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## Language Endangerment in South-South Geo-Political Zone: A Focus on Ukwuani, Urhobo and Ijaw Languages

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### **Abstract:**

*The study examines language endangerment of Ukwuani, Urhobo and Ijaw languages of the South- South Geo- political zone of Nigeria. The aim of the study is to find out whether these three languages and to examine the factors responsible for such endangerment and based on that make a statement on the general health condition of the languages in south-South Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria. The sample for the study is three hundred comprising 100 speakers from each of the language groups under study. The random sampling method is used to select the sample for the study. The study adopts both quantitative and qualitative research design for data collection. Findings from the study show that the three languages: Ukwuani, Urhobo and Ijaw are endangered. Also, the endangerment of the Ukwuani, Urhobo and Ijaw languages is attributes to the negative attitude of the people towards their language and parents' inability to inculcate their language to the generation after them. The study recommends that the Ukwuani, Ijaw and Urhobo parents should create in their children the interest for their local languages and make sure their children learn their respective languages at childhood.*

**Keywords:** Language, endangerment, speakers, generation, attitude, interest, people

### **1. Introduction**

Language is a very functional aspect of human nature that plays important roles in the general strive of man. It is evident that South-South region of Nigerian is bestowed with linguistic variety which gives a view into the cultural perspective of its inhabitant. The region is home to about forty language groups, notable amongst these are: Ukwuani, Urhobo, Itshekere, Ibo, Ika, Isoko, Kalabari, Okrika, Efik, Bini, Esan, Oron, Ogoni, Ikwere and Ibibio. It is instructive to note that these languages are considered minority as they are not among the three recognized major languages. This means that their area of usage is limited. They have very small no of speakers and scarcely used in government and media. As a result of these their sustenance and viability are threatened. The focus of the present paper therefore is to establish features of language endangerment in south- South Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria and examine the factors responsible for such endangerment with particular reference to Ukwuani, Urhobo and Ijaw languages.

### **2. Urhobo Language**

Urhobo is a member of the South Western Edoid family of languages. A substantial number of the Edoid languages are spoken in Edo State and the Southern part of Delta State. Elugbe (1986) postulates that the Edoid languages "fall into four primary subgroups of Delta Edoid, South Western Edoid, where Urhobo belongs, North Central Edoid, and North Western Edoid. A substantial number of these languages trace their ancestry to the Edo (Bini) stock." Aweto (2002) estimates that the population of Urhoboland was 1.2 million in 1991 and it is now about 1.5 million. Despite this Urhobo has a shrinking speakership. Mowarin (2002) observes among others that the polyglossic situation in Urhobo and the flawed language policy of Nigeria are some of the factors responsible for the shrinkage of the Urhobo speaking population

### **3. The Ijaw Language**

Ijaw and Izon are interchangeably used linguistically to refer to the language spoken by the Ijaw people. The Ijaw language consists of nine closely related Niger- Congo languages all of which belong to the Ijoid branch of the Niger- Congo tree. Ijaw is made up of fifty sub-groups, otherwise known as clans. A clan in Ijaw is a sub-group based on kingship with a common religion, linguistic and cultural tradition. The Ijaw people (Ijo or Izon) are a collection of peoples indigenous mostly to the regions of the Bayelsa, Edo, Delta, Ondo, Akwalbom, and Rivers states within the Niger Delta region in

Nigeria. Many are found as migrant fishermen in camps as far West as Sierra Leone and as far East as Gabon along the Western African.

The population of the Ijaw people is estimated to be over 14million people. (UNDP Report, 2006).The Ijaw is presently classified at risk with a 20% certainty based on the evidence available. This started with a case of language shift. The Ijaw people began using the Pidgin English as a second language and its usage spread over almost all the language environment; homes, markets, transport, etc. Another major factor that contributed to the endangerment of the Ijaw language was the massive relocation that has taken place in the area due to the development of Nigeria's oil industry in Port Harcourt.

Some measures are being put in place to save the language from death. In June 2013, the "Izon Fie" instructional books and audio CDs were launched in Bayelsa State. The Niger Delta University is also working to expand the range of books available in the Ijaw language. Ijaw News is also been broadcasted on local radio and TV stations.

#### 4. Ukwuani Language

Ukwuani is one of the numerous minority languages spoken in South – South Nigeria. Ukwuani and its variants are spoken in Delta State, particularly in three local Government of Ndokwa- West, Ndokwa -East Ukwuani and some part of Ughelli North Local. It has over number of speakers. At present the language has not standard orthography and a dictionary (Kesene, 2016, Ejiofor, 2016). It is important to note that there have been a contentious as is the true status of Ukwuani. Some think the language is a dialect of Igbo language while others think it is not (Emenayo Kesene, 2016, Egwenu, 1998...) no doubt this state of affair has greatly affected the state and health of the language. For instance, Ejiofor (2016) is of the view that the wrong classification of Ukwuani language as Igbo is one of the causes of its endangerment state It is important to note that Ukwuani is a language with numerous dialects. In recent times, it is observed that Ukwuani language has over 5,000 minority languages endangered (Crystal, 2000). Many factors have been implemented as investigating its endangerment. Some of these are trace of research in the language. The impact of English and Igbo language and the attitude of the people (Emenike, 2016).

It is in light of the above observation that the present study aims to examine the sociolinguistic condition of some languages focusing on Ijaw, Urhobo and Ukwuani languages and the objective is to find out whether these three languages are endangered, establish features of language endangerment and to examine the factors responsible for such endangerment and based on that make a statement on the general health condition of the languages in south- South Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria and the prospects of their sustainability.

#### 5. Literature Review

A good number of scholarly works have been done to explain language endangerment in Nigeria. In this section, there will be a review of selected works.

Adamu studies language shift and endangerment among the Fulbe people in Gombe State. The study aims to find out younger generation ability to speak the Fultulde language. Questionnaire was used in collecting data from randomly sampled 400 Fulfulde-speaking secondary school students within Gombe metropolis. Simple statistical tools were used to analyze the data collected. The analysis reveals that the younger generation of Fulfulde speakers in Gombe is rapidly abandoning the language for Hausa, which implies that Fultulde is endangered. The study recommends that Fulbe parents should make sure their children learn Fulfulde at childhood and should make it a compulsory means of communication at home.

Okolo studies language death and endangerment. In order to achieve the aim of the study, the researcher postulates the following questions: What is language death? Why do languages die? What are the measures to prevent languages from dying? The study shows that the death of any language marks the death of the cultural heritage of people who speak the language. The study again reveals that a language dies when its speakers neglect it and do not care to pass it across to the upcoming generation. The study argues that the native language is what can truly interpret the norm, practices and custom of the people and as a result of this there must be global measures in the preservation of the native languages. The study among others measures recommends that the Government should be persuaded to implement policies that will favour the speaking of the indigenous mother tongue.

Balogun carries out a study on endangerment of the Yoruba language. He examines the low usage of Yoruba language among some secondary school students in Yoruba land. The study uses questionnaire with cloze test to measure the knowledge of Yoruba language among respondents in three Yoruba speaking states in Southern Nigeria. Findings from the study reveals that Yoruba language has low patronage and patriotism amongst the students used for the data. Also, the students were unable to provide meaning for selected Yoruba proverbs, words and expressions. The study concludes on the note the Yoruba language stands the risk of gradual extinction if stakeholders concerned do not take urgent measures to arrest the dwindling fortune the Yoruba language.

Aminu in a study on Hausa language vocabulary identifies and documents various fragments of Hausa vocabularies. The study aims to safeguard the identified vocabularies so that they do not varnish completely. The qualitative method of research was used to collect data. The data collected was analyzed using simple percent analysis. The factors responsible for the suffering of the vocabularies were explained. Findings from the study reveals that hundreds of words and vocabularies in Hausa is varnishing as adults do not speak some of the old Hausa vocabulary to their children. The study recommends that a committee comprising of elders from Sokoto, Zamfara and Kebbi should be established to identify and design adequate measure to handle the situation. Again, adults and parents should speak and encourage their wards to speak the Hausa language.

Oko in a study on language endangerment examines the attitude of young speakers of some minor languages towards their indigenous music. In order to achieve the aim of the study a total number of 100 youths were randomly selected from two states in the Southern part of Nigeria: Bayelsa and Akwa Ibom. A questionnaire was administered to each respondent. The data generated was analyzed using simple percentage and its represented in a frequency table. Also, the study uses unstructured interview methods to arrive at some conclusion. Findings from the study shows that greater percentage of the young people from the region under study has serious interest for and prefers their indigenous music more. The study concludes that producing music in the indigenous language is the easiest way to bringing the language closer to the people and keeping it alive in them. The study recommends that Nigerians musicians should be encouraged to see their song as a tool for revitalization and sustainable tool for their languages.

Mowarin studies language endangerment in Urhobo land. The study aims to find out the reason for the endangerment of the Urhobo language. Mowari attributes language endangerment in Urhoboland to the impact of English, pidgin, non-implementation of NPE and the negative attitude of the people towards their language. Also, he notes the shrinking speakership of the three constituent languages of Urhobo culture; namely, Urhobo, Okpe and Uvwie. He also suggests ways of turning the ugly tide. In same vein, Fabunmi and Salawu studies the reason why the Yoruba language is endangered. The authors note that "... the introduction of the so-called Western education in Yoruba land has made majority of the elites divided personalities". The study finds the attitude of the speakers, issues of job opportunities and economic policies factors responsible for the endangerment.

It is to be noted that all the literature in language endangerment in Nigeria that are aimed at explaining language endangerment in Nigeria has been mainly qualitative with exception of Fulbe. This means that the researchers have always tended to interpret their observations without giving necessary empirical backup. The present study is therefore an attempt to explain language endangerment through empirical method of research. It is hoped that the study will provide a verifiable evidence to support language endangerment in the South- South region and by implication to the wider world.

## 6. Methodology

### 6.1. Research Design

The survey research design will be used for the study

### 6.2. Population of the Study

The population of the study is speakers of the three language groups selected for the study, that is, Ijaw, Ukwani and Urhobo.

### 6.3. Sample and Sampling Techniques

The sample for the study is 300 comprising 100 speakers from each of the languages. The random sampling study method is used to select the sample for the study

### 6.4. Method of Data Collection

Two methods are used for the collection of data. These are observation and questionnaire. After a close study of the language situations in the zone, the researchers noticed language behaviours such as preferences for the use of English rather than the native languages. Also, noted is reluctant of the younger ones to speak their native languages. In order to give explanation for the observation 300 questionnaires consisting of five questionnaires is designed and distributed to randomly selected subjects (adult male and female). A total of three hundred questionnaires were distributed to three hundred native speakers of Ijaw, Urhobo and Ukwani hundred for each. Out of the 100 questionnaires giving to Ijaw speaker, hundred questionnaires were returned, for Urhobo ninety questionnaires were returned while for Ukwani eighty- nine questionnaires were returned

### 6.5. Method of Data Analysis

The study adopts both quantitative and qualitative research design in generating data. The data collected will be analyzed using tables and graphs.

## 7. Data Collection and Analysis

### 7.1. Research Question 1

Do you speak your language to your children/ ward at home?

The response of the respondents could be shown in the table below.

Item	Yes	No	Total
Ijaw speakers	68 (68%)	32 (32%)	100%
Urhobo speakers	67 (74%)	23 (26%)	90%
Ukwuani speakers	86 (97%)	3 (3%)	89%
Total	221 (239%)	58 (61%)	279%

Table 1

### 7.1.2. Analysis

From the response of the speakers of Ijaw language it was observed that 68 percent of the respondents indicate that they speak their native language to their children while 32 percent say they do not. Also, 74 percent of Urhobo respondents indicate that they speak their native language to their children while 26 percent say they do not. Again, From the response of the speakers of Ukwani language it was observed that 97percent of the respondents indicate that they speak their native language to their children while 3 percent say they do not. From the observation, it is clear that contrary to the belief that parents donot speak their native languages to their children Ijaw speakers, Urhobo speakers and Ukwuani speakers do speak their native languages to their children. From this, it appears that series of awareness aimed at creating interest in the speaking of indigenous languages especially the minority ones are yielding positive result.

### 7.2. Research Question 2

Would you want your children/ ward to be taught in school using your indigenous language?

Below is a tabular representation of the response of the respondents:

Item	Yes	No	Total
Ijaw speakers	65 (65%)	35 (35%)	100%
Urhobo speakers	57 (65%)	33(37%)	90%
Ukwuani speakers	42 (47%)	47 (53%)	89%
Total	164 (177%)	115 (125%)	279%

Table 2

### 7.2.1 Analysis

The table above shows that more than average number of the respondents said they would want their children to be taught in their native language. 65percent of Ijaw speakers would want their children to be taught in Ijaw language if there are available facilities to that effect.63percent of Urhobo speakers would want their children to be taught in Urhobo language while 37 would not. While 53percent of Ukwuani speakers do not want their children to be taught using the Ukwuani language 47percent languages of Ukwani speakers would want their children to be taught in Ukwani language from the responses above, it is not totally correct to say that speakers of the indigenous do not have a negative attitude towards their language or are English crazy as is observed in other studies see . Here, the Ukwuani speakers appear to be different as greater number do not want their children to be taught in Ukwuani language.

### 7.3. Research Question 3

Do you encourage your children to speak your language?

### 7.3.1. Analysis

Below is a tabular representation of the response of the respondents:

Item	Yes	No	Total
Ijaw speakers	70 (70%)	30 (30%)	100%
Urhobo speakers	88 (98%)	2(2%)	90%
Ukwuani speakers	85 (96%)	4 (4%)	89%
Total	243 (264%)	36 (36%)	279%

Table 3

From the table above it could be seen that 70percent of Ijaw speakers encourage their children to speak theIjaw language.98percent of Urhobo speakers encourage their children to speak Urhobo language. In like manner,85percent of Ukwani speakers encourage their children to speak Ukwani language. The revelation from the above is quite significant because one of the stages of language endangerment recognized by Crystal, 2000, Wurm) is that endangered languages are not passed on from one generation to another. As could be seen from the result, efforts are being made by parents of minority languages to pass on their native languages to their younger ones. This holds a lot of promises for the survival of these languages.

### 7.4. Research Question 4

Are your children interested in speaking your language?

### 7.4.1Analysis

Below is a tabular representation of the response of the respondents:

Item	Yes	No	Total
Ijaw speakers	36 (36%)	64 (64%)	100%
Urhobo speakers	77 (98%)	13(14%)	90%
Ukwuani speakers	85 (96%)	4 (4%)	89%
Total	198(230%)	121 (33%)	279%

Table 4

From the table above it could be seen that the younger generation are not averted to speaking their native language. Responses from the Ijaw speakers show that 36percent are interested in speaking their language likewise Urhobo 86percent. Also, 96percent of Ukwani indicate that their children are interested in speaking Ukwani language. The source of conflict could actually be the realities on ground where English plays a dominant role in the daily life of the people. Note in Nigeria today English is recognized as the official language see. It is the medium of instruction in school, in fact, it confers a lot of advantages on the speaker. The important point here therefore is that parents are holding on nostalgically to their native language while the younger ones are looking unto the future promises that English holds for them. This brings to mind the need to create more functional roles for Nigeria native languages. This is because if the native languages cannot serve useful purposes for the speakers, they find it difficult to hold on to them since language is much more than a historic artifact

#### 7.5. Research Question 5

Do you know your language is dying?

##### 7.5.1 Analysis

Below is a tabular representation of the response of the respondents:

Item	Yes	No	Total
Ijaw speakers	91 (91%)	9 (9%)	100%
Urhobo speakers	72 (80%)	18(20%)	90%
Ukwani speakers	85 (96%)	4 (4%)	89%
Total	248 (267%)	31 (33%)	279%

Table 5

From the table above, it could be seen that the speakers of the three languages under study knows that their languages are dying. 91percent of Ijaw speakers are aware that their language is dying. This is also the trend in Urhobo which has 80 percent and Ukwani which has 96percent. The revelation from the above shows that speakers of minority languages in Nigeria are aware that their languages are dying. This might be connected to the awareness campaign in the last ten years. (Ohirk 2011)

## 8. Discussion on Finding

From the findings it appears that the awareness programme being created by linguist and language enthusiast have started yielding result. In this regard, it is instructive to note that the speakers especially of the minority languages are now more aware of the health state of their languages which is clearly shown from our research findings. To this end, indigenous people have started taking measures that could be likened to speakers of old Hebrew language who made deliberate effort to revitalize the language (see Emenike 2016) For instance, in Nigeria today, Igbo speakers have made conscious efforts in adopting measures that are aimed at revitalizing Igbo language which the UN predicted some time ago that would die out in the next 25years. A good example is the establishment of radio stations where Igbo language is actively used as language of broadcast. In the past five years over 6 radio stations have been established in Eastern Nigeria where Igbo language is used, for instance, Odenigbo, Sapienser, Hot FM, City Radio, Onitsha and a host of others. Such efforts have also been noted in other major Nigeria languages such as Yoruba and Hausa. For instance, at the national level, they are three dedicated NTA stations where these languages are used as the sole language of broadcast. These efforts have created by opportunities in the use of these languages in the sense that graduates of these languages could secure employment not only in teaching but also in attractive profession of broadcast. In addition, the use of these languages in the media has increased their prestige among the people. As noted, (Crystal 2000), increasing the prestige of a language and opening up opportunities in the use of a language are some means that could help in sustaining the life of a language.

It is often said that the recognition of the fact that there is a problem is the beginning of a solution. The present study recognizes that these languages in the South- South Geo – Political zone of Nigeria; Ijaw, Urhobo and Ukwani are endangered. This is evident in the result of research question 5, wherein it was revealed that majority of the speakers are aware of the endangerment state of their respective languages. This could be traceable to series of awareness activities and campaigns aimed at saving these languages. Notable in this regard are the activities of Linguistics Association of Nigeria. As an academic association, it has organized over three conferences focusing on the theme of language endangerment and revitalization compiled with this is the activity of the key officers. For instance, in 2014, the then present LAN (Ohire). These activities have doubled have raised the observed work awareness. This has resulted in positive actions aimed at reviving the languages. For instance, linguist have engaged in academic research to document and describe these languages (Kasine 2014). In addition to the academic efforts is noted efforts of the stakeholders.

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