

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE AMOUNT & QUALITY OF DOCUMENTATION OF THE ETULO LANGUAGE OF BENUE STATE.

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Abstract: Small language groups in Nigeria and Benue State in particular are amongst the most understudied and undocumented in the world. This makes most of the languages that are almost all endangered to suffer from low vitality. The amount and quality of documentation of a language speak volumes about the vitality of the language and the extent to which an intervention is needed. The aim of this study is to assess the amount and quality of documentation for the Etulo language, a small language group spoken in a part of the Etulo Council ward of Buruku Local Government of Benue State, Nigeria with a view of identifying the amount and quality of documentation. It employed the use of the structured sociolinguistic questionnaire, focus groups discussions and participant observations for data collection. A sample of 340 respondents was used for the study. The findings show that the Etulo language does not have any amount of documentation which is one of the main reasons why its vitality is very low. It was recommended that the government should make policies that protect the Etulo language and other small language groups in Benue state and hire language specialists to write a grammar and phonology of the Etulo language and include it into the school curriculum as well re-introduce its use in the media.

Index Terms – Documentation, inadequate, fragmentary, fair, good, superlative.

I. INTRODUCTION

Language Documentation is a new area within sociolinguistics that has emerged as a response to the growing crisis of language endangerment. More so, based on the fact that, the number of endangered languages in the world appears to be unknown, language documentation has become so pertinent to enable languages keep their vitality. In the study of the linguistic vitality of small language groups, the amount and quality of documentation for the language is very important as it is a key determinant of the level at which the language is used in the media, schools, other official domains, business and at home. When a language has documents to be used in teaching and learning, it goes a long way in determining the level of the vitality of the language and possible ways to help enhance the vitality of such a language. The amount and quality of documentation of small language groups such as the Etulo language has not been accounted for even though, other languages in the Benue valley have their documentation accounted for. Prominent amongst these languages is the Eggon language in Nasarawa state Nigeria (Suleiman, 2016).

Himmelman (1998: 166) wrote:

“The aim of a language documentation is to provide a comprehensive record of the linguistic practices characteristic of a given speech community... This ... differs fundamentally from ... language description [which] aims at the record of a language... as a system of abstract elements, constructions, and rules.”

Language documentation has also been made possible by mature information technologies that now allow to create sound and video recordings and integrate them with text and other explanatory or analytical material. Additionally, local language communities like the Etulo get stronger relationships with their language heritage materials, because multimedia materials are more easily used by them for local activities aimed at supporting their languages. A language documentation project aims at creating audio, video, graphic and text documents covering how a given language is used in a variety of social and cultural contexts.

Brenzinger et al. (2003), see the amount and quality of documentation of a language as one of the most pertinent parameters in determining the linguistic vitality of any language. Typically, language documentation is aimed at providing a wide audience with knowledge about a language and how it is used culturally, socially and interpersonally, i.e., not only academics, but also community members, teachers and learners.

According to Austin (2008), the core of a documentation is a corpus of audio and/or video materials with transcription, multi-tier annotation, translation into a language of wider communication, and relevant metadata on context and use of the materials – the corpus will ideally be large, cover a diverse range of genres and contexts, be expandable, opportunistic, portable, transparent, ethical and preservable as a result documentation is increasingly done by teams rather than ‘lone wolf linguists’ need to see grammatical analysis and description as a tertiary-level activity contingent on and emergent from the documentation corpus. There is a tendency among some researchers to equate documentation outcomes with archival objects, that is, the number and volume of recorded digital audio and/or video files and their related transcription, annotation, translation and metadata. Mere quantity of objects is not a proxy for quality of research. Equally, some would argue that outcomes which contribute to language maintenance and revitalization are the true measure of the quality of a documentation project. Himmelman (2006), Harrison (2005), Coelho (2005), Eisenbeiss (2005) and others have pointed to the importance of taking a multidisciplinary perspective in language documentation and drawing in researchers, theories and methods from a wide range of areas, including sociolinguistics, social anthropology, musicology and applied linguistics etc).

The Etulo language is an Idomoid language spoken in parts of the Etulo council ward of Buruku local government area in Benue State, Nigeria. The Etulo people reside both banks of the River Katsina-Ala in Benue state, Nigeria. It is not used in the media nor in official domains and it is also not the official language of the speech community. It is not studied nor used in schools

and clinics or any official domain within the speech community but used at home and other community meetings and festivals as well as the river banks of River Katsina-Ala in Benue State.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Population and Sample

The population for the study was 2900 (Blench, 2019). It covered the speakers of the Etulo language in all the nine clans of the Etulo speech community within the Etulo council ward in Buruku Local government area of Benue state. The sample for the study was derived using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) and the sample was 340 respondents. The 340 copies of the data collection instrument, were administered based on quota sampling procedure across the study area uniformly amongst male and female sexes, for the sake of obtaining a fair result from both genders. The study area comprised of nine clans of the Etulo language speakers and were all covered accordingly.

2.2. Data and Sources of Data

For this study, primary and secondary data were collected and used. The respondents and the focus groups were the primary sources of data for this study while Ethnologue, Glottologue and the library were the secondary sources of data. The sociolinguistic questionnaire was administered to the respondents and retrieved for analysis while the discussions with the focus groups were used to elicit more data from the etulo language speakers, who could not be accommodated as part of the respondents for this study. The Ethnologue, glottologue and library provided empirical data for this study as studies on the quality and amount of documentation of other languages was studied in them and reviewed in this study. The data was quantitatively analyzed using frequency tables and simple percentages and shall be presented and discussed in the next session.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 3.1: Quality and amount of documentation for the Etulo language.

Options	SA	A	N	D	SD
Inadequate	337 99.12%	3 0.88%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%
Fragmentary	0 0%	0 0%	2 0.59%	137 40.29%	201 59.12%
Fair	0 0%	0 0%	1 0.29%	39 11.47%	300 88.24%
Good	0 0%	0 0%	2 0.59%	13 3.82%	325 95.59%
Superlative	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	3 0.88%	337 99.12%

Source: Fieldwork, 2019

Table 3.1 above has all the requisite information needed to answer the above question in addition to the responses elicited from the focus groups discussions and the face-to-face personal interviews. The quality and amount of documentation for any language unlike the other factors for the assessment of the linguistic vitality of small language groups above is a major indicator of the linguistic vitality of any language. In this study, we looked at the amount, quality and availability of grammatical sketches, word lists, texts, audio and video recordings for the language and if they are of usable quality, are either annotated or un-annotated in the Etulo language.

On whether there is an inadequate amount and quality of documentation, 99.12% (337) of the respondents strongly agreed that Etulo language grammatical sketches, short word-lists, audio and video recordings for the Etulo language do not exist, while 0.88% (3) of the respondents also agreed with the assertion of the majority above that there is no documentation for the Etulo language. Thus clearly positing that the amount and quality of documentation for the Etulo is grossly absent and reportedly inadequate.

Also when asked whether the amount and quality of documentation was fragmentary, meaning that there are some Etulo grammatical sketches, word-lists and texts useful for limited linguistic research but with inadequate coverage and poor audio and video recordings in varying quality, 59.12% (201) of the respondents strongly disagreed while 40.29% (137) disagreed that the amount and quality of documentation for the Etulo language was not fragmentary with 0.59% (2) of the respondents neutral as to whether the amount and quality of documentation was fragmentary.

Again, the respondents were asked whether the amount and quality of documentation was fair, that is if the Etulo language has an adequate grammar or sufficient amount of grammars, dictionaries and texts, but no everyday media, but with audio and video recordings for Etulo; 88.24% (300) of the respondents strongly disagreed that such a thing does not exist as far as the Etulo language is concerned, 11.47% (39) also disagreed that the amount and quality of documentation of the Etulo language is fair, then 0.29% (1) of the respondents were neutral as to whether the amount and quality of documentation for the Etulo language was fair.

Another inquisition was made on whether the amount and quality of documentation was good, that is to say the Etulo has a good grammar and a number of adequate grammars in existence, dictionaries, texts, literature and occasionally updated everyday media and adequate annotated high quality audio and video recordings but 95.59% (325) of the respondents strongly disagreed that the Etulo language does not have any amount of documentation, while 3.82% (13) of the respondents also disagreed that the quality and amount of documentation was good and 0.59% (2) were neutral as to whether the amount and quality of documentation of the Etulo language was good..

Finally, an inquisition was made as to whether the amount and quality of documentation for the Etulo language was superlative, that is the Etulo language has comprehensive grammars and dictionaries, extensive texts and constant flow of language materials with abundant annotated high-quality audio and video recordings, but 99.12% (337) of the respondents strongly disagreed that the Etulo language has nothing close to any form of documentation, while another 0.88% (3) of the respondents also disagreed that the Etulo language does not have any form of documentation.

Discussions with focus groups and face-to-face personal interviews with some Etulo first language speakers revealed that, because the Etulo language has no orthography, there was no documentation for the language which is while there is not translation of the Holy Bible into the Etulo language, nor the translation of the catholic missal into the Etulo language as well. Observations also revealed that there is no publication of any kind that is written in the Etulo language that was found within the speech community. A visit to the scanty and near empty library of the only government school was a proof that there is no book written in the Etulo language and this was confirmed by the teachers in the school.

Consequently, from the foregoing above, the researcher is left with no other option than to agree with the respondents and the focus groups that there is no documentation for the Etulo language. With respect to the amount and quality of documentation, there is no material/document of any kind on the Etulo language that is written in Etulo, because the Etulo has no orthography and therefore, it is almost impossible to write a grammar or text of or for the Etulo language.

According to an oral interview source who claimed that the Holy Bible was said to have been translated into the Etulo language by Rev. Pastor Peter Angulu, but till date no scrap of such a Bible has been seen. There is therefore, an absence of documentation for the Etulo language which is why the respondents reported as grossly inadequate.

The quality and amount of documentation for the Etulo language depends on the quality of the grammar of the language whether there are few grammatical sketches, some grammatical sketches, an adequate grammar, a good grammar or comprehensive grammars of the Etulo language of Benue state. It also answers the question as to whether there are dictionaries, the quality and amount of the word-lists available, the quality and kind of texts available, the quality and amount of literature, the quality and amount of the Etulo language that is used in everyday media and the amount and quality of audio and video recordings for the Etulo language and if it is annotated or with varying degrees of annotation or unannotated.

The above factors that determine the amount and quality of documentation listed above are judged as either superlative meaning the quality and amount of documentation is very excellent for example in languages like the Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Urhobo and then Tiv etc or good, fair, fragmentary and inadequate with the last meaning that there are massive short-comings in the quality and amount of documentation or a near absence of documentation of the language.

The responses to the sociolinguistic questionnaire as well as additional information from the focus groups discussions and face-to-face discussions and observations show that there is a total absence of documentation for the Etulo language. This is because the Etulo language has no orthography and writing system and so it is almost impossible to have any form of literature, grammar, dictionaries, word-lists and other variables that are indicators of a good amount and quality of documentation for any language.

As shown in the responses to the sociolinguistic questionnaire, observations from school libraries within the community, focus groups' discussions and face-to-face personal interviews. The Etulo language no documentation of any kind. According to Brenzinger, et al (2003), as a guide for assessing the urgency for documenting a language, the type and quality of existing language materials must be identified. Of central importance are written texts, including transcribed, translated, and annotated audio-visual recordings of natural speech.

Schultze-Berndt (2015) state that a language documentation will, however, often include other materials such as a lexical database printed or online dictionaries, additional materials derived from the primary corpus or providing the context for parts of the corpus, or an introductory grammatical description or glossary. It is evidently clear that the Etulo language as reported and observed has no documentation neither in form of texts, audio or visual recordings, grammars, dictionaries nor everyday media usage.

IV. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish to acknowledge Dr. Jones Gilbert Ijoh Ayuwo for guiding me very well throughout this research work and helping to get some empirical works from his archives.

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