

Challenges in Linguistic Research on African Languages: A Case Study of Nigerian Languages

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Abstract

With a particular focus on Nigerian languages, this paper thoroughly examines the several issues that arise while conducting linguistic research on African languages. Using information from journal articles and reports, the study looks at issues like underfunding, poor recordkeeping, colonialism's legacy, and the dominance of English in official situations. The report looks at how these challenges affect the preservation of indigenous languages in Nigeria as well as the country's linguistic diversity. Based on the study's findings, recommendations are made for improving research projects and preserving Nigeria's language heritage.

Keywords: *Nigeria Languages, Africa Languages, Linguistics Research, Colonialism's Legacy.*

INTRODUCTION

Africa is one of the world's most linguistically diverse continents, with almost 2,000 distinct languages spoken there. Nigeria is one of the most linguistically varied countries in the world, with over 500 different languages spoken there (Bamgbose, 2016). Nigeria serves as an excellent example of cultural diversity. The three main language groups to which these languages belong are Niger-Congo, Afroasiatic, and Nilo-Saharan, highlighting the nation's unique linguistic and cultural variety (Blench, 2017). The study of African languages, especially those of Nigeria, is beset with problems that jeopardise the languages' development and preservation despite the abundance of available data. A thorough grasp of these difficulties is essential for safeguarding Nigeria's linguistic legacy as well as addressing the more general problems of language extinction, cultural preservation, and academic inclusion in Africa.

Certain languages have been extensively documented by linguists; however, many other languages are either not documented at all or have not received the necessary amount of research, and some of these languages are in danger of going extinct. Because English is widely used as Nigeria's official language, indigenous languages are marginalised in discourse within the government and educational system (Yusuf, 2019). These problems will be examined in the Nigerian context during the study, and recommendations for improving linguistic research on Nigerian languages will be made. The emphasis on Nigerian languages provides insights into more general issues that African languages face throughout the continent. This is due to the fact that these challenges are representative of general problems in the field of African linguistic studies rather than being specific to Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The region of West Africa is home to a large number of distinct language communities, with Nigeria being particularly notable due to its expansive breadth and numerous ethnic

groups. The significance of Nigeria as a language cluster in West Africa is highlighted in this section. The issues that are given by a large number of language users, a wide range of linguistic structures, and the influence of colonial and post-colonial language policies on native languages are addressed in this work (Hyman, 2003; Blench, 2006).

Overview of African Languages in West Africa

West Africans are conceived to speak more than 500 different languages, most of which belong to the Niger-Congo, Afro-Asiatic, and Nilo-Saharan language families (Appiah, 2010; Bamgbose, 2003). This results in an incredibly varied linguistic landscape throughout West Africa.

Languages of the Niger-Congo Region: Yoruba, Igbo, Akan, and Wolof are the most frequently spoken and regarded as prominent languages. Appiah (2010) asserted that their tonal systems are intricate. Two of the most significant languages in West Africa, Fulfulde and Hausa, are instances of historical trade routes and links between various cultures (Bamgbose, 2003).

West African political and educational systems have been influenced by the colonial languages of French and English (Appiah, 2010). Bamgbose (2003) claims that in order to support the preservation of cultural heritage and the diversity of native languages, modern initiatives support indigenous languages alongside colonial languages. West African languages are linked to rich oral traditions, some of which are exemplified by epics such as Sundiata, which function as markers of culture (Diawara, 1988).

Home and Abroad: The Differences

When conducting linguistic study on Nigerian languages, both nationally and globally, special resources, techniques, and results are used. This section examines the benefits and drawbacks of conducting linguistic research locally versus globally, highlighting the significance of community involvement and local expertise (Akinlabi, 2009; Odisho, 2015). In West Africa, African languages are very important, both in local communities ("home") and among the diaspora ("abroad"). There are significant differences in the importance and use of these languages in different contexts.

Home (West Africa)

African languages are the primary means of intercommunal communication in several West African countries. These languages are necessary for interpersonal connection, cultural identification, and the transmission of traditional knowledge (Ebere, 2018). They are frequently used in a variety of settings, such as social events, family settings, informal conversations, and religious ceremonies. Speaking African languages at home helps community members feel connected and continuous.

Abroad (Diaspora Communities)

The dynamics of African languages vary greatly among outside expat communities. Migration is a common source of linguistic transitions; many second and third generation immigrants prefer the dominant languages of their host countries—like English, French, or Portuguese—to their native African languages (Adegbija, 2018). The desire for social mobility, access to education, and economic integration in the new cultural setting all impact this change. As such, there can be a decrease in the use and fluency of African languages among diaspora communities.

Challenges and Adaptations

Significant barriers to the preservation of African languages in foreign environments include the transmission of African languages over generations, a lack of funding for language instruction, and social pressure to adopt the dominant language (Folarin, 2016). Language schools, community projects, digital media platforms, and cultural events are just a few of the measures being used to keep these languages alive. These initiatives aim to preserve linguistic variety, promote intercultural understanding, and preserve cultural heritage within diaspora communities (Kouega, 2016).

African languages' position and use reveal complex dynamics shaped by migration, socioeconomic variables, and cultural flexibility inside and outside of West Africa and its diaspora communities. Despite the fact that these languages are essential components of cultural identity in their original contexts, they face difficulties and changes in surroundings of diaspora, calling for initiatives to maintain and advance them in order to maintain linguistic diversity and legacy.

Theoretical Foundations and Eurocentrism in Linguistic Research

African languages have historically been marginalised in the global linguistic discourse due to linguistic research's historical emphasis on Indo-European languages (Blench, 2017). African languages have often been mistreated by Western language theories and techniques, which ignore the social contexts and structural nuances that make African languages unique (Bamgbose, 2016). Nigerian languages are known for their complex morphosyntactic patterns and tonal characteristics. Often, these features are not well-accounted for in analytical frameworks. It's possible that the complexity of tonal languages like Yoruba or Igbo are not fully captured by Chomskyan generative grammar, which has dominated Western linguistic theory (Ndimele, 2021).

Documentation and Preservation of Endangered Nigerian Languages

Nigeria's linguistic diversity offers benefits as well as challenges. There are hundreds of languages spoken throughout the nation, but many are in danger of extinction. According to a 2016 UNESCO assessment, Isekiri, Izon, and other 29 Nigerian languages are listed as endangered. These languages are not widely spoken and have no written forms, which makes documentation difficult (Egbokhare, 2020).

Due to a lack of institutional support and funding, linguists have had difficulty recording minority languages. The consequences are severe: when a language disappears, its related culture, worldview, and knowledge base are usually destroyed as well (Yusuf, 2019). Despite the linguistic richness of Nigeria, just a handful of languages—Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo, for example have attracted substantial scholarly attention, leading to the production of several grammars, dictionaries, and instructional materials (Ndimele, 2021). Minor languages are neglected because "major" languages are prioritised in governmental and academic settings, and because funding for large-scale language documentation projects is inadequate.

Influence of Colonialism and Globalization

The colonial legacy continues to shape linguistic priorities in Nigeria. English, imposed as the official language during British colonization, remains dominant in education, government, and the media (Oyetade, 2019). This has resulted in a sociolinguistic hierarchy where English is perceived as superior, while indigenous languages are regarded as less prestigious. The consequence of this colonial language policy is the devaluation of Nigerian

languages and the shift towards English, particularly among younger generations (Blench, 2017). Globalization exacerbates this trend, as English proficiency is increasingly associated with economic opportunities, while indigenous languages are relegated to domestic and informal domains (Yusuf, 2019).

Technological Barriers in Linguistic Research

Technology presents language researchers with both opportunities and challenges. While linguistic research has been revolutionised globally by instruments such as digital corpora, phonological analysis software, and language-learning systems, its application to African languages, especially Nigerian languages, is still limited (Akinwale, 2018). The majority of technological tools are created for languages that are commonly spoken, which means that African languages—which have complex phonologies and morphologies—are frequently left out of technological advancements. In tonal languages like Yoruba, where pitch variations can change word meanings, speech recognition software is infamously ineffective (Akinwale, 2018). The development of digital archives and corpora for Nigerian languages is still in its infancy, mostly because of financial constraints and inadequate technological know-how (Yusuf, 2019). Establishing these kinds of resources will greatly increase the possibilities for linguistic research by giving academics a wealth of material to work with and supporting the digital preservation of endangered languages.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilises a qualitative research style, which comprises secondary data collection. The material include peer-reviewed journal papers, books, and studies concerning the status of linguistic study in Africa and Nigeria. These sources offer insights into the historical and contemporary issues encountered by linguists studying Nigerian languages.

Data Presentation and Findings

Nigeria, home to over 500 languages, nonetheless has challenges with linguistic documentation. There is no recognised orthography for more than 300 Nigerian languages. The reasons behind this are not impossible, in part because, as was already indicated, European languages are given special attention. Nigerian language scholars continue to face numerous challenges as they work to revitalise certain minority languages in Nigeria. The most challenging problems in linguistic study on African languages are related to gathering data, which includes finding, selecting, organising, analysing, and transcribing information.

1) Sourcing for Data

The first step in language documentation is collection of information on a language from the native speakers starting from the spoken form which is primary, as written form is secondary. This first step has continued to be a serious challenge as some native speakers consider it as a waste of their time by reseachers and as such, most often, not ready to provide information to non-native speakers. Besides, many challenges arise in dealing with data from primary and secondary sources and even the data obtained from the researchers' intuitions are not problem free. Some native speakers do not speak the fluent indineous langauges because of their western education. This affects the analysis of the data collected.

2) Varibility in Transcription

Transcription has been a very serious challenge to researchers on Nigerian languages. The phonetic symbols sometime, vary. This is an especially difficult matter. For example, in

the Edoid languages, bilabial / β / and velar / γ / fricatives have both been problematic for researchers. Transcription of these sounds is usually a problem to non-Edoid scholars in Nigeria, thus the solution lies in the analysis by speech filing system of the computerised speech laboratory.

3) Selection and organisation of data

Selection and organisation of information gathered into various sub-heads have been a very serious challenge to African language researchers. Data must be organised into names of human beings, animals, insects and numerals. The problem here is getting the attention of the native speakers as earlier stated.

4) Grammatical Theory

In African linguistic research, phonological theories such Generative theory, Autosegmental theory and Optimality theory have been and are still being used in presenting data on African languages. While autosegmental theory has been complimenting generative theory in presenting data on African languages, Optimality theory has not been found adequate enough to capture data on Nigerian languages as it has not done well in capturing the data on the prosodic organisation of tones in Nigerian languages.

5) Social-Political problems

The political situation, such as banditry and kidnapping, in some African countries like Nigeria today does not encourage data collection on Nigerian languages. Nigeria has been experiencing kidnapping by Boko-haram for over a decade now. This has been the order of the day in Northern Nigeria, especially North-East. Carrying out a research on any language in this region has been a very serious challenge. The Fulani herdsmen have sent away the native speakers of languages in the North-Central states such as Benue, Taraba, Plateau etc. These regions, North-East and North-Central comprise linguistically heterogeneous states that require the attention of linguistic researchers. Besides, native speakers who would provide information on their languages have deserted their villages. This is not peculiar to the Northern Nigeria. While kidnapping with ransom payments trail in the North, banditry has been ravaging the Southern Nigeria unabated. For example, a researcher from Ibadan wrote a propto UNICEF. Australian government was interested in sponsoring the research. Unfortunately, after the Australian government had agreed to sponsor it, the issue of banditry and kidnapping escalated, the non-natives in the bush were in a very precarious situation and the sponsorship was stepped down.

Against Nigerian Languages

Nigerian languages, albeit significant in culture and history, are threatened by a number of factors, including as globalisation, urbanisation, and linguistic change. These issues are thoroughly discussed in this part, along with how they affect language revitalization, preservation, and the role of both governmental and non-governmental measures in reducing language endangerment (Blench, 2006; Williamson, 2002). It is difficult to take a critical stance against Nigerian languages because languages serve as generally cultural heritage and identity carriers. Nonetheless, there have been disagreements raised about difficulties or problems pertaining to Nigerian languages:

- a) Educational Challenges: One criticism is that because English is usually prioritised over native tongues in Nigeria's educational system, Nigerian languages are suppressed in formal education (Eze, 2019). This might result in a generation of young Nigerians who struggle to

communicate in their communities and preserve their cultural identity as they won't be fluent in their mother tongues.

- b) **Economic and Social Implications:** A distinct perspective highlights the social and economic implications, contending that proficiency in English or other foreign languages is viewed as more beneficial for social mobility and economic opportunities, both domestically in Nigeria and abroad (Adedimeji, 2017). As a result, there can be less motivation or perceived value in funding the development of Nigerian languages in a variety of sectors, such as government, the media, and business.
- c) **Language Endangerment:** The prevalence of English and other major languages raises concerns about linguistic endangerment. Fewer people speak several Nigerian languages, which are categorised as vulnerable or endangered. There is also little institutional support for the preservation and advancement of these languages (Emenanjo, 2003). Even if these viewpoints offer criticisms of the state and difficulties Nigerian languages confront, it is important to acknowledge the continuous efforts and activities made to preserve and revitalise these languages. In order to preserve cultural variety and give future generations the chance to connect with their language and culture, these initiatives are essential.

CONCLUSION

The challenges facing linguistic research on Nigerian languages are multifaceted, ranging from a lack of funding and resources to the impact of colonialism and the dominance of English. These challenges not only hinder the academic study of these languages but also threaten their preservation. The findings of this paper underscore the need for a concerted effort by the Nigerian government, academic institutions, and international organizations to prioritize the documentation and study of Nigerian languages before more languages are lost.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Nigerian government and educational institutions should prioritize linguistic research and provide adequate funding for the documentation and preservation of endangered languages. Curriculum Reform Indigenous languages should be integrated into the formal education system to promote their use among younger generations. Encouraging students to study and develop linguistic skills in their native languages will help ensure the survival of these languages (Yusuf, 2019).

Technological Development: Investment in the development of technological tools specifically designed for African languages, including speech recognition software, digital corpora, and language-learning apps, would enhance research and preservation efforts (Akinwale, 2018). **Community Involvement:** Engaging native speakers and local communities in linguistic research is crucial for the success of documentation and preservation projects. Linguists must collaborate with community leaders to ensure that research outcomes reflect the needs and aspirations of native speakers (Egbokhare, 2020).

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