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Prof. J. P. A. Ukoyen



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HALTING THE TIDE OF LANGUAGE LOSS IN NIGER STATE, NIGERIA

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Introduction

In a broad linguistic term, language loss is the result of a systematic or random reduction in the form and content of a language and its sphere of competence. Language loss could be individual or community based. When a language is being lost i.e. dying, it may undergo substantial changes in structure especially in the speech of younger generation. For instance, native lexical items may be replaced by loan words from the prestige language (Trask 1996).

Language loss has been observed to be gradual both in the individual and community that experience it. However, the factors attributed to loss of indigenous languages vary. Among such factors are: thin population, domination by big and influential languages, economy and natural disasters. However, to posit a common factor for all languages may be erroneous as experiences differ from individual to individual and from community to community.

In this study, we shall adduce reasons for language loss generally and discuss the extent of language loss in Nigeria. We shall also examine common factors that can be used in stemming the tide of language loss in general and weigh them against the features of dying languages in Niger State, Nigeria. Niger State is a multiethnic and heterolinguistic State in Nigeria. It has about four million (4,000,000) people with about thirty (30) languages (National Population Commission 2006).

Why and How Languages Die?

So many languages have died in recent times and a whole lot are on the verge of extinction. This trend affects, most especially, the minority languages. Crystal (2000) reports the loss of Kasabe in Cameroun, while Ejele (2002) reports the loss of Ajawa and

Gana in Nigeria. *Ivory Tower Digest* (2010) reports the loss of one of the world's oldest languages, Bo. Boa Sr, the 85-year-old and only surviving speaker of Bo language of Andamanese, Andaman died from the devastating Tsunami in 2004. Thus, with the death of Boa Sr and the extinction of the Bo language, a unique part of human society became history.

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). It could be as a result of voluntary abandonment or imposed rejection of a language. Speakers abandon their native tongue in adaptation to an environment where the use of the language of that environment is advantageous to them. Similarly, a number of Nigerians in the diaspora have had reason to abandon the native languages in favour of foreign languages for economic opportunities.

However, reasons vary among individuals and communities. It is observed that many children not exposed to their mother-tongue in their early years grow up to speak either the language of wider communication (LWC) or an exoglossic language (viz. English), or pidgin, and in the Niger State, Nigeria, any of the major languages. 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. Holmes' (1992:63) example of individual language loss is replicated here:

Annie at 20 is a young speaker of Dyirbal, an Australian Aboriginal language. She also speaks English which she learnt at school. There is no written Dyirbal material for her to read, and there are fewer and fewer contexts in which she can appropriately hear and speak the language. So, she is steadily becoming less proficient in it. She can understand the Dyirbal she hears used by older people in her community, and she uses it to speak to her grandmother. But her grandmother is scathing about her ability in Dyirbal, saying Annie does not speak the language properly.

From the illustration above, Annie's loss of Dyirbal is due to the gradual encroachment of domains of Dyirbal by English. Dyirbal's loss is also facilitated by lack of written materials in the language. Her vocabulary and complex forms would shrink until she can no longer speak the language. The situation may further be complicated if English becomes the norm in her community.

It has also been observed that there is a high rate of loss in mixed marriages. The one that is threatened depends on the language that is used outside the home. For instance, in Nigeria, an Itsekiri lady married to a Yoruba man may experience loss of her language especially if they are resident in a predominantly Yoruba-speaking town. The kind of loss in this instance may be gradual. The children may stand no chance of acquiring Itsekiri language at all. If they do, it may fizzle out as the domain of use is restricted to the home. A similitude of this scenario is reported by Hudson (1999) in Tukano, a Brazilian Island of about 10,000 people. Hudson reports that the patrilineal and patrilocal marriage patterns make it compulsory for a man to marry outside his tribe. It is also a norm that the mother should not speak her language to the children. In essence, the mother tongue of the child is not the language of the mother. Not only that, the wife is forced to abandon her language for the husband's, thus giving rise to generational deterioration of such a language. The linguistic assimilation of people in mixed marriage may serve as an index of social assimilation and, by extension, an index of language loss.

Sometimes, some ethnolinguistic groups may literally give up their language for an overwhelming majority language. Fasold (1992:289) discovered how the domain-oriented

use of English in school arena is to the detriment of Tiwa Indian:

It might be safely assumed that all linguistic minorities want their language to be used as the medium of instruction. There are plenty of instances in which linguistic minorities given a choice have chosen a language other than their community language as medium of instruction.

A similar case is reported in Plateau State, Nigeria, where Yankam, a small language group of 7,500 is losing its language in favour of Hausa (see Adegbija 1994; Ejele 2002). According to this report, no one under the age of 30 years could speak Yankam as the older speakers are bilingual in Yankam and Hausa, while the younger ones are monolingual in Hausa. The same situation holds for Ganawuri, another language spoken in Plateau State (Jibril 1990). This is always the unavoidable fate suffered by languages with very few speakers. The process of linguistic assimilation is accelerated when the affected language, in most cases, has not been reduced to writing.

Economic reason has been adduced as one of the factors for language loss. In English-dominated countries, for example, people learn English in order to get good jobs. This happens virtually in countries colonized by Britain and other countries in Europe that wield political and military power like France, Germany, Portugal, among others. Many people who have travelled to these countries have had cause to learn these prestige languages. The result is bilingualism. Individual bilingualism rarely survives in this situation because of the threat posed by the language of immediate environment (LIE).

A community may seem not to see the reason why it should take active steps to maintain its ethnic language. It may not see the potential of its language and may even think that its language has nothing to offer it. It may not see any connection between its heritage, history, values, identity and its language. It may not see the language as offering any advantages to its children either now or in the future. These impressions may be caused by the non-use of the language in the media or if it is not reduced to writing. When these happen, loss of that language is very probable. A typical situation is when a minority monolingual community is dominated by a majority language in all the major institutional domains namely, school, television, radio, newspaper, courts, etc. Loss of language of such community will be unavoidable unless active steps are taken to prevent it.

Very often, a minority group may consider learning a majority language in order to achieve social and economic success. At first, the group may feel that its language is not under threat because they still speak it. However, with time and without conscious maintenance, it may fizzle out. This is the case with the children of Nigerians in the diaspora and the Arab migrant workers in France.

The speed of loss of a language may be determined by social and economic goals of individuals, especially where the knowledge of the second language is a pre-requisite for success. Young people are mostly found in this category. For instance, young people in a foreign land may find the need to learn the language of their new environment in order to have access to economic opportunities. In the same vein, educated men and women may also shift, while less educated people with little or no challenge retain their language for domestic use.

Holmes (1992) cites young Oberwart women who shifted to German because they were the ones taking advantage of the new jobs offered by the industrial changes. According to her, German became the high language in a broad diglossic situation in Oberwart. It was the language of the school, official transaction and economic advancement. It expressed formality and social distance. Hungarian, however, became the low language that was used in most homes and friendly interactions, especially among townspeople. It was the language of solidarity, cordiality and conviviality. Gradually, Hungarian was considered old-fashioned and German continued to increase in domains of use: for social and economic progress, young people used it among their friends thereby contracting the domains of Hungarian. Holmes attributes the abandonment of Hungarian in favour of German to economic opportunities offered by proficiency in German.

Extent of Language Loss in Nigeria

In Nigeria, many languages have gone into extinction. The need to retain the mother tongue has been receiving attention from scholars in Nigeria due to abated loss of some of them (Fakuade 1995; Fakuade, Gambo and Bashir 2003; Dada 2005). As languages of varying sizes and statuses come in contact, the concomitant social, political, psychological and economic variables make bilingualism, language shift and ultimately language death or language loss imperative. For example, Ake (Nassarawa State), Bakpiaka (Cross River), Butanci, Shau and Kudu-Camo (Bauchi), Chamba (Taraba) Sheni (Kaduna), Holma and Honta (Adamawa) and Sorko languages (Niger, Kwara and Kebbi) have either

gone into extinction or gone moribund (Fakuade 1995; Ugwuoke 1999).

Similarly, Bleambo (1990) reports that a lot of small language groups in Taraba State, Nigeria, which are yet to be classified are in danger of disappearing, or being swallowed up by the Hausa language. In this State and other States in the north, Hausa language is aggressively imperialistic.

Mowarin (2007) observes that many languages are being dropped nowadays because the speakers see them as barriers to development. Besides, the affected languages are those associated with rurality, which might not meet the challenges of the modern world. According to Egbokhare (2004:9), "What has become glaring in contemporary societies is the fact that the fate of any language will be determined not by sentiments but the practical needs of modern man in the global environment and the ability of such a language to respond to such needs".

For the purpose of analysis of the current linguistic situation in Niger State, Nigeria, the languages have been delineated into five groups based on their size (i.e. population of speakers). The breakdown is given below:

- (i) Very large language: Nupe and Gbagyi. Speakers are one million and above for each language.
- (ii) Large language: Kambari and Kamuku. Not less than 150,000 speakers for each of the languages.
- (iii) Medium-sized language: Bisan, Pangu and Dukanci. Each is spoken by 50,000 speakers and above.
- (iv) Small language: Kadara, Acipawa, Dakarci, Ingwai, Kakanda, Bauchi, Dibo, Ushama, Laru, Bassa, Gunganci and Fakanci. Not less than 10,000 speakers for each of the languages.
- (iv) Very small language: Ura, Lupa, Kaami, Gelanci, Baangi and Asu. Each of the languages is spoken by less than 10,000 speakers.

The various patterns of decline of these languages are informed by the different ways the ethnolinguistic variables work for them (see Ajiboye and Rafiu, in press). The next section presents the general as well as the specific approaches that can be used to stem the tide of language loss in Niger State, Nigeria.

Halting the Tide of Language Loss in Niger State, Nigeria

In this section, we shall examine the ways through which the tide of loss of

languages in Niger State can be stemmed. We propose two fronts from which the issue can be addressed namely, the general principles and specific principles. The general principles are those that apply to all the languages collectively irrespective of size or status while the specific principles apply to individual languages.

General Principles

One of the general principles that can save the minority languages in Niger State, Nigeria is improved number of speakers. This is very crucial because it is one of the problems plaguing the languages, particularly the “large”, “medium-sized”, “small” and “very small” languages. In a bid to give the benchmark for determining endangerment situation, Ugwuoke (1999) proposes 5,000 speakers. Though population of speakers is not a sole factor for determining endangerment situation, it is crucial to sustaining languages. Speaker number becomes a critical factor when the people do not wield much power. However, if number is anything to go by, it means one way of securing the future of a language is by encouraging a large number of speakers to use it.

The viability of a language can also be determined if the general attitude of its speakers towards their heritage language is positive. Attitude is paramount because in communities where the minority language is valued, language loss tends to be slower. In other words, when a language is seen as an important symbol of ethnic identity, it is maintained longer. Positive attitude of speakers to their language regardless of their number and support efforts to the use of the minority language in a number of domains tend to help resist pressure from encroaching foreign majority languages. We would buttress this point using French and Greek.

The international or national status of a language can contribute to this positive attitude. For instance, maintaining French in Canada and in the United States is easier because French is a language with international status. In addition to their mother tongue, Canadians and Americans would like to learn French because it has international prestige. Also, the awareness of the Greeks about Greek contribution to western philosophy and culture helps them resist shift to English. On this premise, we expect languages with international prestige to resist shift.

In Nigeria, some languages are enjoying territorial prestige. This affects, especially, the three national languages namely: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. For example, maintaining Hausa in predominantly Yoruba-speaking area will not pose any difficulty. A Hausa speaker

that learns Yoruba does so for affective purposes. The speakers of these three languages hold on to their languages regardless of their location. The reason for this is that the languages enjoy high prestige in addition to having rich literature on them compared to other indigenous languages. They are referred to as “decamillionaire languages” i.e. they are spoken by at least 20 million speakers (Awonusi in Lawal 2006:19).

Another measure for checking the rate of language loss is favourable government policy. If, by legislation, a language is declared language of education and business, such language stands to attract prestige and speakers. This is the case of the three national languages in Nigeria. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are taught and used to teach at all levels of education in Nigeria. They are even languages of legislation at Houses of Assembly in some States though they are not used for documentation. All these measures have put these languages ahead of other ethnic languages in Nigeria. If the same privilege is extended to the languages under consideration, perhaps, they will be saved from endangerment “fever”.

Orthography development of these languages is also very important. According to Ajiboye (2002), one way of preventing a language from stifling is to reduce it to writing. Not only this, literature should be developed in the language so that reading in this language as well as teaching it could be enhanced. Ajiboye's (2002:129) recommendation for ensuring reading in African languages could be used to accord relevance to minority languages. In his view, those “public office seekers, particularly politicians and union leaders (should) read their manifestoes in the languages of their people either in addition, or as an alternative, to doing so in European languages”. Apart from their theoretical relevance, endangered languages need to be empowered economically and politically. That is, speakers of these languages should not see limitations as a result of their linguistic bias or affiliation.

The media have had a great impact on language use and language choice. Television and video cassette recorders have a noticeable cultural impact. In these media, language is involved. The transmission of cultural values, tradition and information involves the use of language. Not all languages spoken in a society are used in the media. Many people are forced to learn a language other than their own because of its media status. In this situation, the languages that are not represented may be pushed to the background. In Niger State, apart from Gbagyi and Nupe that are used for casting news and air “Request” programmes on radio and television, other languages are not represented. For these other languages to survive, they should be used in the media at least for “Request” programmes.

Also, stage and home video drama in local languages should be sponsored by government and indigenous corporate bodies. This will give the speakers a sense of belonging, strengthen their faith and also boost their prestige.

Aside external threat to the survival of the local languages, “glocalization” of the majority languages in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular has remained a major threat to indigenous languages after the exit of the Europeans. Nupe and Gbagyi in Niger State, Efik and Ibibio in Cross River State, Urhobo in Delta State, and Hausa/Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba in the northern, eastern and western parts of Nigeria respectively. These languages have become a major threat to other minority languages. Assigning equal status to these languages regardless of their population strength could impact positively on these languages. Also, if development is tied to indigenous language use, then allowing these other languages to go into extinction means deluding meaningful development. Prah (2002:1) underscores this when he says that “Africans learn best in their own languages, the languages they know from their parents, from home”. He goes further to say that “it is in these languages that they can best create and innovate”. Such innovation and creativity are crucial not only for development in an economic sense, but also necessary for the flourishing of democracy at a cultural level.

Specific Principles

Specific principles are those that are peculiar to individual languages rather than the general ones. Based on this notion, it was observed that the language groups as well as the individual languages that make up the groups exhibited different challenges. The very large, large, medium, small and very small language groups exhibit different needs. Applying general measures may not produce the desired result.

First, it is observed that the number of speakers especially the medium, small and very small language groups is on the decline. Other features of these languages include: (a) increased fluency in the language by the older generation as the younger generations prefer to speak another (usually the dominant societal) tongue. (b) Usage declines in domains where the language were once secure e.g. worship places, cultural observances, and most importantly, the homes. (c) Growing number of parents fail to speak the languages to their children. Based on these observations, it means that, for these languages to thrive, speakers have to use the languages in the vital domains mentioned, a situation that calls for attitudinal change towards their languages. Speakers should be

encouraged to speak the languages. However, this is subject to availability of speakers.

The "very large languages" in Niger State (Nupe and Gbagyi) and the "large languages" (Kambari and Kamuku) demonstrate a different pattern of loss. These languages, particularly Nupe and Gbagyi, are spoken at home, taught and used to teach in schools in addition to living large number of speakers. However, these languages face serious threat from Hausa, a language that is backed by legislation as a national language. With the threat posed by Hausa, it means that there is no language that cannot be endangered especially if the language is not supported by government policy, in addition to other variables that work for language vitality. The languages in these groups can be saved through government support at the state level. For instance, campaign for political offices, television and radio news bulletin, cultural displays, among others, should be done and expressed in the native tongue in addition to doing so in the language of wider communication (Ajiboye 2002).

Second, language loss is determined primarily by internal changes within language communities themselves. External pressure or dislocation may put a language at a great danger. This factor weakens the bond that holds communities together. Yet speakers themselves are responsible through their attitudes and choices for what happens to their native language. In the area studied, speakers demonstrate varying degrees of attitudes. These attitudes range between positive and negative to indifferent. For example, speakers of the "very small" and "small" language groups identify freely with either Hausa or any of the "medium-size" or "large" languages. This indicates that linguistic assimilation is almost complete for some of the small population languages. Speakers of the medium-size and large languages demonstrate fairly good attitude though this is not enough to salvage the languages from endangerment fever.

On the contrary, attitudinal challenge is not the prerequisite for the "very large" languages. All these show that even if a variable is being considered, the degree of effect of the variable must be measured. Language choices are influenced, consciously or unconsciously, in various ways namely through demographic, economic, mass media and social identifiers (Fishman 1991).

Third, domain of use is one of the challenges of the languages studied. While Gbagyi and Nupe enjoy wider domain, other languages have restricted domains of use. Kamuku and Kakanda (large languages) which have relative wider spread are not taught as

languages. This explains why their patterns of loss are different (see Ajiboye and Rafiu, in press).

Conclusion

Thus far, this work has suggested ways to halt the loss of minority languages in Niger State, Nigeria. Our study has shown that for minority languages to thrive, actual steps with respect to the specific needs of these languages rather than the precepts should be addressed; otherwise minority languages in this area will, in no distant future, go into extinction. This study also observed that despite certain common factors threatening the survival of languages in the state, their effects were not equally felt by the languages. Also, the languages in Niger State would benefit from a minority-language friendly policy. In conclusion, we submitted that focusing on common measures will only make big languages bigger and small languages smaller.

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