

The Internationalization of African Languages: A Communication Leap in the Present Millennium

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Abstract—African languages have, for the most part of the immediate past millennium, remained in the dark ages – thanks in part to the disparaging effects of colonialism. Fortunately, though ironically, the colonialists' tools of oppression, i.e. their languages, have turned out to be linguistic assets for the African who can henceforth use them as a springboard to launch a new linguistic offensive in the present millennium. The African linguist can achieve this by first studying the characteristics of currently acknowledged international languages, and then technically developing his indigenous language to reflect the same qualities. Internationalization in the modern sense presupposes the worldwide use of a language by a large section of speakers, with access to modern communication means such as the electronic media, the print media, the internet, the worldwide web, etc. African linguists and communicators owe it to themselves to develop their own communication systems and thereafter integrate them into the technological culture as being practiced in the present millennium. This will ensure a viable communication leap for African languages in the present scientific and technological era.

Index Terms—African languages, linguistic tools, internationalization, technological culture, communication leap

I. INTRODUCTION

Latest information and communication systems which continue to make giant strides everyday have now succeeded in reducing the size of the whole planet to a small access-zone. This is because it is henceforth possible to have access to a myriad of information occurring in any part of the terrestrial globe (and even beyond), no matter how country- or village-bound one is.

This possibility is however not without a major condition: one would need to be, if not a speaker, then a hearer or a reader of at least one prominent international language. So major is this condition that its non-observance could be tantamount to being cut off from the information, and indeed the entire communication network of the larger world. One would then be as good as a deaf-mute living in the heart of New York.

To be a member of the international community in the present millennium would involve being a participant as well as an observer of current global trends. The starting point is often one's own language. To communicate effectively and make a significant impact in an age that is characterized by great scientific discoveries and technological breakthroughs, the African needs to develop a linguistic apparatus that would lend his language the required sophistication to earn the appellation: 'international language'.

What is an International Language?

What then is an international language? Or, rather, what qualifies a language to be called 'international' while others are only 'national' or 'local'? It would appear that one basic criterion is that the language should have speakers in 'many nations', the number of its speakers notwithstanding. The fact of the speakers being in many nations can be viewed as more important than the total number of speakers of a given language, otherwise a language like Mandarin Chinese which is recorded as having 726 million speakers (Crystal, 2003, p. 289) would have attained a more prominent place on the international level than a language like English with 427 million speakers or even French with only 116 million speakers. Perhaps the importance of this criterion can be better appreciated by comparing the two tables provided by David Crystal (2003) below in respect of languages with the highest number of speakers, and languages spoken in the highest number of countries:

TABLE A:
WORLD'S TOP 15 LANGUAGES
(ACCORDING TO FIRST-LANGUAGE SPEAKER ESTIMATES IN)

Language	Number of speakers
1. Mandarin Chinese	726
2. English	427
3. Spanish	266
4. Hindi	182
5. Arabic	181
6. Portuguese	165
7. Bengali	162
8. Russian	158
9. Japanese	124
10. German	121
11. French	116
12. Javanese	75
13. Korean	66
14. Italian	65
15. Panjabi (West and East)	60

TABLE B:
WORLD'S TOP 10 LANGUAGES
(ACCORDING TO NUMBER OF COUNTRIES WHERE SPOKEN)

Language	Number of speakers
1. English	42
2. French	30
3. Arabic	22
4. Spanish	19
5. Portuguese	7
6. German	6
7. Dutch	4
8. Swahili	3 (with 20 million speakers)
9. Malay	3 (with 19 million speakers)
10. Mandarin Chinese	2

In the above lists, it will be observed that some languages which occupied top positions in the first list are near the bottom of the second list (e.g. Mandarin Chinese), while others which were near the bottom moved to top places in the second list (e.g. French). Again, there are quite a few languages which, even though they featured prominently in the first list, did not appear at all in the second (e.g. Hindi, Bengali, Japanese, Italian, etc.).

One thing that is however clear from the displayed lists is that English, among a few others, is considered an international language. Why so? Giving a first response, Edward Finegan (1987, p. 82) remarks that, although according to the renowned Irish Nobel Prize winner Bernard Shaw, English spelling holds the distinction of being the most chaotic in the world, it is remarkably uniform throughout the world, and printed material can be distributed internationally without adaptation. Moreover, the spread of technology, notably the diffusion of American technologies in the 20th century can be said to be an added reason for the internationalization of the English language.

From the foregoing therefore, one might safely deduce that for a language to be considered international, it must:

- Have a number of speakers in many nations of the world;
- Enjoy widespread use in many countries;
- Have a lot of literature written and diffused in it;
- Be amenable to scientific and technological dissemination;
- Facilitate international communication worldwide.

International Language Models

In this section, international language models refer to languages that meet some or all of the requirements enumerated in our preceding section. They are mainly languages that, due to early industrialization or a sophisticated writing system, are widely used for international trade and communication. In this study, we have chosen English and French as our international language models.

► **English**

Edward Finegan (1987, p. 78) observes that, although Mandarin Chinese is spoken by a greater number of people, English is spoken around the globe and has wider dispersion than any other language. According to its linguistic classification, English belongs to the Germanic phylum of the Indo-European language family. It is the principal language of the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and many newly independent islands in the Caribbeans. It is also the official language of more than a dozen African countries.

In its orthography, English can be seen to be more out of harmony with the spoken language than that of many other languages. Nevertheless, many observers note that advantages exist to the relative distance between orthography and speech in that written English is remarkably uniform throughout the world, and printed material can be distributed internationally without adaptation.

Concerning its vocabulary expansion, Comrie (1987) explains that compounding, prefixing and suffixing are largely responsible for adding to the word stock of the English language. A few examples from English technical vocabulary may suffice to illustrate this process:

Lexeme	Prefixation	Prefixation + Suffixation
Radiate (verb)	irradiate	irradiation
Efficient (adj.)	inefficient	inefficiency
Generate (verb)	regenerate	regeneration
Ionize (verb)	de-ionize	de-ionization
Pole (noun)	bipolar	bipolarity

Syntactically, English is an S-V-O language, a fact which has been adduced as one of the reasons for its current widespread use in the world. A further fact noted by Finegan is that S-V-O languages like English are perceptually simpler than languages whose basic word orders are S-O-V or V-S-O. It is also noteworthy that, in addition, to their granted sociological and political statuses, Chinese, French, Russian and Spanish (all of which are S-V-O), are languages of wider diffusion, and so is the spoken form of Arabic. Incidentally, these six languages, i.e. including English, constitute the official languages of the United Nations. Apparently, the perceptual advantages of S-V-O languages is the ready identification of subjects and objects which are separated (by verb) in S-V-O, but not in S-O-V or V-S-O languages.

This similarity in syntactic structure is also shared by the Yoruba language and should facilitate its lexicological modeling, as concerns technical expression, on French and English which are both established S-V-O languages. It might also be added at this point that, another reason that has been attributed to the extension of English, is the spread of technology, notably the diffusion of American technologies during the twentieth century. Since the focus of this paper is equipping African languages with the appropriate linguistic tools to attain internationalization, it can be inferred that adopting the processes responsible for technical discourse in French and English would contribute significantly towards attaining the same goal in Yoruba, an African language.

► French

Rowlett (2000, p. 3) affirms that the French language is currently classed as the 10th or 11th most widely spoken language in the world. It is a Romance language which derives, via Latin, from the Italic branch of the Indo-European language family. Statistics provided by Battye *et al* (2000, p. 2) show that, according to a 1999 French government report, about 112,660,000 French speakers are classified as *francophones réels* (i.e. first or second-language speakers who use French daily), while another 60,612,000 speakers are classified as *francophones occasionnels* (i.e. speakers often living in developing countries or bilingual societies, using French occasionally). To these numbers are added approximately 100 to 110 million learners of French as a foreign language. Taking the upper limit therefore, one could safely place the current number of French speakers and French users at 283,272,000 million worldwide. Crystal (2003, p. 384) also mentions that, apart from the large number of autonomous French speakers within Europe, outside Europe, indigenous French is spoken in Francophone Canada, in the West Indies, and in the Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia). In Black Africa, French is the official language of sixteen independent Francophone states.

Phonologically, French sounds are mostly not indicative of their orthography (cf. bleu, peur; brun, brune; vielle, ville; etc.). However, French is similar to Yoruba in that it is also a language that makes use of tone or accent marks to aid pronunciation and distinguish between certain words in the language (cf. la, là; ou, où; du, dû; mais, maïs; etc.). This is probably what informed the lexicographer, R. C. Abraham, in his choice of French words as examples to illustrate the Yoruba tonal system in his dictionary! (cf. Abraham, 1958, p. xi).

Harris informs that, in its syntactic structure, the order of basic constituents in standard literary French is S-V-O, i.e. the subject (which is obligatory) precedes the verb, which precedes the complement(s) in positive, declarative utterances. Also noteworthy is the fact that alongside this S-V-O order, there is a wide variety of other possible orders, involving the dislocation of one or more nominal elements associated with a verb to the left and/or to the right of the core sentence.

E.g. J'aime Marie (Je-Subject, aime-Verb, Marie-Object/Complement)

But: Marie, je l'aime; Moi, j'aime Marie; Je l'aime, Marie, etc.

With respect to its morphological configuration, the derivational processes of the language are here examined with particular emphasis on word formation techniques which appear to facilitate technical expression in the French language. Whereas prefixation is the more productive word formation process in Yoruba, suffixation is the affixal process which ensures, to a greater extent, the lexical growth in the French language. Words which depict an action or a process mostly bear the suffix '-age' or '-ion' in the language. To portray the doer or agent of an action, the suffix 'eur' is used and this is often derived from the '-age' suffixal formation. Some examples, drawn from Vigner and Martin (1976, pp. 22-23) are given below:

Verb	Noun (Process)	Noun (Agent)
Broyer(to grind)	broyage(grinding)	broyeur(grinder)
Démarrer(to start)	démarrage(starting)	démarrreur (starter)
Souder (to weld)	soudage(welding)	soudeur (welder)
Forer (to drill)	forage (drilling)	foreur (driller)

As a technical discourse paradigm, we shall attempt to replicate the above technical model in Yoruba further on in this paper.

African Languages as International Languages

At this point, another question, one more relevant to the present study, could be raised: can African languages be considered international languages? For us in this paper, the answer would be a resounding 'yes'. Already, as can be noted from the second list in Table B, Swahili, an authentic African language, made it to number 8, over and above Mandarin Chinese which has a higher number of speakers. This is because Swahili is officially spoken in at least 3 countries of the world, thereby satisfying one of the conditions for internationalization.

It should be mentioned that many African languages remained oral languages for very long. This situation was compounded by colonial masters who, not content with colonizing the continent, also colonized the languages found in it. According to Bamgbose (1986, p. 29), only very few indigenous languages, Yoruba being one of them, were tolerated; and this was basically because these languages allowed foreign missionaries to better evangelize, or reach the people they were evangelizing. As Curtin, Feierman, Thompson, & Vansina (1997, p. 418) put it:

“One of the immediate concerns of missionaries on founding a station was the question of language. Not only did they have to learn the vernacular language near their stations to be able to preach the gospel, it was their duty to translate the Holy Scriptures into the vernacular.”

In the case of Swahili, Fasold (1984, p. 267) reports that the German colonizers exploited the fact that Swahili was already a trading language understood by a large section of the indigenous population. A German administrator could therefore learn a single African language like Swahili that was understood by key people over a wide area, instead of a local language that would be of no use elsewhere.

It is however an interesting twist of fate that, at the breaking of the new millennium, African countries find themselves in a situation where they can equally bask in the global limelight and partake in an international culture by making full use of the former weapons of linguistic oppression. A rapid look at the languages in Table B reveals that about six or seven of the present top ten languages in the world are linguistic legacies of Africa's former colonial masters (*viz* English, French, Arabic, Portuguese, German, Dutch, and Spanish).

II. METHODOLOGY

Strategies for Internationalization

In a language analysis situation, Awoniyi (1995, p. 441) takes a pragmatic look at how to achieve linguistic popularity by proposing three options for independent African nations, namely:

- i. Using one or more indigenous languages for all educational and other purposes;
- ii. Giving equal status to one or more indigenous languages and an international one;
- iii. Adopting an international language for all educational and other purposes.

In our view, although the first option appears viable, it would be too restrictive. International communication is not only about communicating with members of the same language group but also with other members in the international community as well. If therefore, a language is known only to one homogeneous language group, regardless of the number of its speakers, that language cannot be internationalized. The third option of adopting an international language for all educational and other purposes could be a shortcut to achieving internationalization, especially if the international language being adopted happens to be English or French which already has a number of speakers in a number of different African countries. But then, this would be done at the expense of the continent's own indigenous languages and would amount to a case of linguistic neo-colonialism from within, and perhaps a final goodbye to internationalizing the continent's own languages.

From the standpoint of this paper, Awoniyi's second option appears preferable for the purpose of achieving a communication leap for the African continent in that, the adopted international language could provide a practical model for the indigenous one and both of them could develop *pari passu*. Such was the case with Swahili in the early 1960s when Tanzania's politicians (the country was then named Tanganyika by the British) led by Julius Nyerere, tolerated English for the purpose of negotiating their independence from Britain and communicating with the outside world to help their case, but promptly designated Swahili the country's national language in 1961 after independence, and declared it the country's official language in 1967, alongside English. Swahili is the stronger for it today.

As stated earlier, many African languages remained at the oral stage for long, but then, many were able to make the transition to the written stage. Ralph Fasold (1984), quoting Ferguson, helps us to understand what is involved in this transition which is basically a language development process (p. 248). According to him, the process takes place in three stages:

- a) Graphization, which involves the adoption of a writing system and the establishment of orthographic conventions;
- b) Standardization, which has to do with a particular variety of the language being widely accepted by all members of the speech community as the 'best' form of that language;
- c) Modernization, by which Ferguson means "the process of..... becoming the equal of other developed languages as a medium of communication".

However, Fasold's implication that some languages are 'undeveloped' has been unacceptable to linguists because every natural language has been found to be developed enough to allow its speakers say anything in it. Terminological development is always going on, making a language able to cope with evolving aspects of modern life.

As seen earlier, the diffusion and dissemination of technologies has been as one of the factors responsible for the spread of English as a world lingua franca. It could therefore be said that one very potent avenue for the internationalization of African languages would be through technical language development.

Wider Diffusion through Technicalization

What then is technical language? Vigner and Martin (1976) define it as "a language that is used to describe technical matter" (p. 19). On his part, David Crystal (2000, p. 384) outlines some of the characteristics of technical language, noting that it is a language which requires 1) objectivity; 2) systematic investigation; and 3) exact measurements. He adds that there is usually an overriding concern for impersonal statement, logical exposition and precise description.

As noted by erudite linguists generally, all languages are amenable to linguistic sophistication, and African languages are no exception. Already, a lot of effort is being deployed in this direction. For example, the proceedings of the roundtable conference jointly organized by the International Federation of Translators and Interpreters (FIT) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) which held in Dar-es-Salam in August 1989, featured such titles as: 'The Coining of Scientific Affixes in Kiswahili', 'Problems of Coining Chemistry Terms for Secondary Schools', 'The Dissemination of Technical Terms', etc. Among the Kalabari, an Ijoid language spoken in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria, members of the Kalabari Language Development Unit of a larger group called the Kalabari Bible Translation and Liturgical Committee, are proposing the introduction of a metric method of counting to reflect modernization and identification with a larger world technological culture. For them, it would be a way of saving the Kalabari language from an anachronistic existence and a more compliant way of facilitating its learning by the younger generation, who are more used to a metric method of counting, prevalent in the era they live in.

III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

African Technical Language Model

In this study, our chosen African language model for internationalization is the Yoruba language. We shall here present a brief overview of its linguistic configuration with a view to exploiting areas for technical discourse that can pave the way for internationalization.

► Yoruba

According to Williamson's classification (1989, p. 23), Yoruba belongs to Benue-Congo, a sub-group of the Niger-Congo language family. The vast majority of speakers are found in Nigeria in the Southwestern States of Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Osun, Oyo, and in some parts of Edo, Kogi and Kwara. Speakers are also found in the West Indies, Brazil, Cuba, Sierra Leone, and in some West African countries like Benin and Togo. Recent figures provided by Crystal (2003) put the number of Yoruba speakers at 25 million worldwide (p. 289).

Pulleyblank (1987, p. 142) informs that, morphologically, the word formation processes in Yoruba are for the most part derivational and not inflectional, and they involve two basic processes: prefixation and reduplication. These again fall into two classes: an 'abstract' class and an 'agentive' class. Prefixes of the agentive class include 'a-', 'o/ò' and 'olu-' among others. With respect to the prefixes that form abstract nouns from verb phrases, there are basically two: 'i-' and 'a-' (Rowlands, 1969, p. 184). Both prefixes may attach to a simple verbal base, e.g. 'imọ' – knowledge (mọ - know); 'alọ' – going (lọ - go). In many cases, 'i-' and 'a-' can be freely substituted for each other, e.g. 'isoye', 'asoye' (explanation). A case has been made by Bamgbose (1992, p. x) for using these two prefixes for semantically distinctive purposes, i.e. the prefix 'i-' used for the abstract noun (i.e. the process), and the prefix 'a-' or 'à-' for the concrete noun (i.e. the result).

Concerning the syntactic structure of Yoruba, it could be said that its basic word order is S-V-O, i.e. Subject preceding Verb preceding Object. Pulleyblank gives an example of this word order in the following sentence:

- Baba (Noun) ra (Verb) Bata (Object) – Father bought shoes

The same word order appears as Subject-Predicator-Object in Awobuluyi (1979) with the following example as illustration:

- Ojo ra moto (Ojo bought a vehicle). (p. 20)

This word order is however not fixed and could be differently altered by versatile language users. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that the S-V-O structure of the Yoruba language makes it easy to learn and, as will be demonstrated further on, it is a feature Yoruba shares with many other widely diffused languages of the world.

Semantically, words in Yoruba can be made to say almost anything. The language displays all the semantic processes of polysemy, antonymy, synonymy, homonymy, etc. To ensure its vocabulary expansion, one of the techniques employed is what NEIDA & NERDC (1988) refer to as semantically-motivated coinage. This is described as a technique which involves the meaning-bearing elements of one language with a view to capturing the meanings or essence of a term or expression in another language (e.g. 'ranmupe' – nasalization). Another semantic resource is the technique of semantic extension. This is a process aimed at increasing the number of distinct meanings found in the language. An example, to cite just one, is the word 'opo', which in the language means 'an upright pole supporting the

roof’, but has, by semantic extension also come to mean, ‘the stem of a word’ (morphology), ‘an electric pole’ (lexis), or ‘an extreme point in an electrical circuit’ (Physics).

Phonologically, Yoruba is a tonal language and tone marks play a distinctive role in it. There are also diacritic signs placed under certain letters to mark a down step or low-tone as in ‘e/ẹ’; ‘o/ọ’; ‘s/ṣ’; etc. This phenomenon also occurs in Kalabari. There are basically three tones: High, represented by an acute accent (´); Mid, generally unmarked; and Low, represented by a grave accent (`). As noted by Katzner (1995), these accents do not indicate stress but rather the rise and fall of the voice. More importantly, however, it can be noted that several words or sets of lexical items are often distinguished by tone in Yoruba. Examples include: ‘igbá’ (calabash); ‘igba’ (two hundred); ‘igbà’ (time). ‘òkò’ (hoe); ‘òkó’ (husband); ‘òkọ’ (vehicle), etc. Awobuluyi (1979) also draws our attention to the fact that the vast majority of Yoruba verbs are monosyllabic, of the form CV, i.e. Consonant-Vowel, as featured in the following verbs: ‘wa’ (come); ‘lọ’ (go); ‘mu’ (drink); ‘ri’ (see); ‘ra’ (buy), etc.

At this point, we wish to reproduce the technical discourse paradigm that was developed in French, but this time in the Yoruba language. This was achieved using the morphological processes of prefixation and partial reduplication as demonstrated below:

Verb	Noun (Process)	Noun (Agent)
lọ (grind)	lilo (grinding)	alagbalọ (grinder/human) oło (grinder/non-human)
ṣina (start engine)	ṣiṣina (starting engine)	aṣina (starter/human) iṣina (starter/non-human)
jorin (weld iron)	jiṣorin (iron welding)	ajorin (welder/human) ijorin (welder/non-human)
gbẹho	gbigbẹho (hole drilling)	agbẹho (driller/human) igbẹho (driller/non-human)

IV. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Given that the world of today is the world of science and technology, and going by the assertion of a former Director General of UNESCO, René Maheu that, “unless it has its own scientists and technicians, no country can call itself free” (cf. Salam, 1989, p. 62), it would appear that those who are best placed to achieve ‘technicalization’, and consequently internationalization of African languages, are the continents’ own scientists and technologists. They can, after first attaining literacy in their own indigenous languages, write out their research findings and disseminate same through the internet, the worldwide web or any other modern communication means. Of course, not all African languages will develop and achieve internationalization at the same time. The languages would first need to go through Ferguson’s suggested stages of language development, especially the second stage of standardization, whereby a particular variety would be accepted by all members of the speech community and be jointly promoted by them.

Among the list of top 40 first-language speakers provided by Crystal (we reproduced only the first 15 in Table A of this paper), Hausa, an African language, features as No. 28 with 24 million speakers, while Yoruba, our featured African technical language model, occupies the 35th position with about 20 million speakers. Swahili features as No. 8 among the list of top world languages (cf. Table B). Going by statistics alone, these languages can emerge as the most viable choices in which to achieve internationalization through, first, widespread use on the continent in particular, and second, widespread use in the world at large. It was probably with this in mind that Swahili featured prominently in the colloquium on adopting one African language as the continent’s lingua franca during the 2nd World Black African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) which took place in Lagos, Nigeria in the year 1977. Unfortunately, there is yet to be a dynamic follow-up to this highly commendable initiative.

Nevertheless, it is easy to envision that once African linguists and communication experts overcome their initial inertia and embark on a linguistic offensive to place African languages on the world map, the many wonders of science and information technology would be those of Africans to enjoy in their own language(s). It would be possible to imagine sending electronic messages in Kalabari or Swahili or Hausa and having such messages accessed at <http://www.nigercongo.com/researcher/language/rl> where ‘http’ stands for Hyper Text Transfer Protocol, and [www.nigercongo](http://www.nigercongo.com) indicates the name of the web server, and where the last part of the web address indicates the web document to be perused and comprehended. It is noteworthy that a group of Yoruba speakers have recently established a website called Centre for Yoruba Language Engineering where the founders aim at promoting the Yoruba language as a major instrument for transmitting scientific and technological knowledge. This site can be accessed at www.ceyoleng.org

Indeed, it is easy to imagine that in the present millennium, with the myriad opportunities for linguistic sophistication, African languages need only adhere to the basic steps necessary for wider recognition and dissemination to be assured a place on the information superhighway. This can be achieved through well-coordinated linguistic efforts aimed at internationalizing the continent’s indigenous languages in the present millennium. Such actions would, most hopefully, provide the much needed communication leap for African languages in particular, and the African continent in general.

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