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## Language Endangerment: The Echie Experience

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examined language endangerment focusing on the Echie experience. It adopted the descriptive survey research procedure. The researchers employed the purposive sampling procedure, and the data were presented in simple frequency tables and the analysis done in simple percentages. The study found out that the languages in contact in Echie speech communities are Nigerian Pidgin, English, Igbo, Ikwere, Yoruba, Hausa and French. This paper observed that Echie is seriously losing speakers to Nigerian Pidgin and English language. It also revealed that Nigerian Pidgin, Echie and English are in serious competition in Echie speech communities. The study further noticed that Echie can be classified as an endangered language because the majority of parents in Echie speech communities, especially those who reside in urban cities such as Port Harcourt are not encouraging their children to acquire the language. This may be as a result of the feeling that Echie is an inferior language since it is not used in the domain of education, administration, and politics among others. Therefore, this work recommended that a deliberate policy should be made to encourage the use of Echie at home by children and linguists of Etche origin should as a matter of urgency document the language for the possible implementation of its use as language of instruction in the first three years of primary schools in Echie speech communities.*

**Keywords:** language, language endangerment, language contact, language shift, language death

## **1. Introduction**

The importance of natural languages in the survival of human race cannot be overemphasized. Without language, it is practically impossible for humans to express themselves, interact with one another, educate the people, exchange ideas, innovation or interact with fellow humans and carry out social and business transactions. This implies that language is extremely relevant in all aspects of human lives. Therefore, the loss of one's language is the loss of one's birthright and identity. It is difficult to imagine how one will feel if he notices that his language is endangered. That is, the language is gradually dying out. The young generation does not use the language but a foreign one. If he wants to interact with the younger generation, he must use a foreign language. This may make him to forget the pieces of his native language. It is also likely that he alone remembers the culture of his people, how they used to live; everyone else has moved on to live more modern lives. This may result in the feeling of solitude even when surrounded by people. This is a very devastating experience not only for those who speak the endangered language, but also to language scholars (linguists). This is because the lost of a language implies the lost of linguistic data and the shrinking of the scope of our ability to learn about our world. Endangered languages can be a great source of information, if only one can reach them before the death of last speakers or user. It is against this background that this paper seeks to investigate whether Echie can suitably be a classified as an endangered language or not.

### **1.1 The language and the Speakers**

In this paper, we shall refer to the people as Etche and their language as Echie. Echie is an Igboid language spoken in Etche and Omuma

Local Government Areas, Rivers State of Nigeria. The language is also spoken in Umuru and Omunbha of Abia State. According to Ndimele (2003) Umuru and Omumbha were part of the Etche ethnic nationality before state creation and boundary adjustment placed them in the present Abia State. Ndimele further, said that “Echie is mutually intelligible with some contiguous Igbo varieties, such as Òwèrè, Ngwhà and Ndòkì.” The language is treated as a distinct language because it falls within the multilingual Rivers State. Echie has eleven major dialectics: Central Echie, Òzùzù/Ìsu, Ihuiè, Òwu, Egbu/Ògidhà, Obità/Ìgbodhò, Ndashì, Mba, Umuoye, Àkpokù and Òmuma. The degrees of relatedness of these varieties/dialects have not been adequately established. Thus, the classification for now is said to be merely impressionistic. However, it is observed that Central Echie seems to be the most favoured in the few written literature and, also the one commonly used in pan-Etche gathering.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Echie native speakers have been in contact with people of other linguistic background for many years. This is mostly due to their geographical location which has given rise to economic particularly oil exploration, religious, educational and social contact. This surely has sociolinguistic implications on the Echie. Also, Echie speakers enter into marital relationship with people of various linguistic groups. Previously, when a couple spoke different languages, the wife used to learn her husband’s indigenous language along with the children. Disappointingly, it is observed that most parents from Echie speech communities who are of diverse linguistic background especially those living in an urban multilingual environment such as Port Harcourt prefer to bring up their children as monolingual speakers of English. One of the main reasons for this preference may be because they (parents) feel that their children need English

language to effectively integrate into the wider society. Also, the increasing number of influx into Etche by people of various linguistic background due to oil exploration may result in a shift from the use of the language to either English or Nigerian Pidgin. Nowadays, most children in Echie speech communities grow up not knowing their indigenous language. The implication of this is that the language may be losing speakers to English and Nigerian Pidgin. In some cases the language is being used in lesser domains and by fewer people, especially children. Hence, English and Nigerian Pidgin seem to be expanding their home while the Echie is being relegated to a position of inferiority. Sometime it is regarded as the language of the illiterates, poor, socially and economically disadvantaged people. More so, it is now fashionable not to be able to speak Echie language. If nothing is done to reverse the trend, the language may be in danger of extinction or death which is usually one of the major consequences of language endangerment. Thus, this paper investigates whether Echie can suitably be classified as an endangered language or not. The aim of this paper is to find out whether Echie can suitably be classified as an endangered language. Its objectives are to:

1. Evaluate the languages in contact in Echie speech communities.
2. Examine the domains where Echie language is commonly used.
3. Ascertain the attitude of Echie native speakers toward their language.
4. Identify the factors responsible for the attitude toward Echie language.

## **2. Reviewed of Related Literature**

Trudgill (1992), Mathews (1997), Salzmann (2007), McGregor (2009), Agbegha (2010), Udu & Swande (2015) and Yibo (2018)

unanimously agree that the terms “language endangerment” is closely related with the terms “language shift” and “language death.” In their opinion, one cannot meaningfully discuss any of them without making reference to the others. According to Trudgill (1992, p. 45), “if the entire community shifts totally to a new language, the original language will eventually have no speakers left in the community in question, and the end point of the language shift will be language death.” Similarly, Mathews (1997) an endangered language is any language that shows evidence that it will or might cease to be spoken, soon or in the foreseeable future.

More so, Salzmann (2007), Harrison (2007) and Hoffmann (2009) assert that some of the primary causes of language endangerment can be classified into external and internal factors or forces. The external forces include military, economic, religious, cultural, or educational subjugation. On the other hand, the internal forces consist of a community’s negative attitude towards its own language or by a general decline of group identity. Once more, Salzmann (2007), Harrison (2007) and Hoffmann (2009) note that internal pressures are usually the product of the external factors. Both break the intergenerational transmission of linguistic and cultural traditions. Many minority communities associate their underprivileged social and economic situation with their inherited culture and language. This is because they assume that their languages are of no use any longer and not worth retaining. Thus, the speakers of minority languages abandon their languages and cultures in the hope of overcoming discrimination, to secure a livelihood and enhance social mobility for themselves and their children. The feasibility of a language is determined first and foremost by the general attitude of its speakers towards their heritage culture, of which their language may be considered the most essential component.

Additionally, McGregor (2009, p. 342) says that “language shift can result in language endangerment and ultimately death.” He also notes that language endangerment is “the process by which the community of speakers of a language reduces significantly, and fewer children acquire it.” Furthermore, Emenanjo (2010) accepts that language endangerment is a prevailing sociolinguistic phenomenon. According to Emenanjo (2010, p. 6), “language endangerment is no longer news in sociolinguistic discourse.” This is because linguists usually agree that over half of the world’s languages are moribund. This indicates that a greater majority of the languages in the world are not effectively being transmitted to the next generation. He also notes that like other living organisms (human beings, groups, plants and animals), languages:

...become endangered when their original, natural, indigenous or auchthtonous habitats, ecologies or environments become hostile, unfriendly, uncomfortable, inconducive or spent. Phenomena react to their environments according to their species. But in the fullness of time when the unfriendly environments persist, the species die out completely (p. 6).

Following Emenanjo (2010), this paper posits that languages can react according to their environment. For that reason, an unfriend or a hostile environment poses a serious danger to the existence of a language. It is also construed from the statement of Emenanjo

(2010) that language endangerment can result to the death of a language. In the same vein, Alamu & Ugwuoke (2010, p. 56) lament that:

...some Nigerian languages are being endangered; the rich cultural heritage is being gradually eroded. The surest way through which people can retain and safeguard knowledge, wisdom and the authentic cultures inherited from their ancestors and hand them on to generations yet unborn is through language.

The assertion of Alamu & Ugwuoke (2010) clearly proves that language endangerment results in the loss of cultural identity. It is a common belief that a group that loses her language to another reduces herself to the position of a slave. In addition, Alamu & Ugwuoke (2010, p. 57) note that “the most important remedy to language endangerment is language loyalty.” This indicates that the speakers of an endangered language can revive the language through consistent use of the language in different contexts. In other words, an endangered language is a language that is used in fewer domains by its speakers. This is in line with the statement of Agbegha (2010, p. 280) that “an initial criterion for language endangerment is the number of speakers.” He says that the issue of language endangerment is more real than the numerical factor can reveal. This means that the initial criterion is obsolete. From the discussion so far, this paper notes that an endangered language is a language with

a weak political status, only a few speakers and limited to certain functions.

## **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

This paper employs the sociolinguistic approach. Linguists such as Trudgill (1992), Mathews (1997), Finch (2000), Adesanya (2002) and Ayuwo (2013) express different opinions about the sociolinguistic approach to the study of human languages. They unanimously assert that it (the sociolinguistic approach) involves the study of all aspects of the relationship between language and society. Mathews (1997) and Finch (2000) claim that the sociolinguistic framework was first advocated by William Labov (an America linguist), and Peter Trudgill (a British linguist) and their followers in the late 1960s. Mathews (1997) acknowledges that the approach was mostly applied or widely known in the late 1970s. Following the statement of Mathews (1997), it is construed that sociolinguistics includes the examination of the correlations between linguistic variables and non-linguistic variables such as the social class of speakers, their age, sex, multilingual or bilingual phenomena, endangerment among others. Likewise, Adesanya (2002) restates that sociolinguistic approach looks at the social significance of language as it relates to humans in their interpersonal and intercrops interactions. This denotes that sociolinguistic approach focuses on the way in which the structure of language changes in relation to its social function in different social context. Once more, the claim of Ayuwo (2013) shows that the sociolinguistic approach or framework is very pertinent to this paper since it involves an examination of the social phenomena commonly referred to as language endangerment.

### **3. Methodology**

This paper employs the descriptive survey research procedure which comprises the study of a sample drawn from a given population in order to identify their basic characteristics that can be generalized to the entire population. It adopts purposive sampling procedure which is a non-probability sample; therefore, each member of the population has a chance of being chosen. The data for this paper was collected through the use of questionnaire which the researchers administered to a total of one hundred and eighty (180) respondents within eighteen communities in Echie speech communities, Etche and Omuma Local Government Areas, Rivers State of Nigeria. This implies that the researchers sampled ten (10) questionnaires in each of the selected community. The data obtained for this study were presented in simple frequency distribution tables and the analysis done in simple percentages in total response by one hundred (100) percent. This suggests that the data were arranged and recorded according to the responses received. The method for the calculation of the percentage is as follows:

$$\% = \frac{\text{Number of responses}}{\text{Total number of items}} \times \frac{100}{1}$$

### **4. Data Analysis/Discussion**

In this section, the researchers present the data obtained through the use of questionnaire, data analysis and discussion of the data. The first part comprises the demographic information of the respondents. The data are presented in simple percentage tables. Out of the total number of one hundred and eighty (180) questionnaires given to respondents, one hundred and seventy four (174) which represents 97% were accurately filled and returned. Thus, the analysis is based on the 97%.

**Table 1: Gender, Age, Material status, the Number of children and Highest Educational Qualification obtained of Respondents**

<b>Demographic Data</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>Percentage</b>		
Gender	Male	78
	Female	96
	<b>Total</b>	<b>174</b>
Age	18 – 25	29
	26 – 33	64
	34 – 40	32
	41+	49
	<b>Total</b>	<b>174</b>
	<b>100%</b>	
Material status	Single	55
	Married	68
	Divorced	14
	Widow/widower	37
	<b>Total</b>	<b>174</b>
<b>100%</b>		

	<b>Total</b>	<b>174</b>
<b>100%</b>		
Number of children	1 – 2	39
22.4%		
	3 – 5	61
35.1%		
	6+	17
9.8%		
	Nil	57
32.7%		
	<b>Total</b>	<b>174</b>
<b>100%</b>		
Highest Educational	FSLC	11
6.3%		
Qualification obtained	SSCE	37
21.3%		
	Grade 11/NCE/OND	46
26.4%		
	First degree	59
33.9%		
	Post graduate	21
12.1%		
	Nil	0
-		
	<b>Total</b>	<b>174</b>
<b>100%</b>		

The data in table 1 shows that a majority of the respondents, that is, 96 which represents 55.2% are female while 78 which represent 44.8% are male. The table also demonstrates that 64 (36.8%), 49 (28.1%), 32 (18.4%) and 29 (16.7%) are within the age ranges of 26

– 33, 41+, 34 – 40 and 18-25 respectively. It further reveals that a majority of the respondents, that is, sixty eight (68) which represent 39.1% are married, 55 (31.6%) are single, 37 (21.3%) are either widows or widowers while 14 (8%) are divorced. More so, a greater number of the respondents that is, one hundred and seventeen (117) which represent 67.3% out of the total respondents of one hundred and seventy four (174) respondents claim to have 3 – 5 (61, that is, 35.1%), 1 – 2 (39, that is, 22.4%) and 6+ (17, that is, 9.8%) children respectively and 57 which represents 32.7 do not have children. Once more, the table attests that 59 (33.9%), 46 (26.4%), 37 (21.3%), 21 (12.1%) and 11 (6.3%) have First degree, Grade11/NCE/OND, SSCE, Post graduate degree and FSLC respectively.

**Table 2: The Language(s) Use in Echie Speech Community**

<b>Items</b>	<b>Responses</b>	
<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>	
1. Which of these languages do you speak as mother tongue?	82.2%	
-		Echie 143
-		Nigerian Pidgin -
-		English -
-		Others 31
	17.8%	
<b>Total Respondents</b>		<b>174</b>
	<b>100%</b>	
2. What other language(s) do you use/speak in addition to your mother tongue?	100%	
-		English 174
-		French 6
	3.5%	

	Hausa	2
	1.2%	
	Igbo	123
	70.7%	
	Ikwere	49
28.2%		
	Nigerian Pidgin	174
100%		
	O□gba	1
0.6%		
	Yoruba	7
4%		
3. What language(s) are you capable of reading?	Echie	81
46.6%		
	English	174
100%		
3.5%	French	6
	Igbo	102
58.6%		
	Nigerian Pidgin	93
53.5%		
4. What language (s) are you capable of writing?	Echie	54
31%		
	English	174
100%		
	French	6
	100%	

	Igbo	97
55.8%		
	Nigerian Pidgin	88
50.6%		

The response to item 1 in table 2 indicates that 143 (82.2%) and 31 (17.8%) of the respondents respectively speak Echie and other languages such as Igbo, Ikwere, Hausa and Yoruba as mother tongue. Also, item 2 in the table reveal that all the respondents speak English and Nigerian Pidgin in addition to their mother tongues. One hundred and twenty three (123) which represent 70.7% of the respondents claim that speak Igbo. Forty nine (49), that is, 28.2%, 7(4%), 6(3.5%), 2(1.2%) and 1(0.6%) of the respondents claim that they speak Ikwere, Yoruba, French, Hausa and O□gba respectively in addition to their indigenous or native languages. Again, items 3 and 4 in the table illustrate that all the respondents can read and write in English. In other words, all the respondents are literate users of English language. Item 3 in the table demonstrates that 102 (58.6%), 93 (53.5%), 81 (46.6%) and 6 (3.5%) claim that they read Igbo, Nigerian Pidgin, Echie and French languages respectively. Additionally, item 4 in table 2 indicates 97(55.8%), 88 (50.6%), 54 (31%) and 6 (100%) have the ability to write in Igbo, Nigerian Pidgin, Echie and French respectively.

**Table 3: The languages used in different domains in Echie speech communities**

Items	Responses	
Frequency	Percentage (%)	
5. Which language(s) do you use when	Echie	139
79.9%		

communicating with children, parents, 65.5%	English	114
siblings, and others? 1.2%	Hausa	2
	Igbo	78
	44.8%	
18.4%	Ikwere	32
95.4%	Nigerian Pidgin	166
1.7%	Yoruba	3
6. Which language(s) do you speak in office 16.7%	Echie	29
with colleagues, boss, visitors and others 58%	English	101
within Echie speech communities? 25.3%	Nigerian Pidgin	44
<b>100%</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>174</b>

Item 5 in table 3 demonstrates that most homes in Echie speech communities are linguistically complex. 95.4% (166) of the respondents claim that they use Nigerian Pidgin when communicating with their children, parents, siblings and others in Etche. Also, 79.9% (139) and 65.5% (114) say that they use Echie and English respectively when communicating with their children, parents, siblings and others in Etche. The data further show that 44.8% (78), 18.4% (32), 1.7% (3) and 1.2% (2) claim that they use Igbo, Ikwere, Yoruba and Hausa when communicating with their

children, parents, siblings and others in Etche. Similarly, item 6 in the same table prove that 101 which represents 58%, 44 which represents 25.3% and 29 which represents 16.7% respectively use Nigerian Pidgin, English and Echie in offices within Echie speech communities.

**Table 4: Attitudes of Echie Speakers toward their Language**

Items	Responses	Frequ ency	Percen tage
7. Which language would you prefer your children to speak fluently?	Echie	61	35%
	English	77	44.3%
	Nigerian Pidgin	34	19.5%
	Neutral	2	1.2%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>100%</b>
8. What are your reason(s) for your response in 7 above?	It is a national, official language and language of education.	77	44.3%
	It is my mother tongue	61	35%
	Other	13	7.5%
	Neutral	23	13.2%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>100%</b>
9. In the office, how do you feel when someone speaks Echie?	Positive	62	35.6%
	Negative	73	42%
	Neutral	39	22.4%

	<b>Total</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>100%</b>
10. In a formal native ceremony, which language do you prefer either as an MC or audience?	Echie	62	35.6%
	English	68	39.1%
	Nigerian Pidgin	36	20.7%
	Igbo	3	1.7%
	Neutral	5	2.9%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>100%</b>
11. How do you feel about the view that Echie language is dying out?	Positive	26	15%
	Negative	58	33.3%
	Neutral	90	51.7%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>100%</b>

Item 7 in table 4 demonstrates that 77 (44.3%), 61 (35%) and 34 (19.5%) indicate that they will prefer their children to speak English, Echie and Nigerian Pidgin fluently respectively. 2(1.2%) are neutral which implies that they are not interested in the language their children speak fluently. More so, item 8 in the table attests that the reasons for language preference in Echie speech communities are national, official language and language of education. 61 (35%) prefer their mother tongue 23 (13.2%) do not have any reason for their language preference. The data further reveal that there are other reasons for language preference which include intermarriage and trade. Furthermore, item 9 in the table illustrates that 73 (42%) express negative attitude when someone speak Echie language in their offices. Also, 62 (35.6%) express positive attitude when Echie is spoken in their office while 39 (22.4%) are neutral when Echie is spoken in their office. Item 10 indicates that 39.1% that is, 68

respondents prefer English language in formal ceremony while 62 which represent 35.6% and 36 which is 20.7% and 3 (1.7%) respectively prefer Echie, Nigerian Pidgin and Igbo in formal ceremony. While 5 (2.9%) are indifferent about the language use in formal ceremony. Once more, item 11 in the table demonstrates that 90 (51.7%) are not bothered whether Echie language dies or not. In contrast, 58 (33.3%) do not want the language to die while 15% which is 26 respondents firmly insist that the Echie language can die.

#### **4.1 Discussion**

The data presented and analyzed in this paper reveal that Etche is one of the linguistically complex societies in Nigeria. There is a high level of language contact in Echie speech communities. This paper found out that the languages in contact in Echie speech communities are Nigerian Pidgin, English, Igbo, Ikwere, Yoruba, Hausa and French. One of the sociolinguistic implications of language contacts is that the language struggle for recognition. This paper observes that Echie is serious losing speakers to Nigerian Pidgin and English language. The data collected for this research show that Nigerian Pidgin, Echie and English are in serious competition in Echie speech communities. For instance, item 5 in table 3 clearly shows that Nigerian Pidgin is the dominant language in the domain of home. This support the earlier assertions of Williamson (2010, p. 3) that “far from English reducing its hold over communication in formal contexts, it seems to be extending it. English or its humble cousin Pidgin seems to be steadily growing at the expense of Nigerian languages.” The results of this are bilingualism or multilingualism code-switching, code-mixing, borrowing, and language shift.

Following Alamu & Ugwuoke's (2010, p. 51) description of an endangered language as a language "whose speakers have lost or are losing confidence in... and thus consider it inferior or incapable of all the potentials believed to exist in other languages." This paper insists that Echie can be classified as an endangered language. The data in table 4 also reveal that most parents in Echie speech communities prefer their children to use English language fluently than Echie. This is another indication that Echie may be heading to death if nothing is done to avert the trend. The reason for the negative attitude toward Echie is the role assign to English as language of education, judiciary, administration, etc. The findings of this paper prove that fewer children are acquiring Echie language. This is because of the negative attitude of most parents in Echie speech communities toward the language.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper has been able to study language endangerment focusing on the Echie experience. It adopts the descriptive survey research procedure. It employs purposive sampling procedure. The data obtained for this study were presented in simple frequency tables and the analysis done in simple percentages. It was noticed that Echie is serious with Nigerian Pidgin, English, Igbo, Ikwere, Yoruba, Hausa and French. It was also found out that Echie is seriously losing speakers to Nigerian Pidgin and English language. The study demonstrated that Nigerian Pidgin, Echie and English are in stern struggle in Echie speech communities. Therefore, it affirmed that Echie can be classified as an endangered language because the majority of parents in Echie speech communities, especially those who reside in urban cities such as Port Harcourt are not encouraging their children to acquire the language. This is because they feel that Echie is an inferior language since it is not

used in the domain of education, administration, and politics among others.

### **5.1 Recommendation**

This paper recommends that deliberate policy should be made to encourage the use of Echie at home by children. Echie linguists should as a matter of urgency document the language for the possible implementation of its use as language of instruction in the first three years of primary schools in Echie speech communities. This is in line with the language policy of the National Policy on Education in Nigeria.

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## **Appendices**

### **Section A**

#### **Demographic Information of Respondents**

**Gender:** male [ ] female [ ]

**Age:** 18 – 25 [ ] 26 – 33 [ ] 34 – 40 [ ] 41 and above [ ]

**Material status:** single [ ] married [ ] divorced [ ]  
widow/widower [ ]

**Number of children:** 1 – 2 [ ] 3 – 5 [ ] 6 and above [ ]

**Highest Educational Qualification obtained:** None [ ] First  
School Leaving Certificate [ ] SSCE [ ] Grade 11/NCE/OND [ ]  
First degree [ ] Post graduate [ ]

### **Section A**

#### **Endangerment of the Indigenous Languages in Rivers State**

16. Which language would you prefer your children to speak first?

(a) English [ ], (b) mother-tongue [ ], (c) Nigerian pidgin [ ] (d)  
others .....

17. What is/are your reason(s) for your responds in 16  
above.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

18. Which language do you speak to your children at home? (a)  
English [ ], (b) mother-tongue [ ], (c) Nigerian pidgin [ ] (d)  
others .....

19. In a formal native ceremony, which language do you prefer  
either as an MC or audience? (a) English [ ], (b) mother-tongue [ ]  
, (c) Nigerian pidgin [ ] (d) others .....

20. What is/are your reason(s) for your responds in 19  
above.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

21. In the office, how do you feel when someone speaks your  
native language (mother-tongue?)

(a) Positive [ ], (b) Negative [ ], (c) Neutral

22. What is/are your reason(s) for your responds in 21 above.....

.....  
.....  
.....

23. How do you feel about the view that our native languages or mother-tongues are dying out? (a) Positive [ ], (b) Negative [ ], (c) Neutral