

SAVING NIGERIA'S INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES FROM ENDANGERMENT THROUGH LIBRARY AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

It is estimated that majority of Nigeria's indigenous languages (for instance Ijaw, Urhobo, Calabari, Tiv, Kanuri, Efik, Gwandara, Angas, Idoma, etc.) are endangered and can be prevented from dying through language documentation. Language documentation aids in the maintenance and sustenance of the oral traditions of speech communities and the grammar and lexicon of a language. This paper discussed the relevance of Library and Information Communication Technologies in indigenous language documentation, revitalization and maintenance focusing on Nigeria's endangered languages. It reviewed and examined the place of the library as a reservoir of information and the unique role of ICT facilities in the development and management of indigenous language materials. The research showed that Nigeria's indigenous languages can be documented using libraries and ICT backing. The library plays the role of a language store house and via the application of Information Communication Technologies; opportunities for easy and stress-free access to indigenous language resources in the libraries, whether in electronic and print formats, would become possible to both language researchers and learners. This paper called the attention of the Nigerian government, indigenous language professionals, linguists and other cooperate organisations to the importance of using the library (print and virtual/digital formats) and ICTs for the effective documentation of Nigeria's endangered languages. When these indigenous language materials are made readily available for public consumption, such postulations about their extinction by UNESCO (2003; 2006) will naturally fade away.

Key words: Nigerian languages; endangerment; library; ICT; language documentation.

Introduction

An indigenous language is one of the key social markers of a people's identity because it showcases not just their cultural heritage in a manner that highlights their ingenious distinctiveness, but it enhances their uniqueness in multiplicity and aids in the advancement of long-standing cultural practices

and belief systems. The gradual loss a people, ethnicity or tribe's indigenous language would mean a decline in their culture, lineage, wisdom and most importantly, their identity. When indigenous cultures, wisdom, lineage and identity diminish, the language via which these values are passed on from one generation to another could either be dying or going into extinction and as such, it is endangered. Nigeria, with its diversity of ethnic groups and an estimated 527 languages, appears to be struggling between rescuing her indigenous languages and sustaining national integration and unity by retaining the English Language as the lingua franca of the country.

According to reports by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), twenty nine minor languages in Nigeria have become extinct while another twenty nine minor languages are seriously endangered and gradually moving toward language death. In addition, Yoruba, Ishekiri and Igbo, all major languages, are also endangered. A 2006 study by UNESCO confirmed that in 50 years, the Igbo language, which is spoken by over 60 million people, will become extinct. Another study by Akinyemi (2017) predicts that the Yoruba language could die out in 20 years as it is endangered. A language is termed endangered when it is heading towards death and as Crystal (2000) puts it, a dead language is that language without speakers. Campbell (1994) describes language death as the result of a language contact situation, where there is a gradual move from the native language to the more dominant language and subsequently, language loss. This description seems to capture the linguistic situation in Nigeria and the Nigerian Language Policy, which has English as the dominant language and Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as major languages. The remaining, mostly minority languages, are in danger of going extinct. More disheartening is the fact that even with such glaring endangerment of Nigeria's languages, most Nigerians are still enthusiastic about attaining native-like competence in the English Language and not in their mother tongues. In fact, asking some children today to speak in their native tongues would be an overly stretched joke. As such, there is an urgent need for the revitalization, development and documentation of Nigeria's indigenous languages.

Ayodele (2013) mentions that Nigeria's indigenous languages form the core of every Nigerian and as such, these languages are essential because without harnessing and preserving them effectively, every aspect of society's activities (cultural, social or otherwise) would record very minimal successes. The implication then is that, a people or ethnic group's culture and identity gradually dies out when they lose their native language. Emeka-Nwobia (2015) adds that a people's identity and cultural values are engraved in their

language and it is the language that serves as a viable tool for the transmission of values to future generations. It is through language that we are able to access a person's patterns of thinking, improve social relations and pass on belief systems. If we lose our languages (that's, Nigeria's indigenous languages) as a people, we lose our culture, a means of successful communication and social interactions and information documentation. In order to avoid the foregoing, it becomes pertinent that Nigerian languages be preserved and documented, specifically in virtual and real libraries.

The library is "an information centre located in an organization, institution, industry, government or agencies to satisfy the information needs of the individual client and the realization of the broad objectives of the parent organization" (Onwubiko & Uzoigwe, 2004, p.4). The aim of establishing libraries is to gather, itemize, preserve and circulate wisdom and knowledge for easy access for future purposes; and most libraries are setup based on the peculiar demands of the funding institution or body. This paper calls the attention of Nigerians, the Nigerian Government and indigenous language enthusiasts to adopt and promote practices that will preserve and rescue Nigerian languages from endangerment. This can be attained via the establishment of virtual and real, academic or public and individual libraries that support and promote the documentation of the Nigerian languages. It is worth noting also that with the recent development of information technology, large chunks of information can be stored with minimal space and ease.

The application of ICTs "offers us new opportunities to achieve equal and universal access to knowledge and genuine changing in a public knowledge forum, thereby, realizing the idea of democracy and freedom of expression" (Abdulsalami, et al., 2013, p.64). They mention that societies that are open to setting up facilities that allow individuals and information to grow without restrictions and create room for various types of knowledge (for instance, knowledge about Nigeria's indigenous languages) to be produced and utilized on a large scale are knowledge societies. Today, the potency of libraries, whether virtual or digital, are hinged on Information Communication Technologies like computers and other multimedia technologies which provide easy access to electronic and print materials. Through the use of modern ICTs, Nigerian indigenous language users and learners will be able to retrieve information without huddles.

Nigeria's Linguistic Situation and Indigenous Language(s) Endangerment

As aforementioned, Nigeria is a multilingual country and it houses about 260 ethnic groups who speak an estimated 527 local languages; these are further categorized into minor (with several dialects) and major languages. Aside from the major and minor languages, the English, Arabic and Pidgin languages are widely spoken in the country. While the English language was imposed on the Nigerian State by the British, Arabic was extended in Northern Nigeria in the 19th century, specifically via the Usman Dan Fodio Jihad and Pidgin progressed as a trade language into a Creole (NigP). Nigerian Pidgin is English lexified and it is spoken all over Nigeria today. While the English language enjoys the place of a lingua franca or official language for use in formal situations, Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo are to be taught as school subjects in Nigerian Institutions. The other estimated 524 languages are restricted to informal settings.

Today, the English language plays roles of symbolic and instrumental values at the expense of Nigeria's indigenous languages and even Igbo and Yoruba that are said to be one of the major languages is endangered (Akiyemi, 2017; Oyelami, 2008 & Nwadike, 2008). UNESCO (2006) explains that languages are endangered when they head towards extinction and categorizes the levels of language endangerment into five (5): *Vulnerable, definitely endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered and extinct*. Vulnerable languages are restricted to certain settings but they are spoken by children in informal environments, "Definitely" endangered languages are languages that children do not as their first language in their homes anymore, the speakers of the "Critically" endangered languages are the older generation who do not speak their languages frequently and "Severely" endangered languages are spoken by grandparents and older generations whose children do not understand the language and they do not speak it to their children. A language is said to be extinct when it no longer has speakers.

UNESCO (2003 & 2006) postulates that only about 84 out of the estimated 527 indigenous languages spread across 260 ethnic groups in Nigeria are still in use today. Other Nigerian languages like Ijaw, Urhobo, Calabari, Tiv, Kanuri, Efik, Gwandara, Angas, Idoma, etc. mainly minority languages, are critically endangered because their use is excluded from formal environments (for instance, schools) while the English language continues to dominate and relegate them to the background. The speakers of these languages have been out rightly denied the opportunity to express emotions, exchange information, ideas and experiences through their mother tongue. In fact, the continuous insistence of Nigerians from distinct linguistic contexts to

communicate in a common language like English or Pidgin and inter-ethnic marriages that force parents to speak either English or Nigerian Pidgin to their children rather than their mother tongues have resulted in the gradual and consistent retrogression and endangerment of most indigenous languages in Nigeria. It follows then that the survival and preservation of these languages rests on their speakers and through the use of visual/audio devices, the ICTs and the internet, these languages can be documented and accessed easily by language teachers and learners alike within and outside Nigeria.

It is important to note that language is an indispensable tool in every facet of human endeavour, whether intellectual, political, social, developmental or economical. Countries like Korea, Japan and China have retained the use of their mother tongue rather than a foreign language, they carry out business negotiations, engage in instructional activities in their indigenous languages and this has enhanced the preservation of their cultural heritage and collective survival. Unlike these countries, Nigeria is losing her indigenous languages and rich cultures because it appears that as a people, we have become so convinced that the English language is the only source of meaningful communication. Nigerians can either choose to give away their heritage over a bowl of English porridge like the biblical Esau or we can take immediate action to revitalize and preserve our indigenous languages.

Promoting, Preserving and Revitalizing Nigeria's Indigenous Languages

The preservation, promotion and revitalization of Nigerian languages are core responsibilities we owe to the present and future generations. According to Ezema et al. (2018: p.140), "... Nigerian languages (NLs) have been suffering a lot of setback both in their use as medium of instruction and their studies in secondary school, due to lack of material resources". If instructional materials are produced in these languages and documented adequately in electric or virtual and print forms, Nigerians within and outside the country will enjoy easy access to them.

Iloene et al. (2013) conducted a study on the instruction of the Igbo language via the application of modern instructional materials like the computer. Their research was limited to two institutions that had not just computers and other modern facilities for advancing literacy in Igbo available, but also competent operators too. They found out that the availability of modern instructional materials like the computers were not enough because they lacked the software for encoding and decoding Igbo since the configuration of these systems was in the English language. They concluded that without taking the

writing systems of the indigenous languages into cognisance while producing modern technology, Igbo as well as most languages will continue to be endangered. Countries like China, Korea, Russia, Germany, etc. have their writing systems configured in computers today and this is a way to preserve their language.

As in the aforementioned countries, Ene (2007) suggests that Nigeria's indigenous languages should be positioned rightly to enjoy the status the English language holds today. He adds that this can be achieved via bilingual language teaching and based on the region the teachers are situated; they should be trained and equipped to teach in both English and the indigenous languages. This should be supported by a well thought out national language policy that will include mandatory mother tongue literacy with the English Language in primary and secondary institutions. This will boost the status of the indigenous languages and enable them to be rightly positioned and adopted in the education system and children development process. Alhassan and Ali (2015) affirm that this will aid cultural transmission, educational advancement, social interactions and advancement of knowledge.

Apart from government, parents also carry the responsibility of speaking their mother tongue to children. In fact, the mother tongue ought to be the foremost language we learn to speak because it exposes us to our cultural heritage, promotes individuality in the face of diversity and preserves the language. If parents refuse to complement the efforts of government by speaking their mother tongues to their kids before they reach adolescence, most languages will not only be endangered, but beyond the 21st century, they will be extinct. It is against this backdrop that we stress the importance to promote, revitalize and preserve Nigeria's endangered languages (particularly for the sake of younger generations) through proper language documentation using the library and information technology.

The Role of ICT in the Documentation of Nigeria's Indigenous Languages

Language Documentation or Documentary Linguistics (Austin 2010), a sub-field of Linguistics, has been observed to be the long-term answer to language endangerment. Documentary linguistics evolved over 15 years ago to address the need for lasting records for about 90% of the world's endangered 7,000 languages and to help preserve these languages for those speakers who wish to maintain them (Austin 2007 & Whalen 2004). Himmelmann (2006) mentions that documentary linguistics works with 'little-known' language communities and he explains further that it deals with theoretical underpinnings, tools and measures for gathering a typical and flexible data of a natural language or a

single variety of the language that can be used for a long time. Languages are documented for reasons of language endangerment, accountability and economy of research resources; and documentary linguistics evolved in order to preserve such languages from endangerment, death or extinction. To this end, language documentation will not only serve to maintain the cultural diversity of Nigerians but it will ensure that these indigenous languages, if adequately documented, are preserved.

The library is a viable tool for this purpose because it is a dependable domain for storing ideas, knowledge, history, culture and traditions in language (Olaifa 2014) and makes these information available to the 'right users' at all times irrespective of the place or distance and in an appropriate manner via the application web based ICTs (Fischer 2012). In library science, IT focuses on the collection, sorting, storage and dissemination of knowledge - textual, numerical, pictorial and vocal. IT is viewed as an all-encompassing term including the collection (gathering), structuring (packaging), storage and retrieval (dissemination) of information that can be in textual or numerical (books, documents), vocal and pictorial forms (audio-visual) or a combination of all the above (multimedia), using computers and telecommunications devices (Fagbe et al., 2015). The emergence of Information Technology has impacted the library positively by enhancing information storage, processing and accessing with outstanding changes in the structuring, management and functioning of the library and information systems (Peyala 2011). Marshall (1984) defines information technology as the combination of telecommunications and computers for the aim of handling knowledge, through the use of technologies that create, store, process, restore and distribute such knowledge. IT is tremendously valuable in language documentation, specifically in mobilization, that's the standardization of data and metadata configurations. Nathan (2003) explains that mobilization provides the formats for data documentation, as such; metadata should not undermine the important improvements IT can make to the documentation of endangered local language data.

The source data are the main files of language documentation comprising of video and audio recordings, interactive events like interactions and historical occurrences, notes put down in interview sessions and family ancestry by actual native speakers of the language being documented. Himmelmann (2006) adds that these source data, known as apparatus, are usually assembled in an organized corpus and made readily available by several kinds of commentary and annotations. Metadata (that's data about data) on the other

hand are organised facts of data files, recordings and events reproduced as text and saved depending on established or orderly requirements (Bird and Simons 2003). "Metadata is structured data about data - descriptive information about a physical object or a digital resource. Library card catalogues represent a well-established type of metadata, and they have served as collection management and resource discovery tools for decades" (Bird & Simons, 2003, p.16).

Similar to library cataloguing, metadata functions as a corpus management tool that enables prompt access to particular information in digital format. It showcases the kinds of documented files, how and where they can be accessed and any other facts related to such files. Metadata also performs organisational functions for the standard organisation of catalogue (Himmelmann, 2006). It determines "the structure and standard of the corpus in the case of documentations in digital format through which searching, copying, or filtering of files within a single documentation or across a set of documentations is done" (Nwaoke, 1999, p.129). Based on this, it is clear that for adequate documentation of the Standard Nigerian Languages or any other language for that matter, the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the library cannot be undermined. With ICT and the library services, it will become possible to connect video and audio tapes with transcriptions, dictionaries and entries in grammar with elaborate databases of descriptive or explanatory examples (Woodbury, 2003).

Nigeria's endangered languages can be preserved using ICTs and virtual library infrastructures. Kumar (2014) explains that ICT, including Library and Information Science, is very common and influential of almost every aspect of human activities today. Without the assistance of internet facilities, it would be difficult for the librarian to give any meaningful help to their clients with ease. ICTs enable librarians to quickly navigate the Internet and World Wide Web (www.) in search of library electronic materials (for instance information about documented indigenous languages) for their clients. It is the objective of this paper to unravel how ICT and the library can be used to document and preserve Nigeria's indigenous languages. The Nigerian states are struggling with problems of language shift, language loss and language endangerment and this is so because more than 50 per cent of these indigenous languages are either not documented at all or they are not properly documented. As such, the meticulous and efficient documentation of Nigerian languages is very crucial because certain aspects of our collective identity and cultural heritage as a people are gradually dying out. The endangerment and subsequent loss or death of Nigerian languages, if ignored, will result in the loss of our

identity, culture and roots. In fact, if action is not taken to document these languages, the Nigerian people will continually live as a reflection of countries like Britain and America, whose languages (British English and American English respectively) continue to dominate the country because they were motivated to retain their culture, identity and lineage by preserving their mother tongues using ICTs and virtual library infrastructures.

There is need for the erection and development of more libraries in Nigeria because they are necessary for storing knowledge or ideas and disseminating information to readers and researchers. As Nwaoke (2019, p.130) puts it, these “ideas permeate and animate all aspect of national life; library is a place where the dead are alive, where the ideas, knowledge and experience of great men though dead continue to live. Thus libraries are of great importance to the knowledge of every society”. Rajkoomar (2012) supports that as a reservoir of knowledge, libraries enable man to preserve and retain valuable information and wisdom documented in books or online so that future generations can have easy access to them. Nigeria’s indigenous languages too can be documented in print (books), audio or visual files and digital or electronic forms and stored digitally. To buttress, digital storage is a concept that evolved from technological convergence and it refers to the gathering and recording of lasting knowledge, electronically or textual, by selecting, scanning, and/or archiving in an accessible and recoverable format (Njameze, 2008).

Conclusion

Majority of Nigerian indigenous languages are endangered, that’s unsafe. While Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba languages are taught as school subjects in every region of the country, the rest 524 indigenous languages appear to be restricted for use in informal domains. The English language has continually dominated the formal setting, thereby reducing their instrumental functions as valuable languages for teaching literacy and cultural expressions. Considering the heterogeneous nature of Nigeria, it is evident that languages are an indispensable tool in the life of Nigerians since every facet of our existence requires the efficient use of language to be successful. This paper therefore, calls for the documentation of Nigeria’s indigenous languages using library infrastructures and information technologies that provide stress-free access to indigenous language instructional and recreational materials. This can be accomplished by setting up academic or public and digitalized libraries that sustain real or virtual documentations of Nigerian languages. The primary data and metadata can be sourced, recorded in the libraries and the

processed information will be retrieved using ICT facilities. Harnessing the library and ICT resources will enable the speakers and learners of Nigeria's endangered languages to have unhindered access to indigenous instructional materials and other documents that boost the use of these languages and other forms of traditional values effortlessly.

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