# Language Preservation and Development: The Role of the Library

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## Abstracts

*Language is an extremely important tool in any society. Its' indispensability nature always necessitates the continuous development. Apart from using language for communication, language is also used for education. In fact, without language, there is no education. A library is one of the tools that thus preserves and keep language for education. The objective of this paper is to examine the role libraries play in the preservation and development of languages in any society. This paper explains how the library functions as "language bank" by preserving the linguistically documented/recorded information, ideas, history etc. The paper laid much emphasis on the crucial roles of libraries in preserving languages, especially the endangered ones.*

**Keywords:** Library, Language, Language preservation, Endangered Languages

## *1. Introduction*

Language is an indispensable tool for human communication and national development. There is hardly any human activity that does not make use of language. There can never be development in a society without language. Language is the key sustenance of both the society and the people. This is further affirmed by Eva Engholm as sited in Nwadike (2003:13) that:

Language is the key to the heart of the people.
If we lose the key, we lose the people.
If we treasure the key and keep it safe, it will unlock the door to untold riches, riches that cannot be guessed it from the other side of the door.

Language in any human society is expected to be preserved and rated with the highest priority and attention from both the government and individuals. This is because "Language is not only a vehicle through which a peoples culture can be expressed but also a medium of one's thought, imaginations, creativity, aspirations, desires, emotions, indeed the entire human need and capacity" (Banjo, 1971).

Libraries in any part of the world provide equitable access to Information, which is essential to enable education and thus helps citizens to participate in a democratic global community. The importance of the libraries in language preservation and development is huge.  Libraries provides information in either written, electronic or audiovisual form, which play a key role in creating literate environments and promoting literacy by offering relevant and attractive reading material for all.

## *2. Definitions*

### 2.1.1. Library

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A library has divers' definition. This may be because it has several historical developments as a result of their changing functions and purposes, which is occasioned by the development of our society.

According to Ojo-Igbinoba (1995), the original purpose of the early libraries was to preserve written records evolved by man.

A library is an agency through which sources of information of accumulated knowledge and experience are selected, acquired, organized, preserved and disseminated.

Library is defined by UNESCO quoted in Ibinewo (1997) as:

An organized collection of published books and audio-visual materials with the aid of the services of staff that are able to provide and interpret such materials as required, to meet the informative research, educational and recreational needs of its users.

At the elementary stage, library is referred to as a collection of literacy documents or record kept for reference or borrowing, a depository house built to contain books and other materials for reading and studying, or a collection of standard programmes and subroutines that are stored and available for immediate use.

Islam (2004) described library as a learned institution equipped with treasures of knowledge maintained, organized, and managed by trained personnel to educate the children, men and women continuously and assist in their self-improvement through an effective and prompt dissemination of information embodied in the resources.

The online Dictionary, Thesaurus and Encyclopedia also described the library as a place in which literary and artistic materials, such as books, periodicals newspapers, pamphlets, prints, records, and tapes, are kept for reading, reference, or lending. In a digital sense, a library may be more than a building that houses a collection of books and other materials as the Internet has opened up an avalanche of online and electronic resources for accessing documents on various fields of interest.

There are various types of library such as academic libraries, research libraries, school libraries, special libraries, public, and private libraries etc.

## 2.1.2. Language

According to Oxford Dictionary, Language is the method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way.

Online Wikipedia also defined language as the human capacity for acquiring and using complex systems of communication. Language is the method of human communication and an integral part of culture and society. It is a complex and open system that allows for innovation, modification and evolution. It can be transmitted in several ways: orally, kinetically and graphically.

Noam Chomsky, (1957), as cited in Lyons, (1981), sees language as "a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements"

Language plays a large role in culture and societal development. We use language every day in many ways and to meet countless different needs. Apart from been a means of communication, language is used for learning (education), it is also used as a means of identifying with a particular cultural group.

Roman Jakobson defined six functions of language according to which an effective act of verbal communication can be described. They include: Referential functions, Expressive/emotive/effective functions, Conative functions, Poetic functions, Phatic functions, and Metalingual or Reflexive function.

### 3. Problems and Challenges of Language in a Society

The greatest challenge of any human language in any society is language endangerment. When a language is endangered, it does not necessarily mean it has few speakers. A language is endangered when its speakers no longer pass it into the next generation. According to a research by the NWO advisory committee on endangered language in the Netherlands, about 85% of the estimated 6,000 languages of the world are spoken in only 22countries. Some of these countries are home to more than 200 different languages: Papua Guinea has (850 languages), Indonesia (670), Nigeria (410), India (380), Cameroon (270), Australia (250), Mexico (240), Zaire (210) and Brazil (210). The research further affirmed that a large number of languages are threatened by extinction in these countries.

A rhetorical question that should be generated from the above findings is "how many of the world languages are documented?"

It is important to note that there can never be a society without a language. Therefore, if any society will cherish the source of her existence, then such society should focus on her language documentation and proper conservation in the library, which will result in adequate and definite dissemination of the language to both the current and in-coming generations.

One of the challenges of language in any society is contact between groups. This involves exchange of cultural elements, products, and cultural prestige, which as reported by NWO advisory committee on endangered language research (2000), is often correlated with different degrees of technological advancement that may lead to a sense of inferiority in the less technologically developed group, which may then be inclined to relinquish its culture, including its language, in favour of that of the more highly developed group.

Many societies today are faced with the challenges of language loss, language shift or even language death. However, this may be linked to the fact that a large percentage of the languages are still not properly documented.  For instance, there are about 410 indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria. Only very few of these languages have written forms. This could be because the government's attention is majorly on the ex-colonial master's language, which is English.

According to Adzer (2012) there are also political, social and attitudinal factors affecting the development of languages in a society. Using Africa as a good example, it is obvious that the influence of the ex-colonial languages on African languages will continue so long as African economic, political, educational and religious institutions are basically managed or run with the so-called colonial master's language.  It is sad to note that most African countries do not have their constitutions written or documented in their native languages. This is a painful situation in the heart of some notable African leaders like Nelson Mandela who said "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart."

### 4. Role of Libraries in Language Preservation

A good response to language endangerment has been the creation of a new discipline within linguistics called Language Documentation. Though, this was catalyzed by Nikolaus (1998) who claim that the aim of language documentation is to provide a comprehensive record of the linguistics practices characteristic of a given speech community, which differs from Language description (which) aims at the record of a language as a system of abstract elements, constructions, and rules.

A proper documentation and preservation of language will not only help the language from death, but also help in the retention of its cultural diversity. The library plays a key role in human's ability to record his thoughts, experience, history, culture and heritage in his language and to make it available to others.

The original purpose of the early libraries was the preservation of written records, which was then newly evolved by man. The written records were originally in different book forms called clay tablets, papyrus roll, and parchment codex, Ojo-Igbinoba (1995).

One of the key functions of the library is the preservation of knowledge. The thought, experience, history, culture and heritage that are recorded using a language, are acquired by the library, which functions as agents of preservation of the records. Libraries engage in several activities to ensure that human records survive time and age and are preserved from generation to generation. The library does not only acquire, preserve and organize the records, but also help in disseminating information and knowledge from generation to generation. Thus, it is important to note that any information or record kept in the library is not only assured of preservation but also dissemination.

## 5. Relationship between Language and Library

It is interesting to know that a library is completely a language bank. This reflects in the nature and types of materials that are acquired in the library. A critical analysis of these materials will reveal that all the materials are records or information that is definitely written or documented using a language.

Library materials are broadly grouped into print and non-print materials. The print materials include books, simply defined as a piece of writing, bound and covered. Akinpelu (1994) described books as, "the shrines where the saint is believed to be, and having built an ark to save learning from the deluge, deserve in propriety any new instrument or engine whereby learning should be advanced". According to Ogbonna (2009) types of books include, reference books, Encyclopedias, dictionaries, directories, bibliographies, concordances, almanac, handbooks, manuals, calendars, biographies etc. The non-print materials include audio-visual materials, microforms and other machine readable materials which are also documented or programmed with a language. There is no communication without language, and there is no library without language. Thus, the relationship between a language and the library is a bank-depositor relationship. Information (in languages) is deposited in the library for onward dissemination.

A key finding in a research on second life (SL) language learning by Hundsberger (2009) suggest that "Libraries and language labs should be two closely cooperating entities, possibly even under the same roof, to make it easier for students to follow up links. He further submits that teaching/learning language in second life (SL) has a great potential for distance learning students in particular and that libraries is capable of providing remote access to a very wide range of electronic resources within second life (SL) language learning.

## 6. Problems and Challenges of Libraries

Libraries in the world face a number of challenges that must be critically viewed and tackled. Some of these challenges are:

Funding: Most libraries especially in Africa solely depend on aids from either NGOs or international organizations. Corruption, educational illiteracy, ignorance, embezzlement, mismanagement etc., has often diverted funds that are meant for library and information development in various countries. Most libraries only preserve outdated and archaic books that are either no longer relevant or damaged beyond use.

Personnel Problem: According to Oyeniyi and Olaifa (2011), the quality of library service depends on the professional quality of its staff, which is tantamount to the quality and relevance of the training they have received.

A research on public libraries in Thailand by (Nimsomboon 2003) revealed that most librarians in rural area are not professional librarians though their titles are called "librarians". Many of the rural area libraries in the world are managed by non-professionals. Thus, they fail to make a recognizable impact.

ICT Challenges: A survey of twenty two (22) public library services in ten (10) English-speaking African countries showed that the majority of African libraries have yet to acquire computers Mostert (2001). If libraries across the world can be upgraded to e-libraries, then the problems of information dissemination will be half-solved.

Physical Facilities: A library building should be conducive enough to house both library materials and library users. On the contrary, many libraries in the world, especially in the local communities (where indigenous languages are dyeing; resulting from poor documentation), are still occupying rooms, stores or offices that are just converted into library probably because of the need to keep 'some books' somewhere.

Maintenance Culture: Oyeniyi and Olaifa (2011) noted that most African libraries rarely have a well-secured future as a result of mismanagement and corruption in library administration and lack of maintenance culture. Rosenberg (2000) also describe library maintenance culture in the following words "originating from the initiative of a group from the community or an aid agency, their birth is followed by a year or two of rapid growth and a good deal of local publicity and attention. This is followed by a period of slow decline, accompanied by theft, the departure of the initiators, loss of interest among staff and users – the library still exists but signs of life are barely discernible. Sometimes this period continues indefinitely, but often a final stage is reached when all remaining books are removed, stolen, or damaged beyond repair and the premises and staff are allocated to another activity". Nonchalant attitude of library staff is also common especially to government libraries.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

It is important for any human society to prevent its languages from becoming unknown. This is because language is the most important part of the society. It enables people to communicate, and it also sustains a vulnerable aspect of culture.

According to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), there are an estimated 6,000 languages spoken worldwide today. But Ethnologue, a reference work published by SIL International, has estimated that 417 languages are on the verge of extinction.

The library is capable of preserving language either in written or spoken form. The internet (e-library) is capable of translating, cataloging, storing and disseminating information and access to languages. Technologies such as podcasts (which are available in the library) can be used to preserve the spoken versions of languages while written documents (books) is capable of preserving information about the literature and linguistics of languages.

There is need to improve and encourage the literature of indigenous languages. Writers should be encouraged to write in their native languages. If textbooks, story books, operational manuals, government publications such as the constitution,etc. are written in native languages and documented in the library for library use, it will go a long way in preserving and ensuring language development. Preserving language is preserving humanity, if the library will function in preserving languages, government policies should encourage the documentation of indigenous and endangered languages in various forms. The library should also be well positioned and prioritized in any society to ensure effective delivery.

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