

Death and Survival of African Languages in The 21st Century

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Abstract

Africa, like many other parts of the world, is faced with language endangerment. According to United Nations Educational and Scientific Organisation (UNESCO), "language is in danger when its speakers cease to use it, or use it in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains, and cease to pass it on from one generation to the next. That is, there are no new speakers, either adults or children". A number of languages in Africa are faced with a situation similar to the one described above. Hence, they can be said to be endangered. Indeed, some of them are already dead. Languages such as Bongomek, originally spoken in present-day Western Kenya are no longer spoken. Other languages such as El Molo, Okiek, Watwa, Hansa are spoken by very few people. They are, therefore, endangered. Yet, there is a third category of languages which previous have been endangered but whose fortunes have been reversed through certain actions some of which were not geared towards language revitalization. In this paper, I discuss language survival and language death in Africa within the broader theme of language endangerment. I base my discussion on information on African languages. I describe factors that have led to the death of the already extinct languages as well as those that are responsible for the endangerment of the languages facing an uncertain future. Finally, I discuss measures that have resulted in the reversal of the fortunes of some of the endangered languages.

Introduction

One of the most important issues in sociolinguistics today is the vexing language endangerment. It is an issue that affects all continents of the world and which is a big threat to human linguistic and cultural heritage.

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It is a matter of great concern not only for linguists but also for organizations such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) which has commissioned some work on the phenomenon with a view to better understanding it. Individual scholars have also spent substantial amount of time researching the area. As a consequence of the studies so far undertaken, the seriousness of the threat to world language heritage has become clear.

In this paper, I explore language endangerment as it relates to Africa. I begin the paper with a presentation of what constitutes endangerment as the issue is understood so far. In so doing, I refer to some of the studies and reports that have come out in the last ten or so years. The studies, by some of the biggest names in sociolinguistics, are insightful and by throwing some light on them I build a foundation upon which the rest of the paper rests.

The next section of the paper deals with the complexity of language situation in Africa. I describe multilingualism on the continent. There is a close connection between bilingualism or multilingualism and language endangerment. Except in the rare occasion when a community might be wiped out by a disease or natural calamity such as a major volcanic explosion, language death entails replacement of one language by another. Such replacement is preceded by bilingualism or multilingualism.

People do not lose the only language available to them for communication. People stop using a language because there is an alternative for their communication needs.

After the two background sections, I discuss language death in Africa looking at the causes of the phenomenon and giving actual examples of seriously endangered languages on the continent. In some instances, I describe language specific circumstances that have led to the languages being endangered. Of course, the Africa linguistic terrain is not all gloom. Consequently, to give a balanced picture of the language situation on the continent, I also argue that there are many languages on the continent that, currently, have a fairly high level of vitality and, therefore, cannot be said to be endangered.

I conclude the paper by discussing possible interventions that can reverse or delay death of the endangered languages. I also present actual cases whereby, through interventions, languages that were on the brink of death are bouncing back to higher levels of vitality.

1. Language Endangerment

Africa, like many other parts of the world, is faced with language endangerment. According to United Nations Educational and Scientific Organisation's Ad Hoc expert group on Endangered Languages (Brezinger et al, 2003:2), "language is in danger when its speakers cease to use it, or use it in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains, and cease to pass it on from one generation to the next. That is, there are no new speakers, either adults or children".

A number of languages in Africa are faced with a situation similar to the one described above. Hence, they can be said to be endangered. Indeed, some of them are already extinct. On some accounts, languages such as Bongomek, originally spoken in present-day Western Kenya, have no speakers. They have only left behind traces in place names such as "Bungoma" which is a name of a county in Western Kenya. Other languages such as El Molo, Okiek, Watwa, Hansa and Rendille are not only spoken by few people but also have low intergeneration transmission. They are, therefore, endangered.

In this article, I address the issue of language endangerment in Africa. I begin the paper by looking at the complex multilingualism on the continent. Except in the rare occasions where a natural catastrophe wipes out a community and, with it, its language - a situation which has not obtained in Africa - language endangerment is intrinsically connected with bilingualism or multilingualism. I look at different approaches and parameters used to gauge degrees of language endangerment including the criteria suggested by the UNESCO Ad hoc Committee on Endangered Languages as well as the evaluation tool used by *Ethnologue*. I then go through factors, most of them already in the literature, that lead to language endangerment whose final stage is language death.

After that foundation, I present the two scenarios of languages in Africa. The first scenario of endangered languages is that of languages with a very low level of vitality and which are, therefore, in danger of death. I use actual examples from Kenya's language repertoire to concretize my argumentation. The second scenario is that of languages that have a reasonably high vitality and which are not with any immediate of language death. I end the paper with a discussion on the need for interventions against language death, measures that have already been taken along those lines and other possibilities that exist.

2. Complexity of the Linguistic Situation in Africa

The African continent is characterized by extensive language diversity. According to the 5th Edition of *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* (Gordon, 2005), there are 6,912 languages spoken in the world today. 2,092 of these languages are spoken in Africa by about 0.7 billion people. The only continent with a bigger share of human linguistic heritage than Africa is Asia which boasts of 2269 languages spoken by about 3.5 billion people.

Africa's indigenous languages have been classified according to different classification criteria. One of the most widely accepted classifications is the one proposed by Greenberg (1963). According to the classification, African indigenous languages fall into four language families, namely, Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, Afro-asiatic and Khoisan. Niger-Congo is estimated to have 1,436 languages (Grimes, 2000).

This makes it the family with the largest number of languages not only in Africa but in the entire world ahead of Austronesian with 1236 languages. It covers most of sub-Saharan Africa and is spoken by more than 360 million Africans. The Afro-Asiatic family comprises 371 languages and its speakers number approximately 175 million. Its family members are found in most of the northern part of the continent as well as in the Horn of Africa. The Nilo-Saharan family has about 196 languages and it is spoken by 11 million people in parts of Central and Eastern Africa. The Khoisan family has about 35 languages. The languages in this family are very small compared to the languages of the other three families. The entire family has approximately 100,000 speakers. Khoisan languages are mainly found in Namibia and Botswana. Since some languages in the group are larger than others, it is reasonable to assume that some of the Khoisan languages have only hundreds of speakers.

Africa speaks not only its indigenous tongues. Several European languages are also spoken on the continent. English, French, Portuguese, Spanish and Italian are used in, respectively, the former British, French, Portuguese, Spanish and Italian colonies. Unlike the majority of the indigenous African languages, the European languages serve as the media of education and are used in other official domains including communication in government offices, law courts and (in most countries) national assemblies. Being the media of education makes them the languages of modern professions and white color jobs. They are, therefore, associated with modernity, opportunity and upward social mobility.

These characteristics give them immense prestige compared to indigenous African languages. As we will be seen later in this paper, this immense prestige of European languages vis-à-vis indigenous African languages has a strong bearing on language vitality, language endangerment and language death in Africa.

Besides African and European languages, a number of Asian languages are also spoken in Africa. There is a substantial number of immigrants from the Indian sub-continent in countries such as South Africa, Kenya and Tanzania. Whereas these immigrants speak English in South Africa and English and Kiswahili in Kenya and Tanzania, they also speak Asian languages amongst themselves. In Kenya, for instance, there are speakers of Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, Gujarat and Goan. Moreover, along the East African coast and the adjacent islands, one finds languages from the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East, notably Arabic and Persian.

In some West African countries, there is sizeable number of Lebanese businessmen who speak their languages amongst themselves. Among the latest foreign languages to make entry into Africa are Chinese and Korean. Today, Chinese is taught in some African universities including the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University in Kenya. With effect from 2013, the University of Nairobi also started offering a course in Korean language and culture.

There is great diversity regarding the number of languages spoken in each African country. Nigeria has a staggering 455 languages, (Gordon, 2005). Two other countries, namely, Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo, have more than two hundred languages each. The former has 247 while the later has 206 languages. Sudan and Tanzania with 120 and 112 languages respectively are the other African countries with more than 100 languages.

At the lower end of the scale, Lesotho and the Cape Verde Islands have two languages each and Rwanda, Burundi and Djibouti have three languages each. Swaziland, Mauritania, the Comoro Islands and Sao Tome e Principe have four languages per country. The rest of the African countries have between 10 and 100 languages each.

Africa's linguistic complexity is not merely about the number of indigenous languages and the presence of European and Asian languages. It is also about the relationship among the various African languages as well as the relationship between the African languages on the one hand and the European languages of the former colonial powers on the other hand.

There is a hierarchy of prestige among the languages of the continent. At the bottom of the prestige hierarchy are indigenous languages which are used solely for intra-ethnic communication. On the next level up, there are indigenous languages that have acquired a supra-ethnic communication function. Such languages are used for inter-ethnic communication and function as lingua francas within specific countries. Such languages include Luganda in Uganda, Lingala in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sango in the Central Africa Republic and Somali in Somalia. Kiswahili, as a regional lingua franca in East and Central Africa, commands a much higher prestige compared to the intra-ethnic languages of East Africa such as Kikuyu, Nyamwezi or Acholi. Arguably, Hausa commands a similar level of prestige in West Africa. Finally, at the top of the prestige hierarchy are the European languages that function in the official and professional domains in the various African countries.

Africans are some of the most multi-lingual people in the world. In countries such as Kenya, the ability to speak three languages is the norm rather than the exception. Indeed, even being fluent in four languages is nothing to write home about. If a resident of Nairobi, for instance, speaks four languages, he or she will not be considered especially gifted in speaking languages; certainly not by Kenyan standards. Their ability to speak four languages will be seen as ordinary.

If I have taken rather long on the issue of bilingualism, it is because it is so central to the phenomenon of language shift which in turn is the beginning point in language death. We can say multilingualism in Africa is at once a great blessing and a curse. It is a blessing because it enables individuals, communities and even nations to communicate. It is, however, a curse in that it gives rise to language shift and, in some cases, language death. It is practically impossible for monolinguals to lose the only language they have even if there are only two speakers. The only way such speakers can lose the only language they speak is through death of the speakers.

3. Language Death

Crystal (2000:11) observes that:

A language is said to be dead when no one speaks it any more. It may continue to have existence in a recorded form, of course – traditionally in writing, more recently as part of a sound or video archive (and it does in a sense 'live on in this way') – but unless it has fluent speakers one would not talk of it as a 'living language'. And speakers cannot demonstrate their fluency if they have no one to talk to, the language is effectively dead when there is only one speaker left...

The prospects of language death or survival can, to a large extent, be predicated on its vitality. A language with a high level of vitality is either not endangered or has a negligible threat from endangerment. In other words, such a language has a very good chance of survival. Conversely, a language that has a low level of vitality is highly threatened by endangerment and, therefore, consequently constitutes a good candidate for language death.

Describing language endangerment, *Ethnologue: Languages of the World, Fifteenth Edition*, (Gordon, 2005), states that “for a variety of reasons, speakers of some languages are motivated to stop using their language and to use another.

Parents may begin to use only that second language with their children. Eventually, there may be no speakers who use the language as their first or primary language and frequently the language ceases to be used altogether and the language becomes extinct - existing, perhaps, only on recordings or written records and transcriptions.”

Ethnologue uses two dimensions to evaluate and characterize language endangerment. The two are, first, the number of speakers of the language and, second, the number and nature of the domains in which the language is used. In other words, a language may be endangered because there are fewer and fewer people who speak it or because it is being used in fewer and fewer domains or because both conditions converge on it.

Ethnologue posts 42 African languages on its list of endangered languages. According to the list, Nigeria leads other African countries with 23 endangered languages. It is followed by Cameroon and Sudan tying at 12 endangered languages. Chad comes next with 8 endangered languages.

Ethnologue's list of Africa's endangered languages is too conservative to reflect the actual situation on the ground. For instance, I know some Kenyan languages on the verge of death that are not on the list. Other African countries too have endangered languages that are not on the *Ethnologue's* list.

According to the *UNESCO* (Wurm, 2001) *Atlas of the World's Language in Danger of Disappearing*, 97 African languages are considered to be in danger. This figure, which is more than double the number given by *Ethnologue*, is closer to reflecting the actual situation on the ground. Still, the number of endangered languages on continent could be higher.

UNESCO's document titled "Language and Vitality" by the Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages states that "a language is endangered when it is on the path to extinction". It adds that "language is in danger when its speakers cease to use it, use it in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains, and cease to pass it on from one generation to the next. That is, there are no new speakers, either adults or children".

Unlike *Ethnologue* which evaluates and categorizes language endangerment using only two parameters, UNESCO uses a much more comprehensive set of parameters to evaluate language vitality. The organisation's Intangible Cultural Heritage Unit's Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages has developed nine factors to assess the endangerment status of a language. The factors are:

1. Intergenerational language transmission
2. Absolute number of speakers
3. Proportion of speakers within the total community
4. Shifts in domains of language use
5. Response to new domains and media
6. Materials for language education and literacy
7. Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies
8. Community members' attitudes towards their own language, and
9. Type and quality of documentation

Experts have continued to develop more comprehensible methodologies for evaluating language vitality. Fishman came up with the Graded Intergeneration Disruption Scale (GIDS) which improved on the method devised by the UNESCO Group. Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) has improved on GIDS to come up with Expanded Graded Intergeneration Disruption Scale.

At more concrete level regarding language death, Mufwene (2006) states that:

Languages die when their speakers give them up. ----speakers do not deliberately refuse to use their languages but are compelled to use other languages that offer practical or material advantages: being integrated in a mainstream society, finding a good job, and getting opportunities for socioeconomic ascension. Speakers could, of course, also keep their ancestral languages, but often wind up speaking only the more advantageous language especially if they move out of their native communities. Then their knowledge of their ancestral languages suffers a form of atrophy. When more and more speakers adopt this behavior and only the older generations speak them for traditional communicative functions, linguists say such languages fall into attrition. As the older speakers die, so do the languages.

We have looked at the broader picture of evaluating language vitality and the related issues of language death and language survival. Let us now focus on African languages.

Generally speaking African languages do not have high vitality partly because they have low status and are restricted in roles. Ayo Bamgbose (2011) has identified eight factors to account for the low status and restricted roles among African languages. They are:

1. Colonial legacy;
2. Negative perception of multilingualism;
3. Language development status;
4. National integration;
5. Modernization and nation development;
6. Globalisation;
7. Negative language attitudes; and
8. Defective language policy

Currently, most indigenous African languages do not have the capacity to function in some new domains. In practically all sub-Saharan African countries, European languages of the former colonial powers, and not the African languages, are used as the media of education.

As a consequence, it is not African languages but English, French, Portuguese and Spanish that are used by professionals in fields such as architecture, engineering, surveying, medicine, economics, accounting, and legal practice. Important government documents are in the European languages and so are books and academic journals and periodicals. Furthermore, in some of the countries, one hardly finds a reputable newspaper in an African language.

The use of European languages in the formal domains in Africa denies African languages the opportunity to be modernized for today's technological world. This makes African languages less and less relevant for a rapidly growing number of African professionals in particular and other people with a substantial level of western education in general.

Urbanization is another aspect of the African reality that is undermining the continent's languages. In the urban centers, European languages as well as the more dominant African languages deprive the smaller languages both their speakers and some communicative domains or both. People from different communities in Ghana resident in Accra might end up speaking Akan more frequently than the languages of their rural communities.

This is particularly so if they come from a minority Ghanaian ethnic group. Even when their attitudes towards their mother tongue are positive, the chance of meeting other speakers of their language in Accra will be much lower compared to that of meeting speakers of Akan. In other words, Akan will be more functional in their daily lives than their mother tongues. Similar observations can be made on Luganda in Kampala, Lingala in the cities of the Democratic Republic of Congo or Sango in Bangui.

In East Africa, a number of languages are faced with a situation similar to the one described above. Hence, they can be said to be either extinct or endangered. Let me illustrate low language vitality using a number of East African cases starting with Bongom. Bongom is one of the extinct Kenyan languages. The speakers of the Bongom language were Nilotes who lived next to and intermingled with the Bukusu who speak Lubukusu, a member of the Luhya Bantu language continuum. The two communities have lived together for many generations. Of the two communities, the Bukusu are more in numbers, stronger economically and better educated.

Over the years, more and more Bongom speakers became bilingual adopting Lubukusu (as well as English for the educated ones) besides Bongom. As early as the 1950s, it became apparent that all was not well with Bongom. An article appearing in the Daily Nation of February 2, 2006, quotes a letter written in 1953 by one Ojambo arap Kishero and addressed to the then Bungoma District Officer. Ojambo arap Kishero was requesting for a license to hold a meeting to help trace the Bongom people's history because, he said, they were losing their language.

In a reply to Ojambo arap Kishero's letter, the Nyanza District Education officer stated that it was the policy of the Government to develop vernacular languages. He added, however, that it was not possible to print books in the vernacular languages unless such ventures were economically viable. He then stated that it was not economically viable to print books in Bongom. Instead of facilitating development of an orthography for the language, the colonial government required Bongom speaking children to learn and do examinations in Lubukusu. After Kenya attained independence in 1963, the new Government was also unsupportive of the small indigenous languages in the country. Today Bongom is practically dead.

Colonial governments in other African countries had similar attitude towards small indigenous languages.

Moreover, post-independence governments in other African countries have treated small indigenous languages in very much the same way as post-independence Kenya Government has treated Bongom. Consequently, many of the languages are either already dead or severely endangered. In the absence of positive intervention, these languages are destined for extinction this century.

There are several African languages listed as being endangered. In East Africa, Okombo (1993) mentions El-Molo, Okiek and Suba as being among endangered languages. *Ethnologue*, (Sixteen Edition, 2013), provides the following as East Africa's endangered languages: El-Molo, Waata, Yaaku, Dahalo, Okiek, Ilchamus, Omotik, Burji and Rendile. In Uganda, endangered languages include Nyang'i, Singa and Soo. Some of the endangered languages in Tanzania are Aasax, Dhaiso, Hadza, Kami, Kw'adza, Ngasa, Nindi, segeju and Zaramo. The only members of the East African community without serious issues of language endangerment are Rwanda and Burundi where Kinyarwanda and Kirundi, respectively, are the only languages spoken.

The issue of language endangerment in Africa is so obvious that it does not take a linguist to notice the phenomenon. In Kenya, for instance, journalists have written newspaper articles highlighting the issue. In a piece titled "Forgotten Tongues of the Dying People", Mwajefa (2012) observes that:

Much is said about the Digos and the Durumas of Kwale as the two largest tribes of the Mijikenda... but little is said about two dying tribes and their almost forgotten languages. For the Degere and the Vuna are becoming extinct...The Duruma, just like their Digo counterparts, view the Vuna and the Degere as outcasts who bring poverty and misfortune to those who marry from their communities...The stigma derived from their former live-hoods as hunter-gatherers has forced Vuna to abandon their language and cultural identities.

In yet another newspaper article titled "The El Molo: On the Edge of Life", Mangat (2012) observes that:

The Maa-speaking hunter-gatherers were at one time said to be the smallest Tribe in Africa but over the last 50 years, they have intermarried with the Samburu, Turkana and Rendille and their numbers increased.

However the last old people to speak the El Molo language passed away in the 1970s and the language is no longer spoken by the people, who now speak Samburu and can only mime the songs of their ancestors.

Incidentally, El-Molo is not the only language threatened by Samburu. The language is also in the process of gobbling up Rendille, a neighbouring Cushitic language. In a PhD study titled From Rendille to Samburu: A Language Shift Involving Two Unintelligible Languages of Northern Kenya, Ngure (2012) observes that in all six settlements of the Rendille, the Rendille language is on the decline. The author notes that:

In almost all six settlements, we found out that the incidence of the use of Rendille is in decline across the generation continuum; the incidence of choice of Rendille by the respondents when speaking to their parents is lesser when they (respondents) are speaking to their grandparents and least when they are speaking to their siblings, (Ngure, 2012:236).

It is plausible to assume that Africa will witness expansion of education, growth in urbanization, improvement in transportation, increase in the number of people in professions and those in other white color jobs, more inter-ethnic marriages, and the weakening of ties between urban residents and the rural dwellers. All these factors will accelerate language endangerment and language death. The first to go will be the small indigenous languages.

4. Language Survival

Unless the unexpected takes place, there is nothing to suggest that the bigger, more economically vibrant and culturally proud ethno-linguistic communities will lose their languages in the near future. Whereas it is not easy to speculate on how long it will take these languages to be weakened by the undermining influences discussed above, it is not too far-fetched to say that the languages will be around by the turn of the century. This is the likely scenario especially for those languages spoken by ethno-linguistic groups with a strong group identity, community esteem and cultural pride. Indeed, with such attributes, even a not-so-large language can survive into the next century. Although compared to some other African languages Sesotho and Seswati are relatively small in terms of the number of speakers, they are in no danger of extinction; at least not in the near future.

Such languages are more than speech systems. They are also cultural and political emblems for their respective countries. It is therefore likely that the two languages and others like them will remain alive not only for ordinary communication but also as symbols of political independence and cultural identity.

Some of Africa's indigenous languages have taken up a number of modern communicative functions. For instance, they are used in print and electronic media, in theatre and film, in creative writing, in popular music, and in commerce. These roles serve to enhance the vitality and prestige of the languages thereby increasing their chances of survival. Included in this group of languages are Kiswahili, Kikuyu and Dholuo in Kenya; Amharic and Tigrinya in Ethiopia; Somali in Somalia; Kinyarwanda and Kirundi in Rwanda and Burundi respectively; Lingala in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; Shona and Ndebele in Zimbabwe; Khosa and Zulu in South Africa; Wolof in Senegal; Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo in Nigeria; and Ga and Akan in Ghana. By the look of things, these languages will sail into the 22nd century.

Some indigenous languages may do better than just survive; they might grow into technologically-developed speech systems. A good example of an indigenous language with such a potential is Kiswahili. Different aspects of Kiswahili linguistics such as phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, discourse analysis and pragmatics are wholly taught in Kiswahili in Kenyan and Tanzanian universities. Arguably, there are more literary works in Kiswahili than in English being published in the two countries. In the mass media, there are news bulletin in Kiswahili in both radio and television. There is also a robust print media in the language especially in Tanzania. Besides the general dictionaries, the language has also specialized dictionaries in areas such as linguistics, physics, chemistry and biology.

5. Interventions for the Endangered Languages

Loss of language, any language, is a loss not only to the community speaking the language but also to the entire humankind. We may compare languages with libraries and archives. Like libraries and archives, languages contain important information and knowledge (Wa Mberia, 2004). Furthermore, they also carry a community's memory and world view. Each language is a unique expression of a community's history, philosophy, fears and aspirations. Losing a language is to irrecoverably lose vital human heritage.

Moreover, studying languages is a window through which we see how the human mind works. By losing a language, we might lose clues on how to solve current or future human problems. In a nutshell, we should, wherever and whenever possible, avoid losing any language through language death. In other words, we should always strive to save any language in danger of death.

According to Brezinger et al (2003):

Language diversity is essential to the human diversity. Each and every language embodies the unique cultural wisdom of a people. The loss of any language is thus a loss for all humanity

Smeets (2006) adds:

Languages do not merely convey messages; they also express emotions, intentions and values, confirm social relations and transmit cultural and social expressions and practices. In spoken or written form, or through gesture, languages are vehicles of memories, traditions, knowledge and skills.

From the above comments and more similar observations that have been expressed by linguists, it is evident that it is of paramount importance for us to intervene to save languages under the threat of extinction as well as to raise the vitality of others with low status. UNESCO is one of the organizations in the forefront of giving assistance in saving endangered languages. In 2001, it published an atlas of the world's languages in danger of disappearing. In 2003 it produced two documents giving policy guidelines on how to handle language vitality and language death.

A number of other organizations are involved in activities which are not necessarily explicitly geared towards reversing the fortunes of languages but which, nevertheless, assist in boosting language vitality. One such group is Bible Translation and Literacy (BTL) which operates in Kenya. The group develops orthographies and facilitates Bible translation and development of basic reading material in languages which until now have had no scripture. The organization works with minority and, quite often, marginalized groups. Through the activities of the Organisation, the languages of such communities are allowed new communicative domains thereby boosting their vitality.

In the last few years, BTL has developed orthographies, translated scriptures, and facilitated development of reading material in languages such as Kitharaka, Suba, Chidigo, Daatchnach, Orma and Kiduruma. Speakers of these languages can now read in their languages. Being in print and being read has positive impact on the languages. It gives language respectability among its speakers thereby raising its vitality.

The Asmara Conference on African Languages and Literatures and the declaration made at the conference was a welcome step in the self-sensitization of African scholars on the importance of African languages and literatures. Linking the languages to literatures in African languages is important because one way of writing literature is one way of raising their vitality. Simons and Lewis (2013) have pointed out that the basic premise of GIDS is that language shift which is central in language death is caused by a language losing functions in society and that to reverse language shift the community must bring back those functions. They add that, to guard against further shift, the community can add new functions to the language to strengthen its position. Writing literature in African languages and especially in those languages that do not as yet have such literature raises their prestige in society thereby enhancing the language's vitality.

In a paper titled "Indigenous Languages, Performing Arts and HIV/AIDS Pandemic" I argued that indigenous African languages are best place to campaign against such mega societal problems such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The approach entails scripting plays, skits, short stories and poems in indigenous languages and performing them for audiences that speak the individual indigenous languages. Because of the emotive appeal that those languages have in their speakers as opposed to English, French, Portuguese or Spanish, there is a higher chance of the members of the audience being persuaded to change their lifestyle. I would like to add that, in so doing, we kill two birds with the same stone. We address a pressing societal problem but, at the same time, enhance our languages' vitality by giving them roles in new domains.

Suba, which has been seen as endangered (Rottland and Okombo, 1992; Okombo, 1993; Gordon, 2005) is bouncing back thanks to a combination of factors. Among these is the setting of Suba District during the presidency of Daniel Moi.

Although, I suspect, the decision was meant to serve a populist goal, it ended up raising the consciousness among the Suba people. Such raising of a people's consciousness also raise their self-esteem and ultimately leads to more respect for their culture including language.

Another phenomenon that is revitalizing the Suba language is a radio station broadcasting in the language. According to Fox (2014), the radio station, known as Ekialo Kiona Suba YouthRadio Station 99 FM (EK-FM), is based in a small community centre. The radio, which broadcasts from 1.pm – 6.00 pm, airs programmes on health, sustainable agriculture, fishing, youth empowerment and importantly Suba language and culture. Included in the language and culture are daily Olusuba lessons, Suba music and discussion with Suba elders. Needless to say, the radio station is a major catalyst in revitalizing the Suba language.

Such marvelous efforts in revitalizing a language can be replicated with very positive results in other Africa communities which do not currently have radio programmes in the local languages. Closely related to such small scale mass media are publishing of newspapers and magazines in the local languages. Not only would such publications sustain and enhance literacy at the grassroots with positive impact critical areas such as human health and agriculture, but would also give the languages new and modern domains consequently raising their vitality.

Including endangered languages as media for instruction or, at the very least, as a school subject can enhance a language on the way to extinction. When the Arabs swept across the Middle East and Northern Africa, they dominated North Africa's people such as the Amazigh which the Arabs labeled Berbers, that is, barbarians, (Dixon, 2005). Although 60% of Moroccans are Amazigh, Arabic is the official language with French also widely used. Dixon observes that to bring back the Amazigh writing system entails reviving an ancient script called Tifinagh which originated at the same time as the Egyptian hieroglyphics. The positive news is that the Ministry of Education in the country has integrated the Amazigh language into the education system. Consequently, the Amazigh are, once again, learning to write and read in their own language. The decision will help the language to bounce back into some healthy state.

Not all languages on the verge of death can be saved. For instance, there are numerous Khoisan languages that look destined to death.

Chabane (2010) cites Batibo (Batibo 1997) as pointing out that most of the Khoisan communities are small and prone to language shift and, ultimately, death. Chabane advocates for the use of dictionaries in such cases for the documentation and codification of the languages.

6. Conclusion

Some of the issues concerning language endangerment (including language death) are so illusive that getting concrete answers to research questions on the same is not easy. For instance, some languages are considered extinct by some commentators and alive by others. That's the case, for instance, with Bongomek. We cannot even point out with certainty the number of endangered languages in a country or a region owing to the multiplicity and overlapping nature of names the same or related languages and dialects. Precisely because of the multiplicity and overlapping of names, extra linguistic considerations in delineating languages and divergent views of informants who supposedly speak the same language on who they are and the language they speak as mother tongue, it is sometimes difficult in establishing the actual number and the actual names of languages in a country. Consequently, claims such as X% languages in country Y are endangered does not necessarily have mathematical validity.

Following from the observation in the above paragraph, in this paper I do not aim at water-tight statements of fact but rather observations that contribute to the discussion on death and survival of languages in African in the 21st century. More investigation, more data, further debate are necessary before we are able to make more solid conclusions on languages death and survival in Africa; that is, if such conclusions are indeed possible.

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