the fact that politics is largely carried out in English. The Nigerian constitution is articulated in English, too. To further underpin the need to use Nigeria's native languages in legislation and politics, the Federal Governments, in 2004, embarked on the translation of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria into the three major Nigerian languages, namely, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Owolabi, (2004:19) equally regrets the growing tendency among the traditional chiefs (Emir, Obi, Oba etc), who abandon the use of the indigenous languages of their people in favour of the English language even during traditional festivals and ceremonies on account of the social prestige and power associated with English in Nigeria. This low opinion about the indigenous languages, even by the custodians of tradition, the traditional chiefs, is what Owolabi (2004: 23) baptized as "Native Language Prejudice Syndrome" (NALPS). Our point however, is that the increasing usage of English in Nigeria has a very powerful historical and political references, which are already mentioned above. English language promises opportunities, which the indigenous languages fail to offer. For instance English language is one of the most powerful instruments for global politics and it is the chief vehicle with which globalization is propelled. The Nigerian language endangerment issue can be described as being ambivalent: In most of her international affairs, particularly within the African Union (AU) and the West African sub-region, Nigeria enjoys the use of English as the medium of communication, thereby propelling the English language further as a powerful political and international language. Nigeria fails to make an attempt even to use Pidgin English, which is a product of hybridization of the cultures-African (Nigerian) and European cultures. But

back home, Nigeria bemoans the attrition of her various indigenous languages.

ii. Natural or man-made disaster-sudden shift

It does occasionally happen that drought, famine, disease, war, flood, earthquake, tsunami, volcanic eruption, acts of genocide or other disasters could decimate population or cause them to migrate from their original home land to another place, where their languages become more or less diffused in a dominant language. According to Grimes, (2002:2), " the Paulohi language speakers in Maluku, Indonesia experienced a severe earthquake and tsunami several years ago which killed all but about 50 of them." In Nigeria tsunami and earthquake are not presently known as a threat to any ethnic group, but there occur occasionally, awful flooding in different parts of the country. Flooding has not equally threatened to drastically reduce the population of any linguistic group in Nigeria, but it has often caused environmental hazards. Nigeria has to be mindful in this regard because nature is usually slow and can act in unpredictable ways.

iii. Migration outside traditional territory-planned shift

Socio-linguists have discovered that forced migration to a location outside the language group's traditional territory is a major function of language shift and shrinkage. Grimes, (2002:5) records that the United States, Russian and Canadian governments moved indigenous children into boarding schools. Consequently, those children were cut off from their traditional ethnic languages and culture. One of the recurring decimal in the history of Nigerian international politics is the loss of the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroun at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The Bakassi Peninsula, Cross-River State, Nigeria is an oil rich peninsula. Over the decades Nigeria has been contesting the ownership of the peninsula with the Cameroun for both political and economic reasons. Consequent to the International Court ruling the peninsula was ceded to the Cameroun. According to the ruling the Bakassi people have to decide whether to pay allegiance to Cameroun and remain in the peninsula or to continue to belong to Nigeria. By implication, they will have to be evacuated to a new area. This international court ruling has serious consequences on the culture, language and psyche of the people. An ethnic group will have to be uprooted from their ecological, cultural, socio-political and historical habitat to a new area- unknown to them. The Bakassi people maintain that they are Nigerians and will continue to be. Of course, they have representatives at both the Lower and Upper Houses. The court decision will definitely have

implications on their language use, perception of the world and general attitude to life. In their hypothetical new environment, their language may suffer a severe endangerment. Not all the Bakassi people will agree to the forced political resettlement, thereby reducing further the number of Bakassi language speakers. The Bakassi dwellers may consider themselves politically disenfranchised; and that their will for genuine self determined livelihood, which is part of basic human right, has been severely infringed upon. All these have implications on the Bakassi minority language and culture. One of such implications is that the various ecological niches which have real linguistic applications and meanings in their language will become extinct ultimately.

iv. Use of second language as a medium of instruction in school

This can cause a widespread shift. We have made comments concerning this as it relates to the Nigerian situation in some of our previous paragraphs. However, we want to point out further that language shift is not peculiar to Africa or Nigeria. Grimes, (2002:5), points out that in the Philippines, people educated before 1972 speak English as a second language in addition to their home language, while people educated after 1972 when the language of instruction was changed to Tagalog are more fluent in Tagalog as a second language than in English.

v. National language policy

Language policy can cause language shift. The desire to build a nation by a people and their government contributes immensely to language shift. The three major different ethnic groups in Nigeria and the government of the country adopted English and Pidgin English as Nigerian lingua franca. Consequently, many Nigerians have very little regard for learning the ethnic languages. One of the factors that accelerated the use of English is that all the lexical categories found in the indigenous languages are present in English, thus making the transfer of complex thoughts from the indigenous languages into English easy. The English language has undergone a lot of linguistic adaptations to the indigenous languages at the various linguistic levels- phonological, semantic, syntactic and morphological levels. Thus, we can talk of Nigerian English. There is equally American English, British English etc.

The National language policy in Israel is a very fascinating one. After the resettlement of the Jews in 1949, the Israeli government adopted a national language policy in favour of Hebrew. According to Grimes (2002:43), there are languages that have been able to recover wholly or

partially from being endangered. Hebrew, which is now estimated to have 5,150,000 mother tongue speakers in the world, is one of them. They make up to 81% of the population of Israel. Hebrew is a typical example of a language preserved from language endangerment by way of national policy. The case of Israel is peculiar. Israel's history has been a chequered one right from the biblical era. Israel has very hostile neighbours – predominantly the Arabs. Despite the incessant aggression of the Arabs, the devastating effects of Hitler's World War II on the Israelis, they were able to gather themselves together to forge a powerful nation with a relatively major language, Hebrew. This points to the fact that, if a people are willing and have the strength to prevent their language from extinction, their language will not die. The strength to prevent a language from death should be looked at from the point of view of the socio-political, economic and technological roles such people play in the international scene. Those are the indices used to measure importance of any language. Hebrew as a language of a people has such strength. Therefore, it cannot be endangered by languages, which do not have such strength. However, from the linguistic view point no language is more important than the other, in as much as much as any language can function as an effective means of communication for the users. The reason why English is the world dominant language is perhaps becoming clearer. The English people were among the first set of people to achieve outstanding technological and economic development in Europe. Then, with their finished products, they began to look for markets beyond the boundaries of their nation and where ever they went, they went with their language. Germany could achieve this technological development only a century latter, but then the English people with their language had accumulated so many colonies of which Nigeria is one.

3.0 Can endangered languages be saved?

This question touches on so many issues such as world politics and globalization. As we look into these issues, we will definitely gain an insight into the solution to the question. Take for instance, people shift to the language that will afford them the greatest amount of opportunity and in essence this ties into power structures. Globalization is a very powerful thrust in the current world politics, and it is an important factor in determining whether or not a language thrives. Globalization more or less reduces diversity and suggests homogenization. Invariably, it also suggests speaking the same kind of language everywhere, just as it

suggests using more or less the same kinds of products everywhere for the same kinds of things or producing things in more or less the same way:

> In our day and age, it is definitely the globalization of pan-Western culture (and pop- consumer culture in particular) that is the motor of language shift. And since America dominated globalization, [she] has become the major economic, technological and cultural thrust of worldwide modernization and westernization, efforts to safeguard threatened languages (and therefore, contextually weaker languages) must oppose the very strongest processes and powers, (Fishman, 2001:6).

By this Fishman suggests that it is very hard to save threatened languages. Its difficulty does not exclude its possibility.

The first step in trying to save endangered language is to determine the functions that are endangered as a result of the impact of the stronger languages on the weaker ones. After this is done, it may be easier to recommend therapeutic measures that must be taken to counteract the injurious effects of the stronger on the weaker. But incidentally, the big brother language has assumed the mainstream functions in the ecological niches of the weak languages. The Nigerian case is typical.

Another virile point, which makes the saving of threatened languages difficult, is that the owners of the endangered languages do not say no to globalization and national integration. Of course, it is not quite easy to close ones door against such innovations otherwise one loses track in historical occurrences, thereby making way for self annihilation. While we admit that it is difficult to save endangered languages, we take a stand that there are certain measures which may be taken to prevent a language from going into extinction. Sometimes, internal pressure often has its source in an external one, and both halt the intergenerational transmission of linguistic and cultural traditions. As an illustration, many indigenous peoples, associating their disadvantaged social position with their culture, have come to believe that their languages are not worth retaining. They abandon their languages and cultures in the hope of overcoming discrimination to secure a livelihood and enhance social mobility or to assimilate to the global market place. In this kind of situation, it is again difficult to save an endangered language.

4.0 The aftermath of language shift

The extinction of each language results in the irrevocable loss of unique cultural, historical and ecological knowledge. Each language is a unique expression of the human experience of the world. Thus, the knowledge of any single language may be the key to answering some fundamental questions of the future. Every time a language dies we have less evidence for understanding the patterns in the structure and function of human language, human prehistory and the maintenance of the world's diverse ecosystems. Above all, speakers of these languages may experience the loss of their language as a loss of their original ethnic and cultural identity. Significantly, three things are lost whenever a language dies: culture of a people, information about plant and animal wild life and people's identity. There is also anti- social behaviour and loss of self-esteem. In fact, some people have turned into deviant behaviours, such as alcoholism, substance abuse, crime, killing and all manners of unmixed evil. Some have abandoned the idea of having offspring claiming that they don't want to bring children into a world where their society, language and people have no place.

> The Warrani in Ecuador, the Carabayo in Colombia and other groups in South America turned to killing and, for that reason some groups have still not had peaceful contact with the outside world. Or some have hidden from cultural pressures as have the Huichol in Mexico, who have moved farther back into the mountains. (Grimes, 2002:6)

5.0 Revitalization of endangered languages

Once a language is tending towards endangerment, there are two basic steps that need to be taken in order to stabilize or rescue the language. The first is language documentation and the second is language revitalization.

Language documentation is a process by which a language community through political, community and educational means attempts to increase the number of active speakers of the endangered language. This process is also sometimes referred to as language revival or reversing language shift.

The following things can be done

i. Basic linguistic and pedagogical training: providing language teachers with training in basic linguistics, language teaching methods and

techniques, curriculum development and teaching materials development.

ii. Sustainable development in literacy and local documentation skills: training local language workers to develop orthographies if needed, and to read, write and analyze their own languages and produce pedagogical materials. One of the effective strategies here is the establishment of local research centres, where speakers of endangered languages will be trained to study, document and archive their own language materials. Literacy is useful to the teaching and learning of such languages.

iii. Supporting and developing national language policy: national language policy must support linguistic diversity, including endangered languages. Social scientists and humanists and speakers of endangered languages themselves should be actively involved in the formulation of national language policies.

> Language policy on behalf of endangered languages must assure the intimate vernacular (home and personal) functions first, and, if possible, go on from there, slowly building outward from the primary (e.g. home) to secondary (e.g. community and perhaps workplace) institutions of intergenerational mother-tongue continuity, (Fishman, 1989:49).

There is inherent problem in maintaining endangered minority languages as has been seen in the Nigerian situation.

iv. Finally the most important thing that can happen to preserve a language is for parents to continue passing on their mother tongue to their children in the home.

6.0 Conclusion

Language shift and endangerment is a function of socio-political and economic factors. These factors inform people's linguistic traditions and what language they will speak. The recurring decimal in world politics is integration and globalization. This is all about homogeneity in all respects and the language being used to propel this powerful ideology is English. Invariably, other languages face being endangered by English. One may imagine that at a particular point in history, all human races may speak the same language, for instance English. That is far from reality because language has the inherent ability to speciate, diversify. Today, for instance we have Nigerian English, American English, British English, Australian

English and South African English, which are all different. In Africa and Asia- former English colonies, indigenized English varieties have developed which are spoken by the indigenous elite. Even though we continue to call all these varieties English and speak of them as the same language we can no longer guarantee that two speakers of English will necessarily understand each other.

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