

# An Analysis of the Native Language Preservation Programme of Plateau State University

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## Abstract

The dichotomy between major/minority languages and its political and social implications, which is prevalent in multilingual societies, is a question of language policy. Nigeria is a multilingual country that has adopted the English language as its official language, and Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa as major languages. These languages are compulsory subjects in the school curriculum to be taught all over the country. This policy has enhanced the development of the major languages through research and training, while at the same time endangering the minority languages, thereby compromising their growth and capacity to incorporate contemporary phenomena. Accordingly, the Department of English Language, Plateau State University, initiated the Native Language Preservation Programme to serve as an intervention measure for the preservation and perpetuation of the minority languages in the state. This paper appraises the Language Preservation Programme by examining Nigeria's language policy and the objectives of the programme. The paper concludes that the programme is timely, because the minority languages are greatly endangered. The paper also highlights the constraints in the implementation of the programme and recommends the teaching of minority languages in schools.

## Résumé

La dichotomie entre les langues majoritaires et les langues minoritaires, et de ses implications politiques et sociales, qui est très répandue dans les sociétés multilingues, est une question de politique linguistique. Le Nigeria est un pays multilingue qui a adopté l'anglais comme langue officielle, et l'igbo, le yoruba et le hausa comme langues principales. Ces langues sont des matières obligatoires dans les programmes scolaires dans tout le pays. Cette politique a favorisé le développement des langues principales, la recherche et la formation, mais en même temps a mis en danger les langues minoritaires, compromettant ainsi leur croissance et leur capacité à intégrer les phénomènes contemporains. En conséquence, le Département d'anglais, à l'Université de Plateau State, a lancé le Programme autochtone de la préservation des langues minoritaires. Cet article évalue ce programme de préservation des langues en examinant la politique linguistique du Nigeria et les objectifs du programme. Nous concluons que le programme arrive à point nommé, car les langues minoritaires sont fortement menacées. Nous soulignons également les contraintes dans la mise en œuvre du programme et recommandons l'enseignement des langues minoritaires dans les écoles

## Introduction

Language endangerment is widely conceived as a state in which a language is likely to go out of use because its current speakers are extremely diminished in number, it is not being learnt by succeeding generations whether as a first or second language, and its usage does not permeate the walks of life of its speakers (Crystal, 2000). Language endangerment is the result of many factors, prominent among which are: physical loss of speakers through manmade or natural catastrophe, disintegration of communities, assimilation into the dominant population, intertribal marriages, need for better educational results, homogenizing effects of mainstream media, self-denigration, suppression, etc. (Hoffmann, 2009). Current developments, especially those through which "major" languages continue to dominate communication in international and local affairs, indicate that the rate of language endangerment is greater than the rate at which languages are being preserved and revitalized, which predicts a gloomy future for many languages.

The state of languages in the world is a manifestation of language planning and language policy. Language planning is the systematic organization of the language resources of a society for the purpose of development, while language policy is the position of a government on the assignment of roles to the language(s) in the society as contained in documents like the constitution, white papers, etc. (Femi & Wale, 1999). Language policy, if not properly articulated, especially in

multilingual societies, can result in language endangerment because major languages are given prominence to the detriment of minority languages, thereby creating an unhealthy dichotomy between the languages in the society. For example, Nigeria's language policy is enshrined in Section 55 of the Nigerian Constitution and the National Policy on Education (N.P.E.) which state respectively:

"The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made thereof".

"The business of the House of Assembly shall be conducted in English but the House may in addition to English conduct the business of the House in one of more languages in the state as the House by resolution approve" (Nigerian Constitution, 1999:29).

"In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process, and as a means of preserving the people's culture, the government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the major languages other than his own mother tongue. In this connection the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba." (N.P.E., 1977:2)

The N.P.E. went further to emphasize that the medium of expression shall be the mother tongue of the child.

Obviously this never took place except at experimental levels in some parts of the country.

The foregoing portends danger for native languages, especially minority languages in Nigeria, because it alienates them from the mainstream political life of the nation since the business of the National Assembly does not include their use. It also restricts the development of the vocabulary of Nigerian native languages to incorporate terminologies and concepts of legislative discourse and politics generally to the major languages. The official classification of some languages as major automatically projects them and relegates the other languages, which are by far more in number, to inferior placement in the psyche of the population. It is a common practice to hear speakers of the major languages referring to the minority languages in vague terms as if the languages are an indistinguishable lump; this sets the scene for the kind of self-denigration that contributes to language endangerment. In addition, the mainstream media focus more on the major languages, thereby enhancing their popularity while some of the minority languages are unknown to the extent that there is no authoritative document that contains the exact number of languages in Nigeria. Even when provision was made for the state houses of assembly to use native languages to conduct their businesses, the states of the minority languages are highly multilingual, so, adopting one of these languages is more divisive than cohesive.

The educational sector includes minority languages because the N.P.E. stipulates that early education should be in the child's mother tongue. This policy should have etched the language generations ahead, but unfortunately it is a moribund policy. Although there is much use of vernacular by pupils, education is basically conducted in English and minority native languages are not taught even as a subject in the curriculum. The major languages, however, are studied up to the degree level in some universities and in all federal colleges of education. This opens them to research, and their vocabulary is expanded to assimilate concepts outside the cultures of the major languages. Consequently, the Department of English Language, Plateau State, Nigeria, initiated the Native Language Preservation Programme. This paper discusses the objectives and operational guidelines of the programme.

### **The State of Plateau State Native Languages**

Plateau State is situated in central Nigeria, it is a highly multilingual state and its indigenes speak an average of two to three languages or more native language(s), English and Hausa, while French is taught in some schools. None of the native languages is a major language; this implies that they do not have the recognition and attention given to the major languages. Most of the languages are spoken well by elders, but the youth and children are greatly influenced by the universal culture which is packaged in Western languages, especially English, and transmitted through the media, with its emphasis on entertainment. Urbanization is also contributing to language

endangerment because the more cosmopolitan life becomes, the more people depend on more widely spoken languages which are not native to them for interaction. Connected to this is the fact that the rural dwellers that have custody of native languages sometimes prefer to speak to city dwellers that are on visit in the official language to show that they too are "sophisticated", and as a means for acquiring prestige. The media, particularly state owned radio and television, broadcast news in native languages. But the time allotted is quite minimal; this is in view of the large number of languages in the state. Also, the Amplitude Modulation (AM) radio band on which native languages are aired is not popular with the youth who prefer Frequency Modulation (FM) because of the entertainment content and the stylish mode of presentation on the FM band. Community based cultural events like Cultural Day, traditional and Christian festivals like Christmas and Easter, and community meetings are avenues for use of native languages. However, most of these festivals, especially the traditional ones, have lost their original essence and are mostly merely ritualistic. Culture being a major determinant of language use, the decline in these events means the native languages are no longer expressing the reality of the world view of the tribe. This is a great loss to language use. The shift from traditional technology to Western technology, whose products are wholly imported, stultifies the expansion of the vocabulary of the native languages. For example, the advent of the computer generated more words or it strengthened the positions of some words in the vocabulary of English language and necessitated the formulation of compound expressions like hard disc, etc. The native languages had a similar experience before the shift in technology. For example, mortar and pestle generated a compound word in the Taroh language of Plateau state; mortar is called *atum* while pestle is *awotum* which is a compound word. *Awo* is hand, but in relation to pestle it cannot exist alone unless it is joined with the word *atum*. The emphasis here is that products of technology automatically produce nouns because they must be named, and nouns need adjectives and adverbs to describe them and how they are used. Also, technology has added meaning to existing words. For instance, the word cloud does not just refer to drifting white or grey mass of water vapour in the sky; as far as cyber technology is concerned, it is now used in relation to storing information in the World Wide Web. These indicate that technological shift is a crucial factor of language endangerment.

The state of affairs shows that the symptoms of language endangerment are assiduously developing and very little is being done to remedy the situation mostly because of ignorance. The native language preservation programme was intended as a remedy.

### **Objectives of the Programme**

The Native Language Preservation Programme was conceived in 2011 with the following objectives:

## **Recording and Preservation of Plateau State Native Languages**

It is important to note that already the Bible and some Christian hymn books have been translated into some of the languages by the Bible Translation Trust. Also a few scholars like Mary Lar produced elementary reading books; a few writers have written stories and poems in some of the languages, etc. The documentation effort of the programme is carried out through fieldwork by which contact is made with native speakers in the locale of the languages, and text, audio and video documents are produced. The three prong production of documents is because text documents help in developing orthography while the audio version gives the exact pronunciations in the language. The audio version is important because certain words have the same spelling but mean different things depending on the stress pattern of the language. For instance, the *nlo* means the day after tomorrow, while *nlo'mo* means the third day in Taroh. Video documents capture the contexts of oral and festival performances, which include the mode of rendition, the mood and tone of a performance, costumes and paraphernalia. An important observation is the fact that much has been lost as a result of the late recording of the languages; therefore, scholars cannot have information on earlier forms of the use of the languages.

The programme seeks to acquire the accoutrements of daily life such as household goods, cutlery, pottery products, tools, regalia, etc. These items will be labeled and their uses recorded. It is hoped that these items will be kept in hard copy and electronic albums and, as the programme progresses, in a museum in the department. This is with the intent of storing materials that can be used to simulate the cultures of the people of Plateau state.

### **Production of Teaching Materials**

If a language is to be perpetuated then it must be taught, and in order to teach, teaching materials are needed. The programme is already working on numeracy, vocabulary, and folktales and songs. The work on numeracy indicates that some communities reached four digits before the colonial conquest. It also illustrates the level of precision that had been attained. After all, the information age economy thrives on the use of precision equipment which are digital in nature. This aspect of vocabulary reveals the richness of the languages, as words of various shades of meaning that seek to express the complex thoughts and feelings that pass through the human mind are being studied. The documentation and analysis of oral literary works serve as texts for teaching because

“Literature is generally known to be the application of language. It is also known to embody the totality of the world view of a people-social and political formations, culture, fears, anxieties, aspirations, etc. Studying language without its literature is known to

be a serious disservice” (National Commission for Colleges of Education 1990:17).

Other subjects to be worked upon for teaching include the ecology of the language communities, labeling, and the translation of elementary textbooks. Some staff of the department are also participating in attempts by groups outside the university to produce instructional video clips for children.

### **Coining Appropriate Expressions for Foreign Phenomena**

This objective falls within the realm of language purification. A major source of language endangerment is the feeling on the part of the speakers of a language that certain concepts or objects cannot be expressed or described in their language because such concepts or objects are foreign to their culture. This is an experience common to most native languages. For example, the three arms of government, or the contemporary mode of business such as the stock exchange and related jargon are foreign to most native languages. Expressing them is difficult and it encourages language shift. The programme seeks to find appropriate expressions by encouraging the coining of compound words that can capture the object of expression. This attempt requires the participation of individuals, groups like news translators/casters, and the language communities.

### **Public Education and Community Participation**

No language preservation effort can succeed without the cooperation of the community. As observed earlier, language endangerment in Plateau state is at the level of symptoms because the languages are still being spoken in their localities. It is therefore difficult for most native speakers to think that their languages may go extinct one day. One important objective of the programme is to promote greater public awareness of the threats to minority languages. This involves interaction with government agencies, community leaders, leaders of tribal youth groups, etc. Dramatic presentations in native languages will also be pursued through tribal students' associations, because they make the people proud that their language is good enough for drama. This is based on the fact artists that produce music in native languages are highly patronized by their communities. This objective is still at the planning level, but some of the native language based assignments given to students of the department have attracted some leaders of tribal students' groups to solicit departmental assistance with their cultural programmes.

### **Raising Resource Persons**

For a programme of this nature to succeed, the energy driving the vision must be continually rekindled. The department has involved all students in the programme by teaching the concept of language endangerment and assigning work on various aspects of native languages to students as part of assessment. It is hoped that these academic drills will give the students sufficient skills to undertake various aspects of language preservation. In

order to retain language preservation skills in the department, outstanding students will also be recommended for appointment on graduation.

### **Mode of Operation**

The language and cultural preservation programme is a staff/student interaction programme. The modules of the programme are integrated into the four levels (100 - 400 level) of the degree programme so that all students enrolled in the department must participate, and all students work on their own native languages. The goal is to reorient students to their languages and cultures, familiarize them with the plight of their languages, and integrate them in their communities as partners in progress. Each department staff member assumes supervisory roles and assists with all possible support. Students are encouraged to write their projects on aspects of their native languages, for example, as comparative studies with English language, in order to benefit from the already established modes of research on the English language, translational studies with reference to their languages, and the analysis of their tribal literary art.

All work done on the native languages will be reviewed and authenticated with the aid of community members and published as reference material for further study. To this end, the scope of the programme is open ended and includes the languages of non-indigent students.

### **Constraints and Recommendations**

Without prejudice to the work done by departmental staff on their native languages, one major constraint is the limited training and experience of staff to handle the noble but gargantuan task of language preservation because it is a highly technical undertaking that is an additional burden on staff that must perform their normal schedules as lecturers. Another constraint is language barrier; between staff and students for the purpose of review and assessment, and for some of the students who have very limited knowledge of their native languages as a result of their parents' intertribal marriages, growing up in cities where the use of the language is limited, etc. The sheer absence of background materials on the native languages is another pressing setback which emphasizes the pioneering nature of the programme and its attendant difficulties.

As remedy, it is recommended that the federal government review the major and minority language posture of its language policy in order to enhance the position of the hitherto minority languages. The Plateau state should enforce the use of native languages for instruction in public elementary schools. This will give a new orientation to the public view of native languages and entrench the use of the languages among children. The mainstream media should increase air time for programmes in native languages and package the programmes in exciting and innovative ways that will attract patronage.

### **Conclusion**

Language endangerment is a silent but progressive menace that is robbing the world of its great heritage and sources of knowledge. The only remedy is the difficult, slow, but necessary process of preservation and revitalization. Public education on the subject is critical in order to gain the support of communities whose languages are endangered.

### **Acknowledgements**

I greatly appreciate the dedication of the staff of the department, in particular, Mr. Gonsum Christopher and Mr. Tongshinung Goteng.

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