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MUSIC DOMAINS AS INDEX OF THE VITALITY OF THE URHOB0 LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Language is the carrier of culture and a repository of the knowledge systems that define a people. Arising from this, the problem of language endangerment is of universal concern. Music is an important functional domain in every language for several reasons. Apart from its emotive value, it is a carrier of critical aspects of ethnic knowledge and a tool for language learning. Consequently, an examination of the utility value of Urhobo music across several social categories is barometric of the vitality of the language. This paper examines these linkages as critical factors in the discourse of Urhobo language endangerment. This research investigates intergenerational variations in the use of Urhobo music for personal and social entertainment. Six hundred and fifty-seven respondents provide data for the study. Based on the sociolinguistic survey carried out, the findings indicate that Nigerian Pidgin and English based music genres are ICT - driven and have made significant inroads into domains hitherto the exclusive preserve of indigenous music. There is a marked generational decline in the preference for, and knowledge about, Urhobo music genres. The finding is another confirmation that the language is endangered.

Keywords: Music, language endangerment, English, Urhobo, Pidgin

Introduction

Language contact is increasingly becoming the norm and an integral part of social realities for billions of people. It is unarguable that the globalisation of English is the main driver of language contact and is primarily responsible for the acceleration of societal multilingualism around the globe. (Kirkpatrick & Sussex, 2012) Scholars agree that the entrenchment of English – and its dominance in global affairs – is set to continue owing to its invaluable utility value in key sectors. These include its role in technology, the internet, the global economy, education, entertainment, the news media, and international travel.

Beginning with Philipson (1992), several researchers assert that the global dominance of English is hinged on the unwavering pursuit of the political and economic interests of the British and

Americans. To them, the global influence of English is primarily driven by Anglo American cultural and linguistic imperialism (Canagarajah, 2002; Singh, Kell & Pandian 2002). While this claim may have had credence in the context of overt linguistic prescriptivism of the past, current sociolinguistic evidence indicates that a majority of users of non-native English have embraced the communicative value of the language at the intellectual and emotional levels. Largely, it is safe to say that the globalisation of English is being driven less by overt Anglo/American economic and political influences and more by its global utility value. English, in addition to the mother tongue, is a veritable means of expressing socio-cultural identities embedded in the substrates of non-native users.

Literature Review

The role of global English significantly features in the language endangerment debate. Furthermore, the transition of English as the official language (utilitarian) to its elevation to the status of L₂ in most former colonies of England lies in the entrenchment of its instrumentality and greater emotive significance in the course of the globalization of the language. Consequently, experts have become alarmed at the existential threat that globalisation and hegemonic English pose to minority languages (Tsunoda, 2013; M). Globally, it is estimated that of the more than six thousand languages, only six hundred are not endangered (Crystal, 2000). Bradley and Bradley (2002: 12) agree with Crystal's estimate. They opine that: "various scholars have estimated that up to 90% of the world's languages will disappear during the 21st century unless- and maybe many perhaps even if- we do something now".

English-based Pidgins and creoles – a component of the world Englishes continuum - is another dimension of the sociolinguistic dynamics that drives Urhobo language regression and the endangerment of some of its dialects (Mowarin, 2004). The expanding utility value of Nigerian Pidgin is driven by a more basic need – as a language of informal interethnic communication. Granted, the linguistic diversity that propels the utility value of Nigerian pidgin in cosmopolitan Niger Delta is lacking in many linguistically homogenous Urhobo speech communities. However, the profile of the language is being promoted by pidgin-based music and its use in electronic broadcast media. Pidgin is also infiltrating many Urhobo speech communities due to the cyclic

movement to the havens of Nigerian pidgin for economic reasons. Consequently, English and NP have continued to encroach on and expand their functional domains at the detriment of Urhobo in many speech communities (Igboanusi&Oha, 2001).

At the global level, the literature on language endangerment is detailed and tackles the subject matter from every perceivable angle (Crystal, 2000; Mufwene, 2002; UNESCO, 2003; Tsunoda, 2005; Horak, 2008 Lüpke, 2018). However, commensurate research priorities have not been given to the problem in relation to the Urhobo language endangerment. Consequently, very few research papers in Urhobo linguistics have tackled the problem using the UNESCO (2003) endangerment benchmark. The notable few online research papers that specifically addressed the issues of Urhobo language endangerment are Mowarin (2004), Ojaide and Aziza (2007), Emama (2017), Emama (2020), Akpofure-Okenrentie (2018). For instance, there is a paucity of definitive data-driven research on key areas of Urhobo endangerment using the UNESCO indices. There is also a dearth of specific data on the population of native users of the language in remote Urhobo speech communities where intergenerational transfer is almost pristine vis a vis those in semi-rural, urban, and cosmopolitan locations. Demographic details relating to the cycle of daily or weekly movement from rural Urhobo communities to cosmopolitan areas – where Nigerian pidgin holds sway - for economic reasons is also lacking. Arising from this, projections on the extent to which these movements lead to the increasing pidginisation of hitherto homogenous Urhobo speech communities is speculative at best.

One of the most significant outcomes of the 2003 UNESCO language endangerment panel is the establishment of universally applicable indicators of language endangerment. These include:

1. Intergenerational language transmission
2. Absolute number of speakers
3. Proportion of speakers within the local population
4. Trends in existing language domains
5. Response to new domains and media
6. Materials for language education and literacy
7. Governmental and institutional language policies, including official status and use.
8. Community members' attitudes towards their language
9. Amount and quality of documentation

Based on the complex interplay between the indicators above, the vitality of a given language is categorised along a cline of ‘safe’ to ‘extinct’ as represented in Table 1 below

Table 1: Degree of Language Endangerment

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Speaker Population
safe	5	The language is used by all ages, from children up.
unsafe	4	The language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by all children in limited domains.
Definitively Endangered	3	The language is used mostly by the parental generation and up.
Severely Endangered	2	The language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and up.
Critically Endangered	1	The language is used mostly by very few speakers, of the great-grandparent generation.
Extinct	0	No native speaker.

As indicated earlier, categorical statements on the vitality of the Urhobo language, on the UNESCO benchmark is problematic due to the paucity of research-driven data on the status of the key indicators of endangerment. Arising from the convergence of some of the indicators of endangerment, scholars generally agree that the Urhobo language is endangered (Mowarin 2005, Akpofure–Okerentie 2018). However, it is generally difficult to give a precise level of endangerment as indicated in **Table 1**.

The Place of Music in Language Acquisition and Sustenance

In most African speech communities, music performs key roles in many domains that are central to communal socio-semiotics. Unlike contemporary English and pidgin-based music genres, traditional Urhobo music genres perform roles that go beyond mere rhythmic pleasure (Nnamani, 2014). Apart from its emotive value, traditional Urhobo music is intricately intertwined with its belief system and culture. It also enacts and entrenches socio-cultural linkages that give individuals within every Urhobo speech community a sense of identity. Apart from its value in personal and communal entertainment, music performs critical roles in various cultural domains: marriage, age-grade initiation, worship, burial ceremonies, warfare, and folktales. The function of music cuts across many domains and is therefore useful in the socialization of the individual in critical components of the user's culture.

The Urhobo music repertoire has specialized subgenres. Omoko (2018) categorises them to include: satire (*ine-ekan*), dirge/elegiac poetry (*ine-uvweri*), war poetry (*ine-ofovwin*), and marriage poetry (*ine-orovwen*). Others are children's poetry (*ine-emọ*), religious poetry (*ine-ega*), and panegyric or praise poetry/popular music (*ine-ejiri/ine-okena*). Music is therefore multidimensional and is central to critical aspects of the Urhobo identity, socialisation processes, and a vital accoutrement to several performances that accompany the identified musical subgenres. Arising from the foregoing, the functional domains where these forms are active, the utility value that they have in various Urhobo communities are therefore veritable indicators of the vitality of the language.

Music is a specialized form of language and a vital component of a people's belief system. It is preserved and perpetuated through language. The role of music in language acquisition and learning is well established in the literature of first and second language studies. For instance, many studies have established that certain music genres have salutary effects on the development of the pre-neonate's mind. It has also been proven that language acquisition begins as early as the third trimester. During this stage, an unborn child is capable of recognizing the mother's voice, the mother tongue, and can even recall word patterns and rhymes (Koelsch 2011). The role that music

plays in the acquisition of our musical conventions, culture and native language is underpinned by several shared similarities. Language and music are acoustically accessed, employ specific categories of elements (phonemes and tones), and are structured with recognizable regularities (Brandt et al, 2012; McMullen and Saffran, 2004).

Music is therefore a very useful pedagogical tool in first language acquisition and second language learning. Due to the power of globalisation, music is a key contributory factor in cases of reverse bilingualism in English. The phenomenon is especially rife in countries where English and other world languages outbid smaller languages for attention in the minds of users primarily because of comparative differences in the semantic load they carry. Some languages are semiotically disadvantaged in lexicalizing aspects of the science that underpins globalisation. Sundqvist's (2009) study provides an in-depth analysis of the role played by out-of-school activities in enhancing students' performance in English. Based on her study of L₂ English users in Sweden, she asserts that spare time activities in English significantly enhance many students' performance in the language. Typical spare-time activities include listening to music, watching films/television programmes in English (Merrell, 2004). The import of these studies is that indigenous Urhobo music is a powerful pedagogical tool, a vital part of the neonate's developmental process and a force for socialisation in Urhobo socio-semiotics. Music bestrides critical components of the culture as it serves as a veritable tool for the intergenerational transfer of vital cultural knowledge systems. This study seeks to establish, comparatively, the force that indigenous Urhobo music exerts as a tool for socialisation in different Urhobo speech communities across different age groups. The aim is to determine the vitality of the language by examining the utility value of language domains.

Instruments

The primary data gathering instruments are questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire is designed to generate data on the age and music genre preferences of the respondents. The age of the respondents, and their preferences, is the most critical variable of the study as it is central to determining the extents of generational transfer of Urhobo music genres to the younger generations. The questionnaire also tests the general knowledge of the respondents as to the

identity of some of the notable exponents of Urhobo music genres. The interviews provide an alternative to getting the same data from respondents not literate in English. These are supplemented by personal observations of the contexts in which indigenous Urhobo music is used vis a vis pidgin and English genres in selected rural communities. A variety of contexts provides opportunities for these observations. These include burial ceremonies, religious events (Christian and traditional), every form of social gathering where music is a natural accoutrement.

Participants

Two factors primarily determined the choice of participants. First, a quantitative study of this nature should be as representative as possible in terms of number and dialect continuum. As a result, four hundred and eighty-four questionnaires (out of a thousand administered) were retrieved. A total of a hundred and seventy-three individuals of the same age demographics were also interviewed using the same parameters in the questionnaire. This brings the total number of participants to six hundred and fifty-seven. The ages of the respondents vary from ten to sixty-five and above. The participants also reflect some of the dialectal variegations that exist in the Urhobo language. The Agbon, Ughievwen, Udu, Agbarho, Avwraaka, Orogun, Ugheni, Agbarha dialects make up the core of the respondents sampled. The second factor is location. Rural Urhobo speech communities were chosen arising from the fact that the linguistic effects of globalization have their greatest impact in cities and urban areas vis a vis rural speech communities (Miehe et al 2007). Arising from the foregoing, respondents were chosen from rural communities where the sociolinguistic pull that globalisation exerts on language use is relatively low. In these Urhobo speech communities, the language is not only intergenerationally transferred, but is also active in many domains. The expectation is that in these Urhobo communities, the forces that drive the expanding utility values of the Nigerian pidgin and English language are expected to be largely muted.

All the participants are Urhobo dominant L_1 speakers domiciled in remote communities of Oku r'Oken, Oku r'Emaka, Onukobare (Agbon), Imodje, Orhomuru (Orogun), Uruagbesa (Avwraaka), Eyara, Imode, Ighwrekan (Ughievwen), Odovie, Inene (Ugheni), Awirhe, Edjeba (AgbarhaOtor).

Method of Data Analysis

The method of data analysis is quantitative. The study is population is large data is best analysed using quantitative procedures. To compare the responses provided by multiple and large numbers of participants, a descriptive statistical method is used. Simple statistical analysis - using tables and graphs - are employed to find empirical answers to the research priorities of the study. Demographic information, especially the age of the respondents is critical to evaluating the utility value of indigenous music genres in the study. It is vital in determining the level of intergenerational transfer of music genres from the older to the younger generations. Consequently, the data is grouped into different age groups: 10 – 20, 21 - 30, 31– 40, 41 – 50, 51 – 60, 61 and above. Although the division is somewhat arbitrary, they provide a tangible for comparing intergenerational transfer of indigenous Urhobo music. Consequently, all responses are counted, statistically calculated according to specific age groups and finally compared using simple percentages to determine the utility value of music across several domains.

Data Presentation, Findings, and Discussions.

The tables below (six) represent age-based statistical analyses of the preferences in music genres for personal and social entertainment. The ages of the respondents vary from ten to sixty-five and above. Apart from age-dependent peculiarities in music preferences, the extent of the participants' socialisation in communal, group-based activities was also tested. These activities include folksongs, folktales, lullabies, and other social activities where songs prominently feature. Their knowledge of the identity and iconic songs of Urhobo musicians make up the last component of the data analysis.

The data indicate that age is a strong factor in determining the music genre preferences of the respondents. The analyses also show a marked decline in the preference for indigenous Urhobo music in personal and social entertainment in the responses of the younger respondents. For instance, while 81% of the oldest set of respondents (61 and above) prefer indigenous Urhobo genres, only 17% of the youngest segment of the study population does.

Table Two: Music Genre Preferences (61 and above)

Music preferences (Personal & social)	Urhobo	Pidgin	English	Number of responses	Percentage by Genre Type		
	89	13	08		Urhobo	Pidgin	English
	Source of data						
Questionnaire		Interview		110	81%	14%	5%
40		66					
General background knowledge of practitioners					89%	7%	4%
Personal experience with indigenous folksongs, lullabies, and other communal song-inspired interactions					89%		

This subset also exhibited the strongest preference (61%) for pidgin and English based music genres for personal and social entertainment. The gradual decline of the utility value of Urhobo music is evident when the data from the six groups into which the study population is examined. The preference steadily falls from 89% (61 and above), 68% (51- 60), 55% (41-50), 37% (31- 40), 30% (21- 30), and 17% (10- 20). From the data, there is also evidence of incremental acceleration of the shift in music preferences from the indigenous to pidgin and English based ones.

The evidence indicates non- Urhobo music genres are exerting greater influences on younger generations in many Urhobo speech communities. It has earlier been recognised that music is pivotal in language acquisition, pedagogy, and socialisation into the core components of a people's culture.

Table Three: Music Genre Preferences (51 - 60)

Music preferences (Personal & social)	Urhobo	Pidgin	English	Number of responses	Percentage by Genre Type		
	113	33	18		Urhobo	Pidgin	English
Source of data				164	68%	20%	12%
Questionnaire		Interview					
87		62					
General background knowledge of practitioners					84%	9%	6%
Personal experience with indigenous folksongs, lullabies, and other communal song-inspired interactions					Experience index		
					79%		

Given the multidimensional role of music in the traditional setting, the increasing influence of non-Urhobo music in rural speech communities is therefore troubling especially in the light of research-backed evidence that shows that music preferences become entrenched between the ages of thirteen and sixteen. The implication is that the increasing intrusion of pidgin and English based music robs the youngest segment of the population of the opportunity to be socialized in the core aspects of music-borne components of Urhobo culture.

In the past, folktales, folksongs, lullabies, praise songs, and other indigenous song repertoires of the Urhobo people constitute a veritable means of socialisation in all Urhobo speech communities. Most importantly, these traditions provided a significant proportion of the folk materials that continue to inspire contemporary Urhobo musicians. The fast waning influence of these forms in present-day Urhobo society is also reflected in the data.

Table Four: Music Genre Preferences (41 - 50)

Table Four: Music Genre Preferences (41-56)							
Music preferences (Personal & social)	Urhobo	Pidgin	English	Number of responses	Percentage by Genre Type		
	106	60	28		Urhobo	Pidgin	English
Source of data				194	55%	31%	14%
Questionnaire		Interview					
121		34					
General background knowledge of practitioners					64%	26%	2%
Personal experience with indigenous folksongs, lullabies, and other communal song-inspired interactions					Experience index		
					62%		

The fast waning influence of these forms in present-day Urhobo society is also reflected in the data. The data indicate a marked correlation between preference for Urhobo music genres and the extent to which the respondents were socialized with folktales and other communal activities from childhood to adolescence.

It is interesting to observe that older participants (from 41 years and above) who experienced some form of family, group, and communal storytelling and singing activities statistically prefer Urhobo music genres for personal and social entertainment. For instance, out of the four hundred and sixty-eight responses received from this group, three hundred and eight (66%) chose Urhobo music genres for personal and group entertainment. For those between the ages of forty and ten, 72% opted for pidgin and English –based music genres. Pidgin has the largest chunk (50%), Urhobo, (28%), and English (22%)

Table Five: Music Genre Preferences (31 – 40)

Table Five: Music Genre Preferences (31-48)							
Music preferences (Personal & social)	Urhobo	Pidgin	English	Number of responses	Percentage by Genre Type		
	73	85	43		Urhobo	Pidgin	English
Source of data				201	37%	42%	21%
Questionnaire		Interview					
143		30					
General background knowledge of practitioners					45%	36%	19%
Ease of access to preferred music genres on e-platforms						75%	39%
Personal experience with indigenous folksongs, lullabies, and other communal song-inspired interactions					Experience index		
					51%		

The same age-based biases are observed when the general knowledge of the respondents about the identity, iconic songs of some prominent artistes of Urhobo music genres are tested. Prominent musicians of Urhobo music genres were also poor. For instance, 75% of respondents between the ages of 41 and above had fewer challenges recalling the names of OmokomoOsokpa, OguteOtan, Juju andUdjabor, David Ayadju, Johnson Adjan, OkpaArhibo, EgbekuKenairu, Ogbiniki, Sally Young, Eghweyanudje, Djanere, and Ojaikre. They also had lessdifficulties remembering and singing some of their iconic songs. However, only 32% of those between ages ten to thirty could recall the names of some of the practitioners and fewer (25%) could remember and sing portions of some of their songs. In contrast, 78% of the youngest segment of the respondents effortlessly reeled out the names of popular Nigerian artistes who ply their trade in pidgin, creditably enacted many of their popular songs, and performed many of the dance steps associated with the genre.

Their attitude of emotional immersion in, and acceptance of, pidgin-based songs is in sharp contrast to the indifference towards those of the MT.

Table six: Music Genre Preferences (21 - 30)

Table 5.11: Music Genre Preferences (21-23)							
Music preferences (Personal & social)	Urhobo	Pidgin	English	Number of responses	Percentage by Genre Type		
	69	111	47		Urhobo	Pidgin	English
Source of data				227	30%	49%	21%
Questionnaire		Interview					
167		37					
General background knowledge of indigenous music practitioners					31%	49%	20%
Personal experience with indigenous folksongs, lullabies, and other communal song-inspired interactions					Experience index		
					39%		

Technological advancement in ICT plays a vital role in the dispersal of pidgin and English -based music genres to many remote Urhobo speech communities. It is instructive to note that an overwhelming number of respondents (86%) indicated that they have greater access to pidgin-based music on FM radio bands in contrast with 17% access to Urhobo music genres. Pidgin is being increasingly saddled with the responsibility of carrying the expanding number of programme content, especially on radio, arising from its expanding role as a language of wider interethnic communication in cities, urban centres, and towns. Radio waves, unfortunately, are ubiquitous.

Table Seven: Music Genre Preferences (10- 20)

Table Seven: Music Genre Preferences (16-20)							
Music preferences (Personal & social)	Urhobo	Pidgin	English	Number of responses	Percentage by Genre Type		
	38	120	57		Urhobo	Pidgin	English
Instrument				215	17%	56%	27%
Questionnaire		Interview					
58		64					
General background knowledge of indigenous music practitioners					17%	61%	22%
Personal experience with indigenous folksongs, lullabies, and other communal song-inspired interactions					Experience index		
					26%		

Apart from intrusive radio waves, other ICT tools also drive the incursion of pidgin music genres into these rural communities. Internet connectivity and the greater ease with which pidgin and English – based songs are digitalized and shared on e-platforms aid their spread. The youngest segment of the participants are more tech-savvy, possess a greater awareness of these e-media, and have the least challenges in exploiting their potentials for the entrenchment of pidgin-based songs. Urhobo music genres on the other hand are disadvantaged not only by the increasing alienation of users but also by modern technological resources.

Conclusion

Music is at the core of several culturally important activities in the socialisation machinery in every Urhobo speech community. The loss of these domains to pidgin and English based music genres in rural speech communities - where the sociolinguistic forces that drive pidgin elsewhere are largely muted - is cause for concern. The data presented in this study is yet another evidence that the Urhobo language is endangered. The need to take redemptive steps towards reclaiming

these domains is therefore a matter of utmost urgency. However, there is a greater need for more research to understand the exact nature of the endangerment dynamics in all Urhobo speech communities based on the UNESCO indices. Doing so will provide a holistic platform to design bottom-up strategies to reverse the trend.

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