

THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDIGENOUS NIGERIAN LANGUAGES FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND PROFESSIONAL USE: THE CASE OF ESAN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This paper examines the issue of developing indigenous Nigerian languages particularly Esan for effective communication and professional use. The study adopted the survey research method while data collection was done using the questionnaire and informal interviews. A sample size of 1500 respondents was purposively selected from Esan people residents in their homeland. The findings show that 95.0% of the people could speak the language fluently without similar proficiency in reading and writing while only 15.0% could read and write scripts in Esan with a high level of proficiency. The dismal situation was adduced to attitudinal problem since the people find it more prestigious and acceptable to speak and study English language being the language of the elites. The paper recommends the teaching and learning of Esan in institutions of higher learning, training of teachers and documentation of the language among others.

Introduction

In contemporary world where information and knowledge have grown to become indispensable in human development and societal advancement, the development and standardization of indigenous languages have become imperative. The world is undergoing a global transformation in every facet of human endeavour. Inadvertently or otherwise the information gap that has developed between the advanced countries of the North and the developing countries of the South through disproportionate information and knowledge handling in the areas of generation, dissemination, storage, retrieval and use is being encouraged in Nigeria between the elites and the so-called non-elites. Today, the proficient use of English as a language of communication in the Nigerian media, be it in the print or electronic broadcast as observed by Omoera (2008) is central to effective communication whereby what is intended is what is received without any form of ambiguity. Can this be said of Esan and other indigenous languages in Nigeria? It is only within the purview of a language that is well developed and standardized, a language not lacking in terminology specialized or general, that the proficiency and effectiveness very much talked about in communication can be of interest.

Generally, language is a tool or resource of communication, an expression of personality, a signal of identity (Dominguez, 1998). Shared code as it relates to language and channels of communication linking people is an absolute necessity for the creation of information and knowledge so inexorably valued for socio-economic,

political and industrial development. Knowledge and information for example can only be transmitted by physical communication and the primary medium of communication is language (Johnson and Sager, 1980). Given that language as Johnson and Sager (1980) further argued is manifested as a sequence of discrete segments, then the number of elements in the lexicon of a given language must be denumerable in contrast to the structure of postulated concepts which is essentially continuous. For any language to meet the requirements for effective communication and professional use, such a language must be well developed and standardized. Seen from a professional point of view, language according to Selander (1980) affords its user a system of components describing thoughts, ideas and facts in the most adequate way. The accompanying vocabulary as Selander (1980) further stressed is a key to the conceptual development of the discipline where the associated lexicology provides the most fundamental method of altering the concepts already established. This position is, however, akin to Wuster's views in Felber (1980) as he observed that the improvement of professional communication could be achieved only by developing an adequate instrument, i.e., terminology; which in a sense will not only assist creativity and innovation, but will aid effective and clear management of information and knowledge in either tacit or explicit forms for the benefit of all. Terminology as used here refers to the theory of terms and the science of the proper use of terms.

The question of developing indigenous Nigerian languages for teaching and scientific communication has been a daunting and protracted one. To some Nigerians, it is a futile initiative and a misplacement of priority at best to think of committing hard earned resources to the course of developing indigenous Nigerian languages each for effective communication and professional use since there are well over 250 of them. Excluding dialects, Hoffman (1974), Hansford (1976) and Blench and Dendo (2003) all in Omo-Ojugo (2004) put the numbers of languages in Nigeria at 396, 395 and 550 respectively. Although no one would wish any of the indigenous languages go into atrophy, the discouraging position held by some of the Nigerian elites whose culture largely subsists and propagated by English language as a predominant medium (Adekunle, 1995) predates postmodernism. This, however, has necessitated the sympathy successive governments in Nigeria shared with the vocal elites that actually believed that domesticated English language is the only language that could foster national unity and cultural awareness in a multi-ethnic state like Nigeria. In spite of the limiting nature of these lack lustre views and considerations of the issues concerning development and standardization of indigenous languages in a fast globalizing society, Nigeria must remain proactive in developing indigenous languages for empowerment as the country is fast losing by the day so much of its cultural heritage and capacity to minimize the looming cultural imperialism and positively contribute to the world order in all ramifications. The seriousness of this can aptly be appraised against the submission of Sutz's (2002) in the face of globalization. According to him,

globalization is not homogenization, it is not convergence, nor is it the end of history, if by that we mean some sort of final uniformity. Globalization imposes harsh conditions

which are hardly ever discussed: one of these is the obligations to maintain an active and changing relationship with knowledge so as to hold open the possibility of escaping at least partially, from a situation of almost total subordination.

Nigeria must make its mark with the increase of local content on the Net to enhance visibility and patronage. The pertinent question is which of the existing languages in Nigeria is considered appropriate enough by the people to serve as an effective medium through which wider visibility and patronage of the nation's prized local contents can be made? Is it Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Tiv, Nupe, Esan, or Ibibio? The answer to this simple question cannot be so easily answered without teasing up the politics that had so badly injured all the efforts made in the past to develop a healthy language policy for Nigeria. Political impediments of this nature will only bring about retardation and stagnancy to socio-cultural, economic and technological development of the nation and its people in so far as English language remains the major and effective access to information that is vital to making quality decisions for advancement and development. What is the stake of the Esan in the emerging global village? Currently there is virtually no computer in any part of Nigeria that speaks any of the indigenous languages including Esan and as such no breakthrough is in site and none can be contemplated without adequate language that can be adaptable. It is against this background that this paper will focus on the efforts already made or could be made to facilitate the development of indigenous languages in Nigeria with particular reference to Esan language.

Research Method

Methods of doing research vary from one discipline to another. In the study of language for social behaviour, some of the most common techniques that can be utilized in doing research as enumerated by Papapavlou (1998) include using surveys and questionnaire, carrying out interviews, recording natural conversations, and employing experimental manipulation. In the present study, however, a combination of the first two techniques, that is, surveys and questionnaire, and informal interviews were used. A sample of 1500 respondents of Esan extraction was purposively selected from various socio-economic strata that included traders, artisans, farmers, opinion leaders, religious and community leaders, teachers and students. Data collection was done between December 2007 and July 2009 in the five Local Government Areas that made up Esan Land.

Development of Indigenous Languages in Nigeria

All the Nigerian indigenous languages are basically oral in nature and their development and documentation in written form date back to the colonial era when the need to produce hymn and prayer books for the local people was felt. Apart from the hymn books and prayer books that were produced for the local people, the Holy Bible was translated into some indigenous languages. Catechisms were also written for the benefits of the people concerned using indigenous languages. For example, copies of catechism written and published for the people using the central

Esan language as spoken by Esan of Uronmhun (Uromi) extraction still exist. According to Okojie (2003) Esan was first written by the Catholic Mission in its Esan Catechism in 1930. The sustenance of the inclination to develop and document some of the indigenous languages in Nigeria in concrete terms could be traced to 1846 when Presbyterian Mission brought a letterpress-printing machine into the country. In 1859 Reverend Townsend published the first newspaper in indigenous language Iwe Iroyin, using the language or words of the Yorubas.

Words of human language according to Moody (1977) allude to things of which we have experience through our own physical senses. The dilemma here is that so far according to Jowitt (1995) not more than half of Nigeria's languages appear to have been committed to writing at all. Williamson (1990) in Jowitt (1995) puts the figure of the languages that can claim to have been written at 117. The danger inherent in this cannot be over emphasized. The point being made is that those who are proficient one way or the other in reading and writing any of the indigenous languages but handicapped in English language which is currently the only language being used in the country to teach and communicate scientific knowledge (Omoera, 2008), will be at a disadvantage in accessing information considered vital to personal and/or societal development and advancement. For example, the relevance and significance of the Yoruba word *ekule* to the people in its everyday use notwithstanding, has no meaningful equivalent in English Language to guarantee the depth of understanding intended in its usage when Yoruba cultural experiences are documented in metropolitan languages. Similar examples of words abound in various indigenous languages across the country whose essence in terms of meaning and understanding are lost within the use of English language as a replacement. Experience such as this could only weaken the process of effective communication and transfer of relevant information and knowledge to a people bound by the same culture. To find solutions to likely frustrations that educators and/or learners across the country could face in an attempt to retain appropriate meanings for important words and concepts as orchestrated by language change at the local or national levels, professionals must of necessity identify the whole gamut of words that could convey the right meaning in order to avoid semantic rejection (Lau, 2004).

In order to develop as many languages as possible, the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) through its Language Development Centre has developed the following orthographies of Nigerian languages (Olude, 1997) in manuals numbered I through VII as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Orthography of Nigerian Languages

S/No	Manuals	Languages Covered
1	Manual I	Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and Efik
2	Manual II	Edo, Fulfulde, Ijo, Kanuri and Tiv
3	Manual III	Ibibio, Nupe, Idoma, Birom and Kalabari
4	Manual IV	Ibira, Bwatye, Isoko, Kaje, Urhobo and Igala
5	Manual V	Esan, Bura, Mambilla, Ikwerre and Jukun
6	Manual VI	Obolo, Lokaa, Igede, Tawk and Mbembe
7	Manual VII	Ngas, Maghi, Etsako, Ejagham and Mumuye

The role orthography plays in language development is so vital that it will not only serve as useful leverage and a guide to excellent writing of cultural and educational books, curriculum development, language teaching, interpretation of staged dramas/plays, electronic and radio broadcasting and publishing, it will prevent overextension of words/terms to cover more grounds because of limitation of vocabularies by assisting the process of generating more acceptable terms for the language. The ultimate is to achieve accurate description of situations and phenomena with ease while retaining their intended and acceptable meaning. The dilemmas and frustrations newscasters frequently encounter during 7:30 pm NTA Irukep news in Esan or during any other Esan-based programme such as 'jo da de, jo da su'nun' in trying to pronounce some words such as one million, two billion, or three trillion Naira will be a thing for the amateurs with sufficient improvement of the language. There is for now no four cardinal points in Esan as it relates to East, West, North and South or the derivatives such as North-East, North-West, South-East, South-West, etc, that accompany the eight, sixteen and thirty two cardinal points. The list is endless of similar gaps and lack of words to designate objects, concepts and situations. To also satisfy quite easily the spiritual requirements in being able to conjure the right moods/feelings using a particular language is a function of the level of development and standardization of such language. Since standardization is involving in human resources, time and money, series of seminars, stakeholders meetings and workshops should be organized to consider the linguistic and sociological aspects of Esan for increased patronage and use in various setting including learning centres.

In Nigeria, for example, the purpose of the educational language policy is to entrench English as the language of education par excellence, particularly with the requirement of a credit pass in English for certification at most levels of education (Bamgbose, 1995). The role of English in several domains, with its consequent dominant position in all official transactions, higher education, science and technology, the media, the legislature and the judiciary as Bamgbose (1995) further stresses is a logical consequence of the official status of English language as well as favourable attitudes to its use by bilingual elites. Since the realization that it is absolutely

rewarding that every child should begin his/her formal education in his/her mother-tongue and continue to be taught in that language as long as the language and the supply of books and other materials permit following the advocacy of United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as Omo-Ojugo (2004)

noted, little or nothing has been done by way of standardizing most indigenous languages in Nigeria for scholarship and scientific communications. Although this appears to be a tall ambition at the moment, the growing awareness and sustained intellectual activities in respect of Esan as engendered by the presence of a university and television house, language research and development as touching Esan will soon outstrip current sketchy benefaction and investment.

Contrary to linguistic evidence, people still believe that some languages are more precise, beautiful, and expressive than other languages and that dialects are inferior, inexpressive and incomplete (Papapavlou, 1998). Esan is expressive to a large extent and with orthography, it has gone beyond the class of a dialect and it is understood by about 500,000 people (Okojie, 2003). To make Esan to be effective for professional use among the people, various distribution channels oral distributors, informal and formal distribution channels must be engaged as suggested by Dominguez (1998). Although the channels are classified into oral distributors (such as opinion leaders, religious and community leaders) and written ones, that is, formal distributors (such as companies, mass media, educational institutions, writers, publishing houses, etc), a third one is distinguishable as informal distributors such as sports clubs, association in the immediate context of the individual, etc. Considering all these, Esan has an array of channels to draw on. The major challenge is that of attitude and the readiness of the people to actively engage the available channels for effect. It is time efforts are made to try out written Esan communication in advertisement in place of some of the numerous ineffective ones that are based on English language. This consideration commends the relevance of publishing houses and writers as invaluable channels and facilitators within the framework of language use and development.

Publishing and the Development of Indigenous Languages

Publishing is obviously working with words and it involves the process of representing author's implicit knowledge in an explicit form for others to learn from. This consideration, however, strongly locates the industry in such a way that significant bonding develops between it and the language of the host community in the light of sustainable development. Publishing as it is today in Nigeria is predominantly being done in English language with the exception of a relatively few number of titles produced in Ibibio, Esan, Birom, Tiv, Etsako, Nupe, Igala, Ejagham and a few other languages spoken by relatively smaller cultural groupings in the country. The one-sided transmission of cultural forms, packaged information and consumer tastes from the West to other parts of the world without a commensurate reciprocal flow in the reverse direction according to Huntington (1996) in Olukoshi (2004) has evoked concerns about the revival of cultural imperialism or crass of civilization. Even with print on demand (POD), a situation that allows books to be published in any of the languages in the country at reduced costs, materials for leisure reading are still hardly available in Esan.

This certainly would have led in part to some of the grave concerns raised by Omo-Ojugo (2004) about the use of Esan. Looking at the paucity of written texts, including transcribed, translated, and annotated

audiovisual recordings of natural speech as indices of documented language, he was tempted to rate Esan on grade 1 when the number 9 factor of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) "Major Evaluative Factors of Language Vitality" was applied. The detail of the number 9 factor tagged "Amount and Quality of Documentation" on the evaluative scale provided by UNESCO (2003) in Omo-Ojugo (2004) is contained in Table 2. In grade 1 for example, the nature of documentation of the languages is inadequate being that only a few grammatical sketches, short-word list and fragmentary text exist. In the languages under this grade, audio and video recordings do not exist even when they do; they are often of unacceptable quality.

Table 2: Details of Factor Nine of the Major Evaluative Factors of Language Vitality

Nature of Documentation	Grade	Language Documentation
Superlative	5	There are comprehensive grammars and dictionaries, extensive texts, constant flow of language materials, Abundant annotated high- quality audiovisual and video recordings.
Good	4	There are no good grammar and a number of adequate grammars, dictionaries, literature, and occasionally updated everyday media; adequate annotated high-quality audio and video recordings.
Fair	3	There may be an adequate grammar or sufficient amount of grammars, dictionaries, and texts, but no everyday media; audio and video recordings may exist in varying quality or degree of annotation.
Fragmentary	2	There are some grammatical sketches, word-lists, and texts useful for limited linguistic research but with inadequate coverage. Audio and video recordings may exist in varying quality, with or without any annotation.
Inadequate	1	Only a few grammatical sketches, short-word lists, and fragmentary texts. Audio and video recordings do not exist, are of unstable quality, or are completely un-annotated.
Undocumented	0	No material exists

Source: UNESCO (2003) in Omo-Ojugo (2004)

It is clear from the analysis of the data collected that while as high as 95.0% of the respondents being the majority could speak the language fluently without similar proficiency in reading and writing it, only 15.0% could read and write scripts in Esan with a high level of proficiency within the limit of available vocabularies. This poor performance of the Esans in reading and writing their language could be as a result of the fact that the language been inherently oral from time. Although 100% of the respondents bemoaned the existence of such a high percentage of Esan population that are not literate profoundly or partially in reading and writing Esan scripts,

they however affirmed the major problem to be attitudinal in that the people find it more prestigious and acceptable to speak and study English language the language of the elites . This finding is obviously in line with

the popular belief in extant literature that English language and its accent is more favourably regarded as superior as a measure of sound education, intelligence and success. To ameliorate this problem, some of the respondents averred that concerted efforts should be made to train reasonable number of teachers that would support the teaching and learning of the language at both the primary and secondary school levels of education.

To facilitate and garner the needed improvement of Esan for effective professional use and scholarship, efforts must be made to advance beyond the teaching and learning of the language at the lower levels of education to the development of book publishing industry in Esan land. This will not only support constant supply of books and other reading materials in Esan to the people, it will also encourage the standardization and effective use of the language in many spheres of communication. No one reads a book that is not available and no one attempt to study a language for which books are nonexistent. Out of all the over 130 publishing houses that registered with the Nigeria Publishers Association (NPA), for example, none is located in any of the five Local Government Areas that constitute Esan land. The implication of this could well be that none of the publishing houses is viable enough to register its presence on the NPA member-firms update or no genuine publishing houses exist in the area outside printers dabbling into the business of publishing for extra earnings. The neglect suffered by the language since 1932 when it was first used in teaching could also mean that language development was not perceived by the Esans as too important a factor that could easily bring about desired socio-economic transformation of the area. Let it be said that it is sufficiently established in the corpus of knowledge that constant and effective use of a language often lead to the perfection of its use in the generation of both general and scientific information as resources for development.

What then is information as a resource? Information is usually everywhere around us in various forms with all the characteristics to inform, entertain or educate. Valued for its ability to inform and reduce uncertainty, information can be paper-based, computer-based, or stored in people's minds, availing itself of various technologies or tools of communication (Ononogbo, 2009). In order words, accessing, manipulating and disseminating information for the benefit of humankind can be achieved using various forms of technologies or tools. Through social contact or research application, information can be updated and modified. So far, who is consciously generating, updating or modifying information within the confines of Esan for beneficial use or are all these processes left to chance occurrences? Whenever information is found and applied, it has the ability to elucidate and dispel uncertainty for healthy decisions to be made. Here lies the origin of the economic value so easily ascribed to information in contemporary society. The information that is acquired in a message for instance does not generally arise out of nothing. Any acquired information is usually about something

and that thing is generally called an information source having information level J which is required to completely describe it (Frieden, 2007). The source is however an effect and its perceived value in a message convey

information level I to the user. In general I cannot exceed J since measurements are generally imperfect. The mapping J → I defined an effective information flow from source to destination (technically referred to as the sink) through a channel. Information economy is a current fad that encapsulates all that happen from the source (J) through the channel () to the sink (I). This emerging economy is far from being exploited from the indigenous stand point as it relates to creating and marketing information product and services in Esan. Apart from the theatre, music and film makers that have made some recorded efforts in registering some products in Esan for the entertainment industry, contributions from other sectors to growing an information economy in Esan land with adequate local content is a far cry.

Information economy describes the transformation of economic and social activities by information and communications technologies (ICTs). In other words, it is an economy with an increased emphasis on informational activities and information industry in which information, knowledge and education are major inputs to business and social activity. Although information economy is not an entirely new phenomenon, it is one in which the rapid development and diffusion of ICT-based innovation is transforming all sectors and aspects of society. Succinctly put, information economy is based on the exchange of knowledge, information and services rather than physical goods and services. The ability to create economic and social value for the society through rapid exchange of information between the source and the user at anytime and anywhere is the hall mark of an information economy and it can only flourish in a society with a well developed and standardized language that could determine effective and efficient selection and combination of codes for profitable transactions.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

The development of a language that will be adequate for professional use and teaching and research must be able to address such basic mathematical notations such as plus (+) *alokugbe*, minus (-) *anebhore*, division (÷) *aghale*, and multiplication (×) *agbeyi* and more. To the 1500 people the researcher interviewed between 2007 and 2009, all, that is, 100% knew what plus, minus, and division were in Esan. Of all, only one man from Uromi representing an infinitesimal 0.00067% of the total knew and supplied the term *agbeyi* used in this paper as Esan version of multiplication. None unfortunately could tell what square root, cube root, and factorial were and none could suggest a term for faith and belief outside *ur??bh?*. The list of cases like this is endless in a language spoken by people who are capable of come up with the desired solutions. Could it be dilemmas of this nature that prompted Onyonyor's (2008) quest to finding a suitable language for communicating theatre to our people? The die is cast and the Rubicon has to be crossed in developing and standardizing Esan for effective communication and professional use both in spoken and written forms.

The central question in any language promotion scheme, no matter what language or level it may be, definitely is the functional relevance of this language to the people who use it, those who are called upon to use it and those who may be attracted to it (Anchimbe, 2006). When people shift from their own language to another because it provides livelihood, they endanger their own language. To enhance effective and wide spread usability of the language of Esan people, the following recommendations are made.

1. Efforts should be made by scholars and other interested researchers to interview the and terms in the event of death.
2. Establishment of specialized language centres and schools for the training of instructors to facilitate the teaching and learning of Esan in the locality.
3. The teaching and learning of the language in the University and College of Education in the locality should be encouraged. The involvement of such institutions of higher learning like the Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma and the College of Education, Igueben will no doubt strengthen the intended development and standardization of the language.
4. Creative use of the language in preparing jingles and advertisements for products and services in the available mass media should be seriously addressed. This could spark new wave of interest in the use of the language professionally.
5. Series of meetings in form of workshops, seminars and conferences should be organized to facilitate development and standardization of the language.

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