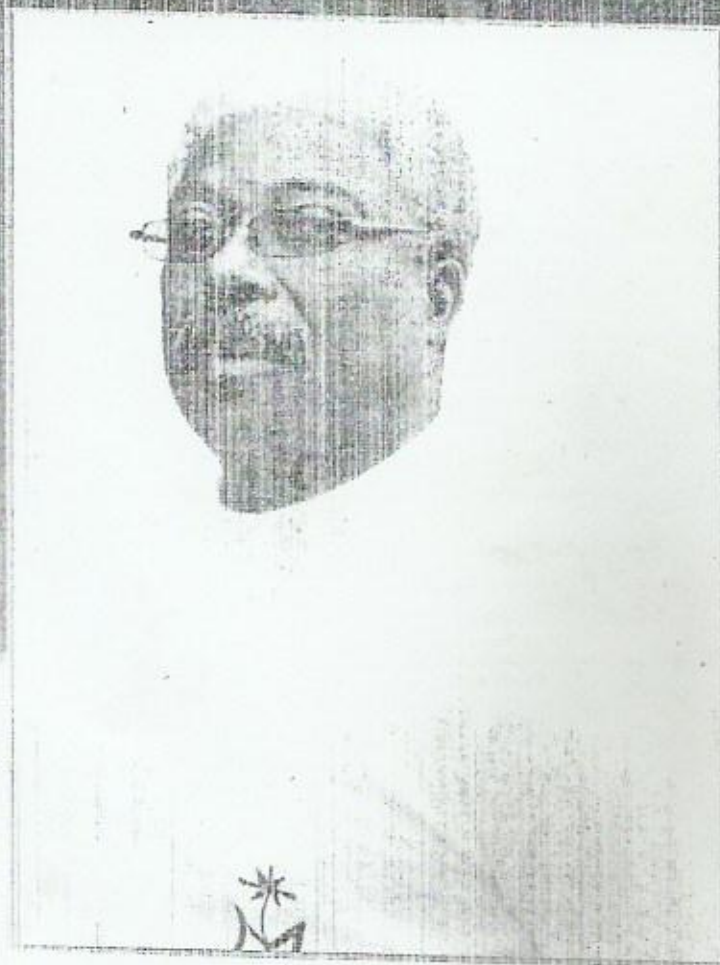


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ISSUES IN LANGUAGE AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

*A Festschrift for
Jerome Ikechukwu Okonkwo*



Edited by
Polycarp A. Anyanwu
and
Ifeoma Obuasi

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Language Endangerment -- A Case Study of the Ogu Language in Badagry, Lagos State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

Badagry is a historical town dating back to 1425 (15th Century). It is located at the Western Zone of Lagos State. At the early stage of settlement, it was a monolingual community with Ogu being the only language. All the daily activities of individuals and communal activities were carried out in their indigenous language before the people came in contact with speakers of other language (Yoruba and English). Today, it is sad to observe that the Ogu language has lost its premier position among the dominant languages spoken and understood by the Ogu natives in Badagry. This research is therefore, aimed at discovering the type of language endangerment that the Ogu language in Badagry has fallen into in line with Wurm (1998) categorization, its causes and what steps to be taken as corrective measures. In view of this, a psycholinguistic theoretical frame work founded by J.B Watson in 1913 known as the Behaviourism Theory, having Skinner as its best proponent was used. This theory deals with how children can be taught language, and how to learn it. The data collected involved both the structured and unstructured interview methods. Our findings revealed that the Ogu language in Badagry is potentially endangered. Possible ways of arresting the situation were suggested.

Introduction

Badagry is one of the towns in Lagos State with a lot of historical antecedents. It was founded by an Ogu ancestor known as Akran Gbafoe around 1425 (15th Century). The first settlers were all Ogus who migrated from Dahomeh, now Republic of Benin. These people settled down as monolingual speakers with their native language, Ogu. All their activities, whether individually or communally were carried out in Ogu language. But because the town is located at the Yoruba speaking zone of Nigeria, some Yorubas started trading with, and settling among them. In addition to this, Badagry town was the first place where Christianity was preached and where the first Primary School was built in 1842 and 1845, respectively. Consequently, there was language contact, thereby, allowing the Ogu natives to learn the language of their zone as well as that of the School. This situation made most Ogu elites of those days multilingual speakers with the ability to speak their mother tongue, Ogu, and the other two languages (Yoruba and English). The trend continued like this until it is recently discovered that most adults between the ages of 50 and 60 (those who attended Grammar

Schools or Colleges in the late 50s and early 60s) code-mix the Ogu language with a lot of Yoruba and English or code switch completely even among themselves when it is not necessary while most of those between ages 25 – 49 have turned to be passive bilinguals. This attitude is highly rampant among the educated elites which have extended beyond control. Those natives discourage their children from acquiring the language and most of them have children between ages 3-10 who are taught either the Yoruba or English language. This attitude has contributed to lack of interest to learn the Ogu language among their children.

Language attitudes, as explained in Adegbija (2004) cited by Soyele (2007:59) 'are the evaluation judgements, opinions whether superficial or societal which are made about a language'. Some of these elites have little or no interest in the maintenance of their ancestral language compared with what it used to be in the old. The value and importance of the Ogu language is depreciating day-by-day while that of the Yoruba and English are appreciating. Tadopede (2010:2) observes that 'it is not uncommon that you find those who understand the Ogu language very well choosing to communicate in Yoruba or English language even at gatherings that bring them together as Gunuvi (Ogu descendants) forum'. This has gradually pushed the native language, Ogu to one side thereby paving way for the other dominant languages, Yoruba and English.

Today, in Badagry town, most children of the Ogu natives are enrolled into preparatory kindergarten and nursery classes starting from age two. The language of communication with these kids is usually in the English language. After school hours, parents who are also Ogu natives continue to speak English and Yoruba languages to them while Ogu, the native language has no place on their language charts. Funny enough, even parents who are Primary or Secondary Schools drop – outs whose spoken English are laced with uncountable errors address these children with such. In essence, the Yoruba language is easily learnt and spoken by the children seconded by the English language. The result of this among the children of the Ogu native speakers is that most of them are now bilingual speakers (Yoruba and English) instead of multilingual speakers (Ogu, Yoruba and English).

The above phenomenon has shown clearly that in some few years to come, if a bold step is not taken to correct parents' attitude of abandoning their native language (Ogu) for Yoruba and English, and encourage children to learn and speak their native language, it will amount to lost of Ogu language. All Ogu native speakers must have strong desire to pass the language onto their children. The present language situation in Badagry falls under what Wurm (1998: 208), cited by Agbedo & Omeje (2008) 'potentially endangered'. In order to save the Ogu language in Badagry from this endangerment, our children must be taught the language and learn to speak it.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted in this research is the Behaviourism Theory. This is a psycholinguistic theory founded by J.B Watson in 1913. Though the proponent of this theory is Skinner B.F., the theory explains the process of language learning in animal by stimulating and conditioning them to modify their behaviours. If this could work with animals, its application to the learning and teaching of human language is certainly at ease. This theory is going to serve as a corrective measure, particularly, among children. Some of the beliefs of the theory in Bello (2001:51) include the following.

First, the Behavioural Theory states that a child has to learn every aspect of language through his/her parents and society. Parents and society are, therefore, immediate teachers of language to children. Any parent or society that embraces other language than the native language is discouraging the use of such native language.

Secondly, learning depends on the condition under which it takes place and not through ability. If all languages within a target environment of learning are taught the same way with equal opportunities, every child will learn equally except for special children.

Third, the theory states that reinforcement and repetition are crucially relevant to language learning. This is the easiest way of learning if properly applied.

Finally, the theory says that one learns by doing because practice makes perfect. When children are encouraged by parents or society to speak their native languages daily, they become proficient in them.

So if all the above beliefs are applied to the Ogu language in Badagry, it will fall back on track.

The Ogu Language in Badagry as an Endangered Language

A language is said to be in danger when its speakers no longer pass it on to next generation. Sociolinguists have observed that today, many speech communities of minority languages are shrinking and their languages will ultimately vanish, if these developments are not reversed. According to Obanya (2004) except we allow Africa's indigenous language to grow in the way all living languages do, then, they are endangered. He went further to state the conditions that will lead to language endangerment:

- Non-use of the language especially children
- Half in further development of the language through education
- Not allowing the language to grow in the way all language do (p36)

It is startling to know their most African language have been reduced to mere ethnic or cultural artistic performance.

Cheruil (2003) cited in Ogunleye (2009) notes that there is the gradual extinction of at least 16 out of the 42 indigenous languages in Kenya and it is equally estimated that worldwide, 6,800 languages are currently under threat out of which 2,400 are indigenous to Africa and that only 10 percent of the present languages in the world will survive. Language endangerment is no doubt a very serious issue. Nations whose languages are endangered are bound to experience stunted scientific, human capital capacity development.

Another crucial and heart touching statement made by Brenzinger and Graaf concerning an endangered language is that children may no longer acquire languages even when they are still spoken by many thousands of elderly speakers. There and then we should know that the language is drowning. This is the situation that sends fear through the veins of all concerned Ogu native speakers in Badagry. Many of our children prefer Yoruba or the English language to Ogu. It is not their faults but that of parents who have failed to attach importance to their native language (Ogu). These writers believe that the havoc caused by internal forces to the Ogu language in Badagry such as individual and community's negative attitude towards it is more than that caused by the external force such as economic, religious, cultural or educational subjugation. The situation to which Ogu children and many Nigerian children are exposed to is quit to unfortunate judging from the fact that the first language is the tool "par excellence" for inter generational transmission of cultural heritage (Obanya, 2004).

The research conducted by Adeniyi and Bello (2008) in the Badagry Regulated Market exposes the attitudes of young Ogu indigenes as evidence to back up our argument with their assertion:

Our observation of this is informed by the attitudes of other Ogu traders to their indigenous language. We observe that contrary to what obtains in the coconut section where the older Ogu communicate with one another in Ogu, reverse is the case with young sellers in other sections who communicate with one another using the Yoruba language. (Adeniyi & Bello, 2008:226)

The young sellers refer to those classified as called passive bilinguals. In most cases, they fall between the ages of 25 and 49. A good number of these people have children that are supposed to be taught their native language (Ogu). But because such parents shy away from using the language, their children are left at the mercy of Yoruba or English. No wonder

Adeniyi & Bello (2008:209) say “the attitudes of the Ogu speakers to their language hasten the demise of the language” It is a fact that, even if the language is still spoken by a thousand of elderly ones, its future is shaking.

The beauty of the Ogu language is fading day-by-day. Rarely could one find two out of ten young educated elites within the age group of 25 and 49 in Badagry today who will speak the Ogu language and apply appropriate proverb or idioms. But such things are easily done in Yoruba or English language. How then do we preserve the beauty of this language? No language is said to be rich without its proverbs and idioms. Like Chinua Achebe rightly said in Things fall Apart that proverbs are palm oil with which we eat language.

Methodology

In order to make an indepth analysis, this research observed some parents between the ages of 25 and 49 as well as their children between ages 3 and 10 from ten different homes of the Ogu native speakers in Badagry. Oral interviews were conducted for them without allowing them to know the intention of the researchers. These people were visited at leisure and proper attentions were given.

Table 1.1. Demographic information on interviewed children

Sociolinguistic Variables	Scale	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative
Sex	Male	7	70%	100%
	Female	3	30%	
Occupation	Pupils	10	100%	100%
Educational Level	Primary Sch.	8	80%	100%
	Nursery	2	20%	
Language Preferences and Competence	Yoruba	7	70%	100%
	English	3	30%	
	Ogu	-	-	

Findings and Analysis

The above table reveals that the children of most of the Ogu native speakers prefer either the Yoruba or English language to their native language (Ogu). It is observed that most of these children are bilingual speakers but the unpleasant thing is that their ancestral language, Ogu, is not part of the two languages they understand. We have seen it clearly that Yoruba is now their mother tongue or first language while English is the second language. This is simply so because even most of those parents we engaged in this work were code-mixing and switching unconsciously.

The Ogu language is rarely heard in most homes because parents are not interested in speaking it to their children. This is reflected in the responses and reactions of the children. The percentage of those that are competent in Yoruba is 70%. This simply shows that the premier position earlier occupied by the Ogu language has been taken over by the Yoruba. Next to Yoruba is the English language with 30%. Children are the owners of the future. Whatever we give them is what they will store and subsequently hand over to generation after them. From our findings we are yet to hand over the Ogu language to our children. And if urgent action are not taken to correct our individual or communal attitudes towards the language, complete language shift may be the next thing.

Some of the factors responsible for the negative attitudes of the Ogu people towards their native language include intermarriage, ignorance of the importance of one's language, education, social status, and residence. Intermarriage affected children inability to speak Ogu language in some homes visited. Some, partners decide to chose a common language to break communication barrier. As a matter of fact intermarriage is common among the Ogus and Yorubas than any other ethnic group aside of couples from the same clan. This made Yoruba to be the most common language. In some cases, we observed that some of couples are Ogu natives yet they don't speak their native language to their children simply because they are ignorant of the importance of this language to their heritage. To them, language is language, and not a crime to train their children with the dominant language of the day. It does not occur to them that they have anything to lose. Another thing discovered is that in most of the highly educated homes, English language tops the language table seconded by Yoruba. In such homes, parents rarely speak Yoruba needless to talk about Ogu even where couples are of Ogu origin. Their children pick the English language as their mother tongue and learn the Yoruba language as their second language while Ogu language is not spoken at all. In addition, it is also gathered from this research that the social status of the Ogus in Badagry, particularly, among young parents also affect the language. Some of these young but highly placed politicians prefer the use of the Yoruba language to their native language. They commonly use this at meetings and the mentality is extended home. Further to this, the

research has also revealed that some Ogu natives that reside in Government Quarters are fond of not speaking their native language to their children. They want their children to identify themselves with those children speaking the dominant languages and not their native language.

It is observed that regardless of the level of education of civil servants in Quarters, they mostly speak the English language to their children and sometimes Yoruba. Most children of the Ogu civil servants living in Government Quarters hardly understand their native language.

Suggestions and Recommendations

- a. Every society invests a lot of resource to ensure effective transmission of its cultural heritage to its succeeding generations. Language being an aspect of culture is the most veritable instrument for preserving and transmitting the people culture. The best language for doing this is the mother tongue or child first language (In this case-Ogu Language).
- b. The following suggestions and recommendations are therefore given to save Ogu language from extinction:
 - Individual owners of the language should not be ashamed to identify themselves as Ogus because the Ogu language is not inferior to any other language since it performs communicative functions that others do.
 - Educated elites should avoid code-mixing and code-switching at home. They should not abandon their native language. Ogu language should be used to address their children. English language will be learnt in school since it is a compulsory subject in the school curriculum.
 - Highly placed Ogu politicians should endeavour to address their children in their native language once they return home for their political meetings where the dominant languages are used. They should even make their political campaigns in their native language where necessary.
 - Each of the couples that come from the Ogu clan, particularly, the man should try as much as possible to teach his better-half the Ogu language. The woman should also know that if she is an Ogu native, her children must understand the Ogu language because children, generally, pick up the language spoken by mothers than that of their fathers.
 - At the Primary School level, the native language, Ogu, should be included by curriculum planners since the language has orthography and textual materials are available in the language. An award should be given to the best pupils in Ogu language by the Local Government Authorities.

No matter where we live, we must not forget to train our children with the Ogu language because once we fail to do this; it will amount to loss of our native language. Therefore, those Ogu natives that live in Government Quarters should change their negative attitudes towards their native language and encourage their children by speaking it to them.

Aggressive awareness campaign must be embarked upon through electronic and print media, religious groups, community leaders on the need to save Ogu language and other endangered indigenous languages in Nigeria from extinction.

Conclusion

We need to do all that is possible to arrest the endangerment of our dear native language. It is an added advantage to understand other languages as native speakers. However, we must not kill our native language. Brenzinger and Graaf (1998) rightly say "Proficiency in nationally and internationally dominant languages will gain importance throughout the world and, for that reason. This development does not necessarily require the sacrifice of the language, ie mother tongue". Therefore, maintenance of mother tongue is a necessity. Language loss is culture loss. Consequently, LANGUAGE and CULTURE loss amount to loss of HERITAGE.

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