

**CRACKS IN THE WALL: TOWARDS
A RE-ORIENTATION OF LINGUISTIC STUDY AND
RESEARCH IN NIGERIA**

Gideon S. Omachonu and Abubakar S. Wakawa

Abstract

The fact that remarkable progress has been made in linguistic study and research in Nigeria notwithstanding, the study of linguistics in Nigeria still leaves much to be desired. Linguistics in Nigeria has remained on the old order in that it has pre-occupied itself with "doing linguistics for its own sake". This strictly formal approach, the paper argues, has rendered the discipline arid and unattractive to students. Besides, it has been observed also that although researchers in African linguistics have taken great strides in the description of the indigenous languages at all levels, the contributions and findings from their intellectual efforts have not imparted considerably on the larger society. Consequent upon the above, this study through a thorough assessment of literature investigated the present state of the art, identified the reasons for the missing links and as well offered explanations for the present scenario in the discipline. Proposals for establishing cross-disciplinary programmes were put forward as a way of charting a new course for linguistic study and research in Nigeria. The paper concludes that making linguistics directly relevant to practical problem solving in the Nigerian economy is not a baseless consideration because the relatively late arrival of linguistics in Nigeria notwithstanding, it has stayed long enough to affect positively the well being of the people. To ensure the survival of African languages and optimal utilization of research efforts in indigenous languages and linguistics, it suggests that a holistic approach which combines action, research, advocacy and activism be adopted by researchers in Nigerian linguistics.

Introduction

The study of languages and linguistics in Nigeria has come a long way. Even though a fully fledged and autonomous Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages (now African Languages) started in 1962 at the premier university (University of Ibadan- Nigeria) simultaneous with the autonomy of the university, a sub-Department of Phonetics had existed since 1954 in the Department of English of the university. Even between 1954 and 1962 a lot was done to widen the scope of the phonetic courses to deal with theories of the phoneme and using laboratory equipment to investigate and establish the phonetic nature of the sounds of selected Nigerian languages (Olatunji, 1995; Ndimele, 1999; Nwachukwu, 2003). Equally in its early years as a full degree course at Ibadan, Ife, Nsukka and other universities in Nigeria where it spread to later following the establishment of those institutions, remarkable progress was made in the study of linguistics and indigenous Nigerian languages. For instance, core linguistic courses in phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics were introduced through which a lot of amazing discoveries have been made and are still being made in the structure of some Nigerian languages. The aim of the founding fathers of linguistics in Nigeria then as enunciated below foreshadowed this progress:

To give the student a scientific approach to the study of language in general, to introduce him to modern linguistic theory - descriptive as well as historical and comparative - and to enable him to undertake the scientific analysis of a language. (Faculty of Arts Prospectus, Linguistics and African Languages, University of Ibadan, 1962).

With this, a solid foundation for viable linguistic study of Nigerian languages was laid. So, over the years, as should rightly be expected,

Nigerian linguists and expatriates involved in the study of Linguistics and Nigerian languages have made remarkable contributions to linguistic and literary scholarship in Nigeria's major, main and small group languages.

The foregoing, notwithstanding, the study of linguistics in Nigeria still leaves much to be desired. It has been observed that linguistics in Nigeria over the years has, in the words of Ndimele (1999), pre-occupied itself with "doing linguistics for its own sake" (See also Bamgbose, 2007; Emenanjo, 2007; Omachonu, 2007). This bookish and strictly formal approach has rendered the discipline arid and unattractive to students as it does not take into cognizance, the survival of the linguist in terms of job prospects and entrepreneurial skills that will equip him to live well in his society as well as blending linguistics with other disciplines for practical problem solving in socio-political and economic matters. Besides, it has been observed also that there is a missing link between linguistic theorizing/modeling in academic papers and the realities on ground in that although researchers in African linguistics have taken great strides in the description of the indigenous languages at all levels, the contributions and findings from their intellectual efforts have not imparted considerably on the larger society (Adegoju, 2008). This is another dimension of knowledge/language endangerment. It is to be noted that by reason of our colonial accident/experience, there is a clear evidence of the hegemonic influence of foreign languages like English and French, whereby African languages suffer marginalization and negligence in terms of acquisition, learning and use, and so does African scholarship. Another contributory factor to this dimension of endangerment is our gross negative attitude towards the study and use of our own indigenous languages which places the foreign languages at higher preference above the indigenous ones.

It is against this background that this study seeks to investigate, identify and discuss factors responsible for these shortcomings in

linguistic study and utilization of research results, reports and or recommendations in Nigeria with a view to suggesting a re-orientation in the study of languages and linguistics in Nigeria, and as well open up new directions for more functional and societal interest based research in indigenous languages and linguistics in Nigeria.

The State of the Art: A Critical Review

The issue of expressing worries over the shortcomings of linguistic study and research in Nigeria as it relates to attitude, course contents and the extent of utilization of research reports, findings and recommendations is not entirely new. Ndimele (1999), observed that Nigerian universities have continued to study Linguistics as it was conceived by the founding fathers at the then University College, Ibadan without modification and without taking into cognizance our peculiar needs and aspirations as a nation. Hence, the study of linguistics in Nigeria has so far concentrated on orthographies and metalanguage development, language standardization, compilation of dictionaries, grammatical description and the teaching of the indigenous languages without showing the relevance of the discipline in its application to problem solving in other areas of human endeavour. This, according to him, has made the students to hate the subject as it is taught in Nigeria at the moment as they continue to question the significance of the discipline in their lives and what it means in terms of their economic survival. The views of Omachonu (2007), on this matter, to a large extent, agree with those of Ndimele (1999), enunciated above.

In another dimension but closely related development, Emenanjo (2007) described linguistics in Nigeria as an endangered discipline. He laments that the future of linguistics as an academic discipline in Nigeria is bleak pointing out that the most destructive of all the factors militating against it is the demands of Nigerian universities that all disciplines must be viable, relevant, monetized and overflowing

with students or 'perish'. Even as some Departments of Linguistics in Nigerian universities are already taking steps by going double-barreled to arrest the situation, they are faced with yet a new set of challenges. In a search for a viable solution, he poses this question: "With the inevitable collapse of the traditional protective walls between disciplines, isn't it possible to have curricula in cross-disciplinary areas such as Linguistics/Physics, Linguistics/Maths, Linguistics/ICTs, Linguistics/Medicine, etc?"

Similarly, Bamgbose (2007), is of the opinion that beyond the teaching and research in formal linguistics (descriptive and theoretical) which has been the emphasis from the beginning of teaching linguistics in Nigeria, the Nigerian linguist should be prepared to go the extra mile of making the discipline relevant in its immediate Nigerian environment through participation in social responsibilities using the knowledge of linguistics in education, justice, health, political system, rural development, the media and so on. He argues that a linguist in a developing country cannot afford to be a 'pure' linguist. Even though the Nigerian linguist is often contented with collecting data, analyzing and publishing for the attention of his colleagues and for promotion, what is really missing in all this, he asserts, is the social relevance of what we do.

Taking the argument from yet another perspective, Adegboju (2008) observes that in the wake of the hegemonic influence of foreign languages like English and French, African languages are being marginalized in terms of acquisition, learning and use. Drawing on the linguistic situation in southwestern Nigeria, he sheds light on three major domains: education, religion and the media, where there is gross disuse of the indigenous language, Yoruba to be precise, in favour of English. This development, he argues creates the impression that although researchers in African linguistics have taken great strides in the description of the indigenous languages at all levels, their contributions and findings (intellectual efforts) have

not imparted considerably on the larger society. Consequently, there seem to be missing links between linguistic theorizing/modeling in academic papers/blueprints and the trajectory of African linguistics-cum-development.

Most universities in Nigeria still do linguistics in its formal and bookish fashion which has rendered it unpopular and unattractive. As a result, people hardly know what linguistics is all about in Nigeria. A few universities like Universities of Calabar and Port Harcourt in Nigeria that had taken steps in diversification by introducing Linguistics and Communication Studies ended up creating new challenging problems whereby students only use them to gain admission into the university but go straight for Communication Studies option without first of all acquiring adequate knowledge in linguistics which would have formed the backbone for studies in communications. This way, the good intention and aim of such effort might have been defeated. And on the issues relating to the extent of utilization of research findings in languages and linguistics cum indigenous language acquisition, learning and use in Nigeria, it seems such exercises neither receive impetus from the government nor the native speakers as stake holders. Therefore where such endeavours exist, they are undertaken as mere intellectual exercises. Arising from the above scenario is the fundamental question of identifying the main causes of this present state of affairs in linguistic study and research in Nigeria, and this forms the object of discussion in the section that follows.

Reasons for the Present State of Linguistic Study and Research

It is a popular axiom that knowing the cause of a problem is a right step in the right direction towards solving the problem. Therefore before we go in search of the cure for the problem of lopsided linguistic study and under-utilization of research findings and

recommendations in Nigeria, one may have to interrogate the whys and wherefores of the present state of the discipline in Nigeria. As someone who has been involved in the study and research in linguistics for about two decades now, I have observed that the following, among others, are the main causes of the shortcomings and or setbacks witnessed in linguistic study and research in Nigeria today:

- * Earlier foundation/orientation of linguistic study and research
- * Negative language attitude
- * Eurocentric tendencies/effects of our colonial history
- * Lack of motivation/incentives/commitment from individuals and the government

From the foundational aim of the founding fathers of Linguistics in Nigeria as reported earlier, it becomes crystal clear that they actually meant linguistic study and research in Nigeria to be mainly formal and bookish. This is because the focus of the discipline hardly considers its application to socio-economic and political problem solving in the immediate Nigerian society or environment. Therefore the shortcomings and setbacks witnessed today in linguistic study and research is a carry over effect of that foundation error.

Besides this error is the fundamental problem of gross negative language attitude displayed by most Nigerians towards the linguistic study and research in indigenous languages. As Omachonu (2007; 2008) argues, it is quite evident that most Nigerians display grossly negative language attitude towards their native languages, worse of all, when it comes to studying the languages as academic discipline. Instances abound where most Nigerians would feel that he who goes into such a study is not doing anything serious and therefore he/she is not so relevant in contributing to the development or immediate needs of the society. Sometimes, they may even ridiculously go as far as giving funny and derogatory names to persons, units and departments that have anything to do with such

studies. The Igalas, for instance, would refer to those studying the language as only studying 'Láá and Kpáá'. But a closer observation of their attitude in this regard would reveal a glaring case of ignorance as well as poverty of the knowledge of language or what language study generally entails. This gross negative language attitude of Nigerians towards their respective native languages runs counter productive to national development. Considering the symbiotic relationship between language and society as well as the place of language in national development, until we accord the right values to our indigenous languages and turn off our grossly negative attitudes towards them, true national development will continue to elude us as a nation. For instance, true development starts with the people, and how can the people be reached or affected without their culture and language? One wonders the kind of development we can achieve as a people in Nigeria without carrying along our cultures and languages. Not until these issues have been properly addressed, the search for cultural re-birth and national development would remain a mere dream. And for us to address these issues, we need to speak the truth to ourselves so that we can adjust appropriately or change for the better; turning our grossly negative language attitude to a positive one through attitudinal change and value re-orientation in this direction.

Closely related to the issue of language attitude is Nigerians' Eurocentric tendencies which in turn is a product of our colonial accident which has so dehumanized us into believing that whatever is of African/Nigerian origin and setting is inferior and sub-standard, including 'made in Nigeria' products; no matter how authentic or qualified. Nigerians' taste and value system is so irresistibly tailored to the West that whatever is not foreign or imported is of less value. This mentality, a cruel colonial legacy, has so much sank into us in Nigeria that it radiates in every aspect of our national life including the way we assess ourselves and everything about us

including our indigenous languages. It is this mentality too that has robbed us of full utilization of research findings, reports and recommendations. It is just like saying; can anything of value, worth its salt, come from a Nigerian and from Nigeria? This loss of confidence in ourselves and our systems has betrayed and sold us as perpetual slaves and copy-cats in the eyes of especially bigger nations of the world. As it stands, redeeming our image or achieving an effective image laundry will require a radical and pragmatic approach.

With the three first problems listed and enunciated above, it will be no surprise to see a clear lack of motivation, incentives and commitment on the parts of individuals and the government towards linguistic study and utilization of research reports in Nigeria. While individuals and respective speech communities display lack of commitment towards the study and research in the indigenous languages, even the respective governments at the various levels are not committed to providing motivation and incentives to linguists and researchers in the various indigenous languages. This has placed at a serious disadvantage linguistic study and research in Nigeria.

Charting a New Course for Linguistic Study and Research in Nigeria

Linguistics in Nigeria might have realized, to some extent, its pristine broad objective of equipping learners with a good knowledge of the main theories, principles and practices of linguistics and their practical applications to the indigenous Nigerian languages but still leaves much to be desired in terms of training the Nigerian linguist to apply such knowledge and skills for advancement of the society especially as it relates to practical problem solving in his peculiar Nigerian environment. Besides, there is a conspicuous missing link between research reports and implementation of suggestions and or recommendations from such reports resulting from the gross

negative attitude of Nigerians (including the government) displayed towards the indigenous languages. Obviously, there are cracks in the wall as far as linguistic study and research in Nigeria is concerned. As a result, the Nigerian linguist is confronted with an army of challenging issues which in turn have rendered the discipline not only unpopular but endangered (Emenanjo, 2007). Besides, even though a pocket of researches and opinion papers over the years have mentioned these challenges; they have not been so articulated in a single research effort like this, especially with a view to charting a new course for linguistic study and research in Nigeria.

One's dream for the study of languages and linguistics in Nigeria which this study is poised to achieve is to invoke an academic revolution that will re-shape and re-focus the course and progress of the discipline in Nigeria to an extent that the practice will tell the story itself. Therefore in this present study, one intends to fashion out viable linguistic programme(s) and research with enduring legacy in Nigeria as the old gives way or is blended with the new with a lot of innovations for best practices. Even as this is equally intended to be an on-going study and continuing agenda for a re-orientation of linguistic study and research in Nigeria, we shall for now present the following proposals as a way of charting a new course for linguistic study and research in Nigeria. These are intended as combined honours programmes and not just courses to be taken in linguistics. They are:

- * Linguistics and Medicine
- * Linguistics and Law/Criminology

First, we have decided to limit ourselves to these two programmes yet because of their relevance to every person and every community; the paramount issues of health and security. Secondly, in order not to leave these suggested programmes hanging, and in a bid to making the suggestions more practical, pragmatic

and realistic, it will be proper to give a clearer focus and objectivity to the proposals. Linguistics rightly described as the scientific study of language has been interested in investigating and analyzing language in its diverse ramifications. This has made linguists to begin to examine language not only from the theoretical/descriptive perspectives but also from the applied, and more specifically, the sociolinguistic point of view which deals with the regular correspondence between language and society. Here lies the intermarriage between language and other disciplines. Besides, with the inevitable collapse of the traditional protective walls between disciplines, the earlier we propose curricula in cross-disciplinary areas such as listed above, the better for linguistics and other endangered disciplines in Nigeria and Africa at large.

Linguistics and Medicine: Even before now, elsewhere in the world, linguists have been very active in speech pathology and therapy. But this practice is not popular and pronounced in Nigeria. Speech pathology and therapy involves the study, diagnosis and treatment given to people with language and speech disorders namely: difficulty with actual production of certain sounds, non-fluency, stuttering, inability to put words together to communicate ideas clearly, voice disorders (problems with pitch, volume or quality of the voice that may even distract listeners from what is being said) and so on. Apart from these expressive disorders which may include limited vocabulary and inability to use language in a socially appropriate way, there are also receptive disorders which may result to difficulty in understanding or processing language. It is important to note at this juncture that these ailments do not need drugs and medications to cure. They only need the services of a qualified speech pathologist and therapist to overcome the difficulties. A speech pathologist helps those who struggle with various speech disorders resulting from developmental delays, brain injuries, mental retardation, stroke, learning disabilities, cerebral palsy, hearing loss

to regain normal communication ability. Speech pathology and therapy, a career that can be practiced in a variety of settings: schools, offices, hospitals etc, requires professional qualification in both linguistics and medicine. A professional pathologist, for instance, has the ability to diagnose specific problems of each patient and devise an appropriate treatment plan that may suit the needs of each patient. It is to be noted, that in developed countries where this practice is in vogue, a speech pathologist like a medical doctor is licensed to be able to practice.

The point is that if this kind of cross-disciplinary programme is introduced in Nigerian universities where linguistics collaborates with medicine to produce Speech Pathologists, linguistics as a discipline will be afforded the avenue to tell the story itself and its direct relevance for the immediate society would have been provided for. And for the proposed programme in Linguistics/Medicine, courses to be taken at both undergraduate and graduate levels shall include core courses in linguistics especially phonetics and phonology, mechanics of speech production, psycholinguistics, anatomy, physiology, psychology among other basic courses in Medicine. The requirements for admission into the programme will be credit in English language, Physics, Biology, Maths and any other science subject or computer science.

Linguistics and Law/Criminology: This is aimed at popularizing Forensic Linguistics in Nigeria. Forensic linguistics which cuts across virtually all the levels of linguistic analysis is the study, analysis and measurement of language in the context of crime, judicial procedure, or disputes in law. It deals with the study of any text or item of spoken language which has relevance to a criminal or civil dispute, or which relates to what goes on in a court of law, or to the language of the law itself. Consequently, the linguist may be called upon to analyse a very wide variety of documents, for instance, agreements relating to ancient territorial disputes, the quality of court interpreting,

an allegation of 'verballing' (claims by defendants that their statements were altered by investigating police officers), a will in dispute, a suicide note, a ransom demand, and so on. The introduction of this kind of programme will create awareness of the role of linguistics in law, crime and judicial procedure. The various interfaces as it relates to language, criminology and the law will be explored to establish the relevant courses that will bridge the hitherto existing academic gaps. Candidates for this programme shall take basic courses in law, criminology and linguistics. Again the requirements for admission into the programme will be credit in English language and literature, Government or History and any two other social science or arts subjects.

Equally, consequent upon these proposals, it goes without saying that the orientation for linguistic research in Nigeria will naturally take a slightly newer dimension because apart from research in formal linguistics (theoretical and descriptive research in the indigenous languages) which has been the old order, there will also be research interests in speech pathology and therapy as well as multi-dimensional areas of forensic linguistics including research on the role of the linguist in crime prevention, protection (security), judicial procedures and social responsibility generally.

Apart from proposing fully fledged interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary programmes as enunciated above one can also suggest enriching the course contents of the existing linguistic programmes in Nigerian universities through introducing equally interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary courses like Linguistics/Gender Studies, Linguistics/Inter-Group Relations, Linguistics/Computer Sciences, Linguistics/Physics and so on to enable linguistics to contribute more meaningfully to immediate societal needs in terms of day to day practical problem solving rather than the hitherto formalist approach we have held on to strictly in Nigeria. This way, the study of linguistics in Nigeria would have been thoroughly diversified for maximum result oriented practice.

Summary and Conclusion

The fact that remarkable progress has been made in the study of linguistics and indigenous Nigerian languages notwithstanding, the study of Linguistics in Nigeria still leaves much to be desired. Linguistics in Nigeria has remained on the old order in that it has pre-occupied itself with "doing linguistics for its own sake". This bookish and strictly formal approach has rendered the discipline arid and unattractive to students. Besides, it has been observed also that there is a missing link between linguistic theorizing/modeling in academic papers and the realities on ground in that although researchers in African linguistics have taken great strides in the description of the indigenous languages at all levels, the contributions and findings from their intellectual efforts have not imparted considerably on the larger society. Consequent upon the above, a thorough review of literature on the present state of the art was carried out to ascertain the current position of the points at issues. Thereafter reasons and explanations were offered for the present scenario in the discipline, followed by proposals for charting a new course for linguistic study and research in Nigeria.

In all, making linguistics directly relevant to practical problem solving in the Nigerian economy and questioning its worth to the Nigerian linguist in terms of "Naira and kobo" as well as ensuring optimal utilization of research results, findings and recommendations are not baseless considerations. "He who has the advantage of being with people has the challenge of transforming them" (Nwankwo, 1999). The relatively late arrival of linguistics in Nigeria notwithstanding, it has stayed long enough to affect positively the well being of the people. And as Ibe (1992) rightly puts it: "Any knowledge that does not change the quality of life is sterile and of questionable value". As it stands, this is the time we must firmly choose the course we will follow in linguistic study and research in Nigeria or a drift of events will make the decision.

Recommendations

Finally, I wish to suggest, in agreement with Jibril (2007) and Adegaju (2008), that to ensure the survival of African languages and optimal utilization of research efforts in languages and linguistics, researchers in African/Nigerian linguistics should adopt a holistic approach which combines action, research, advocacy and activism.

Besides, the Linguistic Association of Nigeria (LAN) as well as the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) should set up joint committee to do a comprehensive report with an all embracing and state of the art proposal for linguistic study and research in Nigeria to be presented to the Nigerian Universities Commission (NUC) for a thorough curriculum review including the proposals put forward in this study. The emphasis in the proposal and the review will be to present linguistic study and research in Nigeria in a more pragmatic approach by ensuring its relevance to the immediate Nigeria environment to the extent that even the layman will understand and recognize the contributions of the discipline to societal needs. And every university that wants to engage in a meaningful study of linguistics in Nigeria should be encouraged to key into the new order and orientation. Besides, research reports, linguistic study and new trends in linguistic research should be accorded their rightful place in the universities, research institutes and the society at large. This way, one's dream and ambition of charting a new course for linguistic study and research in Nigeria would have been realized.

References

- Adegaju, A. (2008). Empowering African languages: Rethinking the strategies. *The Journal of African studies*, 2 (3), 14-32.
- Bamgbose, A. (2007). Linguistics and social responsibility: The challenge for the Nigerian linguist. In O-M, Ndimele (Ed.). *Nigerian languages, literatures, cultures and policy reforms: Festschrift for Ayo Bamgbose*. Port Harcourt: M & J Grand

- Orbit Communications Ltd, 1-16.
- Emenanjo, E. N. (2007). 25 years of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria: Some reflections on the achievements and the challenges facing Nigerian and African language studies. In O-M, Ndimele (Ed.). *Nigerian languages, literatures, cultures and policy reforms: Festschrift for Ayo Bamgbose*. Port Harcourt: M & J Grand Orbit Communications Ltd, 17-32.
- Ibe C. C. (1992). *In search of fine minds*. Jos: Ehindero Nigeria Limited.
- Jibril, Munzali (2007). New directions in African Linguistics. In Akinrinade, Sola et al (eds.). *Rethinking the humanities in Africa*. Ile-Ife: Faculty of Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, pp. 281 – 290.
- Ndimele, O. M. (1999). *Semantics and the frontiers of communication* (2nd Edition). Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press Ltd.
- Nwachukwu, P. A. (2003). Four decades of linguistics in Nigeria: Achievements, issues and principles. In O.M. Ndimele (Ed.). *Four decades in the study of languages and linguistics in Nigeria: A Festschrift for Kay Williamson*. 15-25.
- Nwankwo, Iks. J. (1999). *Sparks of wisdom*. Onitsha: Tabansi Press Limited
- Olatunji, O.O. (1995). Foreword. In K. Owolabi (Ed.). *Languages in Nigeria: Essays in honour of Ayo Bamgbose*. Ibadan: Group Publishers.
- Omachonu, G.S. (2007). The Nigerian linguist and some challenging issues. In B.N. Anasiudu, G.I. Nwozuzu, C.N. Okebalama(Eds.) *Language and literature in a developing country: Essays in honour of Professor Benson A. Oluikpe*. Onitsha: Africana First Publishers Limited. 124-134.
- Omachonu, G. S. (2008). Language attitude as the bane of cultural renaissance and national development in Nigeria: Speaking

frankly to ourselves. In A.D.Menegbe & G.S.Omachonu (Eds.). *Cultural renaissance and national development in the 21st century*. Abuja: Roots Books and Journals Limited. Pp. 59-66.