

## ICT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF NIGERIA LANGUAGES

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### **1. Introduction**

ICT is an acronym for information and communications technology. It is derived from a combination of information technology (IT) and the integration of telecommunications which enable users to access, store, manipulate and transmit information to people all over the globe. For our purposes in this work, we will avoid the scientific definitions and technicalities of ICT but focus on those areas that concern its use in the development of language. ICT is generally concerned with the production, collation, transmission, storage, utilization, retrieval and manipulation of digital data. Its tools include the various communication devices and applications such as the radio, television, cellular phone, internet, wireless networks, computer hardware and software, satellite systems as well as the various services and applications associated with them. The internet is often described as a multimedia information highway. The major function of ICT include: gathering, storing, processing, analyzing, transmitting and retracing digital data/information and making them available to people both near and far. ICT has transformed the way information is received and transmitted by modern man. It is fast and easily accessible and it is the major player in the globalization process that seeks to reduce the world to a global village by enabling people from all over the world communicate with one another and stay in touch. It is widely used in virtually every sphere of human modern endeavor, especially in Education, healthcare, economy and the mass media. In fact, it has featured in academic research since the 1980s but because very popular in the late 1990s and today it is almost indispensable.

The successful utilization of ICT is dependent on the availability of the following, among others: constant electricity, large number of communication devices such as telephone, computers, audio, video and other electronic media devices, and access to the internet. Above all is the availability of a language that is ICT sensitive. The design of any information, its dissemination and reception by the end user can only be successfully done if the language used is recognized by ICT tools. Wilson (2010) citing McQuail (2005) observes that language has been a barrier to communication in the pursuit of globalization pointing out how oftentimes knowledge and information exchange and sharing have been prevented through the existence and use of different languages across the globe. Thus, while language is a veritable tool for the dissemination of information and knowledge of same and other races, it could also be a barrier if not well developed. ICT is therefore a vital organ for the development and promotion of any language.

Indigenous Nigeria language number well over 400. These are bifurcated into two groups: the major/national languages consisting of three languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, and the non-major/minority/small languages group comprising all the other indigenous languages. The languages in the first group, i.e. the major languages have more speakers, more written materials (the first indigenous language newspaper *Iwe Irohin fun awon ara Egba ati Yoruba* was published in 1859 in Abeokuta), are used more for education and other purposes and are perceived to have more prestige than the languages in the second group. A very large number of the non-major

languages are spoken by relatively few people, exist mainly and in some cases only in the spoken form. They feature infrequently in formal education because very little or no written materials exist in them so that their utility value hardly goes beyond basic communication needs.

## **2. The State of Nigeria Language in ICT**

Osborn (2006:88) has observed that most African languages are poorly represented in ICT. According to him, "...efforts to quantify web content by language worldwide do not show even the most widely spoken African languages... among the most represented, whereas some minority European languages with relatively few speakers are ranked". The Nigerian situation is extremely complex, being highly multilingual and multicultural. Let us briefly examine how ICT has been utilized in some areas using Nigeria languages.

- a. Research:** ICT has helped in the documentation of and research into very many Nigerian languages including some very small and even dying languages. Departments of Linguistics in Universities and research institutions all over the nation and internationally carry out research into these languages, document their findings and publish them in journals, books and on the internet. Although simple ICT devices such as the tape recorder and the camera have always featured in the collection of data for the study of languages, this used to be a very tedious exercise that involved endless travels to meet informants either to collect fresh data or to correct loose ends. In addition, results were often poor or fragmented because they were analyzed manually and mainly through perception. Nowadays with the use of modern ICT devices such as the digital cameras, audio tape recorders, video cameras, cellular phones, etc. and processing devices such as the computer together with its software and hardware, one single research documentation can be processed and used to study the structure of a people's language, their literature, culture, vocabulary, worldview, lifestyle, economy, technology, etc. In order to cross-check data, a simple telephone conversation will prevent endless travels. Results from such research are faster and more reliable. This has made it possible to preserve some seriously endangered languages.
- b. Education:** ICT tools do not feature well in education generally in Nigeria, let alone using Nigeria languages. Resources such as e-learning, e-library, etc. are alien to most educational institutions in the country. There is a serious dearth of software localized even for the major languages. Although a number of websites are available on the internet where information on different Nigeria languages, major and non-major, can be found (thanks to sites like Google, Ethnologue and Wikipedia), they are almost entirely in English. Only very few sites exist for teaching/learning of some of the languages, a few online dictionaries and online translations of the Holy Bible but hardly any with majority content in the language. Even where they exist, they are not frequently utilized. As a result, there is a very heavy reliance on English for participation in ICT in Nigeria. A major factor responsible for this situation is because ICT devices have been introduced to those most likely to use them (the educated class) in English. Besides, much of the content on the worldwide web is projected for an international audience which logically requires an international language like English to meet that target. The consequence of this is that those who are not skilled in English are excluded from participating in the new knowledge industry and the societies they represent are put at a disadvantage. It is pertinent to note however that the major languages feature better in education than the non-major ones, being taught in educational institutions not only in Nigeria but across the globe.

Besides, the Nigeria Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) has developed computer fonts for them thereby making it easier for varied materials to exist in them in both the print and electronic media. In addition, a number of Linguistics departments across the country are helping to develop non-major languages within their catchment areas encouraging teaching/learning in them.

- c. **Mass Media:** The potentials of Nigerian languages in the mass media industry are quite encouraging. There are radio and television stations in states across the country where the languages within their catchment areas feature, albeit infrequently but in areas where the major languages are spoken, there are stations that use them as major languages of broadcast. There are also dedicated channels on satellite stations like DSTV in which movies in these languages are relayed for the world to see thereby selling not only the languages but also their cultures, technologies and worldview. International stations like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Voice of America (VOA) have Hausa channels for news and features in the language that are heard all over the world. In recent times, films in Edo, Ibibio, and a few other non-major Nigerian languages have been seen aired on international television stations like DSTV and AIT. There are tens of thousands of audio and CDs and DVDs on aspects of Nigerian cultures that are transported and sold across the globe. Although most of these are in English, there are also quite a number in local languages with English subtitles to make the transmission of information easier. These potentials have greatly redefined literacy in these languages, enhanced their survival and provided jobs for their speakers.

By far most valuable ICT device for the dissemination of information in Nigerian languages is the cell phone. Whereas the use of the computer and the internet is subject to connectivity which is concentrated mainly in urban areas, various telephone providers have expanded their connectivity making it easier to reach people even in very remote villages using the cell phone. With a generator to charge the phone battery and a little amount of airtime, one can get connected and be able to communicate with people thousands of miles away. A friend told me how in her village somewhere in the Southeast, one needed to climb a tree to use the phone. Be that as it may, the beauty of it is that one can get connected to people far away without leaving the village. With the cell phone, one can talk, twitter or send text messages, even use e-mail facilities and connect the social media like facebook, twitter or youtube (depending on how powerful the phone is) in any Nigerian language provided the recipient is also familiar with the language used. To buttress the importance of language in communication, many telephone service providers, e.g. MTN, Glo, etc. use the local languages to advertise their goods and services in order to reach a larger audience and to underscore to fact that any language can be used for the processing and disseminating information.

### **3. Challenges:**

From the foregoing, Nigerian languages are not so well represented in ICT and so are not contributing maximally to the new technological age. Some of the factors that can easily be identified as contributing to this poor showing include but not limited to the following:

- a. **Illiteracy:** It is common knowledge that illiteracy is a major problem in Nigeria. Only recently, Vanguard newspaper of Thursday May 15, 2014, reported that 60 million Nigerian youths are uneducated and that between 10 and 11 million Nigerian children of school age are out of school. Although this figure points to education in the English medium educational system in

the country, reports and surveys that have been carried out by a number of Nigerian linguists show that an even higher number of Nigerian youths can hardly speak their mother tongue languages not to talk of being literate in them. It is generally assumed that so long as a language is spoken and used to provide information and knowledge within a speech community, it has the potential for being used with the new technologies. Unfortunately, most Nigerian languages, particularly the non-major ones have no standard orthographies and consequently, only very few written materials exist in them. As a follow-up to that, there is a low level of literacy in them leading to a low level of readership. Since language is said to be a reflection of society, it is not surprising that speakers of these languages have a poor image of their languages and cultures and see them as not having the potentials of providing sustainable economic opportunities for them. There is therefore an unquenchable thirst for European languages.

Since Nigerian languages are important vehicles for the generation and expression of the vast array of native knowledge available in each of the diverse ethno-linguistic communities, education in these languages is pertinent to full participation and contribution of more Nigerians to the knowledge industry. At present, there is still very little educational activity in Nigerian languages. Mother tongue instruction from the pre-primary to the first three years of primary school as well as for adult literacy as provided for in the National Policy on Education (NPE) exists mainly on paper. Reports from most parts of the country show that implementation of this segment of the policy is a continuous struggle.

- b. **Lack of electricity:** The issue of lack of electricity in most parts of the country is a fact that everyone can attest to. In 1999 when the civilian administration led by President Olusegun Obasanjo came on board, he had promised that within one and a half years of his administration, every part of Nigeria would experience improved power supply. Fifteen years on and in spite of the huge financial and human resources already committed to it, Nigerian power supply has been hovering between two and four thousand megawatts in a nation where the minimum requirement is more than fifteen thousand megawatts. ICT tools, particularly computers and the internet depend heavily on the availability of regular power supply. Telephone access is a rip off in terms of both cost and accessibility when compared to what obtains elsewhere because telephone providers, who are mainly foreigners, complain that they have to run their systems on generators which is quite an expensive venture. The little power available is concentrated in the big cities like Lagos, Abuja and Port Harcourt where English, not a Nigerian language, is the dominant language among those who can have access to connectivity. A modern society is defined according to how well it employs ICT tools to make its goods and services available to people sometimes tens of thousands of miles away, thereby participating in the globalization efforts. With the paucity of power supply in the country, not only is a very significant number of Nigerians excluded from the modern knowledge industry, its unique goods and services cannot be accessed globally. Government needs to go beyond just paying lip service to power supply and ensure that the new measures put in place, including privatization, work well for the benefit of the nation. As has happened in India and Malaysia, it would create opportunities for the development of local communication networks, telephones and computers which would be more receptive to the use of the local languages.
- c. **Attitudinal Change:** So much has been written on the poor attitude of Nigerians, particularly the youth, to the use of their indigenous languages. Study after study from different parts of the

nation attest to the fact that while the hunger for the study of English and other foreign languages, including Chinese, is growing, that for Nigerian languages, both major and non-major is dwindling. Many young Nigerians feel that their languages cannot guarantee them upward social and economic mobility. Until opportunities are created in prestigious work places like the oil industry, banking and other financial institutions, high class technological outfits, etc. indigenous languages will continue to suffer neglect. It is only in Africa that the norm whereby a stranger mandatorily learns the language of the host in order to participate in the society never holds sway. We believe it is time Nigerians realized that the survival, sustenance, development and promotion of their languages lie squarely with them.

#### **4. Recommendations**

- a. Wipe out illiteracy.** The education of citizens is the direct responsibility of any government. The huge number of illiterate Nigerians is completely unacceptable and has been linked to the high rate of crime. It is also the responsibility of government to assign roles and status to the languages within its polity by deciding which languages feature in administration, education, and other sectors. The provision that is made for the use of mother tongue languages for instruction in the lower primary and adult education levels in the NPE is supposed to be just a starting point because life-long literacy and numeracy cannot be completely achieved at these levels. For good results, Nigerian languages should be used as medium of instruction all through primary and secondary school levels. This will ensure more serious development of academic concepts and modernization of the languages and open them up for better utilization in the modern world. This will in turn create a space for them to receive greater interest in the new professions connected with ICT. Efforts must be made by government at all levels to give Nigerian languages a chance to participate more in the lives and affairs of its citizens like the languages of the developed world. It has always been said that “no man enters his house through another man’s door”. Nigerian cannot expect full development through another man’s language. The academia, groups and individuals, especially native speakers, must continue to apply the necessary pressure and commitment to ensuring proper development of more Nigerian languages. Let us not leave them to waste away and die thereby washing away our heritage and what is uniquely ours. We must nourish them so as to enable them become relevant in the ICT age.
- b. Provide electricity:** Again this is within the purview of government. Once electricity becomes more available and affordable, ICT devices and tools will also become more affordable and accessible and, with better education in the indigenous languages, more Nigerians can be reached to contribute their quota to the new knowledge industry. The situation in India is worth emulating. There are community based computer and internet services provided in the indigenous languages which people can easily access in their own languages to provide and receive information on governance, the economy, etc. This has greatly enhanced the status of the languages and given the people a higher sense of belonging.
- c. Positive attitude towards Nigerian languages:** It is the contention of this writer that the present negative attitude towards the se and study of Nigerian languages is not unconnected with their poor utility level besides basic communication in the home and immediate community. They are perceived as not being relevant to modern life and living. It is expected that this negative attitude will change the moment government insists on their being used for

instruction at higher levels of education and they become a requirement for some juicy jobs and contracts and feature more ICT services. It is hoped that government will do the needful and provide the enabling environment for individuals and groups to act.

## 5. Conclusion

In this short paper, we have tried to examine the extent of participation of Nigeria languages in ICT. The study has shown that the level of participation is quite low as a result of a number of setbacks which could easily be solved if government was more accountable, shown that it has political will to address them and corruption reduced to its barest minimum. Until this happens, Nigerian languages and the societies they represent will continue to suffer neglect. As has been noted by Darah (2010), “every old person who dies in Africa is like a library destroyed by fire”. Illiteracy in the languages and consequently, low access to ICT resources using them would prevent them from featuring in the globalization process and lead to their early death. It is the contention of this writer that this should not be allowed to happen. Where there is a will, there surely must be a way. As reports from other multilingual countries, notably India have shown, Nigerians stand to benefit more than they will lose if their indigenous languages feature more in ICT.

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