



Bringing our Cultures Home:
FESTSCHRIFT FOR
BADE AJAYI AT 70

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A Contrastive Overview of English and Yoruba Consonantal Systems Alabi, Taofiq Adedayo.....	247
A Lexicostatistic Study of Some Extinct and Near Extinct Words in Yoruba Rafiu, K. Adewale and Adeyemi, R. Olabimpe.....	264
A Lexicostatistics Comparison of Yorùbá, Igbo and Olùkùmi Dialects Arokoyo, Bolanle Elizabeth.....	271
Àlàyé Lóri Àwọn Kókó Inú Tíòrì Gíràmà Omóléwu, Olátúbòsún Christopher.....	281
Grammatical Structures in Yorùbá-Igbo Code-Switching Amaechi, Mary.....	299
Focus Constructions and Negation of Focused Constituents in Ègbá Dialect Omóléwu, Olátúbòsún Christopher.....	312
Acquisition of Complex Predicates by Yoruba Children Arokoyo, Bolanle Elizabeth.....	335
An Interface between Phonetics and Phonology in Yoruba Language Acquisition Isaiah, Adebola Ayoola.....	353
Vowel Harmony in Ekiti Dialect of Yoruba Language Balogun, Nasrudeen Akanbi and Adewale, Hafsat Omolola	364
Function and Significance of Greetings in Igbo Tradition: a Sociolinguistic Study of Nnewi Community in Anambra State Nwosu, Florence Chika.....	374
A Semantic Analysis of <i>Akpos</i> Jokes Filani, Ibukun.....	399
Comedy and the Comic Art in the Nigerian Theatre Adeoye, Abdulrasheed A.	403
Breaking the Barrier of Imprecision in Play Making in Bayo Oduneye's 'Draft Interchange' Directorial Approach ARINDE, Tayo Simeon	417

A LEXICOSTATISTIC STUDY OF SOME EXTINCT AND NEAR EXTINCT WORDS IN YORUBA

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Abstract

Sudden disappearance of languages is rare; nevertheless, it occurs through natural disasters, extermination through wars, among others. What is common is gradual erosion of languages through some linguistic disservice practices which prone languages to death. Among such are excessive or large scale borrowing, simplification of complex features and preponderant mixing and switching which could result to inter-language situation. This study surveys Yoruba language (Benue-Congo) from lexical loss which has made the future of the language a suspect by close watchers. Lexicostatistics has been used to measure the amount of lexical loss in Yoruba. Data for the study were collected from adult (elderly) speakers of Yoruba and tested on young native speakers. A total of 92 items were gathered. Findings reveal that the younger generation of Yoruba speakers is not proficient in the language. This practice is worsened by the early exposure to English, especially by the elite class. The study concludes that majority of words that are lost are not replaced with native words rather they are replaced with English words for items that are still in use. This practice this study has found to be inimical to the future of the language even though it currently enjoys large number of native speakers and second language speakers. It is recommended, therefore, that speakers of Yoruba should replace words in the language with native words so as ensure the future of the language in addition to using the language in vital domains particular in the home domain.

Key words: extinction, lexicostatistics, endangerment, revitalization

Introduction

This study surveys some words that are falling into disuse in Yoruba, one of the majority languages in Nigeria. The words examined are those that have either been dropped by the speakers due to nonexistence of items they depict or due to lack of competence of natives in those words, especially the young speakers of the language. It is no more a strange news to hear that a language is endangered or extinct.

A Lexicostatistic Study of some Extinct and near Extinct words in Yoruba

Indices of endangerment abound in the literature as manifested by languages that are endangered. When such are noticed in any language, it is better to bring it to the consciousness of the concerned people/natives. Some of the indicators of endangerment of Yoruba include: apparent lack of competence among the young speakers, large scale mixing and switching, lexical loss, among others. This study takes an inventory of items in the language that are either no more in use or the young native speakers are not familiar with them.

Statement of the Problem

Yoruba language is widely spoken in the south-western Nigeria and in some countries in West Africa. It is estimated to be spoken by over 20 million speakers (Ethnologue). Even though this language enjoys large number of speakers, a whole lot of younger generation is observed not to be proficient in the language. This is noticed in the flagrant use of English words where Yoruba words should be used. In other words, code-switching and code-mixing characterize the speech of these young native speakers of the language.

This study, therefore, examines some of the words that are less frequently used by this younger generation. It is believed that some of the items might still be in use in certain quarters, however their less frequency line them up for extinction because some of them are either being replaced by English words or at most by descriptive synonymy.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework adopted for the discovery, analysis and determination of extinct and near extinct words in Yoruba is the lexicostatistics. It is an approach to comparative linguistics that involves quantitative comparison of lexical cognates. It is related to the comparative method but does not reconstruct a proto-language. It is to be distinguished from glottochronology, which attempts to use lexicostatistical methods to estimate the length of time since two or more languages diverge from a common earlier proto-language.

Basic Assumptions of Lexicostatistics

The first basic assumption of lexicostatistics is that some parts of the vocabulary of any language are assured on empirical evidence, to be much less subject to change than other parts (Swadesh, 1957a:12). This basic core vocabulary includes such items as terms for pronouns, numerals, body parts, geographical features. This feature is similar to Sapir's idea of basic nucleus of morphological structure. terms for new items in the material culture, and on the other hand, are frequently borrowed with the cultural items. Such items are also easily lost with a change in the material culture, or the borrowing of new items, or for other reasons.

The second is rate of retention of vocabulary items in the basic core of relatively stable vocabulary items is constant through time. That is given a certain number of basic words in a certain language; a certain percentage will remain in the language after a tough year of vocabulary loss.

The third is the rate of loss of basic vocabulary which is approximately the same in all languages. This assumption has been tested in 13 languages in their historical

records. The result ranges from retention of 86.4% to 74.4% per thousand years, an average of 80.5% (Less 1953:118-119). However, this is not conclusive evidence that all languages change at the same rate, especially since all but 2 of the 13 languages tested are Indo-European.

The fourth is a corollary of the 3rd assumption, namely, if the percentage (%) of true cognates within the core vocabulary is known for any pair of languages, within the length of time that has elapsed since the two languages began to diverge from a simple parent language can be computed, provided there are no interfering factors through any ratings, conquests, or other social contacts is allowed or speeded the divergency. The next section takes a look at some of the items or words in Yoruba that are either moribund or dead.

Extinct and near Extinct words in Yoruba

Extinction refers to something that is dead, something that has no life. By extinct words, we mean words that have fallen out of use in language. It is a term in sociolinguistics that refers to languages that do not have community of native speakers. So many languages have been reported dead across the world (see Fakuade, 1995; Rafiu, 2011). Extinct words in a language might be a signal to endangerment, especially if such words are not replaced with correlate words in the same language. In Yoruba language for instance, some words have fallen out of use without any effort to substitution.

Below is a list of some extinct and near extinct words in Yoruba. The words are those observed to be out of use by the speakers of Yoruba and some that young speakers are not acquainted with. The words range from food, household, numerals to other cultural items in the language. No actual scale is used to measure their use; the words are checked against some selected young native speakers of the language whose average age is between 11 and 25.

Food and Household items

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

Numerals

Òníní	'five shillings'
Ogún	'twenty/20'
Ogójì	'forty/40'
Àádófà	'one hundred and ten/110'
Ogófà	'one hundred and twenty/120'

A Lexicostatistic Study of some Extinct and near Extinct words in Yoruba

Àádóje	'one hundred and thirty/130'
Ogóje	'one hundred and forty/140'
Àádójo	'one hundred and fifty/150'
Ogójo	'one hundred and sixty/160'
Okòó	'two hundred/200'
Óódúnrún	'three hundred/300'
Éédégbèta	'five hundred/500'
Egbèta	'six hundred/600'
Egbàá	'two thousand/2,000'
Òké kan	'two hundred/200'

Other Items

Abèbè	'hand fan'
Àálè/owò	'broom'
Abe-Olúkondó	'shaving blade'
Àgàsò	'ladder'
Jàngo/kúùfín	'lantern made from tin of milk'
Ìròrí	'pillow'
Ìsààsùn	'earthen pot'
Òjìgbòn	'house corner'
Kèngbè	'gourd'
Kóndó	'baton'
Ayípété	'small purse made from leather'
Léwù	'palm fronts used to lit fire'
Òkòtó	'small snail'
Ògùnsò	'local lighter made of palm kernel chaff'
Akoto	'helmet'
Kónkóbì	'seed from odán tree'
Alábaun/yánníbo	'female tortoise'
Agbòn	'basket'
Ìpèkù/àpótí	'stool'
Ògànjó	'mid night'
Bànté	'inner wear'
Ìpèbí	'where oba/king used to be'
Eke	'wrestling'
Ododo	'flower'
Kanna-kanna	'catapult'
Ikeemu	'cup'
Ahá	'calabash for drinking palm wine'
Onìgbajamo	'Berber'
Aláròbòò	'marketer'
Àgùnbánirò	'youth'
Amúgá	'fork'
Yèrì/tòbí	'inner skirt'
Sálúbàtà	'slippers'

Ìyèwù	'room'
Kònkòsò/ajò	'sieve'
Káà	'apartment'
Pàsán/àtòrì	'cane'
Pánda	'fake'
Tanmóóko	'evening sun'
Igbaje	'big bowl'
Iloro	'town entrance'
Ògbun	'deep hole'
Alábedé	'circumcision professional'
Ipón/Epón	'blood'
Abara-méji/Oláyún	'pregnant woman'
Akùdé	'uncompleted row'
Ìgànná/Ògiri	'wall'
Pongbá	'stretched wood for carrying corpses'
Ìpéèrè	'children'
Lábándádà	'a kind of native cap'
Màjèsin	'youth'
Òkítí Ògán	'anthill'
Idàkùrekú	'epileptic'
Kùkùtè	'stump'
Korobá	'container for fetching water'
Agboorun	'umbrella'
Gbàgedè	'open space'
Awakò	'driver'
Ahéré	'hut'
Ìgbàlè	'sacred room of the masquerades'
Opelenge	'slim'
Bata	'a kind of drum'
Digi	'mirror'
Egbé	'medicine that causes disappearance'
Kánàkò	'medicine that shortens distance'
Awò	'specks'
Tùnbòmú	'moustache'
Alubata	'a kind of drummer'
Ìyèwù	'inner room'
Gègé	'biro'
Atapùpù	'motor bike'
Abà	'village'
Èfúùfù	'breeze'
ÒPálábá	'broken bottle'
Òbu	'rotten'

A Lexicostatistic Study of some Extinct and near Extinct words in Yoruba

Discussion

From the items gathered which were tested on the young speakers of the language, it is discovered that early exposure to English coupled with preponderant use of English at informal but vital domains like home is largely responsible for the misfortune of Yoruba as evident in its use by the young speakers. Even though there are cultural items that have fallen out of use like *apoti* 'stood', *marasana* 'a kind of window, usually small', *iloró* 'entrance to a town', *kolo* 'safe', *Àgànrándì* 'dwarf door', *fitilà* 'oil wick burner' etc. due to modern technology, a host of other items still exist but young speakers are not acquainted with them. They only demonstrate knowledge of them in foreign words (English). Some of the words include *tunbomu* 'moustache', *abebe* 'hand fan', *pàsán/àtòrì* 'cane' *pánda* 'fake', *tanmóoko* 'evening sun' *igbaje* 'big bowl' *iloró* 'town entrance' *ògbun* 'deep hole' *igànná/ògiri* 'wall', among others.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the challenges posed by modern technology are not enough to put a language on the endangered list. For instance, while some language experts embark on linguistic purism as done by French, some languages freely allow the influx of foreign words. Such is the case with Yoruba and other African languages that enjoin the use of foreign words with impunity.

It is on record that efforts are being made to make the language relevant in the technology world through creation of native/Yoruba equivalents of technical and technological terms (see Bamgbose, 1984). However, the efforts are being thwarted by the disappearance of some other words. Even the newly created words as found in the 'Yoruba Meta Language' are not available to the ordinary speakers of the language. These creations are used only in the classroom by language teachers while students, obviously, are learning them for examination purpose and not for daily usage.

Implication of Loss on the Future of Yorùbá Language and Culture

It is widely known that if one loses one's mother tongue, one has automatically lost one's culture, and anybody that has no culture can be best described as an incomplete human being. When a language becomes extinct, the culture of the speakers becomes endangered. In other words, it is only a question of time for its culture to disappear. It is also a widely held view by linguists and psychologists that where a child's mother tongue is acquired as his or her first language, he or she would be able to perform any human activity better and faster than using a foreign language like English as it is the case with Yoruba. Therefore, by imposing a second language on a child, it is like suppressing his or her thinking ability thereby killing his or her native intelligence.

By nature, language dominance leads to language shift which in turn leads to language extinction. Any nation that has adopted a foreign language as her official language could be likened to a naked person going out in a borrowed robe. Therefore, such places or countries will automatically take longer time to develop.

An educational system that is based on foreign language would produce only Eurocentric and mimetic citizens who would run counter to development. A nation which conducts its affairs in a foreign language cannot claim to be free because linguistic slavery is worse than political domination.

At our present linguistic crossroad, combating the problems created by the untimely exposure of our children to English language is unceasingly eroding away our

reach cultural norms and robbing Nigerian children of their inventiveness, creativity, originality and manual dexterity.

We should employ the service of professional linguists and set up an orthography committee that will be charged with the responsibility of developing orthography for our language. Reading materials like primers, readers and text books should be produced for the learners and users of the language. After all, a written language has a better chance of surviving than unwritten language.

Conclusion

We have examined in this study some words that have fallen out of use in Yoruba. This is not because there are no items to which the words refer but because the native speakers particularly the young speakers are not familiar with them. The young speakers, it is discovered, depend so much on English in their day-to-day transaction. Counting system in Yoruba is almost moribund, as majority of primary schools most especially private ones do not offer Yoruba as a subject let alone teach in Yoruba language as stipulated in the language policy.

It is our opinion that lexical loss is one of the symptoms/signs of endangerment. Lexical loss has, in part, lead to the loss of native intelligence as encoded in the socio-religious practices. Every cultural practice is attached to fetishism which has not helped the growth of Yoruba (see Adeyemi and Rafiu, *mimeo*). It is therefore suggested that children should be exposed to the language as this would not deter their knowledge of foreign language(s).

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