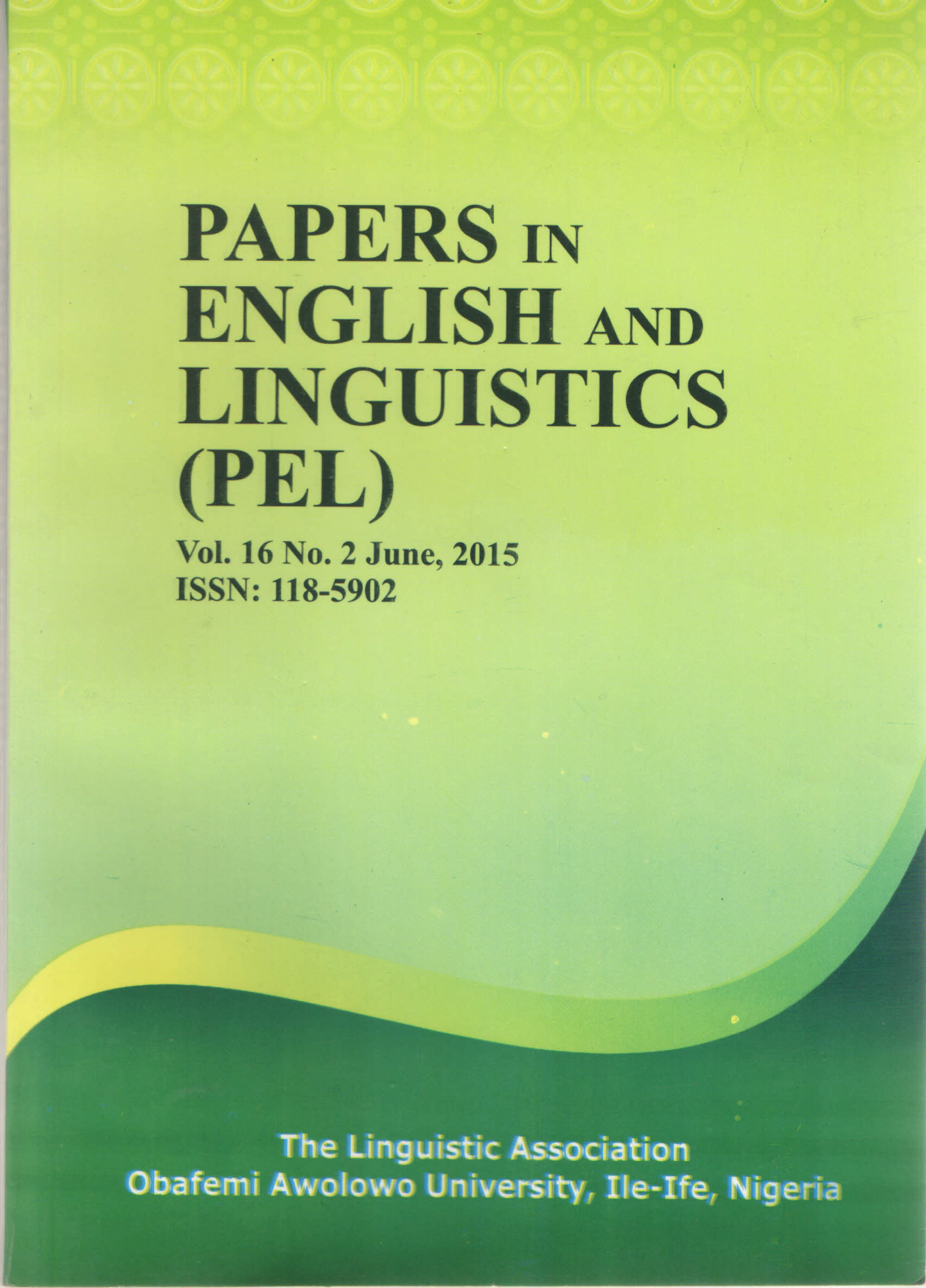


The cover features a green background with a repeating pattern of stylized circular motifs at the top. The title is in large, bold, black serif font. Below the title, the volume and issue information, along with the ISSN, are printed in a smaller black serif font. The bottom of the cover has a dark green section with a wavy yellow-green border above it, containing the publisher's name in white sans-serif font.

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Mother Tongue in Education and the Problems of Language Loss: The Example of Niger State in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines the problems of language loss with respect to mother tongue in education in Niger state, Nigeria. Using the sociological approach as propounded by Edwards to determine the level of language endangerment and loss, the study takes a critical look at the languages in Niger State that are facing extinction and the challenges this is going to pose to mother tongue education in the areas where these languages are expected to be spoken. At the end of the study, it was discovered that some languages in the study area are moribund as no written records or speakers were found on them. The study recommends, among others, collaborative efforts at documenting the dying languages, proactive measures to save the living ones by encouraging their use in vital domains and also designing orthographies for the purpose of education.

Introduction

Language in education has been a contentious issue in Africa. It has attracted a considerable amount of controversy from both language experts and educationists. This is so because of the multiplicity of languages in the continent. Education cannot be discussed without language. Education, according to Awoniyi (1978), is meant to be embedded in the society, drawing inspiration and nourishment from it, and in turn, contributing to societal opportunities for growth and renewal. However, the languages that are supposed to be used for formal and non-formal education are fast facing extinction. While some of them have been pronounced dead, many are at the varying degrees of loss.

Language loss is a global phenomenon which is ravaging both 'weak' and not too 'strong' languages across the globe. This

menace is so rife that many researchers have come up with the 'reductionist' theory, which predicts that the world languages would be reduced by half at the turn of this century (Romaine, 2000).

Given the rate at which languages, especially the minority ones, are dying, one could conveniently say that the advocacy that the mother tongue should be used to teach in schools for better performance, especially at the primary school level is becoming impracticable. This is so because the endangerment of some of these languages has stifled their use in certain important domains like playgrounds, recreation centres, markets, etc. This is further made worse as there are no written materials on the majority of the languages in question.

This study examines the phenomenon of endangerment and loss of languages in Nigeria with particular reference to Niger State where a total of 38 languages are spoken (Rafiu, 2011) by 3.9 million speakers (National Population Commission). The study also discusses the effects of the sporadic loss and continued endangerment of languages without any hope of revitalisation or re-engineering for education.

The major findings of the study are the following:

1. languages in Niger State, Nigeria such as: Lupa, Ingwai, Kaami, Gelanci, Ura and Baangi, which form a group of the very small languages are on the verge of extinction;
2. the languages under reference in 1. generally manifest different stages of decay as the causative variables do not work in a uniform way;
3. in communities where these languages are found, vital domains like home, market and worship centres, which are supposed to be the strongholds of Mother Tongue (MT) are being encroached upon by languages other than MT; and
4. the non-use of MT in schools in the affected communities is caused in part by inadequate number of speakers and lack of orthography.

The Sociolinguistic Setting of the Study Area

Niger State was created by the administration of General Murtala Muhammed on February 13th, 1976 along with six (6) other States. Niger State is one of the thirty-six States in Nigeria and it is multilingual. Niger State is found in the north-central part of Nigeria with Kaduna State and the Federal Capital Territory, FCT, as its neighbours to the north-east and south-east respectively; Zamfara State borders the north, Kebbi State in the north-west, Kogi State in the south and Kwara State in the south-west. The Republic of Benin along Agwara Local Government Area, LGA, borders its north-west.

The 2006 Population and Housing Census indicates that Niger State has a vast expanse of land spanning 76,481.11 per sq. kilometers and population density of 51.05 per sq. kilometers. The land area constitutes 10% of the total land area of Nigeria. The census figure is put at 3,950,725, with males being 2,032,725 and females 1,917,524. The languages spoken in Niger State spread across the 25 Local Government Areas of the State. In essence, the State is multilingual as a total of 38 languages are spoken. An average person in Niger State is bilingual in the Mother Tongue and one of the network languages e.g. Nupe, Hausa, or Gbagyi. Even where the local government is largely monolingual e.g. Agaie, Bida, Suleja, Shiroro and Tafa, bilinguality is a common possibility.

Mother Tongue in Education

Mother tongue in education refers to the use of the native language or the first language to teach at formal and non-formal levels. Mother tongue (henceforth MT) in education is situated within the general concept of *Language in Education*. It is claimed that no educational system stands apart from the society which establishes it (Awoniyi, 1978). This presupposes that for a society to be in the right direction, education must be given its rightful place. Given the assertion that education is embedded in the society, the medium through which the norms of the society are packaged and handed down to generations, therefore, becomes very important.

For MT in Nigerian education to be appreciated, we need to look at it from the formal and non-formal perspectives. MT is

the language a child first encounters as he grows up. Through this medium he is exposed, at the non-formal level, to the techniques and skills of communicating with his peers, elders and parents. Stories, myths, legends, songs and other traditional practices, which are given in the MT, play a major role in this regard and in preparing him for the larger society and even bigger challenges.

At the formal education level, however, the Nigerian child is faced with the task of learning other languages he comes in contact with (see Bamgbose, 1991). In most cases, the Nigerian child is not privileged to be taught in his MT. He may have to contend with a language of wider communication (lwc, like English), a regional language like Hausa or an exoglossic language namely, English or Arabic. In spite of the popular recommendation of the use of MT in schools at least at the basic level and the benefits accruable from such practice, languages other than MT have eroded these benefits owing largely to apathy from parents, lack of written materials in the MT languages, ignorance, among others. Now the wave of loss of languages across the globe has opened another chapter in the clamour for education in the MT.

What is Language Loss?

In broad linguistic terms, language loss is the result of a systematic or random reduction in the form and content of a language and or its sphere of competence. When a language is being lost i.e. dying, it may undergo substantial changes in structure, especially as evidenced in the speech of younger speakers in a given speech community. Native lexical items may be replaced by loan words from a prestige language (Trask, 1996, p.327). Language loss could manifest at the level of an individual or at the level of a whole community.

According to Trask (1996), irregular forms may be regularized, grammatical alternations may be lost, small inflectional classes of nouns or verbs may be lost, with their members being shifted to larger classes. It is also possible to observe loss of tenses, aspects, and moods of the verb. In the same vein, case-systems may be reduced and simplified. When these features characterize the speech of the speakers of a given language, they are said to be

semi-speakers of that language and that language is said to be dying. Languages have been lost for as long as they have existed, but the rate of loss is greater in recent times.

However, there is an important line of difference between language loss and language death. Language loss does not necessarily involve the death of a language. Language loss is a generic term used to designate features of endangerment. For instance, an individual or a speech community may give up his/its language in part or as a whole for another. For example, the Turkish community in England voluntarily shifted to English over a couple of generations ago. This involves the loss of the language for the individuals concerned, and even for the community in Britain. The loss of Turkish by the Turkish speaking people in Britain does not put the language under the threat of disappearing as it continues to thrive in Turkey.

Language Loss in Nigeria: An Overview

In Africa and Nigeria in particular, many languages have been lost (Fakuade 1995, Fakuade, et al 2003, Oyetade 2005, Dada 2007). When languages of varying sizes and statuses come in contact, there is the tendency for social, political, psychological and economic variables to make bilingualism imperative for speakers of minority languages, this may lead to language shift and ultimately language death or language loss. For example, languages like Ake (Nassarawa State), Bakpiaka (Cross River State), Butanci, Shau and Kudu-Camo (Bauchi State), Chamba (Taraba State), Sheni (Kaduna State), Holma and Honta (Adamawa State), and Sorko (Niger, Kwara and Kebbi States) have been reported to have either gone into extinction or gone moribund (Fakuade, 1995; Ugwuoke, 1999). Further, Grimes, cited in Ejele (2002, p.122), identifies and lists a number of languages in Nigeria that are either extinct or nearly extinct. The extinct ones include:

- (i) Ajawa (Ajanci) in Bauchi State, which became extinct between 1920 and 1940. The people now speak Hausa.
- (ii) Auyokwa (Auyakawa, Awlaka) in Jigawa State.

(iii) Basa-Kaduna (Basa-Gumna, Basa-Kuta) in Niger and Plateau States. It is reported that as at 1987, the language did not have fluent speakers left.

(iv) Gano-Ningi, was formerly a dialect cluster. The people now speak Hausa.

The nearly extinct ones as contained in Ejele (2002, p.121) include:

- (a) BasaKontagora in Niger State. The language had only 10 speakers as at 1987.
- (b) Gana (Ganawa, Si-Gana) in Bauchi State.
- (c) Kudu-Camo (Kuda-Chamo, Kudawa) and Taura (Takaya) in Bauchi State have very few speakers.
- (d) Lufu in Taraba State. Speakers now speak Jukun.

Also, Awal in Ejele (2002, p.122) says Yankam language of Plateau State is on its way out because the old speakers are bilingual in Yankam and Hausa, while the younger ones are monolingual in Hausa. Similarly, Bleambo (1990, p.189) reports that a lot of small language groups in Taraba State which are yet to be classified are in danger of disappearing, or being swallowed up by the Hausa language.

On the whole, out of about 516 languages reported to be spoken in Nigeria, it appears that the 'small' language groups are mostly affected by this phenomenal loss. Ejele (2002, p.121) apparently bemoaning the trend predicts as follows:

The small number of speakers of small languages surrounded by more culturally aggressive, more populated groups, will eventually be swallowed up, unless strenuous and concerted efforts are made to pass on the languages from generation to generation, not only through oracy but also through literacy

In the South-South part of Nigeria, Isoko and Erohwa which constitute the major languages in the area are on the verge of loss. Mowarin (2007, p.233) 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, p.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

The (affected) languages usually retreat till they are used only in the home, and in the final analysis, restricted to such personal activities as counting, praying, and dreaming. Also, the stylistic range that people acquire when they use a language in a wider domain disappears. Even in the contexts where the language is still fairly regularly used, there is a gradual reduction in the complexity and diversity of the structure of the language; speaker's sound rules get simplified, their grammatical patterns become less complex, and their vocabulary in the language gets smaller and smaller. In the next section, attention is drawn to the key features of language loss in Niger State.

Features of Language Loss in Niger State, Nigeria

Many factors have been advanced for causes or features of language loss globally. However, an in-depth and empirical study reveals that some of these factors are relative. Some languages exhibit specific features which make their patterns of endangerment very unique and resultant loss unavoidable. This is the situation in Niger State, Nigeria. Among the factors responsible for the endangerment and loss of some of these languages are discussed hereunder:

Restricted Domains of Use

The languages observed are affected in different ways by domains of use. Going by the classification of the languages, some are overtly prone to loss in no distant future (i.e. the very small language group). One major reason for this is that their use is restricted to the home domain. The gradient in the use of other language groups is relative to their sizes.

However, the very large language group exercises some resilience as the languages in this group are used in all domains. They (i.e. Gbagyi and Nupe) are observed to be predator languages even though they are checked in part by Hausa in certain domains.

Negative Language Attitude

Attitude towards language can be positive or negative. The disposition of the speakers to the languages under study is not positive in terms of how the languages are held. The speakers do not freely identify with their native languages. This is observed in their response to one of the questions as follows: 'It is my language but I don't speak it'. A few negative dispositions are noticed among respondents who grow up to speak their non-native languages. Their attitude is no more than the attitude of outsiders. Even though attitude plays an important role in the fate of a language it works in a little way for the spate of loss or endangerment of the languages under study.

Absence of Orthography

All the languages under study do not have evidence of written forms though some languages in the study area have orthography. Orthography is important to languages because it affords both natives and non-natives to have access to both the structure and the literature of these languages in a stable and permanent form. Generally, very few of the languages in Niger State have been reduced to writing thereby crippling the chances of their preservation and hastening their pace towards their death.

For example, Nupe and Gbagyi have fairly rich written texts on them including the Bible and Qur'an. Kamuku and Kambari have evidence of writing with primers and pamphlets made available. Other languages do not have evidence of written history. Earlier efforts by missionaries to reduce these languages to writing were abandoned making them difficult for educational or other uses.

Regressive Prestige

The languages under study which are classified 'very small' languages (Rafiu, 2011) have low prestige when compared to 'larger' languages whose prestige tends to overshadow that of 'very small' languages. It should be noted that the prestige of a language translates into the prestige of its speakers. Consequently, there is a tendency for the speakers of a prestige language to hold on tenaciously to their languages more than the speakers of low prestige languages.

Nupe and Gbagyi which are the majority languages are held in high esteem because they have a very high population of speakers. The speakers also occupy key positions which give them an edge over other ethnic groups in the state. The prestige of the speakers has made the languages not easily and completely overshadowed by Hausa. The languages are also growing in second language (L2) speakers. In communities/towns where Nupe and Gbagyi are predominantly spoken, speakers rarely make use of another language (i.e. Hausa) unless when necessary. Indeed in this area, ability to speak Nupe/Gbagyi or Hausa is a mark of upward social mobility. This invariably puts low prestige languages like Ura, Lupa, Gelanci, Asu, Baangi and Kaami in further jeopardy of loss.

Major versus Minor Language Contrast

The majority languages (Nupe and Gbagyi) contrast sharply with other languages in Niger State. Areas of contrast are observed in their use in domains like: home, media, education, marketplaces, among others. In other words, while Nupe and Gbagyi are used in all domains except in higher education, other languages are battling to survive in such vital domains as home, playgrounds and marketplaces.

Categories of Languages facing Extinction in Niger State, Nigeria

For the purpose of this study, 6 out of 38 languages are observed to be worst hit by the loss phenomenon. Information on the languages under study was obtained through direct contact with the speakers and from the district office of the National Population Commission (NPC) in Niger State. The following is the distribution

of the languages and speakers in the Local Government Areas where they are spoken:

Table 1: Languages spoken in Niger State, population of Speakers and where spoken

Language	Population	Local Government Area
Lupa	8,588	Borgu
Baangi	4,000	Mariga
Ura	9,100	Rafi
Gelanci	1,761	Rijau
Kaami	5,000	Bosso
Asu	1,501	Agaie

Source: National Population Commission, Niger State, 2006.

A common feature shared by these languages is that they belong to the Benue-Congo phylum.

Language Endangerment, Loss and Education in Niger State

The importance of education in the context of a developing nation is quintessential, especially in a multiethnic and multilingual setting like Niger State in Nigeria. It has been argued that the vehicle of education is language. The question that usually arises in a multilingual setting is: Education in which language? Bamgbose, while appraising the varieties of languages that can be used for education says:

First, there is the child's mother tongue, which is the medium of non-formal education in the home and of socialisation processes among his peer group. Second, there is the language of the immediate community which serves as a local or regional lingua franca and is, therefore, mastered by the child. Third, there is, in some African countries, a widely-spoken lingua franca or national language. Fourth, there is a language of wider communication which was the official language during the colonial period, and which has become a second language in the countries concerned. Fifth, there is a language associated with religion. Sixth, there is a LWC learnt as a foreign language. (Bamgbose, 1991, p.62)

The question of what language to use thus becomes a problematic one in any multilingual country, particularly one that has also been subjected to imposition of a foreign official language arising from colonialism. Going by the psychological relevance of the mother tongue in education, a child is expected to be taught in his MT up to an appreciable level.

Language loss, therefore, has added a new obstacle to effective education of the child. To this end, allowing the aforementioned languages to be wiped out either by big endoglossic or exoglossic forces will, in no small measure, tell on the performance of pupils in education.

Effects of Language Loss on the Community's Education: formal and non-formal

When a language dies, it is observed that many things die with it. The situation found among speakers of a large number of 'little' languages investigated in Niger State is characterised by the following:

1. gradual leaning towards other cultures and languages, for example, Hausa, Nupe and Gbagyi
2. lack of respect for the dying languages by both the speakers and non-speakers. This is the result of low prestige attached to the small languages and over-estimation of larger languages by the speakers of the small languages.
3. slow pace of education. It is observed that teaching pupils in languages other than the MT slows down learning. This observation does not exempt young speakers of minority languages in Niger State.
4. unconscious learning pressure from larger languages;
5. cultural identity and self-expression skewed in favour of other cultures; and
6. ambiguity of personality with implications for speakers' psychological make-up.

Summary and Conclusion

This study has appraised language loss phenomenon. It has also examined the distributional pattern of the 'very small' languages in Niger State, Nigeria. The major factors which have put these languages in jeopardy of disappearing in future have also been discussed. The effects of loss of these languages on the community's education have also been highlighted.

In Conclusion, the study supports the view that:

1. Languages that are dying can only precipitate the death of the speakers' cultural identity since language is an integral part of culture.
2. if the education of the Nigerian child is suffering it is in part because it has not benefited from direct contact with the MT.
3. the absence of MT in non-formal education which offers the foundation for human development means, with respect to Niger State situation, the absence of the right primary mental and psychological attitude towards that development.
4. the gradual loss of the languages that serve as MT for certain children in Niger State explains not just the loss of parts of Nigerian culture but also the ease with which exogenous languages are over-estimated.

Based on these findings, the study concludes that the gradual loss of the languages is caused in part by reduced population, restricted domains of use, lack of commitment to indigenous language use and development by the native speakers. Hence, we recommend, among other things, sensitization campaigns on indigenous languages by individuals and communities for the sake of proper child education.

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