

Assessing a language revitalization programme: apparent problems with specific reference to the evaluation of revivalist efforts on Olusuba language of Kenya

Ogone John Obiero

University of Leipzig - Germany

A great deal of research on language contact has been elaborate with regard to bi/multilingualism. Recently, however, the focus has been invigorated with respect to language shift, and the need for language revival where this is conceivable. Today, perhaps due to the dozens of language revitalization programmes across the globe, conceptual frames and guidelines are emerging about how best to approach the engagement of assessing language revitalization. One of the proposed ways to lay the ground for or to assess a language revitalization programme is by examining the vitality of the language in question (Grenoble and Whaley, 2006; UNESCO, 2003). The proposals and the prognoses to be found in these references are so invaluable that it would be difficult to imagine a revival programme taking off without them. Nevertheless, these guidelines and others like them are normally developed over a period of time, drawing from a wide range of situations, to the extent that their inherent value in the manner expected of a framework may sometimes (incidentally) fail to apply to any particular language situation in a comprehensive way. For instance, given the peculiarities of languages and their situations, the range and proportion of what indices constitute language vitality is no easy task to determine in any replicable way. In the case of Olusuba revitalization, for example, parameters such as proficiency or domains of use would be challenging to authoritatively determine from a survey. Even more difficult would be an attempt to approximate the speaker population (the actual population of the Abasuba people as opposed to speakers of the language differs from author to author). This study proposes to report on the experiences gathered during an ongoing project on the revitalization of Olusuba language of Kenya with a view to illustrating the idea that a notion as key as 'vitality', on the basis of which the relative success or failure of a programme is to be determined, may itself be problematic.