

Language (In) Equality, Language Endangerment and the Threats to Nigerian Languages

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Abstract

Whereas there are arguments in favour of the equality of languages, the nearly eight thousand languages of the world do have unequal statuses in terms of the population of their speakers, their geographical spread, their national and/or international applications or uses and their socio-economic value. Some of the languages have so few speakers and such limited geographical spread and socio-economic value that they are hardly known outside their native habitats and they are at risk of endangerment and death in no distant time. This paper dwells on issues of language equality/endangerment, addresses the endogenous threat posed by some indigenous Nigerian languages to some minority Nigerian languages on one hand, and the exogenous one posed by the English language to all Nigerian languages on the other hand. The work accentuates existing fears that many languages among Nigeria's minority groups in particular, are threatened with endangerment from within and outside. With language being an intrinsic part of self/cultural/national identity, it is proposed that older generations should put forth their languages as indispensable possessions by using them consistently, unashamedly and transmitting them to younger generations for posterity.

Keywords: Language, (in)equality, endangerment, transmission, generations, culture, identity, Nigerian languages (major/minor), the English language

Introduction

The possession and use of language mark human beings out from other animals. Algeo and Pyles (2001: 1) say that to possess a language makes one a human. Some African cultures refer to a child as 'it' when it is born and it becomes human only when he/she begins to use language. Thus, apart from the primary roles which it plays – to name things, places, ideas, events, entities, phenomena, to express thoughts, feelings, opinions, to inform, to communicate, language is the very quintessence of humankind. We live by having a language and using it.

Humans are inherently and inextricably bound to their language without which their humanity and their identity are lost. The owners of a language deploy it to live out their humanity, achieving life purposes and by it, they are identified. This intrinsic bond between human beings and their language makes language a single most available and in-dissociable tool for the control and/or manipulation of man's various environments. It is in view of the value of language that Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the 19th century English poet describes to it as "the armoury of the humankind and at once contains the trophies of its past and the weapons of its future conquests". Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf's theories of linguistic determinism and linguistic relativism – that one's language determines one's perception of the world and how one relates with the world – are based on this fact. People's understandings of and interactions with the world are shaped by and are dependent upon their language.

The obvious importance of this human phenomenon has attracted to it critical scholarly attention from the fields of communication, linguistics, literature, anthropology, ethnography/ethnology, philosophy, psychology, sociology etc. These disciplines have given their respective viewpoints about the subject. Childs (2003: 5) states that "language is a core cultural institution and at the heart of an individual's and society's identity" since an individual's use of language signals his/her culture, social class, status, ethnic origins, gender, age-group, ideological or political leanings and so on. Mesthrie and others (2000) explain that "using a language forces us into habitual grooves of thinking: it is almost like putting on a special pair of glasses that heighten some aspects of the physical and mental world while dimming others". So, without a language, an individual or a society would be inoperative or dysfunctional and without identity and perhaps, without a history. Elugbe (2004: 12) writes that:

Language is one of the, if not the most enduring artefacts of culture. Unless forced by conquest or by superior numbers, or by social, economic and political domination to give up their language, a people can always have their history traced through their language.

Around the world, linguists and ethnographers alike have identified about seven thousand languages depending on their criteria for classifying them or those for distinguishing between languages and dialects. Those criteria have been unstable, resulting in the discrepancies and/or uncertainties about the authentic, definite number of languages in the world and even in Nigeria, to be specific. However, it is certain that there are thousands of languages around the globe, many, not known to exist. Sometimes, they are known by only their owner-native speakers. This may be particularly the case with African languages. According to Blench (1998) quoted in Childs (2003: 6) the "majority of Africa's languages have not been fully described, and there are still languages that have not yet been identified by linguists (as many as thirty just in Central Nigeria)". Such

languages not yet identified are likely to even disappear before they become known outside their domains.

Language Equality and Language Endangerment

The thorny question of language equality or language inequality is germane to the reality of language endangerment. By the judgement of the layman using certain indices, all languages of the world do not fare equally in every respect. In other words, there are ways in which languages are equal and also ways in which they are not equal. (This is the same way in which all human beings are equal in some ways and they are not equal in some other ways). However, this is not the view of the linguist. The view of the linguist is that all languages are equal. Hudson (2003: 203) declares that “One of the most solid achievements of linguistics in the twentieth century has been to eliminate the idea (at least among professionals) that some languages or dialects are ‘better’ than others”. Regardless of that declaration, sociolinguistic views recognize inequalities among languages and affirm the factuality of language endangerment. The linguistic and sociolinguistic views on language equality/inequality leave us with two strong perspectives which can be boisterously stood for or against.

Language equality means that every language has a phonological system, a morphological system, a syntactic system and a meaning system all exclusive to it (all together referred to as the structure of language) and it is used to wholesomely satisfy the communication needs of its owners and to express any concept or phenomenon as the situation arises. As Fromkin and Rodman (1983: 13) say, the grammar of every language “is equally complex and logical and capable of producing an infinite set of sentences to express any thought one might wish to express”. In addition, all languages share general characteristics such as human-specificity, arbitrariness, conventionality, duality, culture-bearing, dynamism, creativity, etc. Besides, it is useful for many reasons to proclaim the equality of languages. Bamgbose (2004: 1) lists three reasons for the affirmation of language equality to include i. to stress that every language has a structure and the potential to express any concept, ii. to counter racist attitudes that label some languages “primitive” and iii. so as not to expose minority languages to discrimination.

Paradoxically, inequality among languages is a fact, irrespective of their equality. Language inequality means that languages are not equally ‘strong’, that not all have the same social value and not all are used in every domain of human endeavour with the same sphere of influence even though they all have the potential. Bamgbose’s (2004) third reason for the affirmation of language equality above inadvertently acknowledges the existence of ‘minority languages’ which are not strong and which should be protected from domination or discrimination by domineering ones so that they do not fall out of use. Arguing in favour of linguistic inequality, Mackey (1984: 43) states that:

There is hardly a sovereign state on earth that does not contain a language minority; some have several, including aboriginal, colonial or immigrant language groups. Yet although of equal potential, the languages of these minorities are not of equal educational value. All languages are equal only before God and the linguist!

In Nigeria, in other African countries and around the world, languages are designated ‘majority’ and ‘minority’. This means that there is something a given language has which another might not have and which make the one ‘more equal’ than the other. As we will see and as Aito (2005:1) has pointed out, “Minority and majority languages in Africa derive their designations from numbers of speakers, literary, political or educational status”.

It is the inequality of languages that in some ways exposes such of them to endangerment. Endangerment means that a language faces threats to its existence. The language becomes endangered or threatened with death and extinction. Thus, an endangered language simply refers to a language which is gradually going out of use because fewer and fewer people now speak it and it is no longer being transmitted to the younger generations. Such a language is unlikely to be spoken in the nearest future as it will become unknown. Matthews (2007: 122) views an endangered language as “Any for which there is evidence that it will or might cease to be spoken, soon or in the foreseeable future”.

Different criteria or approaches have been used in classifying levels of language endangerment. UNESCO identifies levels of language endangerment in between those she describes as *safe* (not endangered) and those that are *extinct* (lost). They are *vulnerable* (not spoken by children outside the home), *definitely endangered* (not spoken by children at all), *severely endangered* (only spoken by the oldest generation), *critically endangered* (spoken by only a few members of the oldest generation, often semi-speakers).

Krauss (2007), categorizes languages as *safe* if they are considered that children will be speaking them in 100 years; *endangered*, if children will not be speaking them in 100 years (approximately 60 – 80% of languages fall into this category); and *moribund*, if children are not speaking them now. Krauss’s consideration of time is far-fetched since other factors such as educational and socio-economic value of the language and the owners’ attitudes to it are more immediate as endangerment or dead or extinction may take place in less than 100 years for some languages. Woodbury (2012) observes that:

The fate of a language can be changed in a single generation if it is no longer being learned by

children. This has been true for some Yupik Eskimo communities in Alaska where just 20 years ago all of the children spoke Yupik; today, the youngest speakers of Yupik in some of these communities are in their 20s and the children speak only English.

In his case, Fishman (1991) propounded the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) for determining the degree of disruption of transmission a language suffers that could lead to its endangerment. Reviewed in Fishman (2001), his framework establishes the fact that intergenerational transmission of a language is fundamental to its life and that languages “become endangered because they lack informal intergenerational transmission and informal daily life support”. The GIDS is used to determine the extent to which the transmission of a language from older generations to younger ones is being disrupted. The language with a vigorous rate of intergenerational transmission yields life while the one with intergenerational disruptions is in danger. Lewis and Simons (2010) developed Fishman’s initial works into Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) adding more levels on the Scale with the observations that:

If children do not learn a language from their parents, there is little possibility that they in turn will be able to pass the language on to their children. The GIDS not only takes into account that intergenerational transmission is an individual decision made by parents, but also that societal and institutional choices are crucial in influencing the parental decisions regarding their language behaviour in regard to their children. These societal factors create social spaces in which languages are used. These social spaces are what Fishman and others have identified as “domains of use”, each constituting a constellation of participants, location, and topic that is closely associated with a particular language.

Fishman’s (1991/2001) and Lewis and Simons’ (2010) works show that below the category of languages they have designated ‘Vigorous’ – that is, languages used for face-to-face communication by all generations – are those which are at various degrees of vulnerability. These degrees of vulnerability include *threatened*, *shifting*, *moribund*, *nearly extinct*, *dormant* and *extinct* into which many languages fall either because their socio-economic value is low or they are not being transmitted to younger generations and they may no longer be spoken in the near future.

The variables which bestow a clean bill of health on a language include a huge population of its speakers with intergenerational transmission (see Fishman, 1991; Brenzinger, 1998; Childs, 2003; Godesberg, 2007 etc), wide geographical spread of the language, its high educational and socio-economic value to its owners and other people who use it and its capacity for national and/or international application. On numbers of speakers, Godesberg (2007: 4) opines that: a) Any language with over 50,000 speakers is “not threatened”. b) Any language with below 400 speakers is “definitely threatened”. Even though he argued for emphasizing language equality, Bamgbose (2004: 3) also recognizes indicators of strengths of languages such as number of speakers, socio-economic status of the languages, legal status of the languages and their domains of use. The languages which have all the variables in their favour are ‘stronger’ or ‘have more life’ than others.

Among the causes of the sad phenomenon of language endangerment are the depletion of speakers’ population (through natural disasters, famine, disease, war, genocide, political oppression etc), undervaluing of the language by its owners and the consequent language shift. Language shift, where the owners of a given language begin to use a language other than theirs for their basic communication needs, may be brought about by the owners of a language upon themselves and their language. Such people(s) undermine the value of their own language(s) believing that the other language(s) has/have more value or prestige. This is injurious to the life of the language. Mufwene (2002) points out that “the vitality of languages depends on the communicative behaviour of their speakers who respond adaptively to changes in their socio-economic ecologies”. Also, Coulmas (1992: 87) notes that:

Language shift ... attests to the fact that some languages are not thought valuable enough in a given socio-historical setting to be transmitted to the next generation, and that others are objectively of greater economic utility.

So, where people undervalue their language, they tend to shift to the one they perceive as valuable according to ‘their socio-economic ecologies’ or due to some political and historical forces that may foist this action on them. Yet, whatever the means by which it happens, language shift is a most surreptitious way in which a language becomes endangered as people leave their languages to use a dominant one in the environment without noticing that they are slowly losing their own languages and themselves.

The Threats to Nigerian Languages

It is obvious that the linguistic diversity of Nigeria is complex and acute given the concentration of languages in the country. The number of languages in the country has been controversially pegged at between 200 and 550 at different times by different linguists due to the taxonomic challenges of distinguishing between languages and dialects. To refer to current statistics, Simons and Fennig (2017), puts the number at 527 specifically and describe them as follows:

Of these (the 527), 520 are living and 7 are extinct. Of the living, 510 are indigenous and 10 are non-indigenous. Furthermore, 20 are institutional, 78 are developing, 350 are vigorous, 28 are in trouble and 44 are dying.

It may be gleaned from Lewis and Simons' statistics that the languages in the country, as would be the case elsewhere, are not equally ranked. Some of the languages are not doing as well or are not as valued as others.

Out of the over 500 indigenous languages so identified in Nigeria, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba languages are known to have the largest populations of speakers and are declared majority with estimated numbers as: Hausa – 29 million; Yoruba – 23 million; Igbo – 18 million. The peoples of these language groups occupy large expanses of geographical areas in the country and additional huge numbers of non-natives of these language groups use them for various reasons. For instance, in most parts of Northern Nigeria, Hausa is spoken by nearly all the other language groups to the detriment of their own ethnic tongues. A lay person from the South of the country would, without a second thought, conclude that Hausa is the only language of the North and would be confounded on knowing about the multiplicity of languages there because of their low use. The low use of those other languages avowedly places a strain on their lives while the life of Hausa is strengthened. In the same vein, in the South East and South West where Igbo and Yoruba languages dominate respectively, the 'small' languages there have very narrow social space: Aduge, Izi, Ezza-Ikwo, Wawa and some mutually unintelligible languages are found in parts of the South East while Awori, Egun, Izon, Ijo are other languages in the South West.

Another nine Nigerian languages namely Kanuri, Fulfulde, Edo, Efik/Ibibio, Tiv, Nupe, Igala, Ijaw and Idoma are among those given the second place-rating due to their socioeconomic functions for the people and perhaps, for their fairly large speaker-populations. These have between two and five million speakers each. Many of the rest of the languages have speaker-populations of between 100,000 and as low as 20,000 and much less in some cases.

There is no contradiction in saying that there are threats to many 'small' languages in Nigeria. The threats are posed by both strong indigenous languages (regional lingua francas) and the non-indigenous ones, for example, the English language and the English-based Pidgin. These threats can, therefore be categorized as endogenous or exogenous.

Endogenous threats are from strong indigenous languages on the weak ones as where members of small language groups shift from their tongue to a 'large' one that becomes a lingua franca. There are abounding instances of shifting from one indigenous language to another indigenous language in parts of Nigeria. In Northern Nigeria, there are many minority language groups that have shifted to Hausa as lingua franca and have lost or are losing their mother-tongues. For example, in Nasarawa, a North Central State, there are over 25 languages some of which include Agatu, Basa, Eggon, Gade, Gbagyi, Goemai, Gwandara, Migili, Alago, Ebira, Gbari, Mada, Mama, Ninzam, Nungu, Rindre, Tiv, Toro, Wapan, Yeskwa etc. However, Hausa is being spoken by members of nearly all the other groups in the State to the extent that some of such group members do not transmit their languages to their younger generations. Those other languages are losing their speakers as a consequence and they face the risk of endangerment.

In other parts of the North Central, Plateau State is a potpourri of languages with many of them marginalized because their speakers resort to Hausa. Kogi and Kwara States are certainly not monolingual with Hausa and Yoruba being vigorously spoken along with other minority languages in the two States: Bassa, Bunu, Igala, Igbirra etc in Kogi State; Ogori, Owe, Oworo, Yagba etc in Kwara State; Bassa, Baushi, Boko, Gwandara, Gwari/Gbagyi, Kambari etc in Niger State. In the North East, there are languages like Bansa, Batta, Baya, Gira, Gwa, Kaka etc in Adamawa State; Boma, Bomboro, Burak, Gera, Jukun etc in Bauchi State; Afade, Buru, Bada, Chibok etc in Yobe State. Many of these languages stand marginalized and threatened.

Even the North West considered to be linguistically homogeneous has other 'small' languages subsumed in the domineering Hausa language. Kaduna State is obviously the most diverse in that region with over 50 languages. In Kano State, there are Shirawa and Teshena languages; in Kebbi State, Achipa, Dandawa, Dakarkari, Kambari, Unchinda languages; in Jigawa State, Kanufi-Borno (Kanuri), Kurama; in Sokoto State, there are Shangawa and Uncinda languages. These are hardly heard of beyond their vicinities.

Regardless of their existence, Hausa is the majority language in most of, if not the whole of Nigeria's Northern Region. It is being used profusely by members of the smaller language groups. A cultural-political hegemony is entrenched by Hausa over the peoples of the lesser groups in the region and the other languages in the region are being endangered and as a consequence.

This drift away from a people's mother-tongue to another dominant indigenous language is also taking place among other language groups in other parts of the country. In the Calabar Metropolis of Cross River State, there are Efik, Efut and Qua speaking peoples but Efik language has become the lingua franca for the Efuts and the Quas because of the dominance of Efik. Only the older generations sparingly speak the other languages, sometimes for special purposes or occasions. In fact, the Efut language may have already been lost because it is only the very elderly who use it for special purposes. The clearest evidence of its vestiges is the fact that there are traditional rulers of the Efut people. And the language is not even being listed as one of Cross River State's

many languages (See list of languages in Nigeria). There are also only elderly speakers of Qua language with the slim chance that some young members have only a latent knowledge of the language. Therefore, there is hardly any intergenerational transmission of these two languages, a situation which portends their endangerment. In the case of Qua language, we take note that there are contiguous groups who speak a variety of the Qua language – the Ejagham-speaking people of Akamkpa. This may strengthen or revitalize the Qua language in some ways.

Exogenous threats to Nigerian languages, major and minor, are from foreign languages, particularly English and English-based Pidgin. Because of its very important roles in the educational and socio-economic lives of the people, the English language has permeated Nigeria's public communication space. Besides, the language is the country's first effective official language constitutionally, the others being Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba which are official on paper (see Nigeria's 1999 Constitution as amended). The latter are said to be official on paper because even in the States where the languages are native, they are not used in conducting strictly official functions – native co-speakers of any of these languages must have acquired some literacy in English and must manage some of it to operate in a strictly official situation, must write memos, perform governance functions/ceremonies, etc in English, no matter how low their competence.

In many Nigerian homes across the ethno-linguistic divides and social strata, parents introduce the English language more and more to their children with the perception that the children will be more proficient users of English which places them in good standing for economic and political gains above the mother-tongues. Indeed, in the last two or three generations, some Nigerian children have begun to lay claim to English as their first and perhaps, their only language because they barely know their native languages or any other indigenous language and they relish their inabilities and rootlessness.

Following Wurm's (1994) classification of levels of language endangerment, Balogun (2013: 74) claims that even Yoruba language is 'potentially endangered' in support of a similar claim by Brenzinger (1998: 93) that "even Yorùbá, with 20 million speakers, has been called 'deprived' because of the way it has come to be dominated by English in higher education". The situation is explained as arising from the attitudes of the speakers. It is observed that "Parents want their children to speak and learn English for social acceptability and economic advancement" (Balogun, 2013: 75). This observation reflects Yoruba elite's negligible use of the language because of the dominance of (Western) literacy in English. While they applaud literacy in English, Fabunmi and Salawu (2005) decry attitudes which have led to split identities of the Yoruba:

As good as the introduction of the so-called western education in the Yorùbá land is, it has however made majority of the elite divided personalities. Many of them are cosmopolitan nativists, fighting very hard to eschew their nativity, and at the same time fighting very hard to be adopted into the cosmopolitan order. This is conspicuously demonstrated in the elite attitude towards the use of Yorùbá language.

The findings of Balogun's (2013: 75) work show, among other things, that a huge number of young secondary school students of Yoruba extraction in public and private schools in three Yoruba States of Osun, Oyo and Lagos do not know or speak the language fluently; they rather speak English fluently – over half (52.8%) of the students investigated said that they are not sure they can speak Yorùbá without mixing it with English language.

The same has also been said of Igbo language, another major Nigerian language. According to Odinye and Odinye (2010: 88), the negative language attitudes of Igbo people to their language whereby "Most Igbo parents do not take delight in transferring Igbo to their children" signal the potential extinction of the language. They posit that there is a drift toward the preferred English language. Using the rating of endangerment proposed by UNESCO, they declare that:

The degree of Igbo language endangerment is in between "Definitely Endangered" and 'Unsafe'. It is frightening to note that about 50 percent Igbo children cannot speak Igbo language. Every parent is making effort to see his child speaks English language and none encourages his child to speak Igbo language. There is no place where speaking of Igbo language is encouraged. It is not used in government even in Igbo land, schools, churches, meetings, campaigns, conversations, not even at homes (Odinye and Odinye, 2010: 91).

They go on to predict that "Igbo language would possibly be extinct in the next 50 years if the current rate of decline in its use is sustained" (2010: 91). Many other authors of Igbo extraction share the same opinions and facts on the subject (see Duruaku, 2004; Eme, 2004; Irono, 2005; Nwadike, 2008 etc)

If this can be said of the major languages, what will be said of the minor languages? It is self-evident: speakers of the minority languages are equally drifting to the English language in droves especially in the face of the multiplicity of small language groups with no dominant one in such places. For instance, in the former Ogoja Local Government Area of Cross River State from which two more LGAs of Bekwarra and Yala were created, there are at least 10 languages (Afrike, Bekwarra, Gabu, Mbube, Nkim, Nkum, Igede, Ukelle, Yache, Yala etc) spoken by a population of about 300,000 people. The situation in which those languages are not mutually intelligible forces a choice of a common language on the people and that happens to be English or its

substandard forms. This situation replicates in nearly all other urbanizing but naturally multilingual Local Government Areas because of migrant populations in the State. This drift to English impinges on the vigorous intergenerational transmission of the native languages of these localities as the people join the foray for new identities of effective users of English to earn socio-economic and political statuses.

Apart from the threat from Standard English or Standard Nigerian English as the case may be, there is also that from English-based Pidgin especially among minority multilingual settings. In places like Warri and Sapele in Delta State, Benin, Ekpoma in Edo State, Calabar, Ogoja, Obudu and Ikom in Cross River State, Port-Harcourt in Rivers State etc, English-based Pidgin is dominating the speech of the people to the endangerment of local languages. Both in public and at home in these places mentioned, Pidgin is widely spoken with very little of the native languages spoken by the elderly, perhaps for some special reasons. Pidgin is so engrained in the linguistic landscape of Warri and Sapele that as far back as 1982, Omamor had affirmed, in support of Marchese and Schnukal's claim (1980), that there were "now native speakers NP in Warri and Sapele areas ..." (NP for Nigerian Pidgin).

In Igoli/Ishibori/Abakpa in Ogoja Urban, children as well as their parents and youths/adults also use Pidgin far more than they use the native language to the extent that Pidgin is fast becoming the dominant language and it may have become a first (native) language for some generations in the area like in Warri and Sapele. For school lessons, Standard English is used but Pidgin is reversed to in the school premises for informal communication by both teachers and pupils/students.

In the circumstances above, a majority of minority languages in Nigeria are at risk of endangerment and they will soon be sent to the trashcan of history. Speakers of minority languages are shifting to either another dominant indigenous language such as Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba or they are shifting to one of the varieties of English language. And members of the majority language groups are also shifting to English.

The trend is encouraged by a number of social conditions. For instance, more and more people are drifting to urban centres for government jobs, contracts and 'greener pastures' and English is the language of these tastes. Then, the urban attitude of sending infants below school age to learn English first and learn a native language later or never, has become usual. The attitude is also fast infiltrating the semi-urban and rural areas. So, new generations of Nigerians are shifting increasingly to the English language because of the social attitudes toward the native languages and also because of the roles English has assumed in the country over time. The consequence is that with many more people not learning their mother tongues, there will be no transmission of same to the coming generations.

Conclusion

Irrespective of the strength of any other language, be it indigenous or non-indigenous, owners of a language ought to guard their language religiously since it is the armoury of both the trophies of the people's past and the weapons for their future conquests as Coleridge has pointed out. If people lose their language, they unarguably lose themselves. Therefore, we must save our languages, not by theorizing or conceptualizing but by taking action to cultivate adequate use of our indigenous languages and to redefine their value.

Scholars of the subject have indicated that languages can be saved (Fishman, 1991; Krauss, 2007 etc). Three steps have been suggested for doing so. They include language documentation – write a grammar of the language, dictionary, literary texts in the language, archiving; language revitalization – it should be actively used in various domains of its owners' lives including for educational instruction, business, governance etc; and language maintenance – supporting the language through legislation and policies that project the language and protect it.

Beyond these propositions, owners of a language should cultivate positive attitudes toward their language and use it to ensure the intergenerational transmission of the language. Before we can talk about language documentation, revitalization and maintenance, the language should first have a vigorous life. When the new generation of the language owners do not acquire and use the language, they cannot cascade it down the generations as it should be. Also, when the older generations do not make the younger to see the value of their languages, there is no way the younger will value them. This requires that parents and other adults should use their native languages at home and at all other informal situations involving members of the language group and also at formal ones that require or allow the use of the languages such as ethnic gatherings, meetings etc. Parents who do not want their children to know or speak their languages are helping neither the children nor themselves nor the languages. It is said that language is culture which means that as we learn a language, we learn the culture of the owners of the language and we inversely subdue or even lose our own. We are progressively losing our cultures and ourselves as we abandon our languages.

The use of native languages with members of the younger generations ought to begin from birth and be sustained until language systems are firmly established in the children. The practice where the children are forced into school at the age of one year to get introduced to English blocks the chances of their ever learning their native languages. It is easier to learn English in school after becoming rooted in the native language than to

learn the native language after becoming rooted in English. The reason is that the native language is likely to have restricted usage except it is the dominant language of the child's environment. And, having become a linguistic adult in the English language and having found that his/her communication needs are being adequately met in the language (English), the child would not make much effort to learn the native language which he/she comes to undermine with the presumption of its inferiority to English. But where people already know their native language, they are compelled by the status of English as the national language, the language of education, of governance, administration etc in the country, to learn it.

The use of English should therefore be restricted to situations that inevitably require it. These include inter-ethnic communication/socialization/commerce, educational instruction and officialdom. The severe linguistic diversity of our communities, societies and country is the reason for this allowance. Otherwise, 'a minimum or makeshift language' will have to spring up every now and then, but which does not arise with the ready presence of one variety of English or the other for the prevailing occasion. The adoption of a makeshift language will surely be more encumbering in the current situation where there already exists a resort.

The last line in this is that the lives of people's languages should be revitalized and sustained through the vigorous use of the languages by all generations of members of the respective groups. The disregard for our languages is disregard for ourselves, our cultures and our identities and there is an immutable need for a people to preserve themselves.

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