

Minority Language Maintenance: A Case of Inter-generational Transfer of *Okpe* in Lagos

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Abstract

Non-maintenance of a minority language usually results in language shift to the dominant language in the environment. This study examines the maintenance of *Okpe*, a minority language in Lagos where Yoruba, English and Nigerian Pidgin are dominant. This is with a view to delineating the languages used in different settings, exposure to homeland, traditions, and attitudes. The Purposive and Snowball sampling were used to sample 35 endogamous *Okpe* families in Orile and Ajegunle areas of Lagos. A structured questionnaire was used to elicit data and frequency count was used for data analysis. The result reveals that a minority of old generation *Okpe* used the languages mainly in interactions with their spouses, but minimally in interaction with their children, with whom they used mainly English and Nigerian Pidgin. Furthermore, the old generation of *Okpe* used the language minimally with *Okpe* speaking friends and kinfolk as well as in the expression of their traditions. A significant majority of the young generation were not proficient in the language. They used mainly English, Nigerian Pidgin and Yoruba in interaction across settings. Incidentally, attitude to *Okpe* by the old generation, and a minority of the young generation were positive, as the language is positively related to identity projection and ethnicity. However, most of the respondents signified negative attitude to *Okpe* with respect to social image and value of *Okpe*. Minority groups in metropolitan settings should take proactive steps to transmit their native tongues to the next generation otherwise having shifted to other languages, the children would also lose their ethnic identity in multi-ethnic Lagos.

Keywords: Language maintenance, *Okpe*, Minority language, Lagos, Yoruba

Introduction

One of the apparent effects of immigration is language contact between host communities and immigrants. It is undisputable that language contact is ineluctably injurious to immigrants (national or international) and minority languages, especially where they share the same social space with dominant languages. In language contact situations, two languages are always at conflict and both struggle to survive (Al-Sahafi and Barkhuiza, 2006). Language maintenance and shift have elicited attention from sociolinguists all over the world, especially among European and American scholars. In the context of immigration and minority languages, language maintenance and shift has attracted increasing interest; referring to immigrants, Fishman (1989: 206) holds that “what begins as the language of social and economic mobility ends with three generations or so, as the language of the crib as well, even in democratic and pluralism-permitting contexts”.

Fishman (1966) views the study of language maintenance and shift as an outcome of a binary situation where two unequal/asymmetrical languages come in contact. Thus, we have mainstream versus non-mainstream languages, heritage versus immigrant languages, majority versus minority languages. The term unequal is tactfully employed here, not in relation to the intrinsic quality of two languages, as all languages are equal in regards to its adequacy in fulfilling the communicative needs of its people. Rather, the focus is on the dominance or numeric strength of a particular language and its diglossic role in a setting compared to another language. In that regard, the language of immigrants or minority groups are seen as non-mainstream and not dominant while the language of their hosts or majority groups are seen as dominant in the setting. Consequently, definitions of language maintenance and shift tend to take cognizance of this dichotomous linguistic relationship.

Pauwels (2004: 719) defines language maintenance as “a situation in which a speaker, a group of speakers, or a speech community continues to use their language in some or all spheres of life despite the pressure from the dominant or majority language.” This definition implies that language maintenance is a deliberate and conscious attempt made by a group to preserve its heritage language. When people realize that they are living in an environment where one or two languages are

more prestigious, due to numeric strength of their speakers or functions, they tend to be more concerned and apprehensive of the fate of their own language. The usual tendency is to take practical steps to ensure that the language is not suppressed by the more prestigious ones otherwise, language shift is affected. Luykx (2005) posits that sociolinguistic research has produced a wealth of knowledge about the general trends that shape language maintenance and the tendencies toward shift in the subsequent generations of immigrants.

Benali-Mohammed (2007: 215) defines language shift as “a process whereby people who habitually speak one language, most of the time the minority language, switch to speaking another language, the majority language, and in the process give up using their first language. Knooihuizen (2006) highlights two trends or patterns common in language shift. First is changing patterns of language use referring to the use of languages in varying domains. Second is that language shift occurs within an ethnolinguistic group although psychological studies at the level of individual speakers are also important. However, taken together, it is noteworthy that language maintenance or shift happens “as a result of choices made by individuals in a speech community in accordance with their own motivations, expectations and goals which they may or may not share with other members” and such individual choices “make a collective impact on the future of a speech community and its language (Coulman 2005: 168).

On the whole, maintenance of the native language is a common challenge for families raising children in settings where their language is a minority. Based on the struggle between the minority language and the dominant language, and the question of language shift, this study examines the experience of the Okpe, a minority ethnolinguistic group in Lagos, the former capital city of Nigeria. The study aims to find out the current status of Okpe language in Lagos with respect to maintenance.

The Setting: Lagos

Several scholars are of the view that patterns of global migration in the 21st Century have led to a movement people to urban areas and in the future, dynamics of global economics will continue to push individuals to seek social and economic opportunities in cities (Grillo, 2001; Donato et al, 2007; Martin 2009). Due to its status as the former (political) capital of

Nigeria and presently the economic and commercial capital of the country, thousands of Nigerians from the rural/urban centres in the six geographical zones flock to Lagos mainly for economic reasons. As a big city, Lagos offers opportunities for improved life to Nigerians and Africans and so attracts many people from different regions of the country and Africa. The migration to Lagos is fuelled by such factors as trade, work, job opportunities, education and sometimes marriage. There is no doubt that Lagos is home to almost every ethno-linguistic group in Nigeria. It is like a mini Nigeria accommodating individuals of different cultures and languages. These national and international movements create language contacts which, sometimes, lead to the emergence of linguistic minorities. One of these minority groups in Lagos is the Okpe from the Delta State of Nigeria.

The Okpe

Okpe is a sub-group of the Urhobo nation which consists of over 22 units such as Oghara, Agbon, Uhwuenre, Idjerhe, Uvwie, etc. Its people are said to be descendants of four brothers whose ancestors migrated from the Benin kingdom: Orhue, Orhoro, Evbreke and Esezi which are basically the ruling houses of Okpe kingdom. According to history, the progenitor of the Okpe was Prince Igboze, the son of Oba Ozolua, an Edo prince, whose father ruled Benin from 1481-1504AD. Igboze was himself the father of the four brothers to whom all Okpe trace their origin. They are believed to have migrated from the ancient Benin Kingdom through Okpe-Olomu to their ancestral home of Orerokpe in 1170AD. The Okpe people are part of the Urhobo ethnic group in the Delta State of Nigeria with a population of over 200,000 people (Osume, 2010). Its people are migrants from Edo State (Benin kingdom), although some totally disagree that their lineage is traced to Edo/Benin kingdom. Traditionally, their primary occupation include commercial farming, fishing, hunting, trading and, in contemporary times gas exploration. Existing statistical demographical data show that the Okpe people constitute the dialectal amalgam with the highest numerical strength among the Urhobo group of Delta State. Today, the kingdom is divided into two local governments namely: Okpe and Sapele local government (Asagba, 2005).

Earlier Works

The review of previous studies on language maintenance is restricted to empirical works undertaken by sociolinguists across cultures. This will help to throw light on the experiences of varying minority or immigrant groups as far as their language maintenance is concerned. Jamaï (2008) examined language use and maintenance among the Moroccan minorities in Britain with a view to finding out what role English plays in their lives. He found that the Moroccan community were not maintaining their Moroccan Arabic, despite their high concentration in South East London, but had shifted to English as first language. Within one generation, 27.7% of the Moroccan community claimed that English was their first language. On the whole, the Moroccan community in Britain exhibited no conscious effort to maintain its language, which indicates that the third generation may likely experience total shift to English.

Michieka, (2012) examined language maintenance and shift among a group of young university students in Kenya, aimed at establishing if multilingualism is thriving or if the local languages (Luo, Luhya) are threatened by a potential shift to English. The result shows a gradual shift from the indigenous languages to other languages such as English, Kiswahili and Sheng. English is the preferred language in most domains, except the home, for reading, writing letters, text messages, sending e-mail messages, listening to music, radio and interaction in social gatherings. Kiswahili is preferred for conversing with friends, followed by English and Sheng. Mother tongues only feature in conversation with family members, although even in their homes, Kiswahili and Sheng compete with Luo and Luhya.

Baskin (2015) examined the process of language shift and or maintenance and its relationship to integration and identity among Turkish women in Alsace, France. He found that the women used their ethnic language (Turkish) as the main linguistic tool within the household and with their friends and the ethnic community. However, inter-generational transmission issue appeared more complicated among the young generation. The young generation maintained their parents' dialectal Turkish to some degree; within the household and in the communities, they spoke French with their friends and mixed Turkish

and French when talking with peers. The old generation continued to use Turkish language within the home, and during gatherings or occasions at the Turkish cultural associations.

Kheirkhah and Cekaiite (2015) studied language maintenance in a multilingual family in parent-child interactions in Sweden where the parents were Iranian with Kurdish-Persian language background. Among other things, they found that family meal time conversations were exploited in making heritage language maintenance, and the explicit focus of parent-child interaction was the children's multilingual competencies. The parents used various resources to achieve the goal of maintaining the heritage language, such as requests for translation from the children and feigned displays of ignorance when the child used code-mixing. The parents constrained the children's language choice, by consistently attempting to enforce the use of only the heritage language in the home, which is beneficial for maintaining the heritage language

This review has revealed a mixed picture of language maintenance in different social spheres and by different researchers. While in some settings, parents took practical steps to maintain their native tongues, in other settings, no such steps were taken, resulting in shift to a dominant language. The children often resisted parents' efforts to socialise them in the indigenous languages, as reported by Kheirkhah and Cekaiite (2018) due to exposure to the societal language and educational needs. In some instances, parents were helpless as pressure from multiple sources (internal and external) neutralised whatever desire they had to maintain their languages, as reported by Michieka (2012). Some of the factors identified as militating against inter-generational transmission of heritage languages include exogamous marriages or inter-ethnic marriages, and growing up in cities. The major factor directly related to the present study is the issue of growing up in the city and its effect on a minority language. The city stands in contrast to the pastoral domains, and its admixture of people from multiple ethno-linguistic groups means an unprejudiced and dispassionate adoption of a negotiated or compromised language in interactions.

The Sample

This study is based on the quantitative approach due to the need to collect sufficient data for reasons of generalization. Through purposive

and snow-ball techniques, a total of 35 families were sampled in the Ajegunle and Orileareas of Lagos, which are the home of most minority groups in Lagos State. This number comprises parents (husband and wife) and two children, making a total of 140 respondents: fathers, 35, mothers 35, first child, 35, and second child 35. The population of *Okpe* in Lagos is indeterminate as there are no official statistics available. However, 35 *Okpe* families is statistically significant and representative of endogamous *Okpe* families in Lagos, given their minority status. This is to say that, the margin of error is narrow and therefore represents a high confident interval.

Three criteria were used in selecting participants used in this study and, they are type of marriage, number of children and birth place of both parents and children. In terms of marriage type, only endogamous or ethnically homogenous families were used in the study; in other words, both parents were from the same ethnic group, in this case *Okpe*. The concern is to ascertain how two people who share the same ethnic code of communication, maintain its use in the home and environs. Exogamous marriages (mixed marriages) were not used because it is a very complex linguistic situation where two different languages are in operation. The second criterion adopted in sampling is that the family should have at least two teenage children. The number was limited to 2 for reasons of accessibility and availability, while teenagers were chosen because, at this stage of their life, they have been exposed to a number of languages in their environment, and also have attained basic literacy required to respond to a written inquiry. A third criterion is that both parents must have been born and raised in the homeland (which raises the possibility of having acquired *Okpe* as L1), while the two children must have been born in Lagos State. Thus, we are dealing with old and young *Okpe* in Lagos State.

The Instrument

A 2 page questionnaire was used to elicit information from respondents; the same questionnaire was given to each of the four participants in the family. The questionnaire was focused on language use in the family and language attitudes which represent basic factors in language maintenance phenomenon. The 2-page questionnaire was divided into six sections

comprising bio-data of respondents, language information, language proficiency and use, exposure to *Okpe*, and language attitude. Two types of questions were used; closed questions that restricted respondents to certain options and open-ended questions that required respondents to provide the answers. The open ended questions were mainly used to elicit information about the languages used in particular domains while the close questions were the Likert-scale ranging from lowest to highest degrees. Although the children had sufficient education to respond to the questions posed in the questionnaire, they were not trusted to provide reliable information. Consequently, they were guided by their parents and their responses were also cross-checked by their parents.

A breakdown of the bio-data of respondents indicates that males were higher accounting for 78 as against women, 62. The ages of the respondents ranged from 13-20 to 41-50 with the highest age bracket being 13-20. This is expected since all the children used in this study were from that age bracket. In terms of occupation, a majority (the teenagers) were students while the parents were artisans, civil workers and traders. Respondents with secondary education accounted for the highest number among the sample while the lowest number had university education. Then language information provided by respondents indicated that *Okpe* is their first language while English is second language. Other languages reported by a majority of the parents are pidgin while an insignificant minority reported Yoruba. In contrast, other languages reported by a majority of the children are pidgin and Yoruba.

Data Presentation and Analysis

In this section, the data obtained with the aid of the questionnaire will be presented and analysed. First, the data on language proficiency and frequency will be presented followed by language use in the home domain and environs, exposure to the homeland, visitors from homeland, tradition and language attitudes, in that order.

Proficiency in Okpe

The question on proficiency in *Okpe* was intended to examine the degree to which the respondents were proficient in *Okpe*. It is a closed question and the following 5-point ranking scale was used as options: native speaker, reasonably well, average, poor, very poor. The data is presented below:

Table 1: Proficiency in Okpe

| Respondents | Indicate your level of speaking Okpe | | | | | Total n(100%) |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|---------------|-----------------|------------------|
| | Native speaker n(%) | Reasonably well n(%) | Average n (%) | Poor n (%) | V. Poor n(%) | |
| Father | 22 (62.8) | 10 (28.6) | 3 (8.6) | - | - | 35 |
| Mother | 24 (68.6) | 11 (31.4) | - | - | - | 35 |
| 1 st child | - | - | 2 (5.7) | 13 (37.2) | 20 (57.1) | 35 |
| 2 nd child | - | - | 5 (14.3) | 7 (20.0) | 23 (65.7) | 35 |

Table 1 above shows a discrepancy in Okpe proficiency between the parents and the children. A significant majority of the mothers (68.6%) reported a native-speaker proficiency in Okpe while 31.4% reported a reasonably proficiency in Okpe. In the case of the fathers, a significant majority (62.8%) reported a native-speaker proficiency while 28.6% reported speaking the language reasonably well, and 8.6% reported an average proficiency. On the contrary, none of the children (1st child, 2nd child) reported a reasonable proficiency in Okpe. Among the 1st child category, 5.7% reported an average proficiency while 32.2% and 57.1% reported poor and very poor proficiency in Okpe. A similar result is obtained from the 2nd child category where 14.3% reported average proficiency in Okpe while 20.0% and 65.7% reported poor and very poor proficiency in Okpe. Given the parents' high proficiency in Okpe it is expected that they should utilize it, at least in domestic conversations and the children's level of proficiency shows they did not. The next inquiry is focused on frequency of use of Okpe.

Frequency in Okpe

The inquiry on frequency of using Okpe was intended to note how often the respondents used Okpe. It is also a closed question and the

following five-point ranking scale was used: often, sometimes, occasionally, rarely, never. The data is presented below:

Table 2: Frequency in Okpe

| Respondents | How often do you use Okpe | | | | | Total n(100%) |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|---------------|------------------|
| | Often n(%) | Sometimes n(%) | Occasionally n (%) | Rarely n (%) | Never n(%) | |
| Father | - | 7 (20.0) | 15 (42.8) | 13 (37.2) | - | 35 |
| Mother | - | 10 (28.6) | 19 (54.3) | 6 (17.1) | - | 35 |
| 1 st child | - | - | - | 8 (22.9) | 27 (77.1) | 35 |
| 2 nd child | - | - | - | 10 (28.6) | 25 (71.4) | 35 |

The data in Table 2 is a strong indication that the frequency of the use of Okpe in the sample is very low. In the case of parents, 20.0% of fathers representing a minority reported that they spoke Okpe sometimes while a majority (42.8% and 37.2%) reported that they used Okpe occasionally and rarely, respectively. A similar result is found among the mothers where 28.6% representing a minority reported that they used Okpe sometimes, while a majority (54.3%, 17.1%) reported that they used Okpe occasionally and rarely. The low frequency found in this result is negatively correlated to high proficiency found in the last inquiry on proficiency. The report by the children indicated a very low to zero frequency in Okpe. Among the 1st child category, 22.9% reported that they spoke Okpe rarely while 77.7% reported that they never spoke Okpe. This is nearly the same with the 2nd child category where 28.6% reported using the language rarely while the majority 71.4% reported non-use of Okpe. A very low to zero frequency in Okpe is positively correlated to non-proficiency found in the previous section. The next inquiry is on the languages used in the home domain.

Language use at Home

The question on home language use is designed to find out the actual languages used by respondents at home. It is an open-ended question requiring the respondents to fill in the languages they used in different role relationships. The result of this inquiry is presented below.

Table 3: Language use at home

| Role Relation | What language(s) do you use in the Home | | | | Total n(100%) |
|--|---|----------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| | Pidgin/Okpe n(%) | Eng/Pidgin/Okpe n(%) | Eng./Pidgin/Yoruba n (%) | English /Pidgin n(%) | |
| Father to Mother | 18 (25.7) | 35 (50.0) | - | 17 (24.3) | 70 |
| 1 st child to 2 nd child | - | 7 (10.0) | 28 (40.0) | 35 (50.0) | 70 |
| Parents to Children | - | 7 (10.0) | 2 (2.8) | 61 (87.2) | 70 |

Table 3 shows a discrepancy in language use at home across the participants. In the father-mother role relation, a majority of parents used a combination of English/Pidgin/Okpe while a minority (25.7%, 24/3%) used Pidgin/Okpe and English/ pidgin respectively. This result contrasts with the 1st child-2nd child role relation where a majority of children (50.0%, 40.0%) used English/Pidgin and a combination of English/pidgin/Yoruba respectively, while a minority (10.0%) used English/Pidgin/Okpe. In the realm of interaction between parents and children, a significant majority (87.2%) reported using English/pidgin while a minority (10.0%, 2.8%) used English/Pidgin/Okpe and English/Pidgin/Yoruba respectively. There are three important outcomes of this result. First, the use of the native language, Okpe is low across role relations representing a marked outcome. The second outcome of this result is that Nigerian Pidgin and English are dominant across role relations. The third outcome is the use of Yoruba by the children instead of their native Okpe.

The next investigation will focus on extra-linguistic means of language maintenance such as exposure to the homeland.

Exposure to Okpe homeland

In this inquiry, a close question with 5-point ranking scale was used to inquire about the frequency of visits to the homeland. The result of the inquiry is presented below.

Table 4: Exposure to Okpe land

| Respondents | How often do you visit Okpeland | | | | | Total n(100%) |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------|---------------|------------------|
| | Often n(%) | Sometimes n(%) | Occasionally n(%) | Rarely n(%) | Never n(%) | |
| Father | - | 4 (11.4) | 24 (68.6) | 7 (20.0) | - | 35 |
| Mother | - | 5 (14.3) | 16 (45.7) | 14 (40.0) | - | 35 |
| 1 st child | - | - | - | 8 (22.9) | 27 (77.1) | 35 |
| 2 nd child | - | - | - | 6 (17.1) | 29 (82.9) | 35 |

The Table shows an asymmetry in the frequency of visits to the homeland between the parents and children. A majority of the parents reported visiting Okpe occasionally (father 68.6%, mother 45.7%) while a minority reported visiting Okpe sometimes (father, 11.4%, mother 14.3%) and rarely (father 20.0%, mother 40.0%). On the contrary, a significant majority of the children reported having never travelled to Okpe (1st child, 77.1%, 2nd child, 82.9%) while a minority reported rarely visiting the homeland (1st child 22.9%, 2nd child, 17.1%). This result indicates that whereas the parents made infrequent and insufficient visits to Okpeland, the children did not, thus denying them a golden opportunity to embrace their ancestral land and language.

Attitude to Okpe

This inquiry is related to self-identity, ethnicity, culture, economics and social image for each inquiry. A statement is provided to which the participants were required to respond, based on a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagreed (D), Neutral (N), Agree (A) and Strongly Agree (SA).

Okpe and self/ethnic identity

The first statement sought to find out if the participants tied their native language to their self-identity. In other words speaking Okpe makes one see himself or herself as an Okpe person. The result is presented below:

Table 5: Okpe and self/ethnic identity

| Respondents | I am Okpe and an Okpe should speak Okpe | | | | | Total n(100%) |
|-----------------------|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------------|
| | SD n(%) | D n(%) | N n(%) | A n(%) | SA n(%) | |
| Father | - | - | - | 25 (71.4) | 10 (28.6) | 35 |
| Mother | - | - | - | 27 (77.1) | 8 (22.9) | 35 |
| 1 st child | - | 8 (22.9) | 12 (34.3) | 13 (37.1) | 2 (5.7) | 35 |
| 2 nd child | 2 (5.7) | 10 (28.6) | 9 (25.7) | 11 (31.4) | 3 (8.6) | 35 |

Key: Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neutral (N), Agree (A), Strongly Agree (SA)

The table above indicates that identity projection via Okpe language is varied among the respondents. All the parents were positive in terms of the link between the native language and their self-identity. A significant majority of the parents agreed (father, 71.4%, mother 77.1%), to the statement while a minority strongly agreed (father 28.6%, mother 22.9%) to the statement. Among the children, there is a near balance between the number of participants who affirmed the statement and those who negated it. An insignificant majority among the children agreed (1st child, 37.1%, 2nd child, 31.4%) to the statement, while very few strongly agreed (1st child, 5.7%, 2nd child, 8.6%) to the statement. Additionally, a significant minority disagreed (1st child, 22.9%, 2nd child, 28.6%) to the statement, while another significant minority were neutral (1st child, 34.3%, 2nd child 25.7%) and strongly disagreed (2nd child 5.7%). This result shows a correlation between proficiency in the language and the projection of self-identity, as it is mainly the parents who had facility in the language that related it to their self-identity. Most of the children did not, as some outrightly disagreed, while some were neutral; that is, they neither agreed nor disagreed. The next inquiry is a follow-up to the present one.

Discussion

The general trend of language use and attitudes to language reflected in the data analysis above indicates that shift from Okpe is on-going due to poor maintenance and the shift is into three languages, English, Pidgin and Yoruba. In other words, Okpe contends with three languages that are more dominant in the Ajegunle and Orile settings, thus stifling its

maintenance. Rather than Okpe, English was the language used by most parents in interacting with their children. This is to suggest that English is the most preferred language in this role relation. There are two main reasons for this situation; first, English (not Okpe) is the language of education in Nigeria, including Lagos. It is the main language of instruction, used in teaching other subjects, including, sometimes, the local languages; it is also a subject of study in schools. This scenario puts parents in a helpless position as they do not have any control over the language politically imposed on their children, which they ultimately bring home. Second, parents were more concerned with the future of their children, and so did not see any problem in using English at home, sometimes at the expense of their native language. Since proficiency in English is a pre-requisite for employment and economic success, parents mistakenly think that using their indigenous languages with children may affect the quality of their English and therefore ruin their chances of success. The fact is that the acquisition of the mother tongue or indigenous language has no adverse effect on English or a second language; rather it enhances and facilitates the learning of the second language (Edwards, 1992). The consequence is that parents unwittingly aid their children's shift to the official language, English. This is the reason why the children were not proficient in Okpe, and so cannot use it in most domains.

The second is shift from Okpe to Nigerian Pidgin, hereafter NP. The use of NP is pervasive in Ajegunle and environs which is home to many minority language groups in Lagos. Additionally, the home of NP in Nigeria is the Niger Delta (including Okpeland) where it is the first language of so many children. In Ajegunle, NP is the language of the streets, playgrounds, transport systems, and even in schools, students use it during break time. That NP is the second major language used by parents in parent-child interaction suggests that they (parents) did not see its use as injurious to proficiency in English; probably due to the fact that Pidgin is pseudo English. In this case, shift is also aided by parents and the physical environment. Furthermore, parents may have encouraged the use of NP as a bonding strategy to link their children to the homeland/state where it is mainly operational.

The third is shift from Okpe to Yoruba, the language of the host community. Nearly all parents did not feature Yoruba among their

repertoire at home, but a majority of the children used Yoruba in sibling interactions. This result is unmarked because immigrant's children usually make constant contact with the host community language in two main avenues: school and neighbourhood. This is more so if they are required to learn the host community language in school as a subject, as is the case in the present sample. Eventually the children will bring the hosts language to their homes, thus complicating the linguistic situation in the family. Although this study did not investigate the children's level of proficiency in Yoruba, it is sufficient that they used it in interactions and, given the broad and unrestrictive view of bilingualism, they are qualified as bilinguals in Yoruba, irrespective of their level of proficiency in it. The danger, however, is that the children had acquired Yoruba, at the expense of their mother tongue, which should be a cause of concern and challenge to their parents. This result confirms previous findings including Nwagbo (2004) among Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees in Oru Camp, Nigeria whose children acquired Yoruba at the expense of their native languages. In this earlier study, the host environment was a strong factor that influenced the acquisition of the host language.

To compound the unsavoury status of Okpe in the home domain, the young Okpe (children) were not adequately exposed to Okpe homeland and traditions. Frequent contact with the homeland is tantamount to frequent contact with the native language speakers, especially young, rural, Okpe of the same age who speak Okpe fluently. Furthermore, frequent visits to Okpe land would have exposed the children to attractions in their rural community such as rivers, artefacts, festivals, etc, which could have indirectly aided the acquisitions of Okpe.

The danger of infrequent or non-visit to the homeland is that the children will not have deep ethnic roots, and consequently no emotional or spiritual attachment to their homeland. It is at the formative years that children fall in love with their ancestral land, after drinking its water, playing in its sands and fields, climbing its trees and eating its fruits, swimming in its rivers, playing under its moonlight, listening to its bucolic rhythms, hunting rabbits and squirrels in its jungles, smelling the native fragrance of its pastoral landscape, etc. A child privileged to experience some of these markers of the heritage site will find it difficult disengaging from the homeland and its language.

The result of the language attitude survey indicated that all the parents evinced a more positive attitude towards Okpe, than their children, with respect to self-identity and ethnicity. The parents saw their self-identity as defined by Okpe; that means they saw themselves as Okpe people and also wished to be seen by other groups as Okpe people, because they spoke Okpe language. Okpe was not only the native language or a means of communication, but Okpe was also the people or speakers. This is a strong index of a positive inclination to Okpe, although there was no correlation between positive attitude and actual practice. The implication of this posture is that their native language makes them different from other people or groups in a symbolic way.

Crystal (2000) opines that, in a cultural sense, language serves as a means of segregating one group from others so that members of one group, who speak the same language, see themselves as insiders while other people or groups who use a different language, are outsiders. According to Gibson (2004) this distinction is often the pattern among minority or immigrant groups within a dominant culture, where the minority language is exploited as a tool for self and social distinction. Related to the present case, the old generation viewed Okpe as a symbolic language, that is, a private language which endows an individual or group with a distinctiveness of their own, which may be difficult to lose. It is on the account of the intrinsic bond between language and self/ethnic identities that the old generation Okpe were unanimous in their view that a native of Okpe should speak the language of the group. By identifying with the native language (interactively or privately) the individual or group manifests and announces their Self, social and ethnic identities, and also draws a distinctive line between themselves as in-group and others as out-group. This is an ethnolinguistic luxury not shared by the young generation Okpe in the sample.

Conclusion

The present study has examined and revealed a mixed picture of language maintenance among old and young Okpe in Lagos State. The first major finding is that inter-generational transmission of Okpe is stunted among this group in Lagos; this is in spite of the fact that the old generation (parents) were proficient in their native language, Okpe. Evidently, Okpe parents in this study made no conscious, systematic and sustained effort

at transmitting Okpe to their children, thus maintaining the language in a concrete way. Consequently, the young generation did not have facility in their own heritage language and shifted to mainly English, and also NP and Yoruba. It seems that this is a deliberate means of distancing the children from the language and exposing them to a preferred language, English. It is believed here that, if the old generation were Pro-Okpe, that is, if they sincerely were concerned with the language factor, and were interested in passing it to their children, all that parents needed to do was to make their attitude to the language overt and use the language between them at home. Given the variable nature of attitude, when Okpe parents prioritize their native tongue and behave accordingly by taking practical steps to promote it, their children would most likely change their attitude and behaviour towards the language. This change may take time, but its chances of being realised are very high. That Okpe is a minority language in Nigeria and Lagos, is not an official language and is not taught in schools in Lagos does not stop the speakers from appreciating their native language and promoting it, in one way or the other.

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