The Role of Codification in Language Revitalization: A Study of Endangered Languages in Nigeria

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Abstract

Language endangerment poses a significant threat to Nigeria's rich linguistic diversity, with numerous languages facing extinction due to various socio-economic, cultural, and political factors. This paper undertakes a comprehensive examination of the critical role of codification in revitalizing endangered languages in Nigeria. Codification, the systematic process of formalizing a language's structure, including its grammar, vocabulary, and orthography, is essential for language preservation, education, cultural identity, and modern communication. This study investigates the multifaceted factors contributing to language endangerment in Nigeria, including socio-economic pressures, urbanization, cultural assimilation, lack of institutional support, and globalization. It further explores the significance of codification in language revitalization, highlighting its role in preserving linguistic structure, facilitating language teaching, ensuring consistency in language use, and promoting cultural identity. The paper also discusses strategies for effective codification, including community involvement, technological integration, government policies, training and capacity building, and promotion through media and literature. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of collaboration between linguists, community leaders, and government agencies in codification efforts. Based on the findings of this study, recommendations are made for the implementation of a national language preservation policy, public awareness campaigns, international collaboration, research and documentation centers to support language codification and revitalization efforts in Nigeria. Ultimately, this paper contributes to the ongoing discussion on language endangerment and revitalization, highlighting the crucial role of codification in preserving Nigeria's linguistic diversity for future generations.

Keywords: Codification, language revitalization, endangered languages, standardization, cultural identity

1. Introduction

From birth, children begin to communicate with their parents through vocal sounds, marking the inception of language development. As defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, language is a systematic means of communication that utilizes sounds, symbols, or signs to convey meaning, express thoughts, and exchange information between individuals, groups, or communities. This complex system enables humans to share ideas, knowledge, and cognitive experiences, fostering connection and understanding.

Nigeria is a linguistically diverse country, boasting of numerous languages spoken by its populace. Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, and many others exemplify the languages spoken in the country (Crozier & Blench, 1992). Regrettably, research indicates that some of these languages have become extinct due to various factors. This paper investigates the role of codification in revitalizing endangered languages in Nigeria.

This paper is organized into seven sections. Section 1 introduces the topic of language endangerment in Nigeria and the importance of codification in language revitalization. Section 2 examines the factors contributing to language endangerment in Nigeria. Section 3 discusses the endangered languages in Nigeria, using UNESCO's language endangerment framework. Section 4 explores the role of codification in language revitalization, focusing on grammar, vocabulary, and orthography. Section 5 discusses strategies for effective codification, including community involvement, technological integration, government policies, training and capacity building, and promotion through media and literature. Section 6 concludes the paper by highlighting the significance of codification in preserving Nigeria's linguistic diversity. Finally, Section 7 provides recommendations for language preservation and revitalization efforts in Nigeria.

2. Factors Contributing to Language Endangerment in Nigeria

Language endangerment is the state of a language being at risk of falling out of use and disappearing (Krauss, 1992). The factors contributing to language endangerment in Nigeria are multifaceted:

(i) **Socioeconomic Pressures:** Parents prioritize teaching dominant languages to their children to help them access education and job opportunities (Blench, 2007).

(ii) **Urbanization and Migration:** Urbanization results in people adopting dominant languages for communication, leading to the neglect of native languages (Adegbija, 2003).

(iii) **Cultural Assimilation:** Indigenous communities abandon their languages and cultural practices in favor of more dominant ones (Blench, 2007).

(iv) **Lack of Institutional Support:** Government policies that favor English or regional languages marginalize smaller languages, leaving them without institutional backing (Adegbija, 2003).

(v) **Globalization:** The increasing use of international languages, such as English, erodes the use of local languages (Krauss, 1992).

3. Endangered Languages in Nigeria

UNESCO classifies languages based on their vitality into categories such as vulnerable, definitely endangered, severely endangered, and critically endangered. Examples of endangered languages in Nigeria include:

(i) **Definitely Endangered:** Igede (spoken in Benue State) and Jibu (spoken in Taraba State).

(ii) **Severely Endangered:** Oko (spoken in Kogi State) and C'lela (spoken in Adamawa State).

(iii) **Critically Endangered:** Ajawa (spoken in Bauchi State), Auyokawa (spoken in Jigawa State), and Sheni (spoken in Kaduna State), with some no longer having fluent speakers.

The disappearance of these languages has far-reaching consequences. It means the loss of a primary means of communication, the erosion of cultural identity, and the loss of traditional knowledge systems embedded in local languages, reducing linguistic diversity globally.

4. Understanding Codification in Language Revitalization

According to Akujobi and Onyia (2022) codification processes usually succeed standardization or after appreciable creative changes have taken place in a language and involves setting the grammar and vocabulary into a body of knowledge through social, political or educational means. In the context of language revitalization, codification refers to the formalization of a language's structure, including its grammar, vocabulary, and orthography.

4.1 Grammar in Codification of Endangered Languages

In the context of language revitalization, grammar plays a crucial role in the codification of an endangered language. Grammar encompasses the rules and structures that govern how words are combined to form meaningful sentences. For codification to be effective, it is essential that the grammar of a language is standardized and documented in a way that reflects its native structures, while also being accessible for learners and future generations.

- **Preserving Linguistic Structure**: One of the key aspects of codification is to capture the grammar of a language in a standardized form. This includes documenting the syntactic structure (word order), morphology (word formation), and phonology (sound systems) of the language. For endangered languages, documenting their grammar helps preserve their unique structures that might otherwise be lost with the decline of speakers.

For example, many Nigerian languages like Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa have complex grammatical rules, including tonal distinctions, verb conjugation patterns, and noun classification systems. These rules must be codified so that speakers can continue to use the language correctly, and learners can understand the proper forms and usage.

- **Facilitating Language Teaching**: A standardized grammar is essential for teaching a language, especially in formal education. When a language is codified with a clear set of grammatical rules, it can be taught systematically. This is important for revitalizing endangered languages, as the grammar can be included in textbooks and language programs, providing a foundation for consistent learning.

For instance, Igbo, which is an endangered language in some areas, has undergone efforts to standardize its grammar, including rules for noun prefixes, verb conjugation, and sentence structure. These grammatical rules help teachers instruct students more effectively and ensure uniformity in written and spoken communication.

- **Ensuring Consistency in Language Use**: Codification of grammar helps to ensure consistency in how the language is used, both in spoken and

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written forms. This is especially vital in societies where language is passed down orally, and where variations in grammar can lead to confusion or misunderstandings.

In Nigeria, languages like Sheni (spoken in Kaduna State) may have slight grammatical variations depending on region or speaker. Codifying grammar helps standardize these variations, ensuring that speakers from different regions can still communicate effectively. This consistency is vital for the language's survival, as it encourages speakers to use the language correctly and confidently.

- **Grammar as a Tool for Linguistic Identity**: Grammar is closely tied to a language's cultural and social identity. The rules of grammar reflect the way a community thinks, organizes its world, and expresses relationships. When the grammar of an endangered language is codified, it also codifies the worldview of the speakers.

For example, many African languages, including those in Nigeria, have complex systems for expressing respect, politeness, and hierarchy through grammar. Yoruba, for instance, has distinct forms of speech depending on the age and status of the person being addressed, which is reflected in its grammar. Standardizing these aspects of grammar not only preserves the language but also keeps alive the cultural values embedded in those grammatical structures.

- **Enhancing Literacy and Writing Systems**: Codifying grammar is a key part of developing a comprehensive writing system for endangered languages. The grammar helps define how words are written, how sentences are structured, and how punctuation and tense are expressed. Without a solid grammatical foundation, a written system cannot accurately reflect the language's spoken form, potentially causing confusion and limiting the language's use in writing.

For languages like C'lela or Ajawa, which have minimal or no standardized orthography, a focus on grammar can help create written forms that are true to the spoken language. Once the grammar is established, it enables the creation of grammatically correct texts, such as stories, poems, and educational materials, which are important for language revitalization.

4.2 Vocabulary in the Codification of Endangered Languages

In the process of codifying an endangered language, vocabulary is a critical element. Vocabulary refers to the set of words and expressions used in a language to communicate meaning. Codification involves standardizing the lexicon, which allows a language to be preserved, transmitted, and revitalized effectively. Vocabulary is one of the most important components of language because it reflects a community's culture, values, and knowledge. The role of vocabulary in the codification of endangered languages are:

- **Preserving Cultural Knowledge and Heritage**: Language is not just a system of communication; it also carries cultural knowledge, history, and worldview. Vocabulary, in particular, is closely tied to the identity and traditions of a community. For endangered languages, the words and expressions used by speakers often reflect unique cultural practices, beliefs, and environmental understanding. By codifying the vocabulary, the language is not only preserved as a means of communication but also as a vehicle for cultural transmission.

For example, in Nigerian languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa, certain words are tied to specific cultural rituals, ceremonies, and societal structures. Codifying these vocabulary items ensures that the knowledge embedded in them is passed on, thus safeguarding the cultural identity of the community.

- **Standardizing Lexical Items**: Codification of vocabulary helps standardize the words used within a language, ensuring that there is consistency in how the language is spoken and written. Standardization is crucial for creating educational materials, dictionaries, and instructional resources for language learners. Without a standardized vocabulary, different dialects or communities within the same language group may use different words to express the same concept, leading to confusion and fragmentation of the language.

For instance, in Igbo, the word for "book" may vary slightly in different regions, but codification ensures that a standardized form

of the word is used in educational materials, promoting understanding and unity. Similarly, codification of vocabulary in languages such as Hausa or Yoruba helps bring consistency in how words are used across different dialects.

- **Expanding the Vocabulary**: The vocabulary of a language evolves over time to accommodate new concepts, technologies, and social changes. Codification often includes the creation of new words or the adaptation of existing words to describe modern phenomena. This is especially important for endangered languages that may not have developed vocabulary for contemporary concepts or technological advancements.

i. Introduction of New Terms: Codification helps create new words for emerging concepts, ensuring languages stay relevant in the modern world. Linguists and community leaders can collaborate to generate terms that fit the grammatical and phonological rules of the language.

ii. Facilitating Language Learning: A codified vocabulary supports language learning by providing structured resources like textbooks, dictionaries, and instructional guides. These resources enable non-native speakers and younger generations to learn endangered languages systematically.

iii. Supporting Literacy and Written Forms: Developing a standardized vocabulary is essential for literacy programs. It allows the creation of written texts and materials in endangered languages, aiding in education and the preservation of linguistic heritage. Languages like Igede and Ajawa, which lack strong written traditions, can particularly benefit from codification.

iv. Strengthening Intergenerational Transmission: Codification helps ensure that a language is passed down to future generations, especially in communities where fluent speakers are diminishing. For languages like Yoruba, codified vocabulary has helped preserve cultural knowledge and proverbs, enabling effective transmission to children.

4.3 Orthography in the Codification of Endangered Languages

Orthography plays a vital role in the codification of endangered languages, as it provides a standardized system for representing the language in written form.

The role of orthography in the codification of endangered languages are:

(i) **Documenting the Language**: Codifying vocabulary involves developing a written system (orthography), which is key for documentation and language preservation. Languages like Igede in Benue State are undergoing orthography standardization to ensure they are preserved.

(ii) **Facilitating Education and Literacy**: Standardized orthography makes it easier to incorporate languages into school curricula, promoting literacy in these languages alongside dominant ones. For example, Yoruba has successfully integrated into schools due to its standardized orthography.

(iii) **Promoting Cultural Identity**: A standardized writing system affirms the cultural significance of a language and promotes linguistic pride, encouraging community efforts to teach and use the language.

(iv) **Technological Integration**: Codifying orthography is vital for including languages in digital platforms like social media, mobile apps, and websites. This ensures the languages remain relevant in the digital era.

(v) **Preserving Oral Traditions**: Many endangered languages have rich oral traditions. Codification helps preserve these through transcription into a standardized written form, safeguarding cultural narratives, proverbs, and songs.

5. Strategies for Effective Codification

The strategies for effective codification of endangered language are discussed hereunder:

(i) **Community Involvement**: Engage native speakers to ensure the language remains authentic and culturally relevant.

(ii) **Technological Integration**: Develop apps and online resources for language learning and preservation.

(iii) **Government Policies**: Implement policies that mandate the teaching of indigenous languages in schools.

(iv) **Training and Capacity Building**: Provide training for linguists and educators on codification and language documentation.

(v) **Promotion through Media and Literature**: Encourage the use of codified languages in various forms of media to increase visibility.

6. Conclusion

Language endangerment poses a significant threat to Nigeria's rich linguistic diversity, with numerous languages facing extinction due to various socio-economic, cultural, and political factors. This paper has examined the critical role of codification in revitalizing endangered languages in Nigeria. Codification, the systematic process of formalizing a language's structure, including its grammar, vocabulary, and orthography, is essential for language preservation, education, cultural identity, and modern communication.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of codification in preserving Nigeria's linguistic diversity. The paper has demonstrated that codification can help to preserve linguistic structure, facilitate language teaching, ensure consistency in language use, and promote cultural identity. Furthermore, the paper has discussed strategies for effective codification, including community involvement, technological integration, government policies, training and capacity building, and promotion through media and literature.

In conclusion, codification is a crucial step in the revitalization of endangered languages in Nigeria. It is essential that linguists, community leaders, and government agencies work together to codify and document endangered languages. By doing so, we can help to preserve Nigeria's linguistic diversity and promote cultural identity. Ultimately, this paper contributes to the ongoing discussion on language endangerment and revitalization, highlighting the crucial role of codification in preserving Nigeria's linguistic diversity for future generations.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

(i) The Nigerian government should adopt policies supporting language codification and revitalization.

(ii) Public awareness campaigns should be promoted to raise awareness about the importance of language preservation.

(iii) International collaboration should be encouraged to provide financial and technical

support for language codification and revitalization efforts.

(iv) Research and documentation centers should be established to support language codification and revitalization efforts in Nigeria.

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