

SUSTAINING AFRICAN LANGUAGES IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

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ABSTRACT

Language plays an indispensable role in the lives of people in a society. It embodies the cultures, traditions, and world views of a people. A major underpinning of their identity without which they risk going extinct. However, the meteoric advancements in science and technology have sent the world spinning on the carousel ponies of globalization. Gradually, globalization circumscribes the divergent poles of a diverse world within a space known as the global village. This has birthed a quest for a common language that will be the base of encounters among these diverse nations in the global village. This will disenfranchise many indigenous languages, which will atrophy due to lack of use or get submerged in the doldrums of anonymity; dragged along by the forces of globalization. Even with the multifariousness of African languages, it is still worrisome, if they cannot withstand the whirlwind of globalization sweeping through the globe; having already had her languages brutally bruised by colonialism, which contaminated and threatened to shove them into extinction. Yet, it will be preposterous, given the great benefits of globalization, which have opened the frontiers of progress for the nations of the world, for Africa to excommunicate herself in the global village. How then can Africa sustain and preserve her unique identity - language - in the global village, while still actively involved in the affairs of the village? The method used in this research is qualitative research design and leveraged descriptive analysis. It is the writers submission that in order to preserve african indigenous languages, africans need to employ education in indigenous languages, develop african languages further, document African indigenous languages for future generations and reference as well as embrace good governance that can propel these.

Keywords: Globalization, Global Village, African Languages, Sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Language remains the very heartbeat of a people. Ayodeji et al. (2013) assert that language is the most essential vehicle for actualizing education and the transmission and sustenance of customs and traditions through generations. Languages are not mere means of communication but also serve as markers of identity. Languages are “important symbols of belonging, enabling different groups of people to know what ethnic groups they belong to, and what common heritages they share....a lost language is a lost culture, a lost culture is invaluable knowledge lost” (Kiplangat, 2003). This means that without an indigenous language, people would lose their cultural identity and most probably their origin. Hence, when a people’s language is taken away, it’s like stripping it of its culture and heritage (Ayodeji et al., 2013); they lose their identity. A people without identity are without roots. And a person without roots is dead. Even with its multifarious languages, Africa runs the risk of being fated by the above. The major

culprit of this has been argued to be globalization. Although the defendants of globalization argue that it is the apex of human progress, as it represents progress for all nations, (House-Soremekun & Falola, 2011). In its quest for unity, it tries to converge a previously divergent world, turning it into what is now known as a 'global village'. To strengthen this unity, it moves to enthrone a global language that binds members of the global village. This quest for a uniformity of language tends to eclipse the inherent diversities in the global village.

Africa has already gone through the butcher house of colonization, which was a major crack in the spine of its identity. One of its tragic effects was the near decimation of African languages. The indigenous languages of the people, which preserved their cultures and gives them their identity, were subsumed by the language of the colonial masters, which carries within themselves their cultures, customs and traditions. This had rippling effects, such as the sense of inferiority it bestowed on Africans, which made some of them unwilling to identify with their language. According to Roy-Campbell (2019) "The low level of development of most African languages during the colonial era suggested to many Africans that their languages were not capable of serving as vehicles for advanced knowledge" (pp. 30-31). The development of any language is borne from usage. Going further, he insists that languages are "socially constructed within the context of a given social reality. All languages can serve whatever purposes a society requires them to serve" (p. 35). Hence, once out of use these languages begin to go into extinction. Ezema (2010) avers that those indigenous languages, which are the most effective means of transmitting culture, are under threat of extinction.

Globalization exacerbates this situation. Given that Africa experiences it 'from above'. A situation whereby only the "powerful nations and companies with more resources can control the major actions and policies that determine the characteristics of global encounters" (House-Soremekun & Falola, 2011, p. 1). This will lead most world languages to atrophy (Mbagwu & Obiamalu, 2009), due to neglect; they are not among the powers that are, who determine the basis for global encounters. Gilbert (2008), opines that language is an essential instrument for the exercise of power (cited by Eze, 2010). This automatically translates that the power of the owner of a domineering language supersedes that of the owners of languages spoken by a minority. This is evidenced by about eighty per cent of global information being couched in the language of the West, like English. Hence the quest for homogenization of the world languages is a threat to African languages. Since Africa is a developing economy, it will always be helpless in the face of the imposition of the languages of the powers that be. This domination through language is cultural imperialism: an effective leeway to the extinction of indigenous African languages. Globalization exacerbates this situation for the existing African languages (Ezema, 2010), with its quest for homogenization.

One of the undesirable aspects of globalization is its seeming quest to enthrone a global language. Okwudishu (2003) avers that a global language will lead to an increased mutual understanding

of the world among members of the global village. This mutual understanding will serve as a leeway to the advent of universalization, homogenization, integration and centralization, and form a strong foundation upon which the world as a village would exist. However, how would a situation permitting a common language become possible in this multilingual world? This implies that the less powerful nations like Africa will bear its brunt most, as they will always be sidelined for the language of big powers, like the US. Given the multifariousness of African languages, what then becomes their place in the global village? How can Africa sustain her languages in a vastly globalizing world? How does she balance remaining a member of the global village and still not lose herself by losing her language? It is on these questions that this paper hinges. It is the writers submission that in order to preserve african indigenous languages, africans need to employ education in indigenous langyages, develop african languages further, document African indigenous languages for future generations and reference as well as embrace good governance that can propel these.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

AFRICAN LANGUAGES

African languages are the languages spoken by the people in the African continent. Traditionally, Africa houses four indigenous language families namely Niger-Congo, Afroasiatic, Nilo-Saharan and Khoisan. This division, however, does not depict the totality of African language families, as they are believed to exceed 20, including several isolated and sign languages. In all, it is estimated that there are more than 2000 languages in Africa (Kame, 2012, p, 228). The Niger-Congo label, spoken mainly within sub-Saharan Africa, comprises about 1500 languages. It includes languages like Yoruba, Bambara, Wolof, Ewe and Akan, etc., which are among the largest languages spoken in West Africa. The Bantu language family, the largest subgroup of the Niger-Congo label, hosts most of the largest languages spoken across Central, Eastern and Southern Africa. The Afro-Asiatic language family includes languages spoken in both the Middle East and Africa, including extinct languages known from written records, such as Ancient Egyptian, Akkadian and Ge'ez. Subgroups of Afroasiatic include Berber, Cushitic, Omotic, Chadic, Semitic and Egyptian. Berber languages such as Tamazight, Kabyle, and Tuareg are spoken in North Africa. Cushitic languages such as Somali and Oromo are spoken primarily in the Horn of Africa. Omotic languages and Semitic languages such as Amharic, Tigrinya and Gurage are also spoken in northeastern Africa. Arabic, a Semitic language originating from the Arabian Peninsula has spread across large parts of northern Africa as the language of Islam (including in Egypt, where it has displaced Coptic, the descendant of Ancient Egyptians). Chadic languages such as Hausa are spoken in West Africa in countries such as Nigeria and Cameroon. Nilo-Saharan languages are spoken across the Sahara to eastern Africa, in countries such as Mali, Chad, the Central African Republic and Ethiopia. Sudan is home to a large range of Nilo-Saharan languages, including various Nubian languages. The Nilotic family of 2 languages extends from South Sudan to Kenya and Tanzania

and includes Dinka, Luo, Nuer and Maasai. Khoisan languages are not one family, but rather consist of Kx'a, Tuu and Khoe-Kwadi families in and around the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa, and isolates Hadza and Sandawe found in Tanzania (Sands&Gunnick, 2019). This clearly shows that Africa is characterized by several regionally dominant languages and a larger number of languages which are dominant on national and local levels.

GLOBALIZATION

The term “globalization” is multidimensional and multifaceted, (Ezema, 2010). Volumes in academia have tried to explore its ontology and trajectories, yet, there is no clear-cut definition of the term. Every attempt to define it often finds focusing on its specific aspect rather than the whole.

Ahmadu (2013) cites Akindele (1990) who avers that globalization refers to the process of the intensification of economic, political, social and cultural relations across international boundaries. Globalization is principally aimed at the transcendental homogenization of political and socio-economic theory across the globe. He went further to describe it as an evolution which is systematically restructuring interactive phases among nations by breaking down barriers in the areas of culture, commerce, communication, and several other fields of endeavour.

Uwaezuoke(2010) defines it as a process of “bringing together the compliant nations of the world under a global village with socio-politico and economic-cultural interaction, integration, diffusion and give and take facilitated by information flow and perhaps for the enhancement of the global world” (p. 2). According to Nsibami (2001, cited by Uwaezuoke, 2010), globalization is a “process of advancement and increase in interaction among the world’s countries and people facilitated by progressive technological changes in locomotion, communication, political and military power, knowledge and skills, as well as interfacing of cultural values, systems and practices” (p. 2).

The varied nature of these definitions reinstates the claim of their multidimensional and multifaceted nature. Hence, it must be emphasized that all of these definitions add up in defining the phenomena of globalization, which is quite complex. Scholte (2002) tried to encapsulate these diverse notions of globalization by categorizing the term into four broad definitions:

Globalization as Internationalization

Here, globalization is conceived as a movement. It is the continuous expansion and increased movement of trade, capital investment, people, messages, information and ideas between countries. Globalization, therefore, signifies the growth of interconnectedness and interdependence among nations of the world. Therefore, a more global world is one where more messages, ideas, merchandise, money, investments and people cross borders between national-state-territorial units (Scholte, 2002, p. 8).

Globalization as Liberalization:

Here, globalization is seen as the act of loosening the government's previously constricting arms, in the forms of imposed regulatory controls and restrictions, to allow for the free movement of goods, services, capital and people between countries, to foster international economic integration. In other words, globalization takes place when authorities loosen or remove regulatory measures like trade barriers, foreign-exchange restrictions, capital controls, and visa requirements (Scholte, 2002, p. 10)

Globalization as Universalization

Here, globalization means "worldwide" or "everywhere", since it is perceived as dispersing various objects and experiences to people all over the world. It refers to the process of the worldwide spread of cultural ideas, objects and experiences. Globalization as universalization is assumed to entail the homogenization of worldwide cultural, economic, legal and political systems (Scholte, 2002, p. 11).

Globalization as Westernization

This school of thought classifies globalization as a re-enactment of "colonization" and "modernization". They strongly contend that globalization is essentially Eurocentric. It is a particular kind of universalization, one in which the social structures of modernity (capitalism, industrialization, rationalism, urbanism, etc) are spread the world over, destroying pre-existent cultures and local self-determination in the process, (Scholte, 2002, p. 12).

However, for this paper, the concept of globalization as expressed by Tomlinson (1996, cited by Ezema, 2010) will be used. He defined globalization as:

a rapidly developing process of complex interconnection between societies, cultures, institutions and individuals worldwide. It is a social process which involves compression of time and space, shrinking distances through a dramatic reduction in time taken – either physically or representationally – to cross them, so making the world seem smaller and in a certain sense bringing human beings closer to one another (p. 12).

In agreement with Tomlinson (1996), Ahmadu (2013) asserts that:

Globalization has turned the world into a big village... Despite the ambiguities of the concept, the essential nature of globalization is the compression of space and time, as a result, the world becomes one, and interactions among diverse people begin to look like those within a village. Thus, terms such as "one world" and "villagization" (p. 86).

AFRICAN LANGUAGES IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

Despite the inherent disadvantages of globalization, it still has its positive sides, which include the tremendous advancements in science and technology, which have turned the world into a global village. This is seen in the way it tries to converge a previously divergent world. How then can Africa benefit from these advantages without losing its (identity)? It is possible. However, there is a problem. This problem stems from the fact that Africa experiences globalization “from above”. This is a situation where powerful nations and companies determine the characteristics of global encounters, due to their economic strength (House-Soremekun & Falola, 2011). Thus, they control the major actions and policies that guide global encounters in the global village. They are the main controllers of globalization. The less powerful nations follow these rules because they do not have the power to object. Hence, as globalization waxes stronger, constricting the world into a global village and advocating for a language that unites members of the global village, the move for a global language will adversely affect less powerful nations. Particularly, their indigenous languages. Africa will suffer the brunt of this most. The fact that it is a continent with developing nations, most of which are still recovering from past wounds, like colonialism, bestowed on them by a few of the advanced nations, which greatly contaminated and broke the chord of their languages, the move for a global language will affect and not only cripple their languages that are already fading away but also their cultures (Ayodeji et al., 2013). Therefore, with globalization, there is always a huge tendency for identity loss. The danger of receding, of morphing into the anonymity of the crowd already caught in the whirl web of globalization (Adefarasin & Adefarasin, 2023). Thus, a person or a people loses their roots.

Re-echoing that dangers of imminent language atrophy, UNESCO in its 2012 report stated that: “Among the 6,000 languages and dialects the world, 50% of them are threatened. A language disappears every two weeks, carrying with it an entire cultural and intellectual heritage” (UNESCO, 2012). This paints the precariousness of the situation. Therefore, since Africa is part of the globalization equation, “from below”, discourses on its position in the global system, will automatically lead us into discussions of nationalism and resistance—how Africans can collectively strive to gain power (House-Soremekun & Falola, 2011). This will give them the leverage to be able to also dictate the pace of global encounters. Therefore, given this situation, it behooves Africans to search out means generously leverage the great benefits of globalization “while curtailing the negative impacts on their (languages) worldview, culture, and values that hold together families, communities, and clans, families (House-Soremekun & Falola, 2011, p. 2). The question now is how do we sustain African languages in the global village?

SUSTAINING AFRICAN LANGUAGES IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

The looming precarious fate of African languages in the global village call for all hands to be on deck to salvage it from the clutches of extinction. There are many ways African languages can be sustained in the global village. This paper will focus on elaborating four of these ways.

Education in the indigenous language.

One of the most effective means of sustaining African languages in a global world is using it as a medium of instruction. This instruction must begin in the family: the smallest sociological unit. In Africa, the family is the birth place of culture (language), where it is nurtured and developed (Obiefuna & Kanu, 2017, p. 66). Therefore, parents must take teaching their indigenous language to their children as their primary right, irrespective of where they find themselves. This is because language carries with it the culture and worldview of the people who own it. Hence, language is a veritable instrument for cultural renaissance. The overemphasis on the international language has made most young people dead to their local languages. So, the indigenous language should be used both at home, the smallest sociological unit and in school, especially the basic primary and secondary education. This is the formative years of the students and at this age, if their native language, the language in which they think and which equally reflects their reality is used in teaching them; there is a great chance of improved learning. It is as a result of this that UNESCO (2013) “promotes mother tongue-based bilingual or multilingual approaches in education as an important factor for inclusion and quality in education”. When children are taught in their mother tongue it deepens their confidence in their language. However, in most African countries, the English language is the main medium of instruction. Nyati-Saleshando (2016, cited Tebategeza, 2010); Cook, (2013); and Kinzler (2012) who aver that the common model across the continent is the restrictive use of African languages in education. Even when language policies are positive towards local languages, practice tends to favour English teaching and official use. This is not the only issue. The students are often punished for using their mother tongue, which is labelled vernacular, in school. This makes students who cannot speak the global language appear to be underachieving. Also, there are a limited number of books written in the native language of the people. This is simply because native languages are not used in school and are not considered necessary. So, even authors that wish to write are scared of not recuperating the cost of production. What this attitude does is that it bestows the status of inferiority on the mother tongue. Hence, students are quick to abandon it and even some parents do not educate or speak with their wards in their mother tongue. This stamps in the minds of the children the idea that their language has no inherent worth. It is here that the government has to step in to make the mother tongue a compulsory medium of instruction. Even if the students would learn the global language - English, it should not be done at the expense of their native language.

Developing the Indigenous Languages

The development of indigenous languages is also a very necessary factor to sustain African languages in the global village. The African Union, conscious of the fact that language is the “DNA of culture and its vehicle of expression” (Nyati-Saleshando, 2016, p. 160) has been committed to the development and promotion of African languages. Its Policy Guide on the Integration of African Languages and Cultures into the Education Systems adopted in 2010 and Aspirations 3 and 5 on Agenda 2063 are clear examples of such good intentions. It has been focused on the development and the use of African languages in critical social domains such as education, trade, government and media. Its commitment is also evident in its Languages Plan of Action which was first adopted in 1986 and reviewed in 2006, where it outlined clear goals member states were to achieve in the promotion and recognition of African languages. However, regardless of these good intentions, there has always been a problem of implementation. It is not enough to suggest inclusivity in the use of indigenous languages in global encounters, those at the helm of affairs must be seen using these indigenous languages in the critical domains mentioned above. This will reinforce the belief of their followers that they are proud of the language they are projecting.

It is also not enough to suggest students should be taught in their native languages, the languages also have to be developed and advanced to encompass words in the area of science and technology. African indigenous languages are often limited in vocabulary since most of them have no written tradition, so there is a need to advance these languages to embody advanced ideas of the contemporary time. Language is developed through usage. The continual usage of a language increases its vastness and memory bank. Roy-Campbell (2019) in support of this view cited KhomboMateene (1980), who asserts that:

These languages, *African indigenous languages* (the italicized words are mine) are poor because we do not want to enrich them, by not wanting to use them in certain fields such as education, and translation, which are all factors of language enrichment and development (p. 37).

Therefore, for Mateene, the impoverishment and underdevelopment of African languages in scientific and technical expression are quite voluntary because they have not been used in these fields. This development can only be born through the active use of these languages in various spheres. This will serve to prove that all languages have the innate capacity to express every form of knowledge (Roy-Campbell, 2019).

Documentation of the Indigenous Languages

African languages are primarily in the oral form, with very little availability in the written form. This raises concerns. Given the diverse nature of African languages, which are estimated to be about 2000, in all, the fact that only very few of them are in written form, one wonders about their chances of survival in an increasingly global world, which seeks to enthrone a global language. Documentation gears towards providing comprehensive language data, that encompasses the use of language in its natural setting, (Mbagwu & Obiamalu, 2010). Going further, they cite Urua (2003), who gives instances of such settings, which include: (speeches, conversations, texts etc), pouring libation, marriages, burials, market settings, village meetings, religious activities and language use in other social interactions. The mammoth nature of African languages will indeed make documentation a herculean task; however, it is very necessary for the preservation of African languages, which embodies her cultures and traditions. If this is not done, Africa suffers the risk of lurching deeper into the least position in the five classes of language endangerment, as stated by Wurm (2003) and cited by Mbagwu & Obiamalu (2010). This classification includes:

- a) Potentially endangered: here there is already an overriding interest in the dominant language spoken, hence the language (indigenous) languages in this class are learnt imperfectly by children in the areas where they are spoken.
- b) Endangered: languages in this class have few child speakers.
- c) Seriously endangered: languages here have middle-aged or past middle-aged persons as their youngest speakers.
- d) Terminally endangered: languages here have a few elderly speakers, and;
- e) Dead or extinct: languages in this class have no speakers at all

Therefore, to keep African languages safe, there is a need to preserve her languages, which embody their cultures and traditions, to sustain herself in the global village. To do this effectively, there is a need to ascertain the exact number of African languages, “since some African languages are still being discovered and others with few speakers are disregarded” (Mbagwu & Obiamalu, 2010, p. 89). This will extensively help in the delineation of the different African languages, their positions in the endangerment scale, and the languages that need urgent attention.

Good Governance.

According to Wolfson & Manes (1985, Nyati-Saleshando, 2016) “a rejection of one’s language and culture, is a rejection of the total individual” (p. 164). In other words, the status of a language reflects

the status of its speakers. They further observed that cultural discrimination translates into economic discrimination. This is evident in international transactions, where multinational corporations in providing goods and goods services in continents like Europe and Asia, do so in their different languages; making rooms to accommodate their cultural diversities. This shows the deference they have for the inherent diversities in these regions. Yet, they do not do so for Africa. Africa is solely encountered through colonial languages, even though it is a large market for these corporations (Nyati-Saleshando, 2016). Globalization is about power. The stronger an economy is in the global village, the more political power it gains. This increases its influence in the global village, thereby enabling it to stir global policies to foremost suit the goals and aspirations of its people. A clear case of this is the Security Council of the United Nations, where a few nations have veto power (House-soremekun & Falola, 2011). Africa as a continent is wrought with unimaginable bad leadership, which continues to sink its nations into the doldrums. The rippling effects of this are the continuous impoverishment and withering of the economic strength of African nations. This reduces the continent to a mere pawn in the chessboard of the powers that be. However, with good leadership and governance, Africa's economic strength will become a bulwark in the global scene and give them a place in the table of those determining the terms and conditions of encounters in the global village. Here, they can insist that an African language can be adopted in global encounters. The more an African language is used, the more it gains enough ground in the global scene. The greater the number of speakers of a language in the world, the higher the chances of sustaining such a language. Therefore, unless Africa takes up the responsibilities of good leadership, "the power play within the political and economic domains *in the global village* (italicized words are mine) places Africa in a vulnerable and weak position" (Nyati-Saleshando, 2016, p. 163). Since the world is fast becoming a global village, its inhabitants of this village are 'cosmopolitans on a global conference table', (Obiefuna & Kanu, 2017, p. 64). The currency that buys one a stronghold on the global table is a strong economy. Africa can achieve this only through good governance. This is because "no society in the world has developed in a sustained and democratic fashion on the basis of borrowed or colonial languages" (Roy -Campbell, 2019, p. 38).

CONCLUSION

Although globalization has a negative side, its positive impacts have extensively contributed to making life easier for man; hence, it cannot be relegated to the background. These benefits, particularly the advancement in science and technology, have continued to pull the distant poles of the world together; thereby turning the world into a global village. This is a great advancement. However, there is a problem with it, which is its move to establish a global language, as the major channel of encounter in the global village. Given the indispensable role of language amongst people, as an essential vehicle that carries their identity, cultures, values and traditions, from one generation to the next, the move for a global language will have adverse consequences, especially for languages of developing countries. This is because they do yet have the political and economic strength to call the shots in the global village.

Africa as a continent of developing countries, with over 2000 diverse languages, will likely bear the brunt of this move the most. Even with this awareness, it will be preposterous, given the nature of the contemporary world, for Africa to ostracize herself from the global village. Therefore, she must find a way to stay in the global village, enjoy its benefits and remain authentic and resist being pulled into the globalization crowd of anonymity. This calls attention to the urgency of sustaining the indigenous languages of Africa in a global village. It is this issue that this paper tries to address. It suggests the use of the indigenous language as a language of education, especially for the basic primary and secondary schools; developing the indigenous languages and the documentation of these indigenous languages. If these recommendations are put into consideration, Africa can comfortably enjoy all the benefits of globalization with its language and identity still intact.

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