

DEVELOPMENT OF REMNANT NIGERIAN LANGUAGES: THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

This paper examines the issue of developing remnant Nigerian languages and the role of the government as well as the speech community in orthography development. The motivation for this paper stems from the fact that many endangered Nigerian languages are unwritten and efforts have been made over time to develop writing system for these languages but yield little or no result. Beyond these concerted efforts, many indigenous languages are gradually going into extinction due to dearth of writing system, proper planning and poor implementation of policy on small size languages. However, this paper sets out to explicate strategies that could be adopted by the government and the community to forestall the endangerment of remnant Nigerian languages. This study, among other things, shows that unless the government, its Agencies (Ministry of Education, Committees and Societies) and the community put concerted efforts in establishing rapport with specialized institutes, such as NINLAN, SIL, SOAS, Living Tongues Institute, and departments of linguistics all over the country to develop writing system and devising metalanguages for these languages, majority of these languages will be endangered or lost in the near future. The study concludes by reiterating the pivotal role of the government in policy making and implementation, thus advised that the government should provide guidelines, funds and promote the

use of indigenous orthography in all levels of education and the media. Also, the study suggests relevant actions on the part of the community and government in order to minimize worst cases of language endangerment. Finally, this paper recommends that Readers Project be set up in every state of the federation as a way to develop, document and revitalize remnant Nigerian languages.

Keywords: Endangerment, extinction, government, remnant languages, orthography, speech community

1.0 Introduction

Over the years, the concern of linguists, researchers, language activists, community members and the government has been to develop language materials for unwritten languages of the world through orthography development. The quest to develop written codes is anchored on the fact that many languages of the world are unwritten and purely oral which makes the collection and archiving of natural and raw data impossible or futile (cf. Williamson, 1984). However, the need to develop readable materials for unwritten languages becomes imperative, not only to the accessible speakers of those languages, but for the purpose of education, grammar and/or collection of textual materials for posterity. It is argued that the lack of an orthography exposes a language to timely death or extinction (in the case of endangerment and lack of stored information) such that, the vitality of such a language depends on the production of textual and readable materials (e.g. Latin language). For a language to be vital, it must be codified to an acceptable level. To achieve this, collaborative effort must be ensured.

Oko (2018) reiterates that the development of orthography for unwritten languages is a collaborative effort of

both the linguists, language activists, the speech community as well as the government and other language regulating agencies. Daniels & Bright (1996) remark that “humankind is defined by language; but civilization is defined by writing.” This is to say, mass literacy is made possible through standardized orthography and possibly, a requirement for the survival of oral languages. Goody (2000) reports four benefits of an orthography to include; documentation of ideas, histories, policies and facts about a language. In Nigeria, as in other countries of the world, minority languages are severally endangered due to the presence of English as a national language against indigenous languages and most importantly, the lack of orthography. It is in the light of this that an attempt is made to examine the issue of orthography development for remnant Nigerian languages and the role of the government and the speech community herein along with linguistic decisions. Here, an attempt is made also to address this problem by advocating and succinctly examining the role of government in developing orthography for indigenous languages in line with Lewis & Simons (2010) and Oko’s (2018) proposition accordingly. According to Lewis & Simons, a language is not determined by the number of its speakers, but partly if it is written, standardized and used in education, mass media and enjoyed government support.

Another major concern of this paper is the dearth of writing system (orthography) in some Nigerian languages. As a matter of fact, remnant Nigerian languages have been receding in the spoken form with no written form, and risk extinction as transmission remained predominantly oral. The quest to develop orthography for these languages has been a daunting and protracted one, hence this paper is set out to suggest methods that could be adopted by the government and the speech

community to forestall endangerment of remnant Nigerian languages. In so doing, a number of strategies will be examined and how these strategies revitalize languages of the world. It is expected that these lessons be learnt to avert the ugly situation of some Nigerian languages currently facing extinction. Thus, this paper is intended to be a study of the role of government and the community through the development, preservation, implementation and archiving of linguistic information about a language (or languages) so that it can be accessible to the people.

2.0 The Concept Orthography

Orthography is seen as an ethical and methodological approach to describe, encode, develop and preserve linguistic information of a language through the process of designing and implementing writing system. According to Williamson (1984), orthography refers to the symbols and the rules that are followed in writing a language. Ken (2014) says, the term orthography was not in use until recently. He reports that grammatology was the first term that was used in 1952 by Gelb to mean the study of writing. Matthews (2007) defines grammatology as the study of the nature and history of writing system. Other terms such as graphemics (Augst, 1986) and graphology (Crystal, 1995) were used to compositely refer to the art of writing and the impact of writing on how people think about a language. Largely, orthography is the process of creating a new, standard system for writing a language (Ferguson, 1968; Sebba, 1998).

Following Emenanjo (2010), orthography has to do with a comprehensive writing system that is generally recognized and acceptable. He quotes Williamson (1984) as saying that a standard orthography enforces conformity in general writing practice in a given language. That is to say, efforts must be geared towards uniformity in developing orthography for

unwritten languages. The uniformity in developing orthography must, for instance, determine the standard alphabet and its letters, the diacritics to be used, spelling rules and other conventions, tone differentiation, word boundary and punctuation marks. Alas, the enterprise of orthography development is largely a practice of language management hence, should be seen as an important venture for linguists, the speech community and the government. The reason is that the tradition of literacy depends on the formal existence of orthography. Thus, the concern of linguists and field researchers is to develop readable materials for minority languages and making it as practical as possible.

The survival of many minority languages is a sensitive issue to linguists because unwritten languages face endangerment due to some factors such as social, political and economic inequalities caused by national policies. A response to this problem is the introduction of orthography as part of language management activity because the practice of writing a language helps in maintaining the function of a language which perhaps, changes the status of a language through codification. A language is functional if it is used by accessible speakers of a speech community and above all, codified. On the other hand, a language loses its functionality if speakers of the language choose to speak a dominant language for the sole purpose of recognition, status, economic, political prestige, etc. As each day passes, children are born, old speakers die and language choices are made which, however, puts the language at risk of endangerment or extinction. Thus, the attention of linguists is drawn to this overwhelming fact to develop, codify and preserve minority languages.

In Nigeria, as in other countries of the world, many minority languages are endangered due to social, political and economic reasons. To resolve this anomaly, different types of orthography have been studied by linguists as befitting for minority languages, for instance, non-standardized, incomplete orthography, systematic multidialectal, unilectal and multidialectal orthographies (Unseth, 2014). Linguists often resort to using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to develop orthography for local languages. The IPA which provides a conventional list of symbols (i.e. letters) is used to write local languages. To develop a good orthography for any language, one must follow the convention of symbols (usually the Latin alphabet) and rules in writing a language. The choice of symbols is hinged on five methods according to Williamson (1984:13). They are:

- i. The use of special symbols often taken from the phonetic alphabet such as the hooked **ɓ** and **ɗ** used in Hausa, the **ɛ̃** (inverted e) of Kanuri or the **ɔ̃** (inverted c) in Efik.
- ii. The use of a letter with diacritics, for instance, the sub dots used in Yoruba to represent **ẹ** and **ş**.
- iii. The use of digraph (usually two letters representing one sound e.g. **gh,sh,ny**).
- iv. The use of single Latin letter with a usual value e.g. the use of **p** in Yoruba for the voiceless labial velar stop /**kp**/.
- v. The use of spelling rule e.g. the spelling of **ebwo** (fish) as **ebo** in Igede.

The use of this method provides the impetus for developing orthography for unwritten Nigerian languages. Apart from these choices, a number of linguistic treatments are

required. For instance phonological information (vowels, consonants, syllable and tone) as well as morphological information (word boundary, processes of enriching the terminology of the language), spelling rules, syntactic diagnostics, numeral system, etc. In studying Nigerian languages, for instance, Kay Williamson reiterated that every Nigerian language has its own set of vowels. She identified and grouped vowels into groups out of which a language may belong (see Williamson, 1984). Along this classification, Karshima (2104) reports that Tiv falls under the six-vowel languages with six vowels germinate divided into short and long-**a, e, i, o, ô, u** and **aa, ee, oo, ôô, uu**. In the Jamaican orthography, it was revealed that IPA sound-symbol method is used to represent long vowels. It is germane to state that the Tiv vowel system shares in the spirit of Cassidy and LePage's (1967) Jamaican orthography. However, the use of double letter makes it easier to identify long sounds in languages of this group. This process is very productive in Tiv as shown below:

- | | | | | | |
|------|-----------|-----------------------|------------|------------|------------------|
| i. | ka | 'it is' | kaa | 'to tell' | |
| ii. | ta | 'to hit with a stone' | taa | 'to | help
someone' |
| iii. | ma | 'to drink' | maa | 'to build' | |

Intermittently, the choice to develop a standard orthography hinges around phonology from which complex sound sequences are taken into consideration out of which syllable and word boundary are explicated. Beyond this consideration, a standard orthography must reflect the exact information about the language, the linguistic choices as well as the sentiment of the speakers and owners of the language about their language, that is, orthography must be seen as the expression of people's identity. This is reflected in the Abureni

speech community in Bayelsa State, for instance, to preserve their language and project their identity by voluntarily providing ample information about their language to linguists for the purpose of documentation. This is to say that providing a linguistic framework is a step to writing a language and cannot be done in isolation of the speech community concerned. The speakers and owners of the language must be interlocking toward providing ample information about their language from which linguistic diagnosis are made.

To the linguist, the creation of orthography is a compromise between linguistic and sociolinguistic realities (Ken, 2014). In other words, both linguistic variables and sociolinguistic factors are always interlocking when developing orthographies for unwritten languages. Primary to these factors is the choice of symbols (letters) supported by IPA from which samples are drawn and incorporated into unwritten languages. This is not gainsaying the fact that secondary or sociolinguistic factors are invaluable in orthography decision, but of optimal importance is associating linguistic elements with graphic symbols for sociolinguistic decision. In this case, firm understanding is required by taking social realities such as acceptability (i.e. orthography must be accepted by the speech community) beyond the linguistic scope. The reason here is that for an orthography to be developed, the socio-cultural variability of the speech community must be taken serious and perhaps, the participation of the speech community makes orthography development a collaborative venture. Only this way, orthography development can be achieved. Other sociolinguistic factors are secondary to this assertion, such as the government factor, religious factor, socioeconomic value, and existing literature. It is, however, against these claims that this study intend to look at

the government as a major actor in the promotion of orthography development for minority languages within the ambiance of language management.

Furthermore, the relationship between a speech community's identity and language spoken is integral in the determination of orthography. This is, there is a stronger identification between speakers of the language, the language itself and the prestige that comes with the use of the language. This garner relationship kick starts the development of a language to meet the needs and choices of the speakers in communication, trade and commerce as well as in education in the wider speech community. In so doing, the community may form virile team of language enthusiasts who are believed to be custodians of the culture of the people to help in the documentation process. In other words, there is a high degree of community participation in the development of orthography to serve the needs and choices of language users in the community. However, the community's role in devising orthography is important, hence forms the basis of argument in this paper.

3.0. Strategies for Developing Remnant Nigerian Languages

Orthography development is largely a language management activity because it requires the intentional linguistic and conscious efforts of the speech community to develop, codify and preserve their language. Language preservation enterprise encompasses the actual language development, the planning and policy. To Chaudenson (1989), orthography development is a tripartite activity of planning, policy and management. When a language is codified, policies are made to preserve and encourage the use of the language. Chaudenson (1989) cited in Ken (2014) that language development beckons on policy, planning and management. In other words, when a

language is developed, policies are made through effective planning and management. Policies are made to give status, to allow proper language planning and to promote the continuous existence of a language. Spolsky (2009) describes language policy as the choices made by individual speakers on the basis of rule-governed patterns recognized by the speech community. These choices create language planning and management. The argument of this paper is based on the fact that proper planning of Nigerian languages is achievable in that it accords minority languages status through orthography development and provision of standardized writing system. This will serve as a useful leverage to endangered languages. In India, the planning and management of minority languages gave the impetus for the development of Darma, an unwritten and severely endangered language (Oko, 2018). This concerted effort in India can be sustained in Nigeria in order to develop practical orthography as a requisite for successful maintenance and revitalization of remnant Nigerian languages.

Agbedo (2000) quotes Weinstein (1980) as saying that language planning is a government authorised long-term sustained and conscious effort to alter a language function in the society for the purpose of solving communication problem. Communication, in this context, refers not only to the spoken form of a language, but the written form as well. This is gainsaying the fact that orthography development and management is vital in sustaining unwritten languages through the provision of policies or planning in the development and use of language in the society. This according to Agbedo (2000), involves the assessment of resources, complex decision making, the assignment of different functions to different varieties of language in the speech community and the allocation of

resources. Sadly, these prospects are less prioritized as many indigenous languages are endangered and efforts to revitalize and develop them are dwarfed by poor allocation of funds to language institutes (NINLAN, NERDC), individual researchers and language enthusiasts.

As earlier reported, over a handful minority languages are extinct or near extinction due to lack of orthography or a codified system of writing that is accepted and recognized. The lack of orthography often leads to extinction of the language, its culture and orature. To avert the ugly trend of endangerment, orthography should be developed and effective management be ensured in the preservation or revitalization of minority languages. Language management is one of the many duties of the government and the community. To Kloss (1969), language management must be seen as language planning either status or corpus planning along with acquisition planning (Cooper, 1989). This type of planning according to Kloss (1969), is necessary in the management of minority languages. In effect, the government may ensure the use of an orthography through acquisition planning in schools, and ensure implementation of policy through corpus planning which deals exclusively with orthography development. The speech community on the hand, must promote the development of its language and ensure that it is fit for teaching and learning in their areas of jurisdiction. This way, the government will ensure the provision of laws, guidelines and allocation of funds for the purpose of language development in the community concerned.

4.0 The Way Forward

One of the pertinent roles of the government is the formation of policy, implementation and management of local

languages. In Nigeria, there are over 400 languages which require proper planning. Sadly, minority languages are gradually going into extinction due to the presence of dominant languages. These languages lack orthographies, a unified writing system and proper management they deserve. It is on the occasion of these challenges that this paper is set to examine the role of the government in revitalizing remnant Nigerian languages through orthography development.

The government, which is the highest decision making body is responsible for the development of minority languages. The early stage of orthography development starts with the speech community and at the later stage, the linguists in the codification or graphisation and lastly the government in planning, managing, preserving and archiving language materials. Apart from the general role of government and the community, the following roles are attributive in the development of orthography for minority languages:

- i. Proper planning and policy making on minority languages: One of the duties of government is ensure that local languages are effectively planned and prioritized. This way, the survival of minority languages becomes resolute and thus, makes it possible for language development.
- ii. Radical development of minority languages through codification: When unwritten languages are identified, the government and the speech community must ensure that a process of reduction or codification is put in place. This effort is usually triggered by language activists who are interested in the development of their language. Notably among this concerted and sustained effort is the Kana

project occasioned by the Ogoni speech community in Khana Local Government of Rivers state. The project produced the orthography of Kana and texts, orature and terminology for the teaching and learning of Kana. It is advised that such concerted effort be made by the government and the speech community through funding and proper planning in developing local languages.

- iii. Establishment of language Readers Project. Readers' project is one of the most successful parameters in the development of orthography for minority languages. The government can initiate readers' project to cater for minority languages as one of its policies. For instance, the Rivers Readers' Project produced over 7 orthographies in 2011 and still producing orthographies for minority languages around the riverine area. The establishment of Readers Project revitalizes the numeral systems, produces texts (Abureni poetry), pictorial dictionaries and enriches the terminology of minority languages to fashion their metalanguage, promote and propagate their language at both local and national levels. This strategy has proven to be effective in some parts of the country; hence it becomes pivotal on the government to establish Readers Project in the 36 states of the federation.
- iv. Empowerment of language institution(s) through proper allocation of funds. Language institutes in Nigeria are major actors in the aspect of orthography development for minority languages. The government can partner with departments of

Linguistics, for instance, department of Languages and Linguistics in NSU, Keffi, University of Jos, University of Uyo, etc. to document the languages of the domiciled environment. The department of Languages and Linguistics, Nasarawa State University, Keffi through TETFUND embarked on the documentation of the linguistic profile of the languages of Nasarawa state over the years. The essence is to document the languages of Nasarawa state and create a database for minority languages in the state. It is expected that a similar effort be made by sister departments all over the country through the documentation of Nigerian languages. It is advised that the government ought to provide adequate funding to ease the campaign of developing orthographies for minority languages.

- v. Promotion of academic activities through funding of orthography conferences. Expatriate linguists, indigenous linguists and non-governmental agencies who are interested in the preservation of local languages through orthography development must garner the support of the government. The government especially, the Ministry of Education can partner with foreign organizations like Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), Living Tongues Institutes or School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London to develop orthographies for minority languages through training and retraining of linguists, languages activists and the speech community on the importance of orthography development. This can be seen in the instance of the

Olukumi language where linguists and language activists were trained, and partnership established (Living Tongues Institute) with adequate funding to create database for local languages, especially the Olukumi, a language of the Anioma people of Delta state. A bilingual dictionary of English-Olukumi was produced as a response to the dearth of materials in the language by Dr. B.E. Arokoyo. This concerted effort is plausible in preventing remnant Nigerian languages from extinction.

- vi. Promotion of televised programs in local languages. Government-owned media should resuscitate the learning of local languages. The BBC learning English is one of the televised programs in the United Kingdom which not only promotes English language, but simplify the learning of English through examination and re-examination of English orthography and its complexity. It is advised also that government-owned media like NTA should embark on the teaching and learning of minority languages through review of orthography or spelling rules.
- vii. Provision of grants to field researchers in the documentation of minority languages. Research grants can be provided to field researchers to develop and document orthography for under-defined Nigerian languages by the government, speakers and owner of these languages. This will, however, encourage the impetus for writing local languages. Chief Paul Eriki is known to be helpful in

- awarding grants to students and researchers in Isoko annually. This commendable effort is encouraged.
- viii. Promotion of indigenous orthography for the purpose of education by empowering small size Nigerian languages through writing and publishing of language materials for educational development at all levels of education. This way, it will encourage literacy in indigenous languages.
- ix. Sponsoring writing workshops for texts, and devising metalanguages for remnant Nigerian languages. Government can form virile language planning agencies (committees/societies) to organize workshop(s) to people knowledgeable in their language who in turn write texts in their language, design a standard writing system, produce relevant texts in all genres of writing and fashion their metalanguage. This has been the experiences of all developed languages in the world. In the instance of Kriol, an English-based creole spoken in New South Wales, Australia, the University College of Belize through the Ministry of Education organized the first orthography workshop where participants were trained in phonetics and the IPA to enable them write Kriol. This successful concerted effort can be incorporated in Nigeria, hence the government is advised to do so.
- x. Liaising with the appropriate educational bodies for effective development, teaching, learning and examining local languages at all levels of formal education-NINLAN, NERDC, WAEC, NECO. In a bid to develop indigenous Nigerian languages,

orthographies were produced by NERDC in 35 Nigerian languages (Manual I, II, III, IV, V, VI, VII) as reported by Olude (1997) for the sole purpose of teaching and learning. Languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Ibibio, Fulfulde, Mumuye, etc. are used all levels of education (Universities, Colleges of Education, WAEC and NECO). It is advised that a similar effort be made to other remnant Nigerian languages through collaboration with appropriate educational bodies. This way, minority languages will be developed and used at all levels of education.

- xi. Establishment of language enthusiasts committee. The community concerned through its local authority can form a virile team of language enthusiasts who are passionate about the preservation of their language and culture. The team may be drawn from a large pool of native speakers from diverse professions, cultural and social backgrounds. Notable among them are community elders and family heads who are thought to be custodians of their culture and history. This strategy has been the experience of various languages in Bayelsa, especially the Abureni speech community. In the same vein, the Mada speech community formed a committee to revive the Mada language and since then produced notes on some aspects of the language in 1992 which serves a great purpose today. This step should be taken to avert the ugly situation of many remnant Nigerian languages.

- xii. Ensure village awareness on the importance of documenting language(s) as well as the culture. A meeting between villages can be ensured to enable participants to discuss how a minority language can be lost in the presence of a dominant language in communication. This way the people will become aware of the need to preserve their language for intergenerational transmission and readily understand the benefits of orthography. This has been the practices in the Kuy village in Cambodia. This strategy has been effective given the small size of the speakers of the language, hence it is hoped that if the community takes up this strategy seriously, majority of remnant Nigerian languages will develop over time.

In sum, a collaborative effort is expected of the government, the speech community and language institutes such as National Institute of Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) and Nigerian Education, Research and Development Council (NERDC) in harnessing synergy for the development of minority languages through orthography development. This can be achieved if government is directly responsible on matters of language development, documentation, management, and preservation and archiving. In doing so, many unwritten languages will be accorded special status thereby preventing them from endangerment and extinction.

Also, the gross significance of orthography development is the preservation and documentation of ideas, histories, and thoughts in minority languages. It encourages mass literacy and save minority languages from extinction. The rich value of a language is preserved and transmitted to the next generation if a writing

system is developed, preserved and revitalized. Therefore, government must promote and ensure that minority languages are effectively planned, developed, preserved, and archived for posterity and documentation purposes.

5.0 Conclusion

The primary focus of this paper is to identify the role of the government and the community in preserving minority languages through orthography development. However, instances and strategies adopted by other major Nigerian languages have been drawn and adopted as methods for preventing minority languages from endangerment. These successful concerted efforts if adopted by the government and the speech community, majority of Nigerian languages will become stronger in constant use in teaching and learning, and will forestall endangerment of remnant Nigerian languages which is the major question this study aspired to answer.

From this study, it was shown that orthography development is a means of preventing language endangerment or extinction. As such, orthography design must be a collaborative effort of both the government and the community. The government being the highest decision making body is responsible for the development of minority languages through proper planning, policy formation and implementation, allocation of resources, provision of grants to field researchers and the assignment of diverse functions on minority languages and enforcer of policies. It is germane to state that it is imperative of the government to establish and initiate orthography conferences or workshops or establish Readers' Project in the 36 states of the Federation in order to cater for minority languages through effective codification and planning and forestall the prevalent remedy of language extinction. The

community on the other plays a pivotal role as in the documentation of a language. It is argued that if the community takes the challenge of codifying a language seriously through conscious awareness, orthography development workshop, formation of a language committee of lettered native speakers from diverse professions and engaging team of linguist to work with them, their language will be preserved, documented and revitalized. This method is proven to be successful in the orthography stories of Kuy in Cambodia, Darma in India, Abureni in Bayelsa State, Nigeria etc. this explains why this study argues in favour of the importance of the community in the development and revitalization of remnant Nigerian languages.

It is represented in this study that literacy in a language is not the only outcome of developing orthography, but a major benefit of orthography development. That is, when speakers of a language can write in their language, they are tactically empowered with the ability to create and revitalize their own language. This way, teaching, learning and publication of readable materials in the language becomes pivotal. This paper advocates for the rapid response of the government and the community in the development of unwritten languages for the purpose literacy across levels of education as demonstrated in the case of Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. It is reiterated in this work that if the strategies highlighted above are applied to many dying Nigerian languages, literacy will be promoted. Above all, there are grave effects such as language loss, language death, extinction etc. as speculated by Krauss (1992) that only about 10% of the world's existing languages will survive into the 22nd Century if there are no proper planning, developmental efforts by the government and the community. It is said that a loss or death of a language is loss of cultural wealth accumulated and loss of a

unifying force which welds the community together (cf. Ohiri-Aniche, 2104). Therefore, the attention of the government and the community is drawn to act upon the strategies or roles outline in this paper to forestall the ugly trend of language endangerment, loss or extinction

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