

Endangered Language and Culture: The Gradual Loss of Greetings among Yoruba Children in Southwestern Nigeria

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Abstract

People of diverse languages and cultures across the globe have various ways of greeting, either verbally or symbolically to establish social and Interpersonal relationship. Greetings as a cultural practice is identified as one of the striking ethnolinguistic identity markers of the Yoruba. Many studies have expatiated on the various types of greetings among the Yoruba and their cultural values. However, empirical evidence suggests that this cultural practice is gradually disappearing, especially among the younger generation; an aspect which has been neglected in the literature. It is on this premise that this paper examines the factors responsible for the decline. The paper avers that the transmission of indigenous knowledge which is encapsulated in this cultural practice is threatened. The theory adopted for the study is ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1974) which emphasises the use of appropriate norms in diverse sociocultural context. After a qualitative analysis of the data purposively collected from ten (10) families of teenage children, through participant observation and interview, the paper finds out that the hegemony of English language, the negative attitude of some Yoruba elites and globalization are some of the reasons resulting in the wrong or non-usage of appropriate greetings among the younger generation. Various deficiencies are also found in greetings pertaining to time, professions, situations and circumstances. The paper calls for a re-awakening of this indispensable cultural practice to avoid its eventual extinction especially among young people.

Keywords: cultural practice, endangerment, ethnography of communication, identity markers, Yoruba greetings

Introduction

Nigeria is divided into six geopolitical zones. One of these is the Southwest where the Yorùbá primarily belongs. The Yoruba can be found in Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti and some parts of Kwara and State. (Yusuf, 2018). They are also in Republic of Benin, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire. Yoruba are also found in Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad etc. with different variations of the Yoruba language. The Yoruba are very passionate about their cultures which are regarded as intangible heritage. Yorùbá is the second largest language in Nigeria (Ilesammi 2004: 36), the largest single ethnic group in Nigeria with a population of about 40

million (40, 000.00) with about one-fifth of the population of Nigeria. (Yusuf, 2018). The federal government of Nigeria stipulates that the language should be used as the medium of instruction in lower primary school. (NPE, 2014) and it is taught as a subject in the primary school up to the University level. Yorùbá is also studied outside Nigeria (Adepoju, 2008) asserts that there are more Universities in the United States where Yorùbá is learnt compared to Nigeria. The Yorùbá language is used for diverse functions. Being the lingua franca in the Western part of Nigeria, it is the language of the mass media which is widely used in literature, adult education, public administration, and also complements English in the dissemination of government policies to the people at the grassroots.

The act of greeting as a cultural practice is identified as one of the striking identity markers of the Yoruba ethnolinguistic group. Holmes (1992:308) avers that greeting is clearly a culture-specific activity. However, empirical evidence suggests that this cultural practice is gradually disappearing, especially among the younger generation as a result of the hegemony of English language and the declining profile of the Yoruba language. Considering the negative impact of globalization, the paper explores various greetings and their roles in Inter-generational transmission of indigenous knowledge which are encapsulated in this cultural practice.

Culture is the totality of the ways of life of a people. It provides the kit whereby members of a community construct their world (Beunner, 1966). It is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, law, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a person as a member of a society. Abolarinwa (2019) notes that the Yoruba exchanged greetings with one another in almost every circumstance. A conversation cannot begin until rapport has been established by exchanging greetings. Sofola (1973) also asserts that Yoruba is rich in culture and morality. One of such morals inculcated from childhood is respect for elders, hospitality, sense of belonging, giving and brotherhood (Olumuyiwa and Daniel (2019). According to Thomson (1991, p. 26), culture is defined as the distinctive ways of society at a given point in time. It embraces a particular people's ways of thinking, feelings, believing and behaving and the system of related technologies, and material goods. Idowu (2019, pp57:57) remarks that cultural identity markers are those attributes, behavioural patterns, lifestyles, social structures and norms that distinguish a people from other sets of people.

The culture of a people is directly connected to the language. Therefore, the decreased usage of a language in several domains is an indicator of the gradual loss of the rich cultural heritage of the Yoruba people. Linton (1945) remarks that it is a common knowledge that greetings are considered as an impor-

tant aspect of Yoruba culture., A child is considered to be well mannered, well brought up, and from a good family background if such a child is seen respecting not only his mates but more especially the elders. However, the Yoruba language which is the vehicle to transmit this valuable culture is threatened by civilization and modernization. Most parents are concerned about their children's performance in English language than their proficiency in the mother tongue. Hence the less usage of this language in several domains, with particular emphasis on greetings, is an indicator of the gradual loss of the rich cultural heritage of the Yoruba people. Hymes (1962) writing on the ethnography of speaking was concerned about the age variable in language use. In this context, how many of Yoruba children have equal proficiency in both Yoruba and English and can exchange greetings in the language.

Greetings among the Yoruba

Akindele (1990:2) established the fact that greetings as an exchange of pleasantries and good wishes are designed to maintain interpersonal relationships. He avers that the teaching of cultural literacy will curb electoral warfare in Nigeria. According to her, cultural literacy should be inculcated in the educational curriculum in order to avoid "aggression, war of words, rebellious silence, hate speeches and propaganda" (p.2) which occurs during elections.

Also, the ability to greet appropriately is regarded as a value to be celebrated. It is evident in every *omolúàbí*. According to Idowu (1996, p61), *omolúàbí* is "one who behaves as a well-born,." In Oluwole (2007) cited in Omole (2014). *omolúàbí* here means *omọ tí ó ní iwà bí eni tí a kọ, tí ó sì gbà èkó.* (a person that behaves like someone who is well nurtured and lives by the precepts of the education they have been given). For every time and season, circumstances and situations, there is a perfect Yoruba greeting suitable for the occasion. Even when nothing is happening, one can hear *ẹ kú idúró* (for someone standing) *ẹ kú irètí* (for someone who is expectant; for instance, pregnant women). The first and the most important place to learn this practice is the home. The Yoruba axiom *ilé la ti ñ kẹşọp ròde*, meaning charity begins at home readily comes to mind. One of the first and early education a Yoruba child is given in the home is greetings. This is very important today even with westernization and globalization. Children should be taught how to pay homage to persons older than them by prostrating or kneeling down depending on the gender. In the Yoruba traditional home setting, the Head of the family, *báálé* goes round the compound and exchanges greetings with members of the family. He does young ones find it difficult to greet in this regard. There are other people among the elites who feel unconcerned but when they come across a child that greets, such a child would be commended. So, the question these days for many is not whether the

children are kneeling or prostrating but whether they can see an elderly person and offer a word of greeting.

Greeting is considered as one of the traits found in an “omoluabi.” In the morning “ẹ káàárò.” In the afternoon “ẹ káàsán” and in the night “ẹ káalé.” Greetings among the Yorùbá goes farther than these but many of the young ones are not familiar with them. There are different greetings to congratulate or commiserate with a member of the family/community. Ladele et. al. give (2006) give an example of greetings to someone who has just put to bed. This is “ẹ kú ewu òde yìí o, akọ n bábọ?” “Congratulations, is it a male or female?” A greeting to commiserate with the bereaved can be “ẹ kì yóò ha mójúútó o irú omọ bẹẹ kò gbójú bẹ̀rò /o. arungun omo ni iru omo bee o. Example that readily comes to mind is a boy who passed by an (Ladele et. al. 2006, p. 91) An example that readily comes to mind is a boy who passed by an adult into a compound, apparently on a visit to his friend. He went inside the compound and found out that his friend was not around. This boy realized it was very difficult to return to the person he bypassed without greetings. The young people today have lost so much due to their nonchalance to common courtesy. On a personal note, I have experienced cases of children being taken to school in the morning. I observed that as the parents greet older people on their way, the old man/woman would not only greet in return but will shower prayers on both the little child and the guardian.

Igboin (2012) therefore remarks that the community places a moral demand on her members to exchange greetings whenever occasion requires it. According to him

... in the Yorùbá cultural value system, the act of greeting has moral implications on then person as well as on the community. The person who greets and the other being greeted have moral responsibilities that go beyond them. They stretch, as it were, to the context of communal morality, which approves or disapproves of one's action. (Igboin, 2012, p.17)

In Yoruba communities, efforts are made to ensure that every member of the community maintain peace and cordial relationship among themselves. Greeting is one major avenue of detecting that a relationship has gone sour. Falola (2004, cited in Igboin, 2012, pp 18) stresses that when this is detected, the man who discovered this anomaly would make efforts to correct the situation. According to (Falola 2004), ignoring the early signals of the avoidance of greetings or the use of negative tone to communicate them may lead to more conflicts.”.

Language and Cultural Endangerment

We cannot talk of endangerment except languages come into contact and until there is an evidence of language shift as at today, the Yoruba language, just like other indigenous languages is going through a process of language shift, especially among the younger generation (Oyetade, 2013) It is a clear offshoot of culture shift since culture encapsulates the people's language, arts, belief, and language. The younger generation believes that everything about the western world is better and modern and as such considered the Yoruba less valuable. Fishman (1991: p.1), defines language shift as a "process whereby intergenerational continuity of the heritage languages is proceeding negatively, with fewer speakers, readers, writers and even those who understand the language" in every generation. Hoffman (1991:186) indicates that language shift refers to a process whereby a community does not maintain its language, but gradually adopts another one. This produces or leads to language endangerment.

Brenzinger (1997: p277) indicates that "some shifts reflect a voluntary decision to abandon a language, whereas others are the result of coercion." We opine that there is hardly any society that will voluntarily seek to abandon her language, which is a symbol of her identity and heritage. Certain forces would actually make them to do so. These may be economic or political which could result from governmental policies. The coercion may be covert as the case of the Yoruba language. While much has been reported on language little attention has been paid to cultural endangerment which is one of the major reasons for language shift. Teaching the younger generation the invaluable cultural practices of a linguistic group and passing them to another generation will guarantee Intergenerational transfer. This study elucidates on the cultural practice of greeting among the Yoruba and avers that many Yoruba children demonstrate negative attitudes towards it.

Literature Review

Scholarly articles on language and endangerment can be found in the literature. Many of them analysed Yoruba greetings from sociological point of view. Emmanuel (2018) classified Yoruba greetings into time free and time bound greetings. The free time greetings include occupational and situational greetings while time-bound greetings are used at specific periods of the day. He further examined various strategies used in constructing and negotiating politeness in interpersonal communications. According to him, in Yoruba greetings, people speak or use gesture to show their respect and sociability when they meet someone. It is an interactional behaviour, which brings respect and love to the doer. it is used to seek and pass on information about the person's situations and his family. Fakoya, (2011) discusses the endangerment scenario of the

Yorùbá language and laments the gradual disappearance of the rich linguistic heritage of the Yorùbá people due to both economic and social factors. Areas of endangerment pointed out by the writer is the loss of such lexical words as “àpamó” bag “àtikè” powder and “Ìsaasùn” pot among others. Furthermore, Fakoya (2011) regrets the unguided and unproductive use of loan words rather than the use of metalanguage. He calls the attention of the public to the threat especially as he opines that rapid urbanisation may affect language use negatively. Oyetade (2011:22) states “all Yoruba speakers at home and abroad must see themselves as cultural ambassadors of Yoruba, we must ensure that Yoruba remains for generations unborn and grow to become a global language before the end of this century.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is Ethnography of Communication (Hymes,1974) earlier known as Ethnography of speaking (Hymes,1964) which emphasizes the use of appropriate norms in diverse sociocultural settings. It stresses the use of appropriate patterns of language use and how it is learnt in the community. It handles the sociocultural rules governing the organisation of speech in different contexts. Farah (1998, p.126) explains the acronym of speaking as follows: [s] Setting, including the time, place and physical aspects of the situation such as arrangement of furniture in the classroom; (P) participant identity, including personal characteristics such as age, sex, social status and relationship with each other; (E) ends, including the purpose of the event itself as well as the individual goals of the participants; (A) act, sequence or how speech acts are organized within a speech event and what topic[s] are addressed; (K) key or the tone and manner in which something is said or written; (I) instrumentalities or the linguistic code i.e. language, dialect, variety and channel i.e. speech or writing; (N) norm or the standard sociocultural rules of interaction and interpretation; and (G) genre or type of event such as lecture, poem, letter. Under this theory, language is seen as an important and integral part of social and cultural life. The two important aspects relevant to this study are (P) Participant and (N) Norm.

Methodology

This study is a survey. It investigates greetings among younger generations of Yoruba speakers. This study employs the method of simple random sampling through a language background questionnaire, structured and unstructured interviews complemented with participant’s observation. Visits were made to ten(10) families with special attention paid to the linguistic practices of chil-

dren between the age groups (13-18years), gender and levels of education. The data were analysed using content analysis

Findings and Discussion

The following deficiencies were identified in the study. The first is that some parents interviewed confirmed that many of their children do not prostrate or kneel to greet them. They remarked that they normally insist on this especially among the young adults.

Secondly, deficiencies are found in greetings pertaining to time. Most of the children do not know the exact greetings pertaining to time. For example, very few can identify the difference between greetings in the morning “ẹ kú àárò” and mid-morning which is “ẹ kú iyálẹta.” In raining season, “a kú àsikò òjò yí’ is a rare statement to hear from them. Culture change normally involves not only the elimination of a new element or elements to the culture, but also the elimination of certain previously existing elements and the modification and reorganization of others. Linton (1940, Wenreich,1953,p.5)

Thirdly, deficiencies are also found in greetings pertaining to situations and circumstances. These include instances like when a friend is bereaved or at other unexpected events. In the event of a lost family member, children of today, struggle to capture the right greeting to commiserate with the bereaved. In one of the interviews, a mother narrated an encounter with her daughter. The child was preparing to visit her friend who just lost a father- the mother asked her how she would commiserate with the family members when she gets to the place. Her response was “ẹ kú òkú” which is an illogical statement instead of “e kú àşẹyindè, the right greeting for someone who just lost her father.

Moreover, these deficiencies are noticeable in greetings pertaining to professions. This is the worst hit as there is a general deficiency in the knowledge of greetings to different occupations in the community. The Yoruba have different ways of extending their greetings to people engaged in different occupations. For instance, a normal greeting for a farmer is “à roko bódún dé o” (may you be healthy to till the land always). The palm wine tappers are greeted with the saying “igbá á rò o” which means, “may climbing robes be supple for him” while for the hunters (ode), it is “àrinpa ògún ooo” meaning “may Ògún (the god of iron) provide games for you. (Igboin, 2012) relationships.

What are the factors responsible for the decline? The negative attitude of some Yoruba elites toward their indigenous languages has contributed negatively to the decline of the valuable cultural practice among Yoruba children. Baker (1992) is of the opinion that until speakers of a language have the right attitude towards their language, not much can be achieved in terms of language maintenance. Yoruba children as well as their parents are satisfied with greet-

ings in English language which does not necessarily need to be accompanied with kneeling down or prostrating. Moreover, the role of grandparents in language maintenance has been emphasized in such studies as Onadipe-Shalom (2013 and 2018), where she states that whereas the children communicate in Yoruba and English with their siblings, they are favourably disposed to Ogu (Egun), the mother tongue when they interact with their parents and especially grandparents,

However in several homes children are left to be mentored by maids and servants while the parents have gone in search of economic gains. Such domestic workers do not have the authority to command the children to greet appropriately especially when the parents care less about such issues.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The hegemony of English language, the negative attitudes of the Yoruba youth to Yoruba culture and negative effects of globalization are some of the reasons resulting in the wrong or non-usage of appropriate greetings among the younger generation. For example, attachment to their phones and social media where emojis are learnt instead of appropriate Yoruba words. It can also be argued that it is important for the older generation to recognise and embrace the changing trends in the society. Moreover, indigenous language speakers can also create emojis which bear cultural relevance in the language to attract the younger generation. Especially when the parents care less about such issues. Parents, especially mothers who normally spend more time with the children should be cultural ambassadors in their homes. The study notes that the gradual loss of greetings among Yoruba children is a negative signal to eventual extinction of the cultural heritage. This is a clarion call for a re-awakening of this indispensable cultural practice to avoid its extinction especially among young people.

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