

Etsako: An Anthropological Reflection of an Endangered Minority Language in Nigeria

by

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Abstract

Language is an important means of interaction. As people interact with their indigenous language, their culture, unique experiences and identity are shared and transmitted from one generation to the next. On the other hand, a language could go into extinction when its speakers cease to pass it from one generation to the next. An ethnographic study was conducted to evaluate the epistemological process underlying the threat to Etsako minority language, suggest solutions to safeguarding the language extinction and above all, provide ethno-historical information of the people. The findings show that Etsako is seriously under threat of extinction or simply endangered because the mother tongue is no longer being acquired by children whose parents are from this language community. The study recommends that the challenges of redeeming and revitalising Etsako language should be collective responsibility of Etsako people, their traditional rulers, scholars from Etsako and the government. Especially also, as the home remains the major and important agent of socialization, it is the contention of this paper that parents and other members of the language community of Etsako have a key role to play in intergenerational language transmission. One of the ways they can achieve this is by speaking the mother tongue to the children.

Key Words: endangered, minority, language, Etsako

Introduction

Language is perhaps the most distinctive behaviour that makes human being human. It is among the very first form of behaviour that we learn as children. Anthropologists do not know precisely the origin of human language but on the basis of available evidence, they could trace the evolution of language to the Homo-erectus stage of human evolution (Oke 2004). Language is the primary vehicle through which human culture and unique experience is shared and transmitted from one generation to the next.

Language is an indispensable means of interaction. As people interact with language, they construct meaning and social reality within the context of culture and unique experience within where they live. So, language does not merely reflect an existing reality, it also helps to create the reality (Ahearn 2001). Language is important not only as a system or symbol of communication but also as a way of organising a people's mode of thought (Oтите and Ogionwo 1994). Language is an embodiment of ethnic identity. Indeed each and every language represents a unique expression of the culture and identity of a people. So, loss of any language is invariably loss of the identity, culture, history and the social thought of a people.

A language is lost when it is extinct. When a language becomes extinct, this implies that there is no documentation on the language and it cannot be revived again. A language could go extinct after several years of being endangered. And a language that is endangered is on the path toward extinction. Especially, a language is endangered when its speakers cease to use it as their first language and particularly when its use is increasingly reduced, or it is not spoken by parents as a medium of communication with their children or simply when the elders of the language community cease to pass it on from one generation to the next (UNESCO 2003) About 97% of the world people speak about 4% of the world languages and conversely, about 96% of the world languages are spoken by about 3% of the world people (Bernard 1996) And presently, fewer than 10% of the approximately 2000 African languages are widely spoken and none of this 10% is an endangered language (UNESCO 2003).

Language endangerment is a widespread phenomenon among minority languages. A language is endangered when its use is increasingly reduced or its speakers no longer pass it onto the next generation. This is a situation where children may no longer acquire the language even when the language is still being spoken by the language community elders. Language endangerment may arise when communities with different linguistic traditions live side by side. Such contacts involve an exchange of products as well as an exchange of cultural elements. Very often, the communities do not enjoy the same prestige in contact situations: a dominant vs. an inferior status may arise for specific reasons, such as economic, socio-historical or political strengths of each community. The communities with a lower status commonly acquire proficiency in the language of the dominant group. They may be inclined to relinquish their culture, including their language and may decide to adopt the language and culture of the dominant community. All over the world, member of ethno linguistic minorities are increasingly abandoning their native language in favour of another language including in child rearing and formal education (UNESCO 2003).

Language has an important role in the social thought of any ethnic group and in their ways of life. The indigenous social thought is encoded in proverbs, idioms, riddles, folktales and other oral sources of knowledge meant for promoting the language, norms and value system. This oral literature reflects experience from the socio-cultural and physical environment of the people. But in recent times, the Etsako language like many other minority languages in Nigeria has come under threat of extinction or is increasingly endangered because the mother tongue is no longer being acquired by children whose parents are from this language community.

Since this study adopts ethnographic analysis of Etsako as a minority language, in order to arrive at epistemological conclusions, it is important to assess the threat to the language and the relevance of safeguarding the language. To achieve this, this study shall attempt to evaluate the epistemological processes underlying threat to Etsako as a minority language, suggest solutions to safeguarding its extinction, and to provide ethno-historical information on the Etsako people.

MATERIALS AND METHODS



Fig.I: Edo State on Nigerian map.

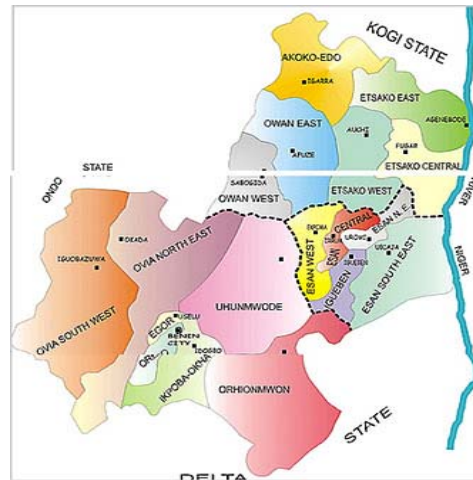


Fig.II: Etsako on Edo map.

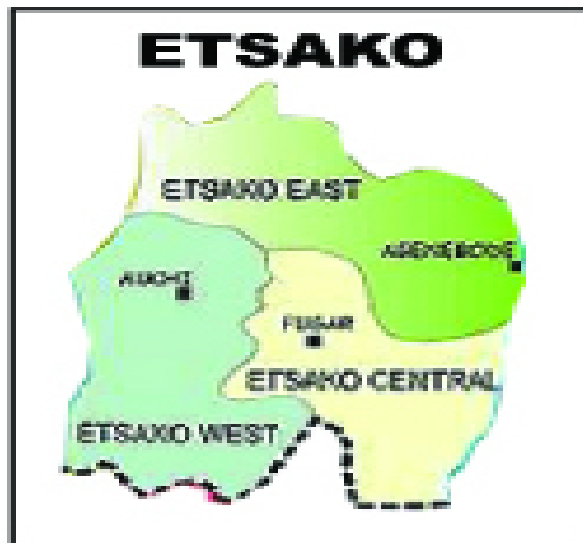


Fig.III: The three Etsako Local Government Areas

Nigeria is comparatively a large country with area coverage of 924,000 square kilometers spanning longitude 3°E to 16°E and latitude 4°N to 14°N and population of over 170 million people (George 2009, Usoro 2003). Nigeria has well over 200 different ethnic groups and over 400 languages apart from English language, which is the official language. The 1979 constitution and national policy on education recognize three major languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (Federal Government of Nigeria, National Policy on Education 1981). Nigeria is politically organised into 36 States among which is Edo State. Edo State is one of the states in Nigeria with language diversity and several ethno-linguistic minorities of which Etsako is one. Etsako is a language and a people.

The commonest anthropological instrument used in studying endangered language, is the collection of ethnographic, historical and geographical information of the language community (Fisherman 1991). An ethnographic study was carried out in the three local government areas (Etsako West, Etsako East and Etsako Central) of Edo state. These local government areas were purposively selected because these are areas where Etsako people are geographically located. In all, two clans/communities from among the clans/communities in each of the local government area were used for collecting the ethnographic information. Using ethnographic instrument, the researcher employed the technique of interacting with the people, asking questions, observation and participating in the people's day to day activities. The questions and interactions were done in Etsako mother tongue. Where questions were asked, these questions were not arranged as a fixed questionnaire. Rather they were asked in such a way as to allow the informants to have the freedom to elaborate aspects of specific interest within the context of language performance and competence. A large collection of materials used for this study came from interaction with the people, observation and oral source. The fact that the researcher is an indigene of Etsako was indeed an advantage. Especially, the oral information gathered across the three local government areas was not at all difficult to elicit. Similarly, the problem of loss of information through interpreter did not arise. Following this, in evaluating the degree at which Etsako language is endangered, and the remote causes of this endangerment, some of the UNESCO (2003) evaluating factors of language vitality were applied to scrutinise and carefully analyse all the information collected and gathered for the study. These evaluating factors include:

1. Intergenerational language transmission and parental attitude to speaking the mother tongue as means of communicating with the children at home.
2. Community member's attitude toward speaking their own language.
3. Government policies and institutional attitude toward promoting indigenous languages.
4. Materials for language education, literacy and documentation.

UNESCO (2003) also constructed a model represented with a table as shown below to rank the degree of language endangerment from safe to extinction based on ethnographic language information and experience of the language community.

Degree of Language Endangerment	Order of Ranking	Speaker Population
Safe	5	The language is used by all ages from children upward. Government policy on indigenous language is positive. There is enough language literacy and documentation
Unsafe	4	The language is used by some children in all domains or it is used by all children in limited domains.
Definitely Endangered	3	The language is mostly and commonly used by the parental generations upward.
Severely Endangered	2	The language is used mostly by the grandparental generations upward.
Critically Endangered	1	The language is used mostly by very few speakers of great grand parental generation
Extinct	0	No speaker exists.

Table I: Evaluating Factors of Language Vitality/Endangerment (Adopted from UNESCO (2003))

Results and Discussion

Ethno-Historical Profile of Etsako People

Etsako is a group of people geographically situated in the northern part of Edo State of the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. They form part of ethno-linguistic minorities of Edo State. They occupy three Local Government Areas out of the eighteen Local Government Areas of Edo State. They occupy an area of approximately 1,000 square miles and the 1991 national census put their population at about 264,509 (Erhagbe 2013). The word “Etsako” was literally derived from the culture of teeth splitting. According to history, women who remain virgin at the time of marriage are commonly honoured by splitting their incisors teeth. Culturally this teeth splitting was a symbol of pride to the women and their parents. Over time, the nomenclature of this practice was adopted as the name of the people.

Historically, Etsako people were known to have migrated from Benin kingdom in the 16th century during the reign of Oba Ewuare or Oba Ozolua (Ede 2012). At first, they settled at the country side of Aviele, lying North to Benin kingdom. At some point, dissension arose between them and the initial settlers and this forced them to further migrate north ward to settle at the area now lying between Auchi, Uzairue and Ugioli.

Later, peaceful expansion followed and the people grew in number to form different clans/communities, which today are geopolitically divided into three Local Government Areas: Etsako West Local Government, Etsako East Local government and Etsako Central Local Government (Erhagbe 2013). The three Local Government Areas are bordered in the south by Okpeho Local Government Area, in the north by Okene Local Government Area of Kogi State, in the west by Owan Local Government Area and to the east by River Niger. Hence, the Etsako West Local Government Area comprises Auchi, Uzairue (Jettu), Agbede, Anwain, Iyaro (Ivbiaro) South-Ibie, Afashio, Aviele/ Ugioli and Warrake; the Etsako East Local Government Area comprises Agenebode, Oshiolu, Iviagbapue, Imiakebu, Afana, Imiegba, itsukwi, Ayogwiri, Emokweme, Ekwother, Iviukhua, Okpella, Iviebua, Ibie and Weppa-Wanno; and the Etsako Central Local Government Area comprises Fugar, Anegbette, Udochi and Ogbonna.

In spite of the artificial boundaries created for government administrative conveniences, the people have largely remained one because of a common ancestral history and language. The people of Etsako have a homogenous native language commonly identified with “Moo” meaning “welcome”. Yet there is dialectical variant and intonations among the people. But the basic point that must be noted is that there are obvious signs of ethno-linguistic threat on the language. Etsako language shares some similarities with the Benin, Afemai, Yoruba and Hausa languages. Despite this, there is still a general understanding of the language by the people in the language block.

Prominently also, Etsako has the largest concentrations of Muslims in the whole of Edo State. Islam as the dominant religion of the people of Etsako has a long history associated with the Jihad of Uthman dan Fodio’s followers in the 19th century. Islam entered the present Edo State through the Edo North corridor where the Etsako people are geographically located. Jihad was used as a means of Islamizing the people to eradicate the people’s traditional belief system (idol worshipping) and introduce Islamic culture and values, which the Etsako people share with the Nupes, Hausas, Fulanis and others in the Northern part of the country.

Some of the prominent traditional institutions and rulers in Etsako land are Okumagbe of Weppa-Wanno (Agenebode), Ogieleni of Uzairue (Jettu), Aidonogie of South-Ibie, Otaru of Auchi, Oba of Agbede and Oliola of Anegbette, among others.

In Etsako land, the clans and communities are endowed with different soil and topographic features, which are: Savannah land found in Auchi, Uzairue, Weppa-Wanno and South-Ibie; Semi forest and swampy land found in Aviele, Anwain, Jegbe Ekperi and South Uneme; and the Rocky land area found in Okpella and Akpepke. The clans and communities are also blessed with abundant water supply coming from six major rivers: River Niger, River Orle, River Edion, River Ogio, River Ogbudu and River Obe. Apart from these big rivers, there are also smaller streams which serve the water need of the people (Ede 2012).

Prognosis of the Epistemological Processes Underlying the Threat to Etsako Language

From available ethnographic information about the degree of endangerment of Etsako language, there are obvious signs of linguistic threat because the language could be ranked between 3 and 4 based on UNESCO (2003) ranking table. This portrays Etsako language as unsafe and definitely endangered with the following remote causes:

The epistemological history of the endangered Etsako minority language like many other minority languages in Nigeria started from the colonial era. The British colonial administrators imposed English Language and suppressed the indigenous language and culture. After the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, the European colonial powers intensified the imposition of their cultures on the colonized Africans. The major cultural element involved was language and its diffusion process was at this stage backed with force (Otite and Ogionwo 1994). This story of imposition of language is everywhere the same in Africa, from the British colonies to the French and Portuguese colonies. The British, French and Portuguese language policies were arrogantly designed to define self as superior and the indigenous languages and cultures as inferior. This indigenous cultural and linguistic deprivation, which in fact, took place in all British, French and Portuguese former colonies, formed an essential part of the colonial government strategies to assimilate colonized peoples. Hence, English, French and Portuguese languages were introduced and made compulsory in schools in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and have since remained as the main official languages in Africa (Otite and Ogionwo 1994). This alienation and ethnocentric language policy laid the structural foundation for the systematic plundering, socio-economic and political imperialism and how Europe eventually underdeveloped Africa. In strict reference to this, Oke (2004) citing Foster (1969), records that Dr. C.K. Meek, an administrative officer with anthropological training was appointed Census Commissioner in Northern Nigeria Province to gather as much as possible several anthropological data during the 1921 census. Data so obtained, together with information from his subsequent investigation, played a major role in the policy formulation. This policy, to a large extent affected the indigenous languages, cultures, attitudes, interactions and relationships of Nigerians, so much that more importance is today, attached to English Language than Nigerian indigenous languages, even years after flag independence.

After political independence, the Nigeria government adopted the language of her colonial masters (English Language) as official language for administration (The 1979 and 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria). Especially, primary and secondary schools took over the vanguard of discouraging mother tongue being spoken by pupils in school. This was pushed far to the level at which pupils were even punished for speaking their mother tongue known as “vernacular” in schools. Following this, new value systems were forced on the children and they were made to deny their culture, heritage and identity. Again, when these children returned back home, ironically, most parents still speak English to them at the expense of their indigenous language.

Especially, because some parents see this as pride for being elites, they derive more joy from hearing their children speak English fluently, even if they cannot say a correct sentence in their indigenous language! This alone gives most parents an assurance that their children are doing well academically and that they are not wasting their money sending them to school. This evidence speaks volume of the harm done to Nigeria indigenous languages. This, no doubt, has had a great impact on the inability of most Etsako children to speak their mother tongue fluently (if at all possible) as their first language.

Worse still, the national policy for education states: In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process, and as a means of preserving a people's culture, the government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major indigenous languages other than his own mother-tongue. These three major languages are Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba (Federal Government of Nigeria National policy on Education, 1977). Following this, government could be adjudged to have some good intentions towards Nigeria's political unity through language. Akindele and Adegbite (1999) similarly observe that speaking and understanding other people's languages could increase the level of social interaction and social cohesion among people. Yet, the adoption of these three major indigenous languages as well as English as educational and official language does not indicate that there will be unity in the country, obviously because the issue of unity in Nigeria project is more fundamentally political. This is because various ethnic groups in Nigeria today were each a nation state before the Scrambling and Partition of Africa and the 1914 Amalgamation of the North, East and Western Protectorate of Nigeria, that gave birth to the present entity called Nigeria. However, the crucial point missing in the so called mother tongue in government policy on education is that the policy did not recognise the teaching of the indigenous language of the ethno-linguistic minorities in Nigeria. Teaching the three major languages supports their vitality at the expense of endangered language of the minorities like Etsako. Therefore, it is arguable that the government policy on language has a direct implication on eliminating the indigenous languages and cultures of the minority people like Etsako.

The problem of intergenerational transfer of language has even become more compounded with inter-ethnic marriages, especially where couples have no other language different from English as a medium of communicating at home. Lenneberg (1968) and Chomsky (1968) cited in Oke (2004) observe that a human infant is born with an abstract model of language programmed in the brain so that learning a language requires him/her to fill in this design with the language that the parents typically and frequently speak to themselves at home. So, where parents speak other language different from their mother tongue typically and frequently as a medium of communication at home (even though the parents could still speak their mother tongue), this could eventually form the children's first language.

The vital role of the home environment has been recognized and acknowledged by psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists as a very important agent of language learning and socialization. Communicating with a child in mother tongue at home provides for the child, psychological, sociological, cultural and mental resource base for an all-around personality development.

Omo-Ojugo (1991) puts this in proper perspectives that a child's outlook, culture, personality, experience and his dealing with ideas, are significantly influenced by his mother-tongue. Of all the three major environmental factors (i.e. the home, the school, and the society) the home provides the earliest, deepest, significant and most direct influence on child's language learning and moral development. Isola (1995) observes that the socialization of a child into culture and moral development involves the use of his indigenous language. He, however, concludes that the use of a foreign language, to a child, can only be a poor second best. It is, therefore, painful to see that Etsako language that is supposed to be an ethnic identity, instead of being proudly flaunted is now being threatened because its speakers seem to be jettisoning its intergenerational transmission in exchange for western language, culture and value system. Speaking ability of Etsako language among children in inter-ethnic marriage homes is not just appalling but alarming! Similar to this, UNESCO (2003) observes that even languages with many thousands of speakers are no longer being acquired by children; at least 50% of the world's more than six thousand languages are continually losing speakers. That in most world regions, about 90% of the languages may be replaced by dominant languages by the end of the 21st century (UNESCO 2003).

A language can only resist threat or extinction when it has been able to move from the stage of oral to written and especially when it can be documented for literary/educational purpose. Although the Etsako language is spoken and well understood by the people of Etsako, there are still dialectal variations. At least, this is a normal phenomenon with all languages. In spite of these slight variations of the Etsako language, the people could still communicate and interact with better understanding. Besides, though few books and studies exist or are available on the history and culture of the people, so far, we are not aware of any scholarly work (book or document) on Etsako written with mother tongue, or the mother tongue used in teaching the children in schools. Obviously the non-implementation of the National Policy on Education revised in 1981 is a cause of language endangerment in Etsako. The policy states that children should be taught either in their mother tongue or the language of immediate community from pre-primary to primary three (Federal Government of Nigeria National Policy on Education Revised in 1981). If this language policy was implemented, Etsako children would have been more literate in their mother tongue since children learn faster when taught in their mother tongue rather than a foreign language (Bamgbose 1984). Sad enough, today, most Etsako children cannot count 1 to 20 in their mother tongue without mixing it with English. These are obvious facts showing that the Etsako language is indeed threatened.

A language can also resist threat or extinction when it could be documented with indigenous songs and appreciated by the people of the language community. Indigenous songs play a role of intergeneration language transmission apart from their entertainment value.

Indigenous songs provide solid foundations in language acquisition, and the fruits are reaped throughout life. Some of these songs actually introduce a child to the first rudiments of language analysis. Apart from few recorded video and songs by prominent indigenous musicians like Agborbesi, Waziri, Jericho, Young Bolivia and Benji, books written in Etsako mother tongue do not exist.

Most of the songs of these indigenous musicians espouse the whole body of social thought of the Etsako people because of the societal etiquette, cultural and entertainment values inherent in them. Yet, it is sad to note that these indigenous songs are now classified as “old school”, which Etsako youths rarely want to listen to compare to various classical Pop music genres currently in vogue. The result is that when youths lack competence in the language of their culture, they may not be able to suitably understand or better still, appreciate the wealth of knowledge and entertainment value encoded in their native songs and culture.

The problem of intergenerational transmission of Etsako language could also be observed in the neglect of the indigenous folk tales. A child performance in his mother tongue could be enhanced through the indigenous oral literature. Oral literature is encoded in folk tales proverbs, idioms, riddles, taboos, superstitions and other oral source of knowledge, moral and ethical values. When a child is growing up, he/she learns the basic value, folk-tales and proverbs of his/her society through language performance, which sharpens his/her reasoning ability that enables him/her to provide suitable answers during conversations and arguments. Oral literature such as folk tale is of crucial importance in the early intellectual development of the child. Folk tale among the Etsako people is a culture of moonlight story. The tradition of telling moonlight stories has a long history among the Etsako people and it is told in mother tongue. It is an art passed on from generation to generation. Especially because the major occupation of the Etsako people is agrarian/farming, storytelling therefore filled the traditional arts vacuum as a pastime for the people. Traditionally, in the evenings after a hard day's work and dinner, a gathering of family members and children from the neighbourhood under bright moonlight makes an audience during the storytelling session. . Narration of Etsako moonlight stories is often punctuated with music, singing, clapping and dancing. The intermittent songs, which are usually poetic and proverbial, are used to highlight the expression of the characters of the story. Besides their entertaining aspect, moonlight stories intend to send a moral message across to its audience, especially children. This intent has apparently contributed immensely to the use of moonlight tales as an effective traditional educational tool for language transmission. Story telling by any measure helps children to sharpen their intellectual faculties and to also grow up to become responsible members of the society. That is to say, because of the moral, cultural and entertainment values inherent in the stories, children are exposed to tales to mould their character right from youth; thereby laying a solid foundation for their future. The condemnation of vice and the reward of virtue as evidenced in the folktales are also to teach children that there is reward in doing good.

Most times, before the story proper, it is customary among the story tellers to proceed the moonlight story session with riddles, meant to overhaul the children's brain in readiness for the moral lessons in the moon light stories. Most of the riddles are made up of metaphorical interrogative statements, puzzles or tongue twisting words that must be resolved as fast as possible by the children

Today the question is, how much of Etsako traditional folk tales are Etsako children and youths exposed to? Lamentably, the researcher observes that most 'modern' parents hardly have any serious knowledge of folktales and proverbs, let alone teach their children. Especially also, the idea of moonlight stories in itself, is fast disappearing from their world view lexicon due to the rapid takeover of today's socialisation process by computer and other social media. To compound this, parents hardly have time to sit their children down to tell folktales as it was in the past. And when the children turn to the television (which appear as their only companion) what they see is "Ben Ten", "Avatar", " Turtle Rangers", "Tom and Jerry", "Power Rangers", "Super Man", "Spider Man", and so on throughout their developmental years. At the end, Etsako children gradually graduate from watching "Ben Ten", "Avatar" and "Tom and Jerry", etc, to watching war films and several unedifying home videos, which mostly project foreign culture, sexual innuendo and violence. At the end, these children are forced to learn foreign cultures from their playmates in school and from what they listen to or watch on television screens, videos, internet and other social media.

Also, of equal importance is the use of proverbs and idioms. The use of proverbs and idioms in communicating with a child has more positive orientation when we consider their intellectual values in terms of enhancement of language performance and competence. Today, the average Etsako child cannot tell good Etsako folk tales, speak or understand simple proverbs and idioms because the mother tongue is typically and frequently not being spoken by most parents. Thus, it is now becoming fashionable to see either illiterate, semi-literate or literate parents speaking Nigerian pidgin English, or a mixture of both Etsako and English, or Etsako and Nigerian pidgin English in communicating with the child. This, overtly or covertly is also observed to threaten linguistic intergenerational transmission, culture and value system of Etsako people. The result is that the competence of Etsako children in Etsako language has been badly affected, and when children lack competence in their mother tongue and culture, they may not be able to have meaningful access to or appreciate the wealth of wisdom embedded in their indigenous proverbs and idioms. Generally, threat to language could manifest in the gradual loss of the oral literature encoded in the unique culture, proverbs, historical and ecological knowledge of the people (UNESCO 2003).

There is also evidence of linguistic threat arising from Etsako people's social contact with other cultures. The People of Etsako have a homogenous language though with slight variance in dialectical intonations. Almost all the words in English have the Etsako version or mimic of the word, e.g. 'buketi' meaning 'bucket' or 'machini' meaning 'machine' in Etsako language.

One significant aspect of the language is that foreign words, especially English, Yoruba, Hausa and Arabic languages have relegated and replaced some indigenous concepts and expressions in Etsako language e.g. “sadaka” is an Arab word commonly being used in Etsako language to mean “sacrifice”; “inawo” is a Yoruba word commonly being used in Etsako language to mean “expenses”; and “gafara” is a Hausa word commonly being used in Etsako language to mean “excuse”.

The cultural contact with these foreign cultures may have been responsible as a factor underlying the process of losing some indigenous Etsako concepts, words and expression. Loss of indigenous words, concepts and language is possible when these words, concepts and language are gradually phased out at the expense of the foreign words, concepts and language. The accumulation and adoption of foreign words, concepts and language is therefore possible through cultural contact.

There are signs of linguistic threat from Nigerian pidgin English because it is seriously encroaching on the intergenerational transmission of Etsako language. This usurpation is now becoming more pronounced because not all children or families of Etsako origin speak Etsako language as their first language. Even, there are many literate parents, nowadays, who deliberately use pidgin English and sometimes English Language as the only means of communication between themselves and their children at home. Also, among illiterate and semi-literate parents, it is becoming something of a “fashion” to use adulterated English, Nigerian pidgin English, or a mix of both Etsako and English or Etsako and Nigerian pidgin English. Hence, Nigeria pidgin English is fast gaining prominence as the major language of communication among the people of Etsako. The sad thing, however, is that Etsako language is gradually disappearing even more significantly among members of highly Westernized and urbanized families. Life’s demand of modern times, especially in urban areas, have regrettably made majority of parents to increasingly abandon Etsako language and culture. Several of the educated parents can hardly speak Etsako without mixing it with English or Pidgin English let alone teach their children the mother tongue.

Nigeria pidgin English, which is popularly known as “broken English”, is the most commonly spoken language in all the ethno linguistic communities of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria. This pidgin English has bridged communication gap and facilitated communication in multi-sociolinguistic situation of the Niger Delta, where there is no other mutually acceptable language of communication, even though pidgin English relatively exhibits variety in form from one community to other. Bamgbose (1994) was probably right when he observes that English Language was indigenized, pidginized, acculturated and twisted to pidgin English for easy expression, communication and interaction. Generally, pidgin English belongs in the language family of West African Pidgin English, which was the lingua franca spoken along the West African coast during the period of the Atlantic slave trade.

British slave merchants and local African traders developed this language in the coastal areas in order to facilitate their commercial exchanges. This language spread up the river systems in the West African interior because of its value as a trade language among African of different ethnic groups. (Ndimele, 2011).

The world is today a global village with obvious movement toward recognising one language as a medium of transacting socio-political and economic business. Fisherman (2001) observes that one of the consequences of globalization is the discouragement of diversity of language and adoption of English as a medium of communication.

In the recent time, the global competitive economy dictated by the western industrialised nations has further promoted this ethnocentrism built around western language and culture as the ultimate index for modernization and development. This is why Adeniran (1995) succinctly concludes that development efforts and scholarship in Africa especially, have hardly been original, instead they have been mostly initiatives dictated by the West. Most Third World nations especially Nigeria saw the industrialized western nations as model for modernization and development. That it makes sense to adopt western language and culture as suitable strategy for modernization and development. Therefore, with globalization, it means that for these countries to modernise and develop like industrialised western nations, they must imbibe western values system, language, culture and commerce. Hence, English language has been adopted as a language that could facilitate modernity and development. And because Etsako people are part of the “global village”, they are more affected by the effect of globalization (because of their minority language), much more than the other major languages in Nigeria, like Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. This effect has an attendant negative impact on intergenerational transmission of Etsako language.

Conclusion and Recommendation

We have provided an anthropological reflection on a decidedly endangered Etsako language through collection of ethnographic information on whether or not the language is being transmitted from one generation to the next. Following this, in evaluating the degree to which Etsako language is endangered and the remote causes of this endangerment, some of the UNESCO (2003) evaluating factors of language vitality were applied to validate the ethnographic language information of the Etsako people. Though the researcher has, necessarily, used his own ethnic minority, Etsako, as illustrative reference point to drive home the theme and thrust of this study (endangered minority language), yet it is pertinent to note that the didactic role and relevance of language as a unique expression of culture and identity of any group of people cannot be overemphasized. The UNESCO (2003) model represented with a table ranking the degree of language endangerment from safe to extinction based on ethnographic language information and experience of the language community was also applied.

From our ethnographic information about the degree of endangerment of Etsako language, there are obvious signs of linguistic threat because the language could be ranked between 3 and 4 based on the UNESCO (2003) ranking table. This portrays Etsako language as unsafe and definitely endangered with the aforementioned remote causes, which we discussed as the epistemological process underlying the threat to Etsako language.

We identify also in this paper the problem of intergenerational language transmission arising from parental and community attitude toward using the mother tongue as the primary means of communication; Government policies and institutional attitude toward promoting English language and only the so-called three major Nigerian languages (Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa) at the expense of other minority languages like Etsako; challenge of movement of Etsako language from oral to written and lack of documents or books written in the mother tongue; neglect of Etsako oral literatures encoded in folk tales, proverbs and indigenous songs; problem of Nigeria pidgin English; and the effect of globalization. Following all these, it is possible to conclude that Etsako people are fast losing their language through the epistemological processes underlying the threat and the speakers seem not very conscious of the danger. The endangerment of this language is a likelihood that Etsako may be one of the languages predicted to go into extinction by the end of 21st century. UNESCO (2003) had predicted that about 90% of more than six thousand languages may be replaced by dominant languages by the end of the 21st century. With what the researcher has observed, Etsako language may clearly go into extinction if the threats continues, and if nothing is done to salvage the situation.

The potential death of Etsako language will result in a geo-historical and cultural loss of the people of Etsako and their identity. This implies that the cultural heritage of the people would also be lost if nothing is done collectively by the people to revitalise the Etsako language and promote the culture. Therefore, this study recommends that, the challenges of redeeming, stabilizing and revitalising the Etsako language should be the collective responsibility of Etsako people and their traditional rulers. Bamgbose (1993) shares similar opinion when he states: "When all is said and done the fate of an endangered language may well be in the hands of the owners of the language themselves and in their will to make it survive." Hence, there is urgent need for all the traditional rulers, various socio-cultural groups in Etsako and prominent sons and daughters of Etsako to convene a conference where the threats to Etsako language would be addressed and the way forward chatted. Besides, The Etsako traditional Council in conjunction with the various Chairmen of the Local Government Areas in Etsako land should come up with annual (or seasonal) programmes to bring together the people of Etsako (including those in diaspora) to celebrate their historical heritage and language identity. During these programmes, lectures and symposia, could be organised to discuss ways of redeeming and revitalising the language. Traditional songs, cultural dances, and sports/games, cultural attires, costumes and beauty contests, among others should also be promoted alongside. Scholars of Etsako origin also have a key role to play in ensuring the possibility of transferring Etsako language from oral to written form through sustainable development in literary and documentation activities in mother tongue. Religious and socio-cultural groups are known to promote and sustain struggles for language development.

These socio-cultural groups among Etsako people should design a programme for promoting and encouraging speaking of the mother tongue irrespective of the dialectical variations. The promotion of Etsako language in the media through radio, television and newspapers is also necessary and useful.

As the home remains the major and important agent of socialization, it is the contention here that parents and other members of the language community of Etsako have an important role to play in intergenerational language transmission. One of the ways they can achieve this is by speaking the mother tongue to the children. Parents and members of the language community should also change their wrong attitude of seeing their indigenous language as inferior. Thus, there is need for a general re-orientation on the psyche of parents and the society at large. Ethnocentric feelings on indigenous languages should be discouraged. Parents and guardians should prevent their children from perceiving their mother tongues as inferior by encouraging them to speak their mother tongues at home. Etsako language has its unique cultural values, which should be made to stimulate the interest of the younger generation towards reviving the language. So, more attention and time should be created for children to learn some of the indigenous folk tales because oral literature such as folk tale and proverbs are of crucial importance in the early intellectual development and language performance of a child. Also, when speakers can appreciate the unique qualities of their language, interest in the songs will be revived. It is only with this revival that intergenerational transmission of the language may stand any meaningful chance.

Etsako language could also be redeemed if the Nigerian government is sincere to implement the 1981 language policy on Education, which provides that at the pre-primary to primary three level, the medium of instruction in primary school shall be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community. Specifically, Section 2:11 and Section 3 paragraph 15 (4) of the 1981 Nigeria Language Policy states: “Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community (which include that of ethno-minority group) and, at a later stage, English”. The implementation of this mother tongue language policy is important as a solution to saving Etsako language and other endangered minority languages. This is necessary because UNESCO is at the fore front campaigning for the promotion of mother tongue through its policy statement, which states: we favour the inclusion of regional language often called mother tongue in formal education but not at the expense of ethno-linguistic minorities (Dunbar 2001). Also, the Federal Government can flag off a programme designed to create intensive awareness using the federal media to propagate and promote the importance of intergenerational transmission of ethno-minority languages through teaching the children their mother tongue early in life.

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