

## Different Strokes for Different Language Groups: A Panacea for Achieving Linguistic Prosperity in Africa

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### Abstract

*Convincing evidence abounds to show that the proficiency of most Africans in their indigenous languages leaves much to be desired. This paper is a contribution to the long-standing debate on this precarious language situation in Africa, especially the setting of high(er) solidarity value for foreign languages at the detriment of indigenous languages in the continent. This paper holds the view that attempting to address the problems of language users in Africa, using a monolithic approach is not the best solution. It therefore recognizes three language groups in Africa with close reference to the linguistic situation in Nigeria: the colonized, the hybrid and the new breed. It then argues that the first group only needs reorientation, as they can help themselves out of the mess; the second group needs to be scrupulously worked upon to have a change of attitude, while the third group is pliable and can be 'bred'.*

**Keywords:** Colonized group, Hybrid group, New breed, Linguistic prosperity.

### Introduction

African linguistic scholarship in the last few decades has been addressing the linguistic problem, facing the continent, that is, the management of her linguistic situation, especially the marginalization of indigenous languages and the endorsement of foreign ones. Language scholars in the continent have succeeded in drawing attention of the world to this ugly trend and in expressing its enormity using several 'offensive' description of it e.g., the state of callibanism (Osundare, 1982), linguistic cultural baggage (Samarin, 1984), suppressive interference (Ekundayo, 1987), functional seclusion of indigenous languages (Anchimbe, 2006), alienation of indigenous languages (Adegoju, 2002, p.130), etc. There are Plethora of local and international conferences e.g. ACAL (Annual Conference on African Linguistics), WOLCA (World Congress of African Linguistics held every three years), the Harare Inter-governmental Conference on Language Policies in Africa (1997) etc, where it was stressed that the promotion of indigenous languages in Africa is indispensable for achieving sustainable development in the continent. Several measures have been taken at national, regional and continental levels to improve respect for, and protection of the indigenous African languages. For instance, Africans have formulated and implemented several Mother-tongue Programmes (See Benson's (2005) "The importance of mother tongue-based Schooling for educational quality"); Africans have sought a common language; Africans have reformulated her international relation theory etc. In spite of all these, the fact even now is that foreign languages still enjoy privileged status to the detriment of the African languages.

The facts expressed above raise for this paper the question: what is/are wrong with the earlier strategies? A similar question as this has been raised by Adegoju (2008), who describes the earlier attempts as a mere "ritualistic academic exercise (p.16), for these efforts have "failed to transform the status of our indigenous languages". Adegoju's paper is certainly a call unto African language scholars to the need to revisit the problem using alternative strategies. The present paper attempts to answer that call by further characterizing or describing the past efforts at solving the problem and offering a new "rescue operation" (Jibril, 2007, p.281) for the African languages.

## Shaping the dry fish, climbing the tree from the leaf part

There is a saying among the Yoruba in South-western Nigeria that it is when the fish is fresh that it can be bent to shape; when it is dry, it crumbles. The similitude of this is an attempt at climbing a tree from its leaf part. The metaphors above describe my assessment of, or assumption about the previous attempts at solving African linguistic problem and this paper will proceed on that basis. I will start off by reacting to the view of Adegboju (2002) that the intellectual efforts of African scholars have not imparted considerably on the larger society. I consider this view to be too sharp considering the perceived people's predilection for indigenous languages in certain areas (for instance in Nigeria) in recent times. I believe that one of the outcomes of the intellectual efforts is the development in advertising industry in my country, where both in print and electronic media, advertising is executed in indigenous languages of the people. Similarly, at least, two of the Nigerian naira notes (ten and twenty naira) now have the features of three major indigenous languages in the country. Also, some radio stations in Nigeria, in addition to increase the number of their transmission programmes in indigenous languages, now run football commentaries, using these languages. Young music artistes in the continent, even the hip hop ones, now attach values to their indigenous languages and employ them in their music more than before.

It is a thing of joy that African languages, more than before, are enjoying global recognition: There are now online dictionary of African languages, for instance, Kiswahili-English online dictionary developed through Kamusi Project, Edeyede, the Yoruba living dictionary, Hausa online dictionary, and Kasa-horow online dictionary written in standard Akan language. According to Adewole (2007, p.335), the production of these dictionaries has brought about brain-gain since the dictionaries are all produced abroad. He affirms that the Kiswahili and Akan online dictionaries are produced by the Yale University while the Georgian southern university and the Universitat Wien in Australia produced the Yoruba and Hausa online dictionary respectively. Adewole hints further that there are two websites on African languages which have started offering e-mail services in African languages. Also, in a bid to promote Yoruba language, for instance, most Nigerian universities that offer it as a course now demonstrate some porosity in their admission requirements by allowing (against the normal process) candidates that do not have elementary and secondary level background in the subject to offer Yoruba as a course of study. Though this arrangement will, in the first instance, succeed in bringing together disinterested students or students who have failed or have lost their hope in other 'lucrative' courses, the universities, being as magnanimous, will not let these students pass through the Yoruba course, without tapping from them the fruits of their generosity. This unusual magnanimity is one of the various attempts at the reenactment of the African linguistic identity in Nigeria. The employment situation in the country today where people who study Yoruba and other 'less-prestigious' courses now work in banks and other attractive work places encourages the survival and workability of this strategy. This situation could also provide some sort of 'cold comfort' for students in this category.

All the developments highlighted above indicate that the intellectual efforts of African language scholars are already bearing fruits. It needs be said however that, the success achieved so far is not commensurate with the efforts put into salvaging African languages from the yoke of linguistic imperialism. That this debate still continues today indicates that we are yet to tackle the problem. In my country, like in other African countries, most people, even the language elite group, still worship foreign tongues. Of recent, I read with utter disappointment, a paper written by one professor of language in one of the leading universities in my country, lamenting that there were errors in his colleagues' inaugural lectures! I quote his words:

*In this age of Ubiquitous ICT, just one badly written Inaugural lecture that somehow finds its way into the*

Website, to be downloaded and read by thousand people all over the world, could create the impression that it is

*the best writing the Nigerian professors are capable of producing. After all, ex pede Herculem (from the part you know the whole): If one Nigerian professor, then, perhaps, all Nigerian Professors!*

The sort of attitude expressed in the above 'song of lamentation' makes me feel bad: the 'singer' has expressed, though implicitly, his 'devotedness' to the foreign tongues and, by implication, reflects his apathy towards their continued 'establishment'. I quite agree that if a language must be used at all, it must be used competently. However, I do not believe that an academic (not honorary) professor can make such magnanimous misuse of English that warrant this kind of lamentation. I am now beginning

to think that there is nothing we can do to redeem some people, particularly the alienated elites, from their linguistic shambles. I reason also that there is no way a scar can heal as to be like a sound flesh. I submit that African linguistic problem is one that can neither be solved through these alienated elites nor through their students who are mere imitators of the wrong linguistic ideal. I therefore propose the splitting of Africans into three linguistic groups and designing of different strategies for solving their peculiar linguistic problem. By my estimation, the three groups include the colonized or the alienated elite, the hybrid and the new breed. In what follows shortly in this paper, I will explain my taxonomy of linguistic groups in the continent and then will suggest that we should pester less on the present linguistic situation in the continent but rather be more concerned with the future, which the new breed represents.

## Taxonomy of the linguistic groups in Africa

The linguistic problem in Africa is one problem which concerns different groups differently. The much-talked- about linguistic imperialism in this continent affects directly just a small percent of the entire population that is privileged to go to school. African continent has been found to have a literacy rate of less than 60 percent (see: <http://www.sil.org/literacy/litfacts.htm>). As a result of this, many indigenous African languages that would have been affected by western education still enjoy unalloyed patronage particularly among rural dwellers in this continent. It seems appropriate therefore to consider the linguistic problem in Africa as much more the problem of literacy. Up till this moment, there are still so many people in this continent who can speak and understand only their indigenous languages. This group is large but insignificant in the sense of their low involvement in matters of state. In the real sense of it, it can be that many African languages are yet to be endangered, generally because it has few surviving speakers is correct. I do not think that many African languages satisfy all the conditions of endangerment identified in UNESCO's Atlas on endangered languages: a language is endangered when its speakers cease to use it, use it in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains, and cease to pass it on from one generation to the next. It can be said however that all African languages are, using the word of Bamgbose (2008), "deprived. But with likely future increase in literacy rate, these languages may be endangered in the nearest future, and if they are not rescued on time, many of them may be annihilated. I do not wish or suggest that we should discontinue raising alarm on the state of the indigenous languages in this continent but do wish to substantiate that some, if not all, of our languages are still intact for they still enjoy wider 'usership', and that they just need to be raised from the spellbinding state to which they are subjected as a result of education and modernisation. In my taxonomy below, I recognise three linguistic groups in Africa: the colonized, the hybrid and the new breed and suggest how each should be tackled in the interest of achieving linguistic prosperity for the continent.

### The colonised group

The colonized group describes the actual "vestiges" (Maathi, 1995) of colonial imperialism. It is the group in which we find people who lived around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1960s which is the period when most African countries were colonized. The group is so named considering the nature and type of education it received, the languages in which members of this group were taught and the great value that was placed on proficiency in English and French by the then colonial rule. The picture is presented by Obanya (1998) in the following assertions:

*That each colonial power imposed its own language on the African countries it colonised is a well known fact. It is also well known that imperial educational and colonial policies often determined*

- a) the level of entrenchment of the colonial language, and
- b) the extent to which indigenous languages were tolerated and consciously promoted in the educational system

In matters relating to languages in education in Africa during the colonial era, Obanya observed that:

- *Countries colonised by the French taught the French language at all levels, and from the first day in school;*
- *Countries colonised by the Spanish and the Portuguese had a practice very similar to that of the French;*

- *Countries colonised by the British taught English at all levels, but always made sure that the first years of formal education were conducted in the first language of learners or in the language of their immediate environment;*
- *Countries colonised by the Germans, while seriously promoting the German language, also gave prominence to indigenous languages in the early years of schooling.*

The language situation described above is a regrettable one, going by the observation by Echu (2004) that some indigenous languages, citing the example of Bamun and Fulfulde in Cameroun, that had already gained a considerable degree of prestige during the pre-colonial period, lost this prestige during imperial rule while colonial languages enjoyed "huge imperial prestige" (Wangari, 1995). It can be implicated that all things at the side of the people who lived at that time encouraged the use of colonial languages. Through several restrictionist policies, the colonial government mandated the Africans in this group to learn their languages and consequently, inculcate "imperial value system" (Walter, 2007). At that time, ability to speak and write in foreign languages determined people's relevance and opportunities. In the words of Maathai (1995), entry into the job market, or upward social mobility was virtually impossible without the ability to read and write in the foreign languages.

Given this circumstance, it should be regarded as a thing of great joy that Africans in this group are still the ones coming up, like the prodigal son, to champion the struggle to redeem the image of African languages: The great Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o once decided to stop writing in English but in Kikuyu. Also, wherever the Nigerian, Akinwumi Ishola, the first professor of Yoruba language, goes to, his refrain has always been "we need to win the people back to their culture" and he demonstrates his good knowledge of this culture through several Yoruba rooted expressions and folktales that punctuate his discourses. I consider these two scholars as the two extreme models of African linguistic struggle - the former standing for the rebellious and the latter, for the activist group.

Our efforts in the last few years have concerned with: turning people back to the indigenous languages and winning people back to them. We can achieve these only with the people who already have 'roots' in these languages. What I have just said indicates that African linguistic struggles of the past years have focused only one group, whereas, the group that has been so focused is not a problem group though they lay the foundation of that problem. For me, this is a major reason why the efforts of these years have met only a partial success.

### **The hybrid group**

The real problem group is the hybrid group, the linguistic 'concoction'. Members of this group are not easily pliable. They are mere imitators of the wrong linguistic ideal of the latter group, the alienated elite (Ishola, 2007, p. 9). They are the present generation of parents, teachers, political office holders, police, health workers etc who are the active agents of child socialization. The general attitude of the members of this group to their indigenous languages is simply that of disdain. The most unfortunate thing about them is that they do not have 'roots' in these languages, neither do they have a good knowledge of the foreign languages. Though they lack the competence in the foreign languages, they desire to be foreign at all costs. They are the actual committers of the crime described by Ishola (2007) as the: "relegation of African languages to mere ethnological footnotes and communication superstition" They are the real dry fishes I talked about earlier. They are the most unyielding linguistic human beings. They occupy a very sensitive position in the social structure and exert significant control on it.

It is the elite group which communicates with itself, minimizes local languages and culture and feels proud speaking foreign languages and mimicking foreign cultures and values (Wangari, 1995). It is the group that controls the social, economic and political activities of the nation.

My view about how to deal with this group is to 'damage the psychological damage' in them by giving them regular linguistic re-orientations. The various categories of the language users in this group, including the academics, politicians and media workers should be invited, on regular basis, to conferences or seminars on language matters as was the case of the Intergovernmental Conference on Language Policies in Africa, held in Harare, Zimbabwe between 17 and 21 of March 1997. By this, we will be accomplishing what Jibril (2007, p. 281) challenged African linguists to do in order to rescue the indigenous languages in the continent: "a combination of research, advocacy and activism". My assumption is that to re-shape an attitude, particularly linguistic attitude, after it has been formed, is not an easy task. These rescue operations should therefore go simultaneously with the ones I will soon



suggest for getting the younger generation develop the right linguistic habit so that this most problematic group will be tackled from two powerful ends of the society.

### **The new breed**

This is the group in which the hope of African languages lies. Members of this group, pre primary, primary and junior college students, are the referents of the metaphor (I drew earlier) of the fresh fishes that can be bent to shape. Children, at these levels of education are almost, if not completely in their 'clean' state. It is at these levels that the foundation of a desirable linguistic habit can be laid. The following view of Ishola (2007, p.13) should be popularized in all African nations:

*We must fight for the revitalization of local languages by reintegrating them into the educational system beginning from the preprimary level. We must insist on the active teaching of history and culture in our schools. If we catch them young they will grow to be culture conscious.*

A very potent weapon I think can be used in achieving the linguistic cum cultural goal described above is Children's literature written in indigenous languages. Many benefits accrue to children from reading literature. Some of these include aesthetic appreciation, literacy education, cognitive development, social and moral values and understanding and appreciation of their culture (Violet, 1990). In order to preserve the children's linguistic identity, they should be exposed to the beauty of their indigenous languages at their critical age of language acquisition (Genessee, 1988, pp.97-100). This critical period is the period before puberty, which coincides with the pre- primary, primary and early secondary school ages in most African nations. The children should not be deprived (as is the common practice now) the right of USING their indigenous languages; rather, they should be given incentives to do so. At this critical period, they should be trained to be competent in the syntax, lexis and special usages of these languages. Certainly, at their advance ages, they will appreciate the values of these languages and use them, without being compelled to do so, in conducting every aspects of their social life. Competence in the indigenous language will also enhance the learning of the foreign language. As reported by Odama Ouane and Christine Glanz of the UNESCO Institute of Education in 2005, learners who first learn reading and writing in their mother tongue have a better command of a foreign language in its written and oral mode.

African elites are faced, in the present circumstance, with the responsibility of making literature available in mother tongues of the children, both in hard copies and electronic form. Literature that had been written in English language should be translated into the indigenous languages to make them accessible not only to children but also to the 'half literate' Africans, who, at least, are literate in their mother tongues. New literature addressing modern interests in technology, computer and education should be written and made available, if not free, at affordable cost to all schools.

### **Managing the new breed: The big task**

The big question which the strategies mapped out above poses to us is: how to get these ideas into the educational scheme of the governments of African nations. These governments have, over the years, made mess of the intellectual efforts of the academics by failing to make use of our noble suggestions in solving African linguistic problems. Unfortunately, these governments know how to lobby and 'use our brain' for addressing political and economic crises. We certainly need to grapple with the problem of reorienting our educational policy makers, who, according to Adegbija (1994), "have largely rubber-stamped or toed the line of language and educational policies bequeathed to them by the colonial masters". He states further that our Educational systems, which have widened and extended beyond what they were in colonial days, have been further used to entrench and perpetuate the feeling of the inviolable worth of colonial languages.

One way of accomplishing this task, I think, is to adopt a holistic approach involving the launching of several 'linguistic pressure groups' on these governments and the people in general. When the pressure is no longer coming only from academic scholars, certainly their rock of resistance will be blast off. In this regards, I suggest the inauguration of the associations of local music artistes, illiterate oral literature artistes, and African literary writers. I suggest this because I am convinced that using the school system only cannot be enough in developing the right linguistic habit that we desire. Having said this, we can now consider how these associations can work to do the magic. These associations should be saddled with the following responsibilities, as suggested by Ishola (2007):

1. Preaching the need for all to start speaking our local languages at home and each time occasion demands it;
2. Scientifying African indigenous languages to make them cope with the modern day scientific cum technological development; and
3. Creating metalanguage for different profession in the indigenous languages.

In addition, these groups should be saddled with the responsibility of organizing, in all African countries, indigenous artists' festival like the one of April 16, 2008 in Nouakchott, Mauritania (See Sociolingo's Africa). This will not only preserve African values but also serve in getting young people interested in these values.

Music can be used in targeting this group as it is one of the things its members love most. Music is certainly a potent means of language preservation: It is in music that people exhibit the wealth of their language- the proverbs, idioms and wise sayings. In making music perform this legitimate function, association of indigenous music makers should be formed to let other music makers realize the need to minimize the extent to which they infuse their music with foreign languages. In line with this view, Nokwe (2002) hints that "the contemporary music makers are the modern day version of our ancestors and they are vehicles that represent indigenous sounds and share them with the world".

## Conclusion

This paper has suggested that efforts at restoring African linguistic inheritance should essentially be directed at the new breed Africans, the school children, who are the future of this nation, using the school, the home and the larger society in developing the right linguistic habit in them. At the primary and pre-primary school levels, indigenous children's literature such as nursery rhymes and novella should complement, if not replace the English medium ones. At the secondary school level, indigenous literature should be included in the school curriculum and should be given the status of required subject for entrance/ admission to the tertiary institutions in the continent. Similarly, indigenous oral literature should be incorporated into the General studies' syllabus of the nation's tertiary institutions.

Also, the paper has indicated that the task of restoring African linguistic inheritance is not the sole responsibility of the elite group but everybody's undertaking. There is a dire need for collaboration among several stakeholders in the promotion of our cultural inheritance. The community at large is a stakeholder in this business. It therefore charged parents (some of who, in the words of Ishola (2007) cannot perform their normal role of child's socialization, because they lack the competence to do so) to allow their children develop skills in the indigenous languages. It also spelt the need for the mobilization of indigenous music makers, folklorists, poets, drummers and dancers to work with the elites in this arduous task of indigenous language management.

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