

Empowering African Languages: Rethinking the Strategies

by

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Abstract

In the wake of the hegemonic influence of foreign languages like English and French, African languages in these modern times are being marginalized in terms of acquisition, learning and use. Drawing on the linguistic situation in southwestern Nigeria, this article sheds light on three major domains: education, religion and the media, where there is gross disuse of the indigenous language, Yoruba, in favour of English. This development creates the impression that although researchers in African linguistics have taken great strides in the description of the indigenous languages at all levels, the contributions and findings from their intellectual efforts have not imparted considerably on the larger society. As such, there seem to be missing links between linguistic theorizing/modeling in academic papers/blueprints and the trajectory of African linguistics-cum-development. To ensure the survival of African languages, this study challenges researchers in African linguistics to adopt a holistic approach which, according to Jibril (2007), should be a combination of action research, advocacy and activism.

Introduction

As a budding scholar in linguistic studies, I have attended some conferences whose themes addressed the vexed issue of the marginalisation of African languages and the imperative need to develop and empower them. Apart from such attendances at conferences, I have also read articles written by experts in linguistics and the central issue has been that African languages are endangered due to the hegemonic influence of either English or French. Having followed this issue with very keen interest, I would like to take a retrospective look, at this juncture, to assess the journey so far and reflect on the essence of the 'Save African Languages Project'. This is with a view to ascertaining how close (preferably) we are to the African linguistics of our dream or how far (regrettably) we are from it.

Each time I scan the articles related to this issue in question, I get excited at some lofty proposals, suggestions and resolutions put forward by scholars as to how African languages can be empowered to meet the challenges of development processes. Consequently, I have come to appreciate the passion for the utilization of African indigenous languages as veritable tools for the development of African communities. But then, something else strikes me: How many of these proposals, suggestions and resolutions have gone beyond the pages of the journals where they appear to accomplish in the larger society that for which they have been thought of? Simply put, have they been adequately converted for the good of our society?

I must confess that each time I check my e-mail account or my pigeonhole in my departmental general office and find the academic jingle 'Call for Papers', I usually get excited. This is because in my academic community, senior colleagues would give us, the younger ones, the stern warning: 'If you are in the system (the academia) you either *publish* or *perish!*' Therefore, the urge to write becomes irresistible whenever one remembers that the only 'narrow way' to the top is to keep churning out articles. 'Writing for publishing sake' thus seems to be the driving force for participation in and contributions to academic discourses, if we consider the sorry state of our indigenous languages.

I feel very strongly that we linguists have for long been wallowing in academic rigours when we do not seem to take cognizance of the fact that we have brainstormed to a level where we need to start taking stock of how much of our intellectualism has transformed the status of our indigenous languages. I am afraid that African linguists are now given to what Uwajeh (2003: 107) calls 'intellectualising diversions' whereby 'the indigenous Nigerian languages inevitably gain increased attention, recognition and prestige as a result of becoming more and more exposed to the academic community's scrutiny'.

Dwelling further on this viewpoint, I shudder at the thought of the seeming ritualistic academic exercise that linguists appear to have been pre-occupied with, and wonder if I could provoke researchers in African linguistics to work out a realistic means of making their research impact positively on the larger society. Thus, this burden on my mind, gave birth to the topic of this paper!

Disuse of Nigerian Indigenous Languages

The 21st edition of the National Festival of Arts and Culture (NAFEST 2007) held in Makurdi, Benue State, Nigeria, between 3rd and 10th September 2007 was an avenue to showcase Nigeria's diverse cultural heritage as embodied in the art, craft, dance, music, and colourful attires, among others. Yet, it was an auspicious moment to reawaken the people's consciousness to the fact that unless Nigerian indigenous languages are preserved, all other cultural traits (embedded in them) would go into extinction. So, amidst the fanfare that should be the hallmark of such a ceremony, an issue of serious national concern was still touched upon; for, according to a Yoruba proverb, 'Bi ina o ba tan laso, eje ko lee tan leekan', meaning that: Until the clothes are rid of lice, the finger-nails will ever remain blood-stained.

Thus, at the colloquium session of the festival with the theme 'Culture, Job Creation and Youth Empowerment', Professor Akinwumi Isola, the first Professor of Yoruba language in Nigeria, formerly of the University of Ibadan, in his paper 'Cultural Education and Development', lamented the neglect of indigenous languages in Nigeria (www.vanguardngr.com/articles/2002/features/arts/at316092007.html). He attributed this pitfall to the fatal effects of interventions like the slave trade, colonialism, and the advent of two foreign religions. The factor of colonialism, in particular, and its attendant foisting upon Nigerians a foreign language, bring to the fore the linguistic phenomenon of bilingualism.

To this end, one could argue that African communities might have regained their territories and consequently their sovereignty from colonialists, creating the impression that we have the physical empires in our possession, but it is rather pathetic that we are fast losing and in some cases have lost the empires of our minds because we have lost touch with our local languages – the only tool with which we can explore, understand and dominate the African world.

Underscoring the place of local languages in national development, Okwudishu (2006: 135 – 36) says:

It has been rightly observed that a national development that has not given a pride of place to indigenous languages as vehicles of national development is likely to be a wasted effort . . . development in Africa should focus on the cultivation of a literate citizenry that can participate effectively in the socio-economic, political and cultural life of the nation. Development in this sense is human-based and languages chosen for that purpose must be those that will facilitate access to information for the masses at the grassroots.

Achieving this target in Africa has turned out to be a wishful fantasy in view of the apparent disuse of African local languages in our development processes. Lamenting this sorry state, Sonaiya (2007: 18) says:

. . . what continues to be of great concern to many in Africa is the fact that even after independence not only are European languages still being maintained within the educational system, but very little is being done to develop African languages which had suffered over a century of neglect. This state of affairs is what Djite (2004: 1) refers to as “the most painful and absurd interface between Africa and the rest of the world”. The fact is that Africa is the only continent in the world in which language-in-education “is largely exogenous to the society it seeks to serve”.

Of course, we must admit that experts in linguistic studies have raised their voices to alert the world on the disuse of African languages, giving rise to the use of such terms as ‘language endangerment’, ‘language death’, ‘vanishing voices’ and ‘tongue-tiedness’, all of which have been characteristically used to define the sorry state of some African languages. In this regard, the hegemonic influence of English on Nigerian indigenous languages has attracted the attention of linguists.

Writing on hegemony and the English language, Awonusi notes:

The notion of hegemonic English implies the perception of the English Language as a significant linguistic superstructure that has a wide usage and acceptance as well as influence. Thus hegemony with relation to language connotes a fairly complex interplay of a number of variables such as power (socioeconomic power of its users), control (how the powerful users of a particular language use it as a weapon of linguistic domination of communities especially those that are multilingual or multicultural), legitimacy (the dependence on a language as the basis of social and political acceptance) and influence (the exercise of power...)¹

Awonusi's view in the quotation above aptly captures the linguistic situation in Nigeria vis-à-vis the role-relationships between English and Nigerian indigenous languages. In this circumstance, language shift is then inevitable. According to Trudgill (2002), quoted in Jibril (2007: 284), language shift is 'the process by which a community more or less gradually abandons its original language and via an intermediate shift of bilingualism, adopts another.' Thus, bilingualism is 'but a transitional stage towards language shift or language death' (Jibril, 2007: 285). However, the hue and cry raised by linguists and their efforts at improving the status of local languages have not found significant expression in practical linguistic situations. And for our present purposes, my focus here is on southwestern Nigeria where I observed that in certain spheres of life, the dream of entrenching the indigenous languages in the scheme of developing the African world is far from being realized.

Thus, linguists in Nigeria have so much touted the National Policy on Education of 1977, amended in 1981, which states that the language of instruction at the primary school level should be initially the child's mother tongue; that one would ordinarily think that it has become an inseparable part of the educational system. Education policy makers who approve the establishment of private schools would certainly not feign ignorance about the reality of the use of English as a medium of instruction in such schools to the detriment of Yoruba. It is, therefore, apparent that the government's policy on the preservation of indigenous languages in Nigeria has been inconsequential. Among the factors which have led to the failure of Nigeria's educational language policy are the dearth of qualified teachers, lack of commitment and the granting of waivers (Bamgbose, 1998: 6).

The consequence of this linguistic situation in relation to the status of indigenous languages is that the native speakers, who should appreciate and extol the languages and the cultural patterns they embody and are supposed to preserve and transmit, but they do not take a pride in using the languages, as English has caught their fancy. Hence, casting light on the phenomenal dimensions of the continued dominance of imported languages in Africa on the indigenous languages, Bamgbose (1998: 9) writes:

The effects of the continued dominance can be seen in alienation resulting in unfavourable attitudes to African languages. The attitudes may be illustrated in the preference for early acquisition of these languages (with two-year-olds being made to speak English or French in elite homes), taking pride in proficiency in the imported languages at the expense of a sound knowledge of one's own mother tongue, preference for written communication in a European language, addiction to information disseminated in imported languages by electronic and print media, and lack of interest in, and concern for, the development of indigenous languages.

Bamgbose's (1998) view encapsulates the linguistic situation in Africa against which we appraise the Nigerian case with special reference to the Yoruba speech community. Commenting on this situation, Awonusi (2004: 97) observes that:

The perception of English as a language of socio-economic power is almost demonstrated in the mushrooming of the straight-for-English nursery and primary schools in many urban centers. Almost all English medium nursery schools (with English as a language of instruction) have private proprietors, unlike primary and secondary schools owned by government and some private proprietors.

The question that now arises is: how come those language/education policy makers who have made so much noise at workshops and conferences about the need to teach the child first in the local language fail to act by enforcing it at the level of implementation? Adebite (2003: 188) blames this ugly development on the Nigerian elite:

Since it is the elite that dominate policy-making in Nigeria, the interest of the elite has always been equated with public interest. Consequently, the dominance of English over the indigenous languages in Nigeria and the attendant positive attitude towards the language can be attributed to elitist interests.

It is, however, ironic that beyond the boundaries of Nigeria, there has been renewed interest in the study of Nigerian indigenous languages. Adewole (2007) points out that although Yoruba is one of the minority languages in the United States of America, the universities where Yoruba is being studied in the United States are more than the universities where the language is being studied in Nigeria. According to him, whereas there are about ten universities in Nigeria where Yoruba is being taught as a subject, there are about sixteen universities in the United States where students learn Yoruba. Commenting on the phenomenal growth of the study of Yoruba at this level, Adewole (2007: 23) says:

The United States Department of Education also gave a research grant for the development of a Yoruba Living Dictionary on the Internet. The address of the dictionary is www.yoruba@georgiasouthern.edu. It is also gratifying to note that the articles in the Yoruba wikipedia, a free encyclopedia on Yoruba on the internet, at www.yo.wikipedia.org, has [sic] grown to over three thousand.

If foreign learners have had this deep interest in learning Yoruba, an indigenous African language, and in developing it to meet the challenges of a globalised world, the ‘owners’ of the language need to have a rethink.

The Yoruba language: An Historical Survey

At this point, it is germane to attempt an historical survey of the Yoruba language in education in order to throw light on the general trend across certain stages. In a survey of the history of Nigerian education and the place given to Yoruba within the system, Ologunde (1982: 279) posits that the changing role of Yoruba has undergone three stages: the period of missionary control; the period of government participation; and the period of government control.

During the first stage between 1842 and 1882, because the Yoruba speaking people were the target of Christian missionary evangelism, Yoruba had to be the language of sermons and instructions in mission-based education. This was the stage when the Yoruba language dominated educational policies, activities and achievements. Therefore, mother tongue played a central role in Nigerian education. Ologunde (1982) considers this stage as indeed 'the golden age of Yoruba' in the educational history of Nigeria.

However, between 1883 and 1964, which marked the period of government participation, the language suddenly played almost no role because the government needed civil servants, clerks and court interpreters which necessitated more emphasis on English, the language of the colonial administration. This situation had the effect of making English the privileged language in the system, on the one hand, and of undermining the status of Yoruba, on the other hand. The third stage from 1964 to the early 1980s (the period up to which Ologunde traced the history) was the period of government control, ushered in by two historic occurrences. First, the mid-western region was created while what was left of the former western region remained almost entirely Yoruba-speaking. Therefore, it was possible for the government of western Nigeria to embark upon a more virile educational policy centered on the Yoruba language. The second important incident was the arrival of the first Yoruba scholars, specializing in Yoruba grammar and Yoruba oral literature. And in spite of these seeming positive developments, Ologunde (1982: 283) laments: 'Yet the position of the Yoruba language in the education of the Yoruba people has not had connotations of dignity. It is still being treated as a stranger in its own home, while English is still considered the real language.' This view, expressed over two and a half decades ago still captures the present linguistic situation, and thus, the level of its degeneracy at present is alarming.

In the present situation, it is not only the pedagogical aspects of the language that are suppressed, but also on the concomitant non-formal aspects that bear upon the transmission of values, norms and mores embedded the language. For example, I recall with a deep sense of nostalgia my elementary school days when time was set aside in the class for writing a composition in Yoruba or the reading of comprehension passages and answering their questions. Hence, with much excitement, we would sing folk songs, and tell folk tales and recite lyrical poems in Yoruba that touch on the value system of the people. And for exemplary relevance, I have to capture one or two here:

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| <p>(i) <i>Jan itana ti o tan</i>
 <i>To tutu to si dara</i>
 <i>Ma duro doja ola</i>
 <i>Akoko n sure tete</i></p> | <p><i>Grab the shining light</i>
 <i>That is cool and beautiful to behold</i>
 <i>Do not wait till tomorrow</i>
 <i>Time is fleeting</i></p> |
| <p>(ii) <i>Kini n o f'ole se laye ti mo wa?</i>
 <i>Laye ti mo wa kaka ki n jale</i>
 <i>Kaki ki n jale ma kuku deru</i></p> | <p><i>What shall I do with stealing in this life?</i>
 <i>In this life instead of stealing</i>
 <i>Instead of stealing I'd rather become a slave</i></p> |

The first excerpt touches on the Yoruba perception of time management while the second celebrates the value of hard work, and condemns stealing as a social vice. In order to expose one to the Yoruba cultural belief system, we were taught some popular Yoruba proverbs, which incorporates an African value system. We were also taught the elaborate greetings among the Yoruba that span every time of the day, period of the year, every occasion, condition, event, occupation or vocation. Such exposure allowed us to realize that within the Yoruba traditional system, no man or woman is an isolated entity and that the use of language to establish and enhance social relationships is a valued way of life. Yet, ironically, all of these forms of Yoruba oral literary tradition would now sound alien to children in our present-day private nursery and primary schools.

Additionally, apart from the oral mode that has vanished from the school curriculum, we hardly find schools where an interesting short story, collection of poems or children's bedtime folk tales in the indigenous language is recommended. In fact, I have a hunch that such literary pieces may not have been published at all because creative writers in Yoruba have not been motivated to write for pupils at that level, knowing fully well that there are no willing readers. Meanwhile, children's literatures in English abound, and it is commonplace to find them recommended to the pupils to develop their reading skills. Interestingly, when such children read the pieces in English, their level of proficiency cannot be faulted, but when they are asked to read a piece in Yoruba, they confess: 'We cannot read Yoruba', or manage to read with a staccato voice akin to the sound produced by the sporadic drops of rain on corrugated roofing sheets.

Incidentally, I think the generation of children we are raising now would certainly not have the experiential knowledge tied to the use of their local languages-cum-environments that would enable them to imprint 'Africanness' in developments at the global scene. Okwudishu (2003: 39) laments: 'African languages according to World Bank 2000 are marching in the 21st century with an important question staring them at the face. Can the African child claim the 21st century?' If we are sincere enough, we know quite well that the scenario needs no debate.

Given the benefit of hindsight, we must note that literary giants from Nigeria such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Niyi Osundare, and the like that we celebrate today were first of all (and still are) good users of their native languages before learning a second language. It is, in fact, the understanding of their immediate environment via the instrumentality of their local languages that invests their works with the local flavours that clearly define their depiction of the African world in their works.

Religion and Media: Discouraging the Use of Local Languages

Apart from the educational sector, one major potentially rich domain for the propagation of indigenous languages, but which has not been utilized is religion. Generally, people acknowledge their mortal nature and, therefore, depend on a higher being (God Almighty) for guidance and sustenance through the journey of life. Interestingly, some parents do everything possible to uphold their faith, as they strive to bring up their children in their chosen faith. What an avenue for entrenching the local languages! But the reality is that the hegemonic influence of English has relegated Yoruba to the background, especially in the practice of the Christian faith. In most churches in urban centers, the medium of transmitting messages is English whereas the largest percentage of the congregation is speakers of Yoruba. Of course, there could be some non-Yoruba speakers who ordinarily would need to get the translation of the messages from Yoruba into English. However (and indeed regrettably), the messages are mainly in English with a translation into Yoruba, if considered necessary. And for Christians in Yoruba-speaking communities, buying a Yoruba Bible for a personal study is a forgone issue, and in fact, dealers in the *Holy Bible* would certainly have unpleasant reports to give when they compare the negligible number of Yoruba Bibles they sell to the ever-increasing demand for the English Bible. Commenting on this development, Ayoola (2007: 120) says:

. . . many Nigerian church-goers believe that attending English-speaking churches can improve their English; hence they would rather worship in an English-speaking church even when they would have been more blessed in a church where their native language is the medium of communication.

The efficacy of the media in the dissemination of information to the people at the grassroots in order to mobilize them to participate in local and national affairs is largely dependent on the intensive use of local languages. In this regard, Bamgbose (2003: 84) notes: 'The test of the efficacy of the media for empowerment should be how far they can reach the widest audience possible, and obviously, this must involve the intensive use of African languages'.

As to the print media, there are a number of news publications in Yoruba which include *Alaroye* magazine, *Atoka Alaroye*, and *Akede Agbaye*. Before these recent publications, there had been some that had gone into extinction (see Salawu, 2004).

Although we cannot dispute the fact that some of the existing magazines and newspapers are geared towards engineering the politics of self-determination for the Yoruba nation, especially those ones that sprang up in the wake of the struggle for the entrenchment of democracy in the mid 1990s which play the roles identified under the general headings of information, correlation, continuity, entertainment and mobilization as put forward by McQuail (2000: 79-80) cited in Salawu (2004: 5). Yet, despite these functions, how many educated Yoruba people buy those newspapers and magazines for their children when they themselves cannot even decipher Yoruba tone marks? Bemoaning the situation, Salawu (2006: 6) writes:

It has already been settled that Africans, especially the educated (Western), do not seem to appreciate their languages as being fit for serious matters of education, business, governance etc.; as such, they do not patronize it [sic]. Unlike the broadcast media, the print media require repeated purchase for use. So, if the educated, who are more likely to have the economic power to purchase, are not appreciative of their languages, then they cannot patronize the media either in terms of copy purchase or placement of advertisements. This, actually, is the reason why newspapers, especially those published in indigenous languages have not been viable.

The problem does not seem to derive from just developing the interest in patronizing the newspapers, but from the doubtful proficiency of the elite in the indigenous language. With reference to the electronic media, the author of these lines has observed that some radio and television stations based in Yoruba-speaking states first of all cast their news in English before giving an abridged version in Yoruba. To shortchange the supposed illiterate television viewers for whom the Yoruba version is meant, the newscaster also doubles as the reporter. As such, one would realize that the reports almost always do not match the pictures displayed in the course of reporting.

Explaining away this marginalisation tendency, a director of news, while fielding questions from viewers on a live programme, argued that news in Yoruba has to be abridged because the rural dwellers do not need the details and technicalities in the English version. If we are genuinely interested in developing our indigenous languages and wish to demonstrate the value we have for them, what is wrong with casting the news first in the native language and then rendering the English version later? After all, the events reported are tied to the people's immediate environment.

From the foregoing, what then can linguists do to ensure that the insightful proposals, suggestions and legislations made at the conference arena, and in academic papers do not turn out to be mere fantasies?

Tying Up the Loose Ends

Doing something the same way and expecting to get a different result is a sure way of keeping to the failure track. As soldiers on the battlefield, linguists need to appraise their strategies so that their efforts would not just end up on their research desk. Pointing out where linguists seem to have missed the mark, Uwajeh (2003: 109) says:

Much more than the language learning strategists, language development experts often miss the point about how to uplift the status of Nigerian indigenous languages by assuming that the problem lies somehow in the languages themselves. Accordingly, the language developer often assumes that the solution to the marginalisation of indigenous Nigerian languages lies in what to do to them. Actually, the problem is elsewhere . . . in the diminishing use made of the languages precisely . . .

For instance, the project of documenting African languages is laudable but it should not be an end, but a means toward achieving an end. Nigerian linguists would often cite the Six-Year Primary Project of the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) (1970-78) as a successful experiment in exploring the dynamics of indigenous languages for effective learning processes which proved that a pupil with his/her early education in the mother tongue would not experience any difficulty in the secondary school because the mastery of the first language, in fact, provides the necessary springboard for efficient learning of the second language. Also, as linguists, we hail the Rivers Readers Project under the supervision of Kay Williamson, E. J. Alagoa and O. A. Nduka in their efforts to develop the languages of the then Rivers State of Nigeria, but the question we have not bothered to ask as contemporary linguists is: What were the strategies for the success of these projects?

With regard to the first project mentioned here, Fafunwa (1982: 297) has the following to say on the organization and administration of the project:

The writer is the overall director of the project while a project co-ordinator handles the day to day supervision of the programme. He ensures that the syllabus is followed to the letter and runs a small secretariat. He consults the teachers frequently, and they consult him. He organizes orientation programmes and short intensive in-service courses.

And as to the second project, Williamson (2006: 99) explains that:

. . . as a result of experience, we emphasized that the language committees should be as inclusive as possible: different dialect areas, chiefs, teachers, who must include women, different churches, etc., should all be involved. The language committee formed a bridge between the community and the Rivers Readers Committee, and the Rivers Readers Committee formed another bridge between the community and the Rivers State Government.

Thus, a number of lessons are here for the contemporary linguist to learn. First, developing languages is not the exclusive reserve of a trained linguist; academics need not see the battle for the survival of African languages as an all-academic-affair, for collaborative efforts between researchers in our language institutes, colleges of education and universities, and other stakeholders would go a long way in saving and empowering our endangered languages. In this sense, Jibril (2007: 285) suggests:

Linguists should thus form lobby groups to enlighten and lobby communities, local government councils, state or regional governments, parliaments and state and national assemblies to pursue policies or carry out actions which will promote the use of African languages in education, government business, in homes and other domains, in addition to direct actions aimed at developing these languages, such as funding research, publication, website development, etc.

Continuing, with reference to the involvement of local government councils hinted above, Babalola (2002: 3) writes:

It is then suggested that the local government councils in Nigeria, which are seen as the custodians of the indigenous cultures, could be given the responsibility of overseeing the development of indigenous languages in their areas of operation so as to nurture and preserve the many cultures in Nigeria.

Thus, in order to make the role of the local councils realizable, he proposes the following:

- (a) Restructuring of the local councils;
- (b) Creation of special schools and colleges;
- (c) Provision of additional income for the local councils; and
- (d) Working alliance with state universities.

With regard to the fourth proposal on the role the academic community can play, we can argue that it is not only state universities that should have collaborative projects with the local councils, any higher institution, be it state or federal, sited within the geographical area of the local councils can take the responsibility; because such collaborative efforts with other stakeholders beyond the academia can forge worthwhile links.

Judging from the above submission, the second lesson for linguists is that development strategies focused on languages themselves without involving the target users would be counterproductive. Thus, language planning policies, however lofty they are, would not produce results unless they are keenly monitored in the process of implementation. The trained linguist should not be an archer whose arrow (linguistic theory) is well sharpened but perpetually kept in the sheath (the academic community) without aiming it at the target (the larger society).

In this context, it is instructive to note that the campaign for the empowerment of our indigenous languages is no less important than any other crusade directed at sanitizing the Nigerian society of certain ills such as corruption, lust for foreign goods, human trafficking, smuggling, child abuse and the production of fake products. All of these have received wide publicity in the media, as there are jingles on state and national radio and television stations, sensitizing the people on the imperative of eschewing such acts that would hinder the development of the country. Surprisingly, I have not heard or seen any advertorial on radio or television where people are exhorted to take a pride in using their indigenous languages the way they are encouraged to patronize 'Made in Nigeria' goods.

Interestingly, it thus appears that the campaign for the empowerment of indigenous languages is confined to the academic community. Hence I contend that except for those that are linked to academe in one way or the other, few people are aware of this battle for the survival of African languages. It is worrisome that the people for whose sake we are gathered every year at conferences do not even know that something is wrong with their cultural heritage, and that unless some urgent steps are taken, the indigenous languages will totally lose their relevance.

While it may not be easy for the linguists in our colleges of education and universities to effectively monitor their proposals and suggestions in the target communities, the role of the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) can readily come to the fore. But if the misgivings that linguists themselves have about the running of the institute are anything to go by, then Nigerian linguists seem to live in a world of fantasy about their projections on uplifting the status of the local languages. In a critique on the running of NINLAN, Nwachukwu (2003: 24) laments:

The establishment of NINLAN has been greeted as a great milestone in our efforts to accord our indigenous languages their rightful position in the scheme of things. But most scholars with whom I have discussed the subject have been surprised by the way the establishment has been run for nearly ten years of its existence. To put it mildly, the affairs of NINLAN appear to have been shrouded in secrecy; certainly nearly all the knowledgeable scholars who ought to contribute ideas on how best to run the institute so that it fulfils the goals and objective of those who set it up have been excluded from its affairs. This method of governance can never allow the institute to grow.

This is the crux of the matter, yet linguists attend conferences and workshops to pontificate on the development strategies of ameliorating the status of Nigerian indigenous languages, but at the point of execution, something goes wrong, creating a gulf between the academic ideals in the conference/workshop room, and the linguistic problems in our communities, waiting to be solved.

Second, there is a setback in the implementation of language development strategies that we seem to have paid too much attention to literacy in the description of our indigenous languages; hence we downplay the oral traditions that our languages preserve. Thus, documenting African languages should not be focused solely on developing the orthography, the lexicon or the dictionary.

Researchers have been so much engrossed in the benefits of literacy that we do not take cognizance of its costs and dysfunctions. Pym (2003: 15) cautions:

With literacy we gain self reflexivity, abstraction, analytical thinking, alienation, fixity, and infinitely cumulative memory, all those talents creating the condition of possibility for turning outward, away from oneself and the voices within, replacing mythology with social knowledge, spirit with materialism, tradition with progress and critique . . .

Linguists at this stage of trying to develop African languages perhaps need to shift the emphasis hitherto laid on literacy to the oral aspects of language use in order to be able to explore the cultural aspects of language that would readily arouse the users' sentiments and sense of pride in their cultural heritage. We have so much to gain in this direction, for Pym (2003: 16) agrees further:

Frequently we name those who do not read and write "illiterates" as opposed to, say, "being of oral tradition", focusing attention upon what they lack rather than upon what they know that the literate have forgotten in consequence of their commitment to the written word.

Little wonder then that Fafunwa (1982: 292) laments that many institutions in Africa have not devoted sufficient attention to African culture in their curriculum. He then suggests that African folklore, mores, and literature; African music, African art; African languages, African history and civilizations; African ethics and religions; and African social and political institutions should be given prominence in the primary and secondary schools, as well as in the tertiary institutions.

On a final note, I am afraid that linguists need not call for conferences with new themes at every meeting, unless we are only interested in churning out papers for promotion and recognition in our respective fields. There should be moments of stocktaking to appraise the successes and pitfalls of the activities and discussions at previous meetings and attendant follow-ups. Furthermore, I think such a retreat could come up periodically at every linguistic association so that there would be enough issues in at least two previous conferences so that they can be reviewed with close reference to how they have can solve linguistic problems in particular speech communities.

Conclusion

This discussion in this study was not an attempt to downplay the efforts of linguists who have shown great commitment to the task of saving African indigenous languages from marginalization, but rather an effort to bring attention to the cracks in the wall that have hitherto weakened the bond between the researchers and the larger society they strive to build. Therefore, we must admit that this paper may not have been able to provide a holistic blueprint for meeting the target, but it certainly can be an eye opener, challenging researchers in the field to give the issues raised a serious thought to further expand and evaluate linguistic research in a bid to genuinely develop African languages.

Note

1. This is quoted from an article by Segun AWONUSI entitled 'Linguistic Hegemony and the Plight of Minority Languages in Nigeria' [www document] URL: <http://www.reseau-amerique-latine.fr/ceisal-bruxelles/ESE/ESE-7-WONUSI.pdf> Retrieved 2nd September 2007.

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