
The Place of the English Language in the Language Ecology of Ngamo: Implications for Applied Linguistics

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Abstract

This study was conceived with establishing the consequences of the interaction between English (a Germanic language) and Ngamo (a Chadic language) in Ngamo language environments. In order to achieve the primary objective of this study, survey was adopted as research design. Five Ngamo communities in Yobe State were visited by the researchers where participatory observation was conducted. In addition, one hundred Ngamo speakers of English as a second language in the state were interviewed. Similarly, two hundred Ngamo speakers of English as a second language in the state responded to a researcher-made questionnaire. It was found that even though Ngamo is actually endangered, English language has no significant role in its endangerment. In consequence, it was recommended that conscious language revitalization processes – corpus planning, language education, etc. should be intensified to save Ngamo from extinction.

Keywords: Ngamo, English, endangerment, language ecology, applied linguistics

1) Introduction

Language ecology depicts the interaction between or among languages in a language environment and the consequences of such interactions (Wendel, 2005). In their contribution, Creese, Martin

and Hornberger (2008:1) see the study of language ecology as conscious exploration into the "... diversity within specific socio-political settings where the processes of language use create, reflect and challenge particular hierarchies and hegemonies, however transient these might be." Such interaction could engender language vitality, language mutation or language loss. Except in the case of sudden language extinction, languages do not die until they undergo endangerment evident in language shift. According to Carolina, Menjivar and Salmon (2018:13), "...language shift and endangerment is unquestionably a result of external motivations and language contact." For instance, Austin and Sallabank (2013:313) had earlier reported that unfavorable attitudes "... towards minority and endangered languages by both the speaker communities themselves and by speakers of the larger languages within which they are embedded are well documented and are both an outcome and a cause of shift to dominant languages." External forces like long histories of marginalization, racism, stigmatization and economic and socio-political disadvantages could necessitate negative attitude towards a particular language, thus making it vulnerable.

It should be noted that not only minority languages are prone to endangerment. In a study conducted by Oparinde (2017), it was found that Yoruba is potentially endangered. In addition, potentially endangered languages can also endanger other languages (Gbeyonron & Chibok, 2017). Even though Holmes (2013) opines that migrant communities are vulnerable to language shift. There are instances where migrant communities show language loyalty to their language, thus enhancing significant language maintenance (Alonso, Durand & Gutiérrez, 2014; Burstein-Feldman, Epstein, Kheimets, Kopeliovich, Yitzhaki & Walters, 2010). The predator language may be indigenous or non-indigenous. For example,

Kandybowicz and Torrence (2017) report that “Unlike Australia, northern Asia, and the Americas, where local languages are threatened and replaced by the nationally dominant languages of colonizers, the most immediate threats to minority African languages are posed by other local or sub-national languages...” It should be noted that in some states in Anglophone West African countries, exonormative English and Pidgin threaten local languages (Mufwene, 2001, Seyfeddinipur & Chambers, 2016).

European languages have also had their share of language endangerment as a result of language ecology. A typical case is that of Guernsey, an island located in the English Channel. It is about 130 kms from Weymouth which is the nearest British port however approximately 32 km from Carteret, the nearest French port. Sallabank (2010:60) reports that “The main language used nowadays is English. Each Channel Island has, or had, its own variety of Norman French, although only those of Jersey, Guernsey and Sark are still spoken.” This is a typical example of language shift in Europe.

Of interest in the current study is the place of English in the language ecology of Ngamo. Ngamo is a Chadic language, with most of its speakers dwelling in Yobe State (Schuh, 2005), while the English language is Germanic, and at present considered *lingua monde* given its vitality and spread (Aitchison, 2001). Unlike English, Ngamo is natively spoken in Yobe State and other states that share border with Yobe, especially Gombe State. Conversely, English language is in principle the language of official government business as well as language of education and language in education at certain levels of education in Ngamo speech community. Ngamo is an endangered language in Yobe State due to loss of young speakers in most cases. According to Crystal (2014:91) many

scholars attribute “the current preoccupation with global English as ‘the cause’ of language death.” In consequence, this study was conceived with the objective of establishing the role of English in the endangerment of Ngamo.

2) Methodology

This study adopted survey as research design. Kothari (2004:36) states that the primary targets of survey are “...people who have had practical experience with the problem to be studied.” The population of the study is all Ngamo speakers. Indicatively, they are up to three hundred and fifty thousand (350,000), representing 12% of the total population of Yobe State (Gbeyonron & Bare 2020), and a large number of them inhabiting Fika Local Government Area of Yobe State, while small Ngamo settlements currently dwell in Fune, Gujba, Gulani, Nangere and Potiskum Local Government Areas of Yobe State. In Fika Local Government in particular, the Ngamo typically dominates towns and villages such as Gadaka, Gadi, Garin Goge, Garin Gamji, Babaji, Godowoli, Gashinge, Gamari Bada, Zadawa, Janga Sirri, Janga Dale, Nahata, Pokkitok, Koyaya, Garin Abba, Baba Nana, Mubi, Garin Balde, Garin Duaya, Loliyo etc. Figure 1 depicts the geographical locations of some Ngamo towns and villages.

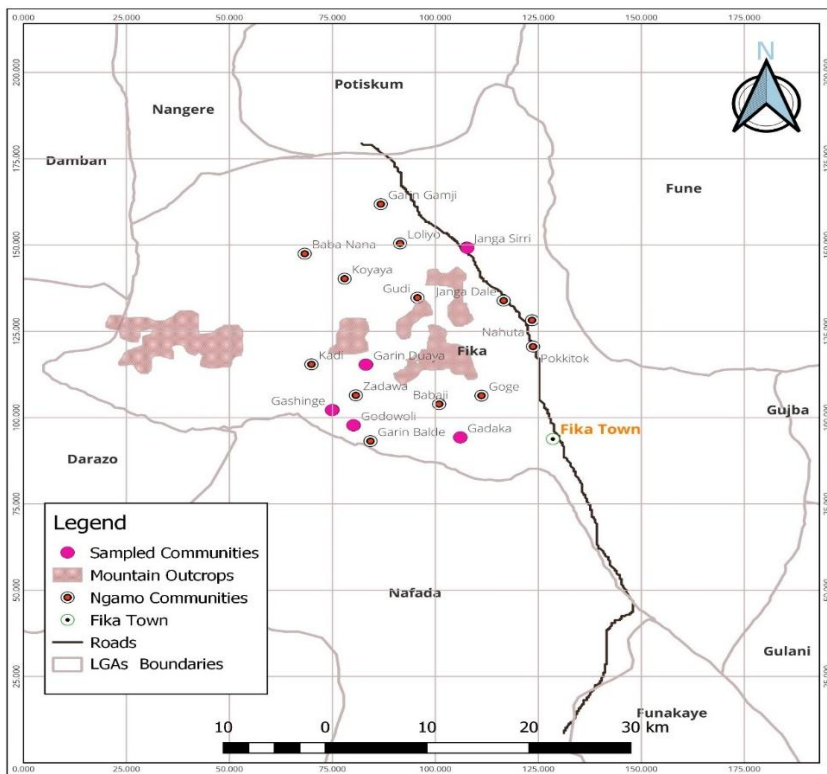


Figure 1. A map depicting Ngamo communities and the sampled Ngamo native communities

Ngamo dialects such as Ngamo Gudi, Ngamo Yaya, Ngamo Janga and Ngamo Dokto abound. Given the inability of the researchers to cover all persons in the population as well as all the Ngamo communities, sampling was adopted. Kumar (2011) defines sampling as the process of selecting a sample from a bigger group (the sampling population) to become the basis for estimating or predicting the prevalence of an unknown piece of information,

situation or outcome regarding the bigger group. Thus, semi-structured interview schedule, questionnaire and participatory observation were used as data collection instruments on the samples. Keya, Makau, Mani and Omari (1989:32) underscore that: “The strength of an interview lies in its flexibility, ensuring a high rate of response, control of the interview situation, recording of spontaneous and unintended responses, and one can prevail upon the respondent to complete all questions.”

As for the key informant interview, thirty Ngamo speakers of English as a second language holding strategic positions at the state and local government levels in addition to those in key traditional institutions were engaged. Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010:4) opine that even though tests in language research attempt to measure how well a subject can do something, “questionnaires do not have good or bad answers; they ask for information about the respondents (or “informants”) in a non-evaluative manner, without gauging their performance against a set of criteria or against the performance of a norm group.”

As for the questionnaire, 300 copies of a researcher-constructed questionnaire were administered to 300 Ngamo speakers of English as a second language in five Ngamo settlements in Yobe State viz.: Gadaka, Godowoli, Gashinge, Janga Sirri and Garin Dauya. The same five communities were purposively selected for the participatory observation. While qualitative method was used in describing the data collected via interview and participatory observation, quantitative method through simple percentage was used for the analysis of the data collected via the administration of questionnaire.

3) Findings

It was discovered that Ngamo language is actually endangered in Yobe State. This is given the fact that 279 of the respondents to the questionnaire, representing 93% of the subjects, lack communicative competence in the language. This is in line with the findings of the participatory observation and key informant interview schedules.

This study also found that Ngamo is neither a language of education nor language in education at the primary school level of education. This implies that the school system in the communities where Ngamo is the language of the immediate community (LIC) did not take advantage of the provisions in the 2013 National Policy on Education and the 2022 Nigeria’s National Language Policy—requiring the use of primary school pupils’ mother tongue as the language of instruction from primary 1-3. Even though all the subjects that participated in the key informant interview and responded to the questionnaire speak English, they do not use it in domains such as home, market, places of worship, informal interaction etc. Instead, 98% of the subjects use Hausa in such domains. Hundred percent (100%) of the subjects use Hausa and either Kare-kare or Bole in the mentioned domains.

4) Discussion

This study discovers that Ngamo is actually endangered in Yobe State. This is in concurrence with what is obtainable in many parts of the world. Wamalwa and Oluoch (2013) report that “... in many urban areas of Kenya ... there is a new group of people who can neither speak nor understand their first languages.” In the case of Ngamo, the endangerment is not delimited to the urban area. It is

glaring that speakers' attitude is the major impediment to the survival of Ngamo language even in the rural areas. Heinrich (2021:23) reports that: "General findings in language endangerment indicate that it is always dominated communities that undergo language shift, and that there is 'nothing to gain' in language loss." In the case of Ngamo language, it is not obvious that the rural communities are dominated. This is given the fact that they are in their ancestral homes and under the leadership of fellow Ngamo people. What could be obvious is the issue of self-perception. According to Austin & Sallabank (2013:313) this "... can lead to 'linguistic insecurity', which is related to Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony, whereby subordinate groups come to accept the inferiority of their own ways of speaking as 'common sense' and 'natural'."

As realized from this study, Ngamo is not a language of education neither is it a language in education at the primary school level of education. This study opines that had the communities taken advantage of the provisions in the 2013 edition of NPE which states in Section 1:8(g) that "every child shall be taught in the mother tongue or language of the immediate community for the first four years of basic education", Ngamo language maintenance would be significant. From the findings of this study, one can conclude that English is not a threat to Ngamo language. This is because none of the participants admitted speaking English at home with their family. Thus, the findings of this study are divergent with the findings of Adegbite (2010) that reveal language shift towards English by speakers of Nigerian language. The findings of this are also in disagreement with the findings of Odeh (2016:68) which states that the "... English language, although a European language, has gained an endoglossic status in Nigeria, as it has become the L1 of many Nigerians and used in every domain of language use in

Nigeria...” The findings of this study are also incongruent with that of Oparinde (2017:3) which reveal that “Most elite parents would prefer their kids to speak English fluently rather than understand Yorùbá; they even correct their children when they make grammatical mistakes and would not do the same with Yorùbá.” Similarly, unlike in the case of Kenya where wa Mberia (2014:137) reports that over the years “... more and more Bongom speakers became bilingual adopting Lubukusu (as well as English for the educated ones) besides Bongom” thus endangering Bongom; English is not a threat to Ngamo.

This study concurs with Mufwene (2001) that African languages rather than European languages, except for Pidgin, are the predators of endangered African languages. The findings of this study also converge with the findings of Kandybowicz and Torrence (2017:2) which provide that “... less than 10% of rural Africa has competence in an imported European language.”

5) Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study have revealed that Ngamo, a Chadic language spoken in Yobe and Gombe States, North East Nigeria, is actually endangered in Yobe State thus not vibrant, spreading and lacking vitality. This is despite the significant numerical strength of persons that have Ngamo ancestry. The study had, at the pre-investigation stage, assumed that English language, Nigeria’s language of official government business is the predator language Ngamo is shifting towards. However, it was found from the questionnaires administered, the interviews conducted and the participatory observation deployed by this study that Ngamo language is not shifting to English language. It was found that the major predatory language is Hausa in spite of the findings of this

study that revealed that persons with Ngamo ancestry who lack the ability to use it but can speak either Bole language or Kare-kare language abound in Yobe State.

The key implication for applied linguistics is that an official language may not necessarily be a predator language. In addition, applied linguists can infer that potentially endangered languages can also have some languages shifting towards them, thus making the potentially endangered languages serving as predator languages. Furthermore, applied linguists should note that the utility value of a language especially as used in many domains such as the market, the school, places of worship etc. can enhance its vitality.

The study recommends that applied linguists, linguists and anthropologists in Yobe State should, as part of their social responsibility, embark on effective advocacy that would lead to change in policy and practice that would engender the revitalization of Ngamo language. Furthermore, the state Ministry of Basic Education and the State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) should ensure that the language provisions in Nigeria's national policy on education and national language policy are implemented without compromise in the state. As such, there would be a need for teachers that can use Ngamo as medium of instruction. For this reason, Gudi Emirate in Yobe State should mobilize for the sponsorship of short courses that would strengthen the teachers' Ngamo language proficiency and the development of meta-language. The Emirate should also mobilize for the organization of language festivals in Ngamo that will include the presentation of Ngamo poems, folklores, debates and quizzes in Ngamo etc. Prominent Ngamo speakers should be actuated to sponsor Ngamo language programmes at the radio and television stations in the state. The Departments of Languages and Linguistics, and Education, and the Centre for Continuing Education at Yobe State University,

Damaturu and the Department of Education at the Federal University, Gashua should collaborate in conducting further research on the endangered Ngamo language and work towards initiating activities that would assist its revitalization.

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