

DOCUMENTATION OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES: A PANACEA FOR THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract

Globalization is the ability of many people, ideas and technology to move from one country to another (cf. Emenanjo, 2005). This implicates globalization as oriented to achieving universalization, homogenization, integration and centralization: factors which portend danger to the cultural and linguistic identity of most of the peoples of the world, especially the African peoples. In fact, the benefits advanced by the proponents of globalization make this danger difficult to be observed. However, some scholars have identified the danger. For instance, Mbat (2005) interprets it (globalization) as neo-colonialism. That is, it is a system with socio-economic cover equipped to destroy the remnants of African cultural and linguistic identity left by colonialism. This paper argues that the only workable way of preserving the remnants of African cultural and linguistic identity is via documentation of African languages, developed, undeveloped or underdeveloped ones. Moreover, it recommends a course of action for the documentation of the languages and proposes that any successfully documented language should be utilized in the modernization of other languages.

1.0 Introduction

Globalization is a relatively great concept. It embodies features that are both enchanting and disenchanting. Emenanjo (2005) must have considered this in commenting, “Globalization in theory and practice is full of paradoxes”. The paradoxes must be the motivating factor in the production of discourses by many scholars and organizations on it. The enchanting feature of globalization is Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), chief of which is the Internet. It is this feature that is the catalyst in the transformation of the world into a village. The implication of the village is manifest in Emenanjo’s definition of the concept (globalization). In his words, “Globalization is the ability of many people, ideas and technology to move from country to country ...”

Indeed, one thing that most people would welcome is the possibility of their accessing any place, idea or technology and this is what it would be if the world became a village.

The disenchanting feature of globalization is the mechanism for the enthronement of a global language. Obviously, a common language in the world offers unprecedented possibilities for mutual understanding across the breadth and length of the world (cf. Okwudishu, 2008). It is the mutual understanding that will facilitate the achievement of universalization, homogenization, integration and centralization, and form a sure foundation upon which the world as a village would exist. However, how would a situation permitting a common language become possible in this multilingual world?

The reaction of some scholars with regard to a common world language has a lot of revelations. Some of them propose certain languages (even though not mentioned) to serve as the world language. Crystal and Toolan cited in Okwudishu (2003) reveal this. Crystal advances that multilingualism is the fundamental principle in establishing a common world language or shared language. This position is based on his conviction that multilingualism will present different perspectives and insights that will ensure a profound understanding of the nature of human mind. Again, it will protect linguistic diversity which will fill the gaps, for instance, where one language calibrates the world in one way another would in another way. Against multilingualism, Toolan proposes extensive bilingualism and extensive translation.

May it be noted that all the languages of the world (7000 in number (cf. Akinlabi and Connell, 2007)) cannot be spoken even skeletally by any individual. Therefore the multilingualism proposed by Crystal will have to favor only a few world languages. Toolan's extensive bilingualism is worse. Which two languages of the world will be favored? Hence, we think that within the conscience of these scholars a case is made for a few languages (such as the ones used in the businesses of the UN) more particularly English, which is spoken by over 380 million people and is well-spread in different countries of the world where it serves as a second language (L2). More so, it is the most functional international language of diplomacy, commerce and the Internet. The point here is that the myriad of other languages of the world will be neglected for

the actualization of a common world language and the indication of this is that the languages will suffer atrophy. This is the negative side of globalization and will affect Africa most. Mbat (2005) must have considered this in interpreting globalization as neo-colonialism. That is, it is a system with socio-economic cover equipped to destroy the remnants of African cultural and linguistic identity left by colonialism.

The position of this paper is that the negative side of globalization would be difficult to check in Africa, especially with the positive side offered by ICT. In other words, all the African languages are marked for death. However, the paper believes that documentation of African languages would go a long way to protect them. In the section below, an overview of language documentation is presented. It is followed by the course of action recommended to facilitate the documentation and conclusion.

2.0 Overview of documentation

Lehmann (2001) comments that documentation is an activity, which gathers, processes and exhibits a sample of data of the language that is representative of its linguistic structure and gives a fair impression of how and for what purposes the language is used. Its purpose is to represent the language for those who do not have access to the language itself.

According to these words, documentation includes data collection, analysis of the data, and provision of the data for accessibility. It is worthy of note that the data are collected to represent not only the linguistic structure of the language but also the impression of how and for what purposes the language is used. This means that documentation aims at providing a record of the linguistic practices and traditions of a speech community (cf. Himmelmann, 1998). The reason for this approach is explained by Akinlabi and Connell (2007), "Language is rooted in a speech community, in its history and its culture, and is at the same time a part of that history and culture; as such a language is a living object."

From the foregoing, documentation pursues the goal of providing comprehensive language data, data reflecting the linguistic systems and sub-systems of a language and the use of the language

in its natural and social setting. Urua (2003) lists instances of such setting. They are discourse (speeches, conversations, texts etc), pouring libation, marriages, burials, market setting, village meetings, religious activities and language use in other social interactions. Here, it is clear that documentation is the best instrument for the preservation of languages and the cultures in which they are borne. This is why this paper has recommended it for African languages, most of which, if not all, already occupy a position in any of the Wurm's (2003) five classes of language endangerment (and, we add, culture endangerment), which include: i) potentially endangered: languages in this class are learnt imperfectly by children in the areas where they are spoken because of the overriding interest in a dominant language; ii) endangered: languages in this class have few child speakers; iii) seriously endangered: languages here have middle-aged or past middle-aged persons as their youngest speakers; iv) terminally endangered: languages here have a few elderly speakers; and v) dead or extinct: languages in this class have no speakers at all. And, with globalization and its negative effects on languages, in no long time, African languages in safer classes will jump into the unsafe ones and on and on Africa will lose all her languages for the 'big languages of the world'. Definitely, documentation is necessary in Africa now!

3.0 Course of action recommended for documentation in Africa

Indeed, documentation in Africa would be a mammoth task. This is owing to the number of languages in the continent. Heine and Nurse (2000) cite Grimes as putting the number of the languages at 2035. It is claimed that this number is not fixed since some African languages are still being discovered and others with few speakers are disregarded. Whatever is the number, the importance of documenting the languages cannot be overstressed. Practical recommendations are therefore needed for its actualization. Below are a few of such recommendations:

- i. Ascertaining the accurate number of African languages and grouping them into the appropriate classes of endangerment, which they belong. This will provide information about the languages that need immediate attention and those that can wait.

ii. Training of documentary linguists. We must commend a good number of organizations which have provided support and are still willing to provide more for programs connected with documenting languages. Worthy of mention are Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project (HRELP), which provided support for the Summer School on Documentary Linguistics in Winneba, Ghana, July 16 – 17, 2008 and the organizers and sponsors of the Institute on Field Linguistics and Language Documentation (Infield 2008), University of California, Santa Barbara, USA, 23 June - 1 August 2008. The authors of this paper benefited from the two training workshops. Such support is needed from more organizations. This is because with few documentary linguists, documentation in Africa will be unproductive.

iii. Soliciting for funds. Documentation is capital intensive. This is because it involves special equipment and elaborate local run. The government of each African country, and private organizations in the continent and beyond should be accessed with a proposal detailing the benefits of documenting African languages and soliciting their contribution in the provision of funds and other logistics.

iv. Delineating languages so that there might not be waste of scarce funds, and energy in working on a dialect of a language as a language. This is necessary because of the role political boundaries play.

v. Introducing documentary linguistics in the linguistics program of African universities. With this the universities will become responsible for training documentary linguists and the amount of funds committed to organizing forums for training documentary linguists will be channeled to procurement of relevant equipment for documentation for the universities.

4.0 Conclusion

Globalization is real. It has a positive side and a negative side. The negative side is associated with its mechanism for the enthronement of a common world language: a situation that will cause the death of many languages, especially African languages. To provide safety for the languages, this paper has proposed documentation, which not only accounts for the systems and sub-

systems of a language but also the use of the language in its natural and social setting.

For a successful documentation, the paper has recommended a course of action, which includes ascertaining the accurate number of African languages and grouping them into the appropriate classes of endangerment which they belong; training documentary linguists, soliciting for funds from the government of every African country, and from private organizations within and outside the continent; delineating languages so that there might not be waste of scarce funds, and energy in working on a dialect of a language as a language; and introducing documentary linguistics in the linguistics program of African universities.

We suggest that mere language preservation should not be the goal of documentation in Africa but what we have called 'language mummification', impeccable language preservation for posterity of limitless ages. (Thank goodness, the real mummification is the modernization of other African languages, especially the developed and underdeveloped ones, which are nearly being endangered. For instance, items for dates in a documented language could be used in a developed or underdeveloped language that lacks them, preventing the language from transliterating similar items from languages foreign to Africa.

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