

An Endangered Nigerian Indigenous Language: The Case of Yorùbá Language

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Abstract

This paper examines the low-usage of Yorùbá language among some selected secondary school students in Yorubaland. The paper uses questionnaire with cloze test to measure the knowledge of Yorùbá language among respondents in three Yoruba speaking states in southwestern Nigeria. The results of the data show that Yorùbá language enjoys low patronage and patriotism amongst the students used for the data. Many of these students found it extremely difficult to express themselves freely in Yorùbá language and at the same time, they were unable to provide meanings for selected Yorùbá proverbs, words, and expressions. The significance of this work is seen in the fact that Yorùbá language stands the risk of gradual extinction if urgent measures are not taken by all stakeholders concerned to arrest the dwindling fortunes of the language.

Introduction: The Linguistic Landscape in Nigeria

Language is the hallmark of any people's life and culture. Language encompasses people's worldview, custom, way of life and history in general. The loss of any language by a people is the loss of their root and the loss of their identity. When a language is lost, such a people who experience the loss continue to live in the shadow of other people's identity and culture. Ethnologists put the living languages of the world at seven thousand with a sad list of three thousand five hundred that are endangered and may be out of reach at the end of the twenty first century. Nigeria as a multilingual country is currently said to have over five hundred languages, though the dominant languages officially recognised by the government remain: English, Yorùbá, Hausa, and Igbo.

The exact number of languages spoken in Nigeria is not quite certain as there are some languages which are yet to be discovered. In fact, what constitutes a language or a dialect has been debated for too long a time by linguists. Hoffman (1974) classifies 396 in language families in Nigeria excluding dialects that are recognised while Hansford (1976) recognises 395 languages in Nigeria. Blench and Dendo (2003) record 550 languages as spoken in Nigeria.

Adekunle (1976) classifies the languages of Nigeria into groups according to their functions as medium of communication in the Nigerian context as examined below:

Class A Languages are the major indigenous languages spoken by at least six million native speakers and used widely outside their state of origin by Nigerians whose mother tongues are different. They are Hausa, Igbo and Yorùbá.

Balogun, An Endangered Nigerian Language

Class B Languages are those not much used outside their state of origin but officially recognised and used at the national or federal level as one of the nine major languages. They are Kanuri, Fula, Edo, Efik, Tiv, and Ijo, etc.

Class C Languages are minor languages with no official recognition at the state level.

While Adekunle's claims as regards the above classification may be questionable in some respects, especially with reference to Class C languages. It should be acknowledged that the Federal Government of Nigeria (1979) officially recognizes Hausa, Igbo and Yorùbá as tools for the conduct of business in the National Assembly side by side with English. The multilingual character of the Nigerian nation has resulted in its inability to develop a national language that can reflect and integrate the cultural diversities of the nation. This development has placed the English language in a preponderance official life. Though regional languages like Yorùbá, Igbo and Hausa are also recognised by the 1999 constitution as official languages, it is, however, important to emphasise the fact that, English enjoys more prominence among the other languages because while these indigenous languages are restricted to the regions which culturally produced them, English language cuts across cultures, borders and races. Thus, the focus of this paper is on the dwindling fortunes of the Yoruba language and its progressive systematic displacement by the English language among secondary schools students in Yorubaland.

Historically, the Yorùbá are widely believed to have descended from Oduduwa, the acclaimed progenitor of the Yoruba nation. They are found in the southwestern part of Nigeria and spread out to states and areas like Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Ondo, and some parts of Kwara, Kogi, and Edo states. The Yorùbá language belongs to the West Benue-Congo of the Niger-Congo phylum of African languages (Williamson and Blench 2000). Apart from Nigeria with about 30 million speakers, Yorùbá is also spoken in Togo, Republic of Benín, Ghana, Sudan, Sierra-Leone and Côte D'Ivoire. Outside Africa, a great number of speakers of the language can be found in countries like: Brazil, Cuba, including Trinidad and Tobago. The effective speakers of the language in the country are about 35% of the country's total population. According to the International African Institute (1980: 60), the Yorùbá language "is used by the media; the Press, Radio and Television. It is also used as a language of formal instruction in some primary schools as well as a curriculum subject in primary secondary and tertiary levels. It has a standard orthography". It must be stated that Yorùbá language still occupies a privileged place within the entire range of African studies because relative abundant literature exists on the language.

Language endangerment and language maintenance

Endangered languages are not necessarily languages with few speakers; in fact, the size of a group hardly matters. The viability of a language is determined first and foremost by the general attitude of its speakers with respect to their traditional culture, of which their language is considered one of the most important exponents. NOW (2000) report is of the view that language endangerment arises in situations of contact between groups. Contact involves not only an exchange of cultural elements and products, but also of cultural prestige, which is often correlated with different degrees of technological advancement. A difference in technological know-how may lead to a sense of inferiority in the less highly developed group, which may then

be inclined to relinquish its culture, including its language, in favour of the more highly developed group. The report is keen to say that: the loss of one language is the gain of another: except in the case of genocide, a language is usually lost because speakers shift to another language.

Mufwene (2002) claims that “languages are parasitic species whose vitality depends on the communicative behaviour of their speakers, who in turn respond adaptively to changes in their socio-economic ecologies”. Mufwene (2002) cited above is a general critique of the literature of the past decade on language endangerment, other scholars like Mühlhäusler (1996), Dixon (1997), Brenzinger (1998), Grenoble and Whaley (1998), Calvet (1998), Crystal (2000), Fishman (2000). Hagege (2000), Nettle and Romaine (2000), Maffi (2001) and Renard (2001) have also dealt extensively on this subject.

Derhemi’s (2002) work is devoted to problems of endangered languages, particularly endangered languages spoken by minorities, focusing on the sociolinguistic study of the causes, circumstances and results of endangerment, and other structural and social processes related to endangered languages and to their survival. Omo-Ojugo (2004) asserts that a language can only resist death/extinction if it is able to move from the status of oracy to a written status. In his definition of endangered language, Darhemi (2002:6) avers that an endangered language is a language that may soon vanish, ceasing to be used as a vehicle of communication, perhaps even disappearing completely from human history. This position is similar to Godesborg (2007:4) when he opines:

- a) Any language with over 50,000 speakers is ‘not threatened’
- b) Any language with under 400 speakers is ‘definitely threatened’
- c) Any language with fewer than 3000 speakers with no status data has been assigned to ‘no information’ on the grounds that it might well be threatened.

To synthesise the afore-discussed meanings of an endangered language, the current paper supports Woodbury (2012) who is of the opinion that languages can be considered dead or endangered when “they are no longer spoken in the form in which we find them in ancient writings”. He also opines that any language that is falling out of use or whose speakers are not handing the language over to the next generation is endangered and could go into extinction in the near future. In other words, these are languages that have lost or fast losing their original forms and have become adulterated languages. In which case Yorùbá language fits in properly because of the fact that younger generation are finding it more convenient to use the English language than the Yorùbá language which is their indigenous language.

Wurm (1998) recognises five-level models of language status: (i) potentially endangered, (ii) endangered, (iii) seriously endangered, (iv) moribund, and (v) extinct. Following Wurm, therefore, Yorùbá language may be classified as belonging to the first level. Any language that crosses the lines of either being potentially endangered or endangered is already passed into the limbo of time. Such a language may continue to have existence in a recorded form but could be falling out of use because of the preference of its speakers for more socially acceptable language. Indeed, languages with large number of speakers like Yorùbá can nonetheless be in danger. Brenzinger (1998: 93) had earlier noted this when he said “even Yorùbá, with 20 million

Balogun, An Endangered Nigerian Language

speakers, has been called ‘deprived’ because of the way it has come to be dominated by English in higher education”.

Fishman (1997) points out that it is not because languages are not being taught in schools or lack official status that make them to be endangered but that they become endangered because they lack informal intergenerational transmission and informal daily life support. Fishman (2002), maintains that a language is simultaneously indexical of both the material and the non-material properties of its traditionally associated culture, symbolic of that culture (and of membership in that culture) and, therefore, like all symbols, easily politicised, and, finally, language is also part and parcel of the bulk of any culture (note the complete interdependence of language and laws, religion, education, jokes, riddles, songs, blessings, curses, greetings and thousand pleasantries of everyday life). Culture and language are in large part identical rather than merely the co-occurrences or “fellow-travellers” that they are all too often taken to be.

Why and how languages are endangered?

There are both remote and immediate causes responsible for the gradual dying out of specific languages. For instance, there could be natural ruinous causes like the physical well-being of the speakers, unfavourable climatic and economic conditions, that is famine and drought, habitat displacement, devastating ferocious diseases, desertification as well as unpredictable human migrations.

Discussing one of the factors responsible for language endangerment and language death, Romaine (2002) posits that many language-policy statements are reactive ad hoc declarations lacking a planning element. A policy is a government statement on a planned course of action usually contained in national documents such as The Constitution and National Policy on Education. The Nigerian National Policy on Education (NPE) states among other things the national policy on language use in government, education and so on. Romaine (2002) cited the Native American Languages Act (NALA) of 1990 as an example of such policy. He argues further that NALA is one of the most explicit statements on language ever issued by the United States Congress, yet it is a classic example of a policy with no planning dimension. Likewise, McCarty and Watahomigie (1998: 321) observe that “in practice, language rights have not guaranteed language maintenance, which ultimately depends on the home language choices of native speakers. Such decisions are notoriously difficult for extra-familial institutions to control, even when those institutions are community controlled”.

In the specific case of Yoruba language, the attitude of native speakers is one of the major factors responsible for its endangerment. Parents want their children to speak and learn English for social acceptability and economic advancement. However, it has been found out that the total abandonment of the Yorùbá language brings total dislocation and loss of identity(Fabunmi and Salawu, 2005). The negative negligence and negligible use of Yorùbá by the élite, has spilling over effects on Yorùbá as a discipline. Fabunmi and Salawu (2005) submit that:

As good as the introduction of the so-called western education in the Yorùbá land is, it has however made majority of the elite divided personalities. Many of them are cosmopolitan nativists, fighting very hard to eschew their nativity, and at the same time fighting very hard to be adopted into the cosmopolitan order. This

is conspicuously demonstrated in the elite attitude towards the use of Yorùbá language.

Another factor which has affected the fortunes of the Yorùbá language is the issue of job opportunities and economic policies. Fabunmi and Salawu (2005) further affirm that this factor directly relates to the attitude of the elites. Among the elites in Nigeria, the ultimate reasons for embarking on any educational discipline are financial inducement and economic well-being of the person pursuing such a discipline. In fact, rather than stick to their calling, some degree holders in Yoruba language still struggle to find their ways into the so-called big money-spinning commercial ventures in telecommunications, banking and the oil and gas industries. It appears that in today's globalised village, the major dictate of the trans-national global market economic policy is self-reliance. Thus, a greater number of the elites will never permit their children to study Yorùbá as a discipline because of lack of financial self-reliance. To them, therefore, of what use is the language if it cannot meet the dictates of the global economy?

Methodology and Data Presentation

The methodology comprises questionnaires, observations and interviews specifically meant to test students' knowledge of Yorùbá language and the parents' attitude towards the language. Three hundred students comprising public and private schools in Oyo, Osun and Lagos states were sampled. The questionnaires were structured into two parts and the students were given forty minutes to complete them. Ten schools were used in each of three states. Senior students in year two (SSC 2) were used as subjects for the questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed with the help of the subject teachers and the class teachers. These were also collected immediately upon completion by the students with the same time limit given all of them. The questionnaires were later analysed in order to test our hypothesis. To test the parents' attitude to Yorùbá language vis-a-vis the two other dominant indigenous languages which are Hausa and Igbo languages in Nigeria, personal observation and interviews were conducted on the parents across the three dominant languages in order to compare the parental attitude towards each of the three regional languages in Nigeria.

Data Analysis and Discussion

From the first part of the questionnaires, it was discovered that Yorùbá language is the mother tongue of all the students. All the respondents claimed that they can speak their indigenous language which is Yorùbá language, and they make use of the language at home and with friends. More than 70 % of these students said that they take Yorùbá as one of their subjects in school because it is compulsory. But it is very surprising when only 43.1% of the total students sampled claimed that they can speak their indigenous language clearly without mixing it with English, 4.1% said this will be impossible for them. 52.8% of the students said that they are not sure they can speak Yorùbá without mixing it with English language.

Section B was divided into four parts which comprised a comprehension passage with five questions. It also had five proverbs to be completed, five English words to be translated into Yorùbá language and five Yorùbá words and expression which the students were asked to supply their meanings. These were structured into section B, 1, 2, 3 and 4 respectively while the answers were categorised and graded as follows:

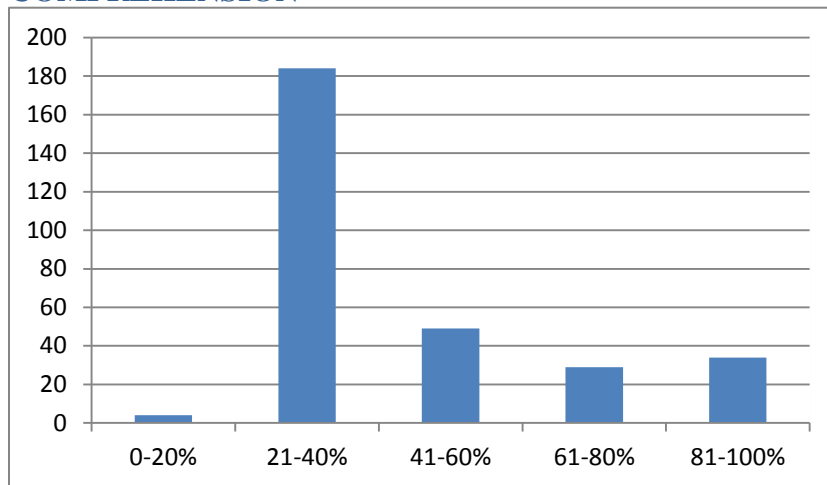
Balogun, An Endangered Nigerian Language

0 – 21%, 21-40%, 41- 60%, 61 -80% and 81-100%.

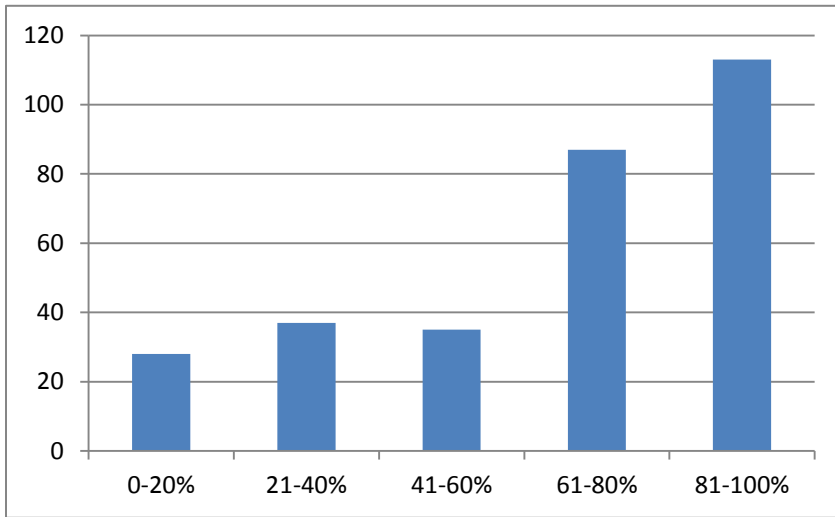
Using the simple percentage frequency, the results of the questionnaires are graphically presented below:

Grade Level	Comprehension	Proverbs	Translation	Meaning
0-20%	4	28	17	133
21-40%	184	37	152	135
41-60%	49	35	76	18
61-80%	29	87	40	10
81-100%	34	113	15	4

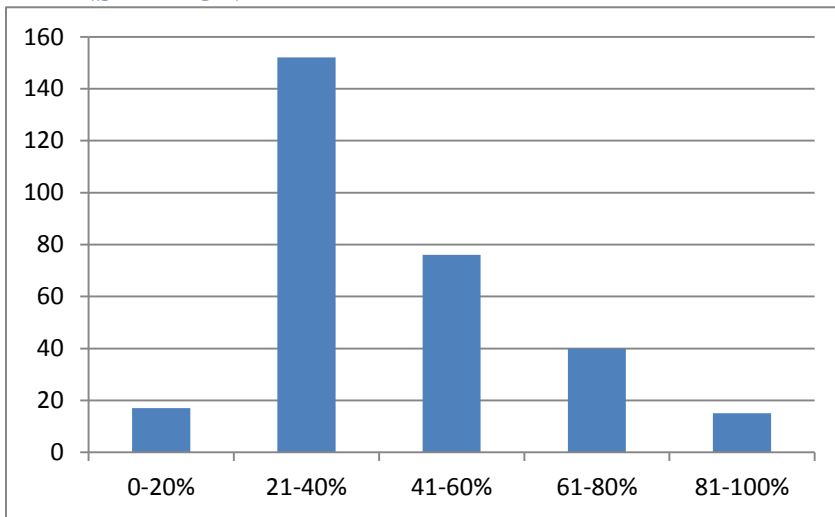
COMPREHENSION



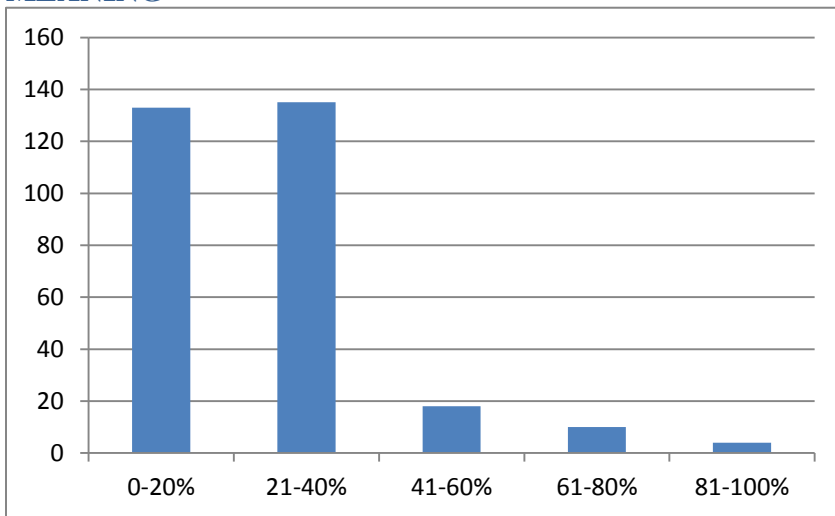
PROVERBS



TRANSLATION



MEANING



Balogun, An Endangered Nigerian Language

In B1, students' results in comprehension were not encouraging because they did not demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of reading comprehension in Yorùbá language. It is disheartening that, based on the performances of these students as presented above; they have deficiencies in reading which serves as the foundation of knowledge in any human endeavour. This showed that most of the students find it difficult to read Yorùbá language. This fact was attested to in the performance indicated above. In fact, more than 50% got between 21-40%. This 21 – 40% performance group remains a pointer to the low failure rate recorded in other grade level as seen above. 49 candidates were able to make the grades within 41 – 60% while 34 and 29 candidates respectively fell between the grades levels of 61 – 80% and 81 – 100% as it were.

The analysis for proverbs in B2 showed that the students had the full grasp of the common proverbs given to them. This is evident in their grade levels which showed a highest frequency (113 candidates) in the total number of students who fell between 81 – 100%, 87 students got between 61- 80%, 35 students fell between 41 – 60%, 37 students were within the limit of 21 – 40% while 28 students got between 28 – 21%. This showed that they have internalised the given proverbs as they have nearly become common expressions among Yorùbá users especially students. It could still be noted that 65 students out of the total number of students examined got below the average which is an indication of their deficiencies in their indigenous language.

In section B3, the students were asked to translate the following English words into Yorùbá language. They are: *deep sleep, table, twilight, argument, and child*. The results that were got also revealed that most of these students even though they claimed they still take Yorùbá as a subject; they are nonetheless not properly grounded in the grammar of the language. This is because though we have just 6 candidates in the 0 – 20 %, 15 of them fell between 21 – 40 %. 6 % fell between the range of 41 – 60, while 51 and 15 were between 61 – 80% and 81 – 100% respectively. The implication of this is that many of the students have general knowledge of Yorùbá language since they claimed that they use the language at informal levels and mostly with their friends when they have the opportunity.

Section B4 was based on a test of meaning of some Yorùbá words. Students were asked to provide meaning to five Yorùbá words which are: *yege, idakureku, lugo, pegede, takete*. The analysis showed that 133 students got less than 20%, 135 students got between 21 and 40 %, 13 students got between 41 -60% while 28 students got between 61 – 80% and only 4 students were able to make the grade level that fell between 81 – 100%. What this suggests is the fact that students have peripheral knowledge of their indigenous language which makes the language to stand the risk of losing its original form as it were.

As a result of time and money constraints, the researcher could not visit the three states to interview parents and also to observe their modes of communication with their children. Thus, the visit was limited to Sabo, Gate, Ojaoba and Aleshinloye markets in Ibadan, Oyo State of Nigeria on different days. Before the researcher interviewed few parents, she had first monitored and observed the communication modes between the parents and the children.

At Sabo market in Ibadan, most of the children were seen around their mothers outside their abodes and the only medium of communication was the Hausa language. After few minutes of observation, the researchers proceeded to interview some of the parents both men and women. They were comfortable using their language to communicate with their children and they said it is part of their culture to train their children using their language. Similarly, at Gate market,

many Igbo motor spare parts sellers were put under observation as they related with their children and apprentices. This place consists of young boys who usually come around to assist their parents after school hours and some apprentices learning how to sell motor spare parts. Amongst these people, their dominant language is Igbo language which they speak with their children and apprentices even though sometimes, they code mixed with English language. Interviews conducted on some of these parents (mostly male) revealed that language showed their identity and bond them to their roots and this is what they want for their children hence, the usage of their language.

At Ojaoba market, the dominant language between parents and children who are still teenagers was Yorùbá language. The parents mostly women are uneducated and when interviewed, they lamented their inability to speak English and said that they speak Yorùbá language to their children because that is the only language they could speak. It was a different thing at Aleshinloye market, where there are different classes of women: highly literate, semi-literate and very few illiterates who have even been exposed to English language and could speak a bit of the English language. All these classes of women used English language as their main means of communication with their children. When they were interviewed, they were of the opinion that since the medium of instruction in school is English, speaking English with their wards will help them to master whatever subjects they are taught in school.

From the different studies carried out, it was discovered that most of these students identified with Yorùbá language but they obviously are not very well exposed to the language, they did not have it as their first language though it still remains their mother tongue. It was discovered that most of them were first exposed to Yorùbá language in schools which accounted for their ill performances especially in reading, translation and the provision of meaning for some common Yorùbá words and expressions. It is disheartening to know that parents who are Yorùbá speakers pride themselves in the fact that they communicate with their children in English. They thereby discourage their children from speaking and using the language as a means of communication. Parents buy story books in English language for their children but they do not deem it necessary to do the same for Yorùbá language thus, they are far contributing to the gradual extinction of the language as they help to reduce its spread by their various actions.

The Implication

When a language is moving gradually towards extinction as a result of the users' attitude, it is an indication that a culture is going out of existence. It is a pointer that the story of a people is about to be lost. Yorùbá language with its rich culture of aphorisms, proverbs, folklore, folktale, oral poetry, oral tradition, moonlight stories, songs, panegyric, praise, and others is gradually losing its relevance and emphasis. While parents do not find time to sit down and pass down cultural heritage through the earlier mentioned media to their children, the cultural values are ebbing out and these are being replaced with foreign cultures as exemplified in different forms of attractive entertainment like the cartoon network, Disney world and others. These acts and many others will have negative impact on the younger generation as it will push them further away from their roots and culture. Many students process their thoughts in English language and so produce expressions like: *Sibi ti subu ni kitchen* for the *spoon has fallen off the rack in the kitchen*. *Tunde refuse lati pick calls mi until yesterday*, an expression which is more of English than Yorùbá language and many other expressions like these. Notwithstanding the aforementioned facts, the paper recognises that language changes over time as a results of many things; these changes in

Balogun, An Endangered Nigerian Language

any case, validate the dynamism of language. The position of the paper is that such changes should enhance, enrich as well as strengthen the language rather than inhibiting it.

Way Forward

There is the need for government, parents, schools, policy makers, language planners and other stake holders to put in place urgent measures that will arrest this unwelcome situation. The first thing to do is to create cultural awareness and revival with the aim of repositioning Yorùbá language in a way that an average Yorùbá person will be proud of the language and also wants to identify with it. This can be done by encouraging people to speak pure mother tongue. The mixing of Yorùbá language with English by Yorùbá speakers should be discouraged. We should borrow a leaf from the French government who banned the mixing of French language with any other language on her media. We need to concentrate more on the upcoming generation so as not to sell out Yorùbá culture totally to a foreign culture like the English language. Also, parents need to go back to the tradition of storytelling to teach morals and cultural values; they should speak Yorùbá language to their children and encourage the children to do the same thereby enhancing their knowledge and confidence in the language. Parents must instill cultural pride in their children by regularly clothing them in traditional attires which must not follow the once in a year syndrome but parents should let this be seen as part of their children's wardrobe.

Furthermore, it is ironical to see academics in Yorùbá language presenting papers in English; they should be encouraged to write their papers in Yorùbá language instead of English language to lend credence to what they are professing. The media is not left out in this crusade; the media must encourage and look for sponsors for pure Yorùbá programmes. Also interesting programmes in Yorùbá language that are children and youth-related must be encouraged. Children and youth-focused drama, comedy; music with the active involvement of the target audience; the youths and children must be encouraged. This could gradually displace the cartoon, Nickelodeon and The Disney series which have nearly captured the upcoming generation. Government also needs to actively encourage the preservation of indigenous languages. It is not enough for our government to put policies in place but they must follow such policies up. Such emphasis that they lay on payment of tax by the citizenry should also be laid on the importance of the mother tongue.

Government can sponsor jingles to create awareness on the importance of the mother tongue; it can also sponsor billboards that will also create awareness with such written in Yorùbá language. Competitions that attract motivations and reward for excellent performance in Yorùbá language at all levels should be encouraged and given wide publicity in order to effect positive impact on other students. Yorùbá language dictionary should be made available online as a resource material, specialist in the language can also teach Yorùbá language in an interactive manner online. This no doubt will assist sincere and willing students to learn and improve their knowledge of the language. It is disheartening to note that some universities in the southwest of Nigeria do not have departments where Yorùbá language is studied. This should be looked into and addressed adequately. Lastly, this paper supports the establishment of a Yorùbá academy which will encourage academic research in the culture of Yorùbá as well as encourage the translation of some scientific-oriented subjects into Yorùbá language.

Finally, it is worthy of note that Nigerian's National anthem is rendered in English in all the geopolitical zones in the country. To enhance cultural rebirth and identification, the onus lies on

regional /state governments to ensure that the national anthem is also sung in their respective regional languages. This could help ignite a cultural rebirth especially in terms of language usage.

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