

TO BE OR NOT TO BE: THE PRESERVATION OF WEST AFRICAN LANGUAGES**BY**

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Abstract

Languages facilitate engagements within and between groups of people allowing for the exchange of ideas and information. They are important repositories of diverse cultural values, knowledge and skills, the loss of which threatens human survival. Yet, little thought is given to how languages evolve or how so many have become endangered. The death of languages is caused by factors that include the predominance of certain languages, the decline in use of some as well as the lack of orthographies that can enable language learning and preservation. These existential threats are evident in West Africa where an increasing number of indigenous languages are fast disappearing from the region's linguistic landscape taking with them vital information and skills that are encapsulated in them. Taking into account available surveys conducted into the decline of languages, this study examines the slide towards extinction and highlights the urgency of arresting this development. Using Paulo Freire's Theory of Learning and Consciousness as a framework, therapeutic measures that can reinvigorate indigenous speech communities such as rethinking national language policies, instituting changes in pedagogy and creating orthographies that can help revitalize language learning are discussed. The loss of languages diminishes the cultural diversity of the world hence the urgent need to support them before they disappear. The study therefore recommends the active use of indigenous languages so as to preserve the rich linguistic heritage of the region for future generations.

Keywords: Languages, West Africa, Endangerment, Shift, Preservation, Learning

Introduction

Languages are defined as structured systems of communication that are conveyed through spoken or written words, and sometimes, through signs. Each language reflects a particular philosophy and mirrors the manner in which a speech community resolves its problems. According to Onwubie (2016), it is the "matrix through which the culture, values, norms and mores of a people are transmitted" (p.230). Thus all aspects of human society, both tangible and intangible are tied to its existence. Similarly, Castells (2004) asserts that languages are also the means by which identity and history are expressed. Each one is the unique expression of a particular world view, of the speakers' experiences, knowledge and skills. Therefore, researchers see languages as indispensable tools by which humans organize society and manipulate objects in

their environment. But importantly for Hockett (2010), the most distinguishing features of human languages is their capacity for productivity and creativity as demonstrated by an unlimited ability to communicate myriad experiences, express new ideas, and embrace discoveries.

Experts in Linguistics, Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology and Neuroscience have uniformly noted the innate human ability to learn languages (Paradis, 2004; Tsunodo, 2005; Anderson, 2012). Their studies reveal that a first language (native tongue, mother tongue, natal tongue) which is original to a people or native to a locality is usually acquired in infancy. Then, for a variety of reasons, more languages are eventually learned bringing about bilingualism (ability to speak two languages) or, in some cases, multilingualism (many languages). However, increasingly, a large number of indigenous West African languages are being endangered by the domination of nearby languages with large populations of speakers or by the colonial imposition of European languages such as English, French and Portuguese with far reaching consequences on lives and society in the region.

Language endangerment occurs when a population that uses a language shrinks as its speakers shift to using other languages for their communication needs and also when the threat of extinction is posed by its speakers simply dying out. Identifying the steps that eventually lead to language endangerment, Hoffman (1999) discerns a pattern whereby languages shift in phases from monolingualism in the indigenous language (L1) to bilingualism with the indigenous language retaining its dominance. This is followed by a stage during which the new or second (L2) language gains the upper hand before an eventually return to monolingualism as the new language takes over completely bringing about the loss or death of the indigenous language (p.186). Hence, the title above which alludes to the conundrum posed by Shakespeare's Hamlet's To be or not to be speech about whether it is better to act or to remain inactive can be applied to the question of whether endangered languages should be save or whether they should be allowed to die.

In answer to this question, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) mandate to ensure the preservation and promotion of the diversity of cultures provides a comprehensive justification for this study. In a document titled *Language Vitality and Endangerment*, it states:

The extinction of each language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural, historical, and ecological knowledge. Each language is a unique expression of the human experience of the world. Thus, the knowledge of any single language may be the key to answering fundamental questions of the future. Every time a language dies, we have less evidence for understanding patterns in the structure and function of human language, human prehistory, and the maintenance-of the world's diverse ecosystems. Above all, speakers of

these languages may experience the loss of their language as a loss of their original ethnic and cultural identity (UNESCO, 2003, p.2).

Statement of Problem and Conceptual Framework

Cultural diversity represents innovation and creativity that are as important for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. These are primarily expressed in languages which are vehicles of human communication and which should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of both present and future generations. The danger posed by the loss of languages is incalculable in terms of the breadth and depth of human thought and knowledge that is lost forever. Therefore, Paulo Freire's concept of "conscientização" which advocates for the need to embrace cultural peculiarities is adopted here as an appropriate framework for examining the dangers inherent in language endangerment. Persuaded by the need to resist the language of "colonizing cultures" that think of themselves as more valuable, Freire emphasizes the legitimacy of the way subordinated communities express themselves in their own contexts. His concern comes from a deep understanding of the role and importance of indigenous languages as well as a commitment to the betterment of communities that is achievable when people learn their native languages, or as he puts it, learns how to speak their own "words" (Barros and Oliveira, 2022). Thus, drawing upon his Theory of Learning and Consciousness model, the following examines the status of endangered languages in West Africa. The focus here is on the reduced use of indigenous languages rather than on the structural changes that they are undergoing and suggestions are made that will help revitalize and preserve those that are on the decline.

Languages in West Africa

According to researchers, 6000 to 7000 languages are spoken around the world but 60% of them are expected to become extinct by the year 2100. They also claim that languages which are more commonly spoken usually dominate those that less frequently spoken. However, this trend is not determined solely by the numbers of speakers as some minor indigenous languages continue to survive in spite of the threat of domination posed by larger speech communities. Nonetheless, there are strong indications that many of such languages will eventually disappear from usage (Crystal, 2000; Tsunodo, 2005; Austin and Sallabank, 2011). The same is becoming evident in sub-Saharan West Africa which is one of the most multilingual and culturally diverse regions of the world. The languages found here belong to the Niger-Congo group which is the largest in terms of member languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, Fulfulde/Pulaar, Akan, Ewe, Wolof and Mande to mention a few. Also found in the region is Hausa, an Afroasiatic language that is spoken by about 27 million people across a large swath of West Africa spanning from Niger, Chad, Togo, Ghana, Ivory Coast to the Senegambia area. The Songhay and Kanuri languages from the Nilo-Saharan family similarly constitute another major group. The region is therefore richly endowed with over 1000 languages that are native to the region. It is similarly worth noting that over 500 of them can be found in Nigeria alone making it one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world.

Living in close proximity with each other, most West Africans are able to communicate in more than one of the many languages found in the region. Trade, religion, colonialism and other historical factors have inclined large numbers of them learn to communicate in multiple indigenous languages as well as in languages that foreign to the area such as Arabic (mainly across the northern Sahel areas), English (Nigeria, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Ghana) and French (Benin, Togo, Mali, Senegal Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire). When Arab traders and scholars came across the Sahara desert bringing the Islamic religion into the region in the 11th century, the Arabic language was introduced into several indigenous speech communities. The linguistic impact of this contact is still apparent in the large number of words borrowed from Arabic that have become part of everyday usage in Hausa, Mandinka, Bambara, Fulfude and Kanuri native languages. These communities have also adopted Ajami, that is, a script derived from Arabic for inscribing their own native tongues which to some extent has helped to ensure their continued use and long time survival.

Current Situation

Batibo (2005) asserts that the rate at which a language shifts and ultimately becomes endangered depends on the amount of pressure or attraction from a second language. The more the pressure exerted on the mother tongue whether from internal or external demographic, socio-economic or political sources, the faster the shift to a second language. It has been noted that the first step towards language endangerment is taken during a period of cultural and linguistic assimilation whether forced as in case of the French colonial policy of assimilation, or voluntarily, as in the case of former British colonies. Thus, Batibo's assertion is validated by how the languages of European colonial incursions into West Africa, French and English, are bringing about language shifts with far reaching consequences for indigenous languages in the region. The deliberate policy of cultural assimilation on the part of the French, as well as the present global ascendancy of English have resulted in the relegation of many native languages. Specifically, in recent times, globalization has further exacerbated the shift towards the large scale adoption of these foreign languages in West Africa as in other parts of the world (Arinze, 2017). Thus, both the French and English languages are implicated in the endangerment of indigenous languages as native tongues in the region are increasingly subordinated to them. However, Austin and Sallabank (2011) aver that this is not unexpected as people will choose to shift to languages that "afford the possibility to participate in larger and more influential speech communities"(p.7). Such languages are usually the ones that wield more economic power whether locally or internationally. Similarly Kuun (2015), asserts that language shift is also determined by the educational opportunities afforded to the younger generation, the opportunities to learn languages as well as the influence of exerted by the media. This may explain why the European languages bestowed on the region by colonialism seem to have the upper hand, and also highlight the need for measures to be taken in order to bridge the gap in indigenous language learning.

Interestingly, while several studies have been conducted on endangered languages in other parts of the world, the West African region has largely been neglected. For instance, the seminal text by Tsunoda (2005) covers virtually all areas of the world including Asia, North and South America, Canada, Asia, the South Pacific, Australia, Europe as well as North, East and Southern Africa with the notable exception of West Africa. While Batibo's (2005) text attempts to address language endangerment across the African continent, by virtue of the large area it attempts to cover, not enough space is devoted to West Africa. Similarly, only a brief chapter is devoted to the region in Brenzinger (2007). Available studies on this particular region are insufficient; yet it presents a unique context for in depth enquiry into the phenomenon of language endangerment because many of its languages are fast disappearing. Hence, the urgent need to draw attention to the area as invaluable cultural heritage, oral histories, traditions, knowledge, and skills possessed by native speech communities are rapidly being lost.

Language Endangerment

Information on West African indigenous languages is extremely sparse and uneven. However, the number languages spoken in various countries in sub-Saharan West Africa are listed below:

| Countries | Total Number of Languages |
|---------------|---------------------------|
| Niger | 11 |
| Togo | 39 |
| Sierra Leone | 21 |
| Mali | 26 |
| Senegal | 35 |
| Guinea-Bissau | 21 |
| Ghana | 66 |
| Liberia | 32 |
| Mauretania | 5 |
| Burkina Faso | 68 |
| Cote d'Ivoire | 76 |
| Gambia | 19 |
| Guinea | 27 |
| Benin | 50 |
| Nigeria | 550 |
| Total | 1050 |

Languages in West Africa (Ethnologue.com)

In an attempt to explain the process of language decline, Harrison (2007) elaborates a correlation between language death and biological extinction. According to him, evolutionary biologists recognize the advantages held by species that maintain the greatest diversity. For example, disaster occurs when there is heavy reliance on only one strain of wheat or corn, "a monoculture"

with no variations. This analogy is applicable to dominant languages that likewise present a similar level of danger over minority languages. However, Kunn (2015) is quick to note that language endangerment may also arise out of internal factors that push native tongues to the brink of extinction. Furthermore, it is also pertinent to mention that language communities are not always homogenous as not all speakers ascribe the same value to their languages. Some segments of a population may use a language while others may prefer to use other options that are available. This attitude can be traced to the common tendency of peoples to incline towards languages that have a high frequency of usage even though doing so weakens the status of their own languages.

Similarly, language loss can be attributed to migration to areas where large language groups exist. Once there, new comers tend to drop their mother tongue in favour of the ones used by the majority. Consequently, the UNESCO (2003) document on language vitality identifies four levels of language endangerment between "safe" and "extinct":

- Vulnerable (not spoken by children outside the home)
- Definitely endangered (not spoken by children)
- Severely endangered (only spoken by the oldest generations)
- Critically endangered (spoken by a few of the oldest generation)

Throughout history, languages have been known to decline in usage but the accelerated rate at which this is happening in 21st century West Africa is unprecedented (Arinze, 2017). The rich tapestry of diverse languages found in here is fast being reconfigured as speech communities shift to adopting majority languages near them. Blench (1998), one of the few scholars who has demonstrated an interest in West Africa specifically lists some of the endangered languages as in following:

| Country | Name | Comment |
|----------------|-------------|--|
| Nigeria | Bade | Still a large number of speakers but vulnerable and giving way rapidly to Hausa/ Duwai |
| | Bakpinka | Critically endangered |
| | Defaka | Critically endangered, about 200 speakers left. |
| | Dugusa | Definitely endangered, giving way to Hausa |
| | Dulbu | Critically endangered , giving way to Hausa |
| | Fyem | Severely endangered, giving way to Hausa |
| | Gera | Vulnerable, giving way to Hausa |
| | Gura | Severely endangered, giving way to |

| | | |
|---------------|---------------|--|
| | | Hausa |
| | Gurdunrj | Giving way to Hausa |
| | Gurdu-Mbaaru | Severely endangered, giving way to Hausa |
| | Gyem | Critically endangered, giving way to Hausa |
| | Ilue | Critically endangered, giving way to Efik/Oron |
| | Kiong | Critically endangered, giving way to Efik |
| | Luri | Critically endangered, about 200 |
| | Mvanip | Critically endangered, about 100 speakers |
| | Ndunda | Severely endangered, less than 400 speakers in 1999 |
| | Ngwaba | Severely endangered, two villages of speakers left |
| | Polci cluster | Definitely endangered, giving way to Hausa |
| | Reshe | Vulnerable |
| | Sambe | Critically endangered, 6 speakers left in 2001. The language has given way to Ninzo |
| | Somyev | Critically endangered, about 20 speakers in 1995 |
| | Yangkam | Critically endangered, about 2000 speakers in 1993 |
| Cote d'Ivoire | Ega | About 1000 speakers in 1999. The population is giving way to Dida |
| | Eotile | 200 speakers in 1999. The population is switching to Anyi |
| | Heri Kuo | 1500 speakers in 1998. Muslims among the population are switching to Mande, the non-Muslim to Sienare Senufo |
| Mali | Banka | 5,085 ethnic population in 1995 but switching to Bambara |
| | Nemadi | The Nemadi migrate between Mauretania and Mali. There were 200 in 1997 |
| Ghana | Ahanta | Giving way to Fante |
| | Awatu-Effutu | By 2010 only about 30% of these children speak no Efutu at all. |

| | | |
|--|---------|-----------------------|
| | | Giving way to Fante |
| | Dangame | Giving way to Twi/Ewe |

Roger Blench (2007)

The above is by no means an exhaustive list but it sufficiently illustrates what is happening in three countries in the region. Most of the examples cited are from Nigeria which is comparatively endowed with more variety of languages (Emenanjo, 2010). In 2006, UNESCO specifically identifies 29 languages in Nigeria that are in danger of extinction. While the Linguistic Association of Nigeria reports that unless proactive steps are taken, more than 50 minority languages are likely to be lost in a few years. However, some researchers argue that minority languages in West Africa occupy a non-dominant position in relation to other languages because of the limited public functions they perform (Batibo, 2005). Apart from the mutual incomprehensibility of minority languages, the use of most is confined to family and village communication. Undeniably, that some speech communities neither engage their languages in active use nor give impetus to them by adapting them to the modern world. But the strongest indication of language endangerment is when younger generations do not learn the indigenous (first) language.

Languages can be evaluated according to their socio-linguistic vitality, that is, the social or contextual ways they are employed for specific purposes. For example, a language with high vitality would not only be limited to use in the home but will also be used extensively in public spheres and by all generations of people. Presently, strongest indication that a language will survive at all appears to be heavily dependent on its use for literacy and numeracy. Thus, those languages that have standard writing systems, are dynamic and possess sophisticated meta-language for oracy as well as a robust literacy tradition are ranked higher while at the extreme end of the scale are languages that occupy a marginal position in relation to large majority languages. Numerically, this latter group has smaller speaker populations with a lesser degree of social, political or economic prestige assigned to them (Edwards, 2010). They are usually ranked lower because they neither have orthographies nor standard forms for usage. Consequently, the threat of endangerment hangs over them until they eventually succumb to a phenomenon that linguists refer to as “language death”. Yet creating a written version of a language is not as complicated as may be imagined. But first in , there is need to embrace the legitimacy of the language and then to commit to organizing its speech or “words” as advocated by Freire (1973).

Primarily, the urgent need to tackle language endangerment in West Africa is highlighted by the pressure exerted by the dominance foreign languages such as English and French as they appear to suppress the development of indigenous tongues and thereby threaten the cultural and linguistic diversity of the region. For instance, in former British colonies, Ghana and Nigeria, English is embraced as unifying disparate speech communities in the task of nation building but

at the same, it serves to diminish the vitality of native languages, especially the urge to learn and use them (Odeh, 2016). According to Tsunoda (2005), as a result of socio-economic pressures exerted by globalization, speakers of some endangered languages seem to “consider their own languages backward and impractical” (p.5). Hence, the conscientization model developed by Freire which advocates that educational goals be achieved through dialogue that prioritizes cultural identity, trust, and commitment is relevant here as it emphasizes self-awareness and positive actions that will maintain and preserve the use of indigenous languages.

Strategies for Revitalization

While it is sometimes argued that achieving desired national development would be impractical without the use of certain major indigenous languages, or, colonial languages that have become entrenched in West Africa as the medium of learning, there is need to remember that languages develop in a variety of ways and experience changes in status over time. For example, Latin and Greek which were once international languages have declined in use and have been overtaken by the English language which presently has worldwide appeal. Similarly, patriotic social engineering has been used to develop Chinese, Hebrew, and Swahili languages which implies that endangered languages in West Africa could be revitalized and preserved by sensitizing speech communities to value and use their languages through a combination of the strategies suggested below:

i. Services of Linguists

Speech communities need to employ the services of linguists who will work to preserve their languages. Such specialists could help to formulate claims about linguistic human rights and chart a path forward that will revitalize threatened languages. By using what they have learnt about other endangered languages to support declining languages, they possess the expertise to provide both technical and practical help with language teaching, revitalization, and preservation. The language skills they possess would enable them create a dictionary and grammar for any given language which would also help to reenergize it.

In addition, recent advancements in digital technology, in particular, the use of the internet, websites, facebook and Youtube could serve as tools for compiling language samples in text, audio, link or video formats for recording, studying and teaching languages as they are used in both formal and informal settings. By these means, a language could achieve not only a “global voice and a global audience”, it will also be documented for posterity (Harrison, 2007). Such efforts would go a long way to enhance the preservation of languages.

ii. Language Learning

While research has shown that learning is most effective in a child’s first language, that is, the mother tongue, the failure of earlier educators in West Africa to observe this rule is a contributory factor to the diminishing value of the indigenous languages. Yet, maintaining a language is important in preserving the cultural identity of its speakers. This also underlies the

right of every child to learn the mother-tongue even when it is not the majority language of the society (Arinze, 2017). It equally follows that children can acquire a language through imitation and practice of the sounds they hear around them (Lightbrown and Spada, 1997). But in sometimes the language learned based on imitation is full of confusing information as it does not provide all the language information that the learner needs and neither is the learner adequately corrected on the language used on the streets.

Therefore, learning a language could be enhanced by optimizing exposure to it in a formal context under the guidance of a teacher employing the use of instructional resources according to a curriculum. Such a process needs to be subjected to periodic evaluation to ensure that learning is taking place. During it, attempts are made achieve set language learning objectives and learners are exposed to useful learning experiences based on the culture of the language which will help to keep it alive. However, in some instances, the formal setting may not be enough for learners to gain a good grasp a language. As Moore (1998) asserts, “success in language education is closely related to parents’ interest and support” (p.107). Consequently, it is necessary to emphasize the need for families in speech communities to complement what schools have to offer. Their attitude towards the language in question could either enhance or debilitate a child’s performance in the language learning process as parents and close relations act as identification models that children emulate. Accordingly, the quality and quantity of the language which a learner hears as well as the consistency of the reinforcement offered by others impact on the success of the learning process. Thus, both the everyday practice of the speech community as well as the formal educational provisions made for the language is important for appropriate language learning. Also, since individuals differ in their approaches to learning, some people learn orally, others auditorily, and still others learn experientially, language learning is more effective when different approaches are used to guide the learners to absorb, process, and retain a language.

iii. The Teaching Process

Language teaching is an integral part of a community’s educational provision. In education, the teachers ensure that facilitation, motivation, tolerance and encouragement are provided in order to give learners life-long personal and civic competences to enable them contribute meaningfully to society. A important part of the educational provision is the need a consensus that a particular language should be learnt within the community. An endangered language that is used as the medium of instruction for all courses and at all levels will rank much higher than one that is taught only for one hour per week (UNESCO, p11). But how well this accomplished will be determined in particular by the adequacy of the teacher training, the funds allocated to it as well as the infrastructure provided for teaching and learning.

It is therefore important that language teachers possess the right qualities for promoting effective learning based on a given language syllabus. A teaching technique that incorporates communicative approaches to orthographies based on dialogue as advocated by Freira (1973) is a

useful strategy for teaching of indigenous languages as it enables learners to identify with and take into cognizance the cultural aspects of their specific speech community and to construct their usage of the language.

iv. Language planning

Also referred to as language engineering, this is the purposeful effort to influence the learning of languages with regards to both function and structure (orthography and grammar). Fishman (2001) defines language planning as "the authoritative allocation of resources to the attainment of language status and corpus goals, whether in connection with new functions that are aspired to or in connection with old functions that need to be discharged more adequately" (p.514). The roles alluded to here include the use of native languages in everyday life, commerce, education and the media. For endangered indigenous West African languages to survive the encroachment of other languages there is urgent need to raise awareness about language loss. Only then can West African indigenous speech communities overcome the linguistic entrenchment of European languages that is threatening the survival of indigenous mother tongues. However, any attempt at reversing the decline will only be successful when the social standing of a language is enhanced and this requires economic and political support from both local communities and national governments. Consequently, the use of language planning for language preservation needs to taking into consideration:

Identity Planning

Identity Planning involves one-on-one correspondence between culture and language. It emphasizes strong positive language attitudes, awareness, language loyalty, spread and maintenance as effective bulwark against the debilitating and destabilizing forces of languages shift and eventual language loss. Identity planning can therefore be used to restore endangered languages.

Status Planning

The potential for language preservation that is inherent in status planning is illustrated in the type of relationship that exists between the Mandarin and Cantonese Chinese which although are not mutually intelligible, constitute one language-Chinese. In a like manner, West Africans need to see the various native languages in the region as being equally relevant for usage. They can all rightfully claim the status of being original indigenous languages but prestige will only be accorded to them if they are utilized as the conventional languages of the speech communities. Once governments across the region embrace this line of thinking and adopt language policies that make unequivocal statements about the status of mother tongues, indigenous languages would not only be protected and revived but their preservation would also be ensured.

Corpus Planning

Corpus Planning is essentially a linguistic exercise, the thrust of which is the development of a language for literacy and numeracy so as to arrive at the optimum level of socio-linguistic readiness. This is done through interventions by specialists with linguistic expertise in the forms of graphization, standardization, codification and modernization (Ferguson, 2006; Hornberger, 2006).

Graphization

The process of empowering a language involves the design of a script or writing system that is acceptable to native speakers of a language (Ferguson, 2006). This requires selecting, promoting, and propagating a variety of a language that becomes the standard written form. In so doing, communication with a larger population as well as transmission through the generations becomes easier. Although secondary to the spoken word, the written form sets the standard by encoding the vocabulary, grammar, and phonological structures of a language. Although no orthography is perfect, it is what sustains a robust literacy tradition and therefore when available should be embraced by all who identify with the language. Some indigenous West African languages such as Vai and Mende already have written scripts even if they are largely ignored or not properly understood. Hence, designing written scripts is not an impossible task and would go a long way to help preserve endangered languages.

Standardization

Languages can be preserved from endangerment if features of the language are systematically organized and are accepted as the standard written form. This is the form of language that is often used as the yardstick by which an individual's language competence is measured. This can be usefully employed where several dialects of the same language exist as standardization will enable similar speech communities develop what is universally agreed as "correct" usage. This is achievable when a poly-phonemic written form that represents all dialects of a language is adopted. An advantage of such uniformity is the socioeconomic mobility it confers on users.

Language Modernization

This is the creation and popularization of new terms as a result of the use of a language extending to new domains through new cultural contacts, developments in science and technology as well as globalization. Modernization introduces and enables the creation of new lexicon from a variety of sources which enhances intelligibility and intra-translatability especially between West African languages and international languages such as English and French.

Acquisition Planning

Acquisition planning for language preservation is all about the language of instruction and language education which is organized around material development and capacity building in terms of training teachers. It could be used to reverse language shifts that end in language loss. However, teachers with the right professional competencies to use and teach a language need to

be employed in adequate numbers. Also, it is necessary that an enabling environment is created as well as the development of instructional materials based on a curriculum that takes into cognizance the cultural realities of learners as advocated by Freire (1973). Furthermore, making laws that stipulate that a particular indigenous language be used for formal educational purposes will help to enforce the use of it.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the existential threats faced by indigenous languages in West Africa, many speech communities have continued to struggle for survival. The loss of languages impoverishes the cultural diversity of the world, hence the urgent need to support and preserve them before they disappear with all the important information that they carry. The oral histories, traditions, as well as the capacity that some languages have to uniquely organize and encapsulate information, ideas, and skills that vital for human survival will be irretrievably lost if languages are allowed to die. Thus, to revitalize the ones in decline, appropriate strategies need to be adopted because inherent in languages is the power to create strong, vibrant and stable societies that could contribute meaningfully to human endeavours. Therefore, the governments of the various West African countries have a duty to protect the identity and self-esteem of their people by safeguarding threatened speech communities and encouraging them to retain their languages which are the rightful linguistic heritage of future generations.

Recommendations

The following are suggestions that could go a long way to strengthen and preserve West African languages for future generations:

1. The governments of West African states need to recognize the value of indigenous languages and be in the vanguard of efforts to revitalize and preserve the rich linguistic heritage of the region by overhauling national language policies in the region.
2. Intellectual elites of minority languages need to support and promote their mother tongues as doing so will lend greater cachet to endangered languages.
3. Supporting formal teaching and learning in indigenous languages will increase their spread and strengthen their use in society.
4. Projects that could give new impetus and adapt dying languages to the modern world could be initiated by leaders of speech communities.
5. Raising the economic status of speech communities would in turn elevate their language and encourage attempts at preservation.
6. The media could be employed to disseminate content using indigenous languages. This would reinforce the value invested on them.

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