



AFRICAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES ARE CULTURAL HERITAGE HISTORY: TOWARDS CREATING A BALANCE WITH SECOND LANGUAGES

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Abstract

This paper explores the heritage and historical values attached to indigenous languages across communities and nations in Africa. Nigeria is a multicultural country with over 500 indigenous languages spread across the country. Language is, therefore, an essential component of human communication in this region. With the rate of global interactions and the flexibility of communicating through social media and otherwise, it becomes imperative that another universal language such as English is adopted. This article provides an analysis of the value of having and placing a second language side by side to play different roles in situations where each is needed. The research method adopted for this work is qualitative. Secondary data is the main source of data for the work. The result showed that each human community has its indigenous language distinct to them and revered as their heritage history. With the English language as a second language, more flexible communication with the world will be actualized.

Keywords: Indigenous Languages, heritage, history, English language

Introduction

Language is an integral part of people and nations all over the world have their own sets of distinct languages associated with them. Vossen and Dimmendaal (2020:3) inform that 'about 6000 languages exist on earth while almost one-third of them are located in the African continent'. People are identified by the language they speak. Jourdan and Tuite (2009) affirm that language plays an important role because words are given meaning by being attached to the things represented via the ideas that represent them. Customarily, children grow up learning their indigenous language and also grow with it. People's indigenous languages are linked solidly with the customs, traditions, and lifestyles of their land. The reason is that indigenous languages are historical cultural heritages inherited by the forefathers and handed down to the next generations. European encroachment into Africa in the nineteenth century influenced the political and socio-cultural life of the people, which included language to a certain degree. There is no gainsaying the fact that Africa attracted foreigners in the nineteenth century for many reasons. Some of the reasons for foreign encroachment into Africa, according to Raji (2019), is because the continent was full of impressive sights-exotic animals, unique landscapes, and indigenous people with their own culture and life, which were completely different from the Europeans. However, Nendauni (2016) observed that when Africans were taken away from their land, most of their language changed. Some other factors that cause a switch from an indigenous language to another language are migrations as a result of conflicts and internal crises. Nakashima et al. (2018) emphasized that "climate change can pose a direct threat to many indigenous societies, thereby making them relocate elsewhere and learn a new language".

Nigeria, a country in West Africa, has more than 250 ethnic groups, with varying languages and customs, creating a country of rich ethnic diversity; however, there are more than 300 dialects within the three main languages and across them (Yeotan 2011:5). There is a great connection between the



people and the languages they speak. However, due to multiple cultural groups in the country, adopting one language from one ethnic group has been very difficult to achieve over the past years. Nevertheless, because of the heritage values of indigenous languages, the government emphasizes the preservation of indigenous languages across the various ethnic groups. Ndimele (2003) stated that the establishment of the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) in 1992 was meant to facilitate linguistics and language studies in Nigeria.

Today, the world has become more unified, interactive, and flexible in many ways. The exchange of speech and languages with foreigners in discussions and forums has become common. Nowadays, indigenous languages are more faithfully spoken in rural communities than in urban cities across the country. According to Borowiecki (2016), it is axiomatic that every age in the course of history experiences changes to a greater or lesser extent. The truism is that both the indigenous language and the English language have their roles in people's lives. The aim now is to balance the two languages for more flexible communication with everyone in different locations. It is against this backdrop that this paper will discuss and evaluate the values inherent in indigenous languages and the English language for a better society. This paper aims to evaluate the values inherent in indigenous languages and also discuss the benefits of having a second language which is deemed necessary within the wider global context. According to Maxom (2020), there is a need for a global language to make international communications smoother.

Statement of the problem

Currently in Nigeria, indigenous languages are facing the challenges of extinction. In most circumstances, indigenous languages are clashing with the English language and there is a failed balance between the two. Citizens have failed to draw a line between the value of indigenous language and the English language. Many primary and secondary schools have stopped pupils and students from speaking indigenous languages at the school premises. Also, some schools have removed indigenous subjects such as Igbo, Yoruba and, Hausa from the list of subjects being taught in schools (curriculum). In most cities and communities in Nigeria such as Warri and Lagos, the pidgin language (a kind of adulterated English commonly used for easy communication) has become a more welcomed unofficial language in the country which the educated and non-educated can freely use to communicate. They tend to reason that while indigenous languages hold their history and heritage and easily leads to their roots, the English language, on the other hand, gives them a wider coverage and enables them to communicate freely with other people from other ethnic groups and cultures.

Method of data collection

Basically, secondary data was used in the work. They include textbooks and journals. The work is qualitative and analytical in nature. These materials are collected, collated, and analyzed to justify the study which aims at striking a balance between the two invaluable languages – indigenous and English language. The world is fast advancing and development is encroaching on rural communities. Understanding the place, role, and balance of the two languages will bring balance in the global context.

Literature review

Indigenous language is the basic component of cultural heritage across most communities in Africa. Diverse ethnic groups with different local languages abound in the continent, which in turn makes inter-ethnic language communication difficult. There is, therefore, no gainsaying the fact that there is a need for a second language to connect communities within the continent and with the



international community. Language is a major part of culture, which Africans cannot do without. Kramsch (1998), in the book *Language and Culture*, focused study on the debate concerning the relationship between language and culture in general. The book looked at the key concepts in language and culture, especially the social context and cultural authenticity, while Preston and Stanford (2009), in *Variation in Indigenous Minority Languages*, looked at the variations in indigenous languages and how indigenous minority languages have played crucial roles in many areas been very valuable in bringing out the flavour in language typology and the ethnography of communication. There is hidden knowledge to learn from many languages in communities that are yet to be discovered. Preston and Stanford looked at how some understudied communities can provide new insights into language variation and change. Similarly, Vossen and Dimmendaal (2020) carried out a study in *The Oxford Handbook of African Languages* in which they comprehensively gave an overview of the state of research in African languages, culture, and society. Indigenous language is customary to groups of people because it has connections with almost everything people do in their local communities. To understand a danger, a level of crisis, and pandemic, for instance, language is needed for communication. In this regard, Salawu and Oyesomi (2020) in *Emerging Trends in Indigenous Language Media, Communication, Gender, and Health* explored new trends in indigenous languages and their connection to media, communication, gender, and even health. They emphasized that indigenous language is one of the strongest means of communication in local communities all over the world today.

Nevertheless, in recent years, some concerned writers have been disturbed by the rate of challenges that indigenous languages are facing. Preston and Stanford (2009:6) note that in the changing world of today, many indigenous minority languages are already facing serious communication difficulties. Kai and Okamura (2020), in their book *Indigenous Language Acquisition, Maintenance, and Loss and Current Language Policies*, discussed the various challenges facing indigenous languages in recent years and pointed out certain governmental policies, education, and colonization as some of the common challenges. Nevertheless, there are a lot of benefits to knowing one's indigenous languages and even other languages. In the words of Rodriguez, 'most people naturally quest to have more than one language' (2014:14). Schroedler (2017), in *The Value of Foreign Language Learning*, gave a detailed study of the basic values that are embedded in language skills. The English language is one language that has always come to the rescue of most countries in West Africa, such as Nigeria. In this area, Beal (2014) took a comprehensive study in his book *Language Arts and Discipline*, where he believes that the contemporary English language was developed in the modern English period and emphasized the need to understand the dynamics that surround the language. Shelton et al. (2021) carried out a study on *Indigenous Languages and the Promise of Archives* and discussed the numerous advantages of indigenous languages as they are connected to the archives. Also, because there are certain factors that can influence language acts in growing children and youths, Kondo-Brown (2006) wrote a book titled *Heritage Language Development: Focus on East Asian Immigrants*. This is a collection of studies that investigates the various societal factors that either promote or discourage the development of heritage language in children and young adults. Then, from the view of language and its policy effects, Seals and Shah (2019) in *Heritage Language Policies around the world* speak of the power of heritage language policies in communities which can either promote or mar the value of heritage languages.

Indigenous language versus the English language

Original languages are the languages that people are born with. In Africa, there are over one thousand languages from various ethnic groups and communities. In Nigeria alone are found languages like Ibibio, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Edo, Fulani, Igala, Idoma, Ikwerre languages etcetera



not to talk of the diverse dialects within some of the languages. These are part of their valued cultural heritage and history that is revered since time immemorial. Children are taught to learn their mother tongue from their parents and immediate families. The names given to children at birth are indigenously meaningful. Names are often coined from experiences and events that took place at a certain time in the parents' lives. More so, cultural values are impacted in children and youths faster through traditional proverbs, folklore, and idiomatic expressions spoken in the indigenous languages. With the introduction of formal schools in the system, they began to learn the second language which is the English language. Johnston (2008) discovered that English Language Teaching (ELT) is not merely a matter of training students in a particular set of skills, but imbued with values.

Nowadays, there is more reliance on digitalized global communication and some indigenous languages are being corrupted. Thus, because of the importance of indigenous languages in a cultural society like Africa, UNESCO (2021: 19) advised on the importance of “engaging indigenous language users and inspiring a new generation of language champions by increasing the number of languages used online”. In societies such as China, Japan, and India, the bond to indigenous language is primary while other languages such as English and French are secondary despite the civilization and modernization prevalent in their societies.

For rural communities in Nigeria, indigenous languages are still essential because of their many cultural and social uses in traditional occasions. In other words, the use of indigenous languages is important when conducting certain traditional ceremonies, rituals, and incantations. The various ethnic groups in the country such as Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa, believe that the gods of their land are better reached and communicated within the local dialects alone. For instance, amongst the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, the prayer that follows the breaking of the kola nut is conducted in an indigenous language no matter the academic forum, place, or event where the nut is presented. This is to say that people are better bonded in cultural and social events where their indigenous languages are spoken. Similarly, shrines and traditional medicines and treatments are effective using the indigenous language. As has been observed, no traditional incantations are conducted in the English language in most African societies. So also is the language of the masquerades and the spirit beings. English language was brought into Africa when the European colonizers came into the continent in the nineteenth century. Common Language for communication was initially a barrier between the indigenes and the Westerners. Gradually the colonial masters began to train some of the faithful indigenous and servants who later were used as interpreters and middlemen between the people and the colonial masters. Historically, the two official languages that officiate across the African continent today are English and French languages. French is spoken where the French colonizers controlled and it is similar for the English-speaking parts of Africa.

There is no gainsaying the fact that people's cultural heritage found in indigenous languages is essential for historical identity but for the sake of flexibility in communication, development, and global communication, a second global language must be encouraged. Dashwood and Son (2011: 19) observed that in multilingual indigenous communities, the process of language socialization is not widely understood. Hence, for a more improved world, there is a need to create a balance between the indigenous language and the English language. None should be disregarded as unimportant. So far, across Nigerian major cities and urban centres, the English language is the second language spoken for better communication among people of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Benefits and challenges of indigenous languages in Nigeria



Africa is a traditional society and the use of indigenous languages is important. This language comes first before any other language. The fundamental elements of each traditional society are contained in their indigenous languages. Wisdom and deep historical meanings are contained in indigenous languages. To wipe away indigenous languages and replace them totally with any form of foreign languages such as English in Africa is to remove the foundational ties that made the continent what it is. In South Africa for instance are many tribes and languages includes Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans. Numerous cultural festivals, ceremonies, rituals, and incantations prevalent in Africa are often conducted and potent in the local languages. More so, most of these important ceremonies are presided over by the elders of the land who do not hear the English language except their indigenous language. According to Okamura and Kai (2020: 32), language and culture constitute a chain that sustains human existence in a harmonious whole. This is to say that language is the transmitter of culture and culture is the root of African society. Traditional songs, proverbs, fables, poems, dances, stories, and folklore music have more energy and meaning when told or done with the traditional language. Cultural identity is constructed historically and socially within groups and is influenced by the contact with differences within these groups or differences between different groups (Thomas and Schwarzbaum 2011: 4).

It is evident that the history of the travails and successes of each Nigerian community are often better explained to the younger ones in indigenous languages. Hence, people pride in their language because it is originally theirs. From another perspective, conflicts and natural disasters are a bad influence on every nation as it has the capacity to send people away to other towns and nations environment where they may integrate, forget their indigenous language, and learn new languages. It is interesting to see that Japan, China, and India, civilization notwithstanding, preserved their indigenous language which has continued to bring respect to them globally.

New forms of internet friendships and associations among youths are fast bringing adulteration of indigenous languages. This has caused lamentation in Nigeria over the dying of indigenous languages amongst some cultural groups such as Igbo. With the expansion of social media communication, languages are dying while new forms of slang are fast being coined among the youth. Each day, they form new languages and code words only people of their age brackets can understand. Also, most Nigerian citizens cannot speak their ethnic language without combining it with English or *pidgin* English language. This is a danger to indigenous languages. Jacob (2015) observed that the influence of globalization on ingenuity and indigenous education has both positive and negative consequences. Preserving every indigenous language in Africa in writing is pertinent as tomorrow is uncertain. Devy et al. (2016: 5), stated that "all language created by human communities are our collective cultural heritage; it is our collective responsibility to ensure that they do not face the global 'phonocide' let loose in our time". Through digital platforms, and the flexibility of transportation from one place to another, the world is fast uniting into one global village. According to Albaugh (2014: 4), "language is the strongest marker of ethnic identity and it is also changeable, susceptible to individual choice and social planning".

Some of the sentences commonly adulterated African-Igbo languages are:

- a) Igbo: *There is no way I ga-esi malu because o gwaghi gi.*

Meaning: There is no way you will know because she did not tell you.

- b) Igbo: *A siri m gi sit down*

Meaning: I told you to sit down

- c) Igbo: *Biko jebe class*

Meaning: Please go to class



d) Igbo: *Tinye sugar na cup*

Meaning: Put the sugar in the cup

Another type of adulterated English that is nationally recognized and acceptable in informal occasions in Nigeria is the *pidgin* English language. Coulmas (1989) observed that multilingual societies typically use language in a functionally specialized manner, which is why not all of their languages or varieties are equally suitable for all communicative domains. Some examples of Nigerian Pidgin English sentences are:

- a) Make you no say that again abeg.
- b) Make una go away.
- c) E be like say you no wan go home today.
- d) Abeg comot for here.

Towards maximizing the English language within the global context

In today's global context, the use of, and learning of a second language such as English is something that is glaringly necessary for many reasons. Rosenhouse and Kowner (2008) observed that English is the lingua franca of the modern world, the "vehicular" language used for science, international business, and for communication at virtually any large international meeting. Language can be made the official language of a country, to be used as a medium of communication in such domains as government, the law courts, the media, and the educational system (Crystal 2003: 3). Overall, the success of the English language is closely allied with its value as a means to employability, professional mobility, social usefulness, and fulfillment. With the increase of social media and the web, the growth of English as a second lingua franca is bound to continue into the foreseeable future (Kirkpatrick 2017). This is to say that the secondary language is important. Some of the outstanding advantages of the English language in the present century and beyond are:

1. The language is far-reaching globally. It has been actively used worldwide hence, giving one the opportunity to blend, communicate, and explore so many opportunities across the globe.
2. The English language makes debates, discussions, and arguments in conferences, seminars, and other forums flexible as people from different cultures easily air their views with the language. This means that it enables scholars the opportunity to contribute their ideas and opinions on such occasions without being misunderstood.
3. Across schools in Nigeria, school children and students from diverse cultural backgrounds associate freely with their mates with the language.
4. Unlike most foreign languages such as Greek and French, English is easy to read, learn, write, and understand.
5. While indigenous language is limited within a given boundary, region, and locality, the English language covers a wider range making blending with other cultures and societies flexible, friendly, and sweet. Travelers or migrants blend into new societies easily and smoothly using the English language.
6. It enhances economic political and diplomatic relations across countries, organizations, and within nations.

Towards creating a balance with English language as the second language

Flexibility, better communication, and wider opportunities are the advantages of using the English language as the second language in the present world. It is unarguably correct that it is easy to identify someone's ethnicity or tribe from his or her indigenous languages. It is also a fact that through African indigenous languages, many traditional performances are legitimate. The socio-cultural foundations of the people are based on their traditions and customs with local language in



the middle of it all. A host of cultural activities are celebrated each year in Africa. For this reason, it is important that indigenous languages are sustained and preserved. Nevertheless, there must be a balance between the indigenous language and the English language. Adopting and respecting the English language as a second language is important because of the numerous opportunities it has within Nigeria, in Africa, and the wider world. Having the English language as a second language is important because a wider range of people, communities, and societies are already using it. It is also an already established language for training and conversing. History has recorded the earlier difficulty in communication between the colonial masters and the indigenous people as a result of the language barrier. Initially, language was an obstacle because the colonial rulers did not understand the people's local language while the natives did not understand their language as well. Thus, for some time, there were misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the white man's speech until the indigenes serving in the courts of the white men learned to speak the white man's language. In recent years, due to globalization and civilization, indigenous languages are being more observed in rural communities than in urban centres where there is a large concentration of people from different backgrounds. The use of a second language is now more important than ever before to speed up transactions and businesses.

Conclusion

The paper stated that the use of the English language as an acceptable second language is worthwhile due to the situation of global integration which is fast becoming one in many ways. In a country with over two hundred ethnic groups with different languages like Nigeria, there is bound to be a misunderstanding if there is no common binding language for proper communication and understanding. English language when used to support indigenous languages will improve the society more than it was. The status of English in the world has changed drastically in the last half-century or so, as innovations in communication technologies, especially the rise of the internet and improvements in transportation have increased international travel and cultural exchange (Kaufman 2013). Following the value of one general language, many governments across states and nations in the country have officiated the English language as their second general language. This paper advised on the preservation of indigenous languages for traditional and cultural purposes in multicultural societies across Africa, yet insisting on maximizing the quantum values inherent in using the English language as the second language, especially for all official, educational, and administrative events.

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