

## Language Endangerment: The English Language Creating a Concern for the Possible Extinction of Yorùbá Language\*

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**ABSTRACT** An endangered language is one which has a possibility of going into extinction in the near future. Not only do languages die, speakers also die. This paper identifies that Yorùbá language which is widely spoken in the south-western Nigeria is largely endangered. In this paper, the researcher maintains that language extinction is real and Yorùbá is not safe from that threat as in few decades from now, the language might go into total extinction. When that happens, not only would the written and spoken words disappear but the Yorùbá culture too. Using a desk approach and descriptive analysis, this paper examines the cases of endangerment in Yorùbá language as observed from the impact of English language. The paper finds out that Yorùbá language is at a high risk of going into extinction in years to come.

### INTRODUCTION

Language is no doubt the most effective medium through which messages or thoughts are expressed, hence, its indispensability as a human phenomenon. The only reason Pythagoras was able to tell us that  $a^2+b^2=c^2$  is a right angled triangle (Maor 2007), Einstein, that  $E = MC^2$  (Bodanis 2000), Boyle, that “the absolute pressure exerted by a given mass of an ideal gas is inversely proportional to the volume it occupies if the temperature and amount of gas remain unchanged in a closed system” (Fulton 1961), and Newton that “an object either remains at rest or continues to move at a constant velocity unless acted upon by an external force” Galili and Tseitlin 2003 was because they all had the

linguistic means, and the medium of communicating these various ideas is language.

For Mheta (2013), language is a cultural and social phenomenon. He is convinced that language is an integral part of a society and is therefore, shaped by the society. As such, Liu et al. (2011), maintain that language is used by people to convey thoughts, feelings, desires, attitudes and intentions from a party to another. They argue that the language we speak defines our “world” and “identity”. There is no language without culture and context and vice versa.

In a nutshell, language is a medium through which thoughts are expressed and it is also important to note that certain thoughts cannot be fully understood without culture and context. It can be gleaned from the above discussion that language is a very important phenomenon in humans’ lives and not only for the purpose of communicating but also preserving our cultures and identities.

Among other papers, Abioye et al. (2014) observe that indigenous languages in Nigeria have become endangered while English language continues to flourish. Balogun (2013) also note that the multilingual nature of Nigeria as well as the use of English as an official language has made indigenous language like Yoruba, very difficult to grow. Aladesote et al. (2016) further provide what the challenges are with regards to the gradual extinction of Yoruba. Their work high-

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light the lack of commitment to indigenous language, habitat displacement, colonial legacy, and defective language planning as influencing factors. This paper tries to expatiate the position of Yorùbá language as an endangered one that needs adequate attention if the identity and culture of Yorùbás must be preserved both within and outside. How and why is Yorùbá an endangered language now becomes the thrust of this paper.

### Objectives of the Paper

- To identify and analyse instances where English language creates concerns for the possible extinction of Yoruba language.
- To proffer recommendations on how Yoruba language can avoid extinction.

### Yorùbá Language

Yorùbá belongs to the Niger-Congo language family, otherwise referred to as the Niger-Kordofanian or Congo-Kordofanian language family (Mheta 2013). This language family is one of the major language families in the world which comprises about 1,532 languages (Mheta 2013). Yorùbá is largely spoken in the south-western part of Nigeria, West-Africa. It is referred to as “*ede Yorùbá*” in the native language, which literally means “Yorùbá language”. Yorùbá is spoken in six of the thirty-six states in Nigeria: Ekiti, Lagos, Osun, Oyo, Ondo, and Ogun state. It is also spoken in some parts of neighbouring countries like the Republic of Benin, and Togo. The language, according to the 2006 national population census, in Nigeria, is believed to have more than twenty-two million speakers. Features of the language have also been traced to Sierra Leone and Cuba. Traces of the language have been found as far as some areas in Brazil. The language is thus a widely spoken one and has a standard orthography of its own. As such, the language is also used for the purpose of writing and literature.

As far back as 1884, Samuel Ajayi Crowther did a translation of the Holy Bible into a comprehensive Yorùbá version from the Standard English version. Literary works in the language abound. One of the Yorùbá literary icons is D.O. Fagunwa who has written a sizeable number of works in Yorùbá. The popular novel *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* (1938) was written by him.

The novel for its popularity and substance was eventually translated into English by Wole Soyinka with the title *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* (1968). The same novel was translated by Abioye into French as “*Le preux chasseur dans la foret infestee de demons*” (1992). Books, pamphlets, bulletins and newspapers such as Akede Agbaye, Alaroye also exist in Yorùbá. Other renowned Yorùbá literary figures are Ak-inwunmi Isola, Adebayo Faleti, Laogun Adeoye, Tunji Oyelana and Amos Tutuola, among others. This short insight into Yorùbá language shows the level of prominence attained by the language. After this, one wonders why the language is endangered after all, and the truth is the language is seriously endangered (Fabunmi and Salawu 2005). Fabunmi and Salawu (2005) continue by adding that one should not be deceived by assuming that the language is not endangered, they proved that language death is always a slow, unannounced and unnoticed phenomenon.

### English Language in Nigeria

A short but methodical and classical insight was given by Taiwo (2009) on English language in Nigeria. In an abstract for his paper “*The functions of English in Nigeria from the earliest times to the present day*”, Taiwo writes:

The use of the English language in Nigeria dates back to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century when British merchants and Christian missionaries settled in the coastal towns called Badagry, near Lagos in the present day South Western Nigeria and Calabar, a town in the present day South Eastern Nigeria. The merchants initially traded in slaves until the slave trade was abolished in 1807, at which time freed slaves of Nigerian origin returned to the country. Many of them, who had been exposed to Western education and Christianity, later served as translators or interpreters for the Christian missionaries. The primary aim of the Christian mission was not to make their converts speak English; rather, it was to make them literate enough to read the bible in their indigenous languages. This must be the reason why Samuel Ajayi Crowder translated the English Bible into Yorùbá, the major language in South Western Nigeria. With the attainment of independence, English gradually grew to become the major medium for inter-ethnic communication. Like

most African nations, the country, after independence, had to grapple with multi-ethnicity and acute multilingualism.

Danladi (2013) adds that English has continued to enjoy its primacy, especially in the formation of political and educational systems as a medium of instruction and conversation. These views have clearly stressed the position of English language in Nigeria to be a strong one and has no doubts had effects on Nigerian indigenous languages.

### **An Endangered Language**

Whaley (2014) understands an endangered language to be one having declining numbers of speakers, and in some cases becoming moribund or extinct. Wamalwa and Mtwara (2013) observe that a language is endangered when it is on the path towards extinction. The danger lies in 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. That is, there are no new speakers, either adults or children. This is to say that an endangered language is one that is at a risk of falling out of use. If a language loses all its native speakers, it becomes a dead language and a loss of language is a loss of humanity (Wamalwa and Mtwara 2013). Dozens of languages as of today, have very few native speakers still living, by implication, the dearth of the few users would certainly lead to the extinction of the languages, that is, it will no longer be spoken, or known, by anyone. It is of course no doubt that some Nigerian indigenous languages are being gradually replaced with English due to the pressure of speaking a more popular and widely used language.

A language totally dies when nobody uses it any longer, this means Yorùbá is not dead yet but can die soon. Wurm (1998) in (Fabunmi and Salawu 2005) identifies five-level models of language status namely: potentially endangered, endangered, seriously endangered, moribund, and extinct. Wurm categorized Yorùbá as endangered as at 1998, Fabunmi and Salawu in 2005 proposed that it should be categorized as seriously endangered, it is therefore very logical to categorize it as moribund in 2015. This indicates that the language is close to total extinction. To Fabunmi and Salawu, any language that crosses the lines of either being potentially endan-

gered or endangered is already passed into the limbo of time. Such a language may continue to have existence in a recorded form but has no fluent speakers. Languages with large number of speakers like Yorùbá can nonetheless be in danger. Brenzinger (1998: 93) had earlier noted this when he said “even Yorùbá, with 20 million speakers, has been called ‘deprived’ because of the way it has come to be dominated by English in higher education.” The section 53 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria recognizes English as the official language. Moreover, the suppressive effects of English over the Yorùbá language and other Nigerian languages are too overwhelming and suicidal. Bamgbose (1997: 22) also notes that Yorùbá is not well used in educational, political and other public situations. This is because its roles have been taken over by English. Here, the issue of decline is stressed: Yorùbá language is not just vulnerable to decline, but on the verge of “extinction” (Fabunmi and Salawu 2005).

### **METHODOLOGY**

A desk approach was employed in this. As such, information was mainly collected through existing sources. Data were generated from common daily activities. In analyzing the data, the research used a descriptive analysis in examining examples provided. Examples were identified and analysed in relation to the objective of the paper.

### **OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **Concerns for the Possible Extinction of Yorùbá Language**

To Romaine (2007), the pulse of a language quite clearly lies in the youngest generation. Languages are at risk when they are no longer transmitted “*naturally*” to children in the home by parents or other caretakers. A major problem Yorùbá now has is the issue of natural transmission to children. Most elite parents would prefer their kids to speak English fluently rather than understand Yorùbá, they even correct their children when they make grammatical mistakes and would not do the same with Yorùbá. It could be argued that ninety-five percent of Yorùbá families living in diaspora do not speak Yorùbá to their kids and as a result, the kids wouldn’t be

able to converse in Yorùbá. The researcher has come across a family where the grandchildren need an interpreter to communicate with their grandparent effectively. Also, a family that made a signage of “vernacular speaking in this house is strictly prohibited” forgetting the fact that if a child is not proficient in his/her first language, to understand a second language perfectly well might be difficult. Moll (1994) and Peregoy and Boyle (2000) in Jiang (2011) adds that when one is literate in a primary language, they possess funds of knowledge about various aspects of the language and this knowledge provides an experiential base for literacy development in the second language. In other words, language operations such as speaking, reading and writing should be transferable across languages. Once a set of language operations has been acquired, they will also be available within second language contexts. In the foregoing of this paper, I will present what I have identified as the exact concerns for extinction of Yorùbá language using the features of our daily discourses. The features are captured under “code-mixing”, “code-switching” and lastly “language shift”. A code in this paper is a verbal component (morphemic or complex) system of a language.

### Code-mixing

Code-mixing according to Moradi’s (2014) opinion is an alternation of two or more languages within a sentence. Bokamba (1989) resonates that it is the embedding of various linguistic units such as affixes (bound morphemes), words (unbound morphemes), phrases and clauses from a co-operative activity. This is very rampant among the educated class who speak English and an indigenous language in Nigeria, in this case, Yorùbá. It is difficult to observe code-mixing between two or more Nigerian indigenous languages (Offiong and Okon 2013). Code-mixing should not be mistaken to code-switching in that while code-mixing is always sentential (within the same sentence); code-switching is always within discourse (communication). To Offiong and Okon (2013), code-mixing is seen as a phenomenon in which two codes or languages are used for the same message. Some reasons why code-mixing is employed are further identified. Code-mixing can be employed when there are no readily available words or lexical units to express a situation or to name an object. Yorùbá

then seeks assistance from English. It could also be used for socio-psychological functions among friends and relations. It portrays a sign of closeness amongst the interlocutors making them feel more at home between themselves. Evidences of code-mixing are repeatedly found in our daily discourses that even some Yorùbá words are often neglected and the English equivalents are opted for. This also occurs with the stark Yorùbá non-literates as they have become so conversant with the usage of that specific word. An obvious example is the word “window” which would mean “fèrèsé” in Yorùbá. Even the aged Yorùbás who never attended schools now use code-mixing as such to express their feelings. It is also not a doubt that some of the English words might not be properly pronounced but then they are still English words. Some sentential examples are given below:

#### Examples:

- i. *Bá mi ti window* yen (Instead of *bá mi ti fèrèsé yen*)  
Close that **window** for me.
- ii. *Ó ti lè school* (Instead of *ó ti lè ilé-ìwé*)  
He/she has gone to **school**.
- iii. *Gbe radio wa* (Instead of *gbé èrè asòròmágbèsì wá*)  
Bring the **radio**.
- iv. *Níbo ni phone mí wà?* (Instead of *níbo ni èrè ìbáńisòrò mí wà?*)  
Where is my **phone**?
- v. *Tan television* (Instead of *tan èrè amòùn-máwòrán*)  
Switch on the **television**.

A large percentage of most of the words we mix with Yorùbá from English are even present in Yorùbá itself. Because of civilization and some other factors already discussed above, we tend to neglect those words and make use of the English equivalents. The examples given are very common ones and it is very “difficult” to find anyone whether literate or illiterate to make use of the Yoruba version as seen in the examples. Gradually, Yorùbá is dying and English is taking charge as code-mixing doesn’t even carry enough weight as code-switching.

### Code-switching

For Bokamba (1989), code-switching is the mixing of words, phrases and sentences from two distinct grammatical systems across sentence boundaries within the same speech event.

Moradi (2014: 1) sees it as “that language alternation which occurs between sentences, as opposed to within of the alternative use of two languages either within a sentence or between sentences. He uses the term code-switching to refer to the process whereby a speaker moves from one language to another, either within a single sentence or between one utterance and the next in the same interaction.” This is clearly different from code-mixing which involves a word or lexical units. Moradi simplifies this by noting that “if switching involves changing into a clause or a sentence, it should be defined as a code-switching, but if it involves the use of phrases or lexical items or group of words, it should be identified as code-mixing.”

Ayeomoni (2006) observes that language experts across the globe have studied the effects of code-switching. Most notably is the making of one language to be more dominant than the other, thereby causing the individual to switch always to the dominant language. In this regards, the English language is considered dominant to Yorùbá language due to many factors such as civilization, modernization, ease of communication, population and so on. Ayeomoni (2006) in his research argues for the adverse effect that the dominant language might have on the other right from childhood. Code-switching from English to Yorùbá has also become very rampant and has posed a great deal of threat on the survival of Yorùbá language. Examples of these situations abound.

#### Examples

- i. *Ó ní kì n jade síta, can you imagine?*  
(Instead of *Ó ní kì n jade síta, sé o le gbágbó?*)  
He/she said I should get out, **can you imagine?**
- ii. *Ó gbá etí mi, what an insult?*  
(Instead of *Ó gbá etí mi, irú àrífín wo nìyen?*)  
He/she slapped my face, **what an insult?**
- iii. *Mo ti ba yin pick call yin*  
(Instead of *mo ti bayin dáhùn èrë ìbánisòrò yin*)  
**I picked/answered your call** for you.
- iv. *Mo ma attend meeting yen*  
(*mo ma losí ipàde yen*)  
I will **attend the meeting.**
- v. **Situation won ma to improve**  
(Instead of *Ayipada ma to debawon*)  
His/her **situation** will soon **improve.**

All these examples are but few of the code-switches we employ in our daily communications. The fusion of code-mixing and code-switching from English language to Yorùbá language have therefore resulted to what is referred to as “language shift” over the years. This is exactly where the problem lies.

#### Language Shift

Language shift to Kandler et al. (2010) is the process whereby members of a community in which more than one language is spoken abandon their original vernacular language in favor of another. The researcher had made it clear in the beginning of this paper that a community or society is defined by its language in connection with the culture. As a result, these three are inseparable companions; an attempt to separate them would not only lead to the death of one but all. Kandler et al. (2010 in Brenzinger 2006) maintain that the major driver of language shift is the decision to abandon a more local or less prestigious language. This is basically because the target of the shift is a language seen as more modern, useful or giving access to greater social mobility and economic opportunities. Nawaz et al. (2012: 73) remark that “language death occurs in unstable bilingual or multilingual speech community as a result of language shift from regressive minority language to dominant majority language.” Nawaz et al. (2012) provides some reasons for the possibility of language shift. They identify some factors namely: historic-cultural, socio-cultural and economic factors.

The historic-cultural factor accounts for the imperative impact of colonization in our lands decades and centuries ago. English became the medium of communication with the colonial masters and as such English gained dominance. It became a language of the upper strata of society; a kind of modernized and civilized air was associated with it. Nawaz et al. (2012) assert that this marginalization of the native tongues in the hegemony system of rule and power devised the concept of “linguistic imperialism”, which ran parallel to the cultural and geographic imperialism. The socio-cultural factor captures the social structure in which an English-speaking person enjoyed a privileged position and the others were marginalized. Because nobody wants to be away from center and to be marginalized, so it became a compulsion to speak En-

English. Thus, English language has been unconsciously assumed as superior to our indigenous languages. The economic factor has undoubtedly presented English to provide financial security. You can get high level jobs only if you know English language. The importance of English for success in any field can hardly be emphasized because it is the language of financial activities. Abushibab (2015) reveals that languages and cultures are experiencing a kind of shift as a result of language contact and some sociolinguistic factors. Languages and dialects are not stable. They are in state of change and development. Most societies are experiencing a gradual shift in their languages, dialects and culture and this is no doubt a concern for Yorùbá language.

### *Language Loss*

The foregoing research has narrowed down the whole discussion to a possible Yorùbá language loss/extinction. A language is lost when there's no speaker again, this is a gradual process and it occurs when an individual stays away from his own language. As it stands, many of our vocabularies are dead, some are dying and this is because we have stayed away from the language. Without enough attention, the dead vocabularies will lead to language loss/death/extinction. Language loss is consequent upon language shift. Appel and Muysken (1987: 42) note that "as a language loses territory in a given community, speakers will become less proficient in it..... loss of lexical skills in the language surfaces.... words in the dominant language replace words in the minority language." This coupled with the above discussions would largely mean we can either watch Yorùbá language go into extinction or find a possible solution very soon.

Having discussed the degree of threats for the extinction of Yorùbá language, it becomes imperative to highlight possible solutions. The speed at which Yorùbá is going into extinction is so fast that any traces of Yorùbá might not be found in the next century. A current example in certain contexts is that a young Yorùbá man of this generation who intends to woo a young Yorùbá lady would often start his campaign in English language owing to the fact that when the campaign is started in Yorùbá, the young man is considered "local". This and some other

illustrative situations pose a great threat to Yorùbá language.

Ayeomoni (2006: 93) demonstrates the genesis of the problem (possible extinction of Yorùbá language) as starting from the school age where most schools especially private ones adopt the English language as the only medium of instruction and the only language taught to pupils. The concern here is that two languages (Yorùbá and English) start to co-exist in the speech stock of the average child in the community. As a result, the child starts to become bilingual right from the primary school stage of education even when the grammar of the first language has not been thoroughly grasped. Given that the child would naturally want to express himself using all the linguistic resources at his disposal, then, "grammatical coalescence" comes into play. As a result, code-switching and code-mixing manifest in the child's linguistic performance right from his early age. Gradually, the language of the school assumes the dominant position and language shift surfaces.

Fabunmi and Salawu (2005: 405) present some possible solution to the problem of Yorùbá extinction after noting that the Yorùbá culture is dying and the fast way of killing a culture is to kill the language. They stress the need for an urgent positive attitudinal reorientation to the proper maintenance of the Yorùbá language among the elites. The work of Fabunmi and Salawu (2005) informs this paper's recommendations.

### CONCLUSION

In this paper, the researcher has considered how Yorùbá is an endangered, moribund, threatened, insecure and declining language. It is only a matter of time before "extinct" is used to qualify the language if care is not taken. Many languages have died, some of which are Latin, Old Dutch, Middle Dutch even Old English and Middle English and some other more. If you doubt the existence of language death, a brief research using Google might help you believe it actually exists. If you also doubt that Yorùbá language is dying, look around and observe the number of fluent speakers currently as compared to 50, 40, 30, 20 and 10 years ago. You might come into the realization that a language does not die in a day, it is a gradual process. The problem is, it might be too late before the speakers realize. Whether

Yorùbá will die or not rests so much on the owners of the language. As this paper is concluded, the question to ponder on is how long till Yorùbá language dies?

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher suggests the following possible solutions sharing virtually the same views as Fabunmi and Salawu:

1. A language is not prestigious until the speakers have prestige in their language. This is to state that Yorùbá speaking people need to be more prestigious about their language. An English man speaks his language with prestige anywhere he finds himself, same goes for the Chinese, Italian, Spaniard, and Korean men. They made the language what it is, Yorùbá language with an estimated number of about 30 million can also be made prestigious.
2. The young generations should be encouraged by their parents and guardians to speak and learn in Yorùbá most especially the Yorùbás in diaspora and the urban areas of Nigeria. The rate at which the language is acquired would be increased and code-mixing/code-switching will be reduced. The language thought to be moribund might take a different direction.
3. Yorùbá language should take an official status in its regional territory of southwest. It could be used as the language of politics and used as a medium of communication in all Nigerian house of assemblies. The language really deserves more recognition in Nigeria.
4. The language should also be used as a medium of instruction in our primary and secondary schools alongside English language up until tertiary education particularly in research works.
5. Yorùbá should be made a compulsory subject for all students in secondary schools and also made a requirement for gaining admission into higher institutions especially in the south-west.

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