Lexical Attrition in Uhàmì

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Abstract
This study investigates the extent of lexical attrition in Uhami, a West Benue-Congo language spoken in Southwestern Nigeria, addressing the challenge speakers face in optimizing the use of lexical items from the traditional lexicon. The primary aim is to assess the intergenerational linguistic gap caused by this gradual vocabulary loss. To achieve this, data consisting of 101 basic lexical items sourced from the Swadesh wordlist were compiled through direct elicitation from 14 speakers across eight age groups. The findings reveal a stark disparity, demonstrating poor performance among speakers aged 30 and below, with correct responses increasing progressively across older demographics (10% for ages 10 and under, 50% for 11-20, 40% for 21-30, 70% for 31-40, 77% for 41-50, 86% for 51-60, 85% for 61-70, and 91% for 71-80), while the inclusion of synonyms and descriptive phrases yielded no significant overall improvement. Ultimately, the study concludes that Uhami is undergoing gradual lexical attrition driven by a lack of intergenerational transmission, shifting speaker attitudes, and language contact, rather than neurological decline.

Keywords: *Uhami language, language endangerment, age group, lexical attrition, intergenerational transmission*

1 Introduction

One of the main characteristics of language is its susceptibility to change. At one time or another, living languages undergo some kind of change in their various structures (Bator, 2006; Dorian, 2013). These changes may be phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic, or even semantic in nature (Bavin, 1989; Adeniyi & Talabi, 2025), and they may be the result of language contact, innovation, ease of articulation, and speakers' reduced lexical resources, among other factors (Gal, 1989; Dorian, 2013). Although Uhami's endangerment status is rated as *safe* by Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig (2025), it is nevertheless still considered endangered because it falls within the sphere of endangered languages with respect to UNESCO's (2003) language vitality and endangerment assessment parameters. The language has attracted little scholarly attention. Among studies that have examined a few aspects of it are Owoyele (2016), Egbokhare (2022), Ojesanmi (2024), Okpum (2024), Olabode (2024), Oladipo (2024), and Afeez (2024).

Uhami belongs to the Edoid group in the Benue-Congo language family and is spoken in Ìṣùà town, located in the Akoko South-East Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria (Elugbe, 1973; Lewis, 2013). Ìṣùà town is split into two distinct communities with variations in their speech forms: Ìṣùà-Oke and Ìṣùà-Ilẹ. Therefore, there are two varieties of Uhami. Because Ìṣùà is located within a Yoruba-speaking state, most of its speakers acquire Yoruba alongside Uhami for ease of communication and interaction with other people within the state. Furthermore, because English is the language of wider communication, administration, and instruction in schools, younger speakers are exposed to three languages simultaneously. However, Uhami is the least spoken of the three. Consequently, the domains where Uhami is spoken are fewer compared to those of Yoruba and English. As a result of the geographical location of Uhami speakers and the linguistic situation in Ìṣùà, there have been many changes resulting from lexical attrition in Uhami. It is therefore important to study the extent of this attrition, which in turn reflects the degree of endangerment of the language.

2 Lexical Attrition

Language attrition is the deterioration of any linguistic skill or part of it in a healthy speaker or community (Adegbija, 2004). Individual language attrition in speakers may contribute to language change at the community and universal level (Ecke, 2004). Language attrition is a feature of endangerment which can be caused by language dominance, globalization, economy, language policy, colonial history, negative attitudes of speakers, and religion, among others (Adegbija, 2004; Fabunmi & Salawu, 2005). Other causes of language attrition are incomplete language transmission, disuse, borrowing, forgetfulness, and language contact, among others (Dike, 1935; Ecke, 2004; Bator, 2006; Dorian, 2013; Lyovin et al., 2017). The rate of language endangerment is increasing: about 44% of the world's languages are presently endangered (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2025). Language attrition can be phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic in nature (Ecke, 2004; Adeniyi & Talabi, 2025).

Specifically, lexical attrition is the gradual decline and loss of lexical items in the lexicon of a language. The reduction or loss of lexical items is a common feature of language change (Sands et al., 2007; Dorian, 2013). This is because lexical items, among other levels of linguistic description, are the most vulnerable to the effects of borrowing and other consequences of language contact. Language attrition is also referred to by scholars as obsolescence (Dike, 1933) or erosion (Adeniyi & Olaogun, 2020).

Lexical attrition includes two methods of analysis (Ma & Vanek, 2024): lexical comprehension and production. Methods employed to test lexical comprehension include word recognition, picture-word matching, and a lexical decision task (Ma & Vanek, 2024).

In word recognition, participants need to identify lexical items or parts of them. This is relevant to attrition because if bilinguals recognize only a few lexical items correctly or need more time to recognize or remember such lexical items than monolingual controls, relative slowdowns and a decrease in accuracy occur; these indicate lexical attrition (Ma & Vanek, 2024). In production, methods include unscripted speech, verbal fluency tasks, and picture naming. Unscripted speech enables participants to talk about a selected topic, and transcriptions of verbal output can be used to analyze the distribution and frequencies of words and word types in a productive lexicon.

Factors that contribute to the loss of lexical items include the cumbersomeness of terms, imagery and association, and conflicting terms, some of which are eventually discarded (Dike, 1935). Buckland (2012), in his study of obsolescence in subject descriptions in library collections, reports that despite the fact that descriptions were written in library terms and were being used, some of the lexical items were still dropped over time as a result of obsolescence. In their study on borrowing as a factor that causes speakers of a particular language to drop their lexical items for another, Lyovin et al. (2017) report that out of 101 words that were blindly selected, 38 words were loan words. In L1 lexical attrition, attriters experience decreased lexical accessibility as a result of their reduced use of the L1. It has also been shown that lexical loss results from the limited number of contexts in which lexical items are used (Ulfiati, 2022).

Yoruba, a major Nigerian language, illustrates a language that has gone through lexical attrition; hence, the use of some lexical items in Yoruba by its speakers has reduced drastically due to borrowing and language contact (Kenstowicz, 2006; Adeniyi & Olaogun, 2020). Similarly, Adeniyi and Talabi (2025) find a generally poor performance among speakers of Igasi aged 10 and below in a research study on lexical attrition in Igasi. Out of the 100 lexical items used to test the competence of speakers of the language, only 36% were retained by the younger generation in Igasi. This shows how seriously lexical items are being eroded in the language.

3 Methodology

The population in the study was Uhami speakers who were resident in Ìṣùà-Òkè at the time of data collection. Data were collected from 14 native speakers of Uhami who were randomly selected in Ìṣùà-Òkè, Ondo State, Nigeria. The number of participants cuts across eight age groups which ranges from less than 10 to 80 years (≤10 to ≤80). Two speakers were selected for each age group except 11-20, 51-60 and 71-80 age groups which had one participant each and 21-30 which had 3 participants. The Swadesh wordlist comprising 101 basic lexical items was used to elicit data. The Zoom H5N digital audio recorder was used to record each speaker through direct elicitation method. They were recorded at different

places and times to ensure that data supplied by a speaker were not influenced by other speakers. For one of the participants within the 61-70 age group, 93 words were elicited; and for the participant within 71-80 age group, 86 words were elicited. In all, 1,391 responses were gathered.

For the purpose of validation of correctness, an earlier data collected through focus group discussion (FGD) involving selected competent speakers recommended by members of the speech community served as a standard. Data specifically elicited for this study were then compared with the "standard".

Responses which were categorized as one of accurate, synonym, descriptive phrases, borrowed, inaccurate, and no response, following Adeniyi & Talabi (2025), were recorded into an excel spreadsheet. These categories were representations of all the options that the participants used. The "inaccurate" category is used for responses that were completely not related to the elicited words. The "no response" category means that the participant did not know or recollect the word in the language. The descriptive statistics method was adopted for the analysis of data (Fisher, 2009; Siregar, 2025). Manual counting of entries for each category was done and recorded into another excel spreadsheet from where percentages, tables and charts were generated.

4 Result

There were 1391 responses from 14 speakers, distributed across eight age groups (Table 1). Age group ≤ 10 had 202 responses, 11-20 had 101, 21-30 had 202, 31-40 had 303, 41-50 had 202, 51-60 had 101, 61-70 had 194 and 71-80 had 86. A breakdown of the responses reported in table 1 shows that out of the 202 responses elicited for ≤ 10 age group, the number of accurate responses was 20; there was one borrowed representation, no inaccurate response, and there were177 items for which they had no response. For the 11-20 age group, out of 101 items, 50 responses were accurate, three were borrowed items, eight were inaccurate responses, and there were 38 items with no response. In the 21-30 age group, 75 responses were accurate out of 201 items. This group had one borrowed item, two inaccurate items, and 115 items without responses. 303 items were elicited for the 31-40 group, 200 responses were accurate. This group had five borrowed items, 28 inaccurate items and 50 unknown items. For the 41-50 age group, 202 items were elicited out of which 143 items were accurate. This group had five borrowed items, thirteen inaccurate items; and 26 with no response. 101 items were elicited for the 51-60 age group and 73 responses were accurate, two items were borrowed, there were seven inaccurate items, and four with no response. 194 items were elicited for 61-70 group and 149 responses were accurate. This group had seven borrowed items, twelve inaccurate items, and eight with no response. In the 71-80 age group, 58 items were accurate. This group

had no borrowed items, six inaccurate items. Results of each category of responses is further broken down in the following sub-sections

S/N	Age group	Responses	Accurate	Synonyms	Descriptive phrase	Borrowed	Inaccurate	No response	Total
1	≤ 10	202	20	2	0	1	0	177	202
2	11-20	101	50	1	0	3	8	38	101
3	21-30	202	75	2	5	1	2	115	202
4	31-40	303	200	3	14	5	28	50	303
5	41-50	202	143	0	13	5	13	26	202
6	51-60	101	73	5	9	2	7	4	101
7	61-70	194	149	2	14	7	12	8	194
8	71-80	86	58	4	17	0	6	0	86
TOTAL		1,391	768	19	72	24	76	418	1391

Table 1: Raw result of response category per age group

4.1 Accurate response

The percentage of accurate responses per age group is presented in table 2. This is derived by dividing the number of accurate responses by the total number of responses per age group, then multiplied by 100. The ≤ 10 age group had the lowest percentage of accurate response with 9.9% while 61-70 age group had the highest number of accurate responses with 76.8%. The percentage of the rest are presented as follows: 21-30 age group had 37.1%, 11-20 group had 49.5%, 31-40 had 66%, 71-80 had 67%, 41-50 had 70.8%, 51-60 had 72.3%. Figure 1 is the graphical representation of the accurate responses per age group.

Age group	**accurate by age group (%)**
≤ 10	9.9
11-20	49.5
21-30	37.1
31-40	66
41-50	70.8
51-60	72.3
61-70	76.8
71-80	67.4

Table 2: percentage of accurate response per age group

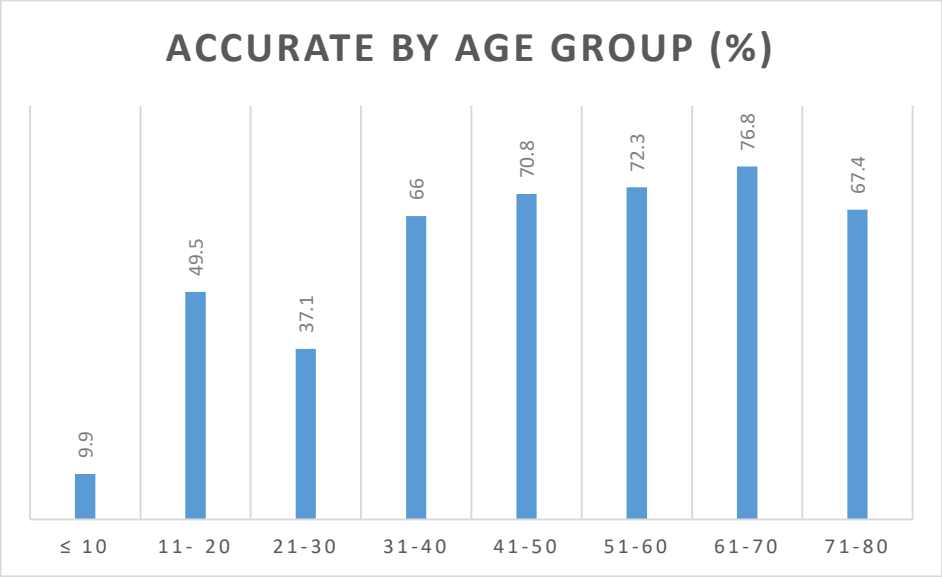

Figure 1: percentage of accurate response per age group

4.2. Synonyms

The use of synonyms is one of the choices the respondents made in their responses. Table 3 presents the percentage of the use of synonyms per age group. The result shows that respondents between 51-60 age group had the highest percentage of the use synonyms with 5%. The 41-50 group had the lowest percentage with 0%. The ≤ 10, 11-20, 21-30, 31-40, 61-70 and 71-80 had 2%, 1%, 2%, 3%, 2% and 4% of synonyms respectively.

Age group	Synonyms%
≤ 10	2
11- 20	1
21-30	2
31-40	3
41-50	0
51-60	5
61-70	2
71-80	4

Table 3: percentage of synonymous response per age group

4.3 Descriptive Phrase

One of the ways of representing a lexical item is the use of descriptive phrase. The result in table 4 shows that respondents that were ≤ 20 did not use descriptive phrase at all. Among the other respondents who used it, those within the 21-30 group had the lowest percentage of the use of descriptive phrase with 5%; while 71-80 group had the highest with 17%. 31-40, 41-50, 51-60 and 61-70 groups had 14%, 13%, 9% and 14% of descriptive phrase use respectively.

Age group	Descriptive phrase%
≤ 10	0
11- 20	0
21-30	5
31-40	14
41-50	13
51-60	9
61-70	14
71-80	17

Table 4: percentage of descriptive phrase per age group

4.4 Borrowed words

Borrowing is one of the main causes of attrition. Table 5 presents the raw percentage of the use of borrowed word per age group in the study. The highest percentage of borrowed words was recorded in the 61-70 age group which was 3.6%; while the 71-80 age group had 0% of borrowed word response. As shown in table 5, other age groups also had relatively low percentage of borrowed words response. All together 24 words were borrowed from Yoruba and English, with 20 of those from Yoruba alone.

Age group	Borrowed%
≤ 10	0.5
11-20	3.0
21-30	0.5
31-40	1.7
41-50	2.5
51-60	2.0
61-70	3.7
71-80	0

Table 5: raw percentage of borrowed words per age group

4.5 Inaccurate

The percentage of the use of inaccurate words varies per age group are presented in table 6 and figure 2 respectively. The highest percentage of inaccurate words use was within the 31-40 age group with 9.2%; while the lowest was within the ≤ 10 with 0%.

Age group	Inaccurate%
≤ 10	0
11-20	8.0
21-30	1.0
31-40	9.2
41-50	6.4
51-60	7.0
61-70	6.2
71-80	7.0

Table 6: raw percentage of inaccurate words per age group

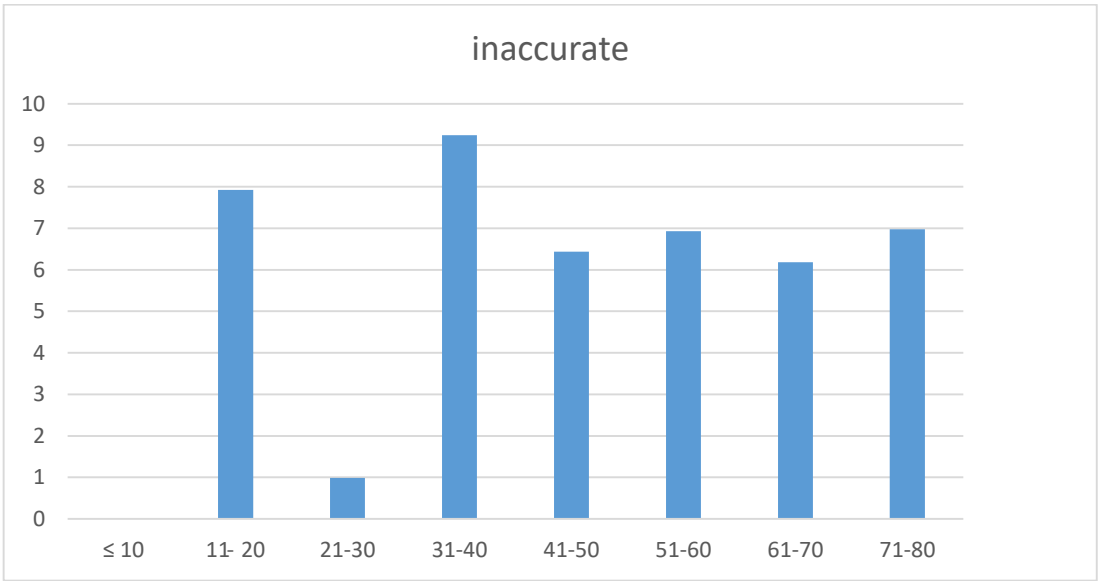

Figure 3: percentage of inaccurate response words per age group

4.6 No response

One of the features of lexical attrition is reduction in lexical resources (Adeniyi & Talabi, 2025). Table 7 shows the percentage of "no response" per age group. This is also presented in figure 4. The ≤ 10 group had the highest percentage of "no response" category with 87.6%; while the 71-80 group has the lowest percentage with 0%. The results show that respondents within age 40 and below had a high tendency not to supply responses at all, while this was more acute in ≤ 10 and 21-31 age groups.

Age group	No response%
≤ 10	87.6
11-20	37.6
21-30	56.9
31-40	16.5
41-50	12.9
51-60	4.0
61-70	4.1
71-80	0

Table 7: percentage of "no response" per age group

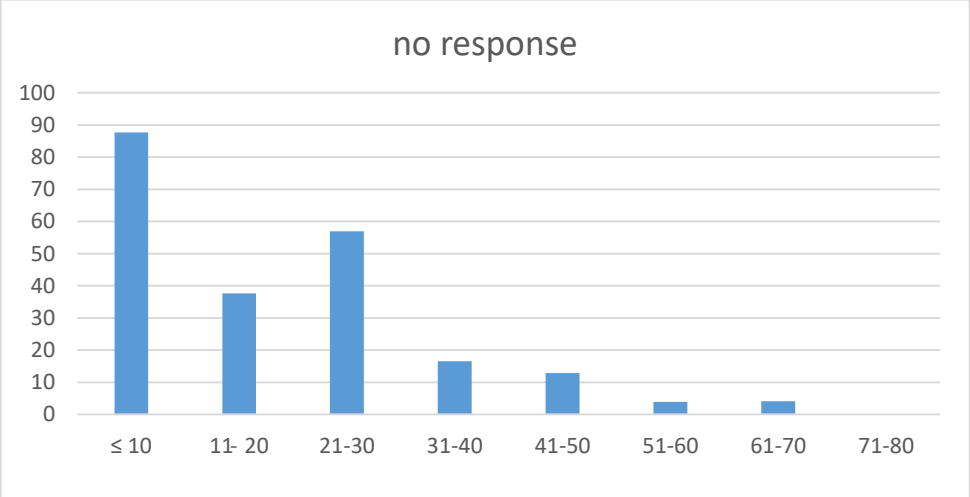

Figure 4: percentage of "no response" per age group

5 Discussion

None of the groups did particularly well in terms of accurate response. The general picture in the result shows that age groups 41-50, 51-60, 61-70 and 71-80 performed better in terms of accuracy; while ≤ 10 group had the lowest percentage of accurate responses, as expected. This however, does not show the whole picture because synonyms and descriptive phrases are also options allowed of competent speakers as long as communication is not hampered. The combination of accurate, descriptive phrase and synonyms improves the performance of the speakers above the age of 30 considerably. Thus, the complete picture becomes clearer when these are taken together under the caption of "correct response".

5.1 Correct response

Correct response is the addition of accurate, synonym, descriptive phrases (Table 8; Figure 5). Although, all the groups made use of synonyms sparingly, it adds up to the percentage of their correct responses. The younger speakers of age 20 and below did not make use of descriptive phrases at all. This may result from their low level of competence in the language. On the contrary, the 71-80 group had the highest percentage of the use of descriptive phrases recording 17% in the breakdown of their general performance (Table 4).

Generally, the ≤ 10 age group had the lowest correct responses with 10.9% followed by 21-30 and 11-20 groups with 40% and 50% respectively. On the other hand, age groups 31-40 and 41-50 recorded 71.6% and 77.2% respectively; while 71-80 had the clear best performance with 91.9%. While not exactly gradient, this picture shows the progressive decline in the mastery of the lexicon among the younger speakers of Uhami and the extent of attrition in the lexicon of Uhami (Figure 5).

Age group	Correct (%)
≤ 10	10.9
11-20	50.5
21-30	40.6
31-40	71.6
41-50	77.2
51-60	86.1
61-70	85.1
71-80	91.9

Table 8: percentage of correct response per age group

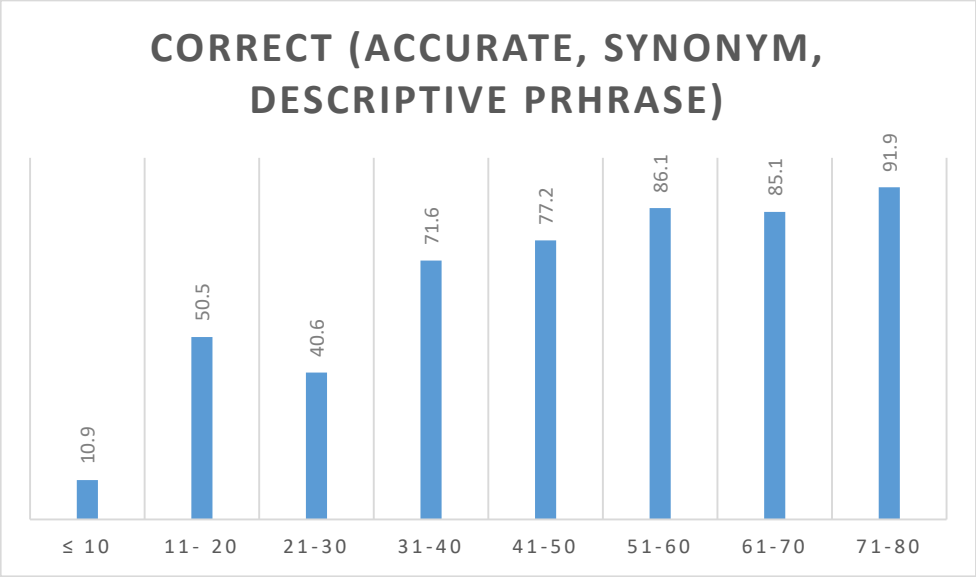

Figure 5: percentage of correct response per age group

It is trite to note as revealed in tables 3 and 4 that the younger speakers aged 30 and below scarcely used synonyms and descriptive phrases; hence the percentage of the use of synonyms and descriptive phrases is relatively low compared to speakers within the ages of 31 and above. This may be attributed to the degree of attrition in the lexicon of speakers within the ages of 30 and below. Although, it may be argued that speakers below the age of 20 may still be acquiring the language, they ought to have at least the basic items.

5.2 Incorrect

It can be noted that age group 31-40 had the highest percentage of inaccurate responses with 9.2%; while surprisingly, ≤ 10 group had no inaccurate responses at all (Table 6). Other groups 11-20, 21-30, 41-50, 51-60, 61-70 and 71-80 had 8.0%, 1%, 6.4%, 7%, 6.2%, 7% respectively. This however does not reveal the true representation of the use of incorrect words per age group. This is because it can also be deemed to be incorrect when respondents had no response at all for a particular item. In this case, age groups ≤ 10 and 21-30 which had a higher percentage of "no response" ostensibly because they did not know the correct responses were also not correct for those tokens. Therefore, inaccurate response and "no response" are combines as incorrect. This then depicts more clearly the percentage of the incorrect responses given per age group (Table 9), and in turn reveals the levels of lexical attrition in each age group.

Table 9 presents the percentage of incorrect responses. The ≤ 10 age group had the highest number of incorrect responses with 87.6% followed by the 21-30 age group with

57.9%. Others, 11-20, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61-70 and 71-80 had 45.5%, 25.7%, 19.3%, 10.9% and 7.0% of incorrect responses respectively. This shows that although ≤ 10 group had the lowest percentage of inaccurate response, it still has the highest percentage of incorrect response. The implication of this is that the ≤ 10 group would rather give no response (which is itself incorrect) than give an inaccurate response.

Age group	Incorrect (%)
≤ 10	87.6
11-20	45.5
21-30	57.9
31-40	25.7
41-50	19.3
51-60	10.9
61-70	10.3
71-80	7.0

Table 9: percentage incorrect responses per age group

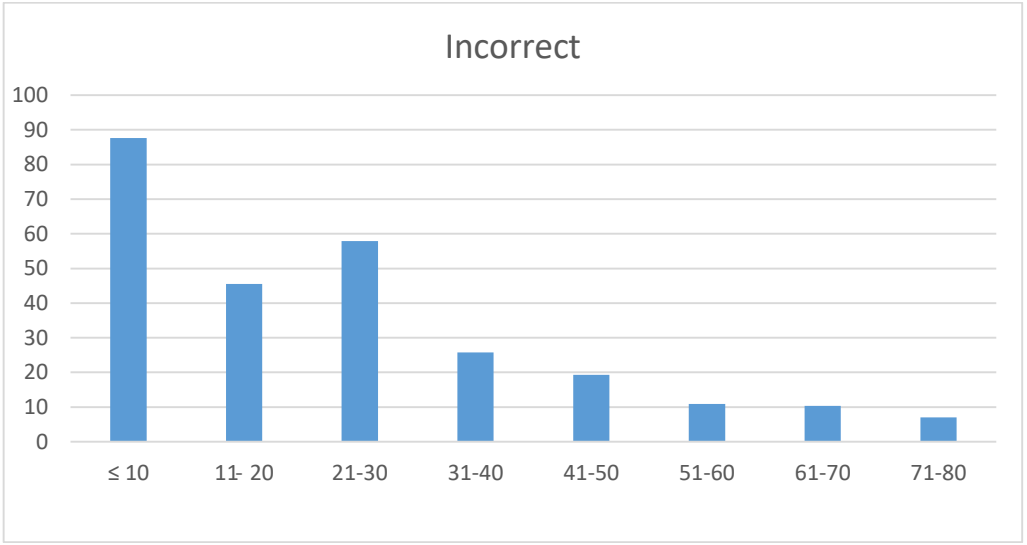

Figure 6: percentage incorrect responses per age group

Another proof that shows the attrition has permeated the lexicon of Uhami is borrowing. It is shown from the result that only the 71-80 group did not use any borrowed word; not because they had no contact with other languages but because they still had a high level of retention of Uhami basic lexicon. Borrowing is evident in the lexicon of the other groups, which shows their contact with Yoruba and English. However, speakers generally tended

not to resort to borrowing when it was obvious that they did not know the correct response. They rather gave wrong responses or nothing than borrowing. This is indicative of their attitude towards code-mixing with other languages. It must be noted that participants were not given prior instruction not to use borrowed words.

A further inference from the results is that a distinction can be drawn between exact lexical retention, partial lexical knowledge and replacement strategies among the participants of this study. Whereas, the category "accurate" reflects exactness in the retention of lexical items by the participants, partial lexical knowledge is indicated by descriptive phrases, synonym and borrowing. This is because, while speakers achieve communication with the use of these options and cannot be deemed to be wrong, the use of the options still indicates that those participants were only able to navigate a state of partial lexical loss by resorting to the use of descriptive phrases, synonym and borrowing. This then projects the use of descriptive phrases, synonym and borrowing as replacement strategies in cases of attrition by the participants.

6 Conclusion

This study examined lexical attrition among speakers of Uhami aged 80 and below. The participants were divided into eight groups to understand the extent of attrition across different age brackets. It was found that a wide intergenerational gap exists between the lexicons of younger and older Uhami speakers - a clear feature of lexical attrition in the language. Many lexical items were lost in the lexicon of younger speakers below the age of 30. This implies that these younger generations were either not receiving proper transmission of the Uhami lexicon or that the older speakers were failing to pass it down to them. The transmission situation was even worse among speakers aged 10 and under. However, older speakers are not entirely immune to attrition; based on the figures, they also used loanwords, which is another indicator of attrition. Further research involving a larger number of participants, as well as an investigation into specific lexical classes vulnerable to attrition, is recommended to substantiate these findings.

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