

Language and Culture: The Role of Tiv Language in Preserving Tiv Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

Language and culture are closely interconnected aspects of human society. Language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a vehicle through which culture, traditions, beliefs, and values are transmitted from one generation to another. This paper examines the relationship between language and culture among the Tiv people of Benue State, Nigeria, with particular attention to the role of the Tiv language in preserving Tiv cultural heritage. The study discusses how proverbs, greetings, folktales, songs, naming systems, and oral traditions reflect the worldview and identity of the Tiv people. The paper also highlights the challenges confronting the Tiv language, including the growing influence of English language, urbanization, and declining language use among younger generations. The study concludes that the preservation of the Tiv language is essential for sustaining Tiv cultural identity and recommends deliberate efforts toward language promotion and cultural education. The study adopts Cultural Linguistics Theory as its analytical framework.

Keywords: Language, Culture, Tiv Language, Cultural Heritage, Indigenous Language, Tiv People

Introduction

Language and culture are inseparable elements of human existence. Every society uses language as a medium for expressing cultural values, beliefs, traditions, and social practices. Culture refers to the total way of life of a people, including their customs, beliefs, norms, arts, and social institutions, while language is the primary instrument through which these cultural elements are communicated and preserved. Among the Tiv people of Nigeria, the Tiv language plays a significant role in maintaining cultural identity and transmitting traditional knowledge. The Tiv people are predominantly found in Benue State and are known for their rich cultural heritage, oral traditions, and communal lifestyle. Through language, the Tiv people preserve their history, values, and worldview. This paper explores the relationship between language and culture among the Tiv people and examines how the Tiv language contributes to the preservation of Tiv cultural heritage.

Concept of Language and Culture

Language is a system of communication used by a group of people within a particular society. According to scholars, language is not merely a tool for communication but also a repository

of cultural knowledge and social identity. Through language, people express thoughts, emotions, and cultural experiences.

According to Ogunsiji and Farinde (2012), language is “a means through which members of a society communicate their thoughts, feelings, beliefs and cultural values.”

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o argues that language carries culture and preserves the identity of a people. Culture, on the other hand, refers to the shared beliefs, practices, customs, norms, and values of a group of people. Culture influences how people interact, dress, eat, marry, celebrate, and relate with one another. It shapes the identity of a community and distinguishes one group from another.

Ibrahim (2022) describes culture as the behavioural patterns, beliefs and practices shared by a group of people and transmitted from one generation to another.

The relationship between language and culture is deeply rooted because language reflects the cultural realities of a people. Cultural practices are often encoded in language through idioms, proverbs, songs, folktales, and rituals. Therefore, the loss of a language may result in the gradual disappearance of cultural identity.

The Tiv People and Tiv Language

The Tiv people are one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. They are mainly located in Benue State, with smaller populations in neighboring states such as Taraba State and Nasarawa State. The Tiv language belongs to the Benue-Congo language family and serves as an important symbol of Tiv identity. Traditionally, the Tiv people are known for farming, communal living, storytelling, music, dance, and respect for elders. These cultural practices are preserved and transmitted through the Tiv language. The Tiv language is widely spoken in homes, markets, traditional gatherings, places of worship, political rallies and ceremonies. It functions as a means of social interaction and cultural continuity among the Tiv people. This study is anchored on cultural linguistics as developed by Farzard Sharifian, this theory posit that language reflects and transmits the cultural knowledge , values ,beliefs and worldview of a speech community through linguistics community expressions such as proverbs, folktales, idioms, songs and greetings, cultural knowledge is passed from one generation to another. In the context of this study,the Tiv language serve as a repository of Tiv cultural heritage therefore , its preservation is essential for sustaining the identity, traditions and indigenous knowledge of the Tiv people. Data collected for this work was through interviews, some Tiv native speakers in Wannune were interviewed to get data, and through introspection as a native speaker of Tiv language. Secondary sources of data was used, from credible sources on Tiv cultural heritage.

Tiv Language as a Carrier of Culture

Proverbs and Wise Sayings

Proverbs are an important aspect of Tiv culture. They are used to teach morals, wisdom, and social responsibility. Chinua Achebe describes proverbs as the palm oil with which words are eaten, highlighting their significance in communication and cultural preservation. Tiv elders often employ proverbs during conversations and dispute resolutions to communicate deeper meanings and life lessons. For example, Tiv proverbs encourage hard work, honesty, patience, and respect for elders. These proverbs preserve indigenous wisdom and reflect the worldview of the Tiv people. Tiv proverbs are a foundation of Tiv culture, using metaphorical language to convey moral lessons, social advice, and practical wisdom in everyday situations. Of all Tiv verbal art forms, proverbs are among the most consistently used in daily interaction. They are employed by both elders and younger people in conversation. Tiv proverbs also serve various social functions: they can be used to advise, correct, shame, praise, or help a speaker navigate difficult situations without losing face.

Comprehensive Tiv Proverbs Collection

1. Agbo ka awa tso inya I pav-

Literal translation: When the water yam grows bigger, the ground will break and give space for it.

Meaning: Do not worry about the size of a problem; when the time comes, there will always be a way out.

2. Or iwan veren aver pe timin nguhar ga-

Literal translation: A crippled person does not choose when to act crippled.

Meaning: You cannot change who you are.

3. Ahi nga hian orapireshe atsenge ahar ga-

Literal translation: A blind person cannot burn two pans of roasted nuts.

Meaning: Once bitten twice shy.

4. Bagu kun a tsuwe a pase ahu-

Literal translation: When a monkey jumps, it must let go of the tree branch.

Meaning: When you stop something, you must stop it completely.

5. Aluer hyev mula ake yo kwaghyan seer aseer kpatema-

Literal translation: When a rat is swollen, it becomes more food for the cat.

Meaning: One person's misfortune can be another person's gain.

6. Bua u alu a tsa ga, ka Aondo a hulen wen iji ye-

Literal translation: A cow without a tail depends on God to chase flies away.

Meaning: God takes care of the helpless.

7. Or u nan yav a ityô i agher yô nana nder a wegh ku human-

Literal translation: He who sleeps with an itchy anus wakes up with a smelly hand.

Meaning: Actions have consequences.

8. Hungwaja soo ka ityo ki kamen-

Literal translation: The cricket loves its head to be pressed.

Meaning: Some stubborn people only respond to force or discipline.

9. Ka we tsembeh orapireshe iyough u ogbongu hondu-

Literal translation: When peeling yam for a blind man, you keep blowing a whistle.

Meaning: Be transparent when dealing with those who cannot see or are unaware.

10. Or u ke soo myam zende a butu-

Literal translation: A foreigner likes sleep so he carries his mat about.

Meaning: Prepare for what you know you need in life.

11. Iyue ka mtwem-

Literal translation: Jealousy is ashes.

Meaning: Jealous actions eventually return to harm the person who initiates them.

12. Tyough ki he a kela kar dyer sha inu ga-

Literal translation: The head is there so they will not use the knee for measurement of the cap.

Meaning: The person involved in an issue should be the one to explain it.

13. Kon mom hingir ikyo ga-

Literal translation: One tree does not make a forest.

Meaning: Unity and cooperation are essential for success.

14. Nginya ngi agahar a nyiin kpa I gbe-

Literal translation: A horse has four legs yet it sometimes falls.

Meaning: No one is perfect; humility is important.

15. Kwagh yan u shohor undu kon ga-

Literal translation: The food meant for a toad does not climb trees.

Meaning: What is meant for you will come at the right time.

16. Or u tso tse aii yol ga-

Literal translation: The canoe man does not sleep with dirt on his body.

Meaning: Your work should reflect in your life.

17. Ze gbem hembra ikpagher-

Literal translation: Doing something repeatedly brings improvement.

Meaning: Consistency leads to success.

18. Ka we lu a kpagh u vende Mngishim ga-

Literal translation: When you have a bag, you do not reject garden eggs.

Meaning: Do not hastily reject help or gifts.

19. Gbenda lihe nah kpa nyor ya-

Literal translation: The road is long but it reaches home.

Meaning: Do not give up; persistence leads to success.

20. Ka mtille u ivo I teen I er-

Literal translation: It is how a goat stands that it is sold.

Meaning: Your behavior determines your value.

21. Faga wa ime hembra tugh-

Literal translation: Ignorance is darker than the night.

Meaning: Lack of knowledge is very dangerous.

22. Ka we lu a ikyondu nga u de ave sha kor-

Literal translation: If you do not have clothes, do not keep touching the rope.

Meaning: Do not interfere in matters that do not concern you.

23. Or fe iyange I tondon gbum ga-

Literal translation: No one knows the day a stone may wound his toe.

Meaning: Life is unpredictable.

24. Orhyundu hunde kpa fa a yange a kasua-

Literal translation: Even a mad man knows the days of the market.

Meaning: Do not underestimate people; even the reckless have limits.

25. Iche mende tsea ichugh-

Literal translation: The hair is on the head, not on the forehead.

Meaning: Do not treat everyone carelessly or the same way.

26. Mimi hembra tyumbu –

Literal translation: truth is greater than collateral

Meaning: being honest pays

27. Ishimawan ine mkom –

Literal translation: Patience gives contentment.

Meaning: one should learn to be patient to overlook somethings

28. Mbakoon kon omboo ga –

Literal translation: It is impossible to bend a dry tree.

Meaning: there is time meant for everything and we shouldn't wait till its late

29. Uwaa sen tswen hure – A stream flowing alone has many bends.

30. Kpev yar ikyoo gema koso iyongo ga – A male goat acts for itself.

31. Atseree wua alom –

Literal translation: Trickery killed the hare.

Meaning: one should desist from craftiness

32. Uya gege uya ihoon ve –

literal translation: you have eaten so much now you have eaten the rotten thing.

Meaning: Excess leads to bad consequences.

33. Orpinen tsum ga –

Literal translation: one who ask does not get lost.

Meaning: He who asks gets it right.

34. Iti idedoo hembra tungu – A good name is better than money.

35. Or ye wan tswen ga –

literal meaning: Nobody enjoys a child alone.

Meaning: one should learn to let others benefit from what they have

36. Ka tema I mongu Mbagbera ve fe iwa er-

Literal translation: It's by sitting together that Mbagbera knows how to do blacksmith.
Meaning; unity and togetherness bring knowledge and progress.

Cultural linguistics theory explains that language is a repository of a peoples cultural knowledge values and worldview. This evident in the Tiv proverbs which embody the wisdom beliefs and moral principles of the Tiv people. Proverbs like **gbenda lihe nah kpa nyor ya**. **Gbenda** represents challenges then **ya** represents success. This proverbs reflects and teaches that no matter how difficult a situation or task is, with determination one can get it done. This proverb is a reflection of the committed spirit of a Tiv man and through such proverb, the Tiv language preserves indigenous knowledge and transmits it from one generation to another. Therefore the continued use of Tiv language is essential for safeguarding Tiv cultural heritage. **Mimi hemba tyumbu**, which means being honest pays. This encourages honesty and the spirit of honesty is handed down from generations.

Ka tema imongu mba gbera ve fe iwa er. Empathizes that unity and togetherness bring knowledge and progress and this knowledge is preserved through the use of proverbs as handed down from generation. The naming system is another way the Tiv values are preserved, names like Angbaindoo which is all about brotherhood and love, Bemdoo, encouraging peaceful coexistent and Suurshater which is putting your trust in God. These names represent and encourages unity, peaceful living and total trust in God and these values are preserved and handed down from generations through names.

Greetings and Respect

Greetings in Tiv culture are highly significant and reflect respect, humility, and social relationships. The Tiv language contains various forms of greetings depending on age, status, and situation. Proper greetings are regarded as signs of good upbringing and moral discipline. The use of respectful expressions in Tiv demonstrates how language reflects cultural values and social structure. **U ndever (good morning), u pande ve (good evening), msugh** etc.

Folktales and Oral Tradition

Folktales are important components of Tiv oral tradition. Traditionally, elders narrated stories to children in the evenings to teach moral lessons and preserve community history. These stories often involve animals, heroes, and supernatural beings.

Through folktales, young people learn virtues such as honesty, courage, kindness, and obedience. The Tiv language serves as the medium through which these stories are preserved and transmitted across generations. Stories about the hare and its trickery ways are often told from generation to generation.

Traditional Songs and Dance

Traditional Tiv songs and dances are deeply connected to language and culture. Songs performed during marriages, festivals, funerals, and social ceremonies communicate communal values and historical experiences. The lyrics of Tiv songs often contain praise, advice, satire, and historical narratives. Without the Tiv language, the meanings and cultural significance of these songs may be lost.

Naming System

Names among the Tiv people often reflect cultural beliefs, historical events, family circumstances, or religious values. Tiv names carry meanings that reveal social identity and family heritage.

For example, some Tiv names may express gratitude, describe birth circumstances, or honor ancestors. The meanings embedded in these names can only be fully understood through knowledge of the Tiv language and culture.

names like:

Tyowua -the kinsmen have killed

Ngodoo- mother is good

Mbatsavwua- witches has killed
Ngohide-mother has returned
Terhide- the father has returned
Tarvihi- the world has spoiled
Ortserga- nobody lives forever
Orhemba- someone pass another
Igbadoo- maternal lineage is good
Tereramodoo- God has done me well
kwagghemba- I am defeated
Aondonenge- God sees
Mluwankumam-I am contented with my lot
Bemdoo-peace is good
Msurshima- my solace
Aondokator- God is king
Orseer- someone has added
Oryina- a human is not supernatural
Mbakosun- people are gossiping about us
Suurshater- trust in the Lord
Hemenseter- lead us Lord
Dooshimauter- the love of God
Sueseter-support us Lord
Msendoo-prayer is good
Tyoapine- the kinsmen will ask
Angbaindoo- a sibling is good
Ornguga- there is no man
Mbasen- people are laughing
Mbalamen- people are talking

There are also names given to children because of circumstances, for instance at the death of a father the next child if it's a boy is named **Terundu** or **Terhide** meaning. father has left or father has returned. **Ngoudu** is given to female children who lost their mothers or mother figures. A mother or family that has gone through a lot of difficulties or challenges will name their child **Yanguchan** which means house is difficult depicting the situation at home. **Movihimze** none is bad, is usually given to a child that the family has a history of birthing girls. **Kumawuese** literal translating it is enough to give thanks. This is a name given to a child whose family has been blessed with many children or good things. **Mgbanyi**, when a mother is not regarded or not treated well in her husband's home, such a mother names her son **Mgbanyi** which means I am nothing.

Tiv names tell stories, there are children bearing names of presidents and prominent people, you hear names like Shehu, Shagari, Buhari, Tinubu, Jonathan, Akume, Awolowo, Obasanjo, Thabo Mbeki, Mandela even Mugabe.

Ankpe More is a name of a girl who was born at the time the brand of more beer was released. Despite the civilization and exposure, the Tiv pattern of naming children is still practiced. There has been a shift in naming as we often hear biblical names or Christian inclined names, for example:

Tomuter, Shashimaiter, Ivseter, Ivimter, Aondosoo, Ivandeiter, Shaikumiter, Kenena, Lianter.

The above are Christian names with godly meaning.

Challenges Facing the Tiv Language

Despite its cultural importance, the Tiv language faces several challenges in contemporary society.

Influence of English Language

English language, being the official language of Nigeria, dominates education, administration, and media communication. Many parents encourage their children to speak English more frequently than indigenous languages, leading to reduced fluency in Tiv among younger generations.

Urbanization and Globalization

Urbanization and globalization have contributed to cultural changes among Tiv youths. Many young people living in urban areas prefer English or Nigerian Pidgin to Tiv language. This situation threatens the continuity of indigenous linguistic and cultural practices.

Decline in Oral Tradition

Modern technology and changing lifestyles have reduced the practice of traditional storytelling and communal gatherings. As oral traditions decline, cultural knowledge previously transmitted through language may gradually disappear.

Parental Attitudes toward Tiv Language Acquisition

Due to modernization and globalization parental language choices has greatly been affected. Many parents now prioritize English and foreign cultural practices over the Tiv language, resulting in weakened inter-generational language transmission. Consequently, the Tiv language is gradually losing prestige posing a serious threat to the preservation of Tiv cultural heritage.

The Need for Preservation of Tiv Language and Culture

The preservation of Tiv language is essential for maintaining Tiv cultural identity and heritage. Indigenous languages serve as repositories of traditional knowledge and collective memory. When a language disappears, aspects of culture attached to it may also vanish.

To preserve the Tiv language and culture, the following measures are necessary:

1. Tiv language should be encouraged in homes and communities.
2. Schools should promote the teaching of Tiv language and literature.
3. Cultural festivals and traditional events should be supported.
4. Tiv folktales, songs, and oral histories should be documented.
5. MEDIA organizations should broadcast programs in Tiv language.

These efforts will help preserve Tiv cultural heritage for future generations.

Conclusion

Language and culture are closely related aspects of human society. Among the Tiv people, language serves as a powerful instrument for preserving cultural identity, traditional values, and historical knowledge. Through proverbs, greetings, folktales, songs, and naming systems, the Tiv language reflects the rich cultural heritage of the Tiv people.

However, the Tiv language currently faces challenges arising from modernization, urbanization, and the growing dominance of English language. There is therefore a need for deliberate efforts to preserve and promote the Tiv language as an essential component of Tiv cultural heritage. Preserving indigenous languages like Tiv is not only important for cultural continuity but also for the protection of linguistic diversity and African cultural identity.

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