WELLNESS AND LINGUISTIC BARRIERS IN DEAF COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA AND PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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OUTLINE

- Background
- Issues specific to Deaf people & communities
  - Linguistic barriers
  - Society-imposed ‘unwellness’
  - Restricted opportunities
  - Physical Unwellness
- Best practices for working with similar communities
- Conclusions
BACKGROUND

Deafness, Wellness & Language Endangerment Globally

- Linguistic barriers
- Stigma
- Identity
- Unique factors for language endangerment
- Small sign languages can contribute significantly to our understanding of language universals
BACKGROUND

Nigeria

- Deaf people are the most vulnerable group in Nigeria. (Asonye, et al, forthcoming)
- The deaf children and youths are highly marginalized and underdeveloped
- They have very low communicative competence in their language
- We have been working in multiple deaf communities in four States in Nigeria since 2013.
Map Showing the areas with Communities we’re currently documenting

SouthEast 1
- School for the Deaf Oredo

SouthWest
- National Stadium

Federal Capital Territory
- Kuje

SouthEast 2
- Enugu
BACKGROUND

Papua New Guinea

- Despite the fact that Papua New Guinea features extreme linguistic diversity, little is known of its sign languages (Kendon 1980; Lewis et al. 2016)
  - Two sign languages had been reported in the country before my research with Sinasina Sign Language began in 2016
  - This is due in part to stigma against Deaf people and their languages

- Sign languages in the Pacific face endangerment for a variety of reasons which is an issue closely tied to physical and emotional wellness for Deaf people in the region (Mathers et al. 2000:19; Woodward 2003; Nonaka 2004; Schembri 2010; Sze et al. 2012)
  - Language documentation & conservation can address such issues here and in Nigeria
ISSUES THAT DEAF PEOPLE FACE

Education
- 86% of the Deaf adults in Lagos State have only high school certificate.
- Deaf people in Sinasina do not attend school.

Work
- 80% of Deaf adults in Lagos State are unemployed.
- Deaf people in Sinasina are subsistence farmers.

Poverty
- Highly prevalent in low income, low education families.
- 75% of hearing loss in children in Nigeria is accidental and avoidable.
- Street begging is almost ‘a deaf thing’
Wellness & Linguistic Barriers

- Linguistic barriers
  - Less than 5% of hearing parents and family members in Imo, Abuja and Lagos can sign.
  - Communication is next to zero with deaf family members.
  - While a significant portion of the hearing population in Sinasina signs, there are no educational materials available for signers.

- Society-imposed ‘unwellness’- medical model of deafness
SOCIETY-IMPOSED ‘UNWELLNESS’

**Stigma**
- Due to long-term stigmatization, the Deaf in Nigeria, to a large extent are still looked upon as cursed, unwell. (Nweze, 2013; Asonye, 2016)
- Cases of job denials; drivers license denials in Lagos State
- In Sinasina, people often deny the existence of Deaf people and signed languages

**Terminology**
- Very many hearing people in Nigeria still use the expression “deaf and dumb” to refer to the deaf individuals.
- In Tok Pisin, the word *longlong* ‘crazy, stupid’ is often used for Deaf individuals; signed languages are often dismissed as being ‘just gestures’
PHYSICAL UNWELLNESS

Physical health issues

- STD’s - 71% of female deaf students in the dormitory in Imo State tested positive to different STD in 2015. (S-DELI, 2015)
- Homelessness
- Abuse: 70% of those girls in the dormitory had been abused sexually
ISSUES THAT RESEARCHERS FACE

- Bureaucratic issues
  - Denied or delayed access to deaf communities.

- Finding these languages can take time
  - Building trust can take even longer
WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES IN LIGHT OF THESE ISSUES

- Understand where they are coming from - Face
  - Family & community levels
  - Stem from stigma & perceived ‘unwellness’
- DON’T reinforce stigma
  - Deafness/hearingness
  - Linguistic genocide
  - Colonization
- DON’T take things at face value
WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES IN LIGHT OF THESE ISSUES

- Include deaf researchers & community members
  - In Abuja, we are working with Mr. Victor, a deaf teacher; funded his 6-week study trip to Gallaudet University
- Training - linguistic & technical
- Build trust within the community - We emphasize on “giving something back” to the community - free medical services, talent hunts and supports.
  - Become a community ally - We mediate between the two communities - Deaf and Hearing.
- Bridging the gap between Deaf and hearing communities - We use media a lot.
  - Re-sensitization - We hold sensitization forums with the deaf communities.
BEST PRACTICES

- Understand issues of society-imposed unwellness
- Create materials which are appropriate for the community & address a range of wellness issues
  - Create appropriate educational materials, esp with respect to health
  - Create job-related training opportunities
- To bridge gaps between deaf and hearing people
  - Work against stigma
- Remember that even if you aren’t a sign language researcher, simple recordings can still be immensely useful
CONCLUSIONS

Is there unwellness?
- Yes
- It comes from hearing people

Use community-driven language documentation & linguistic research to give people a chance
- To bridge gaps between deaf and hearing people
- Work against stigma
- Create appropriate educational materials, esp with respect to health
- Create materials that work for signers
References

REFERENCES

THANK YOU!

QUESTIONS?