

Digital Preservation of the Urhobo Language

Stella E. Igun

Abstract

The paper focuses on digital preservation of the Urhobo Language. The paper argues that there is urgent need for digital preservation of the language documents especially since the younger generation hardly speaks the language. The Urhobo language seems to be dying gradually. The paper also discusses Urhobo language endangerment or extinction, importance of Urhobo language preservation, ways of preserving the Urhobo language, digital sustainability of Urhobo language, digital indexing of Urhobo language collections, and challenges of digital preservation. Consequently, we recommend that one pragmatic way of making the Urhobo language function for its speakers is to make it compulsory as first language of the Urhobo child up to secondary school level. To sustain interest in the use of the language, the essay suggests that the Urhobo language content should be on the internet and there should be National digital preservation policy of indigenous languages, including Urhobo in Nigeria.

Key words: Digital Preservation, Urhobo Language, Urhobo Culture, Indigenous Language

Introduction

Language can be considered as an important part and expression of culture to the individual, family, community and nation. Fishman (1996) suggests that language is the mind, spirit and soul of a people. Thus the importance of preserving and protecting any human language cannot be overemphasised. The development of any society is dependent upon its communication network which is usually predicated on language; this, in turn, will help such society to redevelop and recreate itself.

Language preservation is the effort to prevent languages from becoming extinct. A language is said to be at a risk of being lost when it is no longer taught or spoken to younger generations. Language is an important part of any society, because it helps people to communicate and express themselves. When a language gets extinct, future generations will be

in danger of losing a vital part of the culture that is necessary to complete it. This makes language a vulnerable aspect of cultural heritage and it becomes especially important to preserve it. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), “Atlas of languages in danger of disappearing,” there are an estimated 6,000 languages spoken worldwide today, and half of the world’s population speaks the eight most common. More than 3,000 languages are reportedly spoken by fewer than 10,000 people each. *Ethnologue*, a reference work published by SIL International, has catalogued the world’s known living languages and it estimates that 417 languages are on the verge of extinction. The Urhobo language might soon be counted among these languages that are near extinction if urgent steps are not taken to make the younger generations start speaking the language and if efforts are not made to digitalise Urhobo language documents.

The objectives of the paper are to examine the Urhobo language endangerment/extinction; the importance of language preservation; digital sustainability of Urhobo language, and the challenges of digital language preservation.

Urhobo Language: Endangerment or Extinction

The Urhobo people are the major ethnic group in Delta State. Delta State is one of the 36 states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The Urhobo are a notable ethnic group in the Niger Delta that uses the Nigerian Pidgin for communication at almost every sphere of human endeavour. The Nigerian Pidgin has actually watered down the Urhobo dialects. One of the factors that continue to endanger the Urhobo language is the Nigerian Pidgin. Other contributing factors are:

- Urhobo language is not being taught in schools in the communities. Even the older people prefer communicating in Pidgin English.
- Urhobo children speaking the language are not enough to ensure the survival of the language.
- Urhobo parents are also fond of speaking Pidgin English to their children. Children grow up thinking the Urhobo language is inferior or associated with lower social class. The negligence of speaking the Urhobo language to our children has greatly endangered the language.

Importance of Urhobo Language Digital Preservation

Digital preservation refers to series of adopted management activities necessary to ensure a continued access to digital materials for as long as necessary. The knowledge and ability to understand Urhobo language should not be allowed to be extinct. It is through preservation of teachings, customs, oral traditions and other inherited knowledge that the wealth of Urhobo culture can survive from generation to generation.

Strategies for the Preservation of Urhobo Language

The younger generation should be encouraged to speak the language with pride and also to teach their children with joy. The internet should be used to raise awareness about issues of Urhobo language extinction and the importance of not allowing the language to die. Urhobo language can be used to translate, catalogue, store and provide information in and access to language such as Chinese language. New technologies such as podcasts which is digital recording of music, news or other media can be used to preserve the spoken versions of Urhobo

language and written documents can preserve information about the native literature and linguistics of languages.

Computer scientists state that 10% of the world's languages are used online. Google allows its users to select from 36 languages and 28 of those are European in origin. This clearly marginalizes native and indigenous languages especially, those from Africa. The international internet provider – VeriSign – estimated that 70% of all Internet content is in English. There could be problems with written documents in preserving information about Urhobo literature. Written information in book or manuscript form is subject to acid decay, binding problems, environmental and security problems. Technology can be used to preserve the integrity of spoken versions of languages such as the Urhobo. Many of the techniques used in recording oral history can be used to preserve the Urhobo language. Preservationists can work with reel to reel audio tape recordings with video recordings and new technologies like podcasts to record spoken accounts of Urhobo language. It should be noted that technology is always changing and preservation effort is lost if technology to listen or watch audio tape recording fails.

The Administration of Native Americans (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ana/index.html>) published the “Reference Guide for Establishing Archives and Repositories” (<http://www.acfhhs.govs/programs/ana/programs/languageGuide.html>) which explains why language repositories are vital to long-term language preservation efforts. This guide should have practical advice in how to preserve the Urhobo language, considering what a language repository is, how to build one, and the cost involved.

Digital Sustainability of Urhobo Language

Unlike traditional, temporal strategies and more permanent solutions, digital sustainability which implies more active and continuous process can be used to preserve the Urhobo language. Digital sustainability concentrates less on the solution and technology and more on building an infrastructure. This approach is flexible with an emphasis on interoperability, continued maintenance and continuous development.

Digital sustainability in the present will facilitate access in the Urhobo language and promote availability to future generation (Caplan, 2004). The Urhobo language groups should engage in digital preservation initiatives with cultural institutions, commercial companies such as Google and Microsoft and non-profit groups including the Open Content Alliance (OCA). Digitalization of Urhobo preserved language will help in access, preservation and research and development. It is hoped that digital preservation of the Urhobo language will ensure that documents will remain accessible to future generations.

The Digital Indexing of Urhobo Language Oral Collection

This will help in the cultural preservation of indigenous art and the oral history of the Urhobo people. There could be digital indexing of audio recordings, conducting of oral history interviews, accessioning and cataloguing of back-logged interviews, writing abstracts for interviews. Interviewees can be added to existing (biographies) database that will culminate into education-related projects. Lor (2012) suggests that the digital base will provide technological experience on the most current method of language preservation in the field of study.

Challenges of Digital Materials Preservation

- i) The rapid large volume of digital data is one of the most challenging problems facing preservers of languages (Flouris and Meghini, 2007). This is usually referred to as the problem of digital preservation.
- There is the problem of retaining the meaning of digital object (file, image, database, document, etc) unaltered for an evolving community of readers
- The problem of digital preservation is not fully understood yet, there are ongoing efforts on practical and methodological aspects of preservation.
- **Technological Obsolescence**

Digital materials continuously change their formats with some becoming obsolete (Caplan, 2004). This causes threat to digital preservation, causing loss of means of the access. Such loss of access makes preservation of digital materials meaningless since the main purpose of preserving digital materials is to maintain accessibility (National Library of Australia, 2003).

Continuous Migration

There is continuous migration which is a means of overcoming technological obsolescence by transferring digital resources from one hardware/software generation to another. This is to help preserve the intellectual content of digital objects and make easy it for users to retrieve and use.

- **Lack of Awareness about Digital Materials Preservation**

The UNECO draft charter on preservation of digital heritage stresses the need for awareness and advocacy of preservation of digital materials. This will give room to languages such as the Urhobo language to be digitalized.

Conclusion

The main aim of digital preservation of Urhobo language is to help keep the language from dying out. Since the Urhobo language is almost becoming endangered, the Urhobo people should find it necessary to teach and speak the language to their children and their grand children. Digital preservation will help to prolong the lifespan of all Urhobo documents. Although there are challenges with digital preservation, the digital preservation is more durable than oral or print preservation of language materials.

Recommendations

- Speaking and writing of Urhobo language should be made compulsory up to Secondary School Level as first language in Urhobo land.
- The Urhobo language content should be on the internet. A major focus on International Mother Language and the awareness of digital preservation and the technologies to promote First language diversity should be propagated. The internet or World Wide Web should be used to promote awareness.
- There should be National Policies on digital preservation of languages and Urhobo language should be one of them. This type of policy may form a pillar of programme for digital preservation of Urhobo language and other languages.
- **National policy will help to:**
 - identify institution(s) that will be responsible for language digitalisation.
 - Initiatives at national, regional and international levels.
 - Stimulate the preservation and accessibility level
 - Ensure the authenticity of preserved digital materials
 - Stimulate digital standards in terms of hardware, software processes and procedures to ensure compatibility and easy migration of digital materials.

References and Works Cited

- Caplan, Priscilla (2004). "Building a digital preservation archive: Tales from the Front". *The Journal of Information and Knowledge Management Systems*, 34(1) 38 – 42.
- Digital Preservation Coalition (2008). *Introduction: Definitions and Concept*” *Digital Preservation Handbook*. York, UK.
- Donald W. and John G. (1996). Persevering digital information: Report of the task force on archiving of digital information <http://www.dir.org/pubs/reports/pu63>. Retrieved March 20, 2013.
- Ethnologue: Languages of the world (<http://www.ethnologue.com>) <http://www.ethnologue.com>. Retrieved 2013/4/2.
- Fishman, J. (1996). "What do you lose when you lose your language?" In G. Cantoni (Ed.) *Stabilizing Language* (Pp 80 – 99) Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University. <http://www.nebe.gwu.edu/miscripts/stabilize/iiiifamilies/Lose.htm>
- Flouris G. X Meghini C. (2007). Steps towards a theory of information preservation. In proceedings of the International Workshop on Database Preservation.
- Language Preservation – Wikipedia, the Free encyclopedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/languagepreservation>. Retrieved 2013 - 4 – 2.
- Lor, S. (2012). Exciting Internship Opportunity in Oral History Preservation: http://Falmouthinstitute.com/Language/2012/09/exciting-internship_opp.
- National Library of Australia (2003). *Guide to the Preservation of Digital Heritage*, Paris: UNESCO.
- VeriSign Announces Plan to Further Enhance com and net Global Internet Constellation Sites Regional Resolution Servers” <http://www.verisign.com/verisign-indnewsandandevents/newsarchives/USnews>. retrieved 20/3/2013.