

LAGOS ACC MONTHLY PI LECTURE SERIES

Artificial Demarcations, Natural Language: Yorùbá Language in West Africa and its Implications for Research Prospects in African Studies

Bisoye Eleshin

**Institute of African and Diaspora Studies
University of Lagos**

aeleshin@unilag.edu.ng

Background

- Yorùbá Language, Ile-Ifẹ as the dispersal point
- Dispersal Pattern
- Migration
 - Ifa Directive,
 - War
 - Royal Tussle.



Owu, Oyọ, Itsekiri, Igala, Olukumi, Ajase, Ita-Ifé, Sabe, Popo, Ketu, Ifé-Togo, etc.)



Background

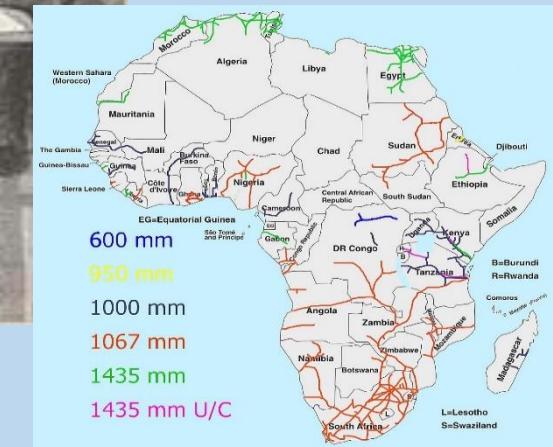
- Transatlantic Slave Trade and abolition (USA and South Americas)



- Sierra Leone
- Liberia
- Ghana (18th & 19th C)



Background



- Berlin Conference of 1884 and Demarcation of Africa countries
(Asiwaju 1984)

Background

- Yoruba is the 5th most spoken language in Africa
(Khan, 2019; Ebatamehi, 2020)
- Swahili, Arabic*, French*, Hausa, Yorùbá
(Kroulek, 2018)
- Three most spoken indigenous African languages
 - Swahili
 - Hausa
 - Yorùbá
- Yorùbá is spoken in 24 countries of the World
- 8 West African countries with different national status
(Joshuaproject.net)

African Indigenous Languages with Most Speakers

Swahili

- Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, DR Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Malawi

98.3M

Hausa

- Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Ghana, Cameroun, Sudan, Ivory Coast

80M

Yorùbá

- Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana

41.5M

Oromo

- Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia

27.5M

Yorùbá Language Geographical Spread in West Africa



Size of Yorùbá Speech Communities in West Africa



Nigeria
40,568,000



Republi
c of
Benin
208,000



Ghana
495,000



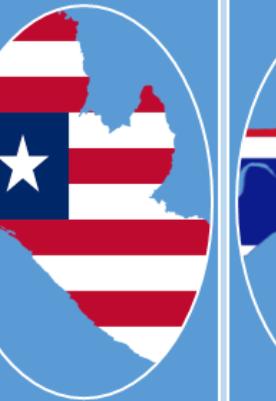
Sierra
Leone
6300
(818,000)



Cot'
Devoir
121,000



Togo
127,000



Liberia
24,000



Gambia
11,000



Yorùbá – Development

- Efforts on Language Development
- Reduction to written form
 - David Hinderer
 - Hannah Kilham
 - Bishop Ajayi Crother
 - Henry Townsend, etc.
- Dictionary (Bowen & Crowther)



Yorùbá – Development

- The Colonialist 1882, 1888 Educational Ordinance
- The Missionaries Reaction
- Orthography Development (1974)
Metalanguage (Vol. I & II)

Even though the Government Inspector, Rev Metcalf Sunter, considered the Yoruba literature 'the most advanced on the whole coast'²² by 1890, he believed that such literature could be grouped into only four sections thus:

1. Devotional works;
2. Standard Reading Books, i-iv;
3. Bishop Crowther's Yoruba Grammar and Vocabulary; and
4. Rev J B Wood's Notes on Yoruba Grammar.²³

To him, these were hardly adequate for serious Yoruba teaching schools.

Awoniyi (1978) *The Role & State of Yoruba Language during the Early Colonial Era*

The Problem?

- Scattered nationalities across Africa
- Obstacle to sociocultural integration.
- Distortion in language and cultural development due to language spread
- The extreme multilingual situation of Africa nations - Africa has the most languages in the world.
Nigeria, second only to Papua New Guinea.

The Problem?

- Government of African nations still lack the confidence needed to engage indigenous languages to meet contemporary demands.

Kashoki (1979)

African Languages as a Tool of Development

"There is -- a lot of work to be done in language development, not only at the level of the school, but also at the level of the University if we are to see a meaningful change in the study of Zambian languages as subjects and in their use as media of instruction. There are certain concepts in Mathematics, Science and Technology, for instance, which cannot be expressed precisely in any of the Zambian languages at the present, simply because such concepts and the technical terms used have no equivalents in the Zambian languages or for which the equivalents are imprecise, inadequate and perhaps completely misleading. Therefore, the establishment of the Zambian languages in terms of functionality, richness of vocabulary and social integration, may have to await such developments as have been indicated above" (p.33).

Educational Reform: Proposal and Recommendations (1977)

Theoretical Approach

Diachronic & Synchronic Approaches

- Diachronic Approach
- Diachronic linguistics examines the historical development and evolution of languages along with their relatedness. (Ferdinand De Saussure in 1916)
- languages are studied from the point of view of their historical development
(Crystal 2008)
- The relatedness of different languages.
- They started attempts at grouping these languages according to their genetic relationship.

Theoretical Approach

- Synchronic Approach
- languages studied at a theoretical point in time: one describes a ‘state’ of the language, disregarding changes in .
- present linguistic realities of a language including the geographical characteristics.
 - Historical study of language change and development
- Comparative linguistics sees that languages can be found to be related when certain features of some selected languages are identified.
- Linguistic relatedness according to genetic and historical connections

Methodology

- Mixed Research Methods
- Interviews, documentaries...
- Oral literatures (Ifá Corpus, songs)
- Joshua Project

A research initiative seeking to highlight the ethnic people groups of the world with the fewest followers of Christ.

Yoruba in Benin Republic

- National language
- Spoken in the Southern region of the country
- Yorùbá speech communities include:

Port Novo (Ajase),

Ketu,

Ita-Ifẹ,

Pẹbò,

Ilara

Anago,

Yoruba in Benin Republic



Yoruba in Benin Republic

- Conscious effort to retain the lexico-semantic features of Yorùbá

Yoruba Benin	Standard	English
yanmu-yanmu	- èfọn	'mosquito'
ta mọra	- múra	'dress up'
yigẹ	- bàjé	'damaged'
ètò ìyí a fi tǐ	- ètò tǐ a fi lélè	'the laid down plan'
ó ti yìn wá	- ó ti yẹ wá	'we are fortunate'

- Some of these constructions are no longer in use in the standard variant in Nigeria

Yoruba Speech Community in Togo

- North-Eastern region of Togo - Atakpame
- The people are referred to as Ana (ara) Ife - ‘the people from Ife’

- Igberiko

Okutaya

Alabata

Okoasade

Jama

Ayepada

Akeem Lasisi (Punch Newspaper)

(Dec. 30, 2015)

Yoruba Speech Community in Togo

- Phonolexical effect

Ife (Togo)	Standard Yoruba	English
nwọn	wọn	'they' (3 rd pl, honorific)
nyin	yin	'you' (2 nd Pl obj, honorific)
ẹnyin	ẹyin	'you' (2 nd pl. Sub, honorific)
aiye	aye	'world'
ẹiyẹ	ẹyẹ	'bird'

- The phonological absurdity (initial nasality has been deleted in the standard (1974 orthography workshop)

Yoruba Speech Community in Togo

- Lexical Evolution

Ife (Togo)

- Ọdọn itsu

year yam

yam festival

Standard Yoruba

Ọdún işu

year yam

yam festival

- koni (kú ònî)

káàáró 'good morning'

Kosan (kú ọsán)

káàsán 'good afternoon'

alé ni

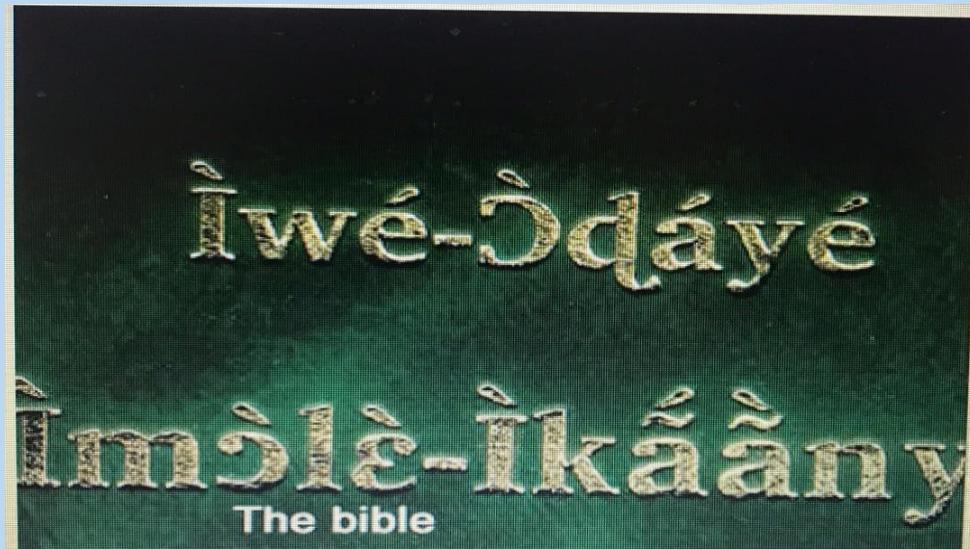
Káalé 'good evening'

o tse iire?

Báwo ni? 'how are you?'

Yoruba Speech Community in Togo

- Tone preservation - The mid tone is preserved.
- Ife (Togo) has not responded to the series of orthographical changes
- No official effort to codify the language
- Younger generation showing no interest
- Ongoing attempt by the missionaries



Yoruba in West Africa

- Aku and Creolization
- Ghana – Yoruba community of Accra
Aguda/Tabom (Returnees of Yoruba descent - 1836)
- There are 50 Yoruba villages in Ghana (Abimbola 2005)
- Sufficient Yoruba presence in Ghana

Yoruba in Gambia – migration and survival struggle



Analysis

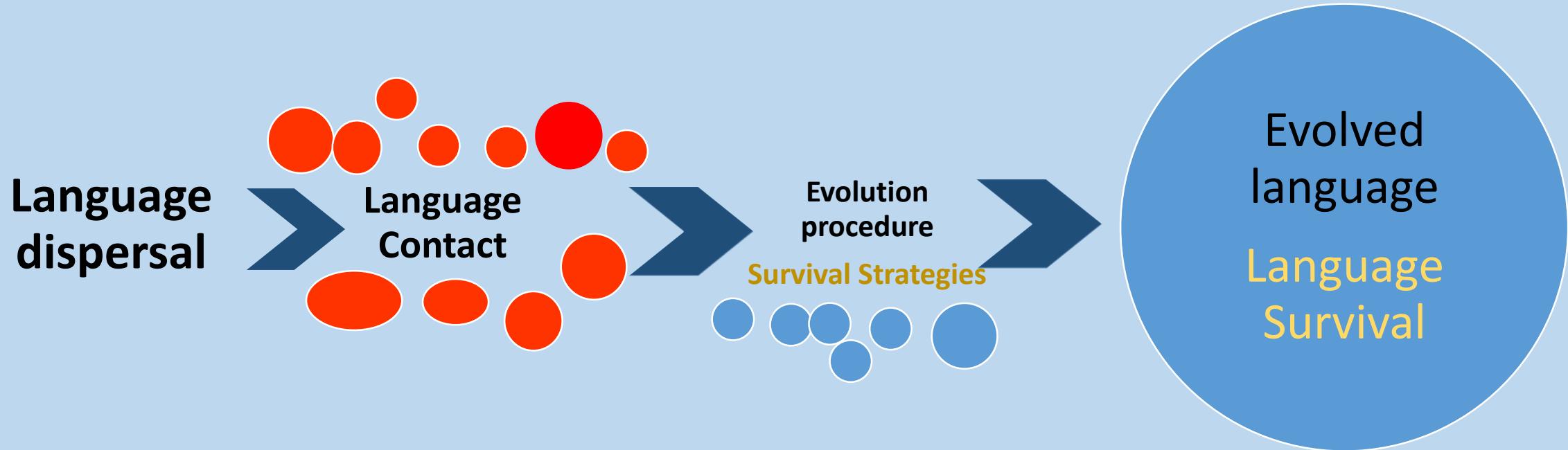
- Yoruba as a pluricentric language
- Different national statuses for Yoruba across West Africa.
- The dynamism of Yoruba in West Africa
- Evolution due to language contact



- Languages do not spread in isolation
- There are innate features ranging from semantics, syntax, phonology, discourse analysis and sociolinguistic elements

- Endangerment & sustainability of Yoruba in West Africa
- Effect of the postcolonial language situation in Africa
- The struggle of the indigenous languages of native speakers.
- Tailspin situation for African indigenous languages





Observation

- Mobilities and migration of humans and languages in Africa
-
- Results phonetic and grammatical changes
- This might be the justification for the excessive multilingual situation in African, especially the sub-Saharan divide.
- Between 1500 and 2000 languages
 - (Bilingual)
- There may be many more dialects than natural languages in Africa
-

Implication for African Studies

- Colonialist flaw: should have created the demarcations along natural language line.
- Easy procedure for sociocultural and sociopolitical development in Africa
- Identity as a germane feature of language because provides representation to its speakers
- Intranational movement – Itshekiri, Olukumi, Igala (Different geopolitical zones of Nigeria)

Implication for African Studies

- Without adequate promotion and development of African languages Africans cannot fully contribute to the knowledge gathering process and hence the development of the continent.

(Dr. Dampha, ACALAN)

- Language plays significant role development
- But how can we focus on African development with this numerous languages across the continent?
- Challenge to the process of reconfiguring African Studies
- Language as a crucial tool for development

Implication for African Studies

- Symbiotic relationship between Yoruba and the other Yoruba speech communities in other parts of Africa.
- Diaspora Africans have made conscious effort to preserve and maintain the naturalness of Yoruba because when they migrated, the proto-Yoruba was still available and accessible.
- The sustainability of the naturalness of the Yoruba in other parts of West Africa can be help the linguistic analysis, especially etymology.
- Evolution of the Standard - The issues of jettisoning Yoruba language in Nigeria (civilization)

Conclusion

- It will foster African study research in West Africa
- Opportunities for language development in those Yoruba minority speech communities.
 - Concern over the future of Ife Togo.
- Orthography development can be suggested
- Diachronic analysis of the Diaspora Yoruba could help solve many unresolved etymological analysis of lexical items in the Standard.
- Other areas of African Studies could be explored (sociopolitical, socioeconomic, ATM, and religion)
- These factors cannot experience real development in isolation of their languages.

