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ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL ENDANGERMENT: EXAMPLE FROM YORUBA

K. Adewale Rafiu PhD and R. Olabimpe Adeyemi*

Abstract

This work chronicles some aspects of Yoruba language and culture that are near extinction. We look at the decadent use of Yoruba by young native speakers. The near loss of some cultural aspects like *oríki* (lineage praises), *Ekún iyàwó* (nuptial art), *ijálá* (hunters' chant), *irèmòjé* (hunters' dirge), among others, is examined. The relevance of these cultural practices and the implication of their loss are also discussed. Interview and observation were used to collect data for the study while Edwards' model of language endangerment is employed for analysis. The study concludes that traces of language endangerment could be found in the disappearance or disuse of some parts of the culture and lexical items. The study, therefore, recommends that since language is a vehicle of culture, rejuvenation of these cultural aspects would enhance language use, thereby sustaining the language therefrom.

Introduction

Language death is an area in the study of language nowadays, especially as linguists have discovered that the rate at which languages are dying is very high. Language death is not caused by the tiny population of speakers alone as big languages have ceased to exist in some parts of the world. The trend of loss does not exclude Nigeria where about 516 languages are spoken (Crystal 2000, Rafiu 2011). In regions that are largely heterolinguistic like Nigeria, the majority languages tend to push the minority ones to the background, thereby restricting or limiting their domains of use. Apart from the majority/minority dichotomy, the language policy as embedded in the Nigerian constitution does not, in practical terms, favour the small language groups.

* K. Adewale Rafiu PhD, Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Ilorin Nigeria, rafenadewale@gmail.com & R. Olabimpe Adeyemi, Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Ilorin, Nigeria. rohbim@yahoo.com

In this study, we investigate the pattern of endangerment of Yoruba language as shown in some cultural entrapments of the language and its speakers. It is observed that an average native speaker of Yoruba language would never concede to the fact that Yoruba language is endangered. Observers that say that are seen as false alarmists. However, we can say that the process of loss of Yoruba language started long time ago. The extinction some aspects of the Yoruba culture and practices as evident in lexical loss and moribund cultural practices abound.

We have used the term 'loss' in this study to underpin some parts of the language and its speakers that are endangered and also the break in the generational transmission of the language. Yoruba belongs to the Benue-Congo phylum of the Niger Congo family (Comrie, 1990). Edwards' (1992) model for classifying endangered language and culture is used for this study.

Theoretical Model and Methodology

Edwards' model uses a number of variables which are relevant to language endangerment situations. He classifies his model into two: 'Categorization A', which consists of different perspectives, and which allows us to characterize human groups according to geography, psychology, religion, politics, history, education, economics, linguistics, sociology, technology and demography. The second is 'Categorization B'. This identifies the scope over which the A-variables can be applied: speaker, language and setting. With these two parameters, Edwards generates a lot of ways to identify and classify languages that are endangered. Questions are then drafted on the ways such variables have worked for the languages under study (see Rafiu, 2011).

The result gives a thorough overview of the features relevant to assessing language vitality. This is particularly useful as it provides a compelling prognosis for the continued use of a given language. Education and westernisation are observed to be the bane of the development of the Yoruba language and culture. In most homes, the language of interaction is English. Children are also sent to schools where the use of the native language is a punishable offence.

This study uses interview with the purpose of obtaining direct information from both young and adult native speakers. Observation complements the interview. Observation involves on-the-spot assessment of the focus of the study. For example, we attended some Yoruba traditional

marriage ceremonies to know if brides still chant *Ekún iyàwó*. We were in villages to know if hunters still chant *ijílá* when going on hunting expedition, also to know how many people can chant *oríkì* and if it is still the norm to use *oríkì* for its wonders- of luring, appealing, inspiring, etc.

Is Yoruba Language Endangered?

This appears like a strange question that does not need an answer given the population of the speakers of the language, the amount of literature on and in the language, the various academic levels where the language is taught, and so on. Nevertheless, it may be right to say that the language is endangered if the facts from this study are considered. In the twenty (20) private primary schools observed within the Ilorin Metropolis, Yoruba language is neither used to teach nor is it taught as a school subject. The implication of this is that the level of proficiency in the native language is impaired. The child's linguistic woes continue if the language in the home is not the native language. For example, of the two hundred students (10 each from the 20 schools visited), one hundred and eighty-five (185) representing 92.5 per cent say they use English at home with parents and siblings. Others also use English at home but, according to them, not in all situations.

Language loss, from the sociolinguistic perspective, is the loss of a mother tongue as a tool of communication by an individual or by a community (Trask, 1996). According to Rafiu, "there are reasons why individuals and communities abandon their language. It is observed that many children not exposed to their mother-tongue in their early years grow up to speak the language of wider communication (LWC) or an exoglossic language, viz. English or pidgin" (53). In a situation where the speaker is exposed to the native language, it does not go beyond its environment as most of these languages are neither taught nor used to teach in schools, or used in the media (Ohiri-Aniche, 2006).

Language loss comes in various forms. An individual may experience loss of his linguistic repertoire or it may be the case of a whole community. The process of language death comes about through gradual loss of fluency and competence by its speakers. For example, with the spread of a majority language into more domains, the number of contexts in which individuals use the ethnic language diminishes. The language usually retreats till it is used only in the home, and finally reduced to such personal activities as counting, praying and dreaming.

From the foregoing, it can be suggested that an individual may experience language loss if he begins to lose proficiency in his native language. Many factors may be responsible for this. This is the case Yoruba language is witnessing, i.e. loss and lack of proficiency in the language by young speakers. Noticeable among speakers of Yoruba is lexical loss. For example, 95 percent of our respondents do not know what the following words mean:

Food and Household items

Àgànrándì	'dwarf door'
Fitilá	'oil wick burner'
Epo èbó	'kerosene'
Fèrèsé	'window,
Máràsáná	'small window,
Gbágùdá	'cassava'
Ìsúsè	'bathing bowl'
Kóló	'small improvised bank'
Àjà	'rafter'
Agadagodo	'padlock'

Numerals

Ogún	'twenty/20'
Ogójì	'forty/40'
Ogóje	'one hundred and forty/140'
Ogójo	'one hundred and sixty/160'
Okódó	'two hundred/200'
Òódúnrún	'three hundred/300'
Èédégbètà	'five hundred/500'
Egbètà	'six hundred/600'

Some Aspects of Yoruba Culture that are Endangered

Culture is a way of life. A society's norms and tradition are entrenched in the culture which guides the people. The term culture thus refers to the customary belief, social forms, and material traits of racial, religious or social groups. It also depicts the characteristic features of expressions and pronunciation, and integrates them into their own speech. The Yoruba oral traditional practices among others include *oriki* (lineage praises), *Ekún iyàwó* (nuptial art), *ijálá* (hunters' chant) and *ràrà* (a form of lineage chant). They are powerful Yoruba orature that are employed in various circumstances by the Yorùbá people. However, as rich and effective as these are, a number of them are being abandoned for contemporary and

western practices. Some of them are examined hereunder with their use and implication of their loss.

Oríkì (lineage poetry/praises)

Oríkì comes in various forms as it is used for different purposes by the Yorùbá people. There is *oríkì orílè* (lineage poetry). This is used to know the type of person one is. It is used to detect one's lineage, among others. The other type is *oríkì oba/ìjòyè* (see appendix) which is a specific type that can be sub-grouped under *oríkì bòròkiní*. Every town in Yorùbáland has its own *oríkì* in which the history and prowess of the people are encoded. For example, *oríkì* Ìbàdàn, Ègbá, Ìjèshà, Ìgbètì, Ìwó, Ìgbòho, etc.

When an *oríkì* is sung, the effect is felt by the addressee in such a way that the person's action is reactionary depending on the encoded effect. Wherever lineage *oríkì* or *oríkì ilú* is chanted, the addressee is forced to react by appreciating the singer. A necessary requirement in this regard is for the addressee to be able to understand the *oríkì* itself. Without that it would just sound like noise.

Though *oríkì* is still being sung by some people, however, it is not being handed down to the younger generation. This has made it a moribund cultural practice. Praise name is fast replacing *oríkì* as many people cannot go beyond their praise names. Nowadays, it is common to ask people their *oríkì* and you get responses like Àbíké, Àlání, Àjoké, among others instead of giving the lineage praises. But praise name is meant to usher in *oríkì* as in the following excerpts:

Èmi Àsàbí, omo kulodo

Ômô o kanlekun bonile ja

Ômô o de biija wu gbendugbendu

Ômô o jowujowu yoko lenu.

Meaning:

I, Àsàbí, the child of Kúlódò

The child that knocks on the door to quarrel with the owner of the house

The child that gets to the scene of fight and brags

The jealous that troubles the husband.

Ekún Iyawo (Nuptial arts)

Ekún iyàwó, a chant which forms a part of Yorùbá traditional oral tradition, is chanted by brides. *Ekún iyàwó* is chanted on the eve of the marriage ceremony when the bride is to be led to the bridegroom's house as

is found in Oyo, Saki, Okeeho and Iseyin areas. The art is handed down from generation to generation through simple cultural devices. The prospective bride goes from one elderly woman to the other after working hours, especially at night, adding more materials to what she might have imbibed in the process of growing up.

Effects of Endangerment

Oral tradition is used to serve many purposes by the Yorùbá people. *Oríkì*, for instance, is used to pacify (e.g. children, angry persons), amplify, inspire as well as instruct people. A good example of this is the *oríkì Ìkòyí* which typifies them as warriors. We have some *oríkìs* that tell the story of the people. Some negative effects include the following:

1. Gradual loss of linguistic competence causes reduction in communication and transfer of information.
2. Stigmatization of the language which provides negative evaluation or attitudes, feeling of insecurity, inadequacy or rejection.
3. Since lexical loss is the first manifestation of language loss, it can be assumed that, the Yorùbá child is experiencing an overall reduction in linguistic proficiency.
4. In its simplest form, loss occurs when the minority members cannot use a language proficiently with the majority members.
5. Negative attitude towards language can prove detrimental to the maintenance of that language, while learner with positive attitude towards their own language maintain additive bilingualism.
6. Yoruba language is potentially technically endangered because of the negative attitude of the middle or elite class towards the language.
7. Language is potentially endangered if there are few children learning the language, and if immediate measures are not put in place, this can ultimately lead to the death of the language.

Implications on Language, Culture and Religion

Language and culture are inseparable. Hence the loss of one is a pointer to the loss of the other. Apart from the entertainment part of the Yoruba oral tradition, the history of people are said to be encoded in it and

handed down from generation to generation. So, a man without culture is as good as dead. Such people live a false life, life that is devoid of identity.

The disappearance of some aspects of the Yorùbá culture portends great danger for the survival of the language. For example, non-chanting of *ekún iyàwó*, *irèmòjé*, *ràrà*, *oríkì*, etc. has taken the shine off these practices. Traditional marriage system is moribund and the value system has depreciated. The fear associated with being deflowered before marriage has become trivialized as it is now a part of civilization not to be a virgin. Less emphasis is placed on the role of the intermediary and the parents' blessings on the wedding day, as most young girls get impregnated without the knowledge of their parents or guardian.

Irèmòjé (hunters' dirge) is a special chant for a dead hunter. It is used to dissociate a dead hunter from his living colleagues. However, since this is associated with occultism as a result of the influx of foreign religions, hunting is now done in modern ways. Hunting is no more associated with occultic or *ijálá* chants. A hunter is a practitioner of either of the popular faiths. But the association of *iremoje* or *ijala* to occultism is a misconception. Our way of life and living is eroded with the discontinued practice of *ijala* and hunters' dirge.

Other identified implications

1. The first identified problem is lack of awareness of the problem as many Yoruba speakers are not aware of the fact that the language is dying. It is, therefore, recommended that oral literature and many other areas where the language is being underutilized should be incorporated in schools' curriculum.
2. We were able to bring out some of the aspects of difficulties such as the numeral system, name of things, use of certain verbs in Yoruba and some praise songs. It is hoped that this will help language instructional designers and teachers to understand their student's difficulties and design lessons which can accommodate their needs.
3. It also has important implications on the parents' attitude to the use of indigenous languages. The home is the first non-formal educational setting for the child. Hence, the use of indigenous languages should be encouraged rather than mandating or enjoining the use of other languages, especially at the home domain. In other words, parents should be committed to providing their children with quality Yoruba language input so that the language may continue to develop.

Conclusion

This work has examined and discussed some aspects of the Yoruba language and culture that are endangered. It has also x-rayed the relevance of language and culture to man, the symbiotic relationship that exists between language and culture in relation to man. Further in the study was the reason for the endangerment situation in Yoruba language.

In the course of study, we looked at the cultural aspects of Yoruba that are either moribund, near extinct or dead, among which are *ekún ìyàwó*, *oríkì* and *irèmòjé*. Their relevance to the Yoruba people was also discussed as well as the implication of their disappearance to the practitioners.

The study concluded that as language and culture are part of man, the loss of one or both of them would make man less what he is in terms of expression, identity, heritage, values, among others. It is, therefore, recommended that man should strive to protect his language and culture. For example, the indigenous language should be spoken by the adults at all settings, starting from the home domain. Young and old should dress in the traditional attires and the media should be encouraged to promote the native language and culture through use and non-formal teaching.

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Appendix

ORÍKÌ ORÍLÈ

Kúlódò ni mí

Òmò atókú jeun

Òmò atààyè sorò

Òmò arúkú

Òmò arùkú

Òmò arúkú rojà má kùtà

Òmò òkú táa gbé d'òjà tí ò tà

Lomo aráyé dásò fún

Ni wọn pe léégún

Ògògò òmò báa kú l'Òyó ò léjo

Báa kú lóko ní daápòn

Òmò òkú èkò ijàdù àkàrà

Òmò adìe sùn wọn ní 'kú lókú

Nígba tí a lèta tán adìe dide

Meaning:

I am Kulodo

The child that sells corpses to feed

The child that sells the living for riches

The child of arúkú

The child of arùkú

The child that bears the corpse to the market and sells

The child of the dead that is taken to the market and sells

That people clothe

And call it masquerade

Ògògò, The child that if we die in Òyó, there is no case

If we die in a village, it becomes a brouhaha

The child of èkò ijàdù àkàrà

The child of adie sùn, they say it is dead
When condiments are ready the fowl rises!

Ekún Ìyàwó (nuptial chant)

Ìyá mi, ìyá mi
E kú kike tée kemi
E kú gígè tée gè'mí dàgbà
Ìbí e ránmi ní mo n rẹ yí ìyá tí mo ní
E ma jẹ o hun mi mama mi
E wípé n ma f'àbíkú s'ewo
E wípé n ma rin n'iso agan
Àbíkú leledee bi
Àbígbìn ní t'ógèdè
Orí o nii jẹ n babigbin òmò
Ewure lẹ sile ya yòò gbòdòrẹ
Aguntan, àní lẹ sile ya yòò gbàtòòrì
Èmi sòboro yojú Alásàbí
Emi ma wa tun sile wo-mo gbàgàn asò
Kin ní n o jẹ gbagbe oloore?
Aguntan o gbagbe Eleeri boro o
Emi o mo ni i fi yin se gbagbe obi tí mo ní o
A bee gbo e mo gbagbe mi o
Ire Lónú orii mi ' fi'rè

Meaning:

My mother! My mother
Thank you for making me comfortable
Thank you for making me grow with comfort
I'm going to where you sent me
Don't let me regret
Bless that I may not have still-birth
Bless that I may not be barren
Pigs are known to have still-birth
Plantain trees are usually buried
May God not let me bury my children
A goat that misses its way will be beaten
Sheep that misses its way will be beaten
I, plain-cheek Àsàbí
I went through wrong way and got bundles of clothes

What will I eat to forget my benefactors?
A sheep doesn't forget its benefactors
I will not forget you my parents
Can you hear me? Please don't forget me
Blessings today, nothing but blessings.

Ràrà

Layiwola Àtandá omo Adeyemi

Poju omo Àtìbà

Poju omo Amori

Layiwola bàbá yèyè

A-tó-báa-tíí perí

Omo póó omo Lawoin

O dùn l'áwo

O dùn nimule

Àtandá ti mo gbekele

Ò níí yawo kú

Nnkan ò níí s'Alayeluwa

Omo Adeyemi

Pelenge bii Fúlàní

Baba Baátúndé.

(Adeyemi, 2010, p.115)

Meaning:

Layiwola Atanda son of Adeyemi

'Poju child of Àtìbà

Polu child of Amori

Layiwola the almighty

One who is worthy of his praises

Offspring of póó, child of Lawon

You are reliable

You are good as confident

Àtandá that I rely on

Will not die prematurely

Nothing will happen to His royal Highness

Child of Adeyemi

Slim like the Fúlàní

Father of Baátúndé.

Ìjálá

Bénìkàn tí wulè
Kó m̀nà ìjàmbá tó
Ìwájú ní yóò BÓlórùn Oba
N ló mú mí rántí òrò ìyàwó àsèsègbé
Tó lo yílé omo rè padà lógbà
Asán nínú asán
N ni gbogbo afé ayé
Té e kólèyà wònyíí
Ohun fún gbà diè ni
Irunmú logbó, irungbòn làgbà
Bóo lódò dàgbà bóo lódò gbó
Bó pe tíí ojú u re a si hunjò
Meaning:

No matter how smart you are
God, the King is there before you
That is why I recollect a newly newly-wedded bride
Who because of fornication
Went to the hospital to tie her womb
Vanity upon vanity
Are all the things of this world
You are pursuing
Everything is for a while
Mustache signifies adulthood
Beard signifies elderly one
If you say you are not old
If you say you are young later your face will wrinkle....
(Ogundare Foyanmu, Orin Mess)