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Aree di transizione linguistiche e culturali in Africa

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Language and Identity Theories and experiences in lexicography and linguistic policies in a global world

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The future of minority languages in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria exhibits an extraordinary linguistic diversity, both in terms of genetic affiliation and sociolinguistic status. A large proportion of the 520 (and counting) Nigerian languages are spoken by minority groups. In most cases, these groups are subject to a process of linguistic and ethnic conversion that will lead to a reduction in linguistic diversity and the consolidation of two main vehicular languages: Hausa and Nigerian Pidgin. This paper will discuss the notion of minority language and the idea of language endangerment, and consequently the factors that seem quintessential in determining the sociolinguistic framework of tomorrow's Nigeria.

KEYWORDS

Nigeria; minority languages; identity; endangerment.

1. INTRODUCTION

The region that extends within the borders of what is now Nigeria is an extraordinary linguistic microcosm. Of the four linguistic phyla on the African continent, three are present in Nigeria (Afro-Asiatic, Niger-Congo, and Nilo-Saharan). With some 520 living languages, Nigeria alone holds 24% of the linguistic heritage of the African continent. This particular situation is the consequence of a turbulent history of contacts and migrations that began thousands of years ago, when the Chadic groups (descendants of the Proto-Chadic group, a population of Afro-Asiatic origin settled around 6,000 - 5,000 BCE on the northern shores of what was then Lake Megachad) came into contact with populations speaking Niger-Congo languages. The theatre of contact between the Chadic-speaking groups and the Niger-Congo speaking groups was north-central Nigeria. One branch of the Chadic family occupied the region west of Lake Megachad (3,500 BCE), which eventually led to a series of migrations of the Niger-Congo groups southwards, thus drawing a distribution of the two main phyla that would be maintained in the following millennia.

Most of the languages spoken in Nigeria are so-called minority languages. In the last few decades, the scientific community has produced an abundant literature on small mono or bilingual communities, trying to identify the relevant factors that contribute to determine the degree of fragility and the risk of extinction of these languages. In this paper, I will discuss the Nigerian case, focusing on three fundamental aspects: the notion of minority language, language endangerment, and the relationship between language and identity. Finally, I will outline a hypothesis of a not too distant future, trying to project the current trends and forces into the linguistic framework of tomorrow's Nigeria.

2. MINORITY LANGUAGES

The state of minority languages in Nigeria is often described within a binary system where the notion of 'minority' is opposed to that of 'vehicular' (or dominant) language. Hence, minority languages would be all those languages whose speakers represent a minority within a given country or region *vis-à-vis* the number of speakers of another language in the same country or region. Such a view would virtually group together all those languages with a number of speakers inferior to that of, let's say, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Moreover, the notion of minority language is often accompanied by the idea that being a minority entails a certain degree of linguistic endangerment, i.e. minority languages are on the path towards extinction due to the pressure exerted by vehicular and other dominant (e.g. national) languages. This picture

is completed by the fact that the languages spoken today in Nigeria are more than 500, an astonishingly high number if we consider that the total number of the world's languages is (near to) 7,139 (Eberhard, Simons and Fennig 2021). The combination of these three notions – the opposition minority-dominant, the relative small number of vehicular and national languages, and the state of endangerment inherent to minority languages – might lead us to think that the majority of Nigerian minority languages are in a state of extreme fragility, which will eventually result in a massive loss of linguistic diversity. To this we could also add the concern as well as the rhetoric of a certain activism within and outside the academia that has nourished a sense of urgency towards the risks of language endangerment.

The notion of 'minority language' is misleading. As we have seen, all languages are doomed to be classified as 'minority' against vehicular or national languages. A binary division, I will argue, is over-simplistic: it does not capture the state of things. First of all, languages can be small and yet have a status of *lingua franca*, as in the case of inter-village communication languages. Then we have languages dominant at state or region level that nevertheless coexist with a national or vehicular language. It would be hard to group a regional language with 1,000,000 speakers together with a local (e.g. mono-village) language of 2,000 speakers, but it would be equally difficult to treat a regional language in the same way we treat a vehicular-national language such as Hausa or Yoruba. Hence the label 'minority' fails to grasp the differences between languages of different numerical consistencies and geographical extensions, neglecting the fact that in most cases being a minority language is a relative condition. Nevertheless an absolute state of minority – i.e. a situation where the language is not spoken by anyone else except for the community that uses it as a mother tongue, often in a single village – does exist and is very common, although it is just one among many. This is the kind of scenario where endangerment becomes a fully-fledged reality.

If talking of minority languages is not so descriptive of what is going on, what term should we use? Or better: how could we regroup languages of different sizes, used in different contexts and spoken at local, state or regional level? The British-German linguist Conrad Max Benedict Brann, concerned with the issue of framing the different types of Nigerian languages for educational planning, proposed a macro-sociolinguistic model (Brann 1977, 1993, 1994).

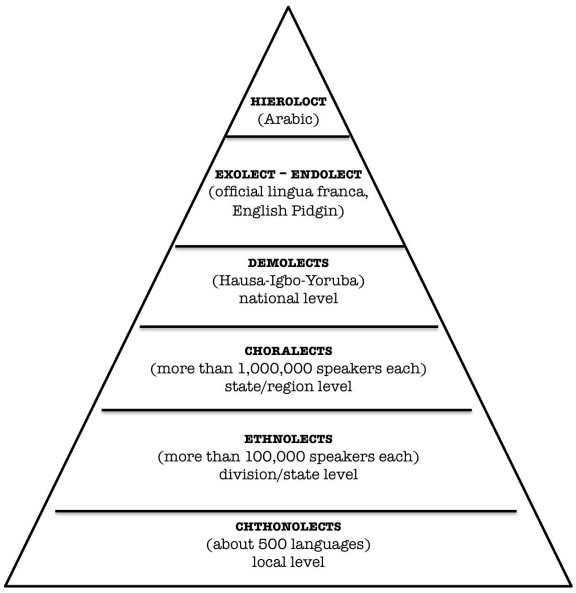

Figure 1– Macro-sociolinguistic model (Brann 1977)

Brann's model takes the form of a pyramid (see figure 1 above) in which five main types of languages are distinguished: chthonolects, ethnolects, choralects, demolects, and exolects/endolects. Chthonolects ('languages of the soil', Brann uses this term to avoid 'vernacular') form the base of the pyramid and are spoken mostly by L1-speakers in small communities. At the second level of the pyramid we find the ethnolects, i.e. those languages spoken by 'larger minorities'. Larger minorities are defined by Brann in numerical terms (100,000 speakers each), but we could also consider them as dominant minorities, that is groups that for historical, demographic and socio-political reasons constitute the majority and at the same time exert political control over other communities present in the area. This is the case, for example, of the Tangale in northeast Nigeria, a group of more than 200,000 people whose traditional ruler, the *Mai Kaltungo*, is also the paramount chief of the other groups of the area (southern Gombe State). At the next level Brann posits what he calls choralects, or regional languages. These languages are "spoken by a majority in any one larger administrative division, but also as a second language by minorities" (Brann 1977: 322). Apart from being used in a larger area and by a larger number of people, choralects have also L2-speakers, whereas ethnolects (with some exceptions) and chthonolects have only L1-speakers. Going up further the pyramid, we find the demolects or vehicular (or national) languages. This position is occupied by those languages whose number of speakers is in the tens of millions. They function at national level and are used in federal mass communication as well as in written primary,

secondary and tertiary education. Not surprisingly, demolects constitute a very small club and for the foreseeable future its members will still be the 'Big Three', i.e. Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. Going up one level we encounter the continuum exolect-endolect, that is English and Nigerian Pidgin English. Although both languages are widely used, they play different roles: English is the official language used in federal mass communication, administration, and education, whereas Nigerian Pidgin English is *de facto* a national *lingua franca*. Finally, at the very top of the pyramid, Brann posits the hierolect or 'sacred language', which in Nigeria is represented by Arabic. This language is of little importance to us, since its function is primarily one of participation and association, and not one of communication.

3. LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT

Let us leave aside for a moment the concept of 'minority' to focus instead on the issue of endangerment. While there is a global trend that sees small communities abandoning their own languages, in Africa the situation seems to be different. Scholars agree on the fact that multilingualism (Vigouroux and Mufwene 2008) and urbanization (Lüpke 2015) play an important role in keeping indigenous languages alive. The assessment of language endangerment/development using the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) (Lewis and Simons 2010) confirms this African peculiarity, with Nigeria making no exception: the absolute majority of Nigerian languages are classified as 'vigorous'[1] (i.e. over 300 languages, Eberhard, Simons and Fennig 2021). Several scholars do not share this view, pointing out that the lack of data may distort the assessment of linguistic vitality and underestimate the real danger of extinction (cf. Essegbey 2020: 834 ff.). Nevertheless, the African case shows – at least to a certain extent – that an important number of indigenous languages do not face an immediate threat of extinction, which makes possible to argue against the automatic association between minority languages and endangerment.

Several studies, however, have shown the precarious state of African languages from the point of view of language endangerment (among others, Brenzinger 1998, Batibo 2005). While it is true, as we have seen before, that more than half of Nigerian languages are classified as 'vigorous', it is worth mentioning that the remaining languages (except, of course, vehicular and institutional languages) are at risk of extinction (about 125 languages). Of the

[1] "This is the level of ongoing oral use that constitutes sustainable orality. Intergenerational transmission of the language is intact and widespread in the community. The language use and transmission situation is stable or gaining strength." (Lewis and Simons 2010: 112).

2,154 languages spoken in Africa, 520 are found in Nigeria. To give an idea of the areal situation, of the 890 West African languages listed on *Ethnologue*, 445 languages are labelled as 'vigorous', 124 as 'in trouble' and 45 as 'dying' (Eberhard, Simons and Fennig 2021)[2]. Moreover, even if we were to take the data reported in *Ethnologue* as faithfully representing the reality of things, the definition of 'vigorous' provided by the EGIDS should not lead us to be too optimistic. On the one hand it is important to remember that things can change very quickly, especially when intergenerational transmission of the language has broken down. On the other hand, the shift from monolingualism to bilingualism observed in recent decades in many communities exposed to the pressure of vehicular languages indicates a clear trend towards the erosion (and possibly disappearance) of local languages. To these two aspects we could add the fact that, in most cases, communities do not oppose the adoption of the vehicular language as a mother tongue.

Languages can be 'in trouble' or 'dying', but what does threaten them? What is the cause of a condition of fragility that will eventually end up in language death? There are two main scenarios that determine the disappearance of a language: the first involves the occurrence of a conflict or disaster that causes the disappearance of a language community. The second scenario – which describes almost all cases on the African continent – is one in which a community abandons its own language and adopts another. As dramatic as this may seem in terms of loss of cultural heritage, the linguistic shift occurs peacefully and, in most cases, without any particular underlying tensions or actions of cultural resistance. To use Edward's words, "it has always been natural in our sublunar realm for societies and their languages to falter, to decline and to pass from the scene. […] the general pattern is a robust and enduring one" (Edward 2010: 14).

If we look at Brann's categorisation, it will be fairly easy to identify the type of language most prone to erosion. The languages most at risk of extinction – and here there is no surprise – are chthonolects. Although the absolute number of speakers alone is not sufficient to assess the vitality of a language, there is no doubt that small communities of only L1 speakers are destined to disappear under the pressure of a changed demographic and cultural context. In Nigeria (and generally in West Africa), monolingualism is a rare condition. In the urban context, a typical speaker is competent in one or more vehicular languages and a choralect; in the rural context, communities tend to add a vehicular language to their chthonolect. While in the former case the languages coexist in a situation of substantial parity (subject to the distinctions inherent to official, administrative and educational uses), in the latter bilingualism is

[2] Compare this with the survey published by Batibo in 2005: 485 languages are attested in Nigeria, of which 73 are classified as 'highly endangered', 55 as '(nearly) extinct' and 363 as 'less endangered' (a more factual label than 'vigorous') (Batibo 2005).

the result of the insufficiency of chthonolect to meet the communicative (and cultural) needs imposed by the areal context[3].

One could object asking the following: why do these small communities not add a vehicular language to their 'local' language, assigning different functions to them but without giving up their chthonolect? This is a fundamental question, as it closely touches on the issue of identity and its relationship with language.

4. THE IDENTITY FACTOR

The issue of the relationship between identity and language is at the core of a prolific scholarly literature. In this section, I will present some aspects relevant to the Nigerian context by attempting to frame the notion of identity in relation to the language(s) spoken by a group.

Language as an identity mark

Language is often regarded as the essential feature of a cultural identity. The close association between language and identity, however, finds a limit in all those cases where the fact of speaking the same language does not act as an identity factor. Newman (1969/70), for example, describes the case of the Tera communities in northeast Nigeria: although linguistically indistinguishable, they can be subdivided into two groups identified with two distinct historical origins, i.e. two different migrations (one group is said to have arrived in the area migrating from the east, while the other originated in the north, in the Bole area). The Tera language and its adoption represent, so to speak, the linguistic output of the coexistence of the two groups, which, however, did not translate into overlapping identities. However, the case of Tera tells us that the opposite is also true: different linguistic groups can share the same identity (e.g. in terms of oral traditions, privileges, and obligations). The Bole-speaking village Kafarati recognises itself (and is recognised) socio-politically in one of the two Tera groups. Again, the linguistic distribution alone does not tell us much about culture and socio-political ties.

Another case of clear dissociation between language and culture (i.e. history and identity) is the one described by Blench (2015) about the Yangkam group (Plateau State, Central Nigeria). Blench highlights the paradoxical situation of the Yangkam where "members of the ethnic group are very proud of their history and identity, but do not associate them with retention of the language" (2015: 151).

[3] The community will eventually shift again to a situation of monolingualism once the chthonolect fades away.

Migrations and adjoining identities

Language distribution is associated with migration phenomena. Specifically, the degree of kinship and the geographical distribution of the languages of the same family should provide an indication of the migrations and subdivisions that have taken place from a proto-group. Consequently, one might think that a language classification diagram is also a faithful representation of the separations (and therefore, migrations) that have taken place between language groups. The migration model underlying African societies is quite different: the system of group reproduction described by Kopytoff (1987), for example, offers a much more complex picture. In Kopytoff's model, the creation of a new group is illustrated by the following stages: 1) the separation of segments (clans, family units, individuals) from the metropolis; 2) their migration into the empty political space, i.e. the 'African frontier'; 3) the formation of a new political centre; and 4) the inclusion, over time, of other segments from other metropolises, regardless of linguistic affiliation. Each segment (clan, household, individual) that aggregates in the newly occupied frontier makes a contribution in terms of culture and identity. The result is a group that has codified all the components both linguistically and socio-politically. On the linguistic level, this product of synthesis can be seen in the lexicon and in the acquisition/transfer/deletion of linguistic traits. Consider the following scenario: the first segment to occupy a space of the frontier speaks language A; in the course of time, other segments will be added: a segment speaking language A' (genetically related to language A), and two other segments speaking language B and C (genetically unrelated). Imagine also that the resulting group speaks language A'': a language derived in its structure from A, but influenced (in terms of acquisition/transfer/deletion of linguistic traits) by A', B, and C. This scenario exemplifies the model of linguistic reproduction and strongly departs from the linearity of internal classification diagrams[4]. As for the socio-political codification, it will take place, for instance, through clan organisation and the setting of obligations, rights, privileges, following modalities determined by the prestige and consistency of the components, as well as taking into account possible situations of conflict.

[4] This scenario exemplifies a model. I would add that to complicate the non-linear picture of the model there may be return migrations (segments decide to return to the metropolis of origin) and splits within the group (segments decide to occupy other space in the frontier). Moreover, some segments may keep their language of origin (e.g. in order not to break the link with the metropolis of origin, because of their socio-political position, etc.).

Changing and shifting identities

The discussion above has shown that identities are not socio-cultural 'blocks', but rather multi-layered realities resulting from a process where different segments (i.e. micro-groups, clans, families, or individuals) with different geo-political backgrounds merge to form a socio-political and cultural complex. Therefore, an essentialist approach to identities in the West African context would miss the complexity of societies. An identity can be considered as the set of practices and ideas that allow a community to define itself, i.e. identity as culture as well as an ideology on culture. However, we should note that identities may not only change, but also shift or disappear.

Cultural shifts are gradual, yet they can occur relatively quickly. They involve, for example, the adoption of a new way of dressing, a change in the religious paradigm, and the transmutation of the value scale.

In northern Nigeria, for example, Hausaisation is a steady process of religious, cultural and political expansion that sees many communities giving up their cultures to adopt that of the dominant group. Hausaisation (and the Islamisation that accompanies it) has erosive effects on the transmission of musical knowledge and non-Islamic rites and beliefs, even acting in the re-modulation of the values codified in the oratures.

The need to identify with the dominant culture inevitably also involves adopting the language that expresses it, since the language of the group is no longer competitive in communicative and cultural terms. In most cases cultural shifts have no dramatic outcomes.

5. THE FUTURE

A prediction of the future status of minority languages – and therefore of their numerical consistency – must necessarily proceed from an accurate set of data on the current state of the languages and their diachronic analysis. Unfortunately, our knowledge of the sociolinguistic situation of the non-dominant Nigerian languages is rather limited: of some languages we know a lot, of many languages we know too little, and the assessment of the degree of penetration within a group of a vehicular language as a mother tongue is often superficial. To this we must also add the scarcity of information and data on the relationships between non-dominant languages within the same area.

The two languages that contribute most to the erosion of linguistic diversity are Hausa and Nigerian Pidgin (NP),[5] in the north and south of the country

[5] Nigerian Pidgin, sometimes called Nigerian Pidgin English, is classified as an Indo-European language belonging to the West African Creole English group. Some scholars use the term Anglo-Nigerian Pidgin (Mann 1993, Simire 2004). Ofolue (2010) employs the

respectively. The sociolinguistic profile of the two languages is quite different: Hausa is a demolect directly attributable to a dominant group, while NP is the output of an exolect-endolect continuum. NP is ideologically neutral, rapidly evolving, and with a very low degree of stigmatisation (in contrast, for example, to Ghanaian Pidgin, see Ofolue 2011). The peculiarity of NP is its use in conjunction with other languages that are usually qualified as vehicular, namely Igbo and Yoruba. This phenomenon highlights the limits of the two southern Nigerian demolects: although they are firmly established in large geographical areas and have tens of millions of speakers, Igbo and Yoruba lack the driving force necessary to transcend their traditional perimeter of diffusion. The consequence is that NP also impacts on demolects such as Igbo and Yoruba, which may one day be demoted to the rank of non-vehicular demolects.

Hausa, on the other hand, possesses the driving force that Igbo and Yoruba lack. The Hausa language has established itself as a *lingua franca* throughout the north and even in the southern parts of the so-called Middle Belt (a large region that roughly occupies the central part of the country from east to west). It is likely that Hausa has somehow met its geographical limits, especially south of the Middle Belt, and that the next stages of expansion will be its affirmation and consolidation as L1 in areas where it is already present as a vehicular language.

So what is the future for minority languages? What will be the linguistic layout of the country in 50 years' time? In all likelihood, Brann's pyramid will remain unchanged in its structure, but will see the thickness of the chthonolect level considerably reduced. On the long run, minority languages spoken by monolingual communities will be replaced by a vehicular language (which will then become L1). Generally, speakers of chthonolects consider their language as lacking in prestige and show a certain indifference towards its disappearance. Moreover, minority language communities often lack political leverage, and the kind of resistance they can exert to language assimilation is almost non-existent.

The current policy approach to the protection of linguistic diversity is consistent with the projection outlined so far. It is interesting to note that often the only bastion of language protection is represented by the local 'language boards', voluntary associations with no official support set up within the communities with the aim of promoting (i.e. maintaining and defending) the local language.

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term Naija, while speakers identify it with the expression 'broken English'. Nigerian Pidgin is different from Nigerian English, which is the variant of English widespread in Nigeria (although some lexical overlaps are inevitable, cf. Blench 2005). Although Nigerian English is establishing itself as a mother tongue among an affluent élite living in urban centres such as Lagos or Abuja (Adeyanju 2009), its position in terms of *lingua franca* is still very weak and will not be discussed here.

An important change that has taken place in Nigeria concerns the ability of minority groups to escape the control of dominant groups, thus escaping the sphere of influence of metropolises. The areas that Jungraithmayr & Leger (1993) define as areas of "ethnic and linguistic compression" (clusters of ethno-linguistic groups in relatively isolated areas) are increasingly rare. Whereas in the past groups migrated to remote areas to escape the control of metropolises or because of conflict, settling in areas where the dominant languages had not yet penetrated, today this isolation is no longer possible (nor, in most cases, desired): population density, commercial and infrastructural development, and the downsizing of conflicts have neutralised the effects of distance, helping to accelerate the dynamics of cultural and linguistic assimilation.

On the basis of what has been discussed so far, it is possible to formulate a prediction of the Nigerian linguistic layout of the future in which the total number of languages will decrease, while the number of Hausa and NP speakers will increase. Of course, we could reason in terms of what will survive and what will die, but there is another way of analysing the issue. There is, in fact, a difference between the languages present in a certain region and the languages (or the language) actually spoken by the population. So far, we have treated languages as discrete units, elements that may or may not be there, live or die, be used or not. However, in a situation of high language density, people do not tend to speak in discrete units, i.e. in abstract blocks distinct from each other. The notion of 'code-switching', for instance, does not help to describe the fluidity of language use: identifying code-switching practices may be useful at the descriptive level, but it does not give us any indication of *which language* is actually being used by the speaker. The notion of 'translanguaging' disseminated by Garcia & Wei (2014) may be more useful in illustrating the process at work. Multilingualism is seen as an obsolete term for what is an integrated and fluid system in which it is no longer possible to separate languages once they occur in speakers' utterances. Migration to large urban centres coupled with the high growth rate recorded in Nigeria favour the phenomenon of translanguaging, and in particular of what Otsuji & Pennycook (2010) identify as 'metrolingualism'.[6]

Urban centres absorb people (just as the Kopytoff's frontier absorbs segments from metropolises), and thus speakers, but not necessarily new languages in the sense of language communities proper. In this context, Brann's pyramid– which is built on discrete units for the purpose of language planning – is no longer a suitable model to describe the state of affairs.

Certainly, the standardised languages (e.g.Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, and English) will be somewhat shielded from the forces of translanguaging, but the vehicular code in use will assert itself independently of the standard lan-

[6] For a discussion of the scope and theoretical implications of the notions of 'translanguaging', 'fluidity' and 'superdiversity' in the African context see Wolff 2018.

guages. Translanguaging is the result of flows emanating from language communities, i.e. from languages in use by relatively large groups of speakers. Chthonolects, as we have said, are destined to be replaced by more functional or more prestigious languages, and therefore their role in the construction of translanguages is rather limited: the migratory flows expressed by chthonolect-speaking communities have little or no impact within the translanguaging process. The situation is different for ethnolects and choralects, which are often already present in the large urban centres and have an important numerical consistency and diffusion.

6. CONCLUSION

The absence of language protection policies, demographic growth, the pressure of prestigious or highly functional vehicular languages, the gradual disappearance of refuge areas, and the fact that in a large number of cases language no longer symbolises identity: these are the main factors behind the gradual disappearance of minority languages, i.e. those languages identified by Brann as 'chthonolects'. Internal migrations towards the large urban centres will stimulate the emergence of two main vehicular languages, Nigerian Pidgin and Hausa. In densely linguistic urban contexts, vehicular codes could take on the features of 'translanguages', i.e. fluid languages made up of flows, exchanges and grafts derived from vehicular and areal languages. In this context, while it is almost certain that the 'languages of the soil' will have no place, national (demolects) and sub-national (ethnolects) languages will contribute to the formation of larger vehicular codes.

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