

LANGUAGE ATTITUDE AND MINORITY LANGUAGE SHIFT AMONG AHAN YOUTHS IN OMUO-EKITI

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigated language attitude and the occurrence of language shift among youths speaking the Ahan language in Omuo-Ekiti community, Ekiti State, Nigeria. The study was motivated by the researcher's observation that Ahan, a minority language in Omuo-Ekiti was gradually becoming less relevant among young speakers, as many of them increasingly adopted the dominant Omuo-Ekiti dialect, Yoruba and English due to the prevailing language attitude and social influences. The study was underpinned by Language Attitude Theory and sociolinguistic approaches to language shift. The study employed a descriptive research design to examine the attitude of youths towards the Ahan language and the factors contributing to language shift. Data were obtained through questionnaires and interviews. The findings revealed that the language attitude of the youths towards Ahan were largely negative and indifferent. Many participants perceived the language as having limited prestige, social relevance and economic value, which contributed to reduced interest in its continued use. In contrast, the dominant languages were associated with education, social advancement, wider communication and economic opportunities and were, therefore, preferred in different domains of communication. The study further revealed that the increasing preference for these dominant languages had contributed to a gradual decline in the use and transmission of Ahan among younger speakers. The study concluded that negative language attitude and the perceived socioeconomic advantages of dominant languages were important factors contributing to language shift and the reduced use of Ahan language among the youths in Omuo-Ekiti community.

Keywords: Ahan language, language attitude, language shift, youth, minority language.

Introduction

Language attitude is a significant factor that determines the use and maintenance of languages, which leads either to their flourishing or death in multilingual and multicultural societies. In addition to linguistic and demographic variables, it is the attitude of the speakers toward their language that dictates its usage, neglect, or death. The discipline of sociolinguistics acknowledges the predictive power of the language attitude as an influential determinant of language maintenance or shift, especially among younger people.

In multilingual societies like Nigeria, language attitude tends to be influenced by various socio-economic, political, and historical factors. For instance, dominant languages like English, and even regional languages like Yoruba, are considered languages of learning and development, whereas minority languages are seen as rural and outdated. Such differential attitude toward languages results in unequal language value judgments and can affect the speaker's attitude toward language transmission. The linguistic reality of Omuo-Ekiti can be cited in this regard. The town is characterized by linguistic diversity as it uses Ahan as the minority indigenous language in addition to the main dialect of Yoruba and English. Although the language acts as an ethnic marker for its speakers, socially it occupies a secondary position. This trend is especially characteristic of Ahan youth, who are reluctant or even ashamed to use it in their daily lives.

The evidence drawn from observations within the community and reactions from youth revealed that the status of Ahan seems to be declining relative to the prestige associated with the dominant languages in Omuo-Ekiti. Use of Ahan in the social environment is discouraged by fears of mockery or criticism, whereas the use of Yoruba Omuo-Ekiti language or English is perceived to be a socially beneficial quality.

This research took place in Omuo-Ekiti in Ekiti East Local Government Area of Ekiti State in Nigeria. The linguistic profile of Omuo-Ekiti is varied, comprising Ahan-the minority indigenous language – along with the majority Omuo-Ekiti Yoruba language and English. This makes Omuo-Ekiti an appropriate area for studying language attitude influenced by contact with major languages.

It follows, therefore, that a study of the attitude of Ahan youth towards their native language is necessary in order to examine the present status of and the future possibilities for this language. The fact that attitude determines motivation and loyalty makes negative attitude of youth a serious danger for the life of a language. This paper seeks to explore the attitude of Ahan youth towards their language the factors that influence this attitude and how far such attitude influences language shift within the Ahan community by examining the perceptions and evaluations of Ahan youth towards their language. The study primarily focuses on exploring the language attitude of Ahan youth in Omuo-Ekiti towards their native language and the effects of such attitude on their language choices. Specifically, the study seeks to, examine the general attitude of Ahan youths toward their mother tongue identity , whether this attitude is positive, negative, or indifferent in nature; identify the sociocultural, educational, and psychological factors that shape language attitude among Ahan youths, with particular attention to peer pressure, language prestige, education, intermarriage, and social mobility, assess how Ahan youths perceive their mother tongue in relation to dominant languages such as Omuo-Ekiti dialect, Yoruba, and English, especially in terms of prestige, usefulness, and social value; and, analyse the relationship between language attitude and language behavior, focusing on how youths' perceptions of Ahan influence their willingness to use the language across different social domains.

Language Attitude in Multilingual Societies

The attitude towards language has for long been acknowledged in sociolinguistics as an important determinant of language choice, maintenance, and shift especially within multilingual communities. Apart from structural considerations like population and institutional backing, the speaker's attitude towards a particular language is often what determines its utilization or neglect. Therefore, the attitude towards language has generally been seen as a reliable index of language vitality.

Conceptualising Language Attitude

Language attitude may be defined as the evaluation that speakers have about their own languages or other languages. According to Adegbia (2008) 'language attitude is a language speaker's evaluative orientation towards a particular language.' Similarly, Baker (2002) describes language attitude as a "combination of beliefs, emotions and behaviour". It should be noted that according to these definitions, language attitude directly affects language use.

For instance, people exhibit their positive attitude when speaking a certain language and try to pass it on to others. On the other hand, people tend to neglect languages because of negative attitude toward them.

Language attitude is formed either internally, or through individual experiences, or externally, or through socialization. Ellis (1994) emphasizes that attitude is dynamic in nature, being formed through constant interaction with the surrounding environment. As for multilingual environments, the development of language attitude can take place against the backdrop of power relations. This means that the majority language gained prestige and the minority language loses it.

Types of Language Attitude

In many cases, academics have noted that there are two types of language attitude: negative language attitude and positive language attitude. Individuals with positive language attitude feel a sense of pride and loyalty for their language and they are committed to preserving their language. On the other hand, negative language attitude includes feelings such as shame and indifference, making people reluctant to identify with their own language.

According to Adegbija (2004), negative attitude towards native languages in Nigeria arises as a result of the historical sociopolitical structure where English is the preferred language while the dominant languages like Yoruba are favoured over native dialects. This negative attitude is reinforced within speakers themselves, especially young people, because they are conscious of the status of their indigenous dialects.

Language Attitude in Multilingual Nigerian Contexts

The linguistically diverse nature of Nigeria with high levels of multilingualism makes it an ideal setting for conducting investigations of language attitude. Bamgbose (1993) finds that minority languages in Nigeria are commonly associated with low status since they are confined to fewer domains and have little institutional support. The official language, English, enjoys a higher prestige since it is linked to education and development, and Yoruba and other major languages have wider communicative domains.

Research shows that language hierarchies impact youths' perceptions and attitude toward minority languages negatively. According to Adegbija (2004), youths often regard their minority languages as having no relevance in modern times and consequently avoid using them. This has caused a decrease in language transmission between generations. In addition, Ajiboye, Bamgbose, and Salami (2011) identify peer pressure, media influences, and schooling as some of the factors that contribute to this phenomenon.

Youth Language Attitude and Language Shift

Youth is of particular importance in studies concerning language attitude since they are not only the current speakers but also future transmitters of a language. It is well established that youth attitude has great potential in predicting the results of language shift. If youth consider their native language as less prestigious and useful, they tend to abandon using it.

According to Batibo (2005) many instances of language shift among minorities in Africa do not stem from demographical processes but rather result from attitudinal shifts. Young people start to see dominant languages as languages of opportunities and success. Therefore, minorities start to abandon using their language, leading to a loss of proficiency.

Language Attitude and Identity

Language becomes an important symbol of one's identity since it helps him/her identify his/her ethnicity and culture. Language attitude becomes a reflection of group identity according to Giles, Bourhis & Taylor

(1977). People who develop negative attitude towards their language are likely to distance themselves not only from the language but also from their ethnic identity.

According to Fishman (1999), language shift becomes a manifestation of identity change especially for members of minority groups who have been integrated within the dominant cultural milieu. Youngsters choose the language of the majority as part of the means of social acceptance, stigma avoidance, or expression of modern identity, but this could lead to cultural alienation and loss of the linguistic heritage.

Language Attitude and Language Endangerment

The concept of language vitality outlined by UNESCO (2003) highlights speaker's attitude as a major component of the endangerment process of a language. Speakers belonging to groups demonstrating low loyalty and negative attitude towards their language face higher risks of language decline than those showing higher speaker counts. In cases where attitude deters the speakers from employing a language in everyday situations, particularly young people, language transmission becomes impossible, and language shifts occur.

The study of minority languages in Nigeria may portend that there exists identical patterns of negative attitude held by young generations resulting in language endangerment and loss.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the language attitude theory and sociolinguistic theory that explain the interaction between language attitude or language behavior and language endangerment. The two theories served as a solid foundation for interpreting the role of disregard and negative perceptions in undermining language use and transmission in the community.

Language Attitude Theory

Language Attitude Theory focuses on social and individual beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes towards a specific language and language variety. Additionally, it also studies the impact of these attitudes on language use, acquisition, maintenance, and shift. Wallace Lambert made a significant contribution to the study of language attitudes, since he examined the relationship between attitudes, bilingualism, and language behavior. According to Wallace Lambert (1967), who proposed the matched-guise technique to measure language attitudes in 1967, positive attitudes, are more likely to result in language learning and maintenance. There are also numerous studies, conducted by different researchers that help understand how language attitude affects language acquisition and use. For instance, Gile's (1970) search on language attitudes and speech evaluation in 1970 revealed that one's attitude towards a particular language might depend on the social and status characteristics of its speakers. Therefore, the analysis of language attitudes seems to be essential and helpful in different contexts of language acquisition and use. Language Attitude Theory can be used to explore the phenomenon of language endangerment because it helps identify how language speakers perceive and evaluate their language. Such information is vital for understanding whether a language will be continued or be used by members of a particular community or not if a language is perceived negatively or if people speak it without any pride, it is possible that this language will eventually be abandoned. Moreover, such a negative attitude may result in language shift, since people may choose to adopt another, more respected and popular language that is deemed to be beneficial for communication. On the other hand, a positive attitude towards a language might be more effective for its maintenance and transmission to younger generations. In fact, people are likely to preserve their native language and culture when they recognize their value and worth. Thus, language attitude theory is crucial in the study of present linguistic practices because it helps determine the current language attitudes of the target population. Specifically, in this study, Language Attitude Theory can be utilized as an appropriate framework for analyzing participants' language attitudes. It helps explain why Ahan Youth Speaker chooses to use Omuo and Yoruba Language instead of their indigenous Ahan Language and whether they plan to continue using it.

Ethnography of Communication Theory

Ethnography of Communication Theory focuses on investigating how age, gender, education, occupation, social class, ethnicity, culture, and geography affect language or how people speak. The researcher who contributed to the development of the Ethnography of Communication Theory is Dell Hymes (1974). He introduced the notion of communicative competence, which refers to understanding language in relation to the society and culture in which it is used. Additionally, Joshua Fishman (1972) also made significant contributions to the development of the Ethnography of Communication Theory through his work on language choice, preservation, shift, and social identity. The Ethnography of Communication Theory helps understand language endangerment because it explains how and why several languages change under the influence of social factors such as education, employment, government, and other institutions. For example, if a language starts losing its significance due to many people adopting another language at work, then it is likely that the abandoned language will be significantly reduced among future generations. In other words, if a given language is used less among people of the younger generation compared to the older generation, then it can be assumed that the language is endangered. Therefore, the Ethnography of Communication Theory explains language maintenance, shift, and endangerment, which have an impact on language choice and social identity.

Methodology

The research uses a descriptive sociolinguistic approach in analyzing the language attitude of Ahan youths toward their mother tongue. This approach is appropriate in studying the speakers' opinions about language and the use and shift consequences that may result from such attitude.

The research took place in Omuo-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria. This study area is a multilingual environment is used alongside other dominant languages such as the Omuo-Ekiti dialect, Yoruba, and English. The target population for the study consisted of Ahan youths in the age range of fifteen to thirty-five years. This group represents active language users of Ahan Language. Eighty (80) participants were sampled purposively

based on their ethnic origin (Ahan), with different exposure levels to their mother tongue and the dominant languages. The data collection tool was a structured questionnaire meant to analyze language use in various situations and language attitude toward Ahan, Yoruba, Omuo-Ekiti dialect, and English.

Data were analyzed quantitatively with frequencies and percentages through descriptive statistics. Graphical representation of data was done in tables and charts to show the trends and patterns in language preferences and uses, and attitude toward the languages and Ahan youth language shift.

Population of the Study

The research sample were eighty (80) Ahan youths within the age range of 15 to 35 who live in the Ahan village of Omuo-Ekiti. The chosen age bracket is due to the fact that youths are very important in either maintaining or shifting languages, as their attitudes significantly have such impact on language usage patterns.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

Sampling methods included purposive sampling and simple random sampling. Purposive sampling was adopted in order to get Ahan respondents, while simple random sampling helped obtain samples that were well-representative of youth in general. There were respondents at various education levels and occupations, and there were some from intermarriage families. Two instruments were employed to ensure reliable and triangulated data on language attitude; instruments like, a structured questionnaire was designed to elicit information on respondents' language attitude towards Ahan, Omuo-Ekiti dialect, Yoruba, and English. It consisted of both closed-ended and Likert-scale items, allowing respondents to indicate their level of agreement with specific statements relating to language preference, prestige, and cultural attachment. While it is acknowledged that questionnaire responses may be subjective, efforts were made to enhance the reliability of the data the efforts made included praying for them, cheering them up and revalidating to them the essence of the research conducted. The use of structured and standardised items ensured consistency in responses across participants. These instruments served to validate the attitudinal

data by providing empirical evidence of language competence. The study ensured a more balanced and reliable assessment of language attitude and language shift among Ahan youths. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with selected respondents to obtain in-depth qualitative data on personal experiences, peer influence, and social pressures affecting language attitude. Participant observation was used in the study as a medium of allowing the researcher to take close attention to how the Ahan youth speaker really use their language in relations to the behavior display when asked question regarding their language. The interviews conducted allowed respondents to explain their views in their own words and provided insight into the motivations underlying their attitude.

The questionnaires were carried out in face-to-face interviews to facilitate correct understanding of questions and prevent any misunderstanding in answering. If there was difficulty in reading or comprehension of questions by illiterate respondents, questions were dictated by the researcher in standard Yoruba Language to them and as well the researcher documented the answers. The interviews were also audio-taped upon the consent of interviewees. Interviews were planned for times convenient for the interviewees, quantitative data from questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts and percentages to identify general attitudinal trends among Ahan youths, qualitative data from interviews and observations were analysed using thematic content analysis, with recurring themes categorized under key sociolinguistic constructs such as language prestige, language loyalty, shame, identity, and language shift.

This study was based on Language Attitude Theory and Ethnography of Communication Theory that relates attitude to language behaviour and language endangerment. Language Attitude Theory and Ethnography of Communication Theory models were useful in interpreting how indifference and negative attitude affect language use and language transmission across generations.

Data Presentation and Analysis

In this section, there is an examination and analysis of the results gathered from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews on the attitude towards the language held by Ahan youth in Omuo-Ekiti. Specifically, the study focuses on the perception of Ahan language by Ahan youth compared other languages such as the dialect of Omuo-Ekiti, Yoruba, and English.

Demographic Overview and Attitudinal Variation

The respondents were Ahan youth in the age range of 15 to 35 years. The analysis of the data reveals that there is a distinct pattern in the language attitude by different age groups. The older youth had more positive attitudes toward Ahan than the younger ones, who exhibited indifference and negativity toward their own language. Education and peer groups are found to be significant determinants of language attitude orientation.

General Attitude toward the Ahan Language

The responses to the questionnaires showed that negative or indifferent attitude towards Ahan predominates amongst young people. Although there were some who felt proud to be associated with Ahan as an indicator of their ethnic identity, most saw it as having little value in today's world.

Table 1: Language Spoken at Home

Language	Frequency (n = 80)	Percentage (%)
Ahan	14	17.5%
Omuo-Ekiti Dialect	40	50.0%
Yoruba	22	27.5%
English	4	5.0%

Total	80	100%
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Interpretation

It is shown in Table 1 that the Omuo-Ekiti dialect dominates in the home domain constituting 50% of speakers. In addition, the Yoruba language occupies an important place (27.5%) in the home domain owing to the regional dominance of this language. However, 17.5% of the respondents speak the Ahan language at home.

In other words, the role played by Ahan in family communication diminishes, which may be viewed as a sign of the decreasing vitality of this language among young people. It should be mentioned that even English is used occasionally in the home domain making up 5% of speakers.

Table 2: Language Used with Friends

Language	Frequency	Percentage
Ahan	8	10%
Omuo-Ekiti Dialect	44	55%
Yoruba	24	30%
English	4	5%
Total	80	100%

Interpretation

From the information presented in Table 2, we learn that Ahan is hardly ever employed in peer interaction, only being used by 10% of the informants when speaking with their peers. On the contrary, the dialect of Omuo-Ekiti reigns supreme in peer conversation (55%) and came (30%) after Yoruba. Only a very small portion of youths (5%) uses English in this domain.

It is safe to conclude that Ahan youths mostly choose dominant language or employ dominant languages as far as peer talk goes. It demonstrates poor ethnolinguistic vitality among young people and, therefore, language shift. Peer interaction is generally regarded as a powerful domain for language maintenance; however, in the case of Ahan, it proves powerless in slowing down language shift.

Table 3: Preferred Language for Daily Communication

Language	Frequency	Percentage
Ahan	12	15%
Omuo-Ekiti Dialect	36	45%
Yoruba	28	35%
English	4	5%
Total	80	100%

Interpretation

As shown in Table 3 above, Ahan does not represent the predominant language for daily conversations among youths, given that only 15 percent of participants chose this language. The Omuo-Ekiti dialect dominates with 45 percent preference, while Yoruba follows at 35 percent, with minimal preference for English at 5 percent.

Clearly, there is an evident shift in the language preference towards the dominant regional languages such as the Omuo-Ekiti dialect and Yoruba. From this finding, it appears that the Ahan language is gradually losing its functional relevance in the realm of daily conversations.

Socially, language preference is one of the factors that predict language maintenance. In this case, the preference for Omuo-Ekiti dialect and Yoruba can be explained through the higher level of utility, wider scope of communication, and social prestige associated with these languages.

Table 4: Pride in Speaking Ahan

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	6	8%
Agree	10	12%
Disagree	32	40%
Strongly Disagree	32	40%
Total	80	100%

Interpretation

From Table 4, it is clear that the attitudinal orientation towards the Ahan language among the respondents is generally negative. Just 20% (Strongly Agree + Agree) were proud of speaking Ahan language, while the remaining 80% (Disagree + Strongly Disagree) were not proud of speaking Ahan Language. Such a distribution is an indication of attitudinal deficiency, an important variable involved in language shift processes. The pride in a language is often connected to language loyalty and maintenance; hence, its deficiency means a weakening emotional tie to the language by the young people.

Sociolinguistically speaking, the negative attitudinal orientation towards the language is a strong indicator of language vitality deficiency since people neither speak the language publicly nor pass it on to the next generations.

Table 5: Attitude Towards Omuo-Ekiti Dialect

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	40	50%

Agree	32	40%
Disagree	5	6%
Strongly Disagree	3	4%
Total	80	100%

Interpretation

Table 5 shows that the Omuo-Ekiti dialect is highly rated among the Ahan youths. Overall, there was a positive disposition among the respondents as 90% expressed positive views about it while only 10% gave negative responses.

The high level of positivity towards the use of Omuo-Ekiti dialect implies that the Omuo-Ekiti dialect is highly rated and is seen as having a high prestige status as it serves as the major language of communication for the youths. This also implies that the Omuo-Ekiti dialect can serve as a marker of identification in daily life situations.

Sociolinguistically speaking, positive attitude towards a dominant variety and negative attitude towards a minority language have been noted to precede language shift. This, therefore, shows that the Omuo-Ekiti Dialect has attained a status of dominance among the Yoruba language group.

Observed Attitudinal Behavior

Attitude observations through participant observation confirmed the reported attitude. Youth who held negative or neutral attitude towards the language never used the language during interactions regardless of whether the other person spoke Ahan. Code switching to the dominant languages was frequent, which further proved that the attitude towards Ahan was low.

Interpretation of Findings

It is clear from the data that the linguistic attitude of negativity and indifference on the part of young Ahan people play a key role in the shift process. Ahan is considered by many to be non-prestigious, irrelevant, and non-useful in a modern context. Such attitude prevents people from using Ahan in social contexts.

Conclusion

The current study has looked at language attitude among the Ahan youths in Omuo-Ekiti and the part has played a significant role in language choice and language shift among them. It has been found that while most of the young people hold negative attitude or are indifferent towards the Ahan language, only a few hold favorable attitude towards the language.

It is clear from the results of this study that the Ahan language is considered undignified, outmoded by the youth when compared to other languages such as the Omuo-Ekiti dialect, Yoruba, and English. Ahan youth stereotype notion to Ahan language are greatly influenced by the perception held about the language, which results in Ahan being shunned among peers.

One of the key findings of this research is the clear relationship between language attitude and language transfer among generations. The majority of young people belonging to the Ahan ethnic group see no need in transferring their mother tongue to their future offspring due to the perception that other dominant languages provide more opportunities for education and economic benefits than the Ahan language. Consequently, such an attitude prevents the language from gaining loyalty and jeopardizes its prospects of further development.

From the angle of sociolinguistics it can be stated that the process of language shift within minority populations depends not only on external determinants of language change such as demographic changes but also on speakers' evaluation of their own language. In situations where a speech community, especially its youth sub-community, depreciates its language, shift may proceed quite quickly regardless of any existing demographic changes within the community.

This paper adds to existing literature in the fields of language attitude and language endangerment with regard to youth attitude influencing the linguistic situation in this minority speech community. By placing emphasis on the opinions of young speakers, young speakers sheds light on the sociopsychological aspects involved in language endangerment and the necessity of considering attitudinal factors when assessing the vitality of a language.

In summary, the fate of Ahan in the future lies in the hands of young people. Unless there is a change in their attitude towards the language, with a resultant increase in the value attached to its use, there is little hope of halting the process of decline which Ahan has entered.

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