Pushing the Boundaries of Learning Materials in African Languages Instructions

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Abstract

African language instruction, especially those that target foreign language learners, have mostly relied on language dictionaries as an important reference material. Despite the relevance of dictionaries to language learning, the design of dictionaries based on learners' proficiency has not gained much attention in African language instruction. Focusing on Yorùbá language pedagogy, I draw on Robert Lew's perspective of factoring the target users characteristics into the design of dictionaries (Lew, 2015, p. 2) to examine the methodic processes of harnessing organized vocabulary of Yoruba and the attendant pronunciation of the words to address the challenge around tones, and contextualized learning of Yoruba words. This paper deconstructs the idea of context, as conceived within the dictionary genre, to repurpose it for proficiency-based language learning. While dictionaries are important reference materials in foreign language learning, they should be developed to respond to learners' proficiency needs using technological tools supported by the appropriate theories and methods of foreign language instruction.

Dictionaries: A Learning Reference Re-Envisioned for African Language Learning

A ubiquitous description of a dictionary refers to a text with compiled, organized vocabulary translated in at least one language and supported with sample sentences and categorization of grammar. In Kushenova's words, to develop a dictionary is to embark on a rare aspect of the linguistic study of etymology (2021, 1). Most dictionaries are bilingual with meaning translations that are either reception or production oriented, "depending on whether they emphasize helping the user to either grasp the meaning of foreign words (reception), or finding the proper way to express ideas in the foreign language (production) (Kaalep & Mikk, 2008, p. 372). Regarding second language learning, scholars have also linked the understanding of vocabulary to reading practice and dictionary use (Luppescu & Day, 1993). Over the years, dictionaries have been the tool that many language users who are either already proficient in the language or have some stability in navigating the language utilize as a reference material. With it, users expand their knowledge of the vocabulary in the language or double-check the meaning of ambiguous words or words

that have other uses.

Existing works in many African language dictionaries are commendable. Languages such as Swahili have developed various dictionary learning materials, including the *Standard Swahili-English Dictionary* (Johnson, 1998) and the *English-Swahili Pocket Dictionary* (Safari, 1996). Other available Kiswahili online dictionaries are Kiswahili-English Dictionary on the apps store and apps on Google Play. Dictionaries also exist in Isizulu, Yoruba, Wolof, and many other African languages. The *Oxford First Bilingual English-Zulu Dictionary* (Paizee & D, 2012), *English Yoruba, Yoruba –English Modern Practical Dictionary* (Fakinlede, 2003) *Proficiency-Based Dictionary of Yoruba Language* (Author, 2024), *Modern Yoruba Dictionary: English-Yoruba, Yoruba-English* (kasahorow, 2013), Wolof-English-English-Wolof Dictionary and Phrase Book (Kantorek, 2005) and many more. Efforts have also been geared towards developing many grammar textbooks to support the dictionary materials, which are published in print or made available online.

The "Proficiency-Based Dictionary of Yoruba" (Author, 2024) builds on these existing works to push the boundaries of how dictionaries are structured and engaged for foreign language learning. With a focus on the Yoruba language, three important gaps are identified: (a) providing dictionary contents that attend to the proficiency needs of foreign language learners (b) engaging technology as a tool to address the challenge associated with tones and pronunciation in the Yoruba language (c) re-conceptualizing context within the dictionary genre. I discuss each of the identified gap in light of the Proficiency-Based Dictionary Project and explicate the possibilities of expanding boundaries, access, and contextualized language learning in African language instruction. I argue that existing structures that are associated with specific textbook genres, such as dictionaries, can be re-envisioned to address learning gaps and the language needs of foreign language learners.

Dictionaries and the Proficiency Needs of African Language Learners

Dictionaries of world languages typically provide organized lexicons of a language along with their pronunciations and meanings. Sample sentences and grammatical constructions that explicate the use of some words are also included to provide context of usage and grammatical knowledge of the language. From a functional perspective, the structure and content of dictionaries of diverse languages have, over time, served the language needs of everyday language users, but without much attention to foreign learners of a language, especially less commonly taught languages. As indicated in Lew's work, the strategy that has been used in monolingual dictionaries, namely, "controlled list of vocabulary items," has been engaged to provide learners with ordinary, everyday common words (2015, p. 4). This approach, according to Lew, removes the challenge of introducing learners to too many unfamiliar words. While the use of a controlled list of vocabularies by lexicographers is useful, structuring learning dictionaries based on theoretically-driven guidelines of foreign language proficiency is very relevant to African language instruction. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

(ACTFL, 2012, 2024) provides the framework for understanding learners' proficiency and learning evidence, namely function and tasks; accuracy; context and content; and text type (FACT). Within this paradigm, a learner's proficiency is assessed in relation to the functions they can perform in the language.

To function in a language implies the ability to produce specific communicative and grammatically accurate content, either in written or oral form (ACTFL 2024, 5). This perspective on the assessment of language learning drives the development and organization of the Pedagogy-Based Dictionary of Yoruba. Myriam Met & Michael Byram's (1999, p. 63) distinction between content and performance standards as what learners should be able to know versus how well a learner is expected to master aspects of a language provides additional insights into the Proficiency-Based Dictionary of Yoruba Language. Using the ACTFL proficiency guidelines (2012, 2024), I developed the contents and structure of the *Proficiency-Based Dictionary of Yoruba* to align with the proficiency grid of assessment of foreign language learning. With specific attention to elementary proficiency of Yoruba, which ranges from the novice low to novice high/intermediate low, the Yoruba proficiency-based dictionary is structured based on the can-do statements of the elementary proficiency and the attending learning contents—vocabulary and grammar notes— within each of the chapters (Secules et al., 1992, p. 480). The can-do statements also provide learners with a threshold of performance measurements, which puts the organized vocabulary in the dictionary within the proficiency level of the learners. Based on this methodic organization of the learning contents, the *Proficiency-Based Dictionary of Yoruba* is not simply a language learning reference material but a learning resource with a measured aggregate of the vocabulary content that learners are exposed to based on their proficiency level. Because the dictionary is driven by learners' proficiency, the targeted functions that learners are expected to perform in the language also prepare them for real-world tasks in the target language.

The ACTFL performance descriptors for language learners (ACTFL, 2023, p. 5) provide details of the expected language output of learners across different proficiency levels. And by performance, the descriptors imply the "language ability that has been practiced and is within familiar contexts and content areas." As a result, the immediate focus of the proficiency-based dictionary of the Yoruba language is the performance descriptors of beginning learners of Yoruba. As indicated in the performance descriptor, language learning is complex, and the modality by which learners learn, cognitive factors relating to age, and the environment of learning, such as the classroom setting or immersion in the cultural setting, are very important factors that determine learners' experiences (ACTFL, p. 2). Regardless of the learning environment or setting, the *Proficiency-Based Dictionary of Yoruba* constitutes a very rich language learning resource grounded in foreign language teaching methods. This dictionary, therefore, provides elementary learners of Yoruba with the tools to learn the vocabulary of the language and their use in real-world situations while considering the learner's proficiency needs in the language. Beginning learners of Yoruba using the proficiency-based dictionary can do or talk about topics such as social introductions, asking and answering simple questions,

ordering a simple meal, talking about self, family and others, talking about familiar topics that extend beyond daily routines, and more. (cf. Author, 2024). In each chapter of the dictionary, words are organized alphabetically alongside their meanings, word category, audio pronunciation, and embedded audiovisuals demonstrating functional use of the language in the target culture. Each lexical item is furnished with an audio component that learners can click on to hear isolated vocabulary so they can acquire skills for the correct pronunciation of Yorùbá words. While each of the listed words has English translations, users of the dictionary also have the option to click on the translations of the monologues and dialogues of the audiovisuals across the chapters. The dictionary also offers H5P and communicative activities for practice. The grammar notes at the end of each chapter provide additional guidance on the structure of the Yorùbá language.

Although the African language of focus in this grand project is Yoruba, it targets beginner learners who may have begun their learning at the novice level but will advance their proficiency in the language to reach the intermediate level. The template of this project will also be used to develop the intermediate-level proficiency of the dictionary learning content. Additionally, similar projects in Swahili, Wolof, Zulu, Akan Twi, and other African languages will also be developed as separate books but interlinked as a series.

The Structure of the Yoruba Language and the Methodic Organization of the Dictionary

World languages dictionaries thrive on organizational structures. Such organization begins with the layouts of contents in alphabetical order and followed by categorization of vocabulary into parts of speech, the definition of words and sample sentences. For languages with unique grammatical features such as tones and diacritics, the organization of dictionary contents prioritizes the appropriate tone placements, diacritics, and explanation of what each tone and diacritic implies in the target language. For example, all the diacritics used in the proficiency-based dictionary have interpretations. The three tones of the Yoruba language mark distinction in pronunciation and meaning. All subdots on the Yorùbá alphabet also indicate the Yoruba writing system. With an attention to the nuances of the Yorùbá writing system, each vocabulary is categorized by the part of speech, the meaning, and sample sentences. Because this dictionary provides in-depth insights into the Yoruba vocabulary and words that are being used in context, it will be reviewed and updated to reflect ongoing language practices in the target context. Such ongoing modifications and additions will provide learners with a continued understanding of Yoruba-language-in-use and the changes that impact the vocabulary words that are being created and/or reused among the speakers of the language. To make sense of the Yoruba tonal systems, the sounds and the processes of tone placements and interpretations are discussed below.

Vowels

Yoruba has a total of seven oral vowels and five nasal vowels. The nasal vowels are marked with an accompanying nasal consonant, /n/. For example, in words like wọ́n "they"; ìtàn "history"; ikùn "stomach."

Oral Vowels	**Nasal Vowels**
/a/	/an/
/e/	
/ẹ/	/ẹn/
/i/	/in/
/o/	
/ọ/	/ọn/
/u/	/un/

The Yoruba Syllable Structure

Like many languages, understanding the vowel sounds is key to understanding the Yoruba syllable structure. In Yoruba phonology, syllables can occur as a stand-alone vowel, for example, /ẹ/ "you," singular pronoun in the object position; /ẹ/ subject plural or honorific pronoun"; / ǐ / in words like ǐ-lù "drum". Syllables can also occur as a sequence of consonant and vowel sounds in monosyllabic and disyllabic words. For example:

1. fò "to jump"
2. olùgbàlà «savior» with the syllables: o-lù-gbà-là

Consonants and Syllabic Consonants in Yorùbá

There are eighteen consonant sounds in the Yorùbá language. These consonants are integral to pronouncing and reading Yoruba words. /b/, /d/, /f/, /g/, /gb/, /h/, /j/, /k/, /l/, /m/, /n/, /p/, /r/, /s/, /ṣ/, /t/, /w/, /y/. It is important to note that the Yoruba language does not allow the sequence of consonants (consonant clusters) in a word, except if one of the contiguous consonants is syllabic. When such a sequence occurs in a word, it is called a **syllabic consonant**. Only two consonants, /n/ and /m/, can function as syllables in Yoruba. For example: In Bímbọ́lá, Bí-m-bọ́-lá, a Yorùbá name that means "born into wealth," /m/ is a syllabic consonant because it stands alone

as a syllable in the word. Similarly, /n/ in aláǹgbá , a-lá-ǹ-gbá, "lizard, /n/ is a syllabic consonant because it stands alone as a syllable in the word.

Note: In Yorùbá syllable structure, nasal vowels are not the same as syllabic consonants. For example: The nasal vowel /in/ in i-rin "metal" is not a syllabic nasal but a combination of consonant /r/ followed by nasal vowel /in/.

Yoruba Tones

Yoruba has three tones, and all three tones occur in word syllables.

High: (́)
Low: (̀) and,
Mid (-).

The high and low tones are marked using the corresponding diacritics in every syllable. However, the mid-tone is always unmarked. For example: In a word like "Adéọlá," the tones are carefully placed thus: A-dé-ọ- lá, " Adéọlá. Note that the first and third syllables have mid tones, but they are not overtly marked using the mid-tone diacritic (-). Therefore, all vowels in Yorùbá words without tone marks are inherently carrying a mid-tone even when they are not marked in the words.

Tones in Yoruba are phonemic because they bring about a change in meaning. As a result, the correct pronunciation of words is extremely important for communicating accurate meaning in Yoruba. For example: Tones differentiate the meaning in these homographs sùn "sleep" versus sun "roast;" jó "dance" versus jó "burn."

- Mo jó ńí àsè ìgbéyàwó ọ̀rẹ́ mi "I danced at my friend's wedding party."
- Oúnjẹ tí mo sè jó "The food I cooked got burnt"

Yorùbá does not use a glide tone on a single vowel sound. Instead, such sounds are repeated to articulate the glide as well as the corresponding tone marks. When there is a combination of tones on a singular sound, such sounds are written as multiple vowels with specific tone marks. Example are in words like: ọlọ́pàá, ọ-lọ́-pà-á "police"; òórùn, ò-ó-rùn "smell"; dábàá, dá-bà-á "suggest."

The order below shows how the contents in the Airtable are organized:

a. The list of vocabulary that correlates with the can-do statement
b. The corresponding recorded pronunciation of the words
c. The part of speech or grammatical category of each of the words
e. The English definitions of each vocabulary
f. Sample Yorùbá sentences and the translation
g. The colloquial form of some of the vocabulary and sample sentences, where

applicable.

To interpret abbreviations in the dictionary, specific abbreviations listed below indicate the parts of speech each vocabulary word is categorized.

Noun "n."
Pronoun "pr."
Verb "v."
Adverb "adv."
Adjective "adj."
Preposition "prep"
Conjunction "ConJ."
Question marker: "que. mk."
Negation "neg."

The Role of Technological Tools in Organizing the Dictionary Contents

The Proficiency-Based Dictionary of Yorùbá utilizes technology as a tool to respond to the gap in access to simultaneous audio pronunciation of vocabulary words in a Yoruba dictionary. Using appropriate technology also provides contextualized and functional use of the vocabulary in ways that carefully iterates the cultures of the language speakers. The organized vocabulary, along with the audio pronunciation and audiovisuals, are only made possible because of tools such as Airtable. The airtable is a versatile database that is suitable for organizing the vocabulary, which is also linked to external tools such as pressbook to allow for a seamless interaction of the vocabulary words of a language and the attendant pronunciation. Specifically, I utilized the Airtable software to organize the dictionary's contents, which, although domiciled in the Airtable platform itself, are linked to an online open education resource on PressBook. All the vocabulary contents are organized to enable the user of the dictionary to produce words both in isolation and in Yoruba sentences while targeting ideas in the context of the specific focus of each section of the dictionary. As users access each vocabulary, they can also click on the audio-recorded pronunciation to hear each word and can repeat such for practice. While the sections of the airtable are structured using insights from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) can-do statements, each of the words listed across the different can-do-statements has a corresponding audio-recorded pronunciation. To access the pronunciation, learners are expected to click on the play button and listen to how each word is pronounced. They can also repeat the pronunciation as it is heard on the audio or self-record their effort to pronounce the words using their device. It is worthy of note that the recorded voice on the airtable will always be the learner's point of reference in assessing the accuracy of their pronunciation. Additionally, words, phrases, and sample sentences are tailored to the novice, novice mid, and novice high elementary proficiency levels. Learners can search the different categories of parts of speech on the

airtable. For example, they may search all nouns in the entire dictionary or filter the search by the can-do statement.

H5P: A Tool for Creating Language Learning Activities

The pressbook is an online book publishing platform infused with the H5P tool used in activity design. This activity design is engaged in two different ways: First, as a tool to provide language transcript and translation in ways that motivate the learners to practice listening skills and attempt to use the language in speaking. Yet, it leaves room for fact-checking meaning by clicking on the translation button, which reveals the meaning in English language. Second, H5P makes the use of notecards in language learning handy and supported with the practice of pronunciations. Rather than the conventional use of notecards in hard copies, which of course has its value, learners using the Yorùbá Proficiency dictionary can now access notecards on their various devices, including phones, iPads, tablets, etc. With this, the dictionary is revolutionized in African language instructions.

Contextualized Audiovisuals with Grammar Notes

The combination of activities developed into the chapters of the dictionary constitutes the contexts created for users of the dictionary. Existing dictionaries have carefully curated sentence samples to provide context of usage for vocabulary words. While those samples are important to experimenting with the vocabulary in a dictionary, technology provides the tool to push the boundaries of context in the dictionary. The *Proficiency-Based Dictionary of Yorùbá is* an Open Education Resource (OER), which is available and accessible online. In it, the vocabularies listed for each can-do-statement are furnished with sample sentences, audio recordings of each word, a sample monologue, and dialogue, followed by a detailed explanation of grammatical concepts. These sentence constructions are exemplified in the sample audiovisuals to provide contexts to the use of the vocabulary words as well as to showcase the cultures of the Yorubas. The representations of contextualized language use and the target culture are critical to the presence of the Yorùbá language and culture in the global space. As a result, not only the language of the people is shared but also their cultures.

Additionally, with the use of appropriate technological tools, context within the dictionary genre is redefined. Unlike the popular contexts created through sample sentences in which speakers read through sample sentences to understand the use of vocabulary words, the *Proficiency-Based Dictionary of Yoruba* expands the idea of context to engage with dynamics of communicative functions using various modalities in which "Video allows second language learners to see the dynamics of inter- action in authentic setting" (Secules et al., 1992, p. 480). In this regard, context constitutes the

communication of meaning as defined by the understanding of the linguistic rhythm of the language exemplified through presentational and interactive audio-visuals. These forms of communication also infuse cultural understanding that is not only depicted in terms of vocabulary but also in motion and the use of cultural products and materials of the target culture. As a result, the dictionary becomes a window into understanding the target language and culture alongside the opportunity to practice the language in use.

The grammatical components of many African language dictionaries have mostly been engaged in terms of categorizations of grammar concepts alongside their definitions. Unfortunately, this existing approach of structuring the contents of a language dictionary does not leave enough room for a meaningful explanation of the grammar components of the language, especially based on the proficiency of the learners. The proficiency-based dictionary of Yorùbá takes a turn from this approach to provide grammatical explanations that are tailored to the proficiency needs of language users. Each of the can-do statements, driven by the ACTFL proficiency guidelines, is, therefore, laced with focused grammatical elements relevant to each of the chapters. The grammatical elements are then explained systematically to respond to the curiosity of elementary learners of the Yoruba language, thereby offering the learners insights into how grammatical rules inform word usage and sentence construction in Yorùbá.

Concluding Remarks

Dictionaries are important reference materials that are critical to language teaching and learning. The usefulness of dictionaries has been recognized as supporting materials that allow learners to not only learn the language but also navigate the language through self-study and attempts to practice the language using the meanings provided in a dictionary. The teaching of African languages as second and foreign languages requires the need to explore newer approaches to structuring and providing access to African language vocabulary based on learners' proficiency. Also, such approach should respond to the intricacies of specific African language, for example, tone and pronunciation of Yoruba words of an African language. As a result, dictionaries of an African language will be methodic as it factors the sequence of vocabulary organization to attend to what language learners can do in the language based on their proficiency. Providing learning tools to give learners access to learn and explore the language as they develop proficiency in the language would impact the students' learning experience. More importantly, dictionaries, when structured based on proficiency, become relatable and suitable for learning. The template provided in the Yoruba dictionary discussed in this paper could be adapted for other African languages. With such a template, African language dictionaries will own a theory-driven structure and will better attend to the needs of foreign learners of less commonly taught languages.

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