

Effects of Modernity on African Languages: A Review of Naija and Urhobo Languages in Nigeria

Ufuoma Emmanuel Tonukari¹, Lucky Ejobee², Eseoghene Aleh³, Aloysius Ikechukwu Orjinta⁴

^{1,2,3}Department of Languages & Linguistics,
Faculty of Arts, Delta State University,
Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria

⁴University of Nigeria, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT--- *Studies over the years have shown that there is a swift change in the language situation in post colonial Africa especially in the urban centers where some new forms of linguistic codes are being introduced over existing ones thus initiating a new nomenclature which could alter the linguistic pattern of Africa. To a large extent, this change is ascribed to the growing effect of modernization and the dynamics of language (which is normal and unstoppable). This paper has two objectives. First, a modest attempt to present the language shift in Africa by looking at some countries with particular reference to the Nigerian situation where Naijá (hitherto called the Nigerian Pidgin) is highly influential and serves as lingua franca for the majority of the population of Nigeria. Secondly, to look at one of the Edoid languages (Urhobo) in the Southern part of Nigeria, with reference to the effect of modernity on culture to ascertain if Naijá is a killer language. The general findings show that Naijá will continue to subdue Urhobo language and other languages in Nigeria if appropriate steps are not taken.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Different factors are responsible for linguistic change but very often, it is traced to a contact situation at a designated period of time. Hence the assertion by some researchers that language contact is prone to language change which is evident in many speech communities. In respect to change we shall align our thought with the quote by Robert Nicholai (2007:11) on language contact that:

There come times when the place of fact in a descriptive configuration changes, when new topics become relevant, when all phenomena can no longer be easily accounted for, when explanatory principles lose their absolute validity. A change of perspective upsets the descriptive framework and diverts attention to new problems which presage conceptual renewal and theoretical reconstruction founded on a changed understanding of the reality to be described. The subject of language contact is currently undergoing a process of this kind.

This process of change highlighted here could be said to be universal because it is felt virtually in all linguistic communities all over the world although to different degrees. It has given rise to some new studies as Matras (2008:1) rightly highlighted:

Manifestations of language contact are found in a great variety of domains, including language acquisition, language processing and production, conversation and discourse, social functions of language and language policy, typology and language change, and more.

There have been lots of works on language oriented activities in the Americas, Asia, Australia and Europe but not necessarily in Africa where 25 per cent of the world's languages are spoken, Gerrit J. Dimmendaal and F. K. Erhard Voeltz (2007). When language issues patterning Africa are discussed, two languages basically come to mind. One is the language inherited from the colonial masters and the other is the indigenous African language spoken by a given linguistic community. Language in Africa has become, over the years, not only an indispensable complement but the most permanent instrument of upholding culture. It articulates, refines and promotes cultural evolution as well as transmits and translates trends, Tonukari (2009). Today, there seems to be a resentment given the dwindling situation of African culture which is alleged to be as a result of the presence of Western languages and cultures.

In this work, we focus on the language change in Africa with particular reference on Naijá (sometimes referred to, all through this work by its former name, Nigerian Pidgin), which is seen as a strong force waxing stronger with the

capacity to reshape the linguistic pattern of the country with direct effect on ethnic languages. We shall attempt to analyze the outcome of some changes from the perspective of speakers of some African languages as presented by some researchers as well as taking a particular example of this change of language attitude of the Urhobo people, found in the southern part of Nigeria. We shall be more particular how language contact has shaped or enriched the Urhobo language over the years, the recent attitude towards the language which has given birth to a new cultural activism aimed not only at cultural documentation but for revitalization of the language.

2. CONTEMPORARY LANGUAGE SITUATION IN URBAN CENTERS IN AFRICA

In the analysis of the interface between colonization and globalization in the African context, Vigouroux and Mufuene (2008:1) insist among other factors that there is an emergence of new language repertoire and new division of labour among the coexistent language, as well as new dynamics of competition and selection among them regarding their vitality. Thus, the language situation in Africa could be said to be facing some inevitable changes and in the near future we shall either be seeing some new sets of languages or redefining old languages as a result of ‘language shift’, a term first used by Uriel Weinreich (1968:68) to paint the picture of change from what he explains as ‘habitual use of one language to that of another.’ We would rather prefer the definition of the term ‘language shift’ given by Dauenhauer Nora Marks and Dauenhauer Richard (1998) quoting Fishman (1991) who refers to the fact that over the last two or more generations, language use in most native communities has shifted, and the shift is toward loss of the indigenous, tribal language in favour of national and world languages. This shift according to Rajend Mesthrie et al (2000) is “the replacement of one language by another as the primary means of communication and socialization within a community.” In the African context, this would be more outstanding especially in the urban centers where there is an increase in social interactions of people from different ethnic background. A common feature of such interaction is change in the dominant language which according to Rajend Mesthrie et al (2000) “are due to ‘external’ influence from other languages, rather than with ‘internal’ change.” In this state of change, borrowing of words from other languages is not an issue but rather a predictable phenomenon obtainable in all languages.

Linguistic changes ravaging the big cities in Africa have been brought to the limelight by some scholars in their works over the years. Sophie Babault work (2001) shows clearly from her survey that the young people in Madagascar, especially in the big cities like Antananarivo, inculcate a lot of French words when they speak Malagasy (a language spoken throughout Madagascar by the entire population). De Féral (2004) describes the use of ‘Camfranglais’ in Cameroun which is gradually becoming the language of the youth. *Camfranglais* is a mélange, a juxtaposition of some Cameroonian ethnic languages, French and English to arrive at a given linguistic code which is spreading in the major cities like Douala, Yaounde, Nkongsamba, Garoua, Bamenda, etc. Suzanne Lafage (1998) takes a critical look at the situation too in Abidjan, Cote d’Ivoire where a new form of language, ‘*Nouchi*’ which is believed to have emerged from Adjamé, a densely populated area of Abidjan where they have people from different ethnic backgrounds. This language is not only reshaping the French language spoken in Cote d’Ivoire, but it brings about freedom to create so many new words. Take for instance some examples given by Lafage (1998: 286) “*il dit je kata dja c’est Pape lui même qui est là*” In this sentence, although the words are wrongly spelt but what is paramount is the complete absence of conjunction which is like a trademark for most young Ivoirians especially the ones residing in the Adjamé area of Abidjan.

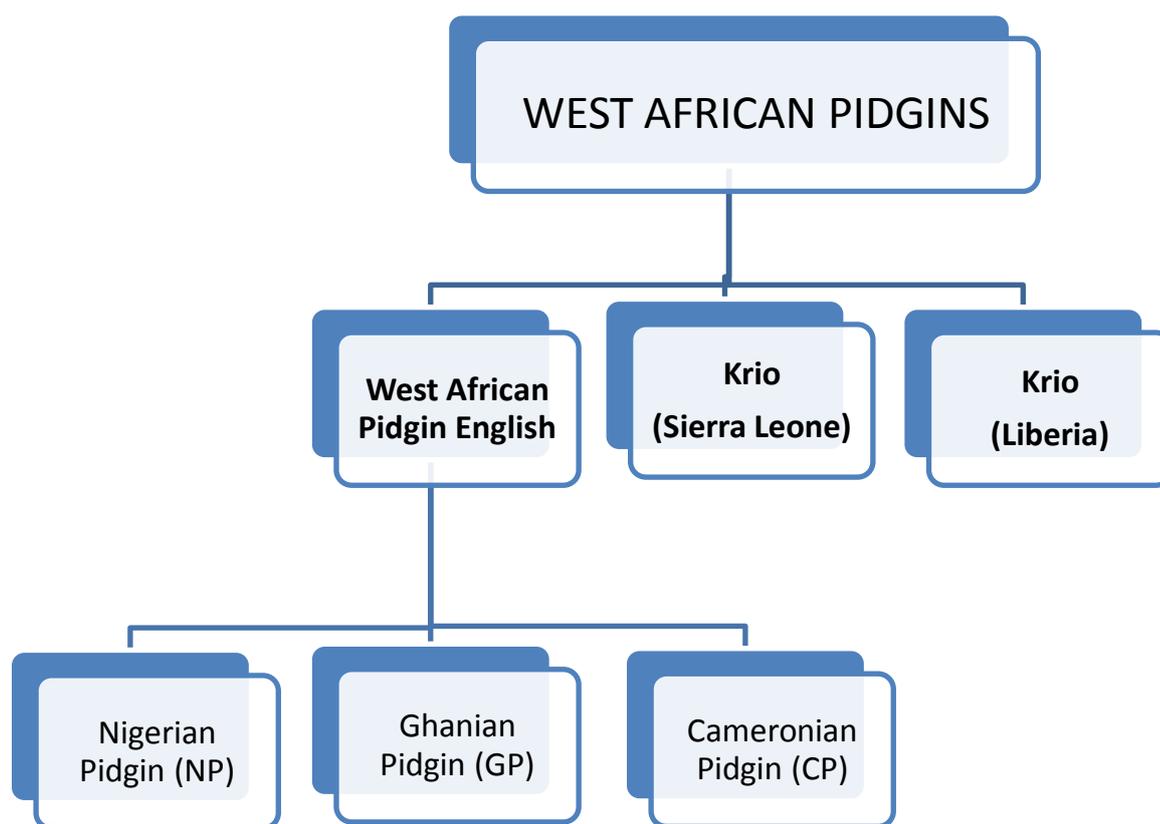
3. LANGUAGE SITUATION IN NIGERIA

The linguistic ‘twist’ in Africa is also evident in Nigeria which Blench (1998) classifies as “... the most complex country in Africa, linguistically, and one of the most complex in the world” where the English language which is the official language has evolved to have a variety peculiar to Nigeria which is known today as Nigerian English. It ranges from how words are pronounced to grammatical structure. Phonologically in Nigerian English there is often no distinction between words like *chip* and *cheap*; *caught* and *court*. In the grammatical structure, one hears “they understand *themselves*” instead of “they understand one another”. But the most remarkable language one will notice everywhere in Nigeria is the Nigerian Pidgin, the only veritable language of inter-language communication, a lingua franca.

We shall adopt the definition of pidgin as given by George Yule (2007:233-234) as “a variety of a language (e.g English) which develops for some practical purpose, such as trading among groups of people who had a lot of contact but who did not know each other’s languages.” In the case of Nigerian Pidgin, it is the outcome of the contact between Europeans and Nigerians. Obviously, they came to Africa through ships and the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria, given its disposition to the Bight of Benin became a gateway for the early Europeans to gain access to the heart of Nigeria sailing through the creeks upwards the River Niger. This is why there is a very strong and uncontestable agreement among scholars that the Nigerian pidgin originated from the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. This is the view of Elugbe and Omamor (1991). There is the need to clarify the term Niger-Delta. It is the region where the river Niger, a major river that took its source from the Futa Djallon Mountain located in the southern part of Guinea near Guinea’s border with Sierra Leone spanning through many countries in West Africa, empties into the Atlantic Ocean through series of creeks and rivers.

The three southern states of Nigeria; Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers are said to be the core Niger-Delta but elaborating on the elements of this definition of Niger-Delta, it is broad enough that it encompasses Edo, Cross River, Akwa Ibom states of Nigeria. Geopolitically, these six states which forms the Niger-Delta region is referred to as the South-South states. The Niger Delta region is very rich and it is considered as Nigeria’s economic strength because it is naturally endowed with viable deposits of hydrocarbon and gas reserves which are the main source of revenue for the nation. It should be noted that, in some context, the Niger-Delta region will be given a different definition which conflict with our working definition.

We cannot discuss Naijá (Nigerian Pidgin) without recourse to West African Pidgin, which is a form of ‘restricted English’ Holm (1988: 409). A cursory look at this field reveals that West African pidgins are made up of three sub-varieties: Krio, spoken in Sierra Leone, Krio spoken in Liberia and West African Pidgin English. The later (West African Pidgin English) has three sub-varieties and they are spoken in Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon. They are referred to simply as Ghanian Pidgin (GP), Nigerian Pidgin (NP) and Cameroonian Pidgin (CP).



They are all mutually intelligible. Huber (1999:75) tries to establish the relationship that exists between the Pidgin English(es) and krio that existed in all the English speaking territories in West Africa by plunging into the historical development which has often been neglected by researchers showing not only the similarities within them but also to establish the direction and ‘influence between West African and New World varieties of restructured English’. But in its development process, scholars like John Holm (2004:115) believes that the varieties of Pidgin English spoken in West African including that spoken in Nigeria “were also shaped by the migrations of African Americans to Africa throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.” This cannot be ruled out but whatever be the case, it is glaring that pidgin is widely spoken in different parts of Nigeria and it is already Creolizing in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria, Mowarin M & Tonukari U.E (2004), Igboanusi (2008). This has been emphasized some few years back by Faraclas (1996) who gave a projection of speaker of Nigerian Pidgin by the year 2000 that the number of speakers would have exceeded 40 million and insisted that the number of people speaking Nigerian pidgin as their first language has already surpassed one million. His projection is correct given the result of some studies carried out on NP in recent times.

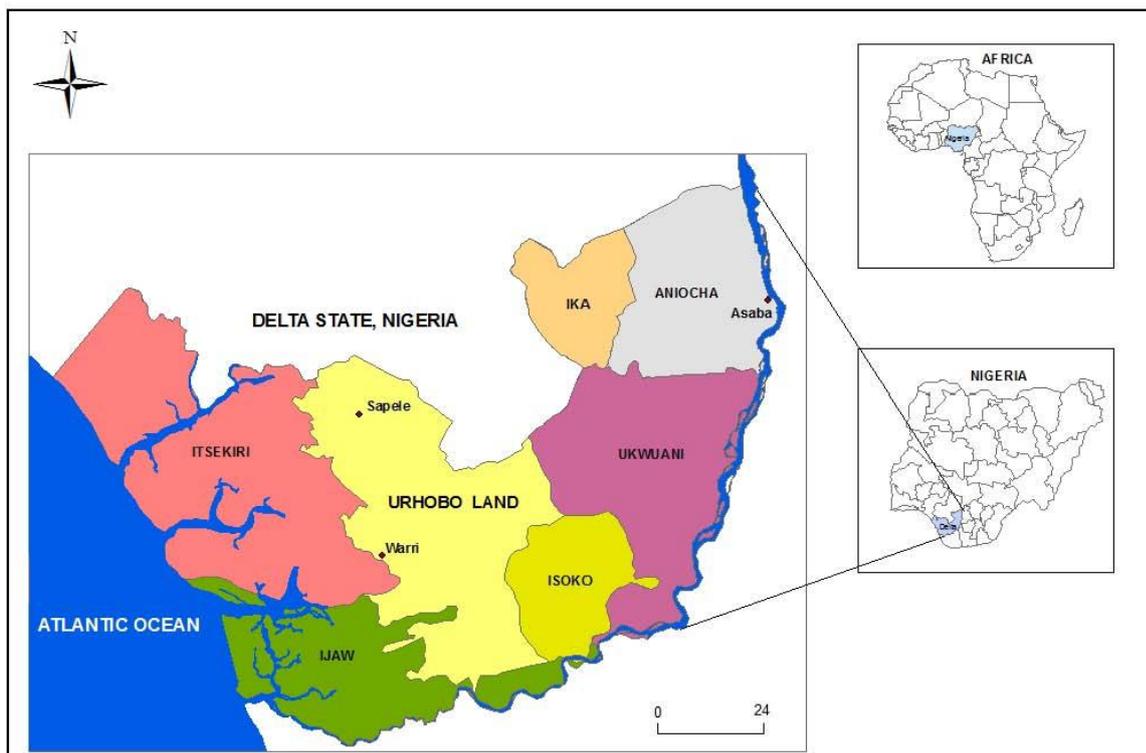
Studies have shown that Nigerian pidgin strives better in multi-ethnic communities than in monolingual ones and this is evident in the Niger-Delta region given the linguistic terrain where there are so many languages. This is further asserted by Igboanusi (2008) in the survey he conducted on how often university students in Nigeria use Pidgin English. The survey focuses on the University of Benin in the Niger-Delta region and University of Ibadan in the western part of the country where they speak predominantly Yoruba, a monolingual speech community. Igboanusi

(2008) quotes Elugbe and Omamor (1991: 141) that, ‘those who have the most favorable attitude to Nigerian Pidgin are those who belong to the ‘community with higher linguistic diversity.’ He concludes by saying “more respondents from Benin have shown more favorable attitudes towards the use of Nigerian Pidgin in education than respondents from Ibadan”. Today the language, Nigerian Pidgin, has since found its way into all sphere of life in Nigeria. In the police force it is like the lingua franca as well as the military. It is the ‘official’ language of their barracks; it is the ‘unofficial language’ amongst students in many public and private universities around the country (Elugbe and Omamor, 1991; Elugbe, 1995; Bamgbose, 1995; Egbokhare; 2001). In the music industry, musicians are conscious that in order to reach majority of the people they have to use pidgin which could be said to be popularized by Fela Anikulakpo Kuti (1938-1997) with his Afro-beat music which started in the 1960. Today we have internationally acclaimed musicians like Tu Face Idibia, P Square, Timaya, Charlie Boy who sing in Nigerian Pidgin. In the entertainment industry, comedians have captured the flavor of Pidgin English to incite the non stop laughing shows organized both in Nigeria and other countries where they go to perform. The Nigerian Pidgin has been used side by side with other indigenous languages but in some cases like the Urhobo land, it is assuming a real undefined position.

4. EFFECT OF LANGUAGE CONTACT ON THE URHOBO PEOPLE

Urhobo lies in a region of the African continent where survival occupies the thoughts and deeds of individuals and communities, Peter P. Ekeh (2007: 7). Urhobo is the language spoken by the Urhobo people in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. They were in the former (defunct) Bendel state of Nigeria which was divided into two states (Edo State and Delta State) in August 1991 and now they are currently in Delta State. The exact geographical position where one could find the Urhobo people has long been established by Otite (1969, 1980) who claims that “The Urhobo people now live in a territory bounded by latitudes 6⁰ and 5⁰ 15’ North and Longitudes 5⁰ 40’ and 6⁰ 25’ East. Their neighbours are the Isoko to the South East, the Itsekiri to the West, the Bini to the North, the Ijaw to the South and Ukwani (Kwale-Aboh) to the North-East.”

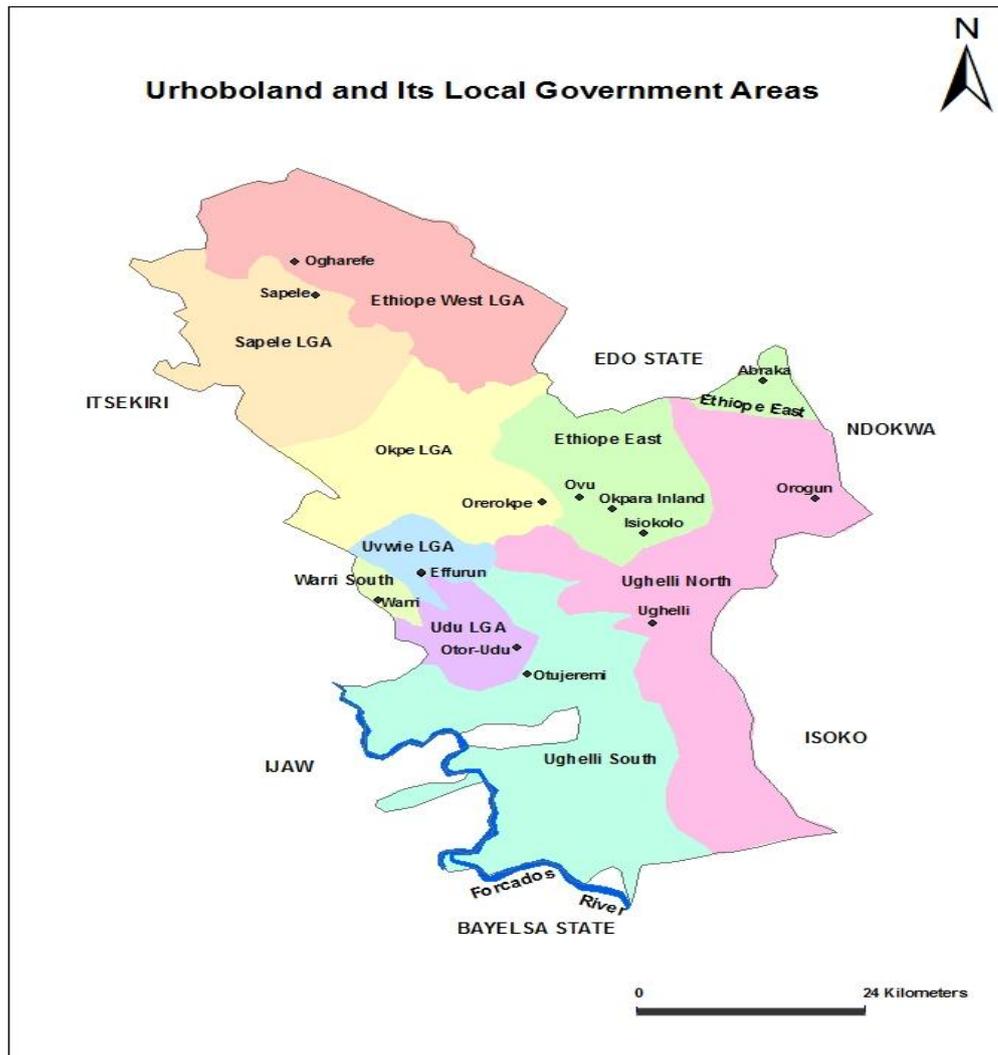
A Map of Delta State, Nigeria, Showing Urhoboland and Other Ethnic Nationalities



Map drawn by Professor Francis Odemero, Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, USA

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The Urhobo people, given its numerical strength as the biggest ethnic group in Delta state, wades a lot of political influence in the state. A cursory look at the territory reveals that the Urhobo land occupies what is known as Delta Central Senatorial District and it comprises of eight local government areas as shown in the map below.



Map drawn by Professor Francis Odemerho, Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, USA copyright Urhobo Historical Society

Ojaide (2009:5) place Urhobo as belonging to the Niger-Congo family of West African Languages with commentaries on how it is intricately tied to the other Pan-Edo languages, but Aziza (2007:21) is more specific when she says that “Urhobo is a southwestern Edoid language spoken extensively in Delta State, Nigeria.”

The Urhobo language is greatly influenced like other tribes along the coastline by pre and post colonial activities. Historically, it is agreed largely by scholars that, the Portuguese, in their trade expeditions, were the first to get to the Niger-Delta region before other European nationals. To a large extent, each of them left some form of traits in most local languages in the Niger-Delta. Today so many words which probably did not exist in Urhobo language could be traced to the English people who came after the Portuguese and colonized the country. These loanwords or borrowings according to Onose (2007:87) “were in most cases made to conform to the morphological pattern of the Urhobo before they were fully accepted in the language.” Here is some of the list of words as given by Onose;

English	Urhobo
Church	Ishóshi
Catechist	Ikátíkísti/ Ikátíkísi
Radio	Irédíó

Television	itení Vishoni
Telephone	Itenifónu
Motor	Imóto
Motorcycle	Imótosakoro (or recently Imashini or Okada)
School	Isukúru
Teacher	Itísha
Dictionary	idishónári
Shorts/knickers	Iníka
Trousers	Itróza
Coat	Ikótu
Powder	Ipóda
Tomatoes	Itomátosi
Kerosene	Ikrasí
Biscuit	Ibisikítí
Butter	Ibóta
Bread	Ibrédi
Pawpaw	Ipopó
Doctor	Idokító
Nurse	Inósi
Lawyer	Inoyá
Court	Ikótu
Jesus	Ijísosi/IJésu
Moses	Imósisi

Like most Nigerian languages, the Urhobo language is a tone language. This is well explained by Aziza (2007). She emphasized that Urhobo has the type of tone system which is classified as the terraced level tone system. There exist other distinct features peculiar to the Urhobo language like the grammatical tones, how positive and negative sentences are formed, etc.

There are comparative studies contrasting Urhobo language with other languages like Naijá. Mowarin (2009) observes that ‘the elaboration and creolization of Naijá has resulted in an increase in the language’s vocabulary inventory to meet the communicative needs of its speakers. The increase in vocabulary inventory evolves from introduction of new lexemes and from the lexico-semantic processes in the language.’ There is still the wide spread use of Naijá which is a concern in some cases because it tends to give a great challenge to some indigenous languages like Urhobo and even to English, the official language spoken the country. The effect is seen in the performance of students especially at the senior secondary school level where there seems to be a decline in their performance in English language as a subject in their final leaving school certificate organized by West Africa Examinations Council (WAEC). Naijá is destroying our languages; this is evident if one takes a look at some given speech communities like Urhobo. We must bear in mind that there is a great difference between the Urhobo people in the urban areas and the ones in the villages in terms of articulation, projection of the language and culture. The people in the villages could be rightly referred to as the custodians of culture given their roles in ceremonies, rites and rituals. However, the presence of Naijá has made a great

change on the Urhobo language and culture both in the rural and urban areas and it is often attributed to the effect of modernity. Prominent among these changes is the effect of code switching and code-mixing which is a common feature among the Urhobo people especially those living in the urban areas. Amongst them, one could hardly hear sentences constructed exclusively in Urhobo language instead, one hears sentences like these ones:

- *Mi guono travel ode* – I want to travel tomorrow
- *Wo worry oma we-e, mi ka foni esiefa* – don't worry yourself, I will call you later.
- *In short, e teacher na wicked i brabra*. In short the teacher is very wicked.
- *Mi laiki omote na* – I like the girl.
- *Frankly speaking, omo na wicked i* – Frankly speaking, the child is wicked.

The sociolinguistic background of the Urhobo people especially those in urban areas who have acquired some level of education tend to be more engaged in this exercise. This is not peculiar to the Urhobo people because it is a concept commonly encountered in most communities where bilingualism prevails. Amuda (1994) is of the opinion that since it makes communication easier it will continue to be used. The concern for such attitude however, is more on the cultural effect which shapes the way of life of the people. Factors responsible for this include code switching, code mixing and other language related 'vices' that could lead to drastic change as highlighted by many researchers. For instance, in his analysis of Urhobo language, Darah (2007) states that, illiteracy and deafness are some of the negative consequences of urbanization with respect to language and culture. He explains that:

The situation since the 1970 has been so bad that there are now several generations of Urhobo children who neither understand nor speak Urhobo. This is tantamount to cultural suicide...the alternative of Delta pidgin is a communicative necessity but not a substitute. (p.108).

It is pertinent to note here that adults are also caught up in this communicative necessity of using Naijá (which Darah refers to as *Delta pidgin*) because of the role that the language plays in the region. In most sociopolitical and economic activities, Naijá would be the best language to use because of the multiethnic situation of the area and it is challenging Urhobo language in its own enclave threatening it to go the way of other endangered languages. It is so glaring that from survey taken in Urhobo land, most Urhobo children raised in urban environments as one can notice in children in Warri/Sapele axis now only utter the common greetings: mingwo (*miguwo*) (I am kneeling down) if you answer with *vren do, mavo?* (Rise up, how are you?) You will get a blank and a bewildered look, Darah (2007).

Urhobo people living in urban centres using the language are contending with the strong influence of Naijá. The two languages are like two opposing forces in the same camp, one (Urhobo) is well organized and trying to keep the old tradition while the other (Naijá) is trying to create a tradition for itself and growing naturally. It is the same people but two languages and one is moving faster than the other which raises the question if the faster one (Naijá) is a killer language. It is difficult to ascertain now since both languages are still evolving but time would surely spell out the outcome of modernity on these two languages.

5. CONCLUSION

The influence of Naijá in a multiethnic situation would be an edge for it to grow faster while the languages in that vicinity could succumb to its superiority if much effort is not done by the people concern to check this influence. Today, there is a downturn in the numbers of people speaking Urhobo properly and this could apply to other Nigerian Languages while there is a great increase in the number of people speaking Naijá. It is obvious that the two languages can never grow in the same proportion since Naijá is being welcomed virtually in all nook and crannies in the country. There is a high tendency that Naijá would put all other Nigerian Languages on the defensive angle. It will be useless for any Nigerian language to guide against the spread and acceptability of Naijá, instead, the nation (like the Urhobo nation) should build a strong ground amongst its people by encouraging and persuading them to speak their native language. This will make speakers to be good in both languages (Urhobo and Naijá). The Urhobo language should be properly documented so that the basic linguistic data can be retrieved in the future. This will not only improve accountability but it will go a long way to truly make available research resources to future researchers of the language.

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