

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF MOTHER TONGUE AND LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT PROCESS

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Abstract

There is no denying the fact that many languages of the world are vanishing at an irrepressible pace, and the status quo of many indigenous languages in Nigeria is an accurate mirror to this reality. According to a UNESCO report, around 27 languages in Nigeria are in the danger zone. There are many causative factors behind this situation. One important factor can be the parents, not teaching their local languages to their young ones. This paper attempts to analyse the role of parents and especially mothers in the transmission and preservation of languages. The key aim is to investigate whether or not; the mothers in Nigerian society are promoting their local or native dialects. For this purpose, a survey research is conducted. The tool of the study is a questionnaire that is administered to a sample population of mothers. The responses collected from a population sample (comprising of almost 300 mothers) exposes the fact that at present a great number of mothers and especially educated mothers tend to emphasize the learning of Pidgin (for general communication) and English (for educational purposes) among their children rather than their native dialects. The situation is worse with the Igbo language. In this regard, (UNESCO) Advisory Committee on Language Pluralism and Multi-language Education predicted that Igbo language and by implication, culture, may be heading for extinction, and subsumed by other stronger Nigerian languages by 2025, if nothing is done by its speakers (Abanobi, 2012). This is alarming and demands certain actions on the part of the government to sensitise the public on the importance of their native languages. The paper suggests the formulation of policies besides the broadcasting of some awareness programmes for the common public, to avoid a heritage of 'zombie languages'.

Keywords—language extinction, endangered languages, local languages, mothers, Nigeria

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the legacies sustained by a generation is language; and the language legacy of the future generations would be comprised of few spoken and many techno-mechanised languages, let us think twice. Language, from a simple tool for communication to a complex system of signs and sounds, has a pertinent implication in the human evolvement process. According to Ilyosovna (2020) knowledge. Nevertheless, it is an established reality that languages can die out. The attention-grabbing point is that if we use the term like language death, do we treat language as a living thing? The answer to this query is yes because we treat languages as living species that can evolve, grow, spread, change, and die. According to Mufwene (2004:203-204), “languages can be treated as species the way they die or born, however, they are not like organisms”. Kornai (2013:1) notes that languages are “long-lived organisms” as per the biological allegory. Thus, if we regard

something like living, we must acknowledge that death is a natural phenomenal end of every living thing. Nonetheless, the processes of life and death have different senses of interpretation for a language.

The death of a language is brought about when there is no speaker left to speak it. Crystal (2000), avers that language death is a terminating stage of a language when nobody speaks it anymore. According to Nettle and Romaine (2000), languages cannot survive if they are devoid of any community of people to speak them and pass them on to the next generation. It is actually not the language that sustains itself but the community of speakers that use it. According to Khokhlova (2014:19) clarification, the conception of language death as usually linked with one of the 'endangered languages', i.e. "languages that are at risk of falling out of use as their speakers die out or shift to some other language". Besides, if a community of speakers lack practicable settings, their languages are expected to demur and ultimately die. Such languages are also known as endangered languages. According to Kornai (2013), a language might not be dead until its last speaker is no more but there are perceptible signs that make it clear that a language is on the threshold of annihilation; these signs include loss of status, loss of function, and loss of competency in that particular language. Among other factors that can contribute to the language endangerment process are the number of speakers, their ages, economic status, their usage intensity, their attitudes about their language, their political status, and above all their professional and educational needs. All of these factors one or the other way mark the intensity of usage of a language and result in preservation or endangerment of a language. For example, Janse (2003) mentions the socioeconomic and socio-political influences as foremost motives that can sustain, retain, or eliminate a language. Isa, & Yagana Grema, (2014) talk about attitudes of people towards a language as a significant factor to language shift (where on language eventually dies).

language is our prime source of sharing ideas and beliefs and no communiqué is probable without it. It is in fact one of the most fastidious facets of a culture that is proudly preserved, promoted, and practiced. There is a cavernous connection between language and culture.

Nabi (2017:91) argues, "the relationship between language and culture is deeply rooted". A language is a mirror to a culture reflecting its values, traditions, and colours and on the other hand, a culture identifies itself through a language. According to Kovecses (2010), language signifies the true picture of a culture, and culture is impenetrable without a language. Nabi (2017) comments that language is used to sustain and express culture and cultural bonds. Ponorac (2010) recognises culture as the product of communally and traditionally positioned discourse groups, shaped and molded by language. The statements from both sides are constant but to conclude, we can say language and culture chemistry exists, though it is a bit complicated. Wardhaugh (2002) as cited in Nall & Nall (2009) summarises this chemistry, as anticipated by different scholars, in the following points: firstly, language regulates culture and thought as per Sapir-Whorf; secondly, language has an impact on culture; thirdly, culture affects people's language; fourthly, language and culture both inspire and regulate each other, and finally that language and culture do not correlate with each other. What matters here is to apprehend the fact that both are indispensable to each other and one could not be saved without the other. In the words,

If I forget my native speech,
And the songs that my people sing

What use are my eyes and ears?
What use is my mouth?

Danger (2011:19) opines that, “to preserve culture, we need to preserve its language, and losing a language means getting deprived of a culture, a viewpoint, a system, and a treasure of knowledge”.

The death of a language is not an unusual process. Languages are dying since the evolution of humankind (Crystal, 2010); however, what is worth noticing is the pace at which this thing is happening at the moment. In 1992, the phenomenon of language endangerment was realized on a large scale. A special issue of the journal *Language* (Hale et al., 1992), grounded on a symposium held at an annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, drew attention to the scale of language endangerment. According to a report by UNESCO ([Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger], 2011), more than 50% of the world’s languages are losing their native speakers and are on the verge of extinction. Further, it is established in this report that by the end of the 21st century, the majority of the world’s languages (that is 90%) would be swapped by the dominant languages. Crystal (2010) has also highlighted the fact that in the next hundred years, almost 3000 (50%) of the world’s languages would disappear. Further, he explained that if we calculate the average speed of this process, we can easily estimate that every two weeks, a language dies. Wiecha (2013:3) also warns about the situation as he claims, “language loss now progresses at a rate of one language every three months”. This is indeed an alarming situation but may be a probability.

Loss of a language is not only distressing for its speakers but also for linguists and scholars who believe that variability of languages provides a diversity of worldviews. Hoffmann (2009) studied the Unami language of Lenape (on brink of extermination) and reported how the loss of a language results in the loss of its distinct cultural values. Atifnigar et al. (2021) tried to explore the reasons that lead to language death and reported several factors like loss of interest in a language, inclination towards a second language, economical reasons, etc. Kornai (2013) studied the phenomenon of digital reasons that lead to language death.

This phenomenon of language death or loss also holds true for the languages situation in Nigeria. According to Hunarmal (2021) a recent report in a local newspaper highlighted the fact that almost 27 languages in Nigeria are in the danger zone, and can be dysfunctional in the upcoming few years. The UNESCO project (2013) on the language situation in also confirms this report (27 Nigerian languages are at the verge of extinction). Thus, we can infer from the above information that almost 50 % of the languages are in danger. The rate at which languages are reaching to end is quite perilous. This pace quite clearly indicates that in the future, we are going to hand over to our next generations only a few alive languages. Consequently, we will deprive them of the rich cultural traditions and values that are associated with these endangered languages; and which will reach their ends with their allied languages.

Tsunoda (2005), Černý, (2010) opine that there are hundreds of reasons behind this phenomenon of language death as proposed by linguists, like colonization, migration, globalization, invasion, and some natural and personal ones. Weinreich (2008) highlights factors like the communal and financial situation of the speakers, their marriage practices, their educational level, their religious connection, their settlement configurations, and many others. According to Crystal (2010), people are the main reason behind this process when they stop using a certain language/dialect simply

because they decide to use a different one. Mufwene (2006) also considers people as more responsible for giving up their language heritage, consciously if not deliberately. According to a UNESCO project, entitled 'Language Vitality and Endangerment' (2003), members of ethnolinguistic minorities abandon their language, thus leading towards the extermination of their particular language. Florey (2005) exemplifies threatened languages as those undergoing process of losing several speakers in connection with an increasing number of speakers in an infringing language. Similarly, Durkacz (1983) entails that people often prefer one language over others for several economic, social, political demographic reasons; in particular, "parents may not allow their children to acquire the community language, in order to disassociate with the minority community to become economically successful". In short, humans' preferences for a certain language at the cost of the other often lead to language endangerment situations and ultimately extinction.

This study equally focuses on the role of humans in the language death or loss process. According to Clarke & Milne (1996), It is an irrefutable fact that parents play an important role in transmitting the process of language from one generation to the next, thus it can be assumed that they can be a major cause of language endangerment activity when they fail to transfer their local languages or dialects to their children. Fishman (1991) asserts that the most frequently used factor in appraising the vitality of a language is whether or not it is being transferred from one generation to the next, or in other words whether or not parents teach it to their children. Consequently, when children will not learn these languages, then after some time, such languages would disappear. According to UNESCO's (2003) grading chart (given below in figure one) for the language endangerment process, this tendency brings a language into grades two and three of 'severely endangered' and 'definitely endangered' categories, respectively.

Degree of endangerment	Grade	Speaker population
Safe	5	The language is used by all ages, from children up
Unsafe	3	The language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by all children in limited domains
Definitively endangered	3	The language is used mostly by parental generation and up
Severly endangered	2	The language is used mostly by grandparental generation and up
Critically endangered	1	The language is used mostly by very few speakers of great-grandparental generation
Extinct	0	There exists no speaker

Figure 1. Intergenerational Language Transmission and Endangerment
(Source: UNESCO [2003]. Language Endangerment and Vitality)

Further, nine distinct factors are used to estimate where a language fits on this scale. These factors include:

1. Intergenerational language transmission
2. Total numbers of speakers
3. Percentage of speakers in the entire population
4. Loss of prevailing language dominions
5. Reaction to new media and new fields of usage

6. Resources for language literacy and education
7. Governmental and institutional language approaches and policies
8. Communal members' attitudes towards the language
9. Volume and eminence of documentation (Brenzinger, 2003)

If these factors are scrutinized, factors one, four, and eight can be linked to the home environment, where parents play a crucial role in the transmission process, language use dominions' identification process, and attitudes improvement process towards the local or native languages. The present study is based on the same theoretical paradigm.

This work has attempted to analyse the role of parents and especially mothers in the transmission and preservation of first languages/ dialects, known as mother tongues, in Nigeria (with bi or multilingual community of speakers). The key aim is to locate whether or not, the mothers in Nigeria society are promoting their local or native dialects to raise an awareness issue of how endangered languages of Nigeria can be preserved along with their speakers in the future. It is important to notice here that this paper does not believe in the preservation of languages as recorded versions which Perly (2012:134) calls 'zombie languages'. According to him, documentation is considered one of the important ways and for some linguists the only way to preserve a language without realizing that 'the documents are artifacts of a living language and not the living language itself. The irony lies in the fact that the experts are interested in the language as a code, but not the speakers who use the code'. Thus, this paper values the revitalization process as a key to saving endangered languages. Revitalization refers to the phenomenon of language revival through humans. But before revitalization, one needs to understand if a language is on the road to endangerment or not, which is the sole purpose of this study.

With a special focus on the role of mothers in transmitting the process of mother tongue, the following research has aims:

- To analyse the usage of languages within the selected context
- To examine the mothers' attitudes towards the local languages through their language choices in the selected context
- To seek the reasons that can ultimately lead to language endangerment

For this purpose, the following questions are posed:

1. What languages are used by Nigerian mothers within their home environment to communicate with their children, within the selected population?
2. Do the mothers teach their local dialects or languages to their children, in the selected context?

In what Almurashi (2017) writes, that linguistics should be concerned about the language extinction process as they can play their part in creating awareness. The answers to these research questions are significant for all those who want to preserve national and local dialects as well as the languages of Nigeria. If today we are talking about the endangered languages' situation in

Nigeria, we first need to identify the causative factors behind it because it is believed that the identification of problems is the first step towards their solution. Thus, it is a contribution to the national cause research repository, as well as a contribution to the field of Sociolinguistics. This paper is an attempt to identify one of the reasons why languages are dying out rapidly in the country and it also aims to suggest certain actions that could be taken to save the endangered languages of the country. The research also has social implications to create awareness among the masses regarding the preservation process of their mother tongues, which are beautiful in their ways.

2. METHODOLOGY

For the purposes stated above, a quantitative method of survey research was used. A quantitative form of research helps us to see a situation in number forms, thus making the situation statistically clear. To get a further understanding of the data, a discussion of the data has also been included. According to Kumar (2005), a survey is a reliable research method to collect facts and figures about the current situations, thus it helps to explore a situation through proper investigation. This study is also exploratory in nature as it aims to explore how mothers are playing their part in the language transmission process and to what extent. A survey was conducted in the capital and adjacent city of Enugu where the researcher got substantial number of Nigerian residents. The reasons for selecting this city are that: firstly, the city was in reach of the researcher as a resident of Enugu; secondly, the majority of the residents of the city belong to various other regions of Nigeria (multicultural cities), thus researcher could access speakers with a variety of mother tongues; thirdly, the city also has rural adjacent areas.

The tool of the study was a questionnaire that was distributed and collected randomly among mothers in the Coal city. The questionnaire contained 8 simple questions (6 close-ended for variable one and 2 open-ended for variable two, given below) about the use of language by mothers at homes while communicating to their children and certain motives behind it. Thus had two variables which were:

- Frequency of usage of local dialects/languages
- Motives behind language choice

For variable one, different domestic scenarios were presented in the questionnaire; and participants were inquired about the usage of different languages at a four scale line: only local dialect/language, less local and more national/ international language, more local and less national/ international and no local dialect/ language (only national or international) at all. For variable two, two simple open-ended questions were asked about the motives/ reasons they have for using a particular language more often than the other (if they do).

Further, these questions were designed at the following three demographic levels:

1. Educated and uneducated mothers
2. Mothers belonging to rural and urban areas
3. Division of mothers according to ethnic origins

The last level was established according to the data received. The questionnaire was distributed randomly in a population sample (comprising of 400 mothers chosen through random sampling method), however, only around 270 responses were chosen for the analysis to keep an equal ratio in the above-mentioned levels. Alongside, the various categories, the number of responses selected

for the analysis also varied for making a comparison in an equal proportion of data. The data for the first variable (i.e. frequency of usage) was quantitatively analysed and presented in graphical forms; whereas, data for the second variable was purely qualitative and discussed alongside the quantitative data

3. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Parents decide the appropriate language for their children and children eventually learn the language to which they are exposed more often, at home. Moreover, local languages should be given more dominion of usage in the social community if other national or international languages are already active in educational and professional domains. This way parents can help the children to develop a positive attitude towards the local languages. To delimit, the present study is focused on parents in general, and mothers' roles in particular. It can be inferred from the above-stated information that mothers can have a fundamental role in sustaining a language by transferring it to their children and vice versa. The study had the following findings with respect to the role of mothers in language nourishment in Nigeria:

The first category selected for the study was to see to what extent educated and uneducated mothers make use of their local language or dialect at home. The data obtained is presented in table one below.

Educated vs. uneducated mothers

Education is a tool to get knowledge and experience in the world. Thus, educated mothers have an edge over uneducated ones to train their children in good ways. However, there was a shocking discovery concerning the usage of native or mother tongues that they tend to avoid with their children. The data revealed that the majority of educated mothers either do not use local language/dialect at all or they use a mixture of languages with less focus on local languages. On the other hand, uneducated mothers have more preference for the local language. The reason could be that they are not well learned in the national or international languages taught in Nigeria. The analysis of the reasons provided by these mothers (who avoided local languages) show that they tend to make their children better speakers of the national language (for communication purposes) and international language (for educational and professional purposes). On the other hand, uneducated mothers prefer to transfer their local dialects to their children as they mentioned lacking a good grip on other languages as well as for maintaining a family environment. This is quite upsetting in many ways as the majority of the research quoted above (for instance, Brenzinger, 2003; Mufwene, 2006; Černý, 2010) stress valuing local languages in order to keep them alive along with worldwide or popular languages. On the other hand, it is quite opposite to what Weinreich (2008) believes that education plays an important role in keeping the languages alive. In the present context, the situation is quite different.

Table 1.**Use of Languages/Dialects: Educated vs. Uneducated Mothers**

	Educated	Uneducated
Only Local Language/ Dialect use	23%	73.5%
More local/ less national (international)	9%	17.5%
Less local/ More national (international)	41%	9%
No local language/dialect use	27%	0%

The second category was based on the results obtained from mothers of rural and urban areas. The data obtained is presented in table two below:

Use of Languages/ dialects: Mothers Belonging to Rural vs. Urban Areas

It is made clear by the data that mothers in urban areas tend to use a variety of languages while communicating with their children while mothers in rural areas prefer local languages more often than the other. The prime motive behind this preference for local languages as per mothers residing in rural areas is that they believe that their children must learn the language of the family. Moreover, they feel more comfortable communicating in local dialects for maintaining family and social relationships. They also want their children to stay connected with their place and people. On the other hand, mothers residing in urban areas consider it a societal pressure to teach national and international languages to their children. They further highlight the fact that they want their children to move with society. It is interesting to know that they consider the usage of local dialects as old-fashioned and unsuitable for the new world. They also mentioned that to compete with new job market demands, it is important to train them from the beginning.

Table 2.**Use of Languages/ Dialects: Mothers Belonging to Rural vs. Urban Areas**

	Urban	Rural
Only local language/Dialect use	23%	77%
More local/less national (international)	31%	17%
Less local/more national (international)	28%	6%
No local language/dialect use	18%	0%

Therefore, respondents of the study had a variety of local languages as their mother tongues or first languages. The researcher could not have enough time and space to gather a reliable and equal amount of data and to compare for all of the ethnic/ geographical levels. Thus, by purposive sampling method, data was selected for only those ethnic origins where there was a sufficient amount of data to make a comparison on an equal ratio.

These reasons clearly indicate that mothers have preferences for the usage of language in domestic settings. If they prefer to use a local language, it is often under their or family control to engage their children however, they set their own reasons to give value to one of the languages over other, by using it. On the other hand, mothers also have strong personal reasons to not use a language or a dialect. An investigation of the reasons clearly indicates the fact that mothers are not well

educated about the importance of the local languages or dialects. Further discussion of the results is provided in the next section.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It is through language that language can best be conveyed, whether written, spoken, or in a visual format. While communicating with their children, parents, and especially mothers, transfer their language to them. This is the way language keeps on living from generation to generation, and if any generation substitutes its language with any other one then the preceding language eventually vanishes, and a new language takes its place. Similarly, if a language starts disappearing from various practical domains of usage like home and other social communities, it is also an early sign of the process of language extinction. Furthermore, attitudes also play an important role in this regard. According to Brenzinger (2003) factors like generational transmission, language use expansion in various domains and attitudes play a major role in identifying the status of a language as safe or endangered, thus these factors are closely related to the social environment and members. Therefore, we can infer that parents play a vital role in keeping languages alive. As mothers spend more time with their children, so they have more capacity to save a language, the first language, the local language, the mother tongue we call it.

Whenever so many number of mothers stop using a certain language(s) or dialect(s) within a certain community of a particular language, it means they mark it as an endangered language (as shown in table 1, above). Moreover, if they are not aware of the fact that how important it is to use and promote local dialects, they would not pay much attention to it. In both ways, ultimately it is a perilous attitude towards a language existence. Kermizi (2015) states that language loss is not just about language; it is the loss of a complete culture and society. The data collected in this research shows the same kind of tendency in Nigeria. It has been observed and verified that mothers and specially educated mothers belonging to urban areas are more inclined towards the usage of national and international languages rather than the local ones. Torwali (2014:1) avers, “the speakers of these minority languages regard their languages to be of no use for them to be able to progress in life”. According to Brenzinger (2003), it is an early stage that would lead to a complete loss eventually if not reversed

The results altogether make it clear that gradually, mothers are shifting their focus from the use of local dialects towards national and international languages with certain motives like global values of certain language, educational needs, professional settings’ requirements, business demands, communication at the national level and social status associated to certain languages, etc. This trend is at the moment more obvious with Nigerian languages. It is quite an alarming situation. According to Clyne and Kipp (1999) (as cited in Kermizi (2015:50) “if a language is not maintained in the home domain, then it cannot be maintained elsewhere”. Thus, this situation is alarming and if the same trends endure, it means we are going to lose some more dialects and languages. It is worth notifying here that some of the local dialects are already listed as endangered languages by UNESCO (2013). In the word of Crystal (2000:34) “if the development of multiple cultures is so important, then the role of languages becomes critical, for cultures are chiefly transmitted through spoken and written languages”. Linguistic diversity is directly related to the sustainability issue of our planet; thus, it is crucial to preserve more and more languages. Odum (1986:12) recounts this idea as “the diversity of living things is directly correlated with stability ... variety may be a necessity in the evolution of natural systems”. This situation demands certain

actions on the part of the government to familiarize the public with the importance of their native languages. According to the findings, mothers use a language in accordance with their family or personal partialities, and have no knowledge about the importance of preservation and conservation of a language.

The paper suggests the formulation of certain policies as well as the broadcasting of some awareness programs for the common public, especially mothers to promote and continue the use of local dialects at home. They should be made aware that children have tendencies to learn and absorb more than one language. We need to motivate mothers to maintain the usage of mother tongues if we, as a nation, do not want to leave a legacy of ‘zombie languages’ for our future generations.

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