LANGUAGE DEATH IN AKOKO-EDO: A STUDY OF SOME STUDENTS' ATTITUDE TO NATIVE DIALECTS IN AKOKO-EDO, EDO-STATE

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ABSTRACT: *Language is God's special gift to mankind. Without language, human civilization, as we now know it, would have remained impossible. It is a carrier of civilization and culture, as human thoughts and philosophy are conveyed from one generation to the other through the medium of language. However, just like living things, languages die. Language death occurs when there are no more speakers of a particular language. In Edo-State, Akoko-Edo Local Government Area (LGA) to be precise, some indigenous dialects are about to go into extinction. Therefore, this paper examines the attitude of students to some native dialects in Akoko-Edo Local Government Area of Edo-State. The study used questionnaires to gather data on students' perspective on why they think some native dialects in this particular part of the state are going into extinction. The results revealed that a considerable number of students' attitude to their native dialects were not positive. The study revealed that various social phenomena have greatly affected some native dialects in Akoko-Edo Local Government Area. In the light of the results, the study recommends that necessary measures and awareness be created to sustain these threatened dialects. This is because young people constitute the future of the nation and if this trend is not checked, it will affect the coming generations.*

KEYWORDS: Language death, Native dialects, Students attitudes, Extinction.

INTRODUCTION

Language death is a protracted phenomenon. It describes community-level loss of competence in a language; it denotes a process that does not affect all speakers at the same time or to the same extent. Total death is declared when no speakers are left of a particular language variety in a population that had used it. Therefore, language death occurs when there are no more speakers of a particular language. Aitchinson and Carter (1987) state:

Language death is a social phenomenon, triggered by social needs. There is no evidence that there was anything wrong with the dead language itself: its essential structure was no better and no worse than that of any other language. It faded away because it did not fulfill the social needs of the community that spoke it. (246)

The above statement reflects that languages do not die because of their inherent structure (syntax, morphology, phonology) or complexity. Thomason (2001) says that "Language death does not just occur, but rather its death is directly correlated to various social phenomena" (52). It is obvious that economic, social and political factors lead a community to shift from one language to another. Also, obtaining a job is one of the very major reasons for abandoning one language for another. This is because the new job mandates the individual to use another language in carrying out the job efficiently. Another important factor that may lead to language death is that a community may not see the need to take active steps to maintain their ethnic language. The language may be seen as a mediocre language that will be of no use to their children or they may not even know that they are gradually losing their language. In addition, other social phenomena that contribute to language death or loss include "rural–urban shift, cultural identity and national identity, prestige and mediocrity, high-class-low-class" (Kuter 2016: 76). When people move from the rural to urban areas, there is every possibility that they may lose their language if it is not used in the city where they reside. For example, if a young man or a woman who is seeking for greener pastures moves to the city to find a job, there is the likelihood to lose his/her language if the language is not used in that city and there is nobody to speak his/her language with particularly when the language is spoken by a minority group. There is always conflict between cultural and national identity and this also leads to language death. If the national language is different from the native language and the national language is codified and spoken widely, then the mother –tongue which is not widely spoken may die over time. A people's culture reflects in the way and manner they use language, but sometimes when another language is made a national language it may gradually erode another language. Furthermore, prestige and mediocrity determines what languages die and which remain alive. The spread of a majority group language into more and more domains reduces the use of ethnic languages. The prestige of a language is determined by the users of a language and sometimes the status awarded by the government. If a people who use an ethnic language discover that the language is looked down upon and cannot help them identify in the society, they switch to the "more prestigious language of the majority and in the process their ethnic language is threatened and may eventually die off" (Akinkurolere & Oluwapelumi, 2018:25).

Similarly, intermarriage between groups can trigger gradual language loss on any of the two parties or on both. In an intermarriage, the language of one of the partners dominates the other or both partners may agree to use a neutral language and this may lead to language loss gradually. Fromkin and Rodman (2000) reiterate that "each language is a unique vehicle for thought, ultimately, when we lose a language, we lose an essential part of the human fabric

with its own unique perspective, a culture and thousands of years of communication die with that language" (269).

Background of the Study

Language endangerment and death is an endemic sociolinguistic phenomenon and it is a by-product of bilingualism and multilingualism. Human language is dynamic; it grows, changes in form and function, and even dies off. This threat of language endangerment and extinction is due to globalization, the advent of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), poor language attitude, and maintenance. While language endangerment and extinction is beneficial to donor languages like English, French, and a host of others, it is a great threat to smaller languages, most especially African languages. Therefore, smaller languages, most especially languages that are not on the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) shall be consumed by bigger and more prestige-laden languages. Aziza (2013) opines that, "a language that can be used for ICT is assured of growth and development and has no problem of extinction" (208). Languages exist in people and they die when nobody speaks it any longer. So, the fate of any language is in the hands of its owners. As a language dies, a chapter of human culture, heritage and also history closes.

Crystal (2008) says that "language attitude is the feelings people have about their own language or the language(s) of others" (266). This attitude determines the existence or extinction of a language. People may either have a positive or negative feeling about their languages, if they have a negative feeling about their native language; they automatically switch over to a foreign one, and if they have a positive feeling about their native language, then they will be loyal to it.

Therefore, this study is aimed at investigating some students' attitude to some native dialects in Akoko-Edo.

Statement of the Problem

There is a heterogeneous linguistic situation in Akoko-Edo LGA. In each of these towns, there are no common dialects. As a result, different ethnic groups within the local government area speak native dialects slightly intelligible to one another. Consequently, the people readily resort to the use of English and the Nigerian pidgin as the common languages for easy communication. This is done to the detriment of the native dialects. Edo State is an inland state in Central Southern Nigeria. Its capital is Benin-City; it is bounded in the North and East by Kogi State, in the South by Delta State and in the West by Ondo State. Edo State was formed on August 27, 1991 when Bendel State was split into Edo and Delta States. The major first languages spoken in the state are Edo, Etsako, Esan, Owan, Akoko Edo, and Okpameri language. Edo State is home to several ethnicities, among them are: Bini, Esan, Afemai, and Emai. Edo-State with Benin City as its capital has a long history of civilization, historians and researchers trace its existence to prehistoric times. The Edo people who are also referred to as Igodomigodos govern themselves through the ancient system of self-governance called Owere (community elders). The oldest male person in the community who is also the senior among the Owere is automatically installed as Odionwere (senior among the community elders). Odionwere and Owere manage the day-to-day affairs of their various communities. This system is still practiced in Edo-land to this day.

Akoko-Edo is a Local Government Area in Edo-State, Nigeria. Its headquarters is in the town of Igarra. The towns in Akoko-Edo include; Ikpeshi, Ago, Sasaro, Egbigere 1, Egbigere 2, Atte, Igarra, Enwan, Aiyegunle, Ugboshi-Afe, Ugboshi-Ele, Ekpesa, Ibillo, Ikiran-Ile, Ikiran oke, Ekor, Somorika, Lampese, Imoga, Ojah, Uneme-Osu, Ososo, Akuku, Ojirami-Dam, Imoga, Eshawa, Ojirami-Peteshi, Ojirami-Afe, Dagbala, Makeke, Ekpe, Ekpedo, Bekuma, Okpe, Ogbe, Onumu, Akpama, Anyonron, Ogugu, Ikakumo, Ijaja, Oloma, Uneme-nekua, and Uneme Erhurun.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to investigate some students' attitude to some native dialects in Akoko-Edo.

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

i. To identify the students' positive attitude towards their native dialects.

ii. To identify the students' negative attitude towards their native dialects.

iii. To examine the effects of the students' negative or positive attitude towards their native dialects.

iv. To determine to what extent these students' positive or negative attitude have contributed to language death in Akoko-Edo Local Government Area.

Research Questions

i. What is the level of language death in Akoko-Edo Local?

ii. What demographic variables have contributed to language death in Akoko-Edo?

iii. How do the students' perceive their native dialects?

iv. What roles do the students' perform with their native dialects?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A language is in danger when its speakers cease to use it. This is when its use is increasingly reduced in a number of communicative domains. Also, when the older generation ceases to pass it on from one generation to the next, that is there are no new speakers, adults or children, that language can be said to be endangered or dead. In addition, an endangered language is a language that is at risk of falling out of use as its speakers die out or shift to speaking other languages. Crystal (2002) submits that endangered languages are not necessarily languages with few speakers; the size of a group hardly matters. The viability of a language is determined first and foremost by the general attitude of its speakers with respect to their traditional culture, of which their language is considered one of the most important exponents. Labov (1969) is of the view that "Language endangerment arises in situations of contact between groups" (20). This contact involves not only an exchange of cultural elements and products, but also of cultural prestige, which is often correlated with different degrees of technological advancement (Balogun 2013:20). A difference in technological

know-how may lead to a sense of inferiority in the less highly developed group, which may then be inclined to relinquish its culture, including its language, in favor of the more highly developed group. Similarly, Kuter (2016) reiterates that "The loss of one language is the gain of another: except in the case of genocide, a language is usually lost because speakers shift to another language" (12).

In addition, Mufwene (2002) claims that "languages are parasitic species whose vitality depends on the communicative behavior of their speakers, who in turn respond adaptively to changes in their socio-economic ecologies" (10). Also, Derhemi (2002) examines the problems of endangered languages, particularly endangered languages spoken by minorities, focusing on the sociolinguistic study of the causes, circumstances and results of endangerment, and other structural and social processes related to endangered languages and to their survival. In her definition of endangered languages, Darhemi (2002) maintains that "an endangered language is a language that may soon vanish, ceasing to be used as a vehicle of communication, perhaps even disappearing completely from human history" (20). Omo-Ojugo (2004) asserts that "a language can only resist death/extinction if it is able to move from the status of oracy to a written status" (12). This position is similar to that of Godesborg (2003) who opines that:

Any language with over 50,000 speakers is not threatened. Any language with fewer than 400 speakers is definitely threatened. Any language with fewer than 3000 speakers with no status data has been assigned to no information on the grounds that it might well be threatened.

In order to synthesize and advance the above discourse, this study supports Woodbury (2012) view that says "An endangered language is one that is likely to become extinct in the near future" (9). He also opines that any language that is falling out of use or whose speakers are not handing the language over to the next generation is endangered and could go into extinction in the near future. In other words, such languages are fast losing their original forms and have become adulterated languages. In this case, Akoko-Edo native dialects fit in properly because the younger generations are finding it more convenient to use the English language than their native dialects.

METHODOLOGY

This study used the quantitative method of research to collect data. This was an empirical study with a convenience sample isolated from 300 students at Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi, Edo-State, Nigeria. Each of the towns in Akoko-Edo was represented by at least two participants in this study. The participants were a heterogeneous group. They were between the ages of 16-23 years old.

Students

In order to get a representative sample for this study, probability sampling was employed for this study. The researcher selected ten departments (Mass Communication, Building Technology, Science Laboratory Technology, Marketing, Public administration, Architecture, Urban and Regional Planning, Statistics, Hospitality Management, and Mechanical Engineering) out of over 85 departments in the school, and then included all the Akoko-Edo students in those departments in the sample. This is known as cluster sampling design. The

students were a heterogeneous (186 male, 114 female) group. The students in the ten departments were a representative sample for this study because they represented all the towns in Akoko-Edo Local Government Area.

Instruments for Data Collection

The data of this study came from a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire used for this study was developed by the researcher. The participants answered the questions on a five-point Likert scale of frequency, where 5=Always, 4=0ften, 3=Sometimes, 2= Seldom, and 1= Never.

DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the analysis of the data that came from the questionnaires. Out of the three hundred students who collected the questionnaires, two hundred and ninety-four filled and returned theirs. Participants' responses to each question were calculated in terms of percentages and frequencies. To aid analysis of the data and interpretation of results, points 1 and 2 and points 4 and 5 of the Likert- scale were combined during the data analysis procedure. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 16.0 was used for computing all descriptive statistics.

Findings and Results of the Research

Attitudes of students towards their native dialects

	Often/Always		Seldom/Sometimes		Never	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
1. I speak my native dialect often.	12	4.1	54	18.4	228	77.5
2. I prefer my native dialect to the English Language.	30	10.2	150	51.1	114	38.7
3. I am more comfortable speaking English.	189	64.3	84	28.6	21	7.1
4. I believe the English Language is more prestigious compared to my native dialect.	204	69.4	66	22.5	24	8.1
5. In my place of worship only the English Language is used.	141	48.0	36	12.3	117	39.7
6. My friends and I talk in English all the time.	183	62.3	105	35.7	6	2.0
7. My friends and siblings laugh at me when I speak my native dialect.	144	49.0	138	46.9	12	4.1

8. My mother and father speak my native dialect at home.	27	9.1	75	25.5	192	65.4
9. I always think my native dialect is too local.	222	75.5	54	18.4	18	6.1
10. I visit my home town often.	0	0	51	17.4	243	82.6

Respondents (*N=294)*

The responses from the survey questions were quite revealing. Question 1 in the table revealed that 95.9% of the students 'never' as well as 'seldom/sometimes' speak their native dialects, while, only 4.1% of the students indicated that they 'often/always' speak their native dialects. In addition, a significant majority of the students (89.8%) reported on item 2 that they 'seldom/sometimes' and 'never' prefer their native language to English Language, whereas, 10.2% of the students reported they 'often always' did. Furthermore, the responses to item 3 revealed that 92.9% of the students were 'often/always' as well as 'seldom/sometimes' comfortable in speaking English Language, with only 7.1% indicating that they 'never' did. For item 4, a significant majority of the students (91.9%) indicated that they 'often/always' and 'seldom/sometimes' believe that English Language is more prestigious compared to their native dialects, while a small percentage (8.1%) of the students reported that they 'never' did. Similarly, the results for item 5 revealed that 60.3% of the students agreed that 'often/always' and 'seldom/sometimes' only English Language is used in their places of worship, however, 39.7% of the students revealed that they 'never' did. For item 6, a significant majority of the students (98%) reported that they 'often/always' and seldom/sometimes' discussed with their friends and classmates in English Language, with 2% reporting that they 'never' did. The responses to item 7 revealed that 95.9% of their siblings constantly laugh at them when they tried to speak their native dialects, although 4.1% of the students reported that they 'never' did. More so, responses to item 8 revealed that 90.9% of the students' parents 'never' and 'seldom/sometimes' speak in their native dialects, whereas, 9.1% of the students reported that they 'often/always' did. It is also perplexing to discover that most of the students (93.9%) reported on item 9 that they 'often/always and 'seldom/sometimes' thought that their native dialect was local compared to English Language, whereas 6.1% reported they 'never' felt so. Similarly, all the students (100%) revealed that they 'never' and 'seldom/sometimes' visited their hometowns.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS/RESULTS

The findings and results from this study revealed that a considerable number of native dialects in Akoko-Edo LGA are seriously under threat. The attitude of the students towards their native language is negative. The neglect of their native dialects in favor of the English language has a serious negative effect on the students. The students have the impression that only English is important, therefore, it has priority over their native languages. This impression needs to be corrected by studying and developing the Nigerian languages alongside English. The findings from the study also revealed that many of the parents do not

speak their native dialects at home. As seen from the study, many parents encourage language death in Nigeria; they see native dialects as inferior to English language, and hence they speak only English at home. Some parents go as far as punishing children for speaking native dialects. Since charity begins at home, it is important that parents communicate and teach their children their native dialects, as well as the cultural values and the general way of life of Akoko-Edo people.

An attitude can be seen as a way of behavior towards something in a particular situation. Language attitude therefore, is concerned with opinions, feelings or beliefs that people have towards a language. Following Adegbija (1994), he reiterates that "language attitudes are evaluative judgments made about a language or its variety" (6). Attitudes are very crucial to the growth or decay of a language. They are also crucial to its restoration or destruction. In addition, they are crucial for sustaining the vitality of a language. The status of a language is seen from the foregoing as being determined by the types of attitudes towards it. The vitality of Akoko-Edo dialects is observed to be currently under serious threat and this can be seen from the attitudes of the youths of the speech community towards the language. Attitudes can either be positive, negative or indifferent. Each of these attitudinal types tends to affect the vitality of any language or dialect in different ways. Negative attitudes to a language as opposed to positive attitudes; arise when there are no favorable feelings towards the use of the language. In the context of negative attitude, speakers of a language shy away from all that has to do with the language. The above study reveals that over 85% of the students have negative attitudes towards their native dialects. The study reveals that the students (youths) do not care what happens to their dialects; neither do they want to be associated with their native dialects. Aziza (2003) agrees that "the continued existence of any language depends largely on the attitude of its native speakers, particularly the youth" (6). This is true because they are the ones who are supposed to carry on the transmission of the language both within and outside their immediate environments. If a language is taken to be functionally irrelevant to its youth, such a language will continue to shift grounds for other languages to take over. Similarly, Omoregbe (2003) reiterates that "Edo is shifting grounds for English and Pidgin as they are now used as common languages in the state to break communication barriers" (10). This probably accounts for the reason why the younger generation of Edo speakers has developed negative attitudes towards their language.

CONCLUSION

Billy and Laboucan (2006) maintain that "language planning is fundamental to the retention and revitalization of any indigenous language" (209). They discuss two types of planning: status planning and corpus planning. Status planning includes the current role of the language, its status in the community, and the role that community members would like to see their language play. Corpus planning includes standardizing the language, clarifying the existing syntax, writing a dictionary, codification (anything that needs to be done to record and code the language), and elaboration: if the language is to be used as the language of instruction in a school, then it will need to be elaborated for academic terminology. Words for new technologies will need to be invented to be able to teach using the language. A language can be revitalized if the right measures are put in place. The revitalization of the Hebrew language is a testimony that a language can be revitalized. Language (or speech) revival can be defined as "the attempt to turn a language with few or no surviving native

speakers back into a normal means of communication in a community" (Nahir, 1984:30). However, Fishman (1998) proposed eight steps that may be implemented in the process of revitalizing a language. These steps are:

i.   Reconstruct the Language: This entails finding out what the linguistic situation is in the community. How many speakers are there, what are their ages, what other resources are available on the language, what are the attitudes of speakers and non-speakers towards language revitalization? When this is done the objectives of revitalizing the language can be set and achieved.

ii. Mobilize fluent speakers: If the language has no speakers, it is recommended that available materials be gathered together to reconstruct the language and develop language pedagogy.

iii. Restore intergenerational transmission (through family, neighborhood, and community reinforcement): If the language has elderly speakers, the language of the elderly speakers should be documented as this will aid when the language is being codified.

iv. Teach the language in school: The development of a second-language learning programme for all is recommended. Formal instruction will to a large extent expose all to the language.

v.   Implement immersion and strong bilingual education: Redevelop or enhance cultural practices that support and encourage the use of the endangered language at home and in public by first and second-language speakers.

vi. Use the language in work environments: The language should be used in the work environment as this will facilitate acquisition.

vii. Offer government services in the language: All government documents and instructions should be administered in the language.

viii. Language discrimination and shame should be discouraged and avoided. Many individuals do not want their languages preserved or revitalized because of the stigma and trauma surrounding it. Therefore, language discrimination should be discouraged.

When the above steps are taken, the issue of language death or endangerment in Nigeria will be reduced drastically. Language is important and necessary to human existence, and we need it in everything we do. It is therefore the duty of the government at various levels to rescue every language in Nigeria by documenting and recording them. The negative effects of the students' attitude to their native dialects as seen in this study can eventually lead to the death of Akoko-Edo native dialects. This is why every speaker of Akoko-Edo language must be concerned with the plight of the language and contribute meaningfully towards its continued existence.

Acknowledgement

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