

MULTILINGUALISM AND THE ETHNIC IDENTITY OF THE ETTE PEOPLE

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Abstract

Due to their diverse nature, the classification of indigenous languages in Nigeria ranks some of them as major, main and small group languages. The Ette people speak two main, and one major, Nigerian languages namely: Idoma, Igala and Igbo respectively. This paper sets out to examine the Ette people in the light of their ethnic identity and also to ascertain which of the languages spoken has the highest percentage with regard to its status and level of proficiency. Primary data were collected from native speakers of Ette resident in Igboeze North Local Government Area of Enugu State using Phinney's (1999) Ethnic Identity measure questionnaire. The findings show that the Idoma language has the highest percentage with regard to language proficiency and use, followed by Igala and then Igbo which is also spoken in Ette perhaps because it shares border with Enugu and Kogi States. The paper in discussing the relationship of language and identity observes that language does not mark the ethnic identity of the Ette people because of their multilingual nature. Also, the geographical location which situates them in other ethnic groups does not give them a sense of belonging. This has resulted to different forms of agitations.

Introduction

Nigeria is made up of diverse indigenous languages which rank them as major, main and small group languages (Bamgbose 1991:4). Ejele (2007:160) states that languages that are formerly called minority language are now made up of 'main' languages and 'small group' languages. According to him, the main languages are those that have attained recognition and dominant status in newly created states. Citing Bambose (1992:3), Ejele listed the main languages which include: Ibibio, Edo (Benin), Tiv, Efik, Kanuri, Urhobo, Fulfulde, Nupe, Igala and Izon. The smaller languages are the ones not yet reduced to writing. The variety of Idoma and Igala spoken in Ette community falls within the category of main group languages. Some of these main or small languages share political borders with other linguistic groups. Due to the geographical and political affiliations, there is this quest for recognition as well as struggle and agitations for national identity. It is against this backdrop that this paper intends to investigate this community in the light of their ethnic identity and linguistic diversity as children born and bred there grow up to be either bilingual or multilingual. A bilingual person is someone who can speak two languages fluently while a person who is fluent in more than two languages is said to be a multilingual. This paper will discuss these concepts further in order to give more insights on

their connection with the subject of the paper. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: section two will give an overview of the historical background of the community. Section three is on language as it relates to ethnic identity. Conceptual explication of Bilingualism/multilingualism will be discussed in section four; while section five forms the data analysis, section six concludes the paper.

Historical background and geographical location

In the past, our ancestors moved from one place to the other in search of greener pastures as well as favourable place of settlement. As they move, inter-marry and intermingle with other ethnic groups, so did their languages. This is precisely the case with Ette people with regard to their historical background. Ette community is made up of nine clans namely: Ogodo, Emenebe, Aishi, Ochigide, Onodaba, Achanya, Ebe and Adokpe. The nine clans constitute two equal and separate ethnic groups; one half speaks Idoma while the other half speaks Igala. The percentage of this ethnic identity is confirmed by the result of our questionnaire in order to ascertain the language that has the highest percentage with regard to ethnic identity and proficiency.

The Ette community speaks Idoma and Igala with an estimated population of about 39000 (1963 population census). It is geographically situated between longitude 7⁰E and Latitude 7⁰W. It is bound to the Northwest by Ankpa and Amaka in Ofu local government area of Kogi State, and Northeast by Ogugu and Ofante in Olamaboro L.G.A also in Kogi. To the North, it is bounded by the Ubelle River and stretches beyond Efeche to Okura in Kogi while to the West; it is bounded by Amara, Aguibeje and Ikem Aji and to the South; Umuopu and Aji, all in Igboeze-North L.G.A. in Enugu State (Ette Community Development Association (ECDA), 2012; Amed, 2000).

The Origin of the people of Ette according to Amed (2000:1) “has been a very difficult and contentious issue to determine or accept for a long time before now”. The simple reason is because quoting Eko (1998) Amed acknowledges that it is so because there are no documentations as regards the origin of Ette which precisely gave rise to his writing a book on “the customs and traditions of the people of Ette”. This fact explains why Ohiri-Anichie’s (2007) opinion on the origin of the Negro hypothesis/Niger-Benue Confluence holds that speakers of the languages which belong to the proto-kwa sub-family of the large Niger-Congo family e.g Igbo, Yoruba, Edo, Igala, Idoma, etc., are said to have migrated from the Niger-Benue confluence area and subsequently dispersed to other parts of West Africa occupied by their descendants. However, the reason why the community is a multilingual one is not within the scope of this paper. But it can be inferred that the origin of a people can be linked to their language since language of an ethnic group is tied to their identity. In the next section we shall look at the relationship between language and ethnic identity.

Language and Ethnic Identity

Our use of language shows and establishes our identity. This is because it does not only organize thought, but also establishes social relations. More so, it serves as an indicator of social identity and group memberships in the same way as mode of dressing, cuisine etc. In essence, language is one of the markers of ethnic group identity. It is an essential characteristic of ethnic identity. Members of an ethnic group use language regularly which significantly distinguishes them from other ethnic groups. This is in line with what Crystal (2004) says, that every language is a temple in which the soul of those who speak it is enshrined.

The concept of ethnicity, however, encompasses a lot of meaning so that its definition is not only restricted to common descent, appearance, cuisine, language, culture, history, territory, mode of dressing, religion, traditions etc. as explained in Wikipedia. An ethnic group sets one apart from other groups because of the common characteristics they share which strengthens their identity. It also conveys a sense of belonging which is usually deep-rooted. Thus ethnic identity is used synonymously with national identity. Joseph (2004:162 & 163) notes that it was formerly used in some languages to refer to the race in which one belongs. However, he asserts that

The focus of ethnic identity is more on common descent and on the cultural heritage shared because of common descent than on political aspirations for autonomy. What this means is that national identity is focused on political borders and autonomy, often justified by arguments centered on shared cultural heritage, but where the ethnic element is inevitably multiple.

This is to say that people who belong to an ethnic group share common descent and culture. In other words, Smith (1981: 66) and Joseph (2004:162) as cited in Kaur Gill (2009) put it this way; “to belong to an ethnic group means possessing a common descent, cultural heritage, religion, language and a distinctive history and destiny and to feel a sense of collective uniqueness and solidarity”. On the other hand, ethnic group according to Manning (1998) “is a unique solidarity cluster into which one is born and bonded culturally and biologically.” Ethnic group not only serves as security and a breastplate against uncertainty and adversity but also, serves as a symbol of identity. Phinney (1999) in studying ethnic identity posits that identity achievement for any ethnic group means acknowledgement of two fundamental problems for ethnic minorities: cultural differences between their own group and the lower status of their group in society. She identifies self identification, affirmation and belonging, ethnic behaviours and practices, and ethnic identity achievement as the four components of ethnic identity which apply across groups. The four major components of ethnic identity identified by Phinney (1999) are as follows:

- Ethnic awareness (understanding of one’s own and other groups)
- Ethnic self-identification (label used for one’s own group)
- Ethnic attitudes (feelings about own and other groups)
- Ethnic behaviors (behavior patterns specific to an ethnic).

Phinney based her multigroup ethnic identity measure questionnaire on these four components to measure ethnic identity.

(See http://www.uky.edu/Classes/FAM/357/fam544/ethnic_identity.htm). The four components elucidate the idea of knowing the group one belongs to with regard to culture, traditions, history e.t.c., and also, being able to feel a sense of belonging, having a positive feeling of pride and ethnic behavior etc. are used by Phinney to develop the multigroup ethnic identity measure in assessing ethnic identity.

Bilingualism and Multilingualism

The term bilingualism/multilingualism is used to refer to the routine use of two or more languages in a speech community. Alamu and Illoene (2003) cited in Agbedo (2007) are of the view that multilingualism refers to a linguistic state where numerous languages are in use by one individual or in the same nation. Nordquist (n.d.,online) defines multilingualism as the ability of an individual speaker or a community of speakers to use multiple languages. This is in contrast with monolingualism whereby a speaker is able to speak only one language. Although the concepts have been used narrowly by scholars to refer to individuals who use effectively more than two languages, but broadly used according to Wikipedia to refer to a person who can communicate in more than one language, be it actively (through speaking, writing, or signing) or passively (through listening, reading or perceiving). It is in this perspective that we shall use the terms “bilingualism” and “multilingualism” interchangeably to refer to the use of two or more languages. According to Aromin & Singleton (2012: 5), Bilingualism and Multilingualism are however used interchangeably in the literature because of the fact that they share many similarities both at the psychological and sociolinguistic levels. But Hoffman (2010:3) cited in Aromin & Singleton (2012:5) says that Multilingualism has “characteristics of its own”. A number of distinctions between bilingualism and multilingualism have been drawn by scholars with regard to quantitative and qualitative factors involved in language acquisition and also distinctions that have to do with cross-linguistic interaction. However, we shall simply adopt the first definition of Francischini (2009:33-34) approach to the definition of multilingualism. According to him:

The term/concept of multilingualism is to be understood as the capacity of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage on a regular basis in space and time with more than one language in everyday life. Multilingualism is a product of the fundamental human ability to communicate in a number of languages. Operational distinctions may then be drawn between social, institution, discursive and individual multilingualism.

Multilingualism (bilingualism) is of two types as identified by Agbedo (2007:14) viz; individual and societal multilingualism. While the former refers to a speaker who has acquired and maintained at least one language during childhood which is referred to as the first language, the later refers to a group or community of speakers who use two or more languages. In other words, societal bilingualism/multilingualism involves more than two languages co-existing within a speech community. In effect, individual multilingualism denotes the multilingual state of a person as opposed to the multilingualism of a community or a society. It is very closely interconnected with and dependent on societal multilingualism. That is to say, it is a very special aspect of multilingualism (Aronin & Singleton 2012). However, for most bilinguals as Njemanze (2012) points out, one of the two languages is the mother tongue; the L2 which is the second is typically learnt at school and is used in formal situations.

From the historical perspective, multilingual communities are said to evolve as a result of migration (voluntary or involuntary movement of people from one place to another), colonization, conquest and incorporating speakers of different languages into a single political unit. Agbedo (2007:12) citing Fasold (1984:9) identifies four kinds of historical patterns that can lead to societal multilingualism namely: migration, imperialism, federalism and border area

multilingualism. Aronin & Singleton (2012:46) distinguish between historical and contemporary multilingualism. One of such distinctions, among others, is geographical location. With regard to geographical location, historical multilingualism in the past uses more than one language which was very often a feature of a particular type of geographical locations (i.e. border area, regions having own local language varieties, towns in trade routes, imperial administrative centers, etc), unlike contemporary multilingualism in which the use of more than one language is becoming an increasingly ubiquitous phenomenon in the sense that most urban centres in Europe, Asia and Africa are characterized by some degree of multilingual language use.

The nature of multilingualism given by Wardhaugh (2006:97) of the Tukano people gives a clue of the multilingual nature of the Ette community. Multilingualism exists among the Tukano of the northwest Amazon because of their customs which forbids marriage among themselves rather they prefer to marry from neighbouring groups who speak other languages. In Ette community, however, people naturally intermarry from neighbouring community just like any other ethnic groups, but that does not only explain their multilingual nature.

Methodology

The questionnaire was designed to elicit information from the participants with regard to their language proficiency and ethnic identity. A total of 50 questionnaires were given to the participants who are of Ette indigenes for the purpose of collecting the data. Out of a total of 60 copies of questionnaire distributed, 50 were returned, but only 35 were properly filled. The analysis was therefore based on the 35 copies that are properly filled and retrieved. The study adopted the ethnic identity measure developed by Phinney which was used to measure the identity of the participants on a 4 point scale ranging from (4) strongly agree to (1) strongly disagree. Also, questions that required yes/no answer which have to do with language use and proficiency was also directed to the participants in order to ascertain the language with the highest percentage.

Data Analysis

The collected data are presented on a table and analysed using simple percentage. The structured questions on proficiency and language use are discussed before ethnic identity measure questions.

Table 1: Shows the languages spoken in the community

| S/N | Question item | No. of Respondents | Responses language No. | | Frequency of Response |
|-----|---|--------------------|------------------------|-----|-----------------------|
| 1 | What language(s) do you speak regularly? | 35 | Idoma | 20 | 57.1% |
| | | | Igala | 13 | 37.1% |
| | | | Igbo | 2 | 5.7% |
| | | | English | Nil | 0% |
| | | | Total | 35 | 100% |
| 2. | What language(s) do you speak to the child at home? | 35 | Idoma | 18 | 51.4% |
| | | | Igala | 14 | 40% |
| | | | Igbo | 3 | 8.6% |

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| | | | | | |
|----|--|----|---------|-----|-------|
| | | | English | Nil | 0% |
| | | | Total | 35 | 100% |
| 3. | What is your mother tongue (MT) or first language? | 35 | Idoma | 19 | 54.2% |
| | | | Igala | 13 | 37.1% |
| | | | Igbo | 2 | 5.7% |
| | | | English | Nil | 0% |
| | | | Total | 35 | 100% |

The percentages of the respondents show that Idoma language has the highest percentage followed by Igala and subsequently Igbo which has the least percentage. This shows that Ette community is a multilingual one with Idoma dominating the other two languages; Igala and Igbo with regard to use and proficiency. This is in line with the fact that in a bilingual/multilingual situation, one language is primary while the others are secondary.

The essence of MT acquisition is to ascertain which of the languages is acquired first. The highest percentage on first language acquisition is Idoma language. Igbo language has the least percentage i.e 5.7%. This result says a lot about the language of the community itself and the language of ethnic groups they share border with.

From the data in table 1, also reveals that the respondents are proficient in idoma and in terms of regular usage; the Idoma language has the highest percentage of 57.1%. While the Igala language has 37.1%, the Igbo language has the least percentage of 5.7% and 28.2% respectively. What this shows is that the Idoma language is the dominant language which is regularly used in everyday life whether it is in the church, meetings, market, family etc. whereas Igala and Igbo languages are also used to meet their communication needs as shown in their percentages; although, Igala is used regularly when compared to Igbo language.

Table 2: Ethnic Group Identity

| S/N | Questionnaire | | SA | A | D | SD |
|-----|---|-------|----|----|----|----|
| 1. | Have devoted time in knowing my ethnic group, such as history, traditions and customs | | 20 | 15 | 0 | 0 |
| 2. | Active in ethnic organization | | 21 | 14 | 0 | 0 |
| 3. | Clear sense of ethnic background | | 25 | 0 | 10 | 0 |
| 4. | Aware of how my life will be affected by my ethnic group membership | | 11 | 9 | 10 | 5 |
| 5. | Happy to be a member | Igala | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Idoma | 16 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Igbo | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 6. | Sense of belonging to | Igala | 13 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

| | | | | | | |
|-----|---|-------|----|----|---|---|
| | | Idoma | 15 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Igbo | 0 | 0 | 7 | 0 |
| 7. | Understand group membership | | 17 | 13 | 5 | 0 |
| 8. | Talked to others about group membership | Igala | 6 | 9 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Idoma | 10 | 8 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Igbo | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| 9. | Pride in ethnic group | Igala | 10 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Idoma | 23 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Igbo | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 10. | Participation in cultural practices | | 15 | 11 | 7 | 2 |
| 11. | Strong attachment towards my own ethnic group | Igala | 12 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Idoma | 17 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Igbo | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| 12. | I feel good about my cultural and ethnic background | | 17 | 13 | 5 | 0 |
| 13. | My ethnicity is | Igala | 10 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Idoma | 12 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Igbo | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 |
| | | mixed | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

NB: SA = Strongly agree, A = Agree, D = Disagree and SD = Strong Disagree

Table 3: Percentage distribution of the respondents for Ethnic Group Identity

| S/N | Questionnaire | | SA(%) | A (%) | D (%) | SD (%) |
|-----|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
| 1. | Have devoted time in knowing my ethnic group, such as history, traditions and customs | | 57.1 | 42.9 | 0 | 0 |
| 2. | Active in ethnic organization | | 60 | 40 | 0 | 0 |
| 3. | Clear sense of ethnic background | | 71.4 | 0 | 28.6 | 0 |
| 4. | Aware of how my life will be affected by my ethnic group membership | | 31.4 | 25.7 | 28.6 | 14.3 |
| 5. | Happy to be a member | Igala | 20 | 20 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Idoma | 45.7 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Igbo | 0 | 0 | 14.3 | 0 |
| 6. | Sense of belonging to | Igala | 37.1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Idoma | 42.6 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Igbo | 0 | 0 | 20 | 0 |
| 7. | Understand group membership | | 48.6 | 37.1 | 14.2 | 0 |

| | | | | | | |
|-----|---|-------|------|------|------|-----|
| 8. | Talked to others about group membership | Igala | 17.1 | 25.7 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Idoma | 28.6 | 22.8 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Igbo | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5.7 |
| 9. | Pride in ethnic group | Igala | 28.6 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Idoma | 65.7 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Igbo | 5.7 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 10. | Participation in cultural practices | | 42.9 | 31.4 | 20 | 5.7 |
| 11. | Strong attachment towards my own ethnic group | Igala | 34.2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Idoma | 48.6 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Igbo | 8.6 | 8.6 | 0 | 0 |
| 12. | I feel good about my cultural and ethnic background | | 48.6 | 37.1 | 14.3 | 0 |
| 13. | My ethnicity is | Igala | 28.6 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Idoma | 34.2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Igbo | 0 | 0 | 11.4 | 0 |
| | | mixed | 25.7 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Table 3 shows ethnic identity measure with regard to membership to an ethnic group, and whether the respondents feel a strong attachment to the group to which they belong. Idoma and Igala have a 60:40% for those who strongly agree or agree to the fact that they belong to Idoma or Igala group and commitment in these groups. Interestingly, the respondents who strongly agree or agree that they belong to or feel strong attachment for the Igbo groups have the least percentage (8.6%). This may have something to do with the language of dominance of the State where Ette community is geographically situated. There is appreciable knowledge of ethnic groups in which they belong to and 71.4% strongly agree or agree with regard to having clear sense of ethnic background while 2.86% disagree. Also, 25.7% feels that their ethnicity is mixed while 28.6% feels their ethnicity is Igala, 34.2% feels they are Idoma, while 11.4% disagree that it is Igbo. However, language do not mark ethnic identity of the Ette people as a person can belong to the different ethnic groups in so far as he/she is proficient in any of the languages. This explains why an Ette person can claim to come from Kogi, Benue or Enugu states as the case may be.

Summary and Conclusion

The study confirms the fact that in a bilingual or multilingual society, there is always a dominant language. For Ette community, the language of dominance is Idoma language which has the highest frequency and percentage with regard to language of the environment, first language acquisition, language use and proficiency. Since the Igala language has the second position, it goes to show that the Idoma and Igala languages are more prominently used than the Igbo language which has the lowest percentage. This suggests that the Igbo language is used for the sole purpose of inter-ethnic, religious and/or socio-economic relationship. An additional point is that more than 50% of the respondents agree to the fact that they have made efforts to

know their origin, history, custom and traditions; given the multilingual nature of the community. The language of an ethnic group says a lot about their descent and affiliations since language is tied to ethnic group identity.

This study is a preliminary investigation into the multilingual nature of Ette community. It focuses on the ethnic identity and the language status of the community. It is observed that the Idoma language is dominant and has the highest number of speakers but that does not mean that the other languages such as Igala and Igbo are not recognized. In as much as it can be inferred that Idoma is the language of the immediate community following from the result of our findings, it is also noted that Igala competes favourably with Idoma as languages used in the community. It is also observed that the younger generation is proficient in the three languages which suggest that the languages spoken in the community are still being maintained since they are transmitted from one generation to another which is a most vital factor for the maintenance of language. However, it should be noted that this figure is tentative, given the size of the sample used.

This paper concludes by recommending that, given the multilingual nature of the community and the incessant agitations and ethnic tension that is associated with especially ethnic community that share borders with other language groups, there is need for boundary adjustment by the government so as to reposition ethnic groups that are situated in another ethnic group that speaks a different language, to a state where their language is spoken. This, no doubt, will give them a sense of belonging as Agbedo (2007:42) rightly says, “the language we speak not only gives us a sense of belonging with those who speak like us but also gives a sense of difference from those who do not speak like us.” An additional point is that for fear of language shift and/or endangerment, speakers of a particular ethnic group would naturally like to identify with those within their own ethnic group and especially because they share the same traditions, customs and culture. The simple reason is because as Iyam-Yisa (2012:62) asserts, “Language is the vector of culture, so to lose an ancestral language is to weaken the links to the ancestors themselves. Language is the preserver of cultures and traditions of different ethnics of the world”. Finally, in order to reduce ethnic tension, strife and rivalry arising from boundary issues and disputes and which could culminate to social instability, the paper calls on the government to tactfully address the issue of boundary adjustments in the different states of Nigeria. It also calls for further researches on multilingual communities and especially on their culture, custom and traditions in order to ascertain their ethnic affinity and identity.

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