

INTRODUCTION

STUDIES ON INDIGENOUS SIGNED AND SPOKEN LANGUAGES OF AFRICA

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Africa is known for its diverse linguistic heritage as well as its rich cultural heritage and magnificent landscape. The continent is a linguistic treasure trove, with around one-third of the world's languages spoken within its borders. This linguistic wealth is the result of the interaction between indigenous languages, which are deeply rooted in many ethnic groups, and imported foreign languages, which were left as a legacy of colonialization. Scholars have long been interested in the history, origins, and linguistic peculiarities of African languages. As of 2021, Africa had about 2000 languages (Eberhard et al. 2022), each associated with diverse ethnic groups spread over the enormous continent. The linguistic environment reflects the continent's rich cultural tapestry and millennia-old legacy. Some of these languages have prospered across vast territory, while others have remained limited to small villages and local communities. Nigeria is Africa's most linguistically diverse country, with 522 languages (Eberhard et al., 2022). This diversity reflects the varied nature of African communities and their extensive histories.

Africa's languages can be divided into two groups: indigenous languages and imported languages. Indigenous languages are profoundly established in distinct ethnic groups' traditions, customs, and history. They have changed throughout the years to meet the changing needs of their speakers. Imported languages, such as English, French, and Portuguese, on the other hand, were introduced to the continent during the colonial era. Despite their foreign roots, these languages have become vital components of communication, education, and governance in several African countries.

Within Africa's wide linguistic landscape, a distinct dichotomy arises between majority and minority languages. While majority languages have

extensive usage and support, minority languages frequently encounter obstacles in maintaining their relevance and vitality (Brock-Utne 2017). The dominance of dominant languages can marginalise minority languages, resulting in decreased usage and, in some circumstances, endangerment (Brock-Utne 2017; Edward 2022). Recognising the importance of conserving linguistic diversity, efforts must be taken to safeguard and revitalise these minority languages so that they can continue to contribute to Africa's rich cultural heritage.

African language research is not a new endeavour. Linguists and academics have spent decades trying to decipher the complexities of these languages. The majority of study, however, has generally focused on spoken languages, leaving indigenous African sign languages understudied and underappreciated. Addressing this research gap is critical because sign languages play an important part in the lives of deaf populations, providing unique insights into the different language modalities.

The survival of indigenous African languages is dependent on a number of variables, including the creation of conducive environments for their continuous use. This includes encouraging bilingual education, instilling pride in native languages, and incorporating them into formal educational systems. Additionally, adequate linguistic documentation and description are critical for the survival of these languages. Linguists must work with native speakers to accurately record the nuances and grammar of these languages, ensuring that their heritage is passed down to future generations.

This volume presents research on indigenous African language, either spoken or signed. The areal perspective of this volume contributes to the research on African languages. The contributions in this volume present different linguistic analysis and methodologies to understanding indigenous languages in Africa. This volume emerged from original papers presented at the first international virtual conference on indigenous African signed and spoken language held in 2021. The theme of the conference, *Indigenous Hands and Voices of African Identity: Discourse on Language Rights*, focused on research done in areas of linguistics and language documentation in indigenous signed and spoken languages in Africa. The volume name “*Studies on Indigenous Signed and Spoken Languages of Africa (SISSLA)*” is a compilation of novel research on indigenous African spoken and signed languages. The contributions present original research on indigenous languages in Cameroun, Gabon, Ghana, and Nigeria.

The different contributions cover sign language research, onomastic, translation, language development and documentation, and tonology. The

overall purpose of this book is to provide insight into the indigenous spoken and signed languages in African countries highlighting their unique features while creating awareness for language endangerment. Some of the discourse in this book focus on the linguistic of indigenous African sign languages, Deaf culture and sign language endangerment, translation, teaching and learning indigenous African languages, socio-cultural implications of indigenous personal names, communicative practices, tones in indigenous languages among many others. The different chapters discuss important issues relevant to the sustenance of indigenous African languages and contributors are from different academic and research institutions in Africa, Europe, and North America.

The structure of the volume

The book is divided into five parts focusing on different discussions on indigenous African languages.

Part I: Sign Languages presents research on indigenous sign languages in Cameroun, Ghana, Nigeria and Gabon. It has chapters on linguistic description, iconicity, creolization, language endangerment and deaf education.

Asonye and Akpan's chapter, "A Preliminary Study of Magajin Gari Sign Language" presents a preliminary study of Magajin Gari Sign Language (MGSL). MGSL is an indigenous signed language used in Kaduna North in the northern part of Nigeria, with a small number of speakers. Their research is the first detailed study on the MGSL, and the authors present detailed demographic information on MGSL and the users. An important point raised in this chapter is the lack of child users of MGSL and the need for immediate documentation.

Dolza and Ebouaney's chapter is titled "Contrastive analysis between the Langue des Signes Française and Langue des Signes Française used at the St. John the Baptist School of the Deaf and Special Needs Children of Bertoua." The authors identified the possible creation of a creole sign language at the St. John the Baptist School of the Deaf and Special Needs Children of Bertoua, which seem to be different from the popular Langue des Signes Française (LSF). The authors highlight the fact that signers do not seem to be aware of the existence of a Cameroonian Sign Language and they think they are using the Langue des Signes Française. This novel or better still creole sign language is indigenous of Bertoua school for the deaf. The school's location has a strong linguistic fragmentation and that might support the emerging sign language in Bertoua.

Edward's two chapters in this volume consider two different aspects of Adamorobe Sign Language (AdaSL). Her first chapter, "Iconicity in lexical and grammatical categories in Adamorobe Sign Language" explores iconicity in AdaSL, an indigenous sign language used in Adamorobe in Ghana and discusses lexical and grammatical data on iconicity in AdaSL. The chapter also considers the different strategies for form-meaning resemblance mapping. Finally, the chapter compares AdaSL to other sign languages to demonstrate that the visual-spatial modality of sign language permit diverse iconic strategies to be used by signers.

Edward's second chapter, "*Signing Out: Linguistic Contact and Possible Endangerment of the Adamorobe Sign Language*" considers a major issue in Deaf communities with linguistic diversity. The chapter considers language contact and its effect in Adamorobe. Edward highlights the fact that AdaSL is gradually losing popularity among the native signers, and the younger deaf are signing with the Ghanaian Sign Language. Finally, Edward discusses how language contact and local laws have led to a progressive endangerment of AdaSL and proposes documentation as the means to preserve this language as a linguistic artifact.

The final chapter in Part I is from Paul Mouziengou who considers the "Sign Language Situation in Gabon." Paul considers the linguistic diversity of Gabon and the enormous influence of deaf education, emphasising how it has provided deaf people with the tools they need to survive in Gabonese society. The chapter also mentions the presence of foreign based sign languages and indigenous sign languages in Gabon. Exploration of indigenous sign languages is an important step towards recognising and protecting Gabon's deaf community's cultural identity.

Part II: Translation presents research on the issues of translating and effective communication. The two chapters in this section consider pandemic communication challenges (Covid-19) and the legal communication challenges.

Chiemezie's chapter "Challenges to Media Translation Services: Implications for Effective Communication during the Covid-19 Pandemic" presents the challenges of translating foreign concepts into local languages and the challenge that this poses to communication effectiveness. The author presents the Covid-19 awareness jingles with focus on the choice of words and how the media employed translation and translated terms established by professional bodies for the promotion of the Igbo language. Chiemezie compared the efficiency of the translation to Igbo and identified

that only one of the media outlets paid a near perfect adherence to the existing translation.

Patricia Ngozi Ijioma's chapter on "Doublets in Legal Parlance in English and Igbo: Implications for Translation" considers the challenges of translating English doublets into Igbo for legal purposes. The author discusses the problems faced by Igbo legal translators and suggests the way forward. Ijioma emphasises the importance of cultural context and meticulous attention to detail in the translation process by diving into the challenges encountered by Igbo legal translators. Legal concepts are firmly established in their different cultures, and any loss or distortion of meaning during translation can have serious implications for legal comprehension and implementation.

Part III: Onomastic, considers the study, origin, and social implications of names. The chapters under this section focus on sociocultural study and the meaning of Igbo names.

Okoli and Egenti's chapter "A Sociocultural Study of Nicknames in Igbo" focuses on nicknames and nicknaming within the Igbo culture of Nigeria. The authors consider the nicknames used by both old and young people living in different locations of Anambra State in Nigeria. The chapter concludes that different sociocultural factors contribute to nicknaming in the Igbo culture and the choice of a particular nickname is indicative of the bearer's identity, cultural inclination, current and future realities.

Okeogu and Emejulu's chapter "*Ahamefula*: Restoring Pride and Meaning to Igbo Names" considers Igbo names as a social communication construct. Exploring the Igbo philosophical, sociological and cultural concept of identity, the authors found out that the decline in choosing Igbo names and the preference for Judeo-Christian and English names is part of a bigger picture. The neglect of families to pass on their Igbo identity and language to their children is a recipe for identity loss in the future.

Part IV: Language Development and Documentation covers a wide range of topics relating the development and documentation of African languages. From language teaching and learning strategies, linguistic classifications, orthographical development, language attitudes and language rights, Part IV raises the borderline issues of most African languages. The lack of interest in the development of languages in many African nations have led to issues of endangerment and moribund languages.

Chikezie and Ikonne embark on a vital exploration of the pivotal role that multiple intelligences play in the teaching and learning of Igbo

language in their chapter, “Assessment of Multiple Intelligences and Effective Teaching and Learning of Igbo Language in South-East Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria.” The authors' research delves into the complexities of tailoring instructional methods to meet the different learning styles and aptitudes of the students in Nigeria's South-East Geopolitical Zone. Recognising that individuals have different intelligences and learning preferences, Chikezie and Ikonne argue for the use of a variety of teaching methods, with a particular emphasis on activity-based teaching practises. Educators can better meet the specific needs and skills of each student by embracing a diverse range of instructional methods, thereby building an environment favourable for effective Igbo language teaching and learning.

Asonye and Fatosin's chapter considers “Noun phrase in Alago” a minority language, spoken by about 350,000 native speakers in the northern part of Nigeria. The authors delve into the constituent structure of the Alago noun phrase giving light on the numerous aspects that comprise this linguistic construct. Asonye and Fatosin reveal the intricate relationships and functions that each ingredient plays within the noun phrase by investigating the roles played by these constituents. Furthermore, the authors explore the position of the head in the Alago noun phrase. Understanding the placement of the head is critical in understanding how the noun phrase transmits meaning and expresses relationships between different elements.

Adeolu's chapter on “Multi-variety pattern of language endangerment: Language attitudes and variety definition in Nigeria” throws light on a pattern of language endangerment where minority varieties give way to majority languages. Using Yoruba (majority) and Iffe (minority) as case studies, the author considered the different variables that trigger preference and alignment with majority languages. Adeolu brings attention to the issues faced by minority languages in Nigeria and worldwide by shining light on this multi-faceted pattern of language endangerment.

Imelda Udoh considers “Language Rights and African Indigenous Spoken Languages” and explores the linguistic rights of speakers of indigenous African languages of both majority and minority groups. Udoh considers the fact that although provisions are made for the rights of the Indigenous African languages, the huge numbers of the languages involved, and the complexities of the sociolinguistic realities erode these rights and render the efforts on implementation ineffective. The chapter proposes the need to promote language rights, especially of the indigenous languages, bearing in mind that language rights are particularly important for accessing other aspects of human rights.

The chapter by Ukaegbu and Chinedu is titled “Employing indigenous Nigerian languages in health communication to social media publics.” The authors believe that social media has become a popular source of exchanging health-related information during pandemics. Their chapter discussed how three major Nigerian languages, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, were used on YouTube to educate Nigerians about the COVID-19 pandemic. It also analyses how these languages are effectively used in connecting with the Nigerian social media public in order to assist them in responding appropriately to the pandemic. After evaluating 75 YouTube videos, the authors claim that little attempt was made to employ Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba languages to sensitise Nigerians to the pandemic in the form of animation and genuine footage on YouTube. The chapter finds that the majority of videos used in talking about the virus on YouTube were in English and Nigerian Pidgin English rather than Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, implying a low utilisation of indigenous Nigerian languages in health communication on social media.

Oyinloye argues in the chapter “Towards a Typology of Interfixation: Making a Case for Yorùbá” that Yorùbá attests interfixes rather than infixes. Oyinloye’s analysis revealed that interfixation in standard Yorùbá often entails reduplicating a root noun (base) to the left, followed by the insertion of an affix between the reduplicant and the root noun, and the derived word reflects some phonological shift. According to the proposed interfixation typology, Yorùbá strictly adheres to “bi-morphemic interfixation with identical constituents” and predominantly attests “interfixation with modification,” with only a few instances of “interfixation without modification” in the language involving consonant-initial roots where only the -k- interfix is used.

The chapter “An Investigation of Selected Lemmas and Their Morphology in English, Ipe, and Yoruba” by Olagunju looks into selected lemmas and their morphology in the Ipe and Yoruba languages. The study demonstrates that blending, compounding, coinage, backformation, borrowing, and descriptive translation are among the morphological processes used by the Ipè and Yorùbá languages in the formation of their lemmas. The chapter concludes that it is necessary to pursue additional research interests in the morphology of indigenous languages in order to save them from extinction and/or death.

Iyalla-Amadi’s chapter “Digital Numeracy In Kalabari: Proposed Numerical Models For A Digital Age” discusses the significance of digitalization in the modern era. It emphasizes the importance of digital numeracy for individuals to thrive in the 21st century, paralleling literacy skills in reading and writing. To bridge this gap, the chapter proposes the

integration of new numerical models, including decimal-based and digitally-compliant counting systems, tailored for the Kalabari language. This aims to empower Kalabari speakers, particularly the younger generation, to engage more meaningfully with contemporary technology, fostering a digital revolution that revitalizes the language and aligns it with the demands of the digital age.

Part V: Tonology provide a comprehensive overview of tonal phenomena within three languages, exploring the tonal levels, patterns, and functions in Ósósò and Ghòtùò, while uncovering the intriguing phono-semantic aspect of tonal homophones in Ibibio. These studies are valuable contributions to the field of linguistics, furthering our understanding of the rich and diverse tonal systems present in the languages of Africa.

Legbeti's chapter explores "Tone in Ósósò." Focusing on the understudied Edoid language, Ósósò, the study investigates its tonal levels, tone patterns in lexical categories, and the basic function of tone. The findings reveal Ósósò as a discrete level tone language with two basic tones, High (H) and Low (L), with an additional downstep high at the phonetic level, resulting in a terrace pitch melody. The L tone is less restricted in the language, allowing it to follow another L in a disyllabic form, whereas H is realized as a downstep (!H) when it occurs consecutively. This chapter provides valuable insights into Ósósò's tonal system and contributes to a broader understanding of tonal languages.

Bankale's chapter "Tone in Ghòtùò" investigates the tonology of Ghòtùò, one of the North Central Edoid (NCE) languages spoken in Edo State, Nigeria. The author emphasises the lexical and grammatical functions of tone in Ghòtùò. Tonal processes including tonal elision, segmentalization, assimilation, and morphotonemic alternations are also considered. The chapter defined Ghòtùò as having a unique terraced level tone system with three tone levels of High, Mid, and Low, with a downstep responsible for the terracing. This tone system distinguishes Ghòtùò from most Edoid languages with the typical two tone plus a downstep. Ghòtùò non-low tones before a Low cause an immediate downstep, while high tones do not.

The chapter "A sketch on tonal homophone in Ibibio" by Noah and Okon examines tonal homophone as a phono-semantic phenomenon in which a linguistic form has the same sound-tone equivalence but provides various denotative meanings. The preliminary findings of this study indicate that: a) tonal homophony is not only more common than commonly assumed, but it is also a notorious factor in semantic ambiguity; b) it has implications for translation and automatic speech

recognition; and c) it can be used covertly, but effectively, for hate speech, vilification, and deception.

The way forward

The different parts of the volume contribute to different discussions on African languages. Although there seem to be a recent interest in the linguistics of minority languages in Africa, there is still a lot more to be done and linguistic coverage is still minimal. It is of no doubt that African linguistics is gradually incorporating novel linguistic fields (such as sign language linguistics), but the more researchers delve into the linguistic of African languages, the more emergent documentation and description is needed (Asonye, Edward and Asonye 2020; Essegbey, Laughlin, and Henderson 2015.). While research on some moribund and endangered languages seem to bring an air of hope, there is also the worrying effect of language shift boosted by the desire to be associated with the languages of power and authority. Even the majority languages such as Igbo are not left out in this gradual loss of interest (Nwabueze and Okoli 2016). Fortunately, there is resurgence of Africans with positive identity about the language and their culture.

The different contributions in this volume indicate the need to be intentional about promoting, documenting, and describing the linguistic features of African languages. The chapters on sign languages indicate the need to be intentional about African indigenous sign languages. A rich cultural heritage such as the Adamorobe Sign Language stands that brink of endangerment if users are not intentional about their language development. Magajin Gari Sign Language does not even have young users and the younger deaf people only know Nigeria Sign Language (an offshoot of American Sign Language), Gabonese deaf students are aware of the presence of indigenous sign languages, but they are educated in foreign-based sign languages just as the case in Ghana, Nigeria and many African countries. The way forward is the promotion of indigenous African sign languages beyond the local communities and a concentrated effort to make the indigenous sign languages appealing to both the native users and people outside the community. The rich linguistic features of indigenous African sign languages can be best documented if there is an enabling environment for the languages to thrive.

Whereas sign languages face the challenge of neglect and endangerment, most spoken languages in Africa are gradually losing speakers because of factors such as economic viability and the prestige (Brock-Utne 2017). Users seem to align more with the languages of power and control as

compared to the minority languages used in local communities and villages. The presence of foreign languages and cultures in Africa is also a major barrier to learning indigenous African languages. For example, legal terms are lifted from foreign languages like English, French and Latin and translating these words into local languages are without challenges. The baptism of the African continent into foreign systems began with colonialization and since then, even our naming patterns are motivated by colonial tendencies with a gradual emersion of English-based names and Judeo-Christian names over names of indigenous African identity.

The way forward is to identify that indigenous African languages are linguistic and cultural heritages and therefore, preserving them begins with African linguists. Describing the linguistic features of sign and spoken language, developing materials, and promoting indigenous language rights are important for the sustenance and growth of indigenous African languages.

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