DOCUMENTATION OF ENDANGERED LANGUAGE VIA ICT: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE "OWERRI /IGBO" LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Documentation of a language portrays the beauty and richness of that language. It safeguards our values and experiences, our stories and artifacts and encourages continuity. The world is dynamic, it is going global; the introduction of the information communication Technology (ICT) into the Nigerian System is a new trend that is eating deep into the fabrics of our nation. With this trend there is the possibility of many Nigerian indigenous languages going into extinction faster than expected. This paper thus, becomes a priority, to change the continued indigenous language shift and to encourage linguistic preservation through saving and documenting the "Owerri" Igbo language. The study therefore, X-rays the potential benefits of using information communication in the promotion and documentation of endangered language, and proffers some suggestions on its actualization.

Key Words: Documentation, language endangerment, ICT

Introduction

Information Communication Technology literacy encapsulates global awareness, technology literacy and basic literacy. These models are needed to achieve effective documentation and preservation of our cultural dividend. The Nigerian society is changing, as well as the skills needed to harness the complexities of life. The 21st Century Nigerian needs to excel in all spheres of life. To achieve this, the individual needs to attain proficiency of some sort in one or more sub-segments of digital technology, and the underlying culture, as well as gain the ability to appreciate, use, create, interpret, evaluate, communicate and store information across a wide range of digital media.

This is necessary because the border line between native language knowledge in Nigeria is very tiny. The only meeting point between culture and communication is language, while language shows the importance of communication and culture. Okonkwo (2000) opines that linguistic richness in any given language imposes not only a respect for the existing language, but also a complex and costly adaptation of the communications network of the language area and speech community.

In other words every individual is not only expected to recognize his/her language but also should be able to use this language in all forms of communication; either in agriculture, music, food, games etc. This type of native language knowledge is termed "Traditional Communication" by the Intergovernmental Conference on Communication Policies in Africa (1980).

According this body, Traditional Communication appears in various arts;
*   Dialogue   -   Story telling, singing, proverbs
*   Corporal expression dancing, music, mime
*   Dramatic art plays, rituals
*   Graphic expression decorations, drawings, costumes
*   Games and rite religious feasts, markets, ceremonies. etc.

This gives an overview of traditional setting. Thus an individual belonging to this setting is expected to speak the language of this environment and keep abreast with all these traditional media. The dwindling nature of the presence and utilization of traditional communication facilities is the thrust of this paper.

This paper thus examines the Nigerian nation and native language attitude; the concept of language endangerment and factors that influence endangerment. It assesses the current societal trend (ICT) and advocates the need for using information communication technology in the promotion and documentation of endangered language and suggests ways of actualizing this. The endangered language is the "Owerri dialect of the Igbo language".

The "Owere" (anglicized Owerri) was founded about four centuries ago. It is made up of five villages; it is situated at the South/East part of Nigeria. It is one of the earliest colonized towns in Eastern Nigeria in the early 19th Century.

The "Owerri/Igbo" people have a large population of people inhabiting in the area but with little population of users; the language is seriously shifting. In order to investigate this issue; an assessment of the language attitude is necessary.

The Nigerian Nation and Native Language Attitude: It is a common knowledge that proficiency, performance and language mastery are achieved through language use. Ker (2002) explains that the more complex society becomes and the more socially and technologically sophisticated man gets, the more communication problems tend to emerge in language. The true situation is that Nigeria is a multilingual and multi-cultural nation. The colonization of Nigerians by the British superimposed a new language system on the traditional ones which have been identified to be over four hundred indigenous languages.

This scenario led to the evolution of a complicated variety of the British/ English language, like the Pidgin, Creole. etc. This very reason started the gradual process of the "Owerri/Igbo" language shift. This paper assessed what I consider the causes of "Owerri/Igbo" language endangerment.

The number of speakers: The strength of a particular language is largely determined by the number of its users in a speech community. It was obvious that the number of people speaking the language without code-switching and mixing were minimal. The Indigenes borrowed words which often substituted the original dialect. The situation was so bad that the least literate persons in the village borrowed a different dialect in their discussions. Example, an Owerri Indigene when communicating with another Igbo person easily shifts to a new domain popularly called the Anambra/Owerri domain. See illustration below.

Shift in domain of use: Here one example readily comes to mind, the case of "Owerri/Igbo" and "Owerri/Anambra". These two languages are in constant contact and ironically the "Owerri" language speakers easily shift to the "Anambra" domain of Igbo language use. Some prolific examples include;

"Nee be fa Lekwa nga anyi" (indicating neighborhood)
"Kee kpa iri (how are you?)
Kpolu fa biama ebee (Bring them to this place)
Kedu kee mega - (what is happening)
Fa ri si nma - (They are all fine)
Ifuroo kpa iri - (look at you)

In citing another example, I met a woman in Ghana who spoke the Owerre/Igbo Language which I heard and identified her ethnicity. I spoke with her and confirmed that she is from Owerri. Suddenly she drifted from the Owerri dialect to the Owerri/Anambra dialect. This happens because some users see this dialect as inferior; they often want to drop the dialect for a more favoured one. The woman complained that her language exposes her ethnicity. I believe people should be proud of their dialect rather than spiting it.

Attitude of the speech community: The attitude of the "Owerri" people to their dialect has contributed to the endangerment of their language. To them if the language disappears overnight,

they will still have another language to speak. Another example is the continuous shift to Anambra/Owerri/Igbo dialect. The level of development has contributed immensely to this shift. The people drift more to the "favoured" dialect; thereby making their dialect fight for relevance and survival.

Having keenly observed the highly educated people of "Owerri", I discovered that most of them cannot engage in a free conversation for up to five minutes in "Owerri" dialect without blending the language with fragments of another Igbo dialect or even the English language. This is unlike the Hausa man and even Yoruba who cannot add "is" to his native language when he is using it. I have also observed that those who claim to be promoters of the native languages like some professors, doctors, teachers do not communicate with their children in their native language. They do not encourage their wards/children to study the language in higher schools. Young children from this village cannot comfortably speak this language; rather they speak blended Igbo or only English.

Native languages are considered to be inferior. The "Owerri/Igbo" language is spatially used. Speakers are often mimicked or even despised. The "Owerri" dialect has predominate features of; 'kpa' 'ri', 'shi' 'tha', 'cha' 'ra', etc. It places ethnicity tag on the speaker, because the moment you speak it, your ethnicity must be identified. For example, I identified an Owerri woman in Ghana because she spoke the dialect. It however, helps in cultural preservation, which is why this paper highlights the consequences of endangerment of Owerri/Igbo language.

The user's attitude endangers the native languages and also encourages shift (Njemanze, (2007). This question thus arises; how can the "Owerri/Igbo" indigenes preserve, uphold, and transfer their culture when the majority of them cannot speak, read or even write in their language? To answer this question, the paper evaluates the concept of language endangerment.

Language Endangerment

Although the phenomenon of language endangerment is prevalent in our society, it is important to examine this concept as an entity, identify the factors influencing this situation and identify the various classification of degrees of endangerment.

An endangered language is one with few surviving speakers; a language with small percentage of the youngest generation acquiring fluency in it. UNESCO (2003) describes an endangered language as one that is on its path towards extinction. A language is in danger when its speakers cease to use it; in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains; and ceases to pass it on from one generation to the next. That is, there are no new speakers, either adults or children.

According to Wikipedia's report on endangered language; at least 3,000 of the world's 6,000 7,000 languages are liable to be lost before the year 2100. This has posed a worrisome issue. Each language is a unique expression of the human experience; hence the loss or extinction of any language is a loss of a people's original ethnic and cultural identity. Some factors have been identified to be responsible for this.

Factors Influencing Language Endangerment:

Language endangerment may be caused by situations such as;
Communities negative attitude towards the language
   Age grading
   Migration
   Economic status
   Language status
   Issues of language shift and maintenance (Giles, 1979; Fasold, 1993).
These issues put together may encourage language endangerment. A community with only adult speakers stands a risk of having their language endangered. The same thing is applicable to a community with large number of immigrants or emigrants. People with higher number of foreign language speakers and people with fewer number of people that maintain the use of their native language are all at risk. How

do we now classify the degree of 'endangerment'.

Classification of Language Endangerment
Language endangerment is classified according to different degrees. UNESCO identified six degrees of endangerment to include;
> the critically endangered degree
>> severely endangered
>> definitely endangered
>> unsafe degree
>> stable yet threatened degree
>> safe degree

The degree of endangerment is considered safe when the language is spoken by all generations. It is stable yet threatened when the language is spoken by all generations. It is unsafe when most families/children speak their parental language as their first language. In other words, an Igbo family that speaks all English in the house has endangered their native language.

A language is at the definitely endangered degree when the language is no longer being acquired by children or the younger generation. This is peculiar to a family that resides outside their home country. Example is a Nigerian residing in the USA, may not have the opportunity of learning his native language. A severely endangered language is one spoken by only grandparents and older generations; while the critically endangered degree is a language that has the youngest speakers as the great-grand parents of that generation in order to save native languages from extinction. Language documentation or storage using ICT or digital services is important.

Documentation/Digital Storage
The concept of digital storage emanated from the practical effects of technological convergence. Digital storage is the collation and storing of information, physically or electronically, by sorting, scanning, and/or archiving in an accessible and retrievable form that would stand the test of time (Ndukwe, 2007). There is tremendous growth of electronic transactions in Nigeria, this gave rise to the need to provide digital storage services.

Interestingly, the focus of this paper is on storing the endangered language digitally. This service will help in reviving a language in extinction. This will also place the Owerri/Igbo language above board, because the inherent problems of no recognizable alphabet pattern, lack of dictionaries, fire gutting files, rodents feeding on vital information, acquisition of distorted information as in oral traditions among other problems would be a thing of the past. Also the traditional system of having paper documents, left unmanaged and stored in filing cabinets or file servers; which exposes an organization or institution to storage risks, service delays and information mutilation and inaccessibility becomes a thing of the past.

Following the digital era and the evolving global trend, this paper advocates software documentation services; it combines documents and record management into a sole entity which is capable of saving time, cost, complexity of storage while giving easy access to document throughout the information life circle (Ndukwe, 2007). It is therefore obvious that the world faces new challenges in keeping its language alive and meaningful, hence prompting the need for language documentation.

Language Documentation
Language documentation is the process of preserving a language by way of its grammar, lexicon and oral traditions. Language documentation assists in stabilizing and rescuing an endangered language. Language documentation serves a purpose of preservation of materials and giving access to crucial materials. Documentation may be in form of audio or video recordings, library information, text, documentary resources, notebooks or even oral evidences.

Importance of Language Documentation
Language documentation is not a new field of study in other disciplines but in the field of

linguistics it is not given adequate attention. However it is important for several reasons.

Enrichment of intellectual capital

Preservation of new cultural perspectives

Reactivation of linguistic knowledge

Production of textual material

Resource production

Cultural preservation

Legacy management.

Salvaging the dying language

Portrays the beauty of a language (UNESCO, 2003; Njemanze, 2007)

There are also various categories of documentation. These includes: good documentation, superlative, fair, fragmentary and inadequate documentations. In order to achieve a better documentation category prevalent in the society today, this paper advocates the use of information communication technology facilities.

ICT and the Owerri/Igbo Language Documentation

The rise of new technologies is drastically changing the pattern of the nation's linguistic resources. There are emergent ways of documenting and describing language using the digital media. To achieve digital language preservation and documentation, this paper advocates efficient utilization and maximum ICT participation and compliance in the information age.

The term ICT refers to information communication technology. Information and communication technology (ICT) is defined as computer based tools used by people to work with the information and communication processing of needs of an establishment or institution. It is made up of hardware and software, the network and other devices such as video, camera, phone, audio etc which convert information (text), images, sound and motion into digital form. It is an electronic application of computing, communication, telecommunication and satellite technology (Yusuf, 2000).

In another opinion by Galbreath (2000), the prevalence and rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has transformed human society from the information technology age to the knowledge age. The emergence of ICT has revolutionalized the activities of the Nigerian person, he has moved from the conventional Catholic style of "as it was in the beginning, it is now and forever shall be" to a more practical approach of taking advantage of state of the art technologies in preserving the endangered language. In the opinion of Ker (2006), ICTs has really revolutionized the existence and activities of the contemporary man, as a result of ambivalence of globalization and new knowledge society. This is an indication that its benefits are enormous.

The Key Benefits of Digital Documentation of the "Owerri/Igbo" Language

The ability to meet individual learning needs

Access to wider range of resources

Exposure to multimedia materials

Data preservation

Flexible interaction

Transactions

Editing

If the Owerri/Igbo language is programmed to reach a wider audience without distortions, it will escape the sledge hammer of extinction. This language should record its oral and written literatures, with a good compilation of its grammar, a dictionary and other necessary information about it, stored and made easily assessable to various ethnic groups, especially the younger generation who often live in urban areas. This will definitely save it from endangerment or extinction. The startling thing about ICT is that it is spreading dramatically and sweeping across all spheres of life like wild fire.

Documenting the Owerri/Igbo language should form part of everyday work because it is part of a historical document meant not only for the ethnic group involved but also for other researchers. In other words, this documentation must be good always and must be kept well for storage and discovery.

This will reduce the dramatic state of increased "Owerri/Igbo" language endangerment.

There are also set of skills and knowledge required for the attainment of proficiency in ICT documentation. They includes:

Cognitive proficiency

Technical proficiency and

ICT proficiency (International ICT Literacy Panel, 2001)

Cognitive proficiency emphasizes that the individual will have the foundational skills of daily need like numeracy, problem solving and visual/spatial literacy.

Technical proficiency requires the acquisition of the basic components of digital literacy. They include foundational knowledge of computer ware application, networking, shooting etc.

ICT proficiency is the integration and application of cognitive and technical skills. This will allow the individual to maximize technological capabilities. This is because ICT proficiencies aid innovation and society change. The individual therefore is able to create files, transfer information, download and upload information on the language he is working on. It also makes the user's digital friendly and literate. The individual is able to have a wider access to data to collect, how to collect or retrieve it. He will be able to interpret and represent information, he is able to work without an instructor. He can download information from anywhere. All these put together will serve as a revolution to the obsolescence of materials for endangered languages.

Conclusion

Human language is dynamic; it grows and develops with a view to accommodating prevalent linguistic complexities. Modern technological equipments have been maximally utilized by recent researchers. This instrument should be used to facilitate the task of language documentation and preservation. This therefore, poses a challenge for every ethnic group to develop their language, preserve and promote their cultural heritage. No language is inferior to another. The current trend of digital literacy should be adopted by all and applied to all spheres of human needs.

The government should assist language institutions in Nigeria to open websites for Nigerian languages, so that wider access to Nigerian indigenous languages, development and information could be stored, retrieved and utilized now and in future. This will save Nigerian languages, especially the "Owerri" Igbo, in its struggle for survival and the second class position given to it by the people.

The web material will also provide the necessary information and history of every language. This will encourage the younger generation, especially in downloading information about their native languages.

Finally, utilizing the ICT process in language documentation will serve a good model for language preservation.

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