

AN ASSESSMENT OF GOVERNMENTAL ATTITUDE TOWARDS SMALL LANGUAGE GROUPS IN BENUE STATE: THE ETULO LANGUAGE EXAMPLE

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Abstract

The linguistic vitality status of the endangered small language groups in Benue State Nigeria, has become a matter of concern. The aim of this study was therefore, to assess the attitude of the Benue State Government including official status towards the Etulo language an Idomoid language spoken in Buruku local government of Benue State. The Attitude and Motivational Questionnaire was administered to 340 respondents. The data collected was analyzed quantitatively using frequency tables and simple percentages. Findings revealed that the attitude of the government towards the Etulo language was very poor and meant to encourage the assimilation of the Etulo language into Tiv language as well as its abandonment by providing education in other languages as well as declaring other languages rather than the Etulo language, the official language of the speech community. It was recommended that the government should introduce the Etulo language as a subject of study in schools and make laws and policies that encourage its use in the new media and other domains of use, as well declare it an official language.

Keywords: Small Language Groups, Attitude, government, official language, new media, endangered small language groups

Introduction

According to Crystal (2000), language endangerment refers to a situation where children in a speech community are spoken to in a language other than, that of their parents, this happens mostly in speech communities where the endangered language is a small language group. Batibo (2003b) state that language endangerment involves two or more languages where the stronger in the very end overpowers the weaker one. When this situation occurs, the stronger language assimilates the weaker one or the weaker language speakers can decide to shift to using the stronger language. Within the area of study, the Etulo

language is a weaker language and is almost overpowered by the Tiv language as a result of the political, economic and social influence of the Tiv language within Benue state.

Sengupta (2009), adds that The UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, (2009), presents a very grave picture of the languages of the world that are extinct or about to go into extinction. The report state that out of the 6000 languages of the world, about 200 have gone into extinction during the last three generations, 538 are critically endangered, 502 are severely endangered, 632 are definitely endangered and 607 are unsafe.

Brenzinger, et al (2003), posit that a country's government may have an explicit language use policy for its multiple languages. At one extreme, one language may be designated as the sole official language of the country, while all others are condemned. At the other extreme, all languages of a nation may receive equal official status. Equal legal status, however, does not guarantee language maintenance and long-term vitality of a language. The objective of this study is to assess the attitude of the government towards the Etulo language, that is the level at which the government prioritizes the Etulo language within Benue State and particularly within the speech community.

The majority language in this case is the Tiv language and is the language of those that are in government who have given more attention to the Tiv language at the detriment of the Etulo language. These questions demand for urgent answers are; does the policies of government favour of all languages? Does the government prohibit the Etulo language? Is the government active or passive about the use of the Etulo language, is the Etulo language an official language within the speech community and does the government force the small Etulo language group to assimilate into the majority Tiv language?

Materials And Methods

This study is a survey design. It employed the use of the attitude and motivational questionnaire as the main data collection instrument in addition to focus groups discussions and participant observations. It used Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sampling techniques and had a sample of 340 respondents and administered the copies of the questionnaire based on quota sampling method. Results were quantitatively presented in frequency tables and simple

percentages, a 5-point scale Likert was used in the attitude and motivational questionnaire.

The area of study is the Etulo speech community of Etulo council ward in Buruku Local Government Area of Benue North-West Senatorial District of Benue State, Nigeria. The speech community has seven clans namely: Okpashila, Ugye, Ogulube, Agia, Agbatala, Agbou, Angwauje, Otsafu and Ogilazi. The scope of the study was an assessment of the attitudes and motivations for the use of the Etulo language by the speakers of the language in Buruku Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria.

Results

Governmental attitudes including policies and official status towards the Etulo language were assessed mainly by using the responses to the attitude and motivational questionnaire. Focus groups discussions were conducted and participant observations were made so as to elicit more data from the field on the attitude of the government towards the Etulo language of Benue state, Nigeria and are shown in table 3.1a-g below:

Table 3.1: Governmental attitudes and policies including official status towards the Etulo language.

a. Etulo is protected by a law that encourages its maintenance through policies

Strongly Agree	0	0
Agree	0	0
Neutral	2	0.59
Disagree	40	11.77
Strongly Disagree	298	87.64
	340	100

b. The government gives the same support for Etulo and other languages in the state

Options	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	0	0
Agree	0	0
Neutral	1	0.29

Disagree	19	5.59
Strongly Disagree	320	94.12
	340	100

c. A policy exists for the protection of Etulo and other minority languages

Options	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	0	0
Agree	0	0
Neutral	1	0.29
Disagree	142	41.77
Strongly Disagree	197	57.94
	340	100

d. Etulo is recognized as the official language of the speech community

Options	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	0	0
Agree	0	0
Neutral	0	0
Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	340	100
	340	100

e. Etulo language is prohibited in schools & offices

Options	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	328	96.47
Agree	10	2.94
Neutral	2	0.59
Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	0	0
	340	100

f. Government is encouraging the abandonment of the Etulo Language by providing education in English & Tiv

Options	NO. OF RESPONDENTS	PERCENTAGE
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Strongly Agree	338	99.41
Agree	2	0.59
Neutral	0	0
Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	0	0
	340	100

g. The government has a policy declaring another language rather than Etulo, the official language

Options	no. of respondents	percentage
Strongly Agree	340	100
Agree	2	0
Neutral	0	0
Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	0	0
	340	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2019

The responses presented in table 3.1a-g above, were those reported in the attitude and motivational questionnaire, by the respondents from the Etulo speech community. The attitudes of the government towards any aspect of human life can be very powerful and effective because, the government is the custodian of the land and all that is in it.

The responses above provided the requisite answers to the aim of this study. 87.64% (298) of the respondents strongly disagreed that the Etulo language is protected by a law that encourages its maintenance, 11.77% (40) disagreed with the above assertion while 0.59% (2) of the respondents were neutral in their responses. This is because, there are currently government policies that prohibit the use of the Etulo language in official domains within the Etulo speech community and Benue state.

Again, 94.12% (320) of the respondents strongly disagreed and 5.59% (19) disagreed that the government gives same support to Etulo and other minority languages in the state, while 0.29% (1) remained neutral. This is to clearly state that the support given to other languages such as the Tiv, Igede, Idoma, Utonkon, Iyive and Uffia etc is more that the support given to the Etulo language

in terms of funding for publication of books in the languages and the conduct of qualitative as well as quantitative researches on the languages in question.

Similarly, 57.94% (197) of the respondents strongly disagreed that a policy exists for the protection of the Etulo and other small language groups in Benue state and this position is supported by another 41.77% (142) of the respondents who also disagreed that the Etulo and other small language groups have protection policies put in place by the Benue state government, while 0.29% (1) reported of their neutrality on the issue of protection policies for the Etulo and other small language groups in the state.

In furtherance of displeasure over the attitude of the government towards the Etulo language, 100% (340) of the respondents strongly disagreed that the Etulo language is an official language within the speech community. This is because, Tiv language and English are recognized as the official languages of communication and education as well as government businesses in the speech community other than the Etulo language.

On the prohibition of the Etulo language in schools and offices except at home within the speech community, 96.47% (328) of the respondents strongly agreed that the Etulo language is prohibited in schools and offices within the speech community except at home, 2.94% (10) of the respondents also agreed that the Etulo language has been prohibited in schools and offices as it is referred to as a vernacular in schools and any student or pupil caught speaking the Etulo language in school receives a mild punishment, while Tiv and English are the only languages officially permitted to be used in offices, then 0.59% (2) of the respondents remained neutral about the above assertion on the prohibition of the Etulo language in schools and offices within the state.

The respondents also reported that the government is encouraging the abandonment of the Etulo language by providing education in English and Tiv languages only as 99.41% (338) of the respondents strongly agreed that the government is seriously encouraging the abandonment of the Etulo language through its laws policies and 0.59% (2) agreed with the above assertion as well. This is very true because from our observations, the researcher observed that the government prohibited the use of Etulo in all official domains in the speech community, thereby encouraging the abandonment of the Etulo language for either Tiv or English.

And finally, 100% (340) of the respondents strongly agreed that the government has a policy declaring another language rather than the Etulo language, the official language of the speech community. The official language within the speech community and the entire country is English, but within Benue state and Buruku local government in particular, Tiv language has been permitted for use by the government at the primary school and junior secondary school levels.

Focus groups discussions and observations as well as face-to-face personal observations revealed that the attitude of the government towards the Etulo language has been very poor and aimed at always encouraging the abandonment of the Etulo language for the Tiv language and also has laws and policies that encourage the assimilation of the Etulo language into Tiv language where the Etulo language and culture will be assimilated into the Tiv language and culture.

It is pertinent to note that, the bad attitude and policies of the government which encourages the abandonment and assimilation of the Etulo language into the Tiv language towards the Etulo language is a negative indicator for the vitality of the Etulo language because according to the respondents, the government has a policy in place declaring another language rather than Etulo the official language, does not have any law protecting and encouraging the maintenance of Etulo and other small language groups, does not give same support to Etulo and other languages in the state, the Etulo language is prohibited in schools and offices, the government is also encouraging the abandonment of the Etulo language by providing education in English and Tiv and worst of all is that, the government does not have any law or policy in place to protect the Etulo and other small language groups in Benue State.

Discussions

The relevant data above aimed at giving the suitable answer to our main objective in this study as presented in table in 3.1a-g above from the administration of the attitude and motivational questionnaire clearly defines the attitude of the Benue State government towards the Etulo language. As already stated above, Brenzinger, et al (2003), posit that a country's government may have an explicit language use policy for its multiple languages. At one extreme, one language may be designated as the sole official language of the country, while all others are condemned. At the other extreme, all languages of a nation may receive equal official status. Equal legal status, however, does not guarantee

language maintenance and long-term vitality of a language. The later clearly spells out the Nigerian linguistic situation and Benue state in particular.

Therefore, data emanating from the administration of the attitude and motivational questionnaire coupled with additional information from focus groups discussions and participant observations enabled this study to find out that there is no law by the government to protect the Etulo language and other small language groups that encourage their maintenance. The study only discovered that the government has formulated policies that are detrimental to the vitality of the Etulo and other small language groups in Benue state. The Benue state government does not give equal support to all the languages within the state, it gives preferential support to Tiv and English as well as Idoma and Igede and abandons every other language to their fate.

There is a policy that places a ban on the use of local languages (small language groups) for teaching science subjects at the primary and junior secondary school levels in Benue State, Nigeria. This policy identifies only three local languages that can be used and they include, Tiv, Idoma and Igede, but bans the use of other small language groups in all official domains.

It was also reported that the government has recognized another language as the official language even within the Etulo speech community rather than the Etulo language itself, has prohibited the use of the Etulo language in schools and office. The government has encouraged the abandonment of the Etulo language for other languages such as Tiv and English by providing education for the Etulo children in English and Tiv languages. Focus groups discussions as well as face-to-face personal interviews all showed that the attitude of the government together with its policies towards the Etulo language are all aimed at encouraging the abandonment of the Etulo language for another language and its assimilation into the Tiv language.

It has become evidently clear from the responses to the sociolinguistic questionnaire, focus groups discussions and face-to-face personal interviews that, the attitude of the government towards the Etulo language is very bad, the government encourages the active assimilation of the Etulo language into the Tiv language, prohibited the use of the Etulo language in schools and offices; is encouraging the abandonment of the Etulo language by providing education at many levels of education within the Etulo speech community in English and Tiv.

The government does not have a law in place that will encourage the maintenance of the Etulo language, it has also put policies in place that will frustrate the use of the Etulo language such as the abrogation of the Otse Etulo kingship and the consequent replacement of the same with a kindred head that has been immersed in the Tiv traditional council. The Benue state government most sadly does not give the same support to all languages especially the small language groups. Consequently, there is no policy in place that exists in support of the linguistic vitality of the Etulo language, but only those meant to encourage the abandonment of the Etulo language for English and Tiv languages and the assimilation of the Etulo language into Tiv language.

Conclusions

From the foregoing, it was this research found out that the attitude of the government including official status towards the Etulo language is very negative towards its linguistic vitality. The government is in the forefront, encouraging the abandonment of the Etulo language by providing education in English and Tiv languages and refusing to acknowledge the Etulo language as one of the small language groups in Benue State.

The government has also proved the above statement by declaring the English and Tiv languages the official languages of the Etulo speech community and consequently prohibiting the use of the Etulo language in all official environments as well proscribing the Etulo traditional council and merging it with the bigger Tiv traditional Council in the Amended Benue State Council of Chiefs and Traditional Council Bill, 2015.

The government does not have laws and policies that protect the Etulo language and other small language groups within the Speech community and in Benue State in general. There are laws and policies that encourage the protection of the English language and the major languages of Benue State such as the Tiv, Idoma and Igede languages.

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