



## Language Documentation and Sociolinguistics

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### ABSTRACT

While a good language documentation programme requires the collaborative assistance of a sociolinguist, some promoters and scholars of language documentation tend to think otherwise. It does appear that such are overwhelmed by the time long controversy on the validity of sociolinguistics as an integral part of Linguistics. One of the evidence of the above assertion could be found in the recent advertisement of some international conferences/workshops on 'Language Documentation and the development of Indigenous Languages. The Sub themes for such conferences/workshops centered on several areas of Linguistics, could be any of the following phonology, phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, orthography, lexicography etc without any reference on sociolinguistics. The list of sub-themes on the flier may not be exhaustive, nevertheless, its omission or neglect tend to be indicative of the place and role accorded sociolinguistics in the enterprise of language documentation. The position of this paper is that one of the criteria of a genuine language documentation project is that it must represent the language as it is used e.g. the breaking of kola or pouring of libation by the Igbo, the naming ceremony, new yam festival, burial and marriage ceremonies in Bekwarra, Lokaa, Ibibio, Efik, Yoruba, Hausa, Echie, etc. Sociolinguistics analyses the use of language in society. Excluding an inquiry of Sociolinguistics in the awareness, sensitization or scholarization of language documentation process in preference for core linguistics areas is not a holistic approach to it. Our conclusion is that the phonetician, phonologist, syntactician, semanticist as well as the sociolinguist are all strategic partners in achieving or evolving a viable language documentation project or theory.

### INTRODUCTION

Akinlabi and Connell (2007) acknowledge that the sociolinguistic input to language documentation is one of the most significant features that

distinguishes it from the core traditional language description. Language documentation is an activity or result of an activity which gathers, processes, and exhibits a sample of data of the language that is representative of its linguistic structure and gives a fair impression of how and for what purpose the language is used. Its purpose is to represent the language for those who do not have access to the language itself. On the other hand, the description of a language is an activity or the result of an activity that formulates, in the most general way possible, the patterns underlying the linguistic data. Its purpose is to make the user of the description understand the way the language works. While both documentation and description is an activity or result of an activity with striking relationships, it could be observed that, language documentation peculiarity seeks to give a fair impression of '*how and for what purpose the language is used*'. This significant aspect of language documentation, is the focus of this paper. Language documentation was initially thought by many to be the same with language description. Those who held this opinion argued that language documentation had a restricted relationship with core linguistics; phonology, phonetics, morphology, syntax as well as semantics. However, the increasing awareness, knowledge and evidence from research into language documentation have shown that it includes such issues as the culture, oral traditions, as well as their arts and craft. Language documentation therefore should not only be capturing the descriptive analysis of the language but also the environmentally and socially conditioned usage for which it is subject to. Sociolinguistics examines the use of language in society, its role and the domains of usage. Divorcing sociolinguistics from language documentation is comparable to divorcing sociolinguistics from linguistics.

### **Linguistics and Sociolinguistics: An Appraisal**

The origin of linguistics is traceable to the ancient Greece as well as India, Linguistics (The Scientific study of Language) recognizes certain views or schools of thought regarding the study. One of such is the structural linguistics school that believes that the task of linguistics is to work out the rules of any language which can be represented as X. they believe that it is only after this that sociolinguistics may enter the scene and study any points at which these rules make contacts with society e.g. where alternative ways of expressing the same thing are chosen by different social groups. This group dominated twentieth century linguistics including Noam Chomsky, the proponent of transformational Generative Grammar in 1957, and more recently, universal grammar (U.G), postulates, that Linguistics accounts only for the structure of language. The structuralists are criticized on the account that they see the organization of language as consisting of rules for linking meaning with sounds used for its expression. Their model according to Essien (2008) implies naming to be the sole use of speech, as if language is

not for the many varied forms of persuasion, directing, expression and symbolic play.

On the other hand, another group or school of thought believes that the study of linguistic form cannot be divorced from linguistic context and function. This group includes names like, William Labor, J. R. Firth, Dell Hymes, Janice Yalden, Michael Halliday etc. They believe that the notion language X, is defined in terms of the group of people who speak it. They believe that speech has a social function both as a means of communication and as a way of identifying social groups. For them, to study speech without reference to the society which uses it, is to exclude the possibility of finding social explanation for the structures that are used. Furthermore, they postulate that the study of speech without reference to the societies is like studying about courtship behavior without relating the behavior of one partner to that of the other (Hudson:2001). They believe that a model of linguistics must be designed with an emphasis on communicative conduct and social life. Human beings have always lived with cultural and linguistic paradox of needing to be like one another while at the same time needing to establish individuality. These needs plus cultural complexities and linguistics change, motivations, attitudes, values, physiological and psychological differences provide a vast laboratory for sociolinguistic investigation.

On the basis of the latter group of linguistic study, which the present writer belongs, it is believed that an holistic language documentation program must draw from sociolinguistic laboratory. However, the neglect of the sociolinguist and sociolinguistics in language documentation programmes, conferences, workshops training and scholarizations, which tend to be an emerging trend among some facilitators, promoters, sponsors and academics in language documentation, appear worrisome. They tend to be overwhelmed by the earlier discussed school of thought that believes that linguistic context and function has no place in the analysis of linguistic forms among systems. Such perception needs to be addressed in the light of evidence from, what distinguishes language documentation and language description as well as further evidence from practical attempts at giving a fair impression of how and for what purpose a language is used.

### **Language Documentation and Language Description**

Akinlabi and Bruce Connell, (2007:2) and other scholars have tried to make a detailed explanation of what constitute language documentation and language description. They even went ahead to show the areas of close relationship and distinguishing features in an attempt to resolve the puzzle of what each of them is and is not. They particularly were influenced by the views of two German Linguists; Christian Lehmann (e.g. 1999, 2002) and Nikolaus Himmelmann (eg 1998, 2006) reputed to have significantly, been instrumental in developing the present view of language translation of primary data that the collection, organization, transcription, and translation of

primary data comprise linguistic description and the result of such work is language documentation. The processing of linguistic data to produce a grammar or a dictionary among other possible materials in such a way that underlying patterns in the data are revealed, constitutes descriptive linguistics, the result of which is a language description. They further state that language documentation includes a considerably wider range of material than is normally included when one think of data collection in linguistics. It involves organizing and annotating data in such a way that it is accessible to others.

Another approach they adopted in distinguishing language documentation from language description, apart from the definition stand point is, by revealing their purposes. Etymologically derived from the Latin term ‘documentation’ (a thing for teaching) language documentation involves creating record of linguistic material that may serve to reach others about the language. According to Akinlabi and Connell (2007:3-4) the primary purpose of language documentation is

“To represent the language of those who do not have direct access to the language itself, independent of the motivation of the deliberate and specific organization of the data collected, together with a high degree of representativeness of the structures of the language (at all linguistic levels), how it is used in as wide a range of contexts as possible and the role(s) that it plays in the society”.

This is contrasted with the purpose of language description which they state, is to make the user of the description understand the way the language works. In a tabular presentation, they specifically pointed out that language is specific.

While language description is general, also, that language documentation is concrete while language description is abstract, we tend to disagree with their first contrast that language documentation is specific and language description is general. We are rather of the opinion that the reverse is the case. We think that language documentation is general while language description is specific. Our reason for disagreeing with the presentation is firstly, that it tends to contradict their earlier argument in the work (Akinlabi and Connell 2007:3) where they had agreed with Bird and Simons (2003) Himmelman (1998, 2006) and Lehmann (2001, 2002) that

“A documentation includes a considerably wider range of material than is normally included when one thinks of data collection in linguistics”.

Furthermore, in their explanation of the purpose of language documentation cited above (Akinlabi and Connell 2007:3-4), they had indicated that language documentation goes with high degree of representativeness of the

structures of the language (at all linguistic levels). This suggests that while language documentation project could not do without representations or descriptions of the various levels of linguistic analysis, a language description project could focus on one area of linguistic analysis even though at the long run, the description may cover the entire linguistic levels. Most importantly, language description represents the structural properties of the language while language documentation represents the structural properties as well as the way the language is used as pointed out in their work cited already in this paper. In fact, quoting Himmelmann (Akinlabi and Connell, 2007:5) stated that,

“A record of the linguistic practices and traditions of a speech community, however, is much more comprehensive than a record of language system since it includes many aspects and much information commonly not addressed or found in a language description”.

One wonders how with all the above, they categorize language documentation as specific while description is general. We, therefore submit that with the above reasons presented in a tabular form below, language documentation is general while language description is specific.

**Table 1:** Language documentation and language description.

Language Documentation	Language Description
+	+ Restricted material
+ all linguistic levels	+
-	- All linguistic levels
+ linguistic practice and tradition of speech community	-Linguistic practices and traditions of speech community
+ More information	+ Limited information
+ general	+ specific

### **Language documentation and core linguistics**

Language documentation gathers, processes and exhibits a sample of data of a language that is representative of its linguistic structure. The linguistic structure of a language could be examined at different levels. These levels include the phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic or semantic levels. These levels are equally referred to as core linguistic levels. As already indicated, all or some of these levels could be represented in a language documentation project. However, the extent of the representation of these core structures are according to the extent that they are found useful for collecting and representing characteristic documents of linguistic behavior

and knowledge. There is therefore, a degree of description in documentation. Those who have knowledge of structural analysis such as phonologists, phoneticians, morphologists, syntacticians and semanticists are therefore required for effective and result oriented language documentation.

While this true fact is acknowledged and stated, it is, however worrisome that much attention is given to these levels of linguistic analysis in documentation workshops, teachings, seminars and theorizations etc as if description is only what documentation entails. Other vital aspects of documentation already identified in this work and by documentation scholars, tend to be ignored. The contention of this paper is that, equally relevant components of documentation and the experts in such areas need to be carried along for a holistic and comprehensive language documentation enterprise.

### **Language documentation and sociolinguistics**

Hudson (2001:1) defines sociolinguistics as the language in relation to the society. He believes that sociolinguistics is both empirical and theoretical. It is theoretical in the sense that it involves going out and amassing bodies of fact (data). It is theoretical in the sense that it involves sitting back and thinking i.e. generating ideas. The theoretical approach, allows the beginning of an analytical framework to be worked out containing terms such as language, which is a body of knowledge or rules, speech which is actual utterances, speaker, addressee etc. the personal experience the individual has is worked out and analyzed. The empirical approach is based on systematic research projects. Some of such research projects take place in exotic communities.

Yule (1996:239) defines sociolinguistics as dealing with the interrelationship between language and society. Sociolinguistics has strong connections to Anthropology through the investigation of language and culture, sociology, through the crucial role language plays in the organization of social groups and institutions. It is also tied to social psychology particularly, with regard to how attitude and perceptions are expressed and how in-group and out-group behaviours are identified. It studies values and beliefs relating them to other fields. It looks at the social functions of language as opposed to its forms. It monitors language use, observes lapses and proffers solutions through effective language engineering. It shows the way of doing things with words which is functionally related to culture and society for example, the use of forms which have a basic signal or value provided by the culture is rewarded with success while failure is the reward for using forms which are omitted from our cultural repertoire. This is because language does not exist for its own sake or referential purposes alone, but also serves for the sharing of ideals and feelings referred to by Edward Sapir as “Phatic Communion”. Fishman distinguishes two aspects of sociolinguistics which according to Brann (2006:7), the micro-

sociolinguistics deals with the face to face language interchange while the micro-sociolinguistics deals with groups.

In the definition of language documentation, we had noted that it does not only give a fair impression for the structure of language, but also gives a fair impression of how and for what purposes the language is used. It looks at how language is used in as wide a range of contexts as possible and the roles that it plays in the society Akinlabi and Connell (2007:5-4). Furthermore, it shows the linguistic practices and traditions of a speech community. We have given a detailed explanation of the definition and concept of sociolinguistics by various sociolinguistic scholars show that the study of '*how and for what purpose a language is used*' is the concern of sociolinguistics. Sociolinguistics examines the role(s) and concept of "*speech community*" as well as linguistic practices is the exclusive preserve of sociolinguistics. It looks at the relationship between language and culture. Culture comprises material, institutional philosophical and creative aspects.

The material aspect has to do with artifacts, the institutional deals with the political, social, legal and economic objectives, the philosophical concerns ideals, beliefs and values, while the creative concerns a people's oral and written literature as well as arts. Language cuts through artifacts, sociofacts and mentifacts according to Emenanjo (2000). Language greatly facilitates the development and the systematic manufacture of tools. Languages and culture exist by complementatization. It is the sociolinguist that is able to analyze the cultural values of one's people in the language of one's speech community. Wardaugh (1998) had indicated that the language spoken by the individual determines his perceptions of the world as well as his behavior. Our perceptions feed our thinking faculties with materials of operation as well as affect our attitudes to reality and our social relations. It is from them that we formulate and build up our cultures. These cultures are transmitted to our children or next generations through education by means of the same linguistic categories. Iwuchukwu (2007:13) discovered that the \language of pricing tend to provide a subtle insight into linguistic categories as determinants of a people's world view as well as articulators of their culture.

What has been said so far is that language documentation has a sociolinguistic input. It does not require structural analysis alone, but also sociolinguistic analysis. The sociolinguist and not only the phonetician, phonologist, syntactician, morphologist, semanticists etc must need to be consulted to provide the expert knowledge on that aspect of language documentation beyond the description of the sounds or preparation of its orthography. We include below a few illustrations of a few vital aspect of linguistic practices and traditions of a speech community that must be captured in language documentation exercise. We have already described this aspect as the sociolinguistics input to language documentation.

**Justifying Sociolinguistics in Language Documentation: Evidence from Bekwarra**

The Bekwarra area is located at the North-East Ogoja Local Government Area. According to the 1993 Census, the population of Bekwarra is to be about 50,000 with a density of 125 to a square mile. A permanent map of Bekwarra within that of Ogoja division was designed officially by Colonial Surveyors and administrators who were never influenced by any of Ogoja settlers within the Colonial period. The map indicated permanent boundaries of each of the clans of Bekwarra people Nkum, Mbube, Boki, Akajuk, Yala, Ukeli, Yache and Gabu. The Bekwarra people speak Bekwarra language among the clans, some of which have become Local Governments. The Bekwarra language is one of the upper cross group of languages. In Bekwarra language. Specific registers are used in specific occasions that involve the communities. These include, marriage and Burial registers.

**Table 2:** Marriage Register.

Bekwarra	English
Ekung Ulugba	A kind of merriment
Ubi atienini	Gun powder (local)
Iyem itang iyka ke enigah	Animal or meat for people
Asha abi	An act of sleeping with another man
Kwin iritiam	Cool the people's mind

The first in table (2) Ekung Ulugba or llugba Ekumi is an expression of joy by the bride in the family of the groom. The sound, Ubi Atienini is an expression made when a male in the family of the groom sets fire on the traditional gun powder and it explodes. The explosion of the gun powder is taken to reflect the fact that the lady has come to stay without any tendency of leaving the husband. Every marriage that did not experience this explosion of the gun powder that leads to the expression is not recognized as belonging to the family.

Iyem, Itang Iyka ke Eniga! this is a kind of question by the eldest in the family asking if there is a kind of goat or animal to be given to the visitors. It is an expression of concern and appreciation to the visitors who have come by the head of the family.

Asha Abi: this expression indicates that after the shooting of the gun powder (Ubi atienini), the woman will not have anything to do with another man, failing which her children will be dying or her husband will be sick and shivering there by exposing her deeds.

Kwin iritaim: this expression is made when a woman goes to live with a man or a man married without shooting the gun powder. Anytime he wants to go and pay her bride price, he will have to do kwin iritiam i.e. to cool the mind of the people or the family of the wife.



**Table 3:** Burial Registers.

Bekwarra	English
Ukani akwa kitang afouw	Elder or heard of the family
Ugu agini	Legacy
Abo abi	Unfortunate situation
Iyem itan	Animal for the visitors
Agurube kere, kere kere	A kind of Screaming

**Ukani a kwa ki tang a fouw:** this is an expression made when one, considered to be the breadwinner of a family dies.

**Abo Abi:** this is a kind of cry or expression from a mother or father that loses the dear child. The expression means that an unfortunate situation has come to the person or family.

**Ugue Ajini:** this is a kind of property or legacy or inheritance left by the deceased. This is normally given to the children.

**Iyem Itang:** this is the animal that is killed in the burial ceremony for the people or the visits to the burial.

**Agurube kere kere:** this is an exclamation made when somebody dies. As people come to witness the sad occurrence, such exclamations can be heard from the sympathizers.

**Table 4:** Chieftaincy Coronation Registers.

Bekwarra	English
Olo Lo Olo Lo	Jubilation (Exclamation)
Achibini	Soak in the water
Abanini	Fermentation
Etia Ochuro	Joy (Excitement)
Anwiah	Sleeping in Local Mat

**Olo lo olo lo:** This is an indication of excitement and jubilation by the members of a family and the extended family to their own, being crowned.

**Achibini:** in the process of preparing for a chieftaincy coronation, the women buy millet to prepare. After, buying it, the process of soaking it is called 'Achibi'.

**Abanini:** If the same millet being prepared for coronation is fermented instead of soaking it, they refer to it as Abanini.

**Etia Ochuro:** In this expression of joy, the society tries to appease the gods of their land through "Ochuro" i.e. rejoicing over the new chief they are about to crown. They will carry the person on their shoulder and go around the village for one day.

**Anwiah:** When the chief is to be crowned, he is made to lie in a local mat for seven days, expecting the gods to speak to him. Another area of interest is, the expression of politeness in Bekwarra which may not be accommodated here because of space. Good language documentation includes and addresses

such areas indicated above. This is an aspect of the linguistic practices of a speech community, which is never a focus in language description. The sociolinguist is eminently equipped to assist in capturing this aspect of the language which is embedded in the culture and tradition of the people. It is therefore ironical to omit or ignore this vital stakeholder in language documentation under any guise. The sociolinguist will further spell out and survey other domains language use in a speech community. Such domains as spelt out by Brann (2006) which may guide in language documentation include, Assembly, Bar, Club, Dispensary, Theater, Farm, Home, Legion Market, Office, Palace, Restaurant, School, Temple, Omnibus and Workshop.

### **CONCLUSION**

Sociolinguistics and the sociolinguist is relevant in language documentation. To alienate it in the process of documentation training, workshop, theorizing and empowerment in preference for structural analysis, is to have a narrow approach to documentation. It is therefore recommended that in every language documentation project or program, competent sociolinguists must be involved to make input into such area as the evidence from Bekwarra has demonstrated.

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