Bridging The Gap in West African
Native Language Learning: What Needs to Be Done

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Abstract
This paper examines learning and usage of indigenous languages in speech communities to preserve the languages from endangerment. Threats to West African indigenous multi-lingual nature necessitate the learning and more usage of the languages among larger native speakers. This is because every language encapsulates its realities and models of how the world works differently. Regrettably, there is no strong will on the part of the native speakers to engage their languages in active use, neither have they orthographies that facilitate learning to enable indigenous workforce fully contribute to their societies. Anchoring on the constructive theory of learning and consciousness model developed by Paolo Freire (1973), this paper emphasizes promotion of learning activities to keep the languages alive in their speech communities. By supplying therapeutic measures, this study is optimistic that the speech communities will be reinvigorated to preserve their language as a culture and linguistic identity as well as giving learners life-long personal and civic competences. Bridging the gap efforts include, change in pedagogy, communicative approaches of orthographies that are not distanciated from the people, learning motivation and a total overhaul of indigenous language policy and implementation among others.
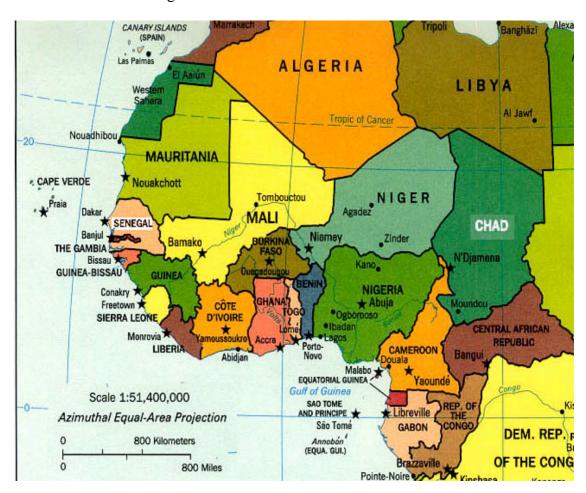
Introduction

All aspects of human society are tied to the existence of a particular language and every language is a unique expression of the world. Language as an essential part of our cultural diversity is viewed as the cord that holds any people together. A people's identity and history are expressed through language but when the language is endangered and disappears, it takes away important information about the rooted identity of the speech community, destroys sense of self worth, and leaves behind loss of original ethnic and cultural identity.

The West African sub region is one of the world's leading multi-lingual and multi-cultural countries. The region is richly blessed with multiple native languages and dialects that cuts across different ethnic groups. Languages as an essential part of cultural diversity is viewed as the cord that holds the region together in all ramifications. The people live in the symbolic environment of languages in the fifteen West African countries. These countries are up to the border of Cameroon, including Mauritania but excluding North African countries.

According to Blench (2003), the availability of information of West African native languages is extremely uneven. However the following West African countries have and speak the following number of languages;

Countries	Total Number of Languages
Niger	11
Togo	39
Sierra Leone	21
Mali	26
Senegal	35
Guinea-Bissau	21
Ghana	66
Liberia	32
Mauretania	5
Burkina Faso	68
Cote d' Ivoire	76
Gambia	19
Guinea	27
Benin	50
Nigeria	550
TOTAL	1050

These languages are classified into many possible and acceptable ways.

These languages can be classified into many possible and acceptable ways. One of these is in terms of their socio linguistic vitality and especially in terms of their readiness for literacy and numeracy. On this score, one can classify these languages into; developed, underdeveloped and minority languages. The developed languages are highest are highest on the sociolinguistic indices because they have;

1. Standard writing system, standardized for use in an entire cultural area.
2. A standard variety of the language used after the QUIRKIAN definition of Standard English.
3. A dynamic and sophisticated meta-language for oracy and literacy.
4. A decimal and digitalizable counting system.
5. A robust literacy tradition.

The developed native West African languages are also called major languages in some West African countries.

However these classifications of the developed languages are detrimental in a way to the growth of the developing and minority languages because of the breeds suspicions of domination. Every evolutionary biologist recognizes the great advantages held by species that maintain the greatest possible diversity. Disaster occur when only one strain of wheat or corn 'a monoculture' is planted everywhere with no variation. A developed language holds the same danger over the developing and minority languages.

On the other hand, underdeveloped and the minority languages themselves neither have orthographies nor standard form of writing for usage and preservation. Most of the native speakers equally have no will to engage their native language in active use nor are they willing to give impetus to their language in order to adopt them to the modern world. These atrophy evidences for understanding patterns in the structures and function of the human languages, human pre-history and the maintenance of the world's diverse ecosystem.

In addition mutual incomprehensibility of West African dialects in companions to natural Comprehensibility of languages of the individual Wes African State are clearly motivated by political and nationalistic consideration rather than linguistic ones. These are made worse by the fact that complete information of all West African native language is not available. The majority of them are yet to be recorded and analyze by linguists. They are not recognized officially in some of the West African states where are spoken. The information on them are often out of date.

This situation favors the use of English or French languages as official languages of West African states. These languages are valued as the greatest assets of unification left behind by the colonialists be that as it may these unifying languages on their own spread western values, they demonstrate pressure for assimilation into dominant cultures and express conscious policies of repression that are often directed at the native languages. This in turn threatens the cultural and cultural and linguistic diversity of the individual West African states.

This situation favors the use of English and French language as official languages of unification of West African countries. But these colonial languages spread Western values and demonstrate pressures for assimilation which threatens the cultural and linguistic diversity of the individual West African States.

Further complexities are added to the facts that the educational polces of the various West African States do not in any way alleviate the problem o f inconsistency between policy and practice. These are as a result of difficulties in the use of native languages in education because most teachers of the native languages are incompetent to guide learners in the native languages as well as English language or French language.

These issues call for attention in order to value our linguistic and cultural identities. These values on their own enable us to acquire a more fulfilling intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual life in our civic contribution to our societies. The endangerment of any languages endangers who we really are.

Background

An endangered language is one that is likely to become extinct in the near future. Many languages are falling out of use and are being replaced by others that are more widely used in the region or nation such as English in Nigeria and Ghana or French in Senegal and Benin Republic.

Endangered languages are spoken by minority communities in most of the West African sub region. The languages exist solely in spoken form and its traditions are

passed on through folktales and story-telling. Yet creating a written version is not as complicated as one might imagine. It requires dialogical approach as advocated by Freire (1973) in creating orthography that is not distantiated from the native speakers of the language. Such orthography should be the absolute representation of the way the languages are spoken and lived.

Language endangerment in West Africa generally is through language shift. This reflects the rise of a dominant culture usually military, but often nowadays commercial or religious. This is particularly the case with Islam; conversion to Islam was historically associated with the rise of highly militarized cultures and indeed the slave trade. It followed that Hausa, Arabic, Mandinka, Bamabara, Falfulde and Kanuri are associated with aggressive expansionism and the forcible conversion of enslaved people during the colonial era. The conveniences of these languages were such that they were frequently adopted as secondary languages of communication. Promoted by the French or English administration in West African Countries they became even more the vehicle of assimilatory forces pressing on minority languages.

Causes of the endangered native West African languages include;
  i.   National catastrophes, famine, diseases
  ii.   War and genocide
  iii. Over repression e.g. for national unity (including forcible resettlement
  iv.   Cultural / political economic dominance. These factors often overlap or occur together

Cultural, political and economic dominance can further be spread into;
  1. **Economy:** Rural poverty can lead to migration to an area where majority languages are and this can lead to language shift.
  2. Cultural dominance by the majority community. This can be done by the homogenizing effects of mainstream media (All in the form of dominant language on television, radio, and the print media. Education and literature through the majority languages endanger the developing and undeveloped native languages of the region.
  3. Political educational policies which ignores or exclude local languages, lacks recognition or political representation and results to the endangerment of the language.
  4. **Historical:** The rise of one ethnic group and their language variety leads to political and cultural dominance over other group languages.
  5. **Attitudinal:** When a minority language becomes associated with poverty, illiteracy and hardship, while the dominant languages are associated with progress lead to attraction of the dominant language and endangerment of the minority language.

Currently the number of endangered languages in West Africa sub-region according to Blench (2003) which does not include languages that are distinct includes;

COUNTRY	NAME	COMMENT
Nigeria	Bade	Still a large number of speakers but given way rapidly to Hausa. Probably also Duwai
	Bakpinka	
	Defaka	About 200 speakers. Those in direct contact with Nkoroo are losing their language
	Dugusa	Giving way to Hausa
	Dulbu	Giving way to Hausa
	Fyem	Giving way to Hausa
	Gera	Giving way to Hausa
	Gura	Giving way to Hausa
	Gurdunrj	Giving way to Hausa
	Mbaaru	
	Gyem	Giving way to Hausa
	Ilue	Giving way to Efitk/Oron
	Jilbe	A single village (Tourneux p.c.)
	Kiong	Giving way to Efik. Moribund
	Kona	
	Kudu-Camo	42 speakerS in early 1990s (Bross p.c.) Giving way to Hausa
	Luri	No information but <200 speakers
	Mvanip	About 100 speakers in 1999.
	Ndunda	<400 speakers in 1999
	Ngwaba	Two villages in 1991
	Odut	Only about 20 speakers in early 1980s
	Polci cluster	Giving way to Hausa
	Reshe	Still a vigorous speech community at present but giving way to Hausa
	Sambe	6 very elderly speakers in February 2001. The language is giving way to Ninzo
	Somyev	About 20 elderly speakers in 1995 (Connel, p.c.)
	Yangkam	About 2-300 Older speakers in 1993 (author)
Cote d'Ivoire	Ega	Est. 1000 speakers in 1999. The population is switching to Dida
	Eotile	200 speakers in 1999. The population is switching to Anyi
	Heri Kuo	Accordin to Kastenholz (1998:259) there are 1500 speakers from an ethnic population of 20,000. The Muslims are switching to Manding, the non-Muslim to Sienare Senufo. See also Kastenholz (1992).
Mali	Banka	5,085 ethnic population in 1995, but the population is switching to Bambara
	Nemadi	The Nemadi migrate between Mauretania and Mali. There were 200 in 1977. Their

Theoretical framework

This paper is undergirded by conscientization model developed by Paolo Freire (1973). Freire believes that the goal of Education can be achieve through free dialogue that prioritized on cultural identity, trust and commitment. The ideas of Paolo Freire are relevant to this paper because it emphasizes on encouraging the consciousness of all native West African languages for preservations through usage in the speech communities.

Although some scholars have argued that it will be a mirage for national development to be achieved in education without maintaining the major languages and the colonial languages as the medium of learning, it should also be remembered that languages acquire status overtime and develop in different ways. Latin and Greek were international languages before English and French languages. English and French developed through dynamic human relationship. Patriotic social engineering is said to be used in the development of Chinese, Hebrew and Swahili languages. Endangered West Africa native languages can be preserved through conscientization. Native speakers of West African languages can bridge the language gap by being conscientized to value and use their languages through a combination of strategies. Such strategies include appropriate learning and teaching empowering the languages through planning and implementation of educational policies base on legislations.

Bridging the gap in West African Native Language Learning

A lot of measures can be taken to bridge the gap in West African native language learning and usage for preservation. Some of such measures include the following;

i.   **Services of the Linguists**

Speech communities of endangered languages need to employ the services of linguists who always work with communities to preserve their languages. Such linguists offer both technical and practical help with language teaching, maintenance and revival. Their services also include creating dictionaries and grammar of the given language. The linguists can also help by using their experiences in teaching and studying wide variety of languages. They can use what they have learnt about other endangered languages and help the community preserve their own languages. The linguists can take advantage of the latest technology for recording and studying languages. Video tapes, audio tapes and written records of native languages use in both formal and informal settings can be done along with translators for preservation and use of the language.

ii.   **Language Learning**

Learning a language is an amazing feet which always attracts the attention of linguistics, language educators and psychologists for ages. Learning a language entails the process of optimizing one's exposure to a particular language in a formal context via the guidance of a teacher or instructional resources in accordance to the given curriculum. Such learning process follows appropriate learning objectives, useful learning experiences based on culture of the language to maximize their impact through good organization and carrying out evaluation to assess the objective of the

learning process. The curriculum which is an essential element in the development of the learner should be subject to continuous evaluation (Tyler; 1949).

However, the formal setting may not be enough for all learners to grasp a language to the utmost. As such the families in the speech communities have some roles to play in order to complement what the school has to offer. It would be of interest to underscore the fact that a family's attitude towards the language in questions could enhance or debilitate a learner's performance in a language learning process. Ndu (1990) explains that parents and close relations act as identification models. Children emulate and adapt beliefs and even biases of families. Thus, if a family's attitude towards a language is negative, it would affect the child negatively when it comes to learning the language in questions. In addition, Moore (1998) emphasizes that "success in language education is closely related to parents' interest and support. Where a parent's linguistic status reveal's that such parents cannot use a language but the parent has positive interest in the language in question, the parents can support the child to learn the language. The linguistics status of a family can be established by the means of ascertaining the number of languages and dialects mastered and by extension used in that family.

It equally follows that the learner can learn a given language through imitation and practice (Lightbrown and Spada 1997). Language learners can learn languages by imitating the sounds and patterns which they hear around them and receive positive reinforcement. According to this view, the quality and quantity of the language which the learner hears as well as the consistency of the reinforcement offered by others in the environment can have effects on the learner's success in the learning process. However, it is useful to examine the actual language data from the curriculum to see how well this view accounts for the development of more complex aspects of the language. Chomsky (1959) argues that the behaviorists fail to recognize the logical problem of structure from the samples of the language.

The language, the learner is to learn usually based on imitation and practice in the speech community is usually full of confusing information. It does not provide all the language information which the learner needs and neither is the learner adequately corrected in the language usage on the street. This requires both the effort of the formal educational provision of the language and the speech community for the appropriate learning of the language.

Individuals are different in their approaches to learning. For example some people learn orally, others auditory, still others learn experientially. Howard Gardner in his influential theory of multiple intelligence (M.I), argues that human beings posses different types of intelligence that enable them to solve problem differently. Gardner (1999) posits in his reformulated M I. theory that there are at least nine types of human intelligence which undergird how people make meaning of their learning experiences.

Language learning works most effectively when different approaches are optimally used to guide the learners.

iii.   **The teaching Process**

Language teaching is an integral part of a community's total educational provision. The community supplies the general social condition of tolerance, encouragement, facilitation, motivation in order to give the learners life-long personal and civic competences to contribute to the society. The educational provisions also consist of the consensus that a particular language should be learnt within the community. The administration and organization of the public will allocate funds, train teachers, provide the infrastructure and so forth for effective teaching and learning.

iv.   The language teacher on the other hand must possess the appropriate qualities, and techniques for promoting effective learning base on given syllabus. A teaching technique that appreciates communicative approaches of orthographies base on dialogues as advocated by Freire (1973) is important for effective teaching of the language. This in a way will enable the learners to construct their usage of the language taking into cognizance the cultural aspect of the speech community as well as English or French languages.

v.   **Language Planning**

Emenanjo (2007) views language planning as strategies to empower languages. Specifically language planning is a veritable tool for language preservation from endangerment. They include;

a.   **Identity Planning**
Identity planning involves one-on-one correspondence between culture and language. It emphasizes strong positive language attitudes such as awareness, language loyalty, language spread and maintenance as against the debilitating and destabilizing forces of language shift, language endangerment, language death and language change. Identity planning can be used to restore endangered languages.

b.   **Status Planning**
Status planning examines the degree of mutual intelligibility between the different dialects or varieties of the languages in the West African sub region. Identity in this regard point in the direction of the types of relationship that exists between the Mandarin and Cantonese Chinese which even though are not mutually intelligible constitute one language – Chinese.

West Africans must see the differences between the various forms of the native languages as differences between dialects. In terms of status planning, West African languages are:
1.   Indigenous languages
2.   Mother tongue
3.   A language of the immediate community because there are many different dialects but all speakers can understand each other without much difficulty. Such status planning should promote language unity (glossotomy) over language splitting (glossogamy) and all governments should come out with national language policy and unequivocal policy statement on preservation from endangerment.

c.   Corpus Planning

Corpus planning is essentially a linguistic exercise whose thrust is development of a language for literacy and numeracy, to arrive at the optimum level of socio-linguistic readiness a language has to pass processes of treatment of Graphization, Standardization, Codification and Modernization.

i.   Graphization
This process of empowering a language from endangerment involves the design of a script or writing system (orthography) which is acceptable to the native speakers of the language. Although there is no perfect orthography it, should be embraced by all who identify with their language relationship. The standard of any language is the written form that sustains robust popular and universal acceptable literacy, tradition. To empower a language for preservation, involves the selection, promoting and propagation of a variety of a language that becomes the standard written form. This is difficult but possible.

ii.   Standardization
West African native language can be preserved from endangerment if the variety of the language is selected, promoted and propagated to become the standard written form. The written form on its own should gradually influence the spoken form.

iii.   Codification
Languages can be preserved from endangerment if the facts of the language are systematically organized and documented in spelling books, grammar books, dictionaries i.e. encyclopedia books on; enumeration, meta language and style manual to mention but a few. These important documents can serve as standard reference text for what should be said, written, explained, and how and why for the language.

iv.   Language Modernization
Language modernization involves the creation and popularization of new terms as a result of extension to new domains thrown up by cultural contacts, science and technology, the new knowledge industry and globalization. Modernization strategy enables the creation of new works of various origins which enhances intra-translatability between West African native languages and English or French Languages.

Acquisition Planning

Acquisition planning for language preservation is all about language in-education and language education. This can be organized around; material development and capacity building in terms of teaching and teachers.

Material development involves infrastructure and instructional material that creates an enabling environment for learning. Such environment helps teaching and learning that are based on the curriculum which equally takes unto cognizance the cultural realities o the languages learners.

Capacity building for language preservation also has to do with employing teachers with the right professional competences. This deals with recruitment and training for adequate personnel that will carry out the learning and usage of the language within the community as stated in the curriculum. Periodical in-service training also helps to keep training of teachers active in the teaching activities.

Recommendations

The following have been recommended as part of effort in strengthening West African native languages for preservation.
-Intellectual elites of minority native West African languages should promote their mother tongue.
-They should initiate projects that can give new impetus to dying languages and adopt them to the modern world.
-Raising the economic status of the people themselves can in turn elevate the languages for preservation.
-The prestige of the languages should be elevated using the media, community radios stations that broadcast various native languages should be used to provide news, educational programming, health information and traditional music to reinforce the people's pride for language preservation.
-Various governments of West African states should give recognition to the multiple native languages in their locality.

Conclusion

The main thrust of this paper is dire need for learning and usage of West African native languages in their speech communities alongside English language or French language. While the paper tasks the stakeholders in individual speech communities to cultivate strong will to engage their language in active use, it also requires linguistics to create orthographies that adequately represent what the people speak to facilitate learning of the language.

Language teachers on their part need to use pedagogic and communicative approaches that take into cognizance the culture of the individual speech communities. The learners on the other hand can construct their learning experiences of the language in a way that enhance the value of the language as a cultural and linguistic identity.

To achieve revitalization of endangered language, appropriate planning are required. The use of the mass media is equally required for popularization of cultural festivities among West African States. Interesting projects and activities in speech communities, a total overhaul of the various native language policies and implementations among others are therapeutic measures on what need to be done for language preservation from endangerments

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