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## **Endangerment scenario: The case of Yorùbá**

**Abstract.** Numerous perils, including death, may befall a language and render its growth or relevance somewhat pointless, leading to the ‘birth’ of a population with little regard for their own languages and an untamed interest in a foreign tongue and culture. The Yorùbá language – currently suffering from numerous ‘perilous’ factors – is purportedly spoken by more than 22 million people (Sachnine 1997), a figure that ordinarily should ensure its strength and survival for many more years to come. However, statistics obtained for this paper demonstrates that most modern speakers of Yorùbá:

- 1) cannot perform purely in the language without using the crutches offered by the English language
- 2) hardly enrich their talk with the legacy of proverbs and axioms
- 3) do not know the meanings encoded in their own names
- 4) have totally lost contact with their ecological heritage.

As a result, although Yoruba has been written since as early as 1800 and possesses a large population of speakers, it is facing an endangerment scenario, especially with its speakers’ inability to express themselves without recourse or appeal to a foreign language; in spite of its rich heritage, these speakers shun it and latch on to other languages for communicative efficiency. As a consequence the language, as well as its speakers as a community, may have reached its development plateau.

*Keywords:* Yorùbá; metalanguage failure; language endangerment; endangerment scenario; development plateau

## 1.0 Introduction

Perhaps a good way to start this paper is to present its focus as captured in the following recently overheard snatch of conversation:

Yorùbá *rich* gan ni. *In fact, àwa native speakers of the language ò mọ ñkan tí a máa lose if we should allow all its cultural flavour to go down the drain, just like that. Mo serious. A máa really lose gan ni.*

*Gloss:* As a language, Yorùbá is very rich. In fact, we the native speakers do not know what we will lose if we should allow all its cultural flavour to go down the drain, just like that. I am serious. We will really lose a lot.

Glancing at the vocabulary chosen leads to a surprising conclusion:

▪ Language being spoken:	Yorùbá	
▪ Total number of words used:		43
▪ Distribution of forms:	Yorùbá:	15
	English:	28
▪ ?Winner:	English	

Another good beginning subject would be to ask just how much Yorùbá the modern Yorùbá person is. Curiously, this question can also address the alienation being insidiously established in other Nigerian languages, especially the main ones e.g., Igbo and Hausa. It is *de rigueur* for Nigerian scholars (including those in the departments of African languages) to study the troublesome effects of civilization, science, and technology on many other languages while being ignorant of the gradual decay that their own languages are undergoing. Sadly, this phenomenon (pointing attention to the speck in the other person's eye while ignoring the log in one's own) is one of the reasons for the ongoing loss of Nigerian languages. In Nigerian academia, for instance, it is more profitable to study the grammatical details of foreign languages; this is believed to show scholarship and therefore attracts greater reward, e.g. promotion based on the number of papers one has published in foreign journals.

The Yorùbá language is chosen for this paper as an illustration of a socially engendered crisis that has the ultimate potential of destroying the linguistic essence of its speakers. There are

various causes of this crisis, each of them stemming from a unique aspect of the lives of the speakers of the language, aggregating to create a cause for worry for the foresighted linguist with the interest of the language at heart.

The overall aim of the paper is to show how all the roots of the crisis culminate in the members' loss of creativity, since they do not (or, indeed *cannot*) give the world something original using their own language. In effect, this means that the members have reached their development plateau.

## 2.0 Is the Yorùbá language really endangered?

According to a UNESCO (2005) overview of the subject, language endangerment is an extremely serious problem with great scientific and humanistic consequences. Furthermore, the review reveals that language loss always involves pressure which can be cultural, economic, military, political, social, or any combination of these. This view of endangerment is directly a mirror of Tuhus-Dubrow's (2002) two-fold submission: first, that even the unlikely field of botany feels the threat of language endangerment what with scientists' primary reliance on, for instance, the vocabulary of Aboriginal Australian languages to research the area's ancient plant life; second, that, being the linguistic branch of the American empire, English has run rampant across the globe, in perhaps the most insidious form of linguistic imperialism: seduction. For Tuhus-Dubrow, people want to speak English because it is the language of advertising, movies, music, and a vital tool for success.

When Yorùbá is seen in the light of these observations, anyone very familiar with the language would readily conclude that there are a host of factors contending with its growth, especially in the present century. These factors are what Himmelmann (2005) describes as an *endangerment scenario*. For Yorùbá, therefore, the endangerment scenario is composed of the unpopularity of the language among members even for ordinary conversations; the 'superiority'

of English as the country's *lingua franca*; the attitude of the members to the language vis-à-vis its economic value; and the failure of its numerous words for herbs and healing processes and the adoption of English expressions in their place.

As if reinforcing the details of the endangerment scenario, Mufwene (2002) remarks that the subject will be better understood if discussed in the broader context of language vitality, with more attention paid to factors which lie in the changing socio-economic conditions to which speakers respond adaptively for their survival. As will be demonstrated in appropriate sections below, all these observations are valid concerning the present situation of Yorùbá. As Igboanusi and Lothar (2005) observe, Yorùbá is the second most widely used language in Nigeria (next to Hausa) but in spite of this seemingly enviable position, the Yorùbá are worried about the situation of their language.

### 2.1 A 'profile' of the modern Yorùbá member

Many researchers and linguists may not think that the Yorùbá language is in a precarious transition in its deployment as a communicative tool among its native users. Given the constellation of endangerment factors, the preservation of the language may not yet be seen as a requirement for its speakers' literal survival. A second look at the conversational snatch above would make the curious researcher or linguist ask, which language shall we say this person is speaking? Well, the answer is in the translation: since the translation is into English, we should presume that the Yorùbá professor is speaking Yorùbá. But really, is he? Curiously, the professor is not alone. Right from the time the modern city-grown Yorùbá child is of speaking or 'understanding' age, the parents speak only English to him/her, a practice rooted in the social anomy enveloping the elite in most of Nigeria. And from that early beginning, the child is made to see culture as largely exocentric, since he is continuously tutored to disregard the rubrics of his own culture. When he is old enough to go to work, he prefers 'a profession' to an

‘occupation’. The ‘New Society’ has reconfigured his thought pattern to be averse to everything his forebears did: for instance, that farming has no social prestige (because of its rural linkage) and that banking is the in-thing (with its fiscal benefits).

As for the working language, he readily knows that Yorùbá, for instance, is not half as lucrative as English, and so he ignores every need to pay attention to the language and its cultural association. Before long, by reason of cultural duality he becomes an official member of his native society and an applicant for membership in the foreign language. In other words, since he lacks a good mastery of his own language and possesses only a working understanding of the other tongue, he is culturally and linguistically neither here nor there. Then, by virtue of social regeneration, he passes on these features to his children and so on, ad infinitum, with all of them nursing, at each stage, the death of their language and culture – and, ultimately, of themselves.

### 3.0 A brief sketch of the Yorùbá language

Sachine (1997) reports that the Yorùbá language is spoken as a first language by more than 22 million people spanning the south-western parts of Nigeria, the neighbouring countries of the Republic of Benin and Togo. Estimates of the number of dialects vary from twelve to twenty-six, although there is a standard language. It has been written since as early as 1800, although there have been changes in aspects of its orthographic representation. Yorùbá has proven to be fruitful for students of language. Its register tone system and vowel harmony system, extensive morphophonology, and numerous reduplicative processes are well documented and continue to be the subject of linguistic analysis.

With this kind of history, would it be accurate to say that the language is threatened in any way? The hasty researcher might be tempted to say ‘no’, but then he would be wrong – in the light of this paper’s findings.

However, Nigeria's language policy has not helped the growth of any of the three major languages (Yorùbá, Igbo and Hausa). While each of these languages has many advocates recommending it as the national language or *lingua franca*, the recurrent rivalries among their speakers constantly make such recommendations unworkable. For instance, as Adegbija (1994) notes, while most of the social and political problems in Nigeria are not always related to ethnic and linguistic differences and attitudes, camps are often pitched along these lines. At other times, the speakers of these languages are often suspicious of each other and this has considerable impact on attitudes towards each other's languages, and consequently on any meaningful attempt at language planning and action (p.53).

This paper discusses some of the overall effect of Nigeria's language policy and other social, political, and economic situations facing Yorùbá and presents evidence of loss emerging from the facts.

#### 4.0 Survey of speaker attitudes toward Yorùbá

This paper has used both a survey questionnaire and participant-observation methods to collect its data from willing and hesitant respondents among members of the Yorùbá speech community in three Yorùbá states of Nigeria: Lagos, Ogun and Osun. Specifically, the data was collected respectively in the following areas: Gbagada, Abeokuta and Ile-Ife. The questions that the respondents were asked to address generally had to do with members' competence in the language, their general or particular application of the language in their daily lives, their attitude to the language, and their expectations. To satisfy the objectives of this paper, only the following questions are addressed:

1. Do you think Yorùbá is suffering any loss (lexical, grammatical, pragmatic, or semantic) given your native knowledge of the language and your understanding of its present use among other members?
2. Would you say that the Yorùbá people these days are proud to be associated with the language as much as their parents about 25 years ago?
3. Do you see any correlation between Yorùbá and economic advantage?

4. Do you like to receive your faith in Yorùbá?
5. Which language (English or Yorùbá) do you use mostly:
  - (a) with your children?
  - (b) with your spouse?
  - (c) with your siblings?
6. Do your children know and understand any Yorùbá folktales and songs?
7. How often do you expect [Yorùbá] proverbs in conversation?
8. Do you feel fulfilled being able to speak Yorùbá?
9. Would you say that English is supplanting Yorùbá even in Yorùbá films?

The respondents are all native speakers of the language and vary only according to the following social criteria: education, age, sex, and faith (whether Christianity or Islam).

#### 4.1 General summary of findings

Since this is a descriptive analysis of the current state of the Yorùbá language, the provision of detailed statistical results has been deliberately ignored in favour of a concise global picture of the facts. Hence, the following paragraphs, including the table provided below, present the contemporary attitudes of the members to their language. From these results, it is easy to determine if the various observations of the scholars presented earlier hold true or not.

**Table 1 Summary of Findings**

Questionnaire item	Emphatic <i>No</i>	Emphatic <i>Yes</i>	Maybe	Don't know
Do you think Yorùbá is suffering any loss (lexical, grammatical, pragmatic, or semantic)?	14%	63%	8%	12%
Would you say that the Yorùbá people these days are proud to be associated with the language as much as their parents about 25 years ago?	85%	10%	3%	--
Do you see any correlation between Yorùbá and economic advantage?	91%	7%	--	--
Do you like to receive your faith in Yorùbá?	90%	6%	1%	--
Do you feel fulfilled being able to speak Yorùbá?	40%	30%	--	28%
Would you say that English is supplanting Yorùbá even in Yorùbá creative works?	16%	77%	2%	3%

As for questionnaire items 5 – 7 (section 4.0 above), respondents' feedback presents a dismal picture of the viability of the language. For 5a, for instance, 87% of the respondents do not speak Yorùbá with their children. They communicate with the children in English – the language in which they are taught most of the things they learn in school. In fact, the children themselves claim that they are taught Yorùbá in their different schools for only one hour weekly.

Only about 10% of the respondents communicate with their children in Yorùbá, and of this number, about 7% say the language of choice when they have company is English – that is, so as to engender social integration. Concerning item 5b and 5c, about 72% of the respondents claim they communicate with their spouse in Yorùbá although switching to English from time to time when the occasion calls for it – but arguments, tiffs and similar indices of communication breakdowns are usually conducted in English.

Item 6 presents a highly disappointing situation. Of the respondents, only 3% report that their children can tell one or two folktales or sing any folksongs at all, but 54% are honest enough to reveal that the children can recite many poems, songs, and tales learned from American and British books, television, and school.

Responding to their expectation of proverbs and similar turns of phrase of Yorùbá origin (Item 7) 81% consider such expressions as befuddling and a mere waste of speaking time and would rather not hear them in conversation at all. Thirty-two per cent say they prefer straightforward and candid talk to speech interlarded with proverbs, idioms, and similar expressions. Without a doubt, these results simply do not augur well for a language that has such a large population of speakers and that is a great ‘repository’ of culture and tradition.

#### 4.2 **Operational terms**

There is abundant literature on issues such as language endangerment, language attrition, language shift, language loss, language death, language contraction, etc. but we would be content to use the UNESCO report *Endangered Languages* (2005) as a fulcrum for the paper. Among other things, UNESCO observes that:

1. Language endangerment is an extremely serious problem with great scientific and humanistic consequences.
2. Language loss always involves pressure of some sort, whether directly or indirectly. The pressure on language can be cultural, economic, military, political, social, or any combination of these.



3. The disappearance of ... indigenous languages will have negative effects on the environment as well as on culture and tradition. The secrets of nature, hidden in songs, stories, art, and handicrafts may be lost forever as a result of growing globalization.
4. Many indigenous peoples have superior knowledge of plants, herbs, trees, flowers, parts of animals, and their use as medicines. With the loss of their language and traditions, we run the risk of loss of clues to create new drugs.
5. Africa – In the birthplace of almost one-third of the world's languages, 54 are believed dead, with another 116 nearing extinction.
6. North America – Eighty-five percent of the 260 native languages still spoken in the United States and Canada aren't being learned by children, a main factor in language loss.

When applied to Yorùbá, these observations are a reflection of the present state of the language.

At present, speakers of the language face enormous pressures to ditch the use of the language and learn/use the language of the ruling class.

In the nation's capital territory, for instance, Hausa is fast becoming the *working* language although the *lingua franca* is English. What this means, in effect, is that no one working in the area, or who hopes to get any job with the government can succeed without a good knowledge of Hausa. This is because the capital territory, as well as all government offices, is overwhelmingly populated by Hausa folk, with the result that without some knowledge of the *working* language, one would be all at sea. Many residents in the Federal Capital Territory affirm that Hausa, not English, is the language of the FCT, although they admit that English is the language used in keeping official documents. These residents agree, however, that since their stay in the FCT is largely economically decided, they have to speak the predominant language, Hausa- although the implications of such a choice or shift for the minority languages in the area are formidable.

But the loss indicated in UNESCO's 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> observations above is perhaps the most disturbing of all. The survey question here was *Do your children know any Yorùbá folk songs?* Many respondents generally answered disappointingly. As a matter of fact, most private schools in Nigeria today operate on the Montessori system of education, with the result that everything

taught is either American or Americanized – which leaves no room at all for all indigenous facts and practices. Thus, folk tales, general cultural knowledge, names of plants, herbs, trees, flowers, parts of animals, and their use as medicines are all lost to the Yorùbá person right from the formative years. The overall effect of this loss is that members simply ignore local ideas and remedies and embrace western practices, even where it is obvious that the latter are inauspicious.

Thus, looking at UNESCO's 6<sup>th</sup> observation, it is not wide of the mark to say that Yorùbá is going through a crisis which may soon classify it with the languages referred to in UNESCO's 5<sup>th</sup> observation.

### 5.0 Lexical loss in Yorùbá

In the view of Adegbija (2001), the official neglect of indigenous languages [because they are considered unworthy of being used in official contexts and because of their low developmental status] is another main source of threat to the existence of African languages; this threat triggers language shift in many African countries. The shift to the use of Hausa among Yorùbá workers in the FCT is an illustration of this fact. Because the speakers hardly need to use the language in a different domain, their consciousness is now geared to a new 'lexis' – a practice that 'decimates' the items in their own language. Going by the report presented in the joint paper by Fabunmi and Salawu (2005), large numbers of words from the basic vocabulary of Yorùbá are disappearing in the face of their counterparts in English. Examples abound but the following simple lexical items are a sample:

abọ	plate
àkókò	time
àpamọ	bag
apàniyàn	assassin
àpò	pocket
àtíkè	powder
bàtà	shoes
dígí	mirror
ibùsùn	bed
isáná	matches

ìsasùn	pot
iyàrá	room
òdòdó	flower
orin	music
Yéèpàripà!	Ouch!

It is possible to regard the use of the English forms in place of the Yorùbá items as a case of code-mixing, particularly in spoken discourse. However, the trait is on the increase even in serious literary texts, e.g. novels and plays, and where one would naturally expect the writer to reinforce the growth of the language through a selection of items from Yorùbá metalanguage resources, the usual phenomenon is an unrestricted transfer of items from the foreign language. The following excerpt is taken from a popular Yorùbá adventure novel:

Apalara gbe *telifoonu*, o sọrọ si ẹnikan pe ko se *kọfi* wa fun alejo oun... Wọn gbe *kọfi* de. Oriowo fi sibi gbe *suga* meji sinu rẹ, o fi wara pupọ si i. O mu ofere kan, o si je *bisikiiti* aladun mẹta...

The loan words in the excerpt [English orthography: *telephone, coffee, sugar, biscuits*] could all have been presented in the metalanguage forms available in Yorùbá. Elsewhere in the text, the author freely imports items which he could have substituted with forms from the language currently at work. Examples are *episii* (APC, an analgesic), *go-sloo* (go slow – Nigerian English for traffic jam), *mesenja* (messenger), *malaria* (malaria), *lebira* (labourer), *kongilato* (contractor), *sinabu* (schnapps), and *waya* (wire). So pervasive is this phenomenon these days that it is commonplace to talk in the manner expressed in the conversational fragment below, which illustrates the facility with which people import even whole phrases of English into speech that is essentially Yorùbá:

Gbogbo *time* ti mo fi wa *abroad* yen, *almost every day* ni mo ma n *visit McDonald's* as if pe ti mi o ba *eat out at least once a day*, mo maa ku *instantly* ni. *But by the time* ti mo fi *move from Las Vegas to Maryland*, *it was a different story altogether*. *These days*, mo le *spend a whole month* ki nma *taste any of those junk* ti won ma n *display* ni gbogbo awon *restaurants* yen. [80 words: Yorùbá: 34; English: 44]

*Gloss:* All the time I was abroad, I visited McDonald's as if I'd die instantly if I didn't eat out at least once a day. But by the time I moved from Las Vegas to Maryland, it was a different story altogether. These days, I can spend a whole month and not taste any of the junk that's displayed in all those restaurants.

The sum of these relentless cases of unconscious lexical transfer is a weakening of members' competence in handling their own language. Since Yorùbá presumably allows foreign items to be imported into it mid-speech, speakers could feel 'compelled' to carry on without stopping to acknowledge the consequent injury to other aspects of the language, particularly its links with the culture.

#### 6.0 **The Yorùbá language and poverty**

Adegbija (2001) observes that the threat of death hangs over many languages in Africa, Asia and Latin America which have an unenviable concentration of status-poor, officially inconsequential and functionally emaciated languages. The complex relationship between language and poverty may not be so easy to establish, especially when a country is governed by a member of the 'endangered language' community. However, as Nettle and Romaine (2000) point out, differential access to economic resources is, in modern times probably the fundamental determinant of language shift and language death. In other words, speakers of endangered languages quite reasonably have more pressing concerns, such as improving their economic prospects, than worrying about the fate of the languages.

As noted, to be able to work effectively in Abuja, the nation's capital territory, people have had to learn Hausa even against their wish. As an example, a female graduate on national assignment in Kano State skilfully 're-punctuated' her name from *Abiola Akano* (a proper Yorùbá name) to *Abiola A. Kano*. The result: she got a well-paying job because her Hausa employers thought she was 'one of them'! Thus in contexts of competition between languages, the shift to another language (to the detriment of the abandoned one) is most often determined by such

factors as perceived economic advantages for oneself or one's children. The buzzword in Nigeria these days is 'relocation': people are emigrating to Ireland, the US, Canada, etc., for bread and butter reasons.

### 7.0 **The Yorùbá metalanguage: a white elephant?**

Perhaps the greatest contribution to the growth, relevance and viability of the Yorùbá language is the publication of *The Yorùbá Metalanguage (Èdè-Ìperí Yorùbá)*, edited by Ayo Bamgbose (1992) – although the project has undergone several modifications in order to accommodate current linguistic additions especially via [information] science and technology. Sponsored by the Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council, the project was primarily concerned with the problem of the medium to employ in teaching Yorùbá at the university level – considering that English was not the most appropriate medium. This called for suitable Yorùbá metalanguage to cover several areas of life and living, including technical, scientific and technological terminology. Some of the strategies adopted in the coining of the technical terms in the work are composition, semantic extension, dialect borrowing, special coinage, and loanwords.

Despite all the effort, time and resources expended on the metalanguage project, the reality these days is that Yorùbá speakers deliberately abandon appropriate metalinguistic items and borrow whole expressions – even when it makes no sense at all to code-mix or code-switch – making the speaker sound like trying to satisfy two different ears during a single stretch of communication. Shall we attribute this phenomenon to metalanguage failure, perhaps because it sometimes does not quite capture some notions that members would like to express, or because, in view of globalisation, it is just better to express oneself in a more broadly used language, e.g. English?

## 8.0 Domains of use: the media, entertainment, home, work

The association between social status and linguistic competence in the *lingua franca* [English] has crated millions of Yorùbá people whose competence in their own language has become atrophied, marking the inchoate stage of language endangerment or language loss. This situation is most easily observed in the domains discussed in this section.

### 8.1 *The media*

In the media, for example, not many of the newscasters, advertisers and allied professionals are skilled in the use of the language any more. What we notice is a competence that may be described as skewed. In entertainment, the situation is not any better; in fact, it is rather worse, as dramatists, comedians, and others who use the language in more relaxed situations merely look for ways of doing away with the old and pristine forms of the language, interlarding their performance too often with loan words that have arisen in technology, information, science, and travel. Indeed, a look at the Yorùbá home videos we watch is enough conviction that all is not well with the present state of the language.

One should mention, however, the determined efforts of one or two Nigerian film organizations that wish to preserve the linguistic and cultural heritage of Yorùbá. In films produced by Mainframe (for instance, *Saworo Idẹ*, *Agogo Eewo*, and *O le ku*), the vintage stock of the beauty of the Yorùbá language is fully displayed. In all their films, Mainframe do not substitute a loan word for any expression or experience that has direct Yorùbá equivalent or metalanguage form, a feature that is absent in most other production agencies. Indeed, since films are produced to reflect life and living as if these were real, we would expect that the flow of the language should not be such that would befuddle non-English speaking members of the Yorùbá speech community. The excerpt below confirms the supposition inherent in the questionnaire item *Would you say that English is supplanting Yorùbá even in Yorùbá films?*

Character: *By the time ti mo fi maa de'be won ti fe ma conclude ceremony yen. Mo kan de take one bottle of Gulder – k'emi na kan fi feelfine, so that mi o ni wa left out. Nkan kan ti mi o understand ni why the programme should have gone on for such a long time before they knew pe ko ki nse dandan ki governor wa in attendance.*

Gloss: By the time I got there, they were ready to conclude the ceremony. I just took one bottle of Gulder – just for me to feel fine, so that I would not be left out. One thing I didn't understand was why the programme should have gone on for such a long time before they knew that it was not necessary for the governor to be in attendance.

This is an example of what we hear these days in many television plays and films that are purportedly Yorùbá in content. Usually, the number of English words and expressions in such situations outweighs those of Yorùbá, readily indicating a phase of language endangerment.

## 8.2 *The home*

A relevant view of endangerment is that advanced by Stephen Wurm (1999) – that an important part of the attempt to hinder the death of a language is the identification of its level of endangerment. Going by his classification, Yorùbá may be said to be potentially endangered, a position underscored by Wurm's own assertion that if not more than 10 – 30 per cent of the children begin to speak a language, the language is potentially endangered. In many Yorùbá families today, the language of the home is English and many times, parents even rebuke their children for speaking Yorùbá – a mentality that highlights the lucrative/non-lucrative correspondence between English and Yorùbá and the presumed tags of economic success and social irrelevance respectively. More distressing is the fact that children of highly educated people abstain from any use of the language to express even ordinary rituals like visiting the toilet, a habit that has become 'pandemic' even among the less educated. In the schools, the Montessori approach to education has been mistakenly applied to produce the obliteration of the indigenous languages, and because most of the pupils come from diverse backgrounds, the use of English becomes a crucial tool for socialisation and integration. But superior to the need to be

socially integrated is the need to realize that one's language is the most precious cultural heritage that can be bequeathed from generation to generation.

### 8.3 *The workplace*

Most workplaces in Nigeria are founded on the use of a foreign language, typically English. As a result, the average high-flying academic, banker, civil servant, oil company executive, etc. has no need for a language that does not 'fetch his daily bread'. Because English has thus become the working language, it is only a matter of time when the death of Nigeria's local tongues will come. In a few words, the English language presents an invasive syndrome much like a cancer cell in the human anatomy, and our local languages are being insidiously eaten away by its ravaging oppressiveness. Given this scenario, university undergraduates often ask what they can do with courses that have a leaning towards Nigeria's indigenous languages, a fact reflected in the number of enrolments for students wishing to pursue careers based on Yorùbá, Hausa, Igbo and other native tongues.

### 9.0 **Cultural loss: Names, Greetings, Proverbs and other 'seasoning' resources**

Language loss resulting from too much dependence on a foreign tongue is also manifest when members attempt to go back to the roots. Many of the respondents confess that they are totally unaware of the cultural significance of their names. About 45% have changed their names from culturally-based identities to names bearing the members' association with, or inclusion in, their faith, e.g. Christianity. The reason for such a switch is mostly that the earlier name bore the mark of a Yorùbá god which the [Christian] faith 'condemns'. Also, about 43% who retain Yorùbá names simply bear these names not attentive to their social/historical/cultural background. In some other instances – about 8% - the respondents claim that they just must have Yorùbá names, at least for inclusion in the ethnic group.



As for greetings, a constant traditional detail of the Yorùbá lifestyle is that the language has a culturally-grounded greeting form for every activity and situation, however simple or complex: hunting, hair-plaiting, sleeping, waking up, eating, sitting down, standing up, travelling, arriving, communal meeting – even private meditation. Yet, these days, probably on account of the effects of globalisation and western education, all these greetings have given way to trite forms that re-classify members as cultural dopes. Examples of such pedestrian, culturally pointless greeting forms are: *Se nkan n roll?* (English: *How are things coming on?*), *S'o n bubble?* (English, roughly: *Is life fun enough?*), *Kinni show?* (English, roughly: *What's going on?*), *What's up?*, *Se o wapa?* (English, roughly: *Are you there?*), *Ki l'owo e?* (English, roughly: *Are you doing anything?*), *Ewo l'ewo?* (English, roughly: *What's what?*) *How far?*, etc. On account of the absence of cultural commitment in these and similar greetings, members lose sight of the substantial flavour, solidarity and strength of cultural knowledge wrapped up in traditional greeting forms. The modern Yorùbá clan is bereft of the dictates of ethnographic conduct as members move from situation to situation, leaving most of them with almost zero consciousness of the greeting forms expected, for instance, on an occasion like visiting the bereaved, as opposed to expressing empathy for someone who has merely lost money!

Among the peoples of Africa, proverbs, aphorisms, axioms and other flavouring resources play a pivotal role in imparting meaning. These days, owing to the loss of our languages, these seasoning devices are going to the dogs. These observations point up the fact that 'unskilful' members are thrilled by proverbs thrown up by their culturally sentient interlocutors during chat or other verbal interactions. Hardly do people want to accept that these linguistic devices are the real walking sticks for the language and that they are the faithful repository of the wisdom and mores of the people.

### 10.0 **The Word and the Language: Is the *Word* eroding the Language?**

The Church seems to have given birth to a new breed of Yorùbá ‘citizens’ who prefer to receive the message of the faith not in their native tongue but in a foreign language, thereby strengthening the trend of endangerment of Yorùbá. Although the Yorùbá Bible is very much available to the adherents of the Christian faith, the data for this paper reveals that about 90% of the respondents would rather receive the faith in English, a practice that points to a steady disregard of the Yorùbá in similar public domains. Sadly, renditions in Yoruba of practices essentially Western or endemic to Britain or America misfire because of the incongruity resulting from a juxtaposition of the cultures represented by the operating languages. Take the invocation of the Holy Spirit for instance. When the preacher in a dominantly Yorùbá Pentecostal assembly calls for the release of the fire (i.e., Spirit) in Yorùbá, the result can be a bit disturbing to anyone who speaks the language effectively, as the following demonstrates:

**Pastor:** Let us call down the fire from heaven  
to fall upon us.  
Fire! Fire! Fire!

**Interpreter:** È jẹ kí a pe iná sọkalẹ láti ọrun  
kí ó bà lé wa.  
Iná! Iná! Iná!

In all its applications in Yorùbá, *iná* ‘fire’ is associated with ‘grave misfortune’. Even in spiritual matters (e.g. *iná ara* and *iná ẹmí* – respectively: *physical fire* and *spiritual fire*) the word has a highly unsavoury nuance. Thus, for anyone to call down the fire (of the Spirit, from Heaven, etc.) is to invite untold calamity on themselves.

On the other hand, even in some non-Pentecostal assemblies, especially in cities such as Lagos, the preference of English to Yorùbá often produces an inadequate presentation of the preferred tongue. The following passage was collected at a church of one hundred per cent Yorùbá membership:

Some people suppose to perish when they climb this pulpit. Why do I say so is that one slave makes us abuse two hundred slaves. What am I saying? Is that it is because of one man that cut finger that the town is called the town of finger-cutter. These people come and tell you many things that God did not send them. Like four square church. Now, tell me, what is four about God? The God that we serve is three. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit...

The sum of all this is that if one's performance in a language one aspires to is so poor, and one's cultural knowledge involving the language being abandoned is equally deficient, the member can be counted as culturally illiterate and cannot be properly classified in either language category.

### 11.0 **Members' development plateau**

As a result of all the factors discussed above, it is easy for us to predict – but very highly uncomfortable for us to accept – that the Yoruba language may not develop beyond its present state. In view of the subtle metalanguage failure arising from its inability to catch up with the state of affairs as dictated by new trends in engineering, technology, the computer, biotechnology, and other advances in numerous areas of human achievement, it is the position of this paper that members may not be able to develop their linguistic performance especially when discussing matters alien to their culture. Learning, too, might be slowed down for the simple fact that people learn better when they can be presented the subject in their mother tongue. Now, with the growing inability to express oneself in one's own language, and the corresponding lack of competence in English, it is obvious that one is merely a linguistic dope, neither Yorùbá nor English; and while not excelling in either language, one's growth may only be material, not cultural, with a suitable net worth but no self worth.

One of the submissions of this paper is that the knowledge of one's language puts one at an advantage in understanding not only the world around one better, but also in understanding the workings of a target (special, or working) language. And since we are determined to lose our local languages to the invading killer language, the gradual decay of much of our heritage – cultural, social, traditional, etc. – and our ecology has only just begun.

## 12.0 Reversing the Trend

The general hope of this short paper is to see to the reawakening of interests in the Yorùbá language. Given the plethora of organisations across the globe (e.g. the Yorùbá Union of Switzerland and a host of others) this paper hopes to enjoin the Yorùbá people – notwithstanding their different interests and backgrounds – to cherish, uphold, and project the honour and dignity of Yoruba culture, language and tradition in Africa other parts of the world. But this kind of idealistic expectation will fall through if a number of principles are not upheld.

First, the government needs to formulate appropriate policies that would entrench the interests of the culture and tradition represented by each Nigerian language in the hearts of its speakers. To realize this may be somehow onerous, given the prevalent disinterest that associations with these languages have bred over the years. If, for instance, the education policy incorporates the comprehensive use of Nigeria's mother tongues as tools of instruction in all [at least, primary] schools, then there is the promise of a new breed of curators for these threatened languages.

Second, employers need to factor into their criteria for employment, a basic knowledge of the culture of the language that employees claim to speak. Without any doubt, a good knowledge of the tradition, culture and mores of a people readily guarantees successful transactional relationship within the target market.

Third, as Crystal (2003) points out, most people have yet to develop a language conscience. Many of the respondents to the survey for this paper failed to acknowledge the vital role of their language in their lives. In other words, most of these people see themselves as successful actors in the society not on the basis of enacting their cultural potential but on the grounds of the material success acquired over time – on account of their proficiency in English.

Thus, as Crystal points out, there is a need to influence public opinion about what linguistic identity means and how it can be fostered.

Globalisation, supposedly a unifying concept, has been misconstrued – and is being ‘advertised’ – as the Americanisation of cultures around the world. From this standpoint, it becomes clear that all other cultures must kow-tow to the American culture. But this should not be taken as the objective of globalisation. Therefore, linguists, sociologists, anthropologists, ethnologists, and others interested in the interrelationships between peoples and cultures ought to become more resolute about the survival of cultures not within the Americas.

### 13.0 **Conclusion**

The conclusion that may be drawn from the discussion is that it would be unfounded presumptuousness for anyone to think that the Yoruba language – as well as numerous other languages in Nigeria and many parts of the world – is not threatened by the English language. With the increasing decline of speakers of the language to cover much of day-to-day life and living, the future of Yorùbá is somewhat dreary – that is, as a result of the pervasive use of English and as a result of other factors that make the use of Yoruba a minor matter. Given this present set of obstructive circumstances, pure forms of the language seem to be unavailable and the researcher, the sociolinguist and the ethnologist might need to travel to the hinterlands to ‘collect’ the pure forms of the language. Sadly, with rapid urbanisation and further globalisation of the world, even those whom we listen to in the villages may become ravaged by the importation and imposition of westernisation and thereby suffer further loss, thus bringing the end of the language nearer and sooner.

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