

Children and Language Choice: A Case Study of Abraka Speech Community

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Abstract

In plurilinguistic societies, there are linguistic alternatives which are constantly available to speakers. Thus in communicative situations, speakers must decide, in the first place, the language(s) within which the communication is to be executed. However, such choice is driven by certain factors. In the present study, attempt is made to examine the typical language attitude of bi-/multi-lingual children in Abraka speech community. The goal is to investigate patterns of choice of language made in different domains by bi-/multilingual children residing in a multilingual society. The research work draws evidence from data elicited from 25 pupils from schools in Abraka town. The pupils were randomly selected, and information was elicited from them through structured interview and participant observation. The data are analyzed using descriptive frequency within the issue-focused framework.

Keywords: *Language choice, plurilingualism, Abraka, Children*

Introduction

It is the case that inhabitants of plurilinguistic societies are often bi-/multi-lingual (See Coulmas 1997, Duan 2004). Thus, there are linguistic alternatives which are constantly available to speakers in such societies. This offers the possibility that interlocutors are likely to have more than one language in common, a situation which may require that varied choices of language be made during conversations in any domain. According to Duan (2004:23), the first choice that participants in an intercultural encounter face is the choice of the language (or languages) in which the interaction is to be conducted. This suggests that when interlocutors in a conversation share more than one language in common, effort is made consciously or unconsciously to make a choice of language in different domains and language situations. Thus language choice is a by-product of multilingualism.

Multilingualism has likely been common throughout much of human history, and today most people in the world are multilinguals (Tucker 1999). According to Dada (2006), current facts within sociolinguistics have revealed that there is no genuine monolingual society in the world. Thus, in most societies, speakers must decide, in the first place, the language or languages within which the communication is to be executed during communication. However, such a choice is driven by certain factors. In some study of language choice, the focus is on deciding factors that influence individuals and communities to choose one language over another in different situations (Decker and Grummit 2012). Speakers' linguistic choices in given communicative contexts are the

result of some factors which directly or indirectly influence these choices. Such factors include participants, level of language proficiency, age, sex, occupation, language attitude, intimacy, speech situation (formality of situation), domains, location, content of interactions, etc.

Fishman (1965) argues that when studying the language choice in a bilingual community, one examines who speaks what language, to whom and when. In the present study, patterns of language choice made by children residing in Abraka are examined. Specifically, it seeks to examine linguistic choices made by children in pre-determined domain, the phenomena of code switching and code mixing among children, and the frequency of code-switching and code-mixing by children. The work is divided into four sections- introduction (section 1), methodology (section 2), data presentation and analysis (section 3), and discussion of findings and conclusion (section 4).

Methodology

This study employs the survey research design, which entails an examination of a research population using a sample size. The research population in this study consists of all the children in the Abraka speech community. The Abraka speech community is located in Delta State, Nigeria. It was chosen as the study area in this study because of its highly multilingual nature given that it is a university community (it houses the main campus of the Delta State University).

The data employed for this study were elicited through individual and group-conversation interviews. A total of 25 pupils drawn from two schools were interviewed. Each respondent was presented with exactly the same questions and in the same order. This was to ensure that the responses provided could be reliably aggregated and that comparisons could be made.

The demographic information of the participants is shown in Tables 1 – 4. The interview was further supplemented with participant observations. The selection of the participants was guided by 3 inclusion criteria, viz:

- a. participant must be from the selected schools used as case study
- b. participant should be able to provide responses to questions posed
- c. participant must be bi- or multi-lingual

Table 1: Distribution of Participants by Age Range

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
7 – 8 years	3	12%
9 – 10 years	13	52%
11 – 13 years	9	36%

Table 2: Distribution of Participants by Gender

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Male	13	52%
Female	12	48%

Table 3: Distribution of Participants by School¹

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Public	15	60%
Private	10	40%

Table 4: Distribution of Participants by Ethno-Linguistic Group

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Urhobo	17	68%
Yoruba	1	4%
Igbo	2	8%
Esan	1	4%
Ukwani	2	8%
Ijaw	1	4%
Isoko	1	4%

Data Presentation and Analysis

An examination of the responses elicited from the participants is presented in this section. The aim is to show the language choice made by the children examined in pre-determined domains. The results are shown in Tables 5 - 13 below, with each table followed by a discussion of the findings derivable from it.

Table 5: Mother Tongue Proficiency

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Not at all	6	24%
With difficulty	7	28%
Reasonably well	9	36%
Very well	3	12%
Total	25	100%

In Table 5, the focus is on the number of respondents who are proficient in their mother tongues, and the level of such proficiency. The result shows that only 24% are not proficient in their mother tongue, while 76% are. However, only 12% of these indicated the option ‘very well’ as their level of proficiency. 36% indicated ‘reasonably well’ while 28% indicated ‘with difficulty’. The relative distribution of those lacking proficiency in their mother tongue is as follows: Urhobo (2), Yoruba (1), Igbo (1), Esan (1) and Ukwani (1).

Table 6: Proficiency in the Language of the Immediate Environment

Variable	Frequency	Percentage	
Proficient	Indigenes	15	60%
	Non-indigenes	1	4%
Not proficient	Indigenes	2	8%
	Non-indigenes	7	28%
Total	25	100%	

¹In Nigeria, the dichotomy between private and public schools sometimes coincides with social stratification. Thus, while the private schools often correspond to the upper class, the public schools correspond to middle or lower class. This position is assumed in this study, and has guided the selection of schools for this study.

Table 6 shows the number of respondents who are proficient in the language of the immediate environment. The Nigerian policy on language specifies that every child should learn the language of the immediate environment for the purpose of promoting social interaction and national cohesion (NPE, 2004). To achieve this, it is further stated in the policy that the language of the immediate environment should be used as medium of instruction in early child-hood education and as school subject in the latter part of primary education². However, the result in Table 6 suggests that while a good number of the indigenes are proficient in the language of the immediate environment, the non-indigenes are not.

Table 7: Number of Languages Spoken by Participants

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
2 languages	6	24%
3 languages	19	76%
More than 3 languages	0	0
Total	25	100

Table 8: Languages Used, Domains of Use and Interlocutors in Abraka

	Home	Grandparents	Siblings	Class	Friends	School environment
Urhobo?	14	2	-	-	-	-
English?	2	-	-	-	-	23
Pidgin?	2	-	5	-	9	2
Yoruba?	2	-	-	-	-	-
French?	-	-	1	-	-	3
Igbo?	1					
Ishan?	1					

Tables 7 and 8 show respectively the number of languages spoken by each respondent and languages used in pre-determined domains. Table 7 shows that 19 participants representing 76%, speak three languages, while 6 participants, representing 24% of the participant speak 2 languages. However, most of the participants who claim to speak three languages speak their mother tongue, English and Nigerian Pidgin.

From the data in Table 8, it is observed that the mother tongue is used mostly at home while Nigerian Pidgin is used more with friends and less at home. This suggests that there is trans-generational transmission of the mother tongues examined. However, their domain of use is restricted to the home front.

Table 9: Responses on Level of Difficulty in Using the Mother Tongue in Conversation and Likely Option of Alternative Code

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Yes/Sometimes	Switch Code	1
	Mix Code	6
No	12	48%
Total	25	100%

² In the schools selected for this study, the Urhobo language which is the language of the immediate environment is taught as a school subject.

Table 9 shows the result of the level of difficulties encountered by respondents in the use of their mother tongue and how such difficulty is navigated. As already noted in Table 5, six of the respondents are not proficient in their mother tongue, while the others are. It is also noted that among those that can converse using their mother tongue, seven encounter difficulties while twelve do not. In Table 9, it is shown that six of the respondents (representing 85.7% of those who encounter difficulties during conversation) code-mix whenever they have difficulties expressing themselves in their mother tongue while one (representing 14.3%) switch to another language, in most cases, English.

Table 10: Frequently of Code Mixing/Switching in Conversation

Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Yes	Frequently	14	56%
	Occasionally	7	28%
No		4	16%
Total		25	100%

Some of the questions presented to the children sought to examine the phenomenon of code-switching. In Table 10, it is shown that fourteen respondents indicated that they frequently code-mix, seven code-mix occasionally, while four indicated that they do not code-mix.

Discussion of Findings and Conclusion

It was the aim of this study to examine patterns of language choice among children residing in the plurilinguistic Abraka speech community. The study drew evidence from data elicited from 25 randomly selected children. The result shows that the English language and Nigerian Pidgin are the most widely used language in the speech community. Implicitly, the domain of use of the language of the immediate environment is restricted to the home front. This is not unconnected with the multi-ethnicity of the inhabitants of the study area, which requires that a common means of communication is required in inter-ethnic communication. The English language and Nigerian Pidgin are the common languages in this regard. Although, the Nigerian language policy requires that every child should learn the language of the immediate environment for the purpose of promoting social interaction (NPE, 2004), this is however not the case as noted in Table 6 in which it is shown that a good number of the non-indigenes are not proficient in the language of the immediate environment. This is common in most areas where minor Nigerian languages are spoken.

It was found that among children who attend public schools, there is significant reduction in the space and domain of the English language. Although English language is one of the two most widely used languages in Abraka speech community, its usage among children attending public schools is often restricted to the school domain.

Code-mixing was also noted as an attested phenomenon in the conversation of the children examined. Such conversation is driven by lexical needs. In a study, Onumajuru (2017:14) notes that code-mixing is a common phenomenon in any bilingual/multilingual setting. Thus it is somewhat understandable that even amongst children, this phenomenon is attested. In an earlier study, Muysken (2000) also notes that there are several reasons for code-mixing in conversations, namely change in topic of discourse, verbatim quotation, solidarity and gratitude, clarification, group identity and exclusion, to soften or strengthen

command and lexical needs. In the case noted in this study, code-mixing is primarily driven by lexical needs.

Furthermore, language pedagogy is insufficient in acquiring language proficiency. This is evident in the poor acquisition of the language of the immediate environment by non-natives and corroborates the assertion by Fishman (1991) in speeches at the first two Stabilizing Indigenous Languages symposiums that schools can only have a limited role in keeping indigenous languages alive. This is because the intergenerational transmission of language in the home from parents to young children is the key to keeping indigenous languages alive; however, schools can play either a positive or negative role in supporting the efforts of indigenous parents and communities (Reyhner, 1999).

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