



Communication in Inter-Ethnic Homes and the Survival of Nigerian Minority Languages

Daniel Nwanmereni*

Department of Mass Communication, Wellspring University, Benin City, Nigeria

***Corresponding Author**

Daniel Nwanmereni

Article History

Received: 04.09.2020

Accepted: 21.09.2020

Published: 30.10.2020

Abstract: Language and communication are inextricably interwoven. The crisscross nature of the duo is that each is given form and effect by the other. Language is expressed through communication and communication uses language to establish meaning. However, for a language to thrive in perpetuity, it requires the maintenance of a sizeable number of competent native speakers. This study investigated the fate of Nigerian minority languages in the face of rising inter-ethnic marriages. Among other objectives, the study investigated how inter-ethnic couples solve their language differences and the consequence of language divide among inter-ethnic couples on Nigerian minority languages. The survey research design was used to study a population of 483,379 from which a sample size of 384 was drawn. The study found that the major lingua franca adopted by inter-ethnic couples were English language and Nigerian pidgin. It was also found out that children born into inter-ethnic homes were constrained to acquire the lingua franca adopted by their parents as mother tongue. The study, recommended, among other things, that inter-ethnic couples should endeavour to learn the native languages of their spouses in order to save such languages from endangerment and sudden disappearance.

Keywords: Communication, Inter-ethnic Marriages, Language, Language Differences, Minority Languages.

Copyright © 2020 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

INTRODUCTION

Communication involves the expression and exchange of needs, emotions, desires, feelings, etc by humans using codes (languages) or signs, symbols or other forms of impressions that are understood by the parties involved in the exchange. It is the use of words (spoken or written), signals, gestures, pictures, visual displays, etc by humans to convey meanings among themselves. It is the transaction or exchange by which humans share ideas and values with the aim of solving some needs. This accounts for why Brooks (1971), cited in Ndimele and Innocent (2006), defines communication as the tool with which humans address needs and circumstances in their immediate and larger environments. He adds that “man is a communicator and his survival, as well the quality of his survival

depends on communication” (p.1). What this means is that communication is indispensable to humans as individuals, just as it is to the management of the human community. It also means that without communication, the world is lost since people cannot express themselves or share meanings to solve their problems. Communication is the centre and indeed the heart of all social intercourses.

Humans are naturally endowed to communicate through spoken or written words as well as the use of signs and visual expressions. It is this man’s God-given ability to communicate using speech, which can be spoken or transcribed (written) as well as the use of signs and symbols that classifies communication into two modes - verbal and non-verbal. Verbal communication involves the use of words (spoken or written) by humans to

share ideas, feelings, emotions, etc. Non-verbal communication does not involve the use of overt words but signs and other communicative cues - cries, signs, facial expression, eye contact, body movements, etc.

As opposed to non-verbal communication which is restricted to signs and symbols, verbal communication perpetuates through the use of identifiable codes (languages) by humans through speech. Speech involves the expression of thoughts, feelings, ideas, etc by humans using the spoken form of language. This is not to neglect the written form which ensures not only the documentation of a language but also the preservation and transmission of its orthography across generations. However, the place of speech in the perpetuation and development of a language cannot be compromised. In fact, when a language ceases to be spoken or loses its speech community; it naturally dies (Yul-Ifode, 2001).

The importance of a speech community is not only as it concerns the survival or perpetuation of a language but the development of the language. Language is a property of a community which distinguishes such a community from other human communities. The development of a language is a by-product of the transformation of members of its speech community (native speakers). This transformation occurs due to encounters and new experiences among the speakers of a language. Yul-Ifode (2001) states that "as long as a language remains in use and new experiences are encountered from time to time, the language will continue to change in the direction of the development of its users" (p. 11).

The history and culture of different communities, ethnic groups and races across the globe are preserved and transmitted from one generation to another through language. This accounts for why language is described as the reflection or mirror of people's cultural heritages. Apart from the fact that different languages have indigenous nomenclature for humans, items, events and phenomena, which is fundamental in the communication and transmission of the cultural heritages of different linguistic communities, the language of individual linguistic environments conveys the culture of different speech communities. What this means is that apart from providing the means of different kinds of intercourses for humans, language serves to preserve, transform and transmit the cultural values of different linguistic communities across the globe and continuously requires dynamic speech communities to thrive in perpetuity.

For a language to thrive in perpetuity, it must continually have a reasonable degree of competent native speakers. In other words, if a language does not maintain a reasonable number of competent native speakers, such a language is considered to belong to the minority group and said to be endangered. The preservation and perpetuation of natural languages begins with the acquisition of the language of one's linguistic community by every normal child. What this means is that the family is a critical component of the process of language acquisition and development. This is because every normal child is said to develop his language acquisition program from the impressions he receives from older members of his speech community (Ndimele, 1992). Such impressions serve as the triggering experience to the eventual acquisition of a native language by all normal children.

Statement of the Problem

In many inter-ethnic homes, couples are constrained to adopt an official language, such as English language in the case of Nigeria, or to develop or borrow a lingua franca, such as the Nigerian pidgin, in order to solve their communication problem. The adoption of a lingua franca by couples who do not share a common language naturally means the disappearance of the native languages of such couples, as children raised in such homes may be constrained to acquire the lingua franca adopted by their parents as mother tongue. At a time when many Nigerian minority languages are said to be endangered, one wonders what becomes the fate of the native minority languages in the face of the rising acceptance of inter-ethnic marriages. This is the burden of this study. Thus, the central question is: what is the fate of Nigerian minority languages in the face of growing inter-ethnic marriages?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study were to:

1. find out the lingua franca mostly adopted by inter-ethnic couples in Obio/Akpor L. G. A. to solve their communication problem;
2. investigate the proficiency of inter-ethnic couples in Obio/Akpor L. G. A. in their spouses' native languages;
3. ascertain the language spoken as mother tongue by the children of inter-ethnic couples in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area.

Operational Definition of Terms

The following terms were defined in accordance with their application in this study:

Critical Language Acquisition Stage: This is the stage at which all normal children acquire a first language (mother tongue).

Inter-ethnic Homes: An inter-ethnic home is a home where the spouses come from different ethnic groups and speak different native languages. It is a home where the spouses do not understand the languages of each other and are constrained to adopt a lingua franca to solve their communication problem.

Minority Language: A minority language is a language that does not have a sizeable speech community. It is a language with few competent native speakers.

Obio/Akpor Local Government Area: Obio/Akpor is one of the Local Government Areas in Rivers State. Some sections of the Local Government Area constitute part of what is regarded as Port Harcourt metropolis. However, the Local Government Area is distinct from Port Harcourt Local Government Area.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study was anchored on the Poverty of Stimulus theory. Some related concepts were also reviewed to define the focus of the study.

Poverty of Stimulus Theory

The Poverty of Stimulus theory evolved from Chomsky's syntactic theory in late 1950s and early 1960s (Ndimele, 1992). The theory describes children's direct response to linguistic stimuli within their linguistic environment at the critical language acquisition stage. According to Chomsky (1957), cited in Ndimele (1992), all normal children are born with a linguistic endowment to acquire the language of their immediate linguistic community. This innate linguistic endowment, otherwise regarded as Language Acquisition Program, provides all normal children with a set of universal principles for developing a mental grammar of the language spoken in their immediate linguistic environment through impulsive speech inputs which they (children) receive from older members of their immediate linguistic environment (Crystal, 1997; Radford, Atkinson, Clahsen and Spencer, 1999).

The definition of the poverty of stimulus theory underlines two crucial components of language acquisition process; one of which is the presence of a linguistic community that provides an immediate speech community for all normal children to acquire their mother tongue. The other component is that there must be speech inputs upon which children develop the grammar of their mother tongue. What this means is that the absence of these

conditions could result in the failure to acquire a natural language by a normal child.

Although the innumerable volume of vocabulary that becomes the output of the finite speech input which a child gathers from older members of his speech community may not be representative of the input, linguists argue that without this finite input (triggering experience), a child may not acquire his mother tongue at the critical stage (Ndimele, 1992). The implication of this situation for children born in inter-ethnic homes is the acquisition of their parents' lingua franca as mother tongue. This condition accounts for why many Nigerian children and adults cannot speak a native language. The condition also represents one of the leading factors why many Nigerian languages are endangered.

The importance of speech inputs which is the consequence of the presence of an immediate linguistic community is that it is required to interact with a child's natural language acquisition endowment to enable the child to develop the grammar of the language spoken in his immediate environment. Whatever is the common language of communication between inter-ethnic couples automatically becomes their children's mother tongue. This condition constitutes a threat to indigenous Nigerian languages many of which are endangered.

Language

Language is the means by which humans communicate (Williamson, 2005). By this definition, it has been established that this study is concerned with natural languages. A natural or human language is any language that is original or identified with a speech community. Examples are English language - identified with the English people (England), with its varieties across the world, Igbo - identified with the Igbo speaking communities across some southern States of Nigeria, Hausa - identified with several States in Northern Nigeria and across several African countries, such as Niger Republic, Senegal and Burkina Faso.

Language is a human medium of communication which involves the use of sounds, signs and symbols. This definition makes a further distinction to the effect that humans communicate by putting together the sounds of a language which manifests in speech and writing and that communication can also be undertaken by humans through non-linguistic signs - facial expressions, gestures, signs, cries, etc as well as other visual symbols - pictures, drawings, paintings, etc.

Spoken language - the major concern of this study is of great importance to the preservation and perpetuation of natural languages. This is not simply because spoken language has primacy over written language, but essentially because a language ceases to exist or dies once it loses its speech community. What this means is that it is possible for a language to have its written form and yet be classified as a dead language due to the fact that nobody speaks such a language. Arabic and Latin are practical examples. Though with their written forms, the languages are said to be dead having lost their speech communities (Yul-Ifode, 2001; Williamson, 2005). The implication of the explanation of the nature of natural languages is the fact that every natural language requires a continual sizeable number of competent native speakers to thrive in perpetuity.

Characteristics of Natural (human) Language

Human languages exhibit certain characteristics. Some of the characteristics of human languages are briefly examined below:

Language is identified with speech communities

The speech community of a particular language is regarded as its homeland (Yul-Ifode, 2001). What this means is that just as individual speakers of different languages have different geographical origins, so languages have locations where they originated from. The particular location where a language originates or was first spoken before spreading to other geographical locations is referred to as its homeland.

Language manifests in speech

Speech is the primary medium through which languages are used. What this means is that writing is a secondary level of language acquisition (Williamson, 2005). Many people have mastery of the spoken form of their native languages but may not be able to write such languages.

Language is environmentally conditioned

Notwithstanding the innate language acquisition program children are endowed with, the acquisition of a language requires the availability of a linguistic community where a language is spoken. Linguists argue that the innate language acquisition ability children are naturally endowed with interacts with the social environment to enable a child to acquire the language spoken in his immediate linguistic environment (Ndimele, 2005).

Language is rule-governed

Every language has a rule which governs the combination of sound units to form words as well as the combination of words to form phrases, clauses and sentences. It is the grammar of a language that

assigns meaning and pronunciation to different grammatical units (Yul-Ifode, 2001).

Language exhibits varieties

Different languages of the world have their varieties. The varieties of a language are regarded as the dialects of the language. The dialects of a language could occur due to changes (lexical, semantic, syntactic, etc) which languages encounter due to geographical spread, contact with other languages, regional dislocation and technology (Blount, 1995, Emenanjo, 1998). The Igbo language, for instance, spoken in some southern States of Nigeria, has several varieties. One remarkable feature of the different varieties of languages is that they are mutually intelligible irrespective of the distance separating the geographical locations where each variety is spoken.

Language Diversity and Profiles

Linguists do not share a near consensus on the taxonomy of languages. Many linguists argue that there are no superior and inferior languages. Proponents of no superiority-inferiority language divide argue that as far as a language serves the communication needs of its native speakers, it shares the same status with other languages and the part of the globe it is spoken remains inconsequential (Yul-Ifode, 2001).

However, the rising disappearing voices calls to question whether some languages are not endangered and should be considered to belong to the minority divide. Ferguson (1972) makes a distinction between major and minor languages. One of the criteria used by Ferguson (1972) in classifying languages is that if a language is spoken as a native language by over 25 percent of people in a country, it can be classified as a major language. On the other hand, if a language is spoken as a native language by less than 25 percent of members of a nation's population, such a language should be seen as a minor language.

In a country like Nigeria, for instance, with a population of over 140 million, according to the 2006 census, the classification of 1million people as representative of a major language may require a second look. If, however, over 25 percent of a population of a linguistic community speaks a particular language as a native language, such a language can be taken to be on the majority divide. The reverse should be the case for a linguistic community where less than 25 percent of the population speaks a particular language as a native language. The point is that when a language has maintained a downward slide in terms of the number of its native speakers, such a language is endangered and can be said to belong to the

minority divide. Ochichi - spoken around Ikwerrengwo axis of Etche Local Government Area of Rivers State belongs to this category. The language is said to retain only a few competent native speakers. It may become extinct in few decades (Ndimele, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

The nature of this study necessitated the use of survey research design for field exercise. Survey involves the study of the characteristics of a sample which can be attributed to the larger population from which the sample was taken Ihejirika and Omego, 2011; Asika, 2012. Following the absence of a valid marriage register to determine the population of inter-ethnic couples in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, the population of the L. G. A, was taken as population of the study. According to the National Population and Housing Census (2006), Obio/Akpor Local Government Area had a population of 464,789. An estimated annual population growth of 2.5% (2007-2018) brought the population of the study to 483, 379.

Based on the population, a sample size of 384 was drawn. The sample size was based on

Keyton's sampling system (2001). To administer the study instrument (copies of the questionnaire) on the sample, the multi-stage sampling system was used. The first stage involved the cluster sampling technique used to divide Obio/Akpor Local Government Area into its seventeen (17) electoral wards (clusters). The next stage involved proportional sampling technique used to allocate samples to the different clusters. The last stage introduced the convenience sampling system. Every inter-ethnic home found was included in the sample until the number of samples assigned to each cluster was exhausted.

DATA PRESENTATION

To obtain data for the study, 384 copies of questionnaire were administered on the sample of the study in the order samples were allotted to the different clusters. Of this number, 373 (97.13%) copies were properly filled and returned. The other eleven (2.87%) copies were not returned. Data presentation and analysis were based on the copies that were properly filled and returned. The presentation was done in tables using simple percentages.

Table-1: Lingua Franca adopted by inter-ethnic couples in Obio/Akpor L. G. A

Lingua Franca	No. of Respondents	Percentage
English	129	34.59
Nigerian pidgin	244	65.41
Any other language	0	0
Total	373	100

Data presented in Table 1 indicate that English language and Nigerian pidgin were the

lingua franca adopted in many inter-ethnic homes in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area.

Table-2: Inter-ethnic couples' proficiency in spouses' native language

Proficiency in spouse's native language	No. of Respondents	Percentage
I understand little but can't speak the native language of my spouse.	124	33.24
I understand and speak my spouse' native language to an appreciable extent.	48	12.87
I don't understand nor speak my spouse' language	201	53.89
Total	373	100

Data presented in Table 2 show that many inter-ethnic couples in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area did not have good grasp of the native languages of their spouses. This is because

only 12.87% of the couples understood or spoke the native languages of their spouses to an appreciable extent.

Table-3: Effort of inter-ethnic Couples to perpetuate their native languages

Nature of effort	No. of Respondents	Percentage
I encourage my spouse/children to speak my language	48	12.87
I speak my language with relatives when they visit	11	2.95
I don't think I can change the situation	310	84.18
Total	373	100

On the effort of inter-ethnic couples in Obio/Akpor L. G. A. to perpetuate their native languages, data presented in Table 3 indicate that many inter-ethnic couples lack the zeal to perpetuate their native languages. This is because only 12.87% of inter-ethnic spouses encouraged their spouses and children to learn their native languages.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The discussion was based on the objectives of the study.

Objective 1: Find out the lingua franca mostly adopted by inter-ethnic couples in Obio/Akpor L. G. A. to solve their communication problem

Responses to the questions raised to address this objective indicated that English language and Nigerian pidgin were the lingua franca mostly adopted by inter-ethnic couples in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area to solve their communication differences. This is evident from the fact that 34.59% inter-ethnic couples used English language and 65.41% others used Nigerian pidgin to communicate at home. What this means is that in such homes, the native languages of the couples were not spoken. It also means that children of these couples have their parent's lingua franca as mother tongue.

As a Corollary, the different native languages of these inter-ethnic couples will gradually lose native speakers, especially due to the fact that children born into such homes would be constrained to acquire the lingua franca adopted by their parents as mother tongue. This situation can be more distressing to minority languages in Nigeria many of which are already endangered. This, as identified by Yul-Ifode (2001), is because the survival of a language is dependent on its ability to maintain a sizeable number of competent native speakers. In other words, the greater the loss of competent native speakers by a language, the greater it faces the danger of extinction.

Objective 2: Investigate the proficiency of inter-ethnic couples in Obio/Akpor L. G. A. in their spouses' native languages

Responses regarding the extent inter-ethnic couples in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area can understand and speak the native languages of their spouses indicated that many inter-ethnic couples did not have good grasp of the native languages of their spouses. Data presented in Table 2 indicated that only 12.87% spouses could understand and speak the native languages of their spouses. Data presented in the same table also showed that a whopping 53.89% of inter-ethnic couples did not have knowledge of their spouse's native languages.

Again, the scenario in the foregoing discussion poses a threat to Nigerian minority languages. This is based on the fact that the survival of a language not only requires the presence of a speech community, but also the maintenance of a sizeable number of competent native speakers. It does not matter whether or not a language has been documented, its spoken form is primal. Arabic and Latin languages, for instance, are said to have their written forms, but are classified as dead languages having lost their competent native speakers (Yul-Ifode, 2001; Williamson, 2005). The condition with natural languages is that every language requires growing competent native speakers to flourish in perpetuity.

Objective 3: Ascertain the language spoken as mother tongue by the children of inter-ethnic couples in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area.

Responses regarding the effort of inter-ethnic couples in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area to sustain the growth of their native languages indicated that many inter-ethnic couples in the area did not make significant effort to perpetuate their native languages. This is evident from the fact that 84.18% of the respondents (inter-ethnic spouses) indicated that they were overwhelmed by the gradual disappearance of their native languages. What this means is that the expected efforts by inter-ethnic couples to perpetuate their native languages by encouraging their children and spouses to speak such languages appears to have been plagued by the monstrous influence of the lingua franca these couples have adopted to solve their language divide. The point is that if an inter-ethnic couple uses English language, for instance, as a lingua franca, it is only natural that their children's mother tongue would be English language.

The implication of this situation is that inter-ethnic couples must rise to the challenge of encouraging their spouses and children to speak their native languages to sustain the growth of such languages. Every natural language requires a speech community to thrive and the family is crucial to the survival of a language. Even though the family represents a micro speech community, its significance is underscored by the pivotal role of a triggering experience to the acquisition of language by normal children (Ndimele, 1992). It becomes crucial, therefore, that inter-ethnic couples make effort to acquire a considerable degree of proficiency in their spouses' native languages in order to provide their children with speech inputs that are necessary to acquire such native languages. Efforts in acquiring one's spouse' native language is also crucial to ensure that such languages do not become extinct over time.

CONCLUSION

The major lingua franca used by inter-ethnic couples in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State in solving their language differences are English language and Nigerian pidgin. This scenario has grave implications for Nigerian minority languages. As long as inter-ethnic couples depend upon the adoption of some lingua franca to solve their language divide and their children are constrained to acquire such codes, the number of competent native speakers of the native languages of such couples will continually depreciate. This is a threat to the survival of Nigerian minority languages.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were considered helpful:

1. Inter-ethnic couples should make effort to acquire the native language of their spouses. This will not only enable them to understand each other but to continuously expand the speech community of such languages.
2. Inter-ethnic couples should also ensure that their children speak their native languages. This is to enable such languages to flourish in perpetuity.
3. Since children acquire the mother tongue at infancy from the speech inputs of older members of their immediate speech environment, inter-ethnic couples must ensure that their children acquire a native language early enough, preferably as mother tongue. This is to avoid the difficulties that could become the attendant consequences of such efforts in later life.

REFERENCES

1. Brooks, G. A., Hittelman, K. J., Faulkner, J. A., & Beyer, R. E. (1971). Temperature, skeletal muscle mitochondrial functions, and oxygen debt. *American Journal of Physiology-Legacy Content*, 220(4), 1053-1059.
2. Ndimele, O. M. (2007). *Advanced English grammar and usage (3rd ed)*. Aba: National Institute for Nigerian Languages.
3. UNESCO (1980). *Many voices, one world: Communication and society today and tomorrow*. Paris: Kogan Page Limited.
4. Udoakah, N. (1998). *Development communication*. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers.
5. Yul-Ifode, S. (2001). *An introduction to language in history and society*. Aba: National Institute for Nigerian Languages.
6. Ndimele, O. M. (1992). *The principles and parameters of universal grammar: A government binding approach*. Owerri: African Education Services.
7. Chomsky, N. (1957). Logical structures in language. *American Documentation (pre-1986)*, 8(4), 284.
8. Ndimele, O. M. (2010). *A concise grammar and lexicon of echie*. Aba: National Institute for Nigerian Languages.
9. Crystal, D. (1997). *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics (4th ed)*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
10. Radford, A., Atkinson, M., Britain, D., Clahsen, H., & Spencer, A. (1999). *Linguistics: An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
11. Williamson, K. (2005). *Practical orthography in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Heinmann Educational Books (Nigeria) Limited.
12. Blount, B. G. (1995). *Language, culture and society: A book of readings (2nd ed)*. Illinois: Waveland Press.
13. Emenanjo, E. (1988). *Language, linguistics and the nation*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.
14. Ferguson, C. A. (1972). *Language structure and language use*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
15. Ihejirika, W. C., & Omego, C. U. (2011). *Research methods in Linguistics and Communication Studies*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.
16. Asika, N. (2012). *Research methodology in the behavioural sciences*. Lagos: Learn Africa Plc.
17. Federal Republic of Nigeria. (2006). *National population and housing census*. Abuja: National Population Commission.
18. Keyton, J. (2001). *Communication research: Asking questions, finding answers*. New York: McGraw Hill Higher Education.