Language use and social interactions in work places in Badagry town

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Abstract

This paper examines language use in workplaces. It focuses on language use by workers for interpersonal communication to meet both official and personal needs. Within Nigerian languages, very few literatures exist on the relevance of languages other than English at work. This research will fill the gap. This study undertakes a look at the language use of workers within the Badagry local government areas. These include workers across different levels. The theory employed for this study is the domain of language behaviour as postulated by Fishman (1965) which stipulates that it is possible to have different language behaviours depending on the topic, interlocutors and the settings. Questionnaire was administered to 127 respondents who cut across different educational backgrounds. This study reveals that although, the main purpose of languages in communities is for effective communication and ethnic identification, speakers often decide on whom they will interact with and in what language. Moreover, protocols are broken in interactions to establish linguistic/communicative rights of the addresser, even at work places. This work reveals that the psychological and emotional fulfillments, necessary for effective performance and optimal productivity are realized when interactions in workplaces are done in native languages. Therefore, the writer supports the increased use of Ogu language in official settings within the Badagry areas as a survival strategy against language extinction.

Keywords: Workplaces, interactions, language use, domain of language behaviour, Badagry.
1. Introduction

The Ogu language is spoken by the Ogu people who inhabit the Badagry areas of Lagos state, Nigeria. It is a minority language that is spoken along with Yorùbá, the language of wider communication in the state. Although most Ogu are bilinguals, the use of Yorùbá is predominant. Trudgil (1983) notes that as social psychologists of language have pointed out, speakers are not sociolinguistic automata. They can use code-switch for their own purposes to influence or define the situations as they wish, and to convey nuances of meaning and personal intention. This explains why often times, bilinguals switch codes in their conversation unconsciously and effortlessly. This is a normal and regular phenomenon in bilingual societies. However, in official places where the official codes are expected to be strictly adhered to, investigation reveals that circumstances have made this impracticable, because speaking the local languages have the effect of making the conversation, among other things more intimate and confidential. To this end, Trudgill (1984) opines the language used is a reflection of mood and intention. Equality and human rights commission guidelines, reports the adoption of multilingualism by January 2002, in work places in California, meaning that it became illegal for employees to “adopt or enforce the use of any language in any workplace” except for business, restrictions and for the observation of the restriction. Therefore, the use of Ogu language within the Badagry areas should be given official approval in order to increase its status.

1.2 Methodology

This study adopts a combined use of the questionnaire, and non-participant observation. 127 workers within the Badagry local government area were randomly selected. These include workers from both the public and private sectors. The junior workers constitute the larger percentage of our respondents. Non-participant observations were made during our visits to the respondents’ places of work in other to view naturalistic interactions

1.3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is the domain of language behaviour or domain analysis. This model seeks to elucidate who speaks what, to whom and when. The model stipulates that there are certain institutional contexts in which one variety of language is considered more appropriate than another. Fishman (1972: 15) maintains that this model is applicable in “those speech communities that are characterized by widespread
and relatively stable multilingualism”. The major considerations in the analysis are the participants, occasions and topic. It stipulates that it is possible to have different language behaviours depending on the topic, interlocutors and the settings. In essence, according to Fishman, “proper usage dictates that only one of the theoretically co-available languages or varieties will be chosen by particular classes of interlocutors on particular kinds of occasions to discuss kinds of topic” (p.15). He argues further that certain socio-culturally recognized spheres of activity are at least temporary, under the sway of one language or variety (and therefore, perhaps under the control of certain speech networks) rather than others. These are grouped into role-relations such as father and son, mother and daughter etc. (Fishman, 1971).

This concept is imperative in the study of bilingualism in as much as language behaviour of people changes according to situations. Even in formal settings, where the high variety of a language is expected, a superior colleague can decide to use the low variety or the official mode of communication to address his junior colleagues. In the same vein, the language spoken by a parent to his child may be different to the one he normally speaks with his kinsmen; hence it is the participants that mainly dictate language choice. This concept hinges on the fact that no bilingual speaks all the languages he understands in each social setting. He uses whichever is appropriate to the domain, topic and the expected pattern of behaviour (Oyetade, 1990: 81). This model is relevant to our study area since Badagry is a multilingual community and most members of this area are bilinguals. In essence, apart from the English language, workers in this area are conveniently communicating in either Ogu or Yoruba.

Anyanwu (2011) remarks that language use could be for identification or instrumental purposes. While the former is indicated for a local language or an individual’s first language, the latter is simply used in inter-personal relationship. In view of this, Anyanwu goes further to state that it is imperative to investigate whether language choice is motivated by ethnic identification or desire to meet communicative needs only. In his paper on language and ethnic interaction, Bourhis (1979) distinguishes between the sociolinguistic and the social psychological determinants of language behaviour between people of the same ethnic group and those of the out-group. Sociolinguistic factors are then sub-divided into micro sociolinguistic and macro-socio-linguistic. The micro sociolinguistic examines language behaviour along “topic, setting and purpose of conversation as well as characteristics of the interlocutors”, Bourhis, (1979:119). The social psychological determinants explain why speakers choose the language they speak. This can be influenced
by mood, emotions, their loyalty to the ethnic group, and the values attached to the local languages among others. Macro-socio-linguistic factors refer to the description of the situation among the linguistic groups in terms of diglossia and bilingualism language planning and language legislation.

What is the situation in work places within Badagry town? Is the choice between the languages for identification or communication or simply to meet personal needs?

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. to assess the language choice of Ogu speakers at work domains.
2. to examine what contexts promote the use of English and Yoruba
3. to investigate if the Ogu language is used at all in workplaces and for what purposes.
4. to predict the future of Ogu language.

1.5 Research Questions

In line with the objectives above, we seek to provide answers to the following questions.

1. What language choices are available to Ogu speakers at work places?
2. In what contexts are the official language (English) and the major languages spoken?
3. Is there any interaction done in the mother tongue?
4. What variables promote the use of mother tongue at work places?
5. What are the implications of these on language maintenance and shift in the community?

The use of English in workplaces

The English language is the official language in Nigeria. In this case, the language serves as a medium of instruction in schools, offices, media, judiciary and other official settings. The importance of the English language in Nigeria is also seen in its integrative role as the only language that brings together peoples of diverse languages and cultures, thus bridging communication gaps and fostering unity and peaceful co-existence. Besides
being a unifying language, English also meet both the scientific and technological needs of the nation, Kebby (1986).

However, the English language poses a serious threat to both the major and minor Nigerian languages. For insistence, demand for a credit pass in English as a prerequisite for admission into higher institutions or job placements and for promotion in the civil service has unarguably increases the status of English in Nigeria. Even if a candidate is pursuing a degree in any of the local languages, a credit pass in English is still compulsory. Therefore, it is the language of education and upward social mobility, language of wider communication or international language and language of interethnic communication. Its knowledge is therefore most valued in Nigeria.”. In his study of the attitudes of the Ogun State Civil Servants, Soleye (2006) posits that workers have a positive attitude to the English language. This favourable disposition is necessitated by the fact that the English language is the nations’ official language and proficiency in the language is a key to successful performance) at “interviews for appointments and promotions in the civil service. Despite this, the writer also reports that workers are seen interacting in the Yorùbá language. A similar incident is reported in Agyekum (2009). He reveals that most shifts in Ghana are ‘occupationally oriented ’(Agyekum 2009:390). Even in formal settings as the banks where the formal language is English, the bank workers are free to speak the Ghanaian languages to the customers. Moreover, in private businesses, especially among the health administrators, non-native Akan doctors in Akan speaking areas of Ghana are compelled to speak the Akan language to their patients who cannot speak English. Even in the educational sector, investigation reveals that teachers employ the use of local languages in their explanation although unofficially. All these portend the effectiveness of the local languages in various spheres of life. Therefore, denying them official recognition is a pretense and an infringement on their human and linguistic rights. This study maintains that speaking indigenous languages, in workplaces makes them avenues where the human rights, principles of fairness, respect, equality, dignity, and autonomy are promoted and are part of the organization’s everyday goals and behavior
1.6 Sociolinguistic analysis of language choice at work places in Badagry Town

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Ogu</th>
<th>Yoruba</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When discussing official matters with a senior colleague</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When discussing private matters with a superior</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing official matters with equals</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing private matters with subordinate</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chatting during break</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing trivial matters</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing serious issues</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following table presents participants responses to their choice code at work places. These include interactions to both superior and junior officers, and at break hours.

Table 1. Respondents’ language choice at work (127 subjects)
1.7 Discussion

A careful study of the above table shows that the in discussing with superior officers, either for official or private matters, the English language is the preferred code. This is to be expected as the English language is the official language at work places. However, use of English drops slightly when workers are discussing private matters even with a superior. Private matters here meant individuals home affairs, finances, health or other personal issues. This is why there is a drop from 66% to 37%. This shows that the English language cannot serve the purpose of creating and establishing the intimacy needed to share one’s problem with a colleague.

However, the use of Yoruba, the second language in the community thrives when workers are discussing their private matters with subordinate. This is closely followed by the combined use of English and Yoruba. This clearly shows a preference for the local as against the foreign language. At informal periods, such as break time, the use of Ogu, the mother tongue in this community takes a second place. This is the only context where the use of the language is obvious with 27.5%.

The table shows that a total number of 127 subjects filled in this column of the questionnaire, 84 (66%) responded that they communicate in English with their superior colleagues, 20 (15.8%) submitted that they speak Yorùbá, 6 (4.7%) speak in Ogu and English, while 6 (4.7%) speak in English and Yorùbá in this situation. However, 5 (3.9%) respondents would speak Ogu to a superior. In discussing private matters with their superior, 47 (37%) would speak English, 5 (3.1%) would adopt Ogu, 28 (22%) would opt for Yorùbá, 38 (29.9%) preferred English and Yoruba, only 4 (3.5%). Interact in Ogu and Yoruba in this linguistic situation, while only 5 (3.1%) speak Ogu and Yoruba. Moreover, 50 (39.3%) responded they relate in English with their equals, 30 (23.6%) in Yorùbá, 7 (5.5%) in Yorùbá and English, 15 (11.8%) subjects communicate in Ogu and only 7 (5.5%) subjects favoured Ogu and English.

This table clearly shows the dominance of the English language at work. In all the different contexts, the English language takes the lead; this may not be unconnected with the fact that English is the nation’s official language. This is followed by Yorùbá. Moreover, the choice of Yorùbá and English also thrives here. The table also reveals the fact that unlike in other official settings where English is the most preferred, communication with a junior colleague is more of Yorùbá or English and Yorùbá, as the percentage drops for private
discussion either with a superior or subordinate and with a mate. We may attribute this to the desire of senior colleagues to build a close relationship and confidence with the junior colleagues who are likely to be at ease with somebody who they can approach in a less formal or informal manner. This also reveals that language use is influenced by the intimacy or distance a speaker aspires or wishes to establish with an interlocutor, (Giles 1973); in other words, language is used to build friendship or create a distance. To this end, Dyers (2008) opines that much more than a policy, the major influence on language choice is the relationship between interlocutors.

Unlike Dada (2006), where the use of local languages is rampant coupled with very few number of government workers, there is a high prevalence of the use of the English language in this community. This is because Badagry is a multilingual community, the cradle of civilization, and a home to people of diverse languages and cultures. It is interesting to note that the Yorùbá language features prominently at informal periods, used as either the only language or combined with English or Ogu. This study confirms Soyeye (2006) that workers diverge to the Yoruba language to meet their communication needs. Apart from official duties, workers are seen discussing in Yoruba at various work places within Badagry town.

Moreover, the study shows that when serious issues are involved, workers tend to reverse to their native language. This proves that language is a psychological thing. They do not view English not even Yoruba as a language worthy of discussing serious issues, especially when they want to be factual and down-to-earth, when sentiments are aroused and when the issues involved are beyond official.

1.8 Conclusion

The study clearly demonstrates language use at work places in Badagry town. As in other places, the English language is used more than the other local languages in the area. However, the local languages serve as language of intimacy because workers prefer to share their private lives and challenges in Yoruba language. Beyond, this Ogu is mostly used at informal periods and in discussing serious issues as a form of ethnic bonding. The study confirms Dyers (2008) where he states that

even in the presence of a powerful language of wider communication, people can continue to identify powerfully with their home languages, especially when it enhances their personal and group identities or is a marker of their ethno-linguistic distinctiveness”(Dyers 2008:19).
However, the use of Ogu in work places is still very minimal; except in few instances as our data presents. Two reasons adduced for this in positions maintained by Onadipe-Shalom, (2013) are that the Yoruba Language is an influential language in the community and secondly, the community operates an open policy (Lewis 1985). Here, Lewis postulates that the openness of a community is related to the people’s language choice. He indicates further that some communities are open to linguistic and non-linguistic contact and these contacts may result in the adaptation of a new language. Lewis (1984) in Yet (2004). However, if the recommendations in Oyetade (2015:32) especially the call ‘to upgrade the status of many minority languages in Nigeria’ are followed, the language will serve better in work places.

These findings have great implications for language maintenance and shift. Since there is no law forbidding the use of native languages at work, especially in oral form, more workers should adapt the use of Ogu rather than Yoruba. This will also boost its prestige within the local government areas. The government also has a role to play in increasing institutional support for the language and making it attractive to speakers across different levels and endeavours of life.
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