

# Mainstreaming the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Etulo language of Benue State-Nigeria

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## Abstract

Language contact as a sociolinguistic phenomenon has been discovered to have brought about several implications ranging from language choice, language attitudes, linguistic borrowing, code-switching, bi/multilingualism, language endangerment to language loss and death. Language endangerment as one of the critical implications of language contact has befallen several languages of the world today. The co-existence of different ethno-linguistic groups in a particular area for whatever reasons paves way for the relation between the languages they speak often resulting into language endangerment and other sociolinguistic implications. In Nigeria today, of the over 400 languages, half of them are tilting towards language endangerment. This paper studies the language of the Etulo people of Benue State and their endangered language condition. It investigates the several factors that have been responsible for this unfortunate language condition. Using the ethno-linguistic vitality theory, the study delves into the field with the use of structured questionnaire as a tool for ascertaining the endangerment of the Etulo language. The results of data analysis suggest that the Etulo language is gravely endangered and requires urgent and drastic rescue action to save it from outright loss and eventual death.

**Keywords:** language endangerment, Etulo, ethnolinguistic vitality, language loss, language death, Nigeria

## 1. Introduction

Language as a tool for human communication and National development is quite indispensable since all activities of man in the society revolve around it. The co-existence of different languages in a community is an inevitable development because in most nations of the world, different languages come to exist and are for different functions even without the presence of their native speakers. In the event of language contact which comes about as a result of the coming together of different ethno-linguistic groups for any reason to live in a particular place thereby making way for the languages they speak to inter play, different linguistic implications are bound to result. These languages compete with one another for particular functions and consequently, some languages in the same community assume the high status while others are accorded low status. It is in this direction that Omeje (2008:51) holds that "...languages compete unfavourably with themselves..." For any language to serve its primary function of communication, and also be preserved, it must be taken to heart by its owners who must be deliberately speaking it so that it will not be endangered. Even though there are some languages that are been used by the owners but are not codified or committed to writing. Such languages still remain valid and are estimably valued by their owners and are well protected and as such they maintain their validity. It is therefore the duty of the owners of a language to maintain it and safeguard it jealously to forestall its endangerment.

On the contrary, some languages have suffered lack of due protection by owners due to several factors and such languages are endangered. According to a report published by Time Magazine as captured by Kujju (1999:38) in Agbedo (2011) there is a shrinking number of languages in the world; up to half of the roughly 6500 languages now spoken across the globe is already endangered or on the brink of extinction.

Similarly, Charlse (2006) as cited in Agbedo (2011:71) confirms that "it is being estimated that globally, some 4000 languages have already been lost, with some 6000 remaining, but with the majority facing one level of risk or the other". The alarming rate at which languages of the world are tilting towards extinction has become a thing of worry to many linguists. Lewis (2009:78) laments thus: overall, the country has a total number of 527 languages, 514 living languages, 2 second languages without mother tongue speakers, 11 with no known speakers". It is no doubt that even among the living languages, there are some that are dangerously being abandoned by their speakers, a situation which renders the languages greatly endangered. The fact that language is identity is indisputable, but the alarming rate at which languages of the world are fast dying leaves one to wonder if the speakers of such languages are still mindful of their linguistic identity. The blessedness of the co-existence of languages which should be a pride to any nation is rather a linguistic obituary. Amfani (2010) notes that language loss is always attributed to a domineering influence of a particular language on the dying language, and this accusation often turns into serious social crisis. He further notes that without a strong national policy on

Nigerian languages, the languages will continue to decay and eventually die, and one day every Nigerian will lose his or her linguistic identity.

In the Benue State of Nigeria among the Tiv people who occupy the Benue valley in the North Central geo-political area of Nigeria, there lives a small ethno-linguistic group called "Etulo". They have a distinct language which they speak when they are within the home domain and strict ritual and festival events. Their language is assimilated into and sandwiched by the Tiv language which is predominantly spoken even in the markets within Etulo communities. A linguistically independent group of people with a distinct culture quite different from that of the Tiv has surrendered their linguistic rights to the surrounding Tiv speakers and have reserved their language for in-group and domestic activities. A language that is hardly heard by a non speaker or spoken in the presence of strangers actually calls for a thorough research in order to save it from the threat of extinction.

This study sets out to investigate the level of endangerment of Etulo language, the possible causes of this critical language condition and proffer suggested solutions as to how best this language can be revived. The study intends to use the ethno-linguistic vitality framework to carry out this research. To this effect the study uses questionnaire as a survey instrument to elicit answers from respondents on ascertaining the vitality or the endangered condition of Etulo language. The data so collected would be analyzed and the result would predispose us to determine whether Etulo language is truly endangered or not and the possible causes thereof would also be ascertained.

## **2. The Etulo people and their language**

The Etulo people are believed to have originated from the Kwararafa Kingdom around the Benue valley. They have being fishermen predominantly right from history. History also has it that following the disintegration of the Kwararafa Kingdom, the Etulos chose to remain on the coast of River Benue to continue with their cherished occupation of fishing. According to Gbor (1974) the Etulos had settled on the coast of River Benue long before their present host, the Tiv migrated from Swem around the Cameroun hills and met them there. Gbor further narrated that it was through conquest that the Tiv people pushed the other segments of the Kwararafa Kingdom such as the Jukuns the Idomas and the rest out of the Benue valley and settled where they are today. Hanior (1989) explains that the Etulo people decided to remain on the coast of River Benue to maintain their occupation.

Following the successive Local Government creation exercises in Nigeria, the Etulos today are found in Buruku Local Government Area of Benue state, neighbouring Mbagen clan in the south and East and Kusuv clan in the West while the River Benue is on the on the northern axis of Etulo community. The whole of Etulo community is far less than Mbagen clan which has four districts meaning that Etulos are less than five thousand population wise. In fact, they are just a district among the over twelve districts in Buruku Local Government Area The Etulos speak just one language which they call Etulo language .It is the unpopular and restricted use they make of this language which endangers it that calls for this study.

## **3. Framework**

This study is anchored on the framework of ethno-linguistic vitality (E.V.). The concept of ethno-linguistic vitality is viewed in different lights. Giles and Johnson opine that ethno-linguistic vitality of a language is either objective or subjective. Objective means that measures are accessible through demographic characteristics, social status of the measures and the degree of institutional support for the group that speaks the language. Fishman (1989) is of the opinion that the interaction network that employs the language for one or more vital language functions is an important indicator of ethno-linguistic vitality. The more speakers of a language variety, the higher their status, and the greater the group language vitality, the greater their chance for linguistic survival. Gumpertz (1971) argues that language behaviour is social behaviour. This corroborates Edwards (1985) that there is a correlation between the functions of a language and social structure.

On the other hand, language endangerment comprises a number of sociolinguistic implications which negatively mount pressures on the survival of the target language undermining its continual existence. Agbedo (2011) in his opinion views language endangerment as a social problem. Citing Elugbe & Udoh (2006), he posits that endangered languages are languages that are threatened by extinction because they are not passed unto a younger generation. Brenzinger (1991:25) sees language endangerment in the light of the number of speakers. In his view, an endangered language is the one with less than 5000 (five thousand) speakers. Given this view by Brenzinger, Etulo is likely to be classified under endangered languages. Emenanjo (2010) posits that all living phenomena: human beings, groups (tribal, Ethnic or racial), animals, plants and languages become endangered when their original natural, indigenous habitats, ecologies or environmental become hostile, unfriendly, uncomfortable, or spent. The position of Emenanjo has taken us to a broader perspective of the concept of endangerment but as linguists, we are chiefly concerned with language endangerment. Agbedo (2011:75) sums it up that "an endangered language is not used in formal education and its communicative role is limited to in-

group communication and such traditional domains as rituals, festivals and communal meetings”. The word “endangered” already presupposes abnormality and an unwanted situation which calls for urgent attention by stake-holders.

Regarding previous studies carried in this area, Agbedo & Krisagbedo (2010) examined the speech behaviour of Uzo-Uwani indigenes resident in Nsukka Urban area and the centrality of subjective ethnolinguistic vitality perceptions in that process. In accounting for the linguistic dimension of the research, a set of lexical and syntactic tests was administered alongside self-rating scales to 30 Uzo-Uwani indigenes in designated areas of Nsukka and 30 reference group respondents in Uzo-Uwani speech community. Elicitation of data for the social-psychological aspect of the study was done by utilizing the ethnolinguistic vitality framework and its accompanying research instruments, that is, the subjective vitality questionnaire (SVQ) and language use-choice questionnaire (LUCQ) to ascertain the vitality perceptions level as well as the dialect use and attitudes of the respondents. Results of the comparative analysis indicate high vitality perceptions and dialect maintenance among the respondents in Uzo-Uwani speech community while the reverse is the case with the Uzo-Uwani respondents in Nsukka Urban area.

Ifegawazi (2013) carried out a study on language endangerment with particular emphasis on Igbo language. He used a descriptive survey design to examine the books written in Igbo language between 2009-2012, Teachers teaching Igbo language between 2008-2012 and students enrolment in the department of Igbo between 2008- 2012 in a given College of Education. He also used oral interview to elicit the necessary information and the instruments inform of books films programme timetable and other records which were supplied by the interviewers. The findings of the study revealed that Igbo language is employed for many vital language functions. Also, the speaking of Igbo is encouraged by language writers, film producers etc. and that Igbo language is enjoying a strong ethno-linguistic vitality and has a great chance for survival in the face of other languages around it.

Omeje (2008) also carried out her research on the language attitudes of the Igbo which pose a threat to the Igbo language. In her research, negative attitudes of the Igbos to their language which include preference to spoken English to Igbo even in situations where Igbo ought to be used, code-switching/mixing, poor attitudes towards writing Igbo names and poor attitudes towards transfer of the language to the younger generation were discovered. She also analyzed the negative effects of those attitudes towards the language. The study ended with recommendations that the Igbo should change their negative attitudes towards their language; they should no longer prefer other peoples’ languages to theirs; rather they should cherish their language. Another study is that recorded by Emenanjo (2010) of Obahiagbon titled “Usen as an endangered language”. The study showed Usen as a Yoruboid language in the Ovia North East Local Government of Edo State as badly endangered Basic lexical items in the language with two Yoruboid languages and Edo , the dominant language in Edo were compared using four tables. The study concluded by saying that Usen was indeed endangered following the poor attitudes of its speakers. The study discovered political and linguistic domination as well as rural-urban migration as being responsible for these poor attitudes. According to the researcher, Usen was not being taught in the schools therefore, some invention strategies were suggested to help rescue the Usen language from going into extinction.

This study mainly focuses on the endangered condition of the Etulo language and the factors responsible for this sociolinguistic phenomenon as well as proffer solutions to the problem .This section reviews some of the works done in relation to language endangerment.

#### **4. Data presentation and analysis**

This section discusses the instrument and method of data collection and analyses in the course of the study. The researcher used questionnaire as a survey instrument. The structured or fixed response questionnaire as presented in Nworgu (1991) was administered to collect data for analysis. The questionnaire comprised questions about the attitudes of the speakers of Etulo language towards their language and the choice of language use. Thirty questionnaire comprising ten questions were given out and all were collected back. Respondents were asked to answer “yes” or “no” questions drawn from areas of attitudes of speakers, influence of a larger and more influential language as well as the use of the language in schools. Some aged men in the community who could not fill in a questionnaire were confronted with oral questions on similar issues to help the researcher furnish himself with enough data to draw findings on the problem under research.

#### **4.1. Results**

The data collected were presented and analyzed as shown below:

**Table1-** This shows the respondents that answered questions on the attitudes of the people towards their language.

S/NO	Question	Response item	No. of Respondents	% of Respondents
1.	is it true that many Etulos bear Tiv names?	Yes	30	100%
		No	-	0%
		Total	30	100%
2.	Can young people(15-20) speak Etulo fluently without code-switching?	Yes	11	37%
		No	19	63%
		Total	30	100%
3.	Can every Etulo person speak Tiv fluently?	Yes	16	53%
		No	14	47%
		Total	30	100%
4.	In Adi market, is Etulo language generally spoken more than Tiv?	Yes	17	57%
		No	13	43%
		Total	30	100%
5.	Is any book written in Etulo language?	Yes	-	0%
		No	30	100%
		Total	30	100%

Source: Field Study 2013

The result on table 1 reveals that the attitudes of Etulo themselves towards their language is not encouraging. This can be seen in the way they relinquish their language rights and allow it to be completely assimilated into the Tiv language which is the larger language. It has also revealed that the young people in Etulo are beginning to prefer the dominant language to Etulo language in agreement with the five levels of language endangerment classified by Wurm (2003) in Nwadike (2006:2) "...when children of a cultural area start preferring the dominant language and learn the obsolescing language imperfectly..." The blunder of deciding to arbitrarily give their children Tiv names is an attitude that is quite unfavourable and detrimental to their language. The attitude of adult Etulos deciding to become fluent Tiv speakers as revealed in the table above is clearly a source of the code-switching effect on the Etulo language. These attitudes put together have deteriorated the condition of Etulo language.

As shown in the Table 2 below, the Etulos have their distinct language separate from the Tiv language which has come to gain more prominence among them. Also, a greater percentage has admitted that Tiv language is also widely spoken among the Etulos along side their own language. The table also shows that Etulo language is not taught in any school from primary to tertiary since the percentage that claims that it is taught is quite negligible. However, one factor that determines a language's ethno-linguistic vitality is its ability to be taught in schools at least at the primary level. On the table again, that Etulo is only spoken at home freely more than outside the home. Finally on the table, the percentage of respondents admitting that Etulo children can speak their language fluently, tallies with those saying the opposite. However the researcher used his observational method and deduces that many Etulo children are fond of and more at home with code-switching/mixing even while communicating among themselves, and the immediate language into which they frequently code-switch is Tiv.

Table 2 : Questions on table 2 seek to trace the language choice of Etulo people in order to determine the ethno-linguistic vitality of the Etulo language'

S/NO	Question	Response item	No, Response	of	No of Respondent
1.	Etulo people have their own language distinct from Tiv language	Yes	30		100%
		No	-		100%
		Total	30		60%
2.	Tiv language is also widely spoken among Etulos	Yes	18		50%
		No	12		50%
		Total	30		100%
3.	Can you say that every Etulo child living within Etulo community can speak Etulo fluently?	Yes	15		10%
		No	15		90%
		Total	30		100%
4.	Is Etulo language taught in any school at any level?	Yes	1		53%
		No	29		47%
		Total	30		100%
5.	Is it true that Etulo is only spoken at home freely more than outside home?	Yes	16		
		No	14		
		Total	30		

Source: Field work 2013

## 5. Ethno-linguistic vitality perception of Etulo people

Indicators of ethno-linguistic vitality can be seen in a number of factors. First and foremost, even though there may be certain external factors that pose a threat to the survival of a language, the most crucial one is the perception of the owners of the language themselves. In the view of Emenanjo (1990) cited in Agbedo (2011) and corroborated by Bamgbose (1993) also in Agbedo (2011), the fate of an endangered language may well lie in the hands of the owners of the language themselves and in their will to make it survive. This is quite instructive to the Etulo people and their language.

### 5.1. Code-switching

Code-switching is likely and almost inevitable in a multilingual setting. This is due to the influence of a dominant language on the smaller one. This occurs when speakers use form from one language (the embedded language) in an inference that is primarily composed of another language (matrix language) within the same conversation. The stretches may be inter-sentential where the switch occur between thought grammatically indicated as sentences or intra-sentential where the switch occur within a thought. This depends to a large extent on the attitude of speakers towards their language. From the study carried out, it is not farfetched that Etulo people's perception of their language is primarily responsible for the frequent code-switching to Tiv language even when communication is taking place among themselves.

### 5.2. Social perception of the speech community

Studies in sociolinguistics have revealed that language influences society and society influences language. The perception of a speech community about who they are determines their ethno-linguistic vitality. In stressing various status that serve as reinforcement to ethno-linguistic vitality, Bourhis, Giles & Rosenthal (1981) point out that how well a group is perceived by outsiders depends on their varied attaché to their language. It is a measure or language community's social perception both internally and externally. Given the economic and socio-



political backwardness of the Etulos, particularly in the face of their host – the Tiv, Etulos themselves do not seem to stand tall in their own little way. They seem to have surrendered both their socio-cultural and linguistic independence to their host. As a matter of fact, the Benue State Government has recognized the existence of every language in the state no matter how small, hence, their slot of news broadcast on the state owned Radio Station where state news is translated and cast in Etulo. With this boost, one would expect the Etulos to encourage themselves and devise ways of protecting their language before there will one day be no body to listen to the news in Etulo language or worst still, nobody to even cast the news.

### 5.3. The domain of language use

In every multilingual society, language remains a significant mark of identity and solidarity. Users of language therefore choose where to use which language or dialect. The domain of language use now brings about choice of language. In the words of Fishman (1972), domain can be defined as a socio-cultural construct abstracted from topics of communication, the relationship between communication and locales of communication in line with the society and the spheres of a speech community. The choice of Etulo language for use only at the home domain and Tiv language for use in the market and outside domains is a mark of loss of ethno-linguistic vitality of Etulo language.

## 6. Conclusions

Etulo language is truly socio-linguistically endangered because it has lost its vitality in all ramifications. The attitudes of Etulo people towards their language is hampering to the survival of the language. The Tiv language into which Etulo language is sand-witched and assimilated has posed an intimidating threat to the survival of Etulo language. It has also been discovered that too little or no attempt has been made by the Etulos themselves to deliberately protect their language.

The reputable possible solutions of language surveys, institutional involvements in the development of languages, media campaigns, implementation of the mother tongue policy and reward system in form of scholarship (especially to children reading endangered languages proposed by Agbeedo & Omeje (2007) in Agbeedo (2011) are realistic and seemingly workable for sustainable ethno-linguistic vitality of Nigerian languages geared towards reviving the endangered languages of Nigeria. If these vital suggestions are well implemented, several endangered languages of Nigeria would be resuscitated.

Considering the various deficiencies characterizing Etulo language, the certainty of loss of ethno-linguistic vitality of Etulo language, hence, the endangered position of the language becomes obvious and indisputable. The dwindling population of the Etulos (less than 5000), their economic and political low status, especially as compared with their host community, and above all, their negative perception of their own language evident in their attitudes towards their language, attest to the fact that the ethno-linguistic vitality of Etulo language is on a danger side.

This study therefore concludes by saying that Etulo language is critically endangered and requires urgent, deliberate efforts in reviving and saving it from total extinction. Many nations today are beginning to see their identity and national prestige in their language and hence, the need to protect them from endangerment and subsequent attrition. In Nigeria, this awakening receives the backing of the Government as observed by Emenanjo (1990) who posits that Nigeria has an explicit National policy that some 44 Nigerian languages have standardized their orthographies and urges other minority Nigerian languages to learn from the experiences of these 44 languages in matters of orthography design and popularization. He also advocates that every Nigerian language needs a language planning agency (LPA) to succeed in its language engineering programme. Mbah (2012) corroborates that Nigerian law favours the use of Nigerian languages in official circles.

From the foregoing, it is expedient to quickly introduce the teaching of mother tongue at least in the primary school as a deliberate attempt to save their endangered language.

It is also pertinent for the enlightened ones to start writing simple story books in Etulo language with which the primary school children would be taught and their interest in the language aroused. As a matter of purposeful drive, the elderly ones should resume the culture of passing the language to the younger ones through oral story telling in the language at home. Having the backing of the Government as earlier mentioned, the aforementioned recommendations would go a long way in reviving Etulo language and safeguarding it from extinction.

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## APPENDIX QUESTIONNAIRE

Department of Linguistics,  
Igbo and other Nigerian  
Languages,  
University of Nigeria,  
Nsukka.

Dear Respondent,

Research Questionnaire

The researcher is a post graduate student of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka currently undertaking a research on the topic: Language Endangerment: The Critical Language Condition of Etulo People of Benue State" Please, read and answer the questions to the best of your knowledge. You are required to tick Yes or No in the box provided.

Yours faithfully,

Kwambeh, Samuel T

## SECTION A

### Personal Data

1.Age:

2.Sex:

3.Educational Qualification: NCE ( ), B.A/B.Sc./B.Ed ( ), M.A.M.Sc./M.Ed( ),

Ph.D ( ), Others( ).

4.Position Teacher( ), Businessman( ), Traditional Ruler( ), Student( )

5.Languages spoken Etulo only( ), Etulo and Tiv( ), Etulo, Tiv and English

### SECTION B

1.Etulo people have their own distinct language Yes( ), No( )

2.Tiv Language is also widely spoken among Etulos Yes( ) No( )

3.Can you say that every Etulo child living within the community can speak Etulo fluently/?Yes( ) NO( )

4. In Adi Market, is Etulo generally spoken more than Tiv language?Yes( ) No( )

5. Is it true that many Etulos bear Tiv names? Yes( ) No( )

6.Can young people (ages 15-20) speak Etulo fluently without code-switching?Yes( ) No( )

7. Every Etulo person can speak Tiv fluentlyYes( ) No( )

8. is Etulo language taught in any school at any language? Yes( ) No( )

9. How many books are written in Etulo language None( ) number( )

10. Is it true that Etulo is only spoken at home freely more than outside? Yes( ) No( )



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