Language Shift in the Nigerian Linguistic Landscape: A Case for Protecting Nigeria's Indigenous Languages[*]

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Abstract: In a multilingual nation like Nigeria with over 500 living languages, efforts to preserve many of the indigenous languages have largely proven elusive. This paper examines the reasons why many indigenous Nigerian languages have struggled to survive in the face of rapid societal evolution. The National Population Commission (NPC) in 2018 put the population of Nigeria at over 198 million, up by over 5 million from the population figure of 2016, which was put at over 193 million. Many indigenous Nigerian languages have failed to benefit from this increase in population figure. From a consideration of the issue, it is proposed that in order to ensure the preservation of many of the indigenous Nigerian languages, language shift must be put in check, especially in those regions that are largely affected by this phenomenon.

Keywords: Language shift; Nigeria; Indigenous languages; language use

1 Introduction

The ever increasing population of Nigeria has given many people the false sense of believe that many of Nigeria's indigenous languages still enjoy the great number of speakers that they once enjoyed. Determining the number of speakers of a particular language using census data is quite tricky. The reliability of such figures is dependent upon how satisfactorily the following questions are answered.

1. Is being an indigene of Oyo state – a predominantly Yorùbá community in southwestern Nigeria – the only criterion to be considered before a man can be regarded as a Yorùbá man?

2. Should the actual ability to fluently communicate in the Yorùbá language equally be considered?

2 Language Shift

The term 'language shift' (LS) has been defined in the following way:

> The term 'language shift' is used when the abandonment of one language for another language results not in the complete disappearance or death of the former but merely the disappearance of it from the specific speech community (or part thereof) that finds itself in the contact situation. In sociolinguistic terms, LS involves the gradual replacement of one's main language or languages, often labelled L1, by another language, usually referred to as L2, in all spheres of usage (Pauwels, 2016:18).

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Just as no building can be constructed overnight, as factors such as topography, cost of building materials, cost of labor, etc. need to be considered before construction can begin, so also, language shift is not a phenomenon that develops overnight.

2.1   Precursors of Language Shift

The main precursor of language shift is language contact. Language contact is a linguistic phenomenon that occurs when speakers of different languages or language varieties come into contact and are influenced by each other. Humans are social beings, and as such are always in contact with one another. As long as humans continue to interact, languages can be expected to remain in constant contacts. Hence giving rise to many of the contact-induced sociolinguistic features of language, such as bilingualism, pidgins / creoles, language shift among others.

Komondouros and McEntee-Atalianis (2007:367) posit that 'every language contact situation is unique and must be evaluated on the basis of its own characteristics and dynamics.' In the Nigerian linguistic landscape, the following factors can be said to give rise to language shift.

2.1.1   Migration

Pauwels (2016:23) defines migration as 'the movement – voluntary or forced – of families, groups and large sections of communities across national and linguistic borders.' Many rural areas in Nigeria continue to face a massive exodus of their young and agile population who move to the urban areas in search of greener pastures. These migrating populations more often than not end up constituting linguistic minorities in their host community and overtime abandon their language for the language of the host community. The fact that the old and weak population that are left in the rural areas have no one to pass their language to, means that the endangered status of such a language will soar as the rural speakers begin to die.

In Nigeria, language shift is more prevalent in the urban areas than it is in the rural areas. This has overtime led to a reduction in the number of urban dwellers who speak the indigenous languages. Even the uneducated migrants who leave the rural areas to settle in the urban areas often abandon their indigenous languages in favor of the Nigerian Pidgin. The few urban population who still use the indigenous languages have seen their languages undergo varying degrees of language change over the years, in most cases, under pressure from the English language. These language changes are confined to the urban areas. Hence creating a situation whereby, the form of a language spoken in an urban area differs slightly from the form of that language that is spoken in a rural area.

Using the *SIL Comparative African Wordlist (SILCAWL),* data were collected from native speakers of the Yorùbá language drawn from both the rural and the urban areas of Kwara State in Nigeria, and the following observations were made.

Table 1: Language Change Between Urban Yorùbá and Rural Yorùbá.

S/N	English	Urban Yorùbá	Rural Yorùbá
1	Bucket	péèlì (derived from pail)	korobá
2	Rubbish	ìdọ̀tí (derived from dirty)	pàǹtí
3	Cup	kọ́ọ̀bù (derived from cup)	ife
4	Soldier	sójà (derived from soldier)	jagunjagun
5	Comb	kóòmù (derived from comb)	òyà
6	Farmer	àgbẹ̀	àgbẹ̀
7	Fisherman	apẹja	apẹja
8	Ghost	òkú	abara méjì
9	Cassava	ẹ̀gẹ́	gbágùdá

From the foregoing, one can observe in *1-5* that the continued exposure of the Yorùbá speakers in the urban areas to the English language has brought about some changes in the lexicon of the Yorùbá language as spoken by those in the urban areas. The difference between the form of the Yorùbá language spoken in the urban area and the form spoken in the rural area at this point in time is not wide enough to bring about mutual unintelligibility or to create a new dialect of the language, although this may all change in a few years if the trend continues.

2.1.2   Language Attitude

Language attitude refers to the feelings, opinions and impressions that individuals have towards a particular language or its speakers. Ryan and Giles (1982:7) define language attitude as 'any affective, cognitive or behavioral index of evaluative reactions toward different language varieties or speakers.' Many Nigerian parents, especially the elites, do not encourage the speaking of indigenous languages by their children. They expend a lot of resources in enrolling their children in privately owned schools, which in addition to not teaching the indigenous languages also forbid the speaking of same on their premises (cf. Adegbite, 2003). These children – seeing the strong opposition posed by their parents and teachers towards the learning and speaking of the indigenous languages – overtime develop a negative attitude towards the indigenous languages.

3   Types of Language Shift

3.1   Indigenous – Indigenous Language Shift

Indigenous – Indigenous Language Shift is a type of language shift that is characterized by the replacement of one regional language with another regional language by members of a speech community. The languages that are involved in this type of language shift are those that are native to the community or country within which the shift is taking place. This type of language shift is common in the northern parts of Nigeria. Adamu (1978) in Igboanusi and Lothar (2004:133) reports that 'in most parts of northern Nigeria, except perhaps Benue, Kogi, and Kwara states, many people who were not originally Hausa and did not use the language as their first language have now become Hausa through assimilation.'

3.2   Indigenous – Foreign Language Shift

Indigenous – Foreign Language Shift is characterized by the replacement of a regional language with a language that is native to a country outside of the one where the shift is taking place. This type of language shift is presently the most prevalent type of language shift in Nigeria due to the fact that the linguistic situation in Nigeria today is one whereby even dominant languages are being dominated by a dominant language. Hausa, Igbo and Yorùbá languages have consistently maintained their status as dominant Nigerian languages in all of the available linguistic classifications of Nigeria (see Ayeomoni, 2012). With globalization and improved access to formal education especially in the rural areas, these one-time dominant languages have seen their dominance toppled by the English language which has proven to be a dominant language. This situation is evident among the Dìbò people of Lapai Local Government Area in Niger State in Nigeria. Going by Krauss (2008:1) classification of languages according to the degree of viability and endangerment, the Dìbò language can be classified as a 'definitely endangered' language, because in the course of this research, it was discovered that the Dìbò language is only being spoken by the parental generations.

To understand the language use among the Dìbò people, a 17-item questionnaire meant to assess the language preferences of the respondents in different societal contexts was administered to 50 native speakers of the Dìbò language.

Table 2: Language Use Among Native Speakers of Dìbò language.

	Dìbò	Hausa	English
Language used at home	5 (10%)	22 (44%)	23 (46%)
Language used with friends	3 (6%)	19 (38%)	28 (56%)
Language used at work	0 (0%)	6 (12%)	44 (88%)

As the table above clearly shows, there has been an obvious shift in language use among native speakers of the Dìbò language, with the majority preferring to use the English language in both formal and informal situations.

Igboanusi and Lothar (2004:134) report that 'English is increasingly replacing the mother tongues of many Nigerian children from such southern minority states as Edo, Delta, Rivers, Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom and Cross River states.'

3.3   Foreign – Indigenous Language Shift

Foreign – Indigenous Language Shift occurs when members of a speech community go from using a non-native foreign language to using a language that is native to the community where the shift is taking place. This type of language shift has proven to be particularly problematic for language policy makers especially in multilingual societies. Peru represents a case of unsuccessful choice and implementation of an indigenous language as official language, (co-equal with Spanish) in Latin America (Fase et al, 1992:62). Section 55 of the 1999 Nigerian constitution states that 'the business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Igbo and Yorùbá when adequate arrangements have been made thereof.' Ricento (2006:298) states that 'no language policy is likely to be successful in the long run if it goes counter to the existing sociocultural forces acting on the local contextual situations.' So, in fairness to the National Assembly, it has to be said that the multi-ethnic and multilingual makeup of the National Assembly will no doubt make the implementation of this language policy rather difficult. Although this is not to say that the implementation of this policy is impossible, as the engagement of interpreters – as is the practice in United Nations' meetings – will help to eradicate the problem of implementation.

Many linguists have made a case for the implementation of a language that is native to Nigeria as the official language of Nigeria in place of the English language (see Mann, 1990; Fakuade, 1994). The multiplicity of ethnic groups and languages in Nigeria has meant that every such proposal has been met with outright rejection. As Fakuade (1994:44) puts it, 'no matter which Nigerian language is chosen, religious and tribal meanings will be read into it.' With each ethnic group locked in a battle of supremacy with the others, it remains to be seen if this situation will change any time soon.

3.4   Foreign – Foreign Language Shift

Foreign – Foreign Language Shift stems from the replacement of a non-native foreign language with another non-native foreign language by members of a speech community. Unlike the other

three types of language shifts that have been discussed, the foreign – foreign language shift is not (yet) evident in the Nigerian linguistic landscape.

4 Mitigating the Effects of Language Shift

4.1 The Role of the Government

4.1.1 Making and Implementing Laws Protecting Indigenous Languages

On paper, the government has done a great job in this regard, one only has to look at the National Policy on Education as well as the Nigerian constitution to see the laudable policies that have been made in order to protect the indigenous languages of Nigeria. It is at the level of implementation that the government has failed, dare I say woefully. Making laws is one thing, implementing them is another, and unless concerted efforts are made to implement these policies, it is as good as not having them in the first place. Many of the proposed language policies of the government are not far-reaching. For instance, section 1, subsection 10a of the National Policy on Education proposes that 'every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment. Furthermore, in the interest of national unity it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yorùbá.' Going by this policy, it is expected that at the Junior Secondary School level, every child would be proficient in the language of the immediate environment, a Nigerian language selected from among Hausa, Igbo and Yorùbá, in addition to English and French languages. The failure of this policy to fully kick-off has meant that it is possible to see a child who is only proficient in the English language at the end of the junior secondary school – and in some cases senior secondary school – education. While the lack of orthography and extensive research of many Nigerian languages may scupper the plans to teach them in schools, there is no reason for the Hausa, Igbo and Yorùbá languages not to be taught in schools, as extensive work has been carried out on these languages.

4.1.2 Providing Incentives to Encourage the Study of Indigenous Languages

With the provision of certain incentives such as scholarships for students enrolled in indigenous language courses, there will not only be a surge in the enrolment numbers, but it will also go a long way in providing enough competent indigenous language teachers who can then go on to teach the indigenous languages in the various primary and secondary schools across the country.

4.1.3 Even Development

Languages – like viruses – do not move except the speakers move. The most prevalent type of migration in Nigeria today is the rural – urban migration which is largely triggered by the quest for greener pastures. The best way to keep migration in check in a (democratic) society is to ensure an even development that cuts across every part of the country. Providing those in the rural areas with an enabling environment where they can thrive like their counterparts in the urban areas will go a long way in eradicating the need for unnecessary rural – urban migration.

4.2   The Role of the Individual

4.2.1   Improved Attitude

A Yorùbá proverb says *orò tí a bá ń ṣe tí a kò bá fi han ọmọ ẹni, irú orò bẹ̀ẹ̀ yí ó parun* which simply translates as 'whatever a person practices and fails to pass on to his / her children is doomed for extinction.' Parents need to refrain from shielding their children from their indigenous languages. English, Spanish and French languages will not be spoken the world over today if the native speakers of these languages failed to pass them on to the younger generations. Every individual is a custodian of his / her own language, as such, the duty of protecting and preserving a language lies at the feet of every speaker – linguist or not – of that language.

5   Conclusion and recommendations

In this study of language shift in the Nigerian linguistic landscape, we have seen how vulnerable even the more developed Nigerian languages are to this sociolinguistic concept. It is important that every language policy or law that is made for the protection and preservation of indigenous Nigerian languages takes into account the peculiarities of the Nigerian linguistic landscape in order for its implementation to be effective. Many will argue that the lack of technical terms and register in indigenous Nigerian languages, especially in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics is the reason for their unpopularity or non-adoption by many Nigerians. In 2017, a research team led by Herbert Igboanusi developed a metalanguage for HIV, AIDS and Ebola discourses in the three major Nigerian languages. This goes to show that with the right research and funding, it is possible to develop these indigenous languages to the point where they are sufficient for use in the STEM fields and beyond.

Every indigenous Nigerian language forms a part of the national heritage and shares a symbiotic relationship with one Nigerian culture or the other. Hence, the loss of a language is by extension the loss of a culture and indeed a national heritage. Each and every language embodies the unique cultural wisdom of a people. The loss of any language is thus a loss for all humanity (UNESCO, 2003:1). The destruction of language is an abstraction which is concretely mirrored in the concomitant destruction of intimacy, family and community, via national and international involvements and intrusions (Fishman, 1991:4).

A report published by the United Nations in January 2016, revealed that one indigenous language dies every two weeks. What this means is that from the start of the year, to the 21st of February when the International Mother Language Day is celebrated, at least three indigenous languages die. On average, at least twenty-six indigenous languages die annually. If language shift is left unchecked, the ultimate doom – language death – awaits all indigenous languages.

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