

A Study on the Extinction of Indigenous Languages in Nigeria: Causes and Possible Solutions

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ABSTRACT

Language, irrespective of its status, enables people to communicate and express themselves in any given society but surprisingly the issue of extinction of indigenous languages has not received much attention. Therefore, this research sets out to identify and examine the causes of language extinction, evaluate the current situation of language extinction and give possible solutions to the problem. Essential questions, in relation to the decline of the use of Yoruba Language, using Ile-Ife as a case study, are addressed. In this research, it is revealed that Yoruba language is an indispensable part of the Yoruba culture and Yoruba culture is enriched with enviable values, customs, morals and general way of life. Also, the extent of the decline of the language was discovered.

Keywords: Language, Yoruba, extinction, culture.

INTRODUCTION

The most important aspect of cultural heritage of any ethnic group is her language. Indeed, people preserve their culture by promoting their language(s). In Nigeria, there are various ethnic groups, each having its own peculiar language and dialects being spoken in different communities (Akinkurolere and Adewumi, 2013). Abdul (2005) acknowledges this polarity and argues that 'The numerically – and politically - major ethnic groups are the composite Hausa-Fulani of the north, the Yoruba of the southwest, and the Igbo of the southeast'. While, Ayeomoni (2012) insists there are over 400 languages in Nigeria, which are from various ethnic groups. Meanwhile, the Yoruba ethnic group makes up about 30% of the population of Nigeria, making them the second biggest ethnic group, among the three major groups, while other ethnic groups have minority status.

Yoruba language is the tonal language vastly spoken in the South Western region of Nigeria and few other countries of the world. Meanwhile, Ojo (2006) has earlier posited that:

The Yorùbá language is spoken natively by over thirty million people in West Africa, primarily in Nigeria and in the neighboring countries of the Republic of Benin and Togo. Varieties of Yorùbá language are also spoken in the Diaspora

in places such as Cuba, Brazil, and the Caribbean.... It is a viable medium of instruction in education with a significant amount of pedagogical materials. In fact, amongst the over two thousand African languages, it is one of the most widely learnt as a second language, especially in Europe and the Americas.

No doubt, Yoruba language is internationally recognised and certified language; with codes such as ISO639-1, ISO639-2 and ISO639-3 under the International Standard Organization (ISO) Native speakers of the language constitute 30% of Nigeria's population and about 40 million speakers through the West African region. Yoruba language was one of the first West African Languages to have written grammar and dictionary in 1849.

In an Article, Toluwanimi Malomo states that Yoruba language is not just a way of communicating, but a way of passing on values, expectations, history and religion. He avers that the language is spoken by approximately 20 million people most of whom live in Nigeria, Togo and Benin. It is imperative to state that Yoruba was solely a spoken language but now it has an officially recognized orthography. Yet, amongst Yoruba-speaking people, a significant number pass on only very rudimentary understanding of the language to their children.

It is heart-breaking that Yoruba culture (beliefs, ideologies, customs and norms) is deteriorating in recent times. Cultures such as greetings (kneeling down and prostrating for elders), chastity (virginity), dressing (traditional attires such as Aso Oke, Dansiki and others), moonlight folktales and traditional hairstyles for females are now considered outdated. In fact, a close examination at churches today shows that most preachers give their sermons in English language. Any Yoruba based speaking church is believed to be a local church for the elderly or aged. Many people especially youths and young children have lost interest in Yoruba movies and songs, rather they prefer foreign movies and songs. No wonder, most of the young children, teenagers and youths, nowadays, cannot fluently speak Yoruba language.

Arowolo (2010) posits that 'culture is about people's total way of life; the way people live, eat, worship, produce, create and recreate.' Culture and language are intertwined and closely related. Language reflects the culture of its speakers; one cannot be separated from the other. Therefore, once a particular culture is being regarded as outdated, the language begins to decline. Since language is an important part of any society because it enables people to communicate and express themselves. When a language dies out, future generations lose a vital component of the culture that is necessary to complete how a culture is understood. This makes language a susceptible aspect of cultural heritage and there is the need to protect it.

According to Fabunmi and Salawu (2005), there are reasons for the decline and endangerment of Yoruba language, which are both remote and immediate causes responsible for the threat of serious endangerment staring the Yorùbá language in the face. They argue that there are natural catastrophic causes like the physical well-being of the speakers, unfavourable climatic and economic conditions, i.e. famine and drought, habitat displacement, devastating ferocious diseases, desertification as well as unpredictable human migrations. Any of these may bring about a decline or total extinction of a language. Specifically, some of the identified factors are the attitude of the elite community, job opportunities and economic, the Nigerian political factors, religious factor.

METHODOLOGY

The study's focus was limited to Ile-Ife, being the historical home of the Yorubas, with the aim of examining the usage of Yoruba language in

the town. Questionnaires were distributed to young people and adults. The young people were, however, limited to secondary school students in Ile-Ife and undergraduates in Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. The adults included lecturers/teachers, public servants and other educated people in the town. However, the sampling did not cover all secondary school students in Ile-Ife, students were selected from four schools (Adventist High School, Lagere, Ile-Ife, Ebenezer Baptist High School, Eleyele, Ile-Ife, Seventh-Day Adventist Primary School, Lagere, Ile-Ife and St. Mulumba Catholic High School, Lagere, Ile-Ife), on the basis of ten students from each school. Also, twenty undergraduates and forty lecturers, selected at OAU, were among the research subjects.

The data used for this research was the administered questionnaires. The questionnaires, 100 in number, were administered strictly by the researcher to the respondents. Each questionnaire contained four sections (A-D). Section A requires personal information such as age, sex, marital status, educational level, occupation, religion, Section B requires information on the suggested causes of Yoruba language decline, Section C tests how they use the Yoruba language and their level of interest in the language and culture and Section D requires the respondents to give suggested solutions (if they have any) to the decline of Yoruba language in Ile-Ife.

QUESTIONNAIRE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Responses were analyzed and findings will be discussed. The results are presented in the following sequence:

Social-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Respondents between ages 10-30 were categorized under young people while, those within the range of 30 and above was categorized under adults. The age distribution shows that larger percentage (52.9%) of the age groups lie within age 10-20 while the least percentage (10%) lie at 40 and 18.6% within age limit 20-30 and 30-40. The sex distribution shows that 54.3% were females, 45.7% were males. 92.1% are Christians and 7.9% are Muslims while they were no traditional worshippers. Examining the marital status of the respondents, a very high percentage of the respondents are single, while just 22% are married. Among the respondents that partook in this research work, 60 are students, and 40 are

A Study on the Extinction of Indigenous Languages in Nigeria: Causes and Possible Solutions

teachers and public servants. A larger percentage of the respondents were young people.

Some Causes of Yoruba Language Decline

Some factors causing a decline in the use of Yoruba language were highlighted in the questionnaire and the results are illustrated in the table below:

Table 1. *Table of Causes of Decline*

Love for western culture	89.3%
Prominence of English language	90%
Unavailability of sound Yoruba teachers	40%.
Failure of parents to train their wards to speak Yoruba	85.7%
Poor facilities such as Yoruba laboratories	72.1%
Yoruba language is too local	22.8%
Political influence	42.2%
Job opportunities outside Yoruba speaking areas	72.8%
Natural disasters is a factor causing Yoruba decline	27.8%
Diversity of languages in Nigeria	65%

Hence, the factors that mostly affect the decline of Yoruba language as revealed above are prominence of English Language, love for western culture and failure of parents to train their wards to speak Yoruba

Yoruba language and Students' Interest

This section evaluates the current situation of the decline of Yoruba language among students only by assessing their general interest. Among the 60 respondents which are students, 49% of them agreed that English language is more important to them than Yoruba, while 41% disagreed and 10% remained undecided. Also, the data revealed that larger percentage 49% preferred African dishes to Western dishes, while 46% preferred Western dishes to African dishes and 5% of the 100 students remain undecided. Furthermore, 50% love dressing in Yoruba attire, while 46% did not, while 4% of the students could not decide. It was, also, apparent that most of the respondents can communicate well in Yoruba while a few cannot.

However, a larger percentage of the students (67%) did not love to communicate in Yoruba or did not love to speak Yoruba language, even though, 58% of the students can communicate well in the Yoruba language. This shows that most of the young people preferred to communicate in English language. Also, a larger percentage of the students (65%) could not evince a good repertoire of proverbs and a deep history of their culture. Stories, as used in the questionnaire, are representations of the history

and culture of the Yoruba people. There is no way a person who has not read or listened to folklores or stories can have a deep knowledge of the history of the culture because Yoruba stories (folklores) teach morals and present the past as opposed the present with adequate portrayal of the values and traditions of the Yoruba people.

Also, 61% of the students did not love Yoruba movies and songs, while 30% loved them, while 9% remained undecided. In addition, 56% of parents communicate to their wards in Yoruba language, while 42% of them did not communicate to their wards in Yoruba. This shows the extent to which parents speak to their wards in the language. Despite the fact that the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria allotted specific functions to indigenous languages and these parents are not oblivious of the fact that major indigenous languages function alongside the English language in Nigeria polity (Akinkurolere, 2016). Therefore, we can conclude that a lot of young people do not have a deep knowledge of stories and proverbs and most of them also prefer to communicate in English. Also, 50% of the young people did not appreciate their culture while 45% did. This showed the rate of Yoruba language decline among the young people. The young people constitute the future of the nation and if this trend is not checked, it will affect the coming generations.

Evaluation of the current situation of the decline of Yoruba language (Teachers Only)

This section showed the evaluation of the current situation of the decline of Yoruba language among teachers. A total of 40 out of the 100 population are teachers. A larger percentage of the sample (90%) can communicate well in Yoruba and just 10% cannot. Also, all respondents loved Yoruba customs. With the positive answers to most of the question being asked, we can conclude that Yoruba language is not really declining among the teachers. However, a larger percentage of the teachers find it comfortable communicating to their students in English language, in informal setting, while did not.

In conclusion, we can conclude that Yoruba language is not really declining among the adults. However, a large percentage of them do not communicate in Yoruba in their workplace and do not prefer to communicate to their children in Yoruba language. Also, all the adults agreed that there is a difference in the way of

life of Yoruba people in the olden days as opposed to now.

Recommended Solutions to the decline of Yoruba language in Nigeria

The section discusses the suggested recommendations given by respondents. 65% of the respondents suggested that parents/guardians need to train up their children/wards in the culture and language of the Yoruba, while 35% suggested other solutions to the decline of Yoruba language in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, efforts have been made to show that Yoruba language is an indispensable part of the Yoruba culture and Yoruba culture is enriched with enviable values, customs, morals and general way of life. Also, the causes of Yoruba language decline have been brought to fore, based on the opinion of the people of Ile-Ife. Indeed, it is crystal clear that Yoruba usage in Ile-Ife is weakening. If the use of Yoruba language is declining in Ile-Ife, which is regarded as the seat of Yoruba culture, the situation will worsen in other South-Western in Nigeria.

Furthermore, we have been able to show the extent of this decline. While conducting this research, it was discovered that Yoruba is no longer a compulsory subject in the curriculum of secondary schools; it is now optional despite government's policy on education that encourages the teaching and learning of indigenous languages in our schools while, the trend is disturbing, it might not be out of place to say that successive governments have not done anything to reverse it. For instance, Section 1, paragraph 8 of National Policy on Education (NPE), states that "the Federal Government beginning from late 1970s shall take official interest in, and make policy pronouncements on the teaching of the indigenous languages, instead of concerning itself solely with English". It was in this context that Sub-section 19(4) declares that 'Government shall encourage the learning of indigenous languages'. Thus, these primary school children were not brought up first in their mother tongue, the secondary school students also are taught in English language, many of them may also choose not to offer Yoruba language in school, some of which their parents do not speak the Yoruba language to them at home. How then would they be culturally grounded?

Also, based on the research findings, most of the young people do not have a deep history of the

Yoruba culture, do not know much about the past happenings and occurrences, and they do not have a good repertoire of proverbs and rich idioms. How then can they pass the Yoruba culture across to the future generations? In addition, the research findings showed that a larger percentage of the adults prefer to communicate to their wards in English language. This showed the decline in the use of the language in homes, especially homes where the parents are educated. Also, all of the adults agree that there is a difference in the way of life of the Yoruba people in the olden days as opposed to now, as westernization, modernization and technology have precipitated the decline in the way of life and culture of the Yoruba people and this is obvious in the opinion of the young people who no longer value the Yoruba culture.

Many research subjects were of the opinion that charity begins at home, therefore it is important that parents communicate and teach their children in Yoruba language, the cultural values and general way of life of the Yoruba people. A large number of the respondents also suggested that the government should make and implement policies that will favour the growth and continuity of Yoruba language. The government should also make Yoruba language a compulsory subject for all students from nursery to secondary school level. Students should also be allowed to communicate in Yoruba language in and out of school, it should not be regarded as "vernacular" and it should also be a criterion for gaining admission into higher institutions. In fact, Akinkurolere (2011) argues the use of a bilingual medium of instruction from pre-primary level will be a better alternative against the present situation whereby English language is expected to be introduced as a medium of instruction at a later stage in primary. It is from this perspective that the use of both indigenous language and English language at every stage of learning will bridge the disparity and clear negative insinuations about the use of indigenous language in schools.

Some of the respondents however, suggested that competent teachers should be recruited into schools to teach the language and there should be shows such as fashion shows, cultural programmes, cooking competition (African dishes) on the various forms of the media to enhance and encourage the continuity of the language and culture of the Yoruba people. The decline of Yoruba language can eventually lead to its and the dearth of Yoruba language means the dearth of the Yoruba tribe, people and

A Study on the Extinction of Indigenous Languages in Nigeria: Causes and Possible Solutions

culture. This is why every native speaker of Yoruba must be concerned with the plight of the language and contribute meaningfully towards its continued existence.

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