

PRESERVING AN ENDANGERED LANGUAGE AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE: THE CASE OF GUGBE IN BADAGRY, SOUTHWEST NIGERIA

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Abstract

Endangered languages are languages usually 'ignored' by language policies and have, therefore, not fully benefitted from linguistic description and documentation of linguistic artefacts and local knowledge associated with them. The neglect makes the language prone to extinction as speakers reduce in population and dominant languages that pose as language predators overtake indigenous practices among users of the languages. This paper examines Gugbe in Badagry, South Western Nigeria. Gugbe is a Western Kwa language of the Niger-Congo language family (Comrie, 2003). Because of the presence of the dominant languages such as English and Yoruba, very little attention has been paid to the lexico-syntactic structures of proverbs in Gugbe. These proverbs have been found to communicate messages, knowledge or ideas in varied definable socio-cultural contexts that signal users of Gugbe as mother tongue as a people with discrete culture and identity. These proverbs are categorized according to social domains and analysed to discover the relationship between lexical choices and syntactic structures of their linguistic contexts. Apart from contributing to research in solving the problem of endangerment of the language and indigenous knowledge, this study will further stimulate interest in the description and development of Gugbe as an African language.

Introduction

Gugbe is a Western Kwa Language of Niger-Congo language family, kindred of the Gbe language clusters. The language is otherwise referred to as Ogu while the speakers are also called Ogu. The need to initiate a project for the preservation of the Ogu language, as the title of this paper seems to suggest is owing to the fact that the language suffers in the fangs of two dominant languages in Badagry—English and Yoruba. Badagry is located around Latitude $6\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ North of the equator and Longitude $3\frac{1}{4}^{\circ}$ East of the Greenwich meridian. It is bounded in the south by the Atlantic Ocean, in the north by the Yewa territory and in the east; it is hemmed in by the swampy water of Lagos. It is bounded in the west by the Republic of Benin (Faluyi, 1994).

The objective of this discussion is to raise conscious awareness on the need to focus attention on the documentation and description of Gugbe (Ogu) in Badagry and other areas surrounding the town where the language is a mother tongue. This awareness is necessary as the language is suffering neglect. To encourage the development and writing of study

materials to help the learning of the language in schools, this paper recommends that the language needs to be attended to. It is obvious that Gugbe or the Ogu language is an endangered language in Nigeria, especially in Badagry. Controversies may arise over this assertion in the circle of field linguists who have had to work on other variants of the language from the Gbe language cluster in places like Togo, Benin and Ghana. However, drawing attention to the peculiarity of the language's situation in Nigeria unveils some serious problems that need solutions to help native speakers gain freedom from the domination of English and Yoruba. Part of the means to identifying Gugbe's peculiar problem is adapting the generally agreed definition of endangered language to the description of the unique condition of the language and the experiences of the speakers within a clear frame for the purpose of tracking the main aspects of dominance that needs crumbling to rescue the language.

The generally agreed meaning of an endangered language is that it is a language whose speakers' population is reducing. The key operative concept in the definition is the reduction in the population of speakers of the marked language as endangered. It is necessary to search for the conditions, social, political, psychological and otherwise, that necessitate the reduction in the population of speakers of any language. When that is done, it is also beneficial to include in the programme for the rescue to address these problems. The fact, therefore, is that endangered languages are ignored by language policies. This leads to the condition that they do not benefit from description and documentation. They are prone to extinction. They are threatened and backgrounded by dominant languages. Already Gugbe in Badagry is suffering the type of language endangerment mentioned here.

Here are some facts about Gugbe. It is difficult to classify it as one of the endangered languages in West Africa. This is going by the definition of an endangered language which hangs the description of such language on the reduction in population of the speakers of the language. Gugbe or Ogu, which is one of the languages of the Gbe family, has enjoyed tremendous attention by some linguists, especially in Republic of Benin. The population of speakers of the language as a mother tongue is not less than one million and there are no signs of reduction but there are signs symptomatic of reduction in the nearest future as some dominant languages are forcing native speakers to engage in acts of deliberate neglect of the language. It is not overstatement that the population of speakers is on the increase and attention on the language is increasing in the Republic of Benin. Native speakers of Gugbe in Badagry and environs dodge the use of the language. This is a phenomenon that needs peculiar attention.

Literature Review

Researching into the problem of language endangerment in Badagry has been on for some time now. While some pure linguists have done some work on the language in Badagry, sociolinguists, historians and geographers have done some considerable works in describing the language situation. In the 1990's some scholars described Badagry in relation to the attitude of the people and their language. Johnson (1991) says:

Badagry is a Nigerian town situated in Lagos State at the border point between Nigeria and the Republic of Benin, a Francophone country with strong histocultural ties with Nigeria. Within Nigeria, Badagry which is predominantly Ogu speaking area is situated in the Yoruba-Ogu speaking

zone of the country, consequently both Yoruba and Ogu are commonly spoken in the town; and being neighboured by a Francophone country, the influence of French and its traces in the local languages are noticeable in the town. It is remarkable that Porto-Novo, the nearest border town to Badagry in the Republic of Benin is equally a Yoruba-Ogu and French speaking area with the noticeable influence of English on the local languages. The cumulative effect of this on Badagry is that multilingualism and multiculturalism have become necessary features of communication and social intercourse in the area.

Johnson's assertion in the above quotation contains some facts. Badagry is in the Yoruba-Ogu zone of Nigeria (Gugbe is popularly referred to as Ogu in Badagry). French influences language use in Badagry. Porto-Novo is Yoruba-Ogu-French zone of the Republic of Benin. The English language affects the Ogu language in Porto-Novo. The implication is that other languages have some impacts on the Ogu language.

Avognon (1994), in a research report, explains that the use of Ogu in Badagry is under the dominance of the Yoruba language. He declares that —Yoruba stands out as the dominant language in Badagry followed closely by Ogu, the second relatively dominant language. The population of Ogu native speakers is higher in Badagry. *This is a point that makes it difficult for some scholars to believe that the Ogu language is not particularly an endangered language.* Yoruba as a dominant language indicates that native speakers' attention is shifting from the Ogu language. It is obvious that under the dominance of Yoruba, the Ogu language suffers neglect. Avognon reports further that

the adult Ogu-Yoruba bilingual, on an account of emotional and social values of the Yoruba language, constrains himself to communicating in Yoruba than he does in his native language, Ogu.

This quotation justifies the claim that Ogu is an endangered language in Badagry. This claim can be supported by the fact that native speakers of Ogu displayed their preference for Yoruba language at the expense of their language. That is symptomatic of endangerment. It is this type of endangerment that this paper seeks to address.

Further evidence of Ogu as an endangered language is found in Makinde, Pemedede and Tadopedede (2012). They argue that:

...most children of the Ogu natives are enrolled into preparatory kindergarten and nursery classes starting from the age of two. The language of communication with these kids is usually in the English language. After school hours, parents who are also Ogu natives continue to speak English and Yoruba to them while Ogu, the native language has no place on their language charts. The result of this among the children of the Ogu native speakers is that most of them are now bilingual speakers (Yoruba and English) instead of multilingual speakers (Ogu, Yoruba and English).

The scenario painted by the quotation explains the nature of apathy that the native speakers of manifest for the language. Again, parents do not speak the language to their children and this spells doom for the survival of the language. Self surrender to the domination of English and Yoruba as suggested by Makinde, Pemedede and Tadopedede (2012) in the quotation above shows that any project on the preservation of the language must take into consideration the attitudinal problems associated with parents' role in helping their young ones to appreciate the values of the language. Giving English and Yoruba the chance to dominate the Ogu language in a space or circumstance where it ought to be a mother tongue sounds much like helping the language die naturally. Such natural death would mean that the native speakers' culture and identity would be vulnerable to forces of extinction, thereby, causing weakening language owners claim to quotidian existence among other ethnic groups of the same geographical space.

There are some social domains in Badagry that encourage the dominance of Yoruba over Ogu. First on the list is marriage. The marriage between the Ogu and the Yoruba, especially when the bride is Yoruba and is unwilling to speak the Ogu language is one factor worthy of consideration. In such a situation, the family adopts the Yoruba language. That means children will most likely acquire the Yoruba language instead of Ogu. Trade is another factor, especially at the Central Agbalata Market in Badagry. The Agbalata market has been reported to have been in existence since the 18th Century and has hosted traders from other ethnic groups in Nigeria. The market has drawn people of varied ethnic groups into Badagry. The presence of government offices and residential quarters (The Civil Service, Military Barracks, Customs Service, The Immigration and other agencies are also responsible for the linguistic cum cultural mix that Badagry has experienced leading to the promotion of English and Yoruba far ahead of the Ogu language.

The Ogu language and the need for its preservation in Badagry

From the arguments made so far it is now a known fact that English and Yoruba dominate the Ogu language in Badagry. As languages of instructions in schools, both languages stifle the Ogu language. They also prevent the perception and construction of knowledge in Ogu. That means there is need to find means to preserve the Ogu language. Perception and constriction of reality cannot be done without the aid of language. By denying a language the right to lending itself to serve as tool for acting in these psychosocial domains, by its speakers, creates assured means to the language's death. The Ogu language cannot be used by its speakers to achieve these functions if there is no space for it in circumstances where English and Yoruba dominate. As young Ogu natives learn formally in school with English and Yoruba, their language use proficiency increases in these languages only. With such a situation, the chances of constructing of social reality will naturally be given to either English or Yoruba. That means relegation to the background of the Ogu language.

The attitude of native speakers in social interactions has not encouraged the development of Ogu. It's important to note that many native speakers of Ogu avoid the use of the language and participation in sociocultural activities that require the use of the language. Naming is one of such activities. They name their children with Yoruba names. They speak Yoruba at home and perform other social acts in Yoruba. Yoruba is freely spoken in the palaces of Ogu traditional rulers. With this, it is obvious that the Yoruba language is taking over from the Ogu language its traditional functions. The attitude of the native speakers is the one aiding the subjugation of the language in this case.

We surmise that if deliberate conscious efforts are not directed at the preservation of the Ogu language, the effects would be damaging to the survival of the language in Badagry. The

effects will manifest in a way that shows Ogu as relegated to the background. Language policy makers will avoid the language though the population of native speakers outweighs the one of the Yoruba native speakers in Badagry. The Ogu are majority in population but linguistically minority. Native speakers' proficiency in the use of the language dwindles. For instance, it is difficult sometimes to identify the differences between Ogu and Yoruba proverbs. These conditions establish the platform upon which the discovery process of the symptoms of endangerment could be established.

In addition to the points made so far, there are other reasons for which attention must be given to the Ogu language in Badagry to preserve it. Apart from the speakers reducing in population, there is no attempt at documenting the language in Nigeria. There are evidences, as earlier mentioned, of the description of some similar languages to Ogu or Gugbe in Benin, Togo and Ghana but there has not been a specific linguistic description of the language in Nigeria. Majority of the speakers of Ogu in Nigeria hardly enjoy the status accorded to native speakers of the other Nigerian languages. For instance, the non-availability of academically published materials on the Ogu language has affected the recognition of the language as an influencing factor in taking political decisions that would require legislative policies in favour of the native speakers of Ogu. Rather, they are subsumed under the notion that they are speakers of Yoruba as mother tongue. This, subtly, affects the identity of the Ogu in the community where they seem not to be recognized as natives. Yoruba, for instance, is taught in all schools where Ogu is an indigenous language. Yoruba names are gaining prominence among Ogu native speakers. Younger generation of Ogu native speakers have no knowledge of the proverbs and wise sayings in Ogu. There is apathy for the language and its speakers

Researching the Ogu Proverbs for Language Preservation

Gugbe or Ogu is a unique language. By this we mean that the language is discrete. It is a natural language and, apart from being a member of a known language family, its users use the language to express their knowledge of the world in ways different from the way users of other languages do the same thing. It is, therefore, not out of place to refer to the Ogu language as a unique language. The situation of the language in Badagry shows the language's unique nature. This is because despite the dominance of English and Yoruba; the expressions of the Ogu native speakers depict their innate knowledge of the world distinct from what other languages could represent. We have studied some proverbs that reveal this reality.

Our study of the nature of proverbs reveals that the Ogu native speakers have social and cultural worldviews. This argument is against the background that the dominance of English and Yoruba over the Ogu language in Badagry sometimes makes it seem that the Ogu as a people does not cultural worldview of their own. We collected proverbs in Ogu and studied them to know if the Ogu have their worldviews expressed differently in the language from the dominant Yoruba language. Senayon (2016) has argued that it is important that a research methodology should be evolved to take care of the need to study the Ogu language. The table below shows the social contexts within which proverbs could be used to express views about the world, the number of proverbs studied, and their percentile representation. The 69 proverbs studied were randomly selected from over 500 proverbs. The proverbs indicate that it is possible for the Ogu native speaker to use proverbs that can only be found in the Ogu language alone. This is against the background that there are some Ogu proverbs that depict the influence of Yoruba on the native speakers' use of them.

SOCIAL CONTEXTS	NUMBER OF PROVERBS	PERCENTILE REPRESENTATION
MONEY AND WEALTH	7	10.14
JUSTICE AND FAIRNESS	4	5.80
CHARACTER AND GOOD CONDUCT	13	18.84
HARDWORK	4	5.80
UNITY AND INTEGRATION INTEGRATION	4	5.80
LAZINESS AND IGNORANCE	10	14.50
	6	
MORALS AND WISDOM	17	24.63
GOD	4	5.80
ALCOHOLISM	6	8.70
TOTAL	69	

Table 1: The table shows the distribution of social contexts in relation to the proverbs that represent thoughts in social interaction.

Discussions on the Studied Proverbs

The proverbs studied for the purpose of this paper were classified into nine socio-cultural contexts that deal with human existence. These contexts also provide the topical issues that define human interaction with nature and people. The proverbs also show differences in appreciation for the values of life. We now discuss proverbs that explain the Ogu people's attitude to life in relation to money and wealth, justice and fairness, character and good conduct, hard work, unity and integration, laziness and ignorance, morals and wisdom, God, and alcoholism.

Money and Wealth

Mankind's life is anchored on money and access to it to show wealth. The value of money is important to human happiness. Without money, it is difficult to live happily. The Ogu people also appreciate the value of money. However, money and wealth are considered more important than children. This is not to say that children are not important but it is believed that if there is not money or access to wealth, it is not possible to raise children. In discourses involving expression of sensibilities around this social reality, proverbs that promote the thought that a parent must strive to possess money so as to raise children feature prominently. The sample below is one of such proverbs:

1. Akue we yin medaho, ovi we yin novi pevi

Money is older; a child is younger

This proverb, under the social domain of money and wealth, is unique to the Ogu language.

The significant lexical items for examination are 'money' and _'child'; _'older' and _'younger'.

Money and children are important desires in African families. Barrenness is a source of sorrow and threat to marriage in Africa. Property and children bring fulfilment to African families. Generally, proverbs that deal with money and children in juxtaposition are not compared in terms of age or seniority. It is unique of the Ogu proverb to see one as older and the other as younger. A Yoruba name, _'Olowolagba' – 'the wealthy is the elder' – does not bring wealth and child into comparison. The Yoruba name, *Omoboriowo*, which comprises the concepts of child and money, clearly declares that the child is superior to money. Meanwhile, the Ogu proverb

here expresses the Ogu people's peculiar worldview that of the two, money is older. Though arguable, there is sense in the fact that without money, it is difficult to train children.

God, wisdom and morals

Proverbs that depict the Ogu knowledge of God, wisdom and morals also exist. The proverb below is a good example:

2. Aga mayon, suwhe ma sogan di

When the cloud is not settled, heavenly bodies cannot appear.

The lexical items of collocative importance are *cloud* and *heavenly bodies* and *not settled* and *appear*. The proverb is classified under the wisdom and morals domain and owes its striking message to the parallelism between nature and human reality. Cloud appears in the sky like other heavenly bodies like the sun, moon and stars. The appearance of the heavenly bodies is hinged on the situation of the cloud thereby establishing a link between the *cloud* and *heavenly bodies*. This proverb is unique to Ogu and shows the thoughtfulness and keen sense of observation of the Ogu people. It is the settling of the cloud that can pave the way for the appearance of the heavenly bodies. There is also a striking comparison between the *cloud* and *heavenly bodies*. While the cloud is often grey, dull and dark, the heavenly bodies like the sun, moon and stars shine with admirable brightness. These characteristics have moral implication for human life application. Until the dull, dark side of one's life is cleared (like the cloud) one's glory (symbolised by *heavenly bodies* – sun, moon and stars) will not appear. One of the dictionary meanings of cloud is *something that makes you feel sad or anxious* (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, International Student's Edition*). The meaning applies here as well as the English idiom, *every cloud has a silver lining*.

Alcoholism

Alcoholism is the term that defines human being's dependence on alcohol for pleasure seeking. The Ogu also have this phenomenon as part of their ways of life. Proverbs from the social domain of alcoholism show the way the Ogu express worldview from this angle. The proverb below exemplifies the idea.

3. Ahannuto ma no nu ogo tata

A drunkard doesn't like empty bottles.

The striking collocative nominal lexical items are *drunkard* and *empty bottles* with the verbal group, *does not*, providing the link between the two. The negator, *not* is used in the proverb in an intriguing way to show what a drunkard likes is implied in what he does not like. Instead of stating the proverb as *A drunkard likes bottles filled with wine*, which is the norm with drunkards, the expectation is disappointed to achieve a striking effect. In the socio-cultural context in which the proverb is situated, the sight of empty bottles will be disgusting to a

drunkard since it cannot satisfy his desire for drink – empty bottles do not contain wine! Another Ogu proverb on drunkards, which is expressed in the negative mode, is ‘*A drunkard does not welcome the condemnation of another drunkard like him*’ (Ahanumuno ma no dike ye ni do oylan do ahannumuno do to e de). There is an element of euphemism in the two proverbs – a pleasant way of saying unpleasant things about drunkards! The proverbs are unique to the Ogu language.

Overlapping in the structure of proverbs

The discussion here is to expose Ogu proverbs whose structures exhibit overlaps such that one sees the influence of Yoruba on Ogu native speakers. We present here examples of such proverbs and their explanations. Below are examples of Ogu proverbs with the instances of overlaps:

4. E ma yin avo daho we ye do no yon me podi akue no.

It is not the quality of one's clothing that determines riches.

The Yoruba equivalence of the proverb is ‘*Aso nla ko l'enian nla*’ – *a big cloth does not make a big (wealthy) man*. There is no significant difference in the Ogu and Yoruba proverbs as ‘*clothing*’ and ‘*economic status*’ constitute the focus of the proverbs.

5. A wa dagbe, a wa na de we

Whenever you do well to others, you are indirectly doing it to yourself.

The Yoruba have about three proverbs that relate to this proverb:

- a. Ika a ka onika, rere a ba eni rere

Evil will befall the evil one and good will come to a good person.

- b. Rere kii gbe, ika kii gbe

Good deeds do not vanish, neither do evil deeds.

- c. Aseni nse ara re.

The one doing to others is doing the evil to himself.

The idea of good coming to the good is expressed in the Ogu proverb as well as in the Yoruba proverbs especially (a) and (b). The Ogu proverb may be traceable to the Yoruba influence. Nonetheless, what seems unique to the Ogu is that the proverb centres only on the good person and the good deeds; no juxtaposition with the evil person and the evil deeds as in the Yoruba proverbs, particularly in (a) and (b). While the Ogu proverb is entirely on ‘The good’, the Yoruba (c) is exclusive to ‘the evil’ – the person doing evil to others is doing evil to himself. The proverb is classified under ‘character’.

Another Ogu proverb in the ‘character’ social domain is the one in (6) below:

6. Jijo oviyonnu ton, ono eton e do di

The character of a female child is inherited from her mother.

This proverb is similar to the Yoruba proverb, ‘the cotton seed sown by a mother is what the child would spin’. Even in this similarity which can be due to the Yoruba influence, the Ogu proverb still makes a difference. Whereas the Yoruba proverb mentions a child – male or female, the Ogu proverb is specific on the gender of the child – female. The importance of the girl child as a future wife, mother and homemaker cannot be overstated. This could inform the Ogu choice of the specific rather than either or both sexes.

Conclusion

As stated in the introductory part of this paper, our aim is to draw attention to the Ogu language in Badagry and other parts of Nigeria where the language is a native language but under the dominance of English and Yoruba. To prove the unique nature of the language, we studied proverbs. The study of the proverbs was done in order to expose the fact that the Ogu language demonstrates discreteness. That means in actual domains of language use where it yields to some influence of the Yoruba language, it is because of the factors earlier stated in the body of the paper. The study in this paper has drawn attention the fact that that if nothing is done to ensure the preservation of the Ogu language, the language shall suffer extinction. This position has been identified in the paper as controversial because there are factors often noted as not strong enough to designate a language as an endangered one.

If the Nigerian constitution and the National Policy on Education encourage the development of indigenous languages and stipulate that school children should be taught with the languages of their immediate environment, linguists now have a push to develop the Ogu language in Nigeria to respond to the constitutional call. To achieve this effectively, there is need to initiate a strong field research project into documenting and describing the Ogu language. From the study’s findings, it will be easy to develop study materials for the teaching of the language at all levels. It is also important that a set date is fixed when the teaching of Ogu should commence, at least, in all public elementary schools in the zones of Nigeria where the language is a mother tongue. Moreover, the documentation and description efforts on the language will have effects on policy

formulation in favour of the Ogu language. Policy formulators will rely on information from adequate descriptive and functional documentation on the language.

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