

African Languages for African Studies: Agenda Setting

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Abstract

It is without any doubt that most African Languages, in the precolonial period were not more utilized orally. It was the coming of the colonialists that facilitated the reduction of African languages to written form. Although, various African colonial governments made some attempts to codify some African languages through the institutionalization and development of their orthographies as well as the codification of the languages, yet, the colonial languages were given a much higher official status. As such, colonial languages were used for documentations of official and religious correspondences. In Nigeria in general, and among the Yoruba in particular, English was employed to facilitate all forms of diplomatic transactions. The consequence of this has seen the incapacitation of Yoruba in the area of speakership and usage in diverse fields, especially in the different academic fora. Following this background, this study is an attempt at creating models for the reconfiguration and strengthening of African languages in order to be able to meet up with the demand and present realities of African studies. Suggestions on how to achieve this includes terminology development in various academic study areas; introducing models and strategies of translation, especially machine translation; elevating the status of the languages and revisiting their codification processes. This study will enable the reflexivity of African languages in line with the culture and general worldview of the African people, which the foreign language has been struggling to achieve. It is expected that the outcome of this attempt could proffer solutions to some of the epistemology and semantic issues facing African studies.

Keywords: Codification, Orthographies, Models, Reconfiguration, Terminology Development

Introduction

African study has experienced various levels of development both from western and the African perspective. Although, the development seems to have gained more attention from the west, much more than it is expected from this part of the divide. During the exploration of the Europeans in Africa, studies about Africa were visible in the academic scene in the global north. Studies in archeology and anthropology could be considered as trail blazers in the various attempts at unearthing the hitherto mysteries of the African continent, especially south of the Sahara. Enclypaedia.com 2019 update defines African studies as all research falling within the identified physical boundaries of the African landmass. Although, this definition covers the entire African hemisphere, this report identifies the distinction between the nations of the northern

African hemisphere and the sub-Sahara Africa. Therefore, the African studies under interrogation relates to the entire worldview and realities of the Sub-Saharan Africa. The emergence of the field of African Studies can be connected to the colonial influence or direct involvement of states in either the colonisation, colonial rule or decolonisation of African regions and people – with the latter as the passive objects rather than the architects of the study areas defined (Melber, 2009 p.186). It is observed that the key players in the systematic scientific study of Africa are the Europeans on one hand, and the Americans on the other, both considered as the externalist. It might not be out of place to conclude that the influence of these externalists is an offshoot of the colonial practices in Africa. Thus, the outlook of African Studies is more conspicuous with the ideologies and observations of the so called externalists. Especially with the provision of funding opportunities into the researches surrounding African Studies. The scenario described above is peculiar to the crux of this study in the sense that there are certain peculiarities that allows for proper research and methodologies in carrying out studies relating to African realities. In order to achieve an optimum African studies research scenario, there have been academic debates on whether only African scholars should be at the forefront of African studies or that African identity does not really matter in carrying out a good research. One of such peculiarities is language. The mismanagement of language of research could lead to identifiable loophole in African Studies in Africa

Matters Arising

Weapons adopted by the Europeans to achieve colonialism in African include the introduction of their language, religion and other institutions to the African people. Majority of African nations have found it so difficult to maintain their indigenous languages amidst the growing popularity of the languages of the colonialists. This situation was implemented across colonial Africa (Awoniyi, 1978; Kashoki, 1979). Africans began to find reasons to learn the language of their colonialists in order to meet up with the new requirements since language is a useful tool in all endeavours. Most of the policies and ordinances that were introduced by the colonial governments across Africa were presented in colonial languages. In Nigeria, and in Yoruba nation in particular, English had no serious competition with Yoruba language.

There was an aggressive awareness and introduction of the English language in various government units. Most importantly, the introduction of western education to the Yoruba people

was a factor that relegated the use of Yoruba language among the people. The Yoruba people had to put in efforts to meet up with the language requirements, this being done at the detriment of Yoruba language development. The Missionaries did their bits to make sure that Yoruba language also enjoyed some level of development. They organized workshop and conferences which resulted into orthography development of the language and other reports that could help in the development of the Yoruba language, using the European standard.

The first set of Yoruba writing exercise is the translation of the Holy Bible into Yoruba language. This translation exercise was coordinated by a certain Reverend, later Bishop Ajayi Crowther. Bishop Ajayi Crowther himself had been captured by slave traders at his early years but was freed and taken to Freetown, Sierra Leone, where he had his education. Bishop Crowther would later returned to Lagos where he was committed to the gospel in the Christian way. As much as the efforts of the missionaries in reducing the Yoruba language into writing is very much appreciated, the Christianity consciousness of these early writers must have affected the deep and complete understanding of the language. For instance, the condemnation of traditional religious practices owing to the belief that they are fetish and that they promote paganism made the missionaries do less research in that area. However, the practice of the traditional religions, with various units producing oral literature which is considered as the treasure box of the understanding of Yoruba language was neglected. This was an obvious gap in the developmental process of Yoruba language. So, two issues that have been identified as the shortcoming of Yoruba language is first, the unwillingness of the colonial government to integrate the colonial language into the African society, thereby refusing to sponsor and develop Yoruba language, and second, the various gaps identified in the efforts of the missionaries to develop Yoruba due to their isolation to the traditional religious practices. These two have created a weak foundation for the language to develop on.

So, western education thrived in the land, but with the language of the colonialists. Researches that were carried out by various the early anthropologists and archaeologists had no complete grasps of the language due to the two points that have been identified above.

Later in African studies researches, western anthropologists, archaeologists, linguists and others scholars dominated the study area. Some of them doing some field works but very few of them taking extra effort to study and understand Yoruba language, which obviously aided their field

works and reports. It is obvious that most of the African studies scholars have a very shallow knowledge of the African languages in whose culture they are working on.

Scholars in African studies that are domiciled outside the continent, whose works aim at creating awareness for the elevation of African indigenous knowledge sure need some level of linguistic understanding of the African nation which their works focus on. This has always not been the case because there is already a gradual relegation of African languages in African Studies scholarship, most non-African scholars are only interested in having more than the basic knowledge of the indigenous language of the affected nation. For instance, in Yoruba cosmology, the *Ifa* Oracle, which is a system of divination, and which is also considered as the words and instructions from the omnipotent to the people; the totality of God's message to mankind on earth which is sent through one of the deities - *Orunmila*. (Bascom, 1969; Abimbola, 1975; Emmanuel, 2000). There are lots of verses used in the process of divination in *Ifa*. These verses contain so much information about the Yoruba people, so much that a considerable percentage of the literary contents of the Yoruba is domiciled in it. Therefore, a level of understanding of the *Ifa* oracle and how it works is required to be able to leverage on it as an important data source.

On the other hand, like many other African languages, Yoruba is a tonal language, and the tones are contrastive, i.e. the tones have their meanings and they can effect semantic differences in a pair of words. The autosegmental effect of the Yoruba language is so important such that no successful research can be carried out in the language without the proper understanding and use of the tones. For instance, it is the tonal effect that distinct words like *àgbà* (elder) and *àgbá* (drum); *ìgbá* (garden egg), *ìgbà* (period), *ìgba* (two hundred) and *ìgbá* (calabash). Another aspect of the language analysis that requires more than the basic understanding is the various stylistic devices, those that are connotatively employed by indigenous language users. Second language learners will find these language situations as a challenge to be able to make use of the language appropriately. Examples of such devices are irony, metaphor, paronymy, antonymy, homonymy, idioms and proverbs. What the above explanation suggest is that language can be a very serious challenge if any serious research is to be achieved.

One of the reasons why agenda setting is being proposed for scholars, both non-African and African, researching in African studies is to facilitate easy interpretation of the knowledges coming

out from the continent. Also, it provides a model that can be employed by scholars working in a continent that is not indigenous to them.

Foreign Researcher, African Language, and African Studies

Undoubtedly, the contribution of the western world to African Studies cannot be overemphasised. This has started long into the precolonial era. The major contributions to different fields of study in African studies have been achieved by non-Africans, Europeans and Americans specifically. It has been suggested by scholars of African studies that it is best to express African worldview in the indigenous languages of the Africans (Ambler, 2011; Falaiye, 2017). The questions that should be asked is: how was this made possible knowing that Europeans and Americans do not speak indigenous African languages? The answers to the question might be that, first, these foreign scholars learnt the African languages before they could achieve success in the study area in Africa. Second, it could be that the foreign scholars rely wholly on an indigenous research assistant who also serves as a translator and/or an interpreter. Third, to say the least, it might be that the research report and documentations have been misrepresented due to the nonunderstanding of the indigenous language of the people.

Any of the three possible answers could be valid, all depending on the methods of research employed by the foreign researchers. Examining the answers, firstly, it will be very uninteresting for foreign scholars to depend on the knowledge of the African language as a second learner before going for field trip. Second language learners tend to learn the basic aspect of a language in a purpose to use it for basic expressions and verbal exchanges. A researcher in a foreign language must have been very fluent in the language before they could embark on such research. Yoruba language is an example of an African language that researchers need to have more than the basic knowledge before a meaningful research can be carried out. Secondly, which is mostly likely the case, the foreign researcher relies on the competence of the research assistant who is believed to have a complete understanding of the language of the society.

However, the complete reliance on such person is risky, such the outcome of the research largely depends on the truthfulness of the assistant. If the data gathered are compromised, the finding and conclusion will also be compromised. The third possibility depends on the first two possibilities, such that if the foreign scholar learnt the language as a second learner only when the research is

about to be carried out, or that the researcher depends wholly on the assistant in the field, these two situations can easily be compromised. And therefore, the research report is misrepresented. This has happened with early colonial researchers in the Yoruba nation where the deities of the Yoruba people were interpreted to be Gods. The foreign researchers, concluding that the Yoruba deities are Gods, should not be, and they were referred to as small gods, writing the word with a lower case initial letter. This is a misinterpretation that could have happened due to any of the three questions raised above.

Furthermore, it is the mistake of the translators of the Holy Bible from English to Yoruba, led by the revered Bishop Ajayi Crowther, that made him and his team translated *Esu* to mean Satan. *Esu* is one of the deities in Yoruba cosmology and there is no character called Satan in the Yoruba belief system. These are some of the misinterpretations in African studies, caused by the lack of understanding of the Yoruba language. Indeed, this must have happened to many other African people where the foreign researchers have presented them wrongly to the global scene.

Setting the Agenda for African Languages in African Studies

There are diverse studies that have been carried out in the Yoruba cosmology either by a non-Yoruba scholar or an indigenous Yoruba scholar. Whichever, language plays a vital role in the development of Yoruba studies in particular and African studies in general. Obviously, there are series of challenges of African Studies as it relates to the studies of the Yoruba people of Nigeria and other West African countries. One of the series of challenges is language; language use; language interpretation and translation. A simple reason is due to the fact that language cannot be isolated from culture and tradition of the people. In this report, I present some agenda that can serve as a model for the role of African language in doing research in African studies. This agenda is targeted towards African studies centres, both in the African continent and outside the continent.

African studies centre should, as a matter of policy, include the provisions of the teaching and learning of African Indigenous languages in their curriculum and should be made to be offered as compulsory courses for students. Certificate courses in African languages should also be introduced, this will afford researchers to enroll in such certificate courses with the intention of acquiring a substantial knowledge about the language. Arrangement for language immersion exercise should be an integral part of the language course and certificate programme, where

students and researchers will have the opportunity to integrate with the locals in a particular African ethnic group. This is vital and should be considered a prerequisite for researchers seeking grants to carry out a research in African studies where a field trip to that African country is imminent. African language scholars should be made to teach the courses so that the nitty gritty of the language, which is hardly found in black and white, would be communicated to students and researchers. This should go beyond the teaching of only the basics, the advanced concept of the indigenous languages should be critically investigated.

There are still some account of orality in the literatures of some of the indigenous languages of Africa which have not yet been documented. Also, there are some languages that have not been reduced to the written form, before research can be carried out in such culture, it is expedient that the language be documented. Therefore, production of dictionaries and metalanguage of selected African languages should be a continuous exercise at African Studies centres, world over.

Conclusion

Multilingualism is one of the sociolinguistic features of African nations. It has been stated that the one-third of the world languages are found in Africa. The world has a big role to play in order to make sure that these multiple languages are properly documented and well preserved for the future; this will also avert possible extinction of many African languages.

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