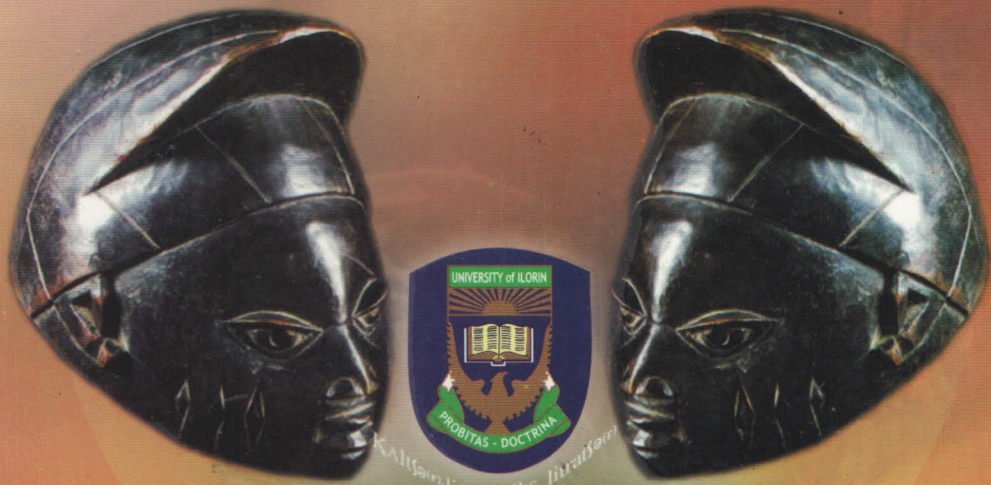


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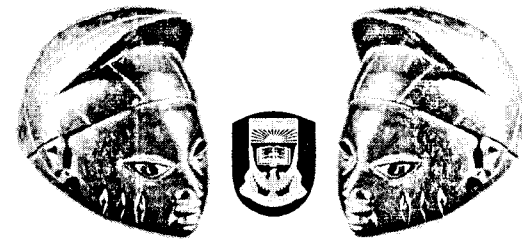
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Information

This is to inform our contributors and the general public that in an attempt to acquire **ISSN number** for our journal, it was discovered that another publication bears the same title with our former title - EDE. Thus, the need to change our own title to: *Ilorin Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Culture*. All former documents remain valid.

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Asu: An Example of a Language on the Verge of Total Extinction in Niger State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper identifies the areas of constraints for Asu, one of the minority languages in Niger State, Nigeria, which have lined it up as one of the languages that is likely to go into extinction in no distant future. This study focuses on the key domains of language use like home, education (school) market places and recreation centres. The research instruments used are questionnaire, observation and interview while Edwards' (1992) model for determining the status of languages is our theoretical tool. The study observes that domains of use of this language have whittled down immensely. It is therefore recommended that proactive steps should be taken to encourage use and development of Asu language. Among these steps are: enjoining use of the language in the home domain, reducing the language to writing, using the language to teach at basic school level, among others.

Keywords: minority language, domains, language endangerment, death, revitalization.

Introduction

The rate at which human languages are going into extinction is high. This trend does not exclude Nigeria where about 516 languages are spoken (Crystal, 2000). In regions that are largely heterolinguistic like Nigeria, the majority languages tend to push the minority ones into the background, thereby restricting or limiting their domains of use. Apart from the majority/minority dichotomy, the language policy as embedded in the Nigerian constitution does not, in practical terms, favour the small language group.

An example of a minority language that is under pressure of endangerment and death is Asu, a Benue-Congo language spoken in Niger State, Nigeria (Comrie, 1990). We examine in particular, the areas or domains of use of Asu, which have put the language on the endangerment list. On a general rank scale of languages in Niger State, Asu belongs to the very small language group (Rafiu, 2011). Edwards' (1992) model for determining the status of languages, which is modified by Grenoble and Whaley (1999), is used to discuss the prospects of Asu in Niger State.

Methodology

This study focuses on the endangerment of Asu language in Niger State, Nigeria. Having carried out a preliminary study of the language situation in the study area, we designed a questionnaire with which basic data were collected. The questionnaire used is modeled after Fakuade's (1995). For validity and suitability, the questionnaire was pre-tested to determine its effectiveness and also to correct errors that might occur.

Though personal information is equally important, the crucial thing centered on the linguistic bias of the informants. After the pre-test, the entire questionnaire was administered. The distribution covered all main categories: the young and the old (between the ages of 12-20, 21-30, 31-49, and 50 and above respectively), the educated and uneducated, and the male and the female. The questionnaire was administered in English. The illiterates were guided using Pidgin

English or interpreters as the case may be.

One hundred and fifty (150) copies of the questionnaire were administered. The questionnaire was divided into three parts: Section A focuses on the language use of the informants in different domains. Section B focuses on the language attitude of the respondents while section C is designed to collect information on informants' personal details. Basic statistical principles are employed and a simple percentage formula is used to arrive at our findings.

The study also uses oral interview. This is done so as to have an unbiased report on the language use and the attitude of the speakers to their language. The researcher used both structured and unstructured interviews with the aid of bilingual speakers. By this, we prepared questions for our respondents and also asked spontaneous questions.

Questions asked covered different domains of use of their languages. For example, the respondents were asked to answer such questions as: 'How many languages do you speak?' 'What language do you speak at home?' 'Is your language used to teach in school?' 'What language do you use to communicate with friends outside the home?' 'What language do you speak in the market?' 'Is your language used on the radio?' The questions have been structured to cover certain specific areas.

We have also made use of observation as a vital instrument in this study. In particular, we used participant observation. The participant observation enabled us to record natural data on the language use of the speakers. By this, we watched and observed language use in market places, canteens, recreation centres, suya spots and other places of public interest. The method enabled us to assess language behaviour and language attitude of the people in the areas under study. However, we used observation to complement and validate information obtained through questionnaire and interview.

Asu Language

Asu language is one of the minority languages in Niger State, Nigeria. Asu is member of the Benue-Congo language family with features characteristic of this language group, namely, subject-verb-object word order (SVO), tone, simple consonant and vowel systems, and open syllable. Blench (1991) put the speakers of Asu at 5,000. By 2006, the number had reduced sporadically to 1,501 speakers (Rafiu, 2014 p.136). The speakers are unevenly distributed among the speakers of other majority languages in Borgu, Munya, Rafi, Mariga and Rijau Local Government Areas in Niger State.

Areas of Threat of Asu Language

To ascertain the level of endangerment of Asu language, certain prominent variables which affect language vitality were tested. These areas which are discussed hereunder are: domains, attitude, prestige, economy and orthography.

1. Domains

In research in Puerto Rican community in New York City, sociolinguists working on domains in which either Spanish or English was used identified family, friendship, religion, employment and education domains (Romaine, 2006). Domains serve as the anchor points for distinct value system as embodied in the use of language. For the language under study, domains such as recreation centres, media, home and marketplaces were considered.

Asu is affected mostly by the sphere of use in the media, school and marketplaces where it is not used. The language is used only in the marketplaces if the interlocutors are defined. In these places, Nupe language (a millionaire language) is favoured. The clusters of contextual factors typical of a bilingual or multilingual community informed the choice of Nupe in these settings. However, other big languages in the area thrive in other domains, i.e. home and recreation centres. In the home domain, we looked at language use involving parents, grandparents, siblings and neighbours. On the

whole, out of 150 respondents, 14.6% of children respondents use the mother tongue (Asu) with parents, grandparents, siblings and neighbours. The parents' self-reports on the use of Asu in the family domain revealed 32% of the native language use.

In the other domains observed, recreation centres where the young/children are observed, 2% was recorded. The very low percentage was due to the fact playground was a convergence point for children from different ethnolinguistic backgrounds. The same argument can be advanced for 2% recorded for language use at recreation centres, as 3% was also recorded at marketplaces.

The restricted domain of use of Asu is indicative of a language that is losing the battle for survival. The speakers could hardly be identified in conversation because Nupe is the norm in virtually all domains. The young speakers gave many reasons for nonuse of the native language. The adult speakers use the language in side-talks and secret conversations. At worship centres, sermons are translated from Nupe to Asu. There are worship centres where sermons are done in Nupe only. On this note, it can be said that, though it is not possible to predict with absolute certainty which language an individual will use in a particular situation (Romaine, 2000 p.45), variable use of a language can arise when domains become unclear and setting and role relationships do not combine in the expected way. Asu language is used in the home domain mostly by adult speakers. Romaine (2000) reports of a similar situation in Peru where Quechual-speaking parts are identified with the physical territory of rural communities, while the colonial language, Spanish, is linked with the cities, mines, and coastal areas.

Attitude of Speakers

Appel and Muysken (1987) while adducing reasons for different attitudes to languages and their speakers submit that no speaker of a language will despise his/her language. They use Lambert, Ansfield and Yeni-Komshian's findings on the attitude of Arab-Israeli and Jewish-Israeli adolescents towards Hebrew and

Arabic. According to their reports, both the Arab and the Jewish listeners judged their language as reliable, better looking, friendlier and the like (see Appel and Muysken, 1987).

The disposition of the speakers of Asu is positive in terms of how the language is held by the speakers. The respondents freely identified with their native language. However, few were noticed among young speakers of the language. This was obtained in their response to one of the questions as in: 'It is my language but I don't speak it'. The few negative dispositions were noticed among respondents who grew up to speak a non-native language. Their attitude is no more than the attitude of outsiders.

Even though attitude plays an important in determining the fate of language, it works in a little way for the spate of loss or endangerment of Asu. The major reason for the unalloyed attitude of speakers towards their language was, perhaps, due to the fact that the threat was endoglossically motivated, i.e. the loss of one indigenous language to another. Generally, the attitude of speakers was positive rather than negative. However, on a scale, we can say that Asu speakers have indifferent attitude towards their language.

Prestige

One of the factors that have assisted in determining the level of endangerment of Asu language is the prestige associated with the speakers of the language. Here, we identified two types of prestige that are working differently for the language namely, internal and external prestige. Internal prestige is the prestige accorded by the speakers to themselves. This may be caused by so many factors, e.g. demography, history, (territorial spread), etc. external prestige is the prestige accorded to a particular group by outsiders on account of, perhaps, history, economic advancement, political pedigree or cultural height.

The low prestige in which Asu is held has made the language to be easily overshadowed by bigger languages, especially Nupe. The relevance of prestige to language vitality is that it helps to enhance the

use and development of language. Asu language does not enjoy second language speakers. Prestige of its speakers

It should be noted that the prestige of a language translates to the prestige of its speakers (Appel and Muysken, 1987) in the same way the prestige of a language group translates to the prestige of its speakers. Hence, there is a tendency for the speakers of a high prestige language to hold on tenaciously to their language more than the speakers of a low prestige language. So, for speakers of Asu that have relative prestige, competence in a prestige language like Nupe is a mark of upward (social) mobility. This invariably puts low prestige language in further jeopardy of loss.

Economy

Economy has been cited as one of the reasons why people abandon their language or aspire to learn a language that is advantageous to them. Some languages are said to have economic value such that speaking them will open doors of opportunities to them. The numerical advantage over Asu makes the former have economic advantage over the latter because there are more who speak and who still wish to speak Nupe than Asu. In larger domains particularly at marketplaces, ability of Asu speakers to speak Nupe enhances their bargaining power during economic transactions. This is because Nupe is a state language and enjoys large number of speakers.

Orthography

Orthography is an exercise that is geared towards writing a language (Anagbogu, 2007 p.721). It may also be an attempt at documenting a language. Orthography or graphization is usually a joint undertaking between government and language boards, or between a state government and state's language associations (Emenanjo, 1985 p.90). However, the cumbersome processes involved at reducing a language to writing have made orthography design of most Nigerian languages almost impossible.

Orthography is important to languages because it affords both native speakers and non-native speakers to have access to both the structure and the literature of these languages. Asu language does not have evidence of orthography efforts. The language is neither used to teach nor taught as a school subject at the basic school level.

Style of Threat of Asu Language

The style of threat of Asu language is sharp at present even though it started gradually. The analysis of data on language use among Asu speakers showed that the style of threat is sharp. What this portends is that it is likely to disappear if urgent actions are not taken. Information on the areas of threat is observed on the competence and performance of the speakers of the language investigated. It is observed through our field assistant that words of Nupe characterized the speech of speakers. The major reason for this was that the speakers were surrounded by Nupe, a language of high prestige and large population in the area.

When a language is endangered, other non-linguistic aspects could be affected as well like loss of cultural heritage, identity, among many others. Other indicators of loss include: lexical, syntactic and morphological loss. This could be in form of simplification of complex forms in the dying languages. In the Local Government Areas where Asu is spoken, code-mixing and switching characterized the speech of speakers, which is an indication of two or more languages in contact. An average person in this area is a bilingual. This inadvertently makes bilingualism a phenomenon. However, rather than bilingualism being additive in these individuals, it is subtractive as one of the languages in the bilingual's repertoire gives way for the other. This is observed among the speakers of Asu who abandoned their language in favour of Nupe.

The greatest challenge of Asu language is population (see Rafiu, 2011) where it is observed that there is an astronomical decrease in the population of Asu speakers. Another major threat as this study has shown is domains of use. The statistics of domains of

use is shown as follows:

Parents' self-report on language use (%)	
Language of wider communication: Nupe	
When speaking with spouse	10
When speaking neighbours	9.2
When speaking with children	9
When speaking with relations	3.8
Total	32
Average	8%

Children's self-report on language use (%)	
Language of wider communication: Nupe	
When speaking with parents	5
When speaking with grandparents	3
When speaking siblings	3.7
When speaking with children in the neighbourhood	2.9
Total	14.6
Average	4 %

Conclusion

This study has identified the variables that have worked negatively for the continued existence of Asu as a language in Niger State, Nigeria. The language is spoken among big languages like Nupe and Gbagyi which are regarded as millionaire languages. The majority language (i.e. Nupe) contrasts sharply with Asu in terms of use and status particularly in domains like: home, media, education, recreation centres and marketplaces. In other words, while Nupe is thriving, Asu is at the edge of extinction.

On this note, we conclude that Asu language is majorly challenged by population which has hindered its spread. This, in our opinion, explains why the rate of loss is high in Asu language. So, to forestall further loss, the specific needs of this language must be

identified rather than adopt a generalized approach. The major need of the language is its use as a medium of communication by its speakers. Other survival strategies include: reducing the language to writing, using the language to teach at basic school level, among others.

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