

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN SOCIETY – PERSPECTIVE OF IJAW LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Language is an indispensable tool for keeping and transmitting a people's culture. Language is the basic factor in communication. To be communicative is to be understood. Every aspect of human behavior or endeavour can be expressed through language. Human language is culturally transmitted so long as children are exposed to the language of their parents. This paper presents 'the role of language in society; perspective of Ijaw language'. Ijoid is a language family spoken only in the Niger Delta in Nigeria consisting of Defaka, a tiny endangered language, and Ijo, a language cluster, Bender – Samuel (1989). The aim of this paper is to determine the language spread and the prospects of the language for the speakers. We made a sample selection of four dialects of Ijaw to demonstrate the word order paradigm. We collected data from the native speakers of the language. Results provide insights into the negligence and lack of interest by the youths in the language. Most of the Ijaw students do not know the orthographic, phonological, morphological, syntactic and the semantic features of their mother tongue. There is a need for a pragmatic approach to the medium of instruction whereby mother tongue and foreign languages will be on an equal basis and prevent the creation of a psychological gap in the development of the child.

1.0 Introduction

This paper presents the role of language in society. The perspective is on Ijaw language spoken in the Niger Delta of southern Nigeria. Many Nigerian students believe so much in English as a superior language more than their mother tongues. This is a psychological barrier to the mother tongue literacy in Nigerian language. Personally I have interviewed many students in my class in relation to the orthography, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics of their mother tongues. We prepared a list of English sentences which was shared to some Ijaw students to write out the sentences in Ijaw language. The response we got from the students was very poor. This is the reason why we decided to write this paper.

The paper has four parts. The first part discusses what Language is, and language contact in colonial Nigeria. The second part presents the identification of the role of first language (mother-tongue or language one L1) in Nigeria. The third part exhibits the role of English in Nigeria. The last part presents the Ijaw languages in Nigeria.

2.0 What Language is and Language Contact in Colonial Nigeria

According to the International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English language (2003), language is defined as: "The expression and communication of emotions or ideas between human beings by means of speech and hearing the sounds spoken or heard being systematized and confirmed by usage among a given people over a period of time".

In his essay on language, Hall (1968:158), tells us that language is, “The Institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral – auditory arbitrary symbols”. According to Chomsky (1957), “A language is a set (finite or infinite) of sentences , each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements.” According to Chomsky, all natural languages, in either their spoken or their written form, are languages in the sense of his definition: since

- (a) Each natural language has a finite number of sounds in it (and a finite number of letters in its alphabet – on the assumption that it has an alphabetic writing system); and
- (b) Although there may be infinitely many distinct sentences in the language, each sentence can be represented as a finite sequence of these sounds (or letters). It is the task of the linguist describing some particular natural language to determine which of the finite sequences of elements in that language sentences are and which non-sentences are.

Chomsky’s definition of language focused attention upon the purely structural properties of languages (structure – dependence) i.e, the processes whereby sentences are constructed in natural languages. Language, however, is distinctively a human system of communication, based on oral and written symbols.

Nigeria existed before the formation of the political space called Nigeria in 1914 through the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorate by Lord Lugard, Martin, (2013). The English language also existed in this geographical space before the political entity was created. Prior to the colonial era and long before the amalgamation, these different ethnic nationalities existed as empires, kingdoms, or nations with their own languages, customs and territorial boundaries. They had contacts in form of trade, intermarriages etc. The earliest contact between the indigenous nationalities and the European explorers was at about 1469. The earliest contact was made with the coastal people of the Niger Delta where the visitors found rivers through which they navigated a little inland Elugbe (1991). From the 17thC, the British people became the major traders with the people of the coastal areas and had many trade posts. In 1884, at Berlin, in Germany, Nigeria was partitioned to the British empire to administer. From this came fully the contact between the English language and the indigenous Nigerian languages. From trade to missionary activities and to colonialism, there arose the urgent need to communicate with the natives to facilitate their missions. Language became the prime factor to achieve all these.

Society is a group of people related to each other through persistent relations or a large social grouping of humans sharing some geographical location or territory. Human societies are usually characterized by patterns of relations between and among individuals who share a distinctive culture and institutions. In this paper the Niger Delta refer to a body of individuals bound together by such characteristics of national or cultural identity, social solidarity, language or hierarchical organization.

Ijaw (also known by the subgroups “Ijo” or “Izon”) are a collection of people mostly in the forest regions of the Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers States within the Niger Delta in Nigeria Martin (2013). Some are resident in Akwa-Ibom, Edo, and Ondo states also 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 Africa coastline Kouwenberg, (1994).

The Ijo people number about an estimated 3.4 million Kari, (2004). They have long lived in locations near many sea trade routes, and they were well connected to other areas by trade as early as the 15th century. The immediate past President of Nigeria, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, is an Ijaw person.

2.1 The Identification of the Roles of First Language in Nigeria

Mother-tongue is one's language at birth, the language of the native community into which the child is born. First language is also known as the mother-tongue or language one. It is called mother tongue because a child acquires it from the parents who are culturally bound to speak their native languages. A child who grows up in his or her village is expected to speak the language of the immediate environment, which is the mother-tongue. We present some major roles of first language below:

1. First language is used as a means for getting things done – for functional purposes such as for expressing one's emotion, feelings, thought and needs
2. First language is used for controlling other behaviour through such practices as warning, advising, persuading, encouraging, correcting and directing through various forms of control like:
 - (a) Prohibition, "You should not take things that do not belong to you".
You should not fight with people rather you should be at peace with one another. This will make you to be a good citizen of your society. You should never insult anybody. "Do not urinate here".
 - (b) Threat of reprisal if behaviour is not discontinued e.g. "I will punish you if you do that again".
 - (c). Emotional blackmail, e.g. "You will give your mother hypertension if you continue with your bad behaviour".
3. First language is used for inter- personal purposes like getting along with others, for social interaction such as greeting, praising, sympathizing, joking etc.,
4. First language is used for the exploration of the child's own identity. It is regarded as language of awareness as a form of the child's own individuality. With the normal child, awareness of oneself is closely tied up with speech.
5. Representational Function - First language is described as symbolic because it can convey messages or information or even express proposition. Counting or numeracy is usually begun in mother-tongue. Mathematical symbols and formula are representational language, Olaoye (2007).

Mother-tongue is different from the school language. The school language is 'language two' – the English language which is characterized with the pupil/student – teacher relationship which functions at the official level. Mother-tongue is characterized with the mother/father – child relationship which functions at the informal level where the child is free to express himself or herself at any length. Without first language, the development and transmission of shared values and traditions would be impossible within a given community. This is one of the reasons why an indigene of a particular place would enjoy the jokes, comprehend the idiomatic expressions and interpret correctly even the non-verbal signs that make up the totality of that community's language.

Every parent should discourage the children from using the second language to greet elders in the villages like: "Fubara say hi to uncle, grandma, and grandpa", Kombotari how you de? "hello to

you all". The children should be encouraged to use their indigenous languages at home. If we love our local languages, it will help to maintain peace and unity in our society.

2.2 The Role of English in Nigeria

English is the official language in Nigeria. It is our lingua franca. It is used for the purposes of government and administration for instance, Nigeria Constitution, government records, administrative instructions or directives, legislative procedures, court proceeding and minutes of official meetings etc, are all in English.

English is a language for specialized education. It is used as the medium of instruction from elementary to the university level. This means that the Nigerian learner's access to the cultural and scientific knowledge of the world is largely through English. English is a language for the mass media. For instance, most National Newspapers are published in English. Over the radio most of the non-musical programmes such as feature talks, news items, lectures and other educational programmes as well as advertisements are in English. Television programmes are also done in English.

Another role of English in Nigeria is as a medium of social communication. Nigeria has more than four hundred and fifty local languages in Nigeria. We are a multilingual society where many indigenous languages are used. English is therefore the only effective medium of interpersonal communication between Nigerians from different ethno-linguistic backgrounds, and also between literate Nigerians and foreigners who speak English. English is in a predominant position in business and commerce in Nigeria. Business records, contract tenders, business advertisements, accounts and certificates are generally in English.

In language education, goals are usually determined by the role which a particular language is expected to play in and outside the school curriculum Olaoye, (2007). In pursuance of the objectives of the new National Policy on Education, especially Mother-Tongue Education, the role of English is being slightly de-emphasized at the early stage of the child's primary education. According to the language policy, the language of the immediate community is to be used as the medium of instruction for classes one to three in the primary school. English is to be taught as a subject throughout the primary school course, and used as medium of instruction only from classes 4 to 6. The National Policy on education was first published in 1977, the second and third editions were published in 1981 and 1998 respectively in keeping with the dynamics of social change and the demands on education. The fourth edition was necessitated by some policy innovations and changes, this was published in 2004. When, the National Policy was first enunciated in 1977 the educational system was 'manual' –driven, while almost 39 years on, education has become electronically/globally ICT-driven and Nigeria cannot be an exception. That is why we now have such concepts as e-education, e-classrooms, e-library etc. We can extend this e-education to our local languages. Today Nigeria operates on a 9-3-4 system:

- Primary School 6 years
 - Junior Secondary School 3 years
 - Senior Secondary School 3 years
 - University First Degree 4 years
- Scope of Universal Basic Education (UBE).
Source: Federal Ministry of Education

3.0 Ijaw Languages

Human language is a unique system of communication. The most important function of language is for individuals to pass on information from one person to another. Language serves as a means of understanding ourselves and our society. The Ijaw language is the language spoken by the Ijaw people in southern Nigeria. The Ijaw speak nine closely related Niger-Congo languages, all of which belong to the Ijoid branch of the Niger-Congo tree. The primary division between the Ijo languages is that between Eastern Ijo and Western Ijo Martins (2013).

Western Ijaw speakers are: Ekeremor, Sagbama (Mein), Bassan, Apoi, Arogbo, Boma (Bumo), Kabo (Kabuowei), Ogboin, Tarakiri, and Kololuma-Opokuma (Yenagoa). Nembe, Brass and Akassa (Akaha) dialects represent Southeast Ijo (Izon). Buseni and Okordia dialects are considered Inland Ijo.

Eastern Ijaw speakers are: Kalabari, the name of one of the Ijaw clans that reside on the eastern side of the Niger-Delta (Abonnema, Buguma, Bakana, Degema etc.) who form a major group in Rivers State. Other “Eastern” Ijaw clans are the Okrika, Ibani (the natives of Bonny, Finima and Opobo) and Nkoroo. They are neighbours to the Kalabari people in present day Rivers State, Nigeria.

The Ijaw ethnic group consists of 50 loosely affiliated tribes. These clans are based along kinship lines and/ or shared cultural and religious traditions. The Ijaw ethnic group is represented below.

Name	State	Alternate Names
Akassa	Bayelsa	Akaha, Akasa
Andoni	Rivers, Akwa Ibom	Obolo
Apoi (Eastern)	Bayelsa	
Apoi (Western)	Ondo	
Arogbo	Ondo	
Bassan	Bayelsa	Basan
Bille	Rivers	Bile, Bili
Bumo	Bayelsa	Boma, Bomo
Bonny	Rivers	Ibani, Ubani
Buseni	Bayelsa	Biseni
Egbema	Delta, Edo	
Ekeremor	Bayelsa	Operemor, Ekeremo
Ekpetiama	Bayelsa	
Engenni	Rivers	Ngeni
Epie-Atissa	Bayelsa	
Furupagha	Edo	
Gbaranmatu	Delta	Gbaranmatu
Gbaran	Bayelsa	Gbarain
Iduwini	Delta	
Isaba	Delta	
Kabo	Delta	Kabowei, Kabou
Kalabari	Rivers	
Kolokuma	Bayelsa	
Kula	Rivers	

Kumbo	Delta	Kumbowei
Mein	Delta	
Nembe	Bayelsa	
Nkoro	Rivers	Kala Kirika
Obotebe	Delta	
Odimodi	Delta	
Ogbe	Delta	Ogbe-Ijoh
Ogbia	Bayelsa	
Ogboin	Bayelsa	
Ogulagha	Delta	Ogula
Okordia	Bayelsa	Okodia, Akita
Okrika	Rivers	Wakirike
Olodiana (East)	Bayelsa	
Olodiana (West)	Edo	
Opobo	Rivers	
Opokuma	Bayelsa	
Oporoma	Bayelsa	Oporomo
Oruma	Bayelsa	Tugbene
Oyakiri	Bayelsa	Beni
Seimbiri	Delta	
Tarakiri (East)	Bayelsa	
Tarakiri (West)	Delta	
Tungbo	Bayelsa	
Tuomo	Delta	
Ukomu	Edo	
Zarama	Bayelsa	

Martin, (2013)

Results reveal that the speakers of Ijaw language are located in different states such as Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Delta, Edo, and Ondo. From the data, Bayelsa has the highest number of Ijaw speakers, followed by Delta and River states.

We collected data on some Ijaw languages on parts of the human body. The lexical items that we collected have physical resemblance, phonological, morphological and semantic relationship except the Ogbia dialect which is different from the other dialects. They are from one language family. The data is presented below.

Amasoma (Southern Ijaw)	Bolu Toru	Otakeme Ogbia	Okirika	English
1. Nini	Nini	Izon	Nini	Nose
2. Tebe	Tibi	Emu	Tilot	Head
3. Bebe	Bibi	Onu	Bipi	Mouth
4. Toru	Toru	Adien	Tomgbolu	Eye
5. Miliyei	Mulou	Anem	Bele	Tongue
6. Aka	Aka	Akai	Aka	Teeth
7. Coi	Kun	Orum	Kongo	Neck
8. Abele	Apele	Emuobhargua		Shoulder
9. Bira	Bira	Aguo	Bara	Hand

10. Mimi	Bira-esangbala	kparsala-guo	Baratungali	finger
11. Biri	Biri	Ewunu	Buo	Stomach
12. Agbobu	Agbobu	Ikpokpolgi	Ekpe	Chest
13. Mbu	Ombu	bubulu		Naval
14. Bowo	Buwou	Alike	Buo	Legs
15. Igbele	Emgbele	Edurumalike	Buoikpuku	Knee
16. Beri	Beri	Ato		Ear
17. Konutu	Konu	Egum	Kanju	Waist
18. Inido	Endou	Amamam		Breast

From the data above the lexical structures of Ogbia are different from the other dialects of Ijaw in phonology, morphology and semantic features. The reason might be that Ogbia must have diverged earlier from the family language tree.

4.0 Solutions to the Neglect of Mother Tongue in Nigeria

Government should view investments on mother tongue literacy in Nigerian languages as long term affairs. The government should provide instructional materials and facilities in primary and secondary schools. The e-education should be introduced in our different schools. The government should encourage and provide trained Nigerian languages teachers in schools. Allowances should be given to language teachers by the state and Federal governments.

Students should have interest on the mother tongue literacy in Nigerian languages. Today many students are not competent in English and their mother tongues. They are not good in L1 and L2, this is a ridiculous situation.

Parents should also be proud of their languages because they are in a better position to advise their children/wards at home. Language teachers should help to encourage pupils and students to use L1 both in spoken and in written forms. Teachers should not harass their students who use their L1 in communication as some teachers always use this quotation to put fear on the children, 'If you speak your mother tongue I will flog you'. This will always bring fear in the minds of the children.

However, aggressive and steady work on the mother tongue literacy in Nigerian languages would liberate and sensitize the masses. Moreover qualitative and quantitative mother tongue literacy in Nigerian languages would harmonize and sharpen Nigerians impressions of themselves; they would become culturally aware of our society.

5.0 Conclusion

We have demonstrated in this paper the role of language in society – perspective on Ijaw language. Basically, all languages perform certain functions – communication, emotional expression, social interaction, entertainment, logical, critical, or prepositional thinking and learning functions. The lack of use of L1 in the educational domain means that a wealth of knowledge is being locked away, and is gradually being lost. It is only by using our L1 that they will become the key resources for empowering communities to combat poverty, impoverishment and illiteracy. Our basic assumption is that the students of Ijaw have not given time and interest to their L1 in putting it into writing. The youths of today are leaders of tomorrow. The success of tomorrow is the preparation of today. This success could be achieved through the help of families, schools, government (local,

state and federal levels), communities, churches and individuals respectively for the promotion and development of our local languages.

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