

UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN



THE TWO HUNDRED AND EIGHTY-SECOND (282ND) INAUGURAL LECTURE

“FROM THE MOUTHS OF BABES TO THE WISDOM OF ELDERS: A VOYAGE OF LANGUAGE EXPLORATION”

By

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**DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS AND
NIGERIAN LANGUAGES,
FACULTY OF ARTS,
UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN, NIGERIA**

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The Vice-Chancellor

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Greatest Unilorites,
Greatest FASAites,
Distinguished students of the Department of Linguistics and
Nigerian Languages,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.

Preamble

Vice-Chancellor, Sir, I give God all the glory, honour, and adoration for the opportunity and privilege given to me to stand in front of this great audience to deliver the **282nd** Inaugural Lecture of this great University. It is indeed the day the Lord has made. I rejoice, and I am glad.

My soul doth magnify the Lord,

And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour
Because He hath regarded the humility of his handmaid:
for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me
blessed.

Because He that is mighty hath done great things to me,
and holy is His name.
And His mercy is from generations unto generations to
them that fear Him.
He hath shewed might in His arm: He hath scattered the
proud in the conceit of their heart.
He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath
exalted the humble.
He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich
He hath sent empty away.
He hath received Israel His servant, being mindful of His
mercy.
As He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his seed
forever.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy
Spirit,
As it was in the beginning is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.

Today is a momentous occasion for me, with deep personal significance. As I stand here to deliver my inaugural lecture as a professor, I do so not only to mark an academic milestone but also to commemorate the 40th anniversary of my father's passing. This day is a tribute to the two people whose sacrifices and values laid the foundation for everything I have become. I was born to the family of Mr. and Mrs. Baiyere in the mid-seventies in Kabba, present-day Kogi State. My mother, Madam Hannah Bamidele Baiyere, died on the 26th of June 2003. She was at least fortunate enough to see all her children educated. She had something good to tell her husband, who cherished education so much.

My father, Pa. Michael Eesakan Baiyere, died on the 17th of April 1985. The circumstances surrounding his passing left a lasting imprint on my life. The whole scenario began on the 16th of April, my eleventh birthday. While others celebrate their birthdays with joy, for me, for a long time, this period each year served as a moment of deep reflection. My birthday became a

reminder of loss and also of purpose. My father passed, leaving me with memories of his unwavering belief in my potential, a belief that would go on to define my life's path. His memory and the lessons he imparted have been a guiding light on my journey.

I remember vividly a moment in my early years that could have defined me differently. In Primary 2, I came 28th out of 30 pupils in my class. For many, this would have been a source of shame or discouragement, but not for my father. Instead of reproach, he encouraged me. Instead of disappointment, he expressed belief. Carrying me on his lap, he said, 'You can do better.'

Those simple words became a turning point in my life. From that moment on, my academic record changed. I moved from near the bottom of the class to consistently taking the first or second position. But more importantly, I learnt that the power of belief, someone believing in you and you believing in yourself, can change the trajectory of a life. It is in his honour that I stand here today. My journey from that classroom to this auditorium has been shaped by his faith in my potential. His belief taught me resilience, determination, and the value of striving for excellence.

As I deliver my inaugural lecture today, I share a story of hope, a story that reminds us all of the difference, encouragement and support can make, especially from parents. My father did not live to see this day, but his legacy lives on in every step I have taken to get here. May their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen.

Vice-Chancellor Sir, this is the 7th Inaugural Lecture from the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, a department that is home to all the languages spoken in Nigeria. This is the 4th from the Linguistics Unit of the department and the 1st to be presented by the first female professor of Linguistics at the University of Ilorin.

From the Linguistics Unit, Professor Oladele Awobuluyi, the father of the Department, my father, teacher and mentor, delivered the very first Inaugural Lecture, then called

(University Lecture) in this University on *The National Policy on Education in Linguistics Perspective* on the 15th of February, 1979. I am proud to say that the honour of the first inaugural lecture cum university lecturer belongs to my department. This was followed by Professor Beban S. Chumbow on the 27th of June 1985, entitled: *Linguistics, Language and National Development*. Professor H.B. Capo, on the 23rd of January, 1992, presented the 44th Inaugural Lecture entitled *Let Us Joke Over It: Nigeria as Tower of Babel*.

In the Yorùbá Unit, the 28th Inaugural Lecture and 3rd from the department was delivered by Late Professor Oludare Olajubu, on the 10th of December, 1987, titled: *The Voice of the Artist: The Voice of the People*. Professor Yekeen Ajibade Ajayi, my father of blessed memory, delivered the 90th Inaugural Lecture of the university and 5th from the department on the 19th of March, 2009, entitled *Yorùbá Cosmology and Aesthetics: The Cultural Confluence of Divination, Incantation and Drum-Talking*. Professor Olalere Adeyemi, the Dean of Arts, delivered the 172nd and 6th Inaugural Lecture from the department on the 10th of August, 2017 titled: *Yorùbá Literary Criticism: Theories and Theorising in Nativism*.

Today, I feel highly honoured to present the 282nd Inaugural Lecture titled ***From the Mouths of Babes to the Wisdom of Elders: A Voyage of Language Exploration***. This topic encapsulates the journey of language from its earliest stages to its mature forms. It highlights the importance of our roles as linguists and language users in preserving and revitalising the linguistic diversity of our world. The lecture will take us through the interesting and intricate world of language, starting from its very inception in the minds and mouths of babes to the wisdom of elders as we explore language acquisition, description, documentation, revitalisation and digitalisation.

Introduction

Vice-Chancellor Sir, as I concluded writing this lecture and tried to look at what had been done previously in the department, I discovered that the last Inaugural Lecture

presented in the Linguistics Unit by Professor H.B. Capo on the 23rd of January, 1992 was entitled: *Let Us Joke Over It: Nigeria as Tower of Babel*. It is so interesting and coincidental that the Tower of Babel is my opening montage. It means that there definitely is a connection to the past. In **Genesis 11:1-9**, we encounter the fascinating story of the *Tower of Babel* rendered here in different languages.

Genesis 11:1-9 in Multiple Languages

1. **English:** Now the whole earth spoke one language and used the same words (vocabulary).
2. **Yoruba:** O si ẹ, bi nwọn ti nrìn lati ìha ìlā-òrùn lọ, ti nwọn ri pẹtẹlẹ kan ni ilẹ Şinari; nwọn si tẹdo sibẹ.
3. **Hausa:** Sai suka ce wa juna, “Ku zo, mu yi tubula, mu gasa su sosai.” Suka yi aiki da tubali maimakon dutse, katsi kuma maimakon lāka.
4. **Igbo:** Mgbe ahụ , ha kwuru si , “Bịanụ ka anyị wuere onwe anyị obodo nke ogo ya ga -eru n’eluigwe, ka anyị si otu ahụ meere onwe anyị aha ; ọ bughị otu a , anyị ga-abụ ndị atụsasiri n’ụwa niile.
5. **Igala:** Taki Jihofa gwọru wa k’i li ewo kpai ọdọgọ, e-k’amone ne lẹ.
6. **Nupe:** Tso-ci ga, Cinle, 'za ẹni kété a yí ọ, a kpata ma èta ezi misun nini, ẹ tún nà a a yà nyi lo ani nà dānā: enya ndondo ma kà gbani bẹ à, nya etun nà a ga, a à lo nà.
7. **Ebira:** O kà vẹ eni è chi ne tú wa, dī ẹni ẹ và ẹkura ẹni ẹ yaa kà zī dī asī ẹ kụkụ wú irẹyī ẹngụ.
8. **Idoma:** Anóó Óndú ā lẹ uwá pahīla ga ẹga dóódu kú ẹce ā, anóó igelī nēē yō ī gwó kwú ci á.
9. **Pidgin:** Dat na why dem koll di town, *Babel*, *bikos na dia Godgive dem difren language and from der, Eskata dem for evriwhere for di world.*

This passage, beautifully rendered in different Nigerian languages, making up just about two per cent of the languages spoken in Nigeria, describes the story of the *Tower of Babel*, where humanity attempted to build a city and a tower that would reach the heavens. However, God intervened by confusing their language, leading to the dispersion of people across the earth. The *Tower of Babel* narrative illustrates the power of language, human ambition, and divine intervention. It reminds us that unity and understanding can lead to remarkable achievements, and that forces beyond our control can humble pride and arrogance. Just as *Babel* symbolises the emergence of linguistic diversity, we face the challenge of maintaining linguistic unity in diversity, even in our country today and ensuring that no language is lost. It shows that God is divinely interested in linguistics.

The Concept of Linguistics

Linguistics is the scientific study of language and its structure, including the analysis of the sounds, words, grammar, and meaning systems used in human communication. It encompasses a broad range of topics, from the intricacies of phonetics and syntax to the social and cultural aspects of language use. Linguists seek to understand the universal properties of language, as well as the diversity of languages spoken around the world. Linguists do not need to be able to speak many languages, as I have been asked several times: “How many languages do you speak?” Linguists are not polyglots, although they could be. A linguist may speak only one language. However, we understand the rules that govern languages in general and have linguistic knowledge about aspects that are common to most languages (linguistic universals). Language is the means and the end of linguistic analysis. Language is our material and end product. There are various classifications of linguistics: microlinguistics and macrolinguistics, descriptive vs theoretical linguistics, theoretical vs applied linguistics, etc.

Human Language

Just like the Faculty of Arts is the heartbeat of the University of Ilorin, language is the heartbeat of human communication. Language is the principal means by which human beings communicate with one another. It is our most powerful tool, the bridge that connects our thoughts to the world around us. It is how we express love and hatred, build friendships and rivalries, create art and literature, and share our deepest fears and greatest aspirations. From birth, we are immersed in language, learning, shaping, and using it to navigate the complexities of life. If the spoken means of communication is unavailable, as may be the case among the deaf, visual means such as sign language can be used.

Finocchiaro (1964, p.8) defines language as “a system of arbitrary vocal symbols, which permit all people in a given culture, or other people who have learned the system of that culture, to communicate or to interact”. In essence, language is not just a collection of words; it is a medium of thought, an instrument of socialisation, and a mechanism for cooperation. It enables us to share knowledge, pass down traditions, and connect with people across time and space. Language is inseparable from human life. We live in a world of words, whether we are buying and selling, arguing or joking, writing poetry or signing contracts. We talk to friends, strangers, and even to ourselves. Language flows through every aspect of our daily existence, shaping our relationships, identities, and worldviews.

Language is universal; where humans exist, language exists. It runs through all cultures, binding humanity together. Language is dynamic; it is constantly evolving. Words change, new expressions emerge, and meanings shift over time. Language is culturally transmitted and not inherited biologically. Children are born with the ability to acquire language, but the specific language they learn depends on their surroundings. Language is the defining characteristic of humanity. It is the foundation of knowledge, the thread that weaves societies

together, and the force that shapes our understanding of the world. Unlike any other form of communication, language is fluid, limitless, and essential to our existence. Through language, we think, remember, create, and connect. It is not just something we use; it is who we are.

Vice-Chancellor Sir, in my 30 years of language exploration as a student and 25 years as a teacher of linguistics, I have voyaged into most aspects of linguistics. I have been able to bridge various subdivisions of linguistics and also interact with other fields such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, education, statistics, geography, engineering and technology and most recently, digital humanities and, narrowly, digital linguistics. In the following sections, I will present my experience and humble contributions to the entire spectrum of language's life cycle by showcasing the importance of language at every stage and to every stage.

Part 1: Language Acquisition: From the Mouths of Babes

Language, the quintessential hallmark of human communication, begins its journey in the tender mouths of babes. Language acquisition is the process by which the ability to use language develops in humans; it enables humans to develop language use. Language acquisition is one of the most remarkable feats of human development. From the cries and coos of newborns to the sophisticated conversations of adults, language is a fundamental aspect of our existence.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, learning to speak is one of the most significant and visible achievements of early childhood, and of all the young child's startling accomplishments, none is as impressive and mysterious as his entrance into the world of language (de Villiers & de Villiers, 1979). Language acquisition 'is doubtless the greatest intellectual feat anyone of us is ever required to perform' (Bloomfield, 1933, p.29). The major concern of language acquisition studies is knowing how children acquire their first set of words. For us to also understand adult linguistic knowledge, we need to trace its development from the

early years. Understanding a little more about how the child acquires language is to move a step forward in unravelling the complexities of language (Kessler, 1971). Considering the complexities involved in language acquisition, there is a great deal that we still need to know.

Language acquisition begins very early in life, and research has shown that some children start talking as early as four to eight months. The acquisition process begins logically with the acquisition of the sound patterns of the language. What a child learns during language acquisition is not a set of utterances but rules for processing utterances (Slobin, 1974). Pinker (1994) further states that once acquired, a language is not a fixed list of sentences, but a combinatorial algorithm, allowing an infinite number of new thoughts to be expressed. Language acquisition is indeed a complex process, but learning a first language is something almost every child does successfully in a matter of a few years without the need for formal lessons.

Linguists make a very important distinction between language acquisition and language learning. Krashen (1981, p.5) states that language acquisition is subconscious while language learning is conscious; he believes that the two systems are interrelated. However, language acquisition is more important. Unconscious knowledge is acquired. The grammar of a language is unconscious, and so it is acquired by the child. It is believed that children acquire language through a subconscious process at a time when they are unaware of grammatical rules (Haynes, 2005). Language acquisition occurs in an unorganised way; there is no syllabus for children who are learning their first language. The data or source is the natural communication that they are exposed to. Every human has an innate capacity to acquire language, and by the time a child is five years old, he has become almost fully competent in his mother tongue.

Language learning is organised. It is a product of formal instruction, of direct instruction in the rules of language. Learners have a conscious knowledge of the new language. Language acquisition refers to the first language learnt by children, while language learning refers to second language

learnt by children and adults. While second language learning is highly influenced by need and strong impulses, children acquiring their first language need no motivation as language acquisition is a natural phenomenon and occurs in a natural environment. Every child, except those with language impairment, acquires a first language, but not everybody learns a second language.

Studies in Child Language Acquisition

Interest in how language is acquired has existed from time immemorial. With the advent of modern linguistics, language acquisition received more attention. From the beginning of the twentieth century to around 1950, most research on language acquisition was carried out by behaviourists. Behaviourism is a movement in psychology that advocates using strict experimental procedures to study observable behaviour (responses) in relation to the environment or stimuli (Bijou, 2008). Behaviourists do not believe innateness has any role in language development; to them, the development of an individual is dependent almost wholly on environmental factors. The concept of *tabula rasa* (blank slate), which implies that individuals are born with a mind devoid of any learned information, is central to behaviourism.

The end of that era witnessed the emergence of a cognitive approach to language acquisition. It also witnessed the emergence of Noam Chomsky into the world of grammar and language acquisition in particular. This period, according to Surakat (2007, p.431), “marked the emergence of cross-sectional, experimental studies involving groups of children who vary in sex, age, birth position, and socio-economic background”. I am a member of a consortium of acquisition scholars across the world, looking at diversifying acquisition studies by organising biannual language acquisition summer schools titled ***Truly Global /L+/ Summer/Winter School on Language Acquisition***. The University of Ilorin was one of the five Local Hubs in 2023. Available online at: L+ 2023 - Local hubs

Arokoyo (2007) propelled me into language acquisition studies. The paper explored the developmental stages of syntax acquisition among Yoruba-speaking children. Using longitudinal data, it analysed early verb use, sentence formation, and the emergence of complex structures. The findings highlighted the significant role of caregiver input and social interaction in shaping linguistic competence, providing insights into the cognitive mechanisms of language learning.

Developmental Sequences

A central question for the study of acquisition is how to account for children's transition from the initial state to adult-like knowledge of language (Uziel-Karl, 2001a). It is a known fact that children understand more than they produce, and at a very early stage, their perception is very high. This is an indication that language is innate. Crystal (1987, p.232) also observes that in child language acquisition, "there is a simultaneous development of sounds, grammar, meaning, and interaction skills; and significant progress can be made on several different fronts in a matter of days". This indicates that what the child learns at any point in time is a bundle; it cannot be measured. I concluded that acquisition is a continuous and dynamic process involving a large number of transitions and changes that are affected by multiple factors. The developmental sequences of the Yoruba child were described in **Arokoyo** (2011, 2014, 2017); Sanusi and **Arokoyo** (2011); **Arokoyo** and Babatunde (2012); **Arokoyo** and Amaechi (2016); **Arokoyo** and Adekeye (2016); and **Arokoyo** and Tijani (2016), respectively.

Babbling Stage

It is a stage when children begin to experiment with uttering sounds of language, but they do not yet produce any recognisable words. This stage is prior to the development of language, and it occurs between 4 and 6 months. Infants utter all known speech sounds, sound sequences, and syllables. These are meaningless, but they are recognisable. They are also more language-like than the infant cries. Children begin to distinguish between the sounds of their language and those that are not part of it.

The One-Word Stage (Holophrastic)

Children begin using recognisable words by late first year or early second year, between 09 and 18 months. This stage presents each ‘sentence’ as only one ‘word’ long. There have been reports of children articulating their first words as early as four months (Cook, 1979). These words taken from **Arokoyo** (2007) include:

1. names of familiar people, animals and objects in the child’s environment, for example, *bàbá* “father”, *mama* “mother”, *bingo* “name of toy” *bàtà* “shoe” *ojú* “eyes”, *síbí* “spoon” *tiga* “golden morn”, *pinpin* “car” *owo* “hand”, *ajá* “dog”;
2. words indicating specific actions which the child participates in and demands like *sùn* ‘sleep’, *gbé*, ‘carry’ *gbá* ‘play’ *jẹ* ‘eat’, *wá* ‘come’, *kọjá* “pass” *wẹ* “bathe”, *gbe* “carry” *jáde* ‘go out’, *subú* ‘fall down’, *gòkè* ‘go up’ *gbà* “take” *mu* ‘drin’;
3. words used to indicate emotion include negatives like ‘no’. At this stage, negation is also expressed by single negative words, e.g. *titán* “finished” *kòsi* “none” *ún hùn* “no (with shaking of head)”.

Despite being able to mouth the first words, their pronunciation is still not perfect, and there are a lot of sound substitutions at this stage. For example, *ajá* is pronounced as [*adá*] “dog” and *ògèdè* is pronounced as [*dèdè*] “banana”. What was the first word spoken by your child? How excited were you to hear ‘daddy’ or ‘mummy’ for the first time?

Two-Word Stage

The two-word stage is a stage when children begin to put morphemes together. Radford (1990, p.vi) describes this stage as “of paramount importance for any attempt to construct a theory of language acquisition, since it represents the first point at which we have clear evidence that the child has begun to develop a grammar of the language being acquired”. At the early telegraphic stage, which is referred to as proto-syntax by Herschensohn (2000), the child begins to form an elementary two-word structure characterised cross-linguistically by the production of lexical items, an impoverished morphology, null and inverted subjects, sentence-initial negation and the lack of determiners. This stage marks the beginning of the building up of syntactic structures, of merging complements and heads via the process of merger. See the following data:

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------|
| 4. a. Yọọ pampers | b. Ọwọ mi |
| Remove pampers | my hand |

According to Fromkin and Rodman (1983, p.331), “the child’s utterances are not simply words randomly strung together but, from a very early stage, reveal his or her grasp of the principles of sentence formation”. Nomination, noticing, possession, location, requests and imperatives are some of the concepts expressed. Negative words occur at the beginning of expressions; they do not occur between other words. Negative words are also added to any lexical item, as seen in the examples that follow:

- | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------|
| 5. a. n yàrá | b. n tî |
| no room | no tea |
| ‘I am not going to the room. | ‘I don’t want tea.’ |

Looking at Damilare's data at 20 months, there is the addition of *negation plus nouns*. This cannot be found in the speech of adults in the language.

Multi-word Stage

This stage begins from the second year of life and extends to the fifth year. We broadly divided this stage into two to capture the period between 24 and 36 months and 37 to 60 months (i.e. development of two-year-olds and three to five-year-olds), respectively. The period between 24 and 36 months is known as the optional infinitive (OI) stage. Optional infinitive is also known as root infinitive. During the optional infinitive stage, the child, depending on the language being acquired, produces root infinitives, null and Verb Phrase internal subjects, determinerless Noun Phrases, preverbal negation, lack of auxiliaries and lack of verb raising as seen in the following examples:

- | | |
|--|---|
| 6. a. Mama, Tobi Adija
Mummy Tobi Adija
“Mama, Tobi has gone to
Adija’s house.” | b. Mummy geje Tóbi
Mummy cut.eat Tobi
“Mummy, Tobi has
bitten me.” |
|--|---|

The child at the optional infinitive stage also produces sentences containing inflected verbs, overt subjects, post-verbal negation, auxiliaries and verb raising cross-linguistically. At this stage, it is generally observed that the mean length of the child's utterances increases significantly, but there is still an alternation between the different patterns. Cross-linguistic evidence showed that the patterns are in a complementary distribution (Pierce, 1992; Wexler, 1994; Clahsen, 1996). Children acquire all that they need to know quite swiftly without any lag, and by the time a typical child without speech-language impairment (SLI) turns four, he has acquired all parts of the language, including those that are difficult for the adult second language learner. This is the focus of the later studies discussed below.

Acquisition of Argument Structure

In my Ph.D. thesis titled *Acquisition of Argument Structure by Yoruba Children* (Arokoyo, 2010), I explored the early acquisition of Yoruba argument structure and the order of emergence of arguments in the speech of the Yoruba child. The

research was couched in the Minimalist Programme, which believes that language acquisition is a matter of learning vocabulary and determining lexical idiosyncrasies. One of the most important and remarkable achievements of children at the early stage of language acquisition is the development of the lexicon. I looked at the types of verbs and the argument structure that the Yoruba child acquires at a point in time. I did this in order to be able to make claims about how and why children acquire particular types of verbs before others.

The acquisition of null arguments formed another very important part of my discussion in the thesis. I made a proposal about how and why children omit arguments at the optional infinitive stage (OI). I also predicted that when null arguments began to surface, they would eventually disappear from the speech of the Yoruba child. Arguments are NP participants subcategorised by the predicate; they are participants in an activity (Haegeman, 1994). Arguments refer to every participant who plays some role in a syntactic process. Arguments represent the participants in a proposition. The arguments of a verb are made up of subjects and complements.

Arguments stand in different semantic relationships with the predicate. Each argument must have a role it is playing, and the predicate assigns this role. Predicates have thematic structures, so they theta-mark their arguments. The data below illustrate the relationship between a predicate and its arguments:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 7. a. <u>Olú</u> gbá <u>ilẹ̀</u> | b. <u>Tolú</u> pọ̀n <u>omi</u> |
| Olu sweep floor | Tolu fetch water |
| ‘Olu swept the floor.’ | ‘Tolu fetched water.’ |

The underlined words *Olu*, *ilẹ̀* ‘floor’, *Tolú* and *omi* ‘water’ are the arguments of the verb *gbá* ‘to sweep’ and *pọ̀n* ‘to fetch’, respectively: *gbá* and *pọ̀n* assign the role of Agent to *Olu* and *Tolu*.

Two sets of data, i.e. the longitudinal and cross-sectional data, were analysed, and the results were presented. I relied more on the naturalistic longitudinal data for discussion on the order of acquisition of Yoruba argument structure, null arguments, order

of acquisition of transitive and intransitive verbs and nature of overt arguments used by the Yoruba child. I decided on this because these are features common to children at the early stage of syntactic development, a period covered by the longitudinal data. I will present three major findings of the thesis.

Early Lexicon of the Yoruba Child

The lexicon is the human mental dictionary or list of words and their properties, and one of the most important tasks that children acquiring language face is the development of this lexicon. Lexicon development comes at the early stage of language development, right from the pre-grammatical stage (Arokoyo, 2014). I examined the composition of the early lexicon of the Yoruba child and how they are acquired. A quantitative analysis of the data was carried out. At the initial stage, the lexicon is very few in number, but gradually, it is built up. The acquisition of lexical items helps to build the children's lexicon. I also discovered that the first sets of words to be acquired are verbal items, followed by nominal items. The presence of transitive and intransitive verbs is noted in the children's utterances, and I concluded that the children use verbs related to actions and events that they or those around them are involved in.

To test these claims, I examined the early verbs of Damilare and Temiloluwa and Tola from the one-word stage to the early multi-word stage. The boundary for this stage is set at twenty-four (24) months, i.e. two years. By this time, the children's naturalistic speech had become complex. The children moved from the one stage to the early word combination stage in the course of taking the samples. Table 1 below shows the occurrence of nouns and verbs in the children's utterances.

Table 1: Distribution of Nouns and Verbs in the Early Utterances of Damilare, Temiloluwa and Tola

Child	Damilare		Temiloluwa		Tola	
Age (in months)	Nouns	Verbs	Nouns	Verbs	Nouns	Verbs
16	45.8%	47.8%	36.8%	42.1%		
17	45.4%	54%	46.2%	30.7%	27.8%	39.9%
18	45.3%	46.7%	34.6%	30.67%	44.4%	44.4%
19	35.04	44.4%	48.3%	31.0%	33.3%	33.3%
20	41.3%	43.1%	46.7%	30.0%	47.1%	35.3%
21	48.6%	41.3%	42.9%	28.6%	39.3%	28.6%
22	49.3%	41.3%	41.1%	21.4%	22.2%	33.3
23	50.8%	47.7%	41.5%	27.6%	34.3%	28.4%

The distribution shows that the Yoruba child uses verbs more than nouns at this stage. However, with further development, nouns overtake verbs. Figure 1 displays the distribution of Nouns and Verbs in the speech of Damilare:

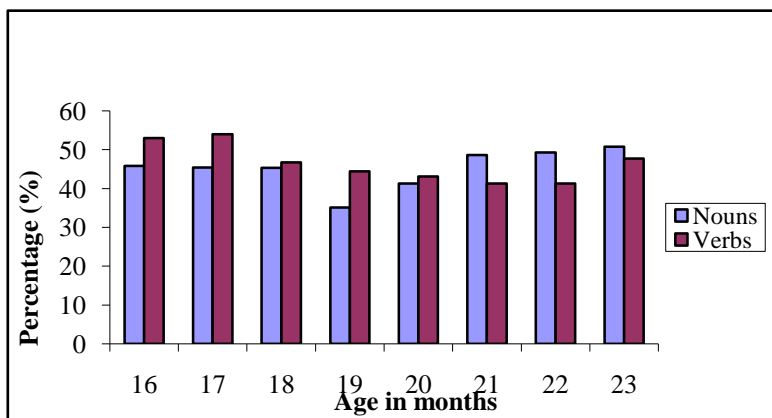


Figure 1: Distribution of Nouns and Verbs in the Early Utterances of Damilare

The statistical representation in Figure 1 above shows the growth and decline of some features. It was discovered that

as children grow, the number of utterances without verbs decreases, which shows that their language is developing typically. Evidence from our cross-sectional data shows that the Yoruba children from thirty-six (36) to sixty (60) months have acquired many language skills and can use language very productively. Every lexical category is represented relatively in their speech. In fact, at this stage, they have a proficiency that is close to that of the adult.

Null Arguments in the Yoruba Child's Early Speech

Across languages, children miss out arguments at the initial stage of acquiring their language. The argument that is missed could be the subject, direct object or indirect object. It is assumed that missing subjects are more readily licensed than missing objects (Wang, Lillo-Martin, Best & Levitt, 1992; Uziel-Karl, 2001a). In Yoruba, argument positions must be filled. This means that a transitive verb, for example, must have two arguments, the subject, which is the external argument and the direct object, the internal argument. These are canonical argument positions. These are, however, missing in the early speech of the Yoruba child. To better understand the phenomenon, we present the following data from Damilare, Temiloluwa, and Tola at 18 months.

- | | | | |
|----|--------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| 8. | a. sùn | b. wẹ̀ | c. jòkó |
| | Sleep | bathe | Sit down |
| | ‘I want to sleep.’ | ‘I want to bathe.’ | ‘Sit down.’ |

The data above show that the children have a high percentage of subject elision. Radford (2000) assumes that children freely allow arguments and predicates to be null if they are *given information*. He claims that in a perfect language, lexical items could have a null PF-spell-out if their content can be pragmatically determined. Ellipsis of phrases, the gapping of heads and the zeroing of arguments are instances of null PF-spell-out in adult language. This is, however, not permitted in Yoruba, as the language does not permit null arguments. The children's use of null arguments characterises a case of null PF spell-out. They take the missing subjects as *given information*.

Acquisition of Verb Argument Structure

The verb constitutes a universal and essential lexical category. Awobuluyi (1979, p.114) says that verbs play a central role in sentences and that they are almost always present in sentences. Verbs especially play a vital role in language structure, in linguistics form-function relations, and in processes of language acquisition and language development (Uziel-Karl, 2001b). Argument structure is a very important aspect of verb knowledge; it provides a good template for understanding how verbs relate to nouns in the process of language acquisition.

The properties of each language influence the acquisition of the language and its argument structure in particular. According to Clark (2002, p.2), ‘since languages differ, their acquisition might also be affected by the properties of each language’. The child who is acquiring Yoruba will have to learn the syntactic category of words in the language and, more importantly, the sub-categorization of verbs in the language. A verb in Yoruba and its equivalent in English could be realised differently. This is because equivalent verbs in these languages would have different patterns in projecting their arguments. For example, the verb ‘love’ in English is a transitive verb that subcategorises for its object, as in *Olu loves you*. The closest equivalent to this form in Yoruba is *Olú fẹ̀ràn rẹ*, which may not have the same meaning as *Olu loves you*. This same sentence is rendered as *Olú ní ifẹ̀ rẹ*, which translates as ‘Olu has love for you’.

Issues like these present good reasons for our study (Arokoyo 2010), as we cannot rely on studies in other languages to capture the peculiarities of the Yoruba language. Arokoyo (2010) therefore, proposed an insight into the mental processes of the child acquiring Yoruba argument structure, as each stage indicates the child's cognitive development level. At what stage does the child use the word, *ifẹ̀* ‘love’ in Yoruba? What of the adult? Which one is easier to say? I love you or *Mo ní ifẹ̀ rẹ*. Does *Mo ní ifẹ̀ rẹ* have the same meaning as ‘I love you’? Is there a more romantic or possessive innuendo in *Mo ní ifẹ̀ rẹ* than in ‘I love you? How is love conceptualised and expressed in

different linguistic and cultural contexts? This is a question for all of us as I say '*Mo ní ifẹ yín*', for being here today.

The acquisition of verbs requires that children engage in both a semantic and a syntactic analysis of forms used in discourse as learning verbs is learning the structure of language. What type of verbs does the Yoruba child initially acquire? What motivates the use of particular verbs at the initial point of acquisition? Did your child ever say something grammatically incorrect but meaningful? That is the beauty of language acquisition.

Implications

Studies on language acquisition have specific implications for education, cognitive science, and artificial intelligence. For instance, in preparing a language teaching syllabus, the curriculum designer would know how to sequence the topics, e.g., moving from simple to complex structures and from concrete to abstract concepts. Having examined the journey of language acquisition from the mouths of babes, we need to know what happens to the patterns and rules that children acquire and internalise when they finally arrive at adult grammar which calls for language description.

Part II: Language Description

Vice-Chancellor Sir, for a linguist to fully grasp linguistic knowledge or competence, it is important to have a good knowledge of the processes associated with how it evolved. Any theory of grammar must have issues of language acquisition underlying it, as the acquisition of language is seen as "the principled build-up of grammar" (Kessler, 1971, p.13). Theories of grammar and language acquisition, in particular, want to know what we know and how we know what we know, i.e. the grammar of language. Once language is acquired, the task of the linguist begins. Language description involves meticulously analysing and documenting the structure and use of language in its many forms.

Language description, often regarded as a core component of linguistics, involves the systematic study and characterisation of a language's structural features, including its phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. The primary purpose of language description is to provide a comprehensive and coherent account of how a language functions, detailing the rules and conventions that govern its use without prescribing how it ought to be used. Language description seeks to understand and document the components of a language and how they interact. Many of my research focuses on the description of languages across the different levels of language analysis. I have explored topics in phonology, morphology, and syntax.

As a linguist with particular interests in syntax, many of my studies delve into syntactic analysis, exploring topics like focus constructions, reflexivisation, null arguments, and children's acquisition of Yoruba syntax. One of my contributions includes **Arokoyo** (2004), which examined the status of the focused Noun Phrase in Owé. It accounts for the different Case Features on the trace and the antecedent in focus constructions. The hypothesis formulated is that the focus marker, being the head of the focus phrase, functions as a Case assigner. This paper concluded by proposing that the Case assigned to the focused Noun Phrase is Emphatic Case.

Arokoyo (2020) examined the phonological systems of the Yorùbá, Owé, Igala and Olùkùmi languages to find a reason for their similarities and differences. These languages belong to the Defoid language family and, by default, are constituents of the Niger-Congo language family. In the study, we established a very strong relationship among these languages, with the discovery of some common lexemes. I, however, discovered that the languages are mutually unintelligible except for Owé, which has a degree of mutual intelligibility with Yoruba. The major reason for divergence is language contact as each group has experiences, relationships and contacts with different peoples and languages.

Furthermore, **Arokoyo** (2016) examined Olùkùmi, an amorphous language on the verge of extinction. The paper

examined the Ugboodu and Ukwunzu varieties of Olùkùmi along with Yorùbá and Igbo languages and found that the two varieties examined are very different from each other. The Ugboodu variety of Olùkùmi is closer to Yorùbá, while the Ukwunzu variety is closer to Igbo. The lexicostatistic analysis showed a higher percentage (77.61%) of cognates between Ugboodu and Yorùbá and between the Ukwunzu variety and Igbo (82.1%), thereby betraying closer affinity between the two sets. The effort of the Ugboodu community to revive the language was also examined. The language that is spoken now is a hybrid of Yorùbá, Igbo, Igala, and Esan languages.

I have also carried out studies on different aspects of Linguistics in the Media. **Arokoyo** (2010) analysed data collected from billboards and vehicles on major roads in Lagos, Ibadan and Ilorin. The study investigated the syntactic structures of the message of outdoor advertisements. It was discovered that despite the constraint on the copywriter to put so many ideas and concepts in a few interesting and understandable words, they still conform to the rules governing language use.

Arokoyo (2019) also conducted a study titled *A Grammatical Analysis of Subtitling in Yoruba Home Videos* with a view to identifying grammatical errors in the media. This study carried out a linguistic analysis of the subtitling of Yoruba home videos into English using a descriptive approach. Three Yoruba home videos, *Atóbijù*, *Yèmíwò* and *Èkọ Funfun*, subtitled in English were purposely chosen for this study. About one hundred and fifty (150) sentences constitute our database. It was discovered that most subtitles are ungrammatical. Words, phrases, and sentences were analysed, and errors at various levels were discovered.

Tense Errors

9. a. That was all I said and she start insulting me.
- b. The she start insulting me.
- c. My mother refuse to believe me.
- d. I will checked back on you.
- e. It is this order that you have you to spoilt everything.

10. a. Did you told mommy that a man dropped her at home?
- b. Didn't your husband told you?
- c. Did your father did the right thing?
- d. When did they brought it
- e. When did you became a drinker Segun?
- f. Where did it reacted

The examples in (9) show tense errors in declarative sentences. The underlined verbs in (9a-c) should be in the past tense while the underlined verb in (9d) should not have the -ed inflection. The presence of the auxiliary 'will' indicate that the sentence is in the future.

The data in (10) are interrogative sentences, yes-no questions and wh-questions. There are peculiarities attached to the formation of these sentences which are not attested in Yoruba. Examples (10a-c) are yes-no questions while (10d-f) are wh-questions. These types of questions require a *yes* or a *no* as an answer. In deriving yes-no questions and some wh-questions in English, the auxiliary verb, along with tense, moves and swaps positions with the subject NP. This is called the Aux-NP inversion.

In situations where there is no auxiliary, a dummy verb, *DO*, is inserted. This is called *DO-Support*. When that happens, *do* and tense move to swap position with the subject-NP. This means that the verb can no longer be inflected for tense as the tense has moved, hence the ungrammaticality of the questions. The questions should rather read:

11. a. Did you tell mommy that a man dropped her at home?
- b. Didn't your husband tell you?
- c. Did your father do the right thing?
- d. When did they bring it?
- e. When did you become a drinker Segun?
- f. Where did it react?

The wrong use of the verb *Do* was also discovered in the subtitles. For example:

12. Did you not sleeping

should read:

13. Are you not sleeping?

Number Errors

14. a. They all has a price
b. She said you is coming
c. Your wife and I has an appointment by 4pm at Larry King hotel.
d. I am not just for any man, if he want to marry me, let him take me to his house.
e. Sidi, give this men whatever they want.

The underlined verbs in (14a-c) should carry the plural forms while the underlined verb in (14d) should be singular. The determiner in (14e) should be plural as it is referring to a plural noun 'men'. In many instances, the first alphabets of names and first words in a sentence are not capitalised. For example:

17. a. What happening? tell me
b. Where is tinuke? is this good?
c. she often speak about you that you are closer friends

Have you ever watched a Nollywood movie with terrible subtitles? Have you seen something like these examples? Have you noticed this in chats and messages expecially by the youth? Some of the errors revealed outright lack of knowledge on the part of the person who did the subtitling while some revealed errors on the part of copywriters and also poor editing. It was recommended that outstanding translators, grammarians, and copy editors be engaged to make the Yoruba home video industry and, by extension, the Nigerian movie industry, otherwise called Nollywood, a money spinner that it should be. It will also help to position the Yoruba movie industry in the proper position, where it can compete favourably with Hollywood and Bollywood. Our students are trained and positioned to be useful in the fieldsof broadcasting, publishing, editing, and proofreading.

Implications

The primary purpose of language description is to provide a detailed and coherent account of how a language functions, detailing the rules and conventions that govern its use without prescribing how it should be used. Understanding the structure of language helps refine translation strategies, natural language processing, and speech recognition systems. That is why theoretical or descriptive linguistics is still the core of linguistics, as it serves as the input to be applied. Language description helps linguists with the necessary tools needed to preserve, document, and revitalise languages at the risk of extinction.

Part III: Language Documentation and Revitalisation

Vice-Chancellor Sir, language is life and it encodes our identity. Language encodes our communicative systems, our knowledge systems, our belief systems. Language loss translates to the loss of all these systems but, more importantly, the loss of our identities. Nigeria has about five hundred indigenous languages with various designations and classifications. These languages belong to the African language families of Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo, while one Nigerian language, Lufu, is unclassified. There are the three major Nigerian languages; Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba being languages of the three major ethnic groups in the country.

Other major and minor languages include Fulfulde, Kanuri, Tiv, Ibibio, Igala, Edo, Esan, Birom, Nupe, Isoko, Kamuku, Mwaghavul, Epira, etc. The classifications of the languages as either major or minor are done based on the population of the speakers. French, Arabic, Chinese, and German are some of the exoglossic languages in Nigeria. English is the official national language; it is the lingua franca, the language of education and the language of wider communication.

Nigerian languages have many forces to contend with. There are forces of globalisation and glocalisation that are causing the loss or endangerment of both small and major languages. There is a conservative estimate that 50% of the

world's languages will be lost in the 21st Century, translating to one language disappearing every two weeks (Crystal, 2000). For most languages facing language loss, the threat of endangerment eats slowly but deeply. A language becomes endangered when it is no longer learnt by children, and there is no intergenerational transfer. Any language parents no longer pass on to their children will likely disappear if conscious efforts are not made.

A language also becomes endangered when there are social and economic pressures from other languages. Gradually, there are language shifts, which will eventually lead to language loss. This is the case of many minority languages in Nigeria. The case is highly pronounced in Northern Nigeria, where Hausa is spoken in virtually all domains, usurping other minority languages like Fungwa, Gbagyi, Pongu, Kamuku, etc. Olùkùmi spoken in Delta State, South-South, Nigeria, is a language also suffering from the influence of Igbo and other languages surrounding it.

With the state of these languages, many varied efforts have been put in place for their documentation, revitalisation and description. The National Policy on Education assigns different status and roles to the languages, but implementation has been a problem. There are really no concerted efforts on the part of the government to stem the tide of language death. There are documented efforts from individuals, groups, associations (Linguistic Association of Nigeria) and communities to help in mitigating the course of language loss. I have worked extensively on Olùkùmi and Owé. Olùkùmi, labeled as Ulukwumi (ISO-639-3 ulb), is an endangered Edekiri language of the Yoruboid group enclaved by the Igbo communities in the Aniocha North Local Government Area of Delta state of Nigeria. Owé is a dialect of Yoruba (ISO-639-3 yor) spoken in Kabba and her surrounding in communities in Kabba-Binu Local Government of Kogi State, North Central Nigeria. The following sections describe various efforts at preservation and documentation using digital tools and techniques.

The Olùkùmi Talking Dictionary

The Olùkùmi Talking Dictionary (Anderson, **Arokoyo**, & Harrison, 2015) is part of our language preservation and revitalisation efforts of the Olùkùmi language. The dictionary is a vital tool in preserving an endangered language, ensuring that future generations can speak Olùkùmi. It is an English-Olùkùmi and Olùkùmi-English bilingual dictionary with Yoruba and Igbo equivalents. The Olùkùmi Talking Dictionary was designed with the Talking Dictionary App in 2012-2015. There are five hundred and twenty-one (521) Olùkùmi headwords with corresponding glosses in Olùkùmi and English. Two hundred and twenty-two (222) audio files provide pronunciation of some of the words. The dictionary is available at: <http://talkingdictionary.swarthmore.edu/olukumi>.

The Bilingual Dictionaries

The Olùkùmi Bilingual Dictionary and Owé Bilingual Dictionary (**Arokoyo**, 2017; **Arokoyo** & Mabodu, 2017) are contemporary simple learners' dictionaries compiled and published in conjunction with the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, USA. The data for the dictionary was collected over a period of more than eight years (for Olùkùmi) and fifteen years (for Owé) and the elicitation still continues. Owé traditional oral genres and performances like cognomen '*oriki*', masquerade chants '*àbọ' egún*', proverbs, idioms and abuse '*òghe, ùfẹ̀ àti ogeèbú* etc. also served as sources of our data. Other secondary sources were also consulted. The dictionaries were compiled using Lexique Pro, dictionary software developed by SIL. Efforts are on to produce the online publication of the dictionaries.

The two dictionaries have appendixes that provide useful additional information. Charts for language learning and teaching were provided. Information about vocabulary, including nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, the pronominal system, number, time and season, colours, etc., was provided. Sample simple sentences, greetings, proverbs, and idioms were provided.

The Owé Lexicon

The Owé Lexicon was designed using the Lexique Pro (**Arokoyo**, 2018). The language of the lexicon is Owé which is used as the title of the lexicon on the homepage and the task bar. The gloss language chosen for this dictionary is English with its appropriate language marker. There are many field markers which provide grammatical, semantic, etymological, etc. information about the entries. For every entry in the dictionary, the gloss, part of speech, example sentences in Owé and translation in English were provided. Phonetic forms were provided where necessary as Owé is phonetic. The need for better equipment has stalled the addition of sounds and pictures in the dictionary. As stated earlier, however, the data elicitation still continues and with the software, changes, amendments and corrections can be made. Reviews are also possible. With more data, more sound files will also be created. Available online at: www.bolanlearokoyo.com/Owe - Lexicon/lexicon/index.htm

Language Learning and Teaching Charts

Charts are important as they help us to know basic things, hence their importance in the teaching and learning of languages. We have been able to develop some charts in both Olùkùmi and Owé which could be used in teaching and learning (**Arokoyo**, 2017; **Arokoyo & Mabodu**, 2017). This would only be done in unofficial capacities as Olùkùmi and Owé are not used for teaching and learning in schools. The charts could be mass produced for the communities. Charts showcasing Olùkùmi and Owé *alphabets, numbers, parts of the body, animals, food items, fruits, materials/colours, and household items* were developed. Two charts are presented below taken from **Arokoyo** and Mabodu (2017):

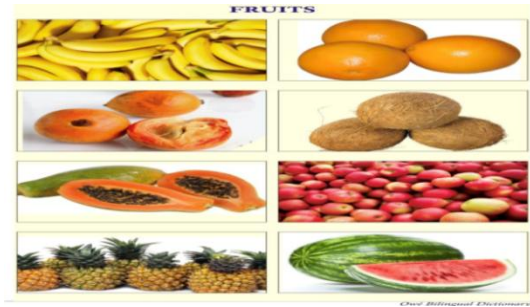


Figure 2: Olùkùmi Fruits Arokoyo & Mabodu (2017, p.119)

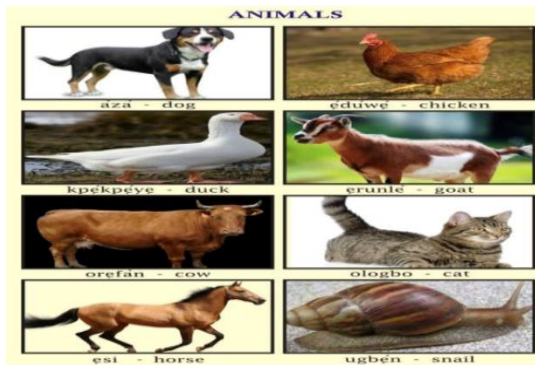


Figure 3: Olùkùmi Animals Arokoyo & Mabodu (2017, p.121)

Implications

Vice-Chancellor Sir, imagine waking up one day and your language is no longer spoken by anyone. How would you feel? What can we do to stop this from happening? The most important essence of language documentation and revitalisation is to ensure that endangered languages, along with their histories, traditions, orature, and Indigenous knowledge systems, are preserved before they become extinct. Linguistic rights and cultural preservation efforts of indigenous communities are supported.

Online repositories such as *the Living Tongues App* and *the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR)* and projects like *the Olùkùmi Talking Dictionary* ensure that languages are not only recorded and archived, but also made accessible to a global audience and also made available for future generations. A critical contribution of language revitalisation is education and language policy. A case in point was the effort to integrate indigenous languages as done with the 6-3-3-4 system when a Nigerian language was compulsory at all levels. Inter-generational transmission of language is a key factor in revitalisation as a language that is not being transferred from generation to generation cannot survive.

The 21st Century Linguist

The 21st Century linguist is a dynamic, interdisciplinary scholar who combines traditional linguistic expertise with modern tools and global awareness to address the complexities of language in a rapidly evolving world. Our role has expanded beyond the academic study of language to encompass practical applications in technology, education, social justice, and cultural preservation. Today's linguist is not just a theorist, but a problem solver working in speech technology, translation services, language preservation, artificial intelligence, etc.

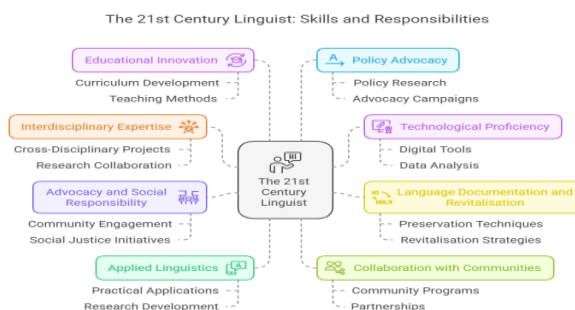


Figure 4: Diagrammatic Representation of the 21st Century Linguist

Some Core Attributes and Contributions of the 21st Century Linguist

1. **Language Technological Proficiency and Development:** Modern linguists leverage digital tools for research, such as software for corpus analysis, acoustic analysis (e.g., Praat), and field documentation (e.g., ELAN) and building tools like chatbots, translation apps, and speech-to-text systems that rely on linguistic research. We also engage with technologies like artificial intelligence and machine learning to process and analyse large linguistic datasets. Linguists contribute to the development of systems like Google Translate by creating grammars and datasets for underrepresented languages. Examples of large linguistic data sets I have created are the Olùkùmi and Owé data sets (Anderson, **Arokoyo**, & Harrison, 2015; **Arokoyo**, 2017; **Arokoyo** & Mabodu, 2017; **Arokoyo**, 2025a; **Arokoyo**, 2025b). The corpora for the Olùkùmi language and Owé dialect were collected over a period of about ten years. The documentation and revitalisation efforts of the languages continue. The database for the corpora are the Talking Dictionaries and the Living Dictionary App ((Anderson, **Arokoyo**, & Harrison, 2015; **Arokoyo**, 2025a; **Arokoyo**, 2025b). The dictionaries can be found at: livingdictionaries.app/olukumi/entries/list and livingdictionaries.app/owe/entries/list.
2. **Collaboration with Communities:** Linguists of the 21st century emphasise working with language communities as partners rather than subjects. We prioritise ethical research practices, ensuring that documentation and revitalisation efforts benefit the communities involved. I have been actively involved with the communities that I have worked with. The community took total charge of the launching of the Olùkùmi Bilingual Dictionary at Ugboodu, Delta State in December, 2018. It was a giving back to the community.



Figure 5: Ugbođu during the Presentation of the Olukumi Bilingual Dictionary

3. **Advocacy and Social Responsibility:** Modern linguists advocate for linguistic rights, such as the right to mother tongue education and the recognition of minority languages. We address issues like linguistic discrimination and work to promote equitable access to language resources and opportunities. I have been actively involved in the Olùkùmi, Okun, Owe, and Oworo Orthography projects. My seminal works on the phonology of the Okun dialects and designing the orthography of the Okun dialects have been a reference point. I am the consultant for the Oworo Orthography Committee, and the Owé Orthography Committee set up by the Oluku Club of Kabba. I worked with the Bible Society of Nigeria (BSN) on the quality assurance of the Okun Bible published in 2022. I, along with my team, proofread the sixty-six books of the bible. *My Owé Linguistics: an Introduction, Owé Bilingual Dictionary, and Olùkùmi Bilingual Dictionary* serve as the core materials used for the ongoing work on Owé Bible and Olùkùmi Bible by the Mission for Language Translation (MLT). I was also a part of a team that visited some communities in Kwara North to advocate for the right to mother tongue education. It was a community service for Kwara State University, Maleté. We visited Animaje, Gbugudu and Gaa Alaanu.



Figure 6: Mother Tongue Advocacy Visit to *Animaje, Gbugudu and Gaa Alaanu*

The linguist of the 21st century is a versatile, innovative, and socially conscious professional, whose work transcends academia, addressing global challenges while respecting local realities. By combining traditional linguistic knowledge with modern technology and interdisciplinary collaboration, they play a pivotal role in preserving linguistic diversity, advancing communication technologies, and advocating for linguistic equity in an interconnected world.

The new and current curriculum approved by NUC, the Core Curriculum Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS), requires students of linguistics to be highly ICT literate and be able to apply new technologies, methodologies and theories relevant to linguistic training. The curriculum also requires that the students develop 21st-century skills that will make them not only employable but also employers of labour. This is highly in line with the needs of the society.

Indigenous Languages: Linguistics Curriculum, Nigerian Language Policy and UNESCO's Statement

The overview of the NUC-CCMAS for B. A. Linguistics captures the essence of indigenous languages thus:

Nigeria is a pluralistic society with over 500 languages and 250 ethnic groups. This diversity, together with the human development indices and the new realities of globalisation and ICTs, pose enormous challenges for curriculum development and training. The value of indigenous languages to Nigeria's development has not

been explored adequately in spite of what is universally known about the critical role of indigenous languages in fostering literacy, educational achievement, scientific development, originality, creativity, innovative and abstract thinking, the generation, preservation, transmission and conversion of knowledge, identity formation, national integration, and peaceful and harmonious coexistence (NUC-ARTS-CCMAS 2023, p.413).

The Policy Statement on Language Use in Education, which is embedded within the National Language Policy (2022), provides guidelines on the use of languages in Nigeria's education system. It recognises Nigeria's multilingual nature and the need to promote Indigenous languages while maintaining English as the country's official language. UNESCO's statement on indigenous languages highlights the importance of preserving, revitalising, and promoting indigenous languages, as they are essential for cultural diversity, sustainable development, and the preservation of human heritage.

Nigeria's National Language Policy and *UNESCO's* statement on indigenous languages emphasise the importance of linguistic diversity in education, identity formation, and national development. Despite the fact that the policy in Nigeria is well-articulated, weak enforcement and societal preferences for English hinder its effectiveness. The framework of UNESCO provides a global perspective that underlies the urgency of language preservation, urging nations to take decisive steps toward integrating indigenous languages into education and public life. This fact clearly underscores the importance of indigenous languages in education. While the connection between language and the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) is not straightforward, there is an unclear fact that they might be related. Let us take a look at some of the countries of the world ably represented by some countries in Africa, Europe and North America, their official languages and their HDI:

Africa

1. **Algeria:** Arabic, Berber
2. **Angola:** Portuguese L-HDI
3. **Benin:** French L-HDI
4. **Botswana:** English, SetswanaL-HDI
5. **Burkina Faso:** French L-HDI
6. **Burundi:** Kirundi, French L-HDI
7. **Cameroon:** English, French L-HDI
8. **Cape Verde:** Portuguese L-HDI
9. **Central African Republic:** French, Sango L-HDI
10. **Chad:** French, Arabic L-HDI
11. **Comoros:** Comorian, Arabic, French L-HDI
12. **Congo (Democratic Republic):** French L-HDI
13. **Congo (Republic):** French L-HDI
14. **Djibouti:** Arabic, French L-HDI
15. **Egypt:** Arabic L-HDI
16. **Equatorial Guinea:** Spanish, French, PortugueseL-HDI
17. **Eswatini:** Swazi, English L-HDI
18. **Ethiopia:** Amharic L-HDI
19. **Gabon:** French L-HDI
20. **Nigeria:** English L-HDI
21. **Rwanda:** Kinyarwanda, English, French, Swahili L-HDI

Europe

1. **Albania:** Albanian H-HDI
2. **Andorra:** Catalan VH-HDI
3. **Austria:** German VH-HDI
4. **Belarus:** Belarusian, Russian VH-HDI
5. **Belgium:** Dutch, French, German VH-HDI
6. **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian H-HDI
7. **Bulgaria:** Bulgarian H-HDI
8. **Croatia:** Croatian VH-HDI
9. **Czech Republic:** Czech VH-HDI
10. **Denmark:** Danish VH-HDI
11. **Estonia:** Estonian VH-HDI
12. **Finland:** Finnish, Swedish VH-HDI
13. **France:** French VH-HDI

14. **Germany:** German VH-HDI
15. **Greece:** Greek VH-HDI
16. **Hungary:** Hungarian VH-HDI
17. **Iceland:** Icelandic VH-HDI
18. **Ireland:** Irish, English VH-HDI
19. **United Kingdom:** English VH-HDI
20. **Vatican City:** Latin, Italian VH-HDI

North America

1. **Antigua and Barbuda:** English H-HDI
2. **Bahamas:** English VH-HDI
3. **Barbados:** English H-HDI
4. **Belize:** English H-HDI
5. **Canada:** English, French VH-HDI
6. **Costa Rica:** Spanish VH-HDI
7. **Cuba:** Spanish H-HDI
8. **Dominica:** English H-HDI
9. **Dominican Republic:** Spanish H-HDI
10. **El Salvador:** Spanish M-HDI
11. **Grenada:** English H-HDI
12. **Guatemala:** Spanish M-HDI
13. **Haiti:** French, Haitian Creole L-HDI
14. **Honduras:** Spanish M-HDI
15. **Jamaica:** English H-HDI
16. **Mexico:** Spanish H-HDI
17. **Nicaragua:** Spanish M-HDI
18. **Saint Vincent and the Grenadines:** English H-HDI
19. **Trinidad and Tobago:** English H-HDI
20. **United States:** None (de facto English) VH-HDI

Adapted from United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), (2022)

From the foregoing, we can see that all countries using their indigenous languages are developed, i.e., have Very High and High HDI, while all countries using foreign languages as official languages and language of instruction are Least Developed (Low HDI). Others fall between Developing (Medium HDI) and other classifications.

Most of the key aspects of NLPE and UNESCO's Statement are key to developing indigenous languages, which also significantly affect the HDI. For example, they advocate for mother-tongue instruction to enhance learning outcomes and language and knowledge preservation. This is based on extensive research showing that children learn better and faster when taught in their native language (Fafunwa, 1971, Bamgbose, 2000). This leads to higher *literacy rates* and *better cognitive development* (Kosonen, 2005), reduced dropout rates in schools, particularly in multilingual societies like Nigeria and *increased confidence and classroom engagement* as students better understand lessons. The problem of development in Nigeria is compounded by high illiteracy, low school enrolment, low educational achievement and the threat to local languages and cultures due to globalisation and the spread of the English language to the traditional domains of indigenous languages (NUC-ARTS-CCMAS, 2023). Most people who are classified as illiterates are really not. They just do not understand or speak the English language well. Their performance would be better if they were taught in their mother tongue. The English language is definitely not a measure of intelligence.

Vice-Chancellor Sir, with the multilingual nature of Nigeria, with about 500 languages, it is difficult to choose an indigenous language as the official language. Ethnic and regional identities tied to language will lead to political tensions, making national consensus difficult. Nigeria's linguistic diversity reflects the fragmentation reported in the biblical story of the *Tower of Babel*. This linguistic fragmentation symbolises the rich culture of Nigeria and the challenges of communication. Although adopting a single indigenous language may not be possible, strategic policies can help preserve linguistic heritage, enhance national unity, and promote development. The Geo-political Zones and States that speak the same language can adopt their indigenous languages as the medium of communication and teaching.

Linguists should be at the forefront of creating tools for translation and data for large language models (LLM). Instead of viewing linguistic diversity as a curse, Nigeria can embrace it as

a resource for innovation, cultural identity, and economic growth. It is therefore important that Linguistics programmes address the existing training deficits, enlarge the space for graduates' participation in national development and the global economy, and imprint Nigerian indigenous knowledge and linguistic footprints on the global flows of knowledge and content production ((NUC-ARTS-CCMAS 2023, p. 413).

AI and LLMs have incredible potential to support indigenous languages. However, the challenge is that AI models are only as good as the data they are trained on because many indigenous and endangered languages lack sufficient digital resources. This means that AI cannot accurately learn them without deliberate efforts to provide high-quality data. To truly support advancement in the world of information technology, AI must be trained on high-quality, community-driven linguistic data. This is why documentation efforts across levels and genres are very important. Without these foundational resources, AI cannot accurately capture the resources, principles, and parameters of these languages.

Future Directions for Language Research and Preservation

1. The Yoruba Dialects Project is an ongoing project that aims to create digital archives of Yoruba dialects, along with oral narratives, in collaboration with indigenous communities.
2. **The Documenting Owe Oral Literature Project** aims to document myths, legends, cognomen and folktales of the Owé people.
3. **Developing a Digital Reference Repository for Academic Resources in the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages** is an ongoing project that seeks to make academic material available in digital formats, it is meant to enhance digital access and make the resources in the department more visible. The project is positioned to be scaled up to other departments and the university as a whole. It is sponsored by the Senate Research Grant. <http://capstonepro1.omeka.net/>

Contributions to the University

My journey at the University of Ilorin has been dedicated to academic excellence, leadership, and institutional development. I have risen through the ranks from a Graduate Assistant appointed in 2001 to a Professor in 2023. I am currently the Head, Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages. I humbly occupy the position of the first female professor and first female Head of Department. I have worked to strengthen academic programmes and foster collaborations. I have served as an External Examiner and consultants to different institutions and projects. I am presently a Fellow of the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, Oregon, USA. I served as a Level Adviser across all levels from 2001 to 2016 and as the Examination Officer from 2007 to 2011. I also served as the departmental Postgraduate Coordinator from 2017 to 2019.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, in addition to teaching and research, I have served in key committees focused on development, project oversight, and student engagement. These include: Member, Faculty of Arts Quality Assurance Committee, 2023 to Date; Member, Senate Committee on PG Board, 2025; Member, Committee on the Inauguration of the Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Ilorin, 2023, Member, University of Ilorin Branded Project Committee, 2021 to 2023; Chairperson, Faculty Undergraduate Project Committee, 2021 to 2023; Chairperson, Result Verification Committee, 2022; Member, Board of Unilorin 89.3 FM, 2020 to 2023; Member, Faculty Ethical Review Committee, 2017 to 2019; Member, Digital Committee, Faculty of Arts, 2017 to 2019; Member representing Faculty of Arts on the Board of Centre for International Education (CIE) University of Ilorin (2015 to 2017); Member, Faculty Time Table and Room Usages Committee (2013 to 2017); Secretary, Ilorin Journal of Language, Literature and Culture, 2006 to 2017; Editor-in-Chief, Ilorin Journal of Language, Literature and Culture, 2023 to Date; Member Faculty of Arts Web-ring Committee 2011 to 2017. I served as the President of the Academic Multipurpose Cooperative Society, University of Ilorin, from 2014 to 2016.

Conclusion

Vice-Chancellor, Sir, based on the findings and discussions in this lecture, it is clear that language acquisition, description, documentation, and revitalisation are crucial to preserving linguistic diversity and ensuring the continued transmission of cultural heritage. We began by exploring language acquisition, affirming that every human child is born with an innate capacity to learn language. The journey from the mouths of babes to the wisdom of elders has far-reaching implications shaping educational policies, curriculum development, cultural identity, technological and global advancements. Every language has a full repertoire of knowledge, tradition, and ways of understanding the world. The task of preserving, revitalising, sustaining and promoting linguistic diversity is for everyone. If we fail to act, we risk losing not just languages, but entire cultural legacies, histories, and identities. However, with commitment, innovation, and collaboration, we can ensure that languages continue to thrive from the mouths of babes to the wisdom of elders.

Recommendations

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, the following recommendations are hereby proposed to guide future efforts in language research, education, policy-making, and technological development.

1. **Strengthen Indigenous Language Education:** Governments, educational institutions, and language communities should integrate indigenous and minority languages into formal and informal education systems to ensure their survival and continued use. This will support natural language acquisition and foster early literacy development in the child's dominant language(s).
2. **Expand Language Documentation and Research:** Universities, research institutions, government agencies, and international organisations should prioritise documenting endangered languages to preserve their grammatical structures, vocabulary, and cultural narratives by increasing funding.
4. **Promote Language Revitalisation through Technology and Media:** Governments, technology companies, and cultural organisations should leverage digital tools and media to revitalise and promote endangered languages.
5. **Advocate for Linguistic Rights and Language Policy Implementation:** Governments and policymakers should recognise the linguistic rights of indigenous language speakers and enforce policies that protect and promote language diversity.
5. **Encourage Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Linguistic Research:** In line with 21st century expectations, linguists should collaborate with professionals in technology, anthropology, education, and policy-making to enhance the effectiveness of language preservation and revitalisation efforts.

6. **Integrate Business and Entrepreneurial Training into Linguistics Programmes:** Universities and training institutions should incorporate business, digital marketing, and entrepreneurship courses into linguistics programmes to equip the 21st century linguists with the skills needed to start language-based businesses such as translation, language teaching, consulting, and AI development.
7. **Introduce Student Industrial Work Experience Scheme:** Linguistics students should be exposed to industry experience through the introduction of the Student Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES).
8. **Adequate Implementation of CCMAS Minimum Academic Standards:** Governments, institutions, and organisations should ensure that the staff, facilities and equipment, library, and office space needed to train 21st-century linguists, as stipulated in the CCMAS, are provided.

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