

Ogu¹-Yoruba Bilingualism and Evidence of Language Shift in Badagry

Oyetade, Solomon Oluwole, PhD & Onadipe-Shalom, Titilayo A. PhD

Abstract

Ogu–Yoruba bilingualism is the norm in Badagry. Therefore, this study examined language ability, language choice in a number of domains, attitudes and inter-ethnic relations between the Ogu (Egun) and the Yoruba to see whether there is a noticeable trend of language shift or maintenance among Ogu speakers in Badagry. With data from 300 respondents and observation, it was discovered that the youths and adults maintain relative degrees of proficiency in Yoruba, but the youths are losing ability in Ogu. As for language choice, the influence of Yoruba looms large in the various domains including the home. The Ogu recognised their language as a symbol of their identity and a vital link to their ancestors. Nevertheless, they held Yoruba in high esteem as the language of education and vehicle for reaching out to their neighbours. The paper concludes that Ogu is endangered and recommends steps to boost its vitality.

Keywords: bilingualism, language choice, shift and endangerment,, Badagry.

Introduction

Widespread societal bilingualism involving two Nigerian languages is the norm rather than the exception in some communities in Nigeria. These are urban centres like Lagos, Kano, Kaduna, Ibadan, Warri, Sapele, Port Harcourt, etc. as well as frontiers of two language areas. The speakers of various Akoko languages split between the present Ondo and Edo States are typical examples. Oke (1972) describes them as ambilingual due to their level of mastery of Yoruba and their Akoko languages. Studies have, however, shown that cases of language endangerment are high there due to the pressure from Yoruba. These are reported in Oyetade, 2007 and in Dada, 2006 and 2008). Yorùbá is gradually displacing Akoko languages in some domains according to these studies.

Fishman, (1965), Ervin-Tripp, (1968), Rubin, (1968), Fishman, Cooper and Ma (1971) all demonstrate the fact that the major factors influencing language choice are the setting, the participants, the topic and function of the interaction. In addition, studies have revealed that even in the home domain, the major national languages and foreign languages e.g. (English) are still predominantly employed in conversation, threatening the existence of minority languages in Nigeria. Such studies include Oyetade (1990, 2007), Avognon (1994). Fakuade (1996, 1997), and

¹ Ogu or Egun is used to refer to both the language and its speakers.

Dada (2006), Onadipe-Shalom (2013) and Senayon (2016, 2018). However, there are also situations where language shift does not tend towards the dominant language or even the languages taught in schools, but to a language of political power. A case in point is in Adamawa State, a multi-complex and multicultural state in Nigeria, where the minority language speakers are shifting not to Hausa but to Fulfulde as a second language. (Fakuade et al. 2003, Onadipe-Shalom, 2018).

Another place where there is wide-spread societal bilingualism is Badagry. This is a frontier zone between Nigeria and Benin Republic which provides contact between Yorùbá and Ogu whose speakers are split between Nigeria and Benin Republic. Asiwaju (1979) noted various degrees of influence of Yoruba on Ogu (also referred to as Aja, Gbe, Gun or Egun) not only in Badagry but also in other communities as found in Ogun and Lagos States. (Senayon 2016). According to Asiwaju (1979:22), “settlements that are geographically contiguous to the Aja culture area appear to retain or maintain ‘Egun’ but only tolerate and use Yoruba “rather reluctantly and often imperfectly as a second language”. Asiwaju’s submission is the prime motivation for the present investigation. One has every reason to doubt that Yoruba is tolerated and used reluctantly in some Ogu settlements. For instance, it is possible for one to find one’s way around without speaking a word of Ogu in Badagry which is the chief of Ogu settlements. Onadipe-Shalom (2013) and Senayon (2016) present evidence of language shift in Badagry, Lagos State and Ogu-speaking communities in Ogun State respectively. If at all Yoruba is resisted, we conjecture that it might be among the older generations of Ogu who see the continued use of Yoruba as a threat to the continued existence of Ogu. The linguistic behaviour of the youths and the educated class seems to favour Yoruba. Given the time of Asiwaju’s study, we believe that the pattern of language use in all Ogu-speaking communities must have changed drastically. Recent works on the ogu language have shown that this statement does not capture the linguistic situation today. The present reality is the dominance of Yorùbá over Ogu, in spite of the efforts made by some Ogu indigenes as reported in Senayon (2014:7). Here, the researcher having established the endangerment of Ogu language, reveals that “a number of families living in ancestral and diaspora space have been making serious and consistent efforts at ensuring that Ogu is not only spoken by adult couples but it is used also by their young children” the report on a family efforts, especially a non-native mother at language maintenance. However, the solution to the problem is still far away. As mentioned in her study, inter-marriages among Ogu women and Yorùbá men have strengthened the use of Yorùbá in the home domain. Are these efforts yielding desirable and tangible results that can make us agree that the Yorùbá language is merely a tolerated and imperfectly spoken language by the Ogu?

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Ofulue (2015) was concerned about the impact of bilingualism on the use of cross-border languages on Gungbe, considering its socio-cultural and historical background. The study was carried out in Badagry and Porto Novo. She maintained that minority languages in these areas as common with borderland communities are 'more vulnerable to language endangerment'. (Ofulue, 2105:43). She opines that whether of conflict or convergence, bilingualism is a natural phenomenon in borderland communities for the purpose of integration and economic advantage. It seems also that even the ogu speakers are not aware that their languages are endangered, hence, the need for proper awareness (Aniche-Ohiri, 2008). A work of this nature will, therefore, create an awareness that will help in safeguarding the language from eventual extinction.

Historical Background to the Bilingualism in Badagry

Badagry is a coastal town situated towards the border between Nigeria and Benin Republic. It is the present local government headquarters of Badagry Local Government Area. According to the 2006 Nigerian National Census, the population of Badagry is 241,093. The ancient town of Badagry was founded around 1425 A.D. (Mesewaku et al. 2000); and it served the present-day widespread bilingualism in the town dated back to the earliest times.

Badagry is an exceptionally important town for two reasons. It was a leading outpost for transatlantic slave trade of the early 1500s to 1800s. In addition, it was the gateway to Christianity and education in Nigeria. Missionary activities started in Badagry in 1842 as Thomas Birch Freeman and Henry Townsend of the C.M.S preached the gospel for the first time there under the Agia tree. Activities that led to the translation of the Bible into Yoruba also took place there. Yorùbá was already wide spread in Badagry before the coming of the Europeans. When the Europeans arrived, they had no alternative language other than Yoruba for their religious activities. Thus, the need to translate the Bible to Yoruba. This is one of the many factors that promoted Yoruba, being the language encouraged by Christian missionaries for the propagation of Christianity among the natives.

Therefore, whereas Senayon (2016:120) opines that 'harsh language policies' can 'force' an ethnolinguistic group to adopt the language of the larger society, Onadipe-Shalom (2018:77) maintains that this must be viewed as 'passive assimilation' following the UNESCO's Ad Hoc Committee's reports. In regards to government and institutional language attitudes and policies, in the work places the Ogu language is on level 3, which states that "No explicit policy exists for minority languages; the dominant language prevails in the public domain."

The Yoruba appear to be predominant and influential right from the earliest times in Badagry. While the Ogu indigenes were farmers and fishermen, the

Yoruba that came from Oyo were primarily traders. The Yoruba had been in Badagry long before the coming of the Europeans. They enjoyed a peaceful coexistence with the Ogu. They were receptive of each other as evident in inter-marriages, traditional festivals, employments, etc. This promoted bilingualism in Ogu and Yoruba. The Yoruba also became economically stronger than their Ogu counterparts. This must have made knowledge of Yoruba imperative for Ogu speakers. Senayon (2016;122) asserts that “the privileging of Yorùbá in official terms as the language of education, commerce and politics also contributes, in no small measures, to the acceleration of the pattern of shift from Ogu to Yorùbá. In view of all these, Yorùbá was already wide spread in Badagry before the coming of the Europeans. By the time the Europeans came, they had no alternative language for their religious activities other than Yoruba. Thus, the need to translate the Bible to Yoruba. This is one of the many factors that promoted Yoruba, being the language encouraged by Christian missionaries for the propagation of Christianity among the natives.

The Linguistic Situation in Badagry

Badagry is now cosmopolitan with influx of people from diverse backgrounds. Basically, three languages are predominantly spoken in Badagry. These are Ogu, Yoruba and the English languages. Nevertheless, immigrants from other parts of the country like the Igbo and the Hausa communicate in their respective languages. Ogu, otherwise called Egun is the mother tongue of the natives. It has a number of varieties. Up to now, none of these varieties has been developed as the standard language. The implication of this is that there is no uniformity in the way Ogu is written and used by different people.

It must be mentioned that Ogu is used on radio and television for news broadcasts, public enlightenment, and entertainment programmes by the Lagos and Ogun State governments. It is also used alongside English in some Pentecostal churches. In some orthodox churches, services are conducted in English and interpretations are made in Yoruba.

As far as the local administration is concerned, Ogu is used at the Oba's palace. However, much depends on the people involved in any matter. Although Ogu is the “official” language in the palace, other languages within the community are allowed, if the parties involved are not natives and, therefore cannot speak Ogu. But in government offices like the Local Government headquarters, in spite of the fact that English is the official language, Yorùbá is predominantly used.

The English language is the language of education in Badagry both at the primary and secondary school levels. Ogu is not used as the medium of instruction at the early stages of primary education as stipulated by the National Policy on

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Education², neither is it taught as a subject at both primary and secondary school levels. English is used as the medium of instruction at the primary school level. Nevertheless, there is an informal bilingualism at this level depending on the teacher. Explanation of difficult things can be in either Ogu or Yoruba, having taught in English. Significantly, Yoruba is taught as a subject both in primary and secondary schools. It has a flourishing literary tradition including novels, drama, poetry, pedagogical materials, etc. as well as newspapers, magazines and comics. There is now an upsurge in Yoruba films, which is a new dimension to the development of the Yoruba language. These have boosted the status of Yoruba tremendously among non-native speakers of the language. By contrast, none of these is attested in Ogu.

By virtue of the fact that Badagry is a border town, language use in the market does not bear any correlation to a person's ethnic group. Languages predominantly used in the market include Ogu, Yoruba, Nigerian Pidgin English, English and French. In Agbalata International Market, Nigerian Pidgin English is the medium of communication for dealers in second-hand goods like shoes, dresses and electronics. The Ogu traders communicate in Yoruba with their Yoruba customers. Therefore, without any knowledge of Ogu one can easily make commercial transactions in Badagry. It is against this background that this study tries to investigate the veracity of the claim made by Asiwaju (1979) that Yorùbá is a tolerated language among the Ogu and also review the recent revitalisation efforts reported in Senayon (2018).

Research Questions

This study intends to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the extent of Ogu/Yoruba bilingualism in Badagry?
2. In what contexts are Ogu and Yoruba used, with whom, when and why?
3. What is the attitude of Ogu speakers to the Ogu language on the one hand, and Yoruba, their second language, on the other hand?
4. Are there noticeable changes in language behaviour among these bilinguals and what factors are responsible for this?

Answers to these questions will be able to reveal to us the present status of Ogu compared with Yoruba. It will be unravelled, for instance whether Ogu is being maintained or not and whether the Yorùbá language is merely a tolerated language.

² The National Policy on Education published in 1977, but variously revised in 1981, 1998, 2004 stipulates that the medium of instruction at the pre-primary and primary levels of education should be the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community.

Methodology

The study employed a questionnaire to elicit data pertaining to the questions raised above from the respondents in randomly selected homes. On-the-spot and unobtrusive observation of language behaviours within the town were made to supplement or corroborate data gathered from the questionnaire. Nevertheless, for non-literate subjects, the questionnaires were used as interview schedule since they could not fill in the questionnaire by themselves. Finally, settings such as schools, markets, churches, post office, hospitals and playgrounds were visited to observe actual language use.

As for language ability, the respondents were asked to rate themselves on a 5-point rating scale of poor, fair, good, very good and excellent. We used their spoken ability in the two languages as indices of their degree of bilingualism. As native speakers of Yoruba we were able to validate their claims of their competence in Yoruba by their level of proficiency in Yoruba when they speak the language without any trace of non-native accents.

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented below.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics (N=300)

Sex	
Male	48
Female	52
Age	
8 – 20	37.5
21 – 30	20
31 – 49	25
	50 + 17.5
Level of Education	
No formal education	6
Primary	12
Secondary	58
Post-secondary	24
Occupation	
Schooling	51
Farming	7.3
Petty Trading	18
Civil service	23.7

Table 2: Mean proficiency in Ogu and Yoruba by Four variables.

Variables	Ogu	Yoruba
Sex		
Male	4.65	4.62
Female	4.63	4.58
Age		
8 – 20	3.53	3.75
21 – 30	4.43	4.62
31 – 49	4.82	4.81
50 +	4.85	4.78
Level of Education		
No formal education	4.55	4.53
Primary	4.67	4.89
Secondary	4.52	4.88
Post-secondary	4.46	4.89
Occupation		
Schooling	4.23	4.53
Farming	4.89	4.87
Artisans	4.85	4.86
Civil Servants	4.87	4.87

Our findings indicate no significant difference in the proficiency of our male and female respondents in both Ogu and Yorùbá. Nevertheless, the males have a slightly higher level of proficiency in the two languages than their female counterparts. The mean score of males in Ogu is 4.65 compared with the females' 4.63 in the same language, while for Yorùbá, it is 4.62 compared with 4.58. These results indicate almost equal degree of proficiency in both Ogu and Yoruba.

Taken into consideration other demographic variables, the scores of the respondents were subjected to one-way analysis of variance. We discovered a statistically significant difference between different age groups. The children and the youths as represented by 8-20 and 21-30 age groups appear to rank below the performance of other age-groups who are young adults and middle age adults. It must, however, be pointed out that the younger generation of Ogu respondents represented by 8-20 and 21-30 appear to be more proficient in Yoruba than Ogu. The level of proficiency of the respondents in Yoruba tends to increase with education and occupation as evident in Table 2. But there is no statistically significant difference in the means of the different educational levels and occupational groups. These findings, we believe, have implications for language use as well as for language maintenance and shift.

Language Use

On language use, the respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which they use the three major languages spoken within Badagry community. These are Ogu Yorùbá and English and the mixture of any of them. The following options were given ‘always’, ‘sometimes’, ‘hardly’ and ‘never’. The result is shown on Table 3.

Table 3: Frequency of use of Ogu, Yorùbá and English in Badagry (N=300)

Context	Yorùbá	Ogu	Ogu + Yorùbá	Yorùbá	Yorùbá + English	Ogu + English
How often do you speak Ogu?						
Always	44	71.7	76	68	60	69
Sometimes	23	15.7	20	17	27	20
Hardly	24	7.6	4	16	8.3	7
Never	9	5	-	-	5.0	4
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

The table shows that majority of our respondents always use Ogu and Yorùbá either alone or in combination with each other even in one single discourse. It is noticed in column three (3) that those who indicate the use of both Yorùbá and Ogu are in the highest number. This is also a pointer to the dominance of Yorùbá in this community. The true position obviously manifest in our investigation of the various domains of language use in the community.

Language use in selected domains

Language use in five different domains was examined viz: the home, the school, workplace, market and religion. Domain involves not only the place and time, but also participants, topics and pragmatic conditions. We can then speak of formal domains or public domains and informal or private domains. There is no point in wasting time on complex domain analysis in all public domains involved here, namely the school and the workplace. As to be expected, the respondents admitted to using English mostly in communication involving official matters with their bosses, equals and subordinates. Ogu is not indicated as being used in the official domain; rather Yorùbá is used in informal discussions in offices. This is equally validated by our observation of language use in the offices. This same situation holds in the school. All teachings are done in English but informal interaction between teachers on the one hand, and between teachers and

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students, as well as between students on the other hand, are mostly carried out in Yorùbá, or alternatively in English interspersed with Yoruba.

It is only in the home domain that Ogu is prominent. Nevertheless, the influence of Yoruba and English is still felt. This is shown in tables 4 and 5 below.

Our observation also revealed that children on the playgrounds in the neighbourhood, use Yoruba mostly for interaction.

Table 4: Parents' self-report on language use in percentages (N=130)

Context	Ogu	Yorùbá	English	Yor+Eng,	Ogu+Eng	Ogu + Yor
When talking to children	30.8	3	27.7	26.2	3.8	8.5
When talking to friends (Ogu speakers)	42.5	40.0	1.5	4.0	3.0	8.0
When discussing important family matters	62.1	1.5	2.0	4.4	-	30.0
When talking to neighbors	36.2	9.2	3.8	33.8	7.7	9.2

Table 5: Children's self-report on language use at home (150)

Context	Ogu	Yorùbá	English	Eng+Yor	Eng+Ogu	Yor+Ogu
When talking to parents	61	6	17	28	26	12
	40.7	4	11.3	18.7	17.3	8
When talking to grandparents	102	20	12	4	4	8
	68	13.3	8	2.7	2.7	5.3
When talking to brothers and sisters	30	16	24	46	8	26
	20	10.7	16	30.7	5.3	17.3
When talking to other children in the neighborhood	20	4	6	70	22	28
	13.3	2.6	4	46.7	14.7	18.7

From these tables one would notice slight differences in the use of the languages. The Ogu speakers are understandably more inclined to use their language in the home. Nevertheless, it is evident that Yoruba and English have crept in the home. This is indicated by the percentages of parents who communicate with various interlocutors at home in Yoruba alone or Yorùbá +English or Yorùbá+Ogu. Even though they are small, we cannot neglect them as this is indicative of gradual infiltration of Yoruba and English in the domain reserved for Ogu.

This observation is pertinent when one considers the extent to which the

Ogu have embraced the Yoruba culture. For instance, they worship identical gods and goddesses with the Yoruba. Two of such are Ogun-the Yoruba god of iron and Olokun, the sea goddess of the Yoruba. The Titles of some of their chiefs are identical with those of the Yoruba. For example, out of the titles of the seven kings in the towns in Badagry District, six of them are clearly Yoruba titles, while only one is distinctly Ogu. These are Onigbanko of Igbankoland, Alabirun of Ikaare, Onilado of Ilado and Inagbe Island, Onijanikin of Ijanikin, Oba of Ibereko and Osolu of Irewe. (See Lagos State Traditional Rulers in Nigeria Galleria (<https://www.nigeriagaller>). More importantly, in some of the homes surveyed, virtually every one of them had one Yoruba name or the other. When this is taken with their perfect proficiency in Yoruba, it becomes overly difficult to doubt their true identity as non-Yorùbás This phenomenon confirms Senayon's (2016) remarks of stigmatization from the Yorùbá neighbours and maginalisation in "admission to secondary and tertiary institutions as they were regarded as Yorùbá, the majority language group in South West Nigeria. This stigmatization has led many to change their names to Yorùbá names and learn Yorùbá as a matter of social, political and economic survival". It is only their surnames or family names that usually reveal their identity. Proof of change in names is shown in the following: Bukola Hunge, Toyin Aabove, Tolu Hunge, Sesi Asokere, Senami Omotola, Semande Adesina, etc.

Against this background, informants were required to indicate whether or not they were comfortable with Yoruba or their separate Ogu identity. Sixty-five percent (195) definitely wanted to maintain their Ogu identity, while 20 of them said they could take up Yoruba identity because of their competence in Yoruba; 15 of them were undecided.

Conclusion

It is quite noticeable from this survey that Yorùbá is widely used in Badagry; and its usage has made its incursions into domains reserved for Ogu. In addition, some Ogu speakers tacitly accepted the dominance of Yorùbá. This is due largely to the numerical strength of the Yorùbá compared with the Ogu. A number of institutional support factors have boosted the status of Yoruba over and above Ogu. These are education and mass media. For instance, in spite of the directive in the National Policy on Education of 1981 that the medium of instruction at the Pre-Primary and Primary education should be the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community, Yorùbá is actively used both as a medium of instruction and taught as a subject in both primary and secondary schools in Badagry. Ogu is neither a medium of instruction nor a school subject in spite of the large number of its speakers in Badagry and in the entire local government.

Yorùbá is widely used in the mass media (radio, television and newspapers).

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Even though Ogu is used on radio and television in Lagos and Ogun States, the programmes in which it is used are far less than those in relayed in Yorùbá, -a fact attested to by Onadipe- Shalom (2013). While there are many newspapers and magazines published for the reading pleasure of readers in Yorùbá, none of such can be said for Ogu. It is obvious, therefore, that although Ogu is positively regarded by its speakers, nevertheless, they see the need to continue the use of Yoruba in the community. This is in consonance with Senayon's (2016) findings of ambivalent attitudes of the Ogu in Ogun State.

One cannot gloss over the factors of inter-marriage too. A large number of Ogu women are married to Yorùbá men. Since the Yorùbá are demographically superior to Ogu, it should be expected that more of Ogu women will be married to Yorùbá men compared with Yorùbá women to Ogu men. All these factors encourage the dominance of Yorùbá among Ogu in Badagry.

As rightly noted in Dagamseh (2020:15) that most of the world's population is bilingual or multilingual, with monolingual speakers in the minority, one thing that is clear from this study is that there are more bilinguals than monolinguals in Badagry and Ogu (Egun) is definitely endangered. In terms of the levels of language endangerment described by Wurm (2003), Ogu is in the first level, i.e. potentially endangered. This is so because the children are beginning to prefer Yorùbá the dominant language and relatively use Ogu imperfectly. Similarly, based on the ethno-linguistic vitality scale presented by Brenzinger et al. (2003), Ogu can be regarded as 'safe' in terms of inter-generational transfer since it is used by all age groups. However, it is used more by the adult population. Its use is dwindling in the home domain because of the statuses of Yoruba and English. It now becomes necessary for native speakers to take concrete steps to safe-guard the Ogu language from eventual obsolescence or death. Senayon's (2016, 2018) reports adequate efforts made in that direction.

Good enough, Ogu is used on radio and television in Lagos and Ogun States. Programmes on these channels should be used to mobilize the native speakers' interest in the language to wake up the people's interest and ensure that their language is not "swallowed up" by Yorùbá. The Badagry Local Government Chairman's directive that any undergraduates coming for any official transactions at the local government should be allowed to permeate all levels of Badagry community is a pointer to making Ogu alive. This should be followed up by another drastic step: a bill should be sponsored by the representative of the Badagry Constituency at the Lagos State House of Assembly to the effect that Ogu be used as the medium of instruction in the early stage of primary education as stipulated by the National Policy on Education.

Efforts to stem the tide of shift from Ogu to Yorùbá should be an undertaking

cutting across all the strata of the Ogu society - the masses, the elites or the people in the upper echelon of the society. Programmes could be sponsored on the radio and television in the language drawing attention to the usefulness of the language. There should be an annual activity where the arts and culture of the people would be showcased. What is more, literary activities like drama, prose and poetry in Ogu should be sponsored and prizes be awarded to the best entries and these should be published to further encourage the populace. In all, these steps will add up to ensure the development of the language. No effort should be spared to ensure the development of the language to rescue it from relegation and eventual death.

The status of the Ogu language, though a small-group language (to steer clear of the pejorative term “minority language”) yet a crossborder language like Yorùbá between Nigeria and Benin Republic should make it a strategic language for sub-regional integration. Therefore, symbiotic efforts should be made between Nigeria and Benin Republic to ensure the development of the language and promote its intergenerational continuity. Native speakers of Ogu should take up the gauntlet to defend the language from eventual death.

This study shows that Asiwaju's (1979) claim of perfect health with regard to the retention of ‘Egun’ in Badagry can no longer be sustained with the present realities. Finally, this study lends credence to earlier observation by Sommer (1989) that language death in Africa typically tends to involve a shift to other indigenous languages, particularly national languages and lingua francas rather than to the European Languages of the colonial powers.

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