

## On the Survival of BI-/Multilingualism in Erushu Community

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**Abstract:** Bi-/multilingualism is one of the most remarkable natural endowments of African countries. Indeed, this linguistic phenomenon was never a colonial heritage, but rather a virtue enriched partly by colonialism. In other words, language pluralism existed in African countries ever before its colonization. It is however disturbing today that this natural endowment like the colour of the skin is being rebelled against by the youths due to civilization and technological advancement so much so that many bi-/multilingual communities in Africa are fast becoming monolingual ones. The Erushu linguistic experience is a case in point. This study examined language use and language attitude in Erushu community with a view to determine the issue of language maintenance, shift and loss as far as its linguistic repertoire is concerned. The result revealed a case of language shift and language endangerment. Language attitudes are a basic requirement in matters of language shift and loss. Indeed, the survival of a language in a multilingual setting depends on the true inward attitude of the owners towards the language. Our data revealed that the supposedly positive attitude expressed by the Erushu is external only. They substituted the outward act for the correct inner attitudes. The result is a clear indication that attitudes are latent inferred from the direction and persistence of external behaviour.

**Key words:** BI-/Multilingualism, erushu community, linguistic phenomenon, colonial heritage, language attitude, Nigeria

### INTRODUCTION

Amidst the different types of bilingualism in the world today, we found endoglossic bilingualism very widespread in African countries. Bilingualism is one of the most remarkable natural endowments of African countries. That is, granted that bilingualism is the alternate use of two or more languages (Appel and Muysken, 1987). Indeed, this linguistic phenomenon was never a colonial heritage, but rather a virtue enriched partly by colonialism. In other words, language pluralism existed in African countries ever before its colonization. However, with colonization came another type of bilingualism into African communities. Experts have referred to this type as semi-exoglossic bilingualism.

The focus of the present study is endoglossic bilingualism in an African community. The 2 major indigenous languages in contact in Erushu community today are Erushu and Yoruba languages. Thus, the present study investigates specifically language attitude in Erushu community with a view to determining the fate of the community's heritage language, Erushu, vis-à-vis, a national language, Yoruba.

From the sociolinguistic perspective, works on societal bilingualism usually explore bilingual proficiency, language use and language attitude. Of these three, this analysis will focus on the language attitudes of our

respondents in that, of all the factors relevant to language shift and loss, attitude is of paramount importance since it is the most vulnerable of all. Language attitude is of considerable relevance in matters of language restoration and decay. Language attitude, scholars argue, provide a measure of the health of a language just as good positive attitude to healthy eating and exercise is to life expectancy. Besides, the notion of attitude according to Baker (1992) has a place in psychology, sociology, anthropology, education, history, human geography and creative art. Thereby making a research endeavour in this area to be of much relevance to some other academic disciplines.

Some recent studies on societal bilingualism in Nigeria (Oyetade, 1990, 1995, 1996 and 2002; Fakuade, 1995, 1999; Kuju, 1999; Haruna, 1998; Williamson, 1999; Caron, 1999; Dada, 2004) are of a fact sensitizing the world on the need to stabilize community heritage languages in Africa. Indeed, the relevance of ethnic mother tongue retention to cultural continuity cannot be overemphasized. No wonder, Haugen (1973) opines that language is man's most distinctive and significant type of social behaviour learned anew by every child.

Very good examples of societal bilingualism abound all over Nigeria. In Northern Nigeria, cases of societal bilingualism involving Hausa and other minor languages here are too numerous to mention (Sami, 1991; Etim, 1985;

Fakuade, 1995; Haruna, 1998; Dawulung, 1999). In the Southeastern part of the country, Igbo, a major language here is in contact with Anang, a frontier town, thereby making inhabitants of these towns (Onitsha-Nwa and Ikot-Umoessien, respectively) to be bilingual in Igbo and Anang.

In what follows, we present bilingualism and language attitude in Erushu-Akoko, a border area in Ondo state of Nigeria where 2 languages are used on regular basis in virtually all domains.

**The study area:** Erushu-Akoko is one of the fifty-two<sup>4</sup> towns and villages in Akokoland. Akokoland is the eastern part of Ondo State. Akokoland is made up of four Local Governments viz: Akoko North East, Akoko North West, Akoko South West and Akoko South East. Further still, Akokoland, according to Aminu and Kolawole (2001) is within longitude 5°E and 6°E and latitudes 7°N and 7° 45N. To the North and Northeast, it is bounded by Kabba and Yagba areas of Kogi State. To the Northwest, South and West, it shares common boundaries with Ekiti East, Owo, and Ekiti South Local Government, respectively. In the East, Akoko-Edo Local Government bounds it. The foregoing probably accounts for its multilingual nature.

Erushu is a village with linear settlement along Ikare-Kabba road. Erushu is one of the border villages in the Akoko North West Local Government. This Local Government shares a common boundary with Kogi, Edo and Ekiti States. As at 1991 population census in Nigeria, Akoko North West had a population figure of 119,278 while Erushu community had a total of 5,326 out of this figure.

The paucity of documented materials on the people of this area before the 20th century made the written accounts of the origin of the settlement to be almost nil. Indeed, the origins of the Akokos seem to be unknown. However, the consensus of opinion is that the Akokos have their origin in Ile-Ife. and that they came through various routes (Benin and Kabba provinces) to settle in their present location. This therefore, explains the heterogeneous nature of the community.

Erushu is a multilingual community with three major languages, which are Erushu, Yoruba and English. Two indigenous languages, Erushu and Yoruba are predominantly spoken here. The native tongue here is Erushu<sup>6</sup> language. Other 'minor' languages found in this community are Ebira, Hausa and Igbo. As will be made evident very shortly, the domains of the routine use of these languages differed considerably. This is to be expected in a multilingual setting where languages are bound to have different status as well as different roles.

The main economic preoccupations of Erushu people are agriculture, pottery and trading. The men engaged themselves in farming while women are engaged in pot making and trading. Iron ore and granite form part of the natural resources nature has endowed this village. Moreover, the people of this community are very religious in view of the fact that virtually all the religious groups within the country are duly represented here. To this extent, Christians, Muslims and the traditionalists abound in this community.

Ethnically speaking, Erushu is a homogenous community with very few non-indigenes who are either government workers or traders. Thus, aspects of communal life in religion, education or even other social institutions like health centres can be described as congenial. In terms of tradition (customs and belief) and oral literature, Erushu shares everything with the Yoruba and they also regard themselves attitudinally as Yoruba by tribe. This dual identity of our subjects has implications for the societal bilingualism in practice in the community. This informed our suspicion which has equally been translated into the present investigation. According to Abiodun (2000) Erushu belongs to the Defoid group of Benue-Congo phylum. Yoruboid and Akokoid are the two sister nodes under the Defoid group.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The study is a survey. The language background questionnaire supplemented by participant observation method was used to gather the data. The questionnaire was designed to elicit information from respondents in four stages. The first section was designed to reveal demographic facts such as sex, age, educational level, source of knowledge and occupation of the subjects. The other three sections focused respectively on language ability, language use and language attitude. The research instrument featured closed items while a few of them were however open ended to allow participants offer free, unassumed, unanticipated but pertinent points.

On language use, participants were tested on various contexts of situation. For instance, they were requested to indicate the languages with which they communicate generally. Again, they were also asked to indicate their choice of codes with respect to different interlocutors (say between husbands and wives, parents and children, etc.) in different domains (home, school, church, work, neighbourhood and the market).

**Procedure:** Subjects for the study comprised 300 respondents. For the purpose of the investigation, the four quarters in Erushu (Aga, Okesan, Okega and Amo)

**Table 1: Description of the sample Demographic characteristics**

	Frequency	(%)
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	166	55.3
Female	134	44.7
<b>Age</b>		
10-19	104	34.7
20-29	26	8.6
30-39	44	14.7
40+	126	42.0
<b>Education</b>		
Nil	73	24.3
Primary	41	13.7
Secondary	170	56.7
Post Secondary	16	5.3
<b>Occupation</b>		
Student	185	61.7
Farmer/Trader/Artisan	87	29.0
Civil Servants	19	6.3
Others	9	3.0

were visited for a full coverage of the study area. These respondents were randomly selected from each quarter. All the three hundred questionnaires given to the participants were all returned. The questionnaire was the multiple-choice type, thus to fill and return immediately was not too difficult. Those who could not write were assisted by the researcher and his assistants to complete their copies. Besides, the researcher's intimate knowledge of this village since 1966 was also a contributing factor to the hundred percent return of the questionnaire forms.

Although, the respondents were selected based on their accessibility and co-operation, to ensure representativeness, the researcher went round schools, churches, homes, markets and playing grounds to meet with participants. Again, this afforded us the opportunity to observe first hand the language behaviour of these respondents in a natural setting.

The instrument for the study contained a section where respondents were asked to assess their speaking and understanding abilities in Erushu and Yoruba along a four point rating scale: Poor, Fair, Good and Very good. While respondents were completing the other parts of the questionnaire, the researcher was also available to clarify respondents' confusions and doubts. The data analyzed here is the self-report of our respondents with respect to their language use and language attitude to Erushu and Yoruba. Suffice to say that the researcher speaks Yoruba as his mother tongue and also possesses a working knowledge of the Erushu language.

**Demographic information:** The sample is made up of 300 respondents. The demographic characteristics of our respondents presented in Table 1 include: Sex, age, education and occupation.

The importance of this demographic information presented above is 2 fold. First, it provides an insight into

the background of our respondents. Secondly, it will enable us to ascertain the reason for any variations(s), if any, in the respondents' choice of code and attitude towards the codes under study.

## RESULTS

As will be made evident shortly in this analysis on language use, the bilingual status of our respondents is not in doubt in anyway. This may be due to the fact that 96.3% of the respondents claimed to have learned the two languages at home, 1.7% said in the school, 0.7 said in the neighbourhood while 1.3% marked elsewhere. Besides, the researcher did not enlist non-indigenes at all for participation.

However, with respect to abilities in the 2 languages, we discovered a split between the young and the old (Dada in progress). The emergent picture is such that the adults of over thirty years have greater facility in using Erushu than the younger people. Thus, the dominant language for the youths in this community is Yoruba while the adults still retain their mother tongue-Erushu. We hope to work out details of this aspect of bilingualism in Erushu in a subsequent work suffice to say for now that this split holds implications for language maintenance, shift and death.

**Language use:** Oyetade (1990, 1992) has identified two types of bilingualism evident in Nigeria: Endoglossic and semi-exoglossic. These 2 types are found in Erushu community. A combination of these two makes the pattern of language use here to be very much triglossic in nature. Indeed, every participant in the study is bilingual in Erushu and Yoruba. Furthermore, educated participants do understand the English language in addition to these two. Thus, while virtually all the inhabitants of this town are bilingual in Erushu and Yoruba, the few educated ones are trilingual in Erushu, Yoruba and English.

For the purpose of the present analysis, we present in (Table 2), the parents' self-report of their language use with different interlocutors while that of the children is presented as (Table 3). Thus, (Table 2 and 3) are on language use in home domain only. The home domain is a major factor in matters of language use. Six code possibilities were recognized in the questionnaire viz: Erushu, Yoruba, English and alternation between the three.

For very clear picture of language use in this community to emerge, we present respondent's responses to the question on general language use. This is presented in (Table 4).

Table 2: Parents' self-report on language use

Context	No Response	Erushu	Yoruba	English	Erushu + Yoruba	Yoruba + English	Erushu + English
Talking to siblings	11.3	31.0	27.0	2.7	28.0	-	-
Talking to spouse	46.3	12.7	25.7	1.3	13.0	1.0	-
Talking to Relations	47.0	13.7	17.3	1.0	18.3	3.0	-
Talking to Neighbours	47.7	7.0	24.7	0.3	17.3	3.0	-
Talking with another Erushu speaker	43.3	6.7	26.7	1.7	15.3	3.3	-
To discuss important family matter	46.3	15.0	18.0	0.7	19.7	0.3	-

Table 3: Children's self-report on language use

Context	No Response	Erushu	Yoruba	English	Erushu + Yoruba	Yoruba + English	Erushu + English
Talking to Parents	44.0	12.3	34.3	1.7	7.3	1.3	-
Talking grand parents	44.3	32.3	19.3	-	3.3	0.7	-
Talk'g to other siblings	45.3	11.7	30.3	4.7	5.0	2.7	1.3
Talking to other Children in the Neighbourhood	43.3	7.7	38.0	5.0	4.3	1.3	1.3

Table 4: Responses to the question on general language use pattern

Language	Frequency	(%)
No. Response	1	0.3
Erushu always	49	16.3
Yoruba always	226	75.3
English always	19	6.3
Others always	5	1.7

Table 5: Languages considered prestigious

Language	Frequency	(%)
Erushu	16	5.3
Yoruba	239	79.7
English	42	14.0
Others	3	1.0

It is observed that there is a correlation (with minor variations) between the general language in use in this village and the language used at home both by the young and the old. On general language use pattern, Yoruba always, has an overwhelming 75.3% while, Erushu always has a paltry figure of 16.3%, although noteworthy. Since the Yoruba language is dominant as the choice of general code among respondents, it is of no surprise to discover that this same pattern (with minor variations) is in place for both parents and children when it comes to language use even at home.

In Table 2, Yoruba is the major code used in communicating with various interlocutors by the adults at home. 12.7% used Erushu only with their spouses at home while 25.7% claimed the use of only Yoruba. Thus, Yoruba is of a higher use than Erushu even in this domain. We observe however, that parents' language use at home talking with their siblings in Erushu only had 31.0%, Erushu and Yoruba, 28.0% and Yoruba only 27.0%. interestingly, this happens to be the only situation where Erushu tops the list. It is more interesting if we consider the fact that though the children themselves are not favourably disposed to the use of Erushu language itself at home, parents still use it with them probably to ensure continuity. Any adult knows the dangers inherent in not using his language with his children. The picture changes again when parents discuss with neighbours, Erushu only

had 6.7%, while Yoruba only had 26.7% and alternation between Erushu and Yoruba recorded 15.3%. thus, Yoruba once again, is that language which is of high use in this situation.

The pattern of language use among the youths in this community is not markedly different from that of their parents. A good percentage of Erushu youths claimed to use exclusively Erushu in holding discussions with various interlocutors, especially with grandparents. However, when Yoruba is compared with Erushu, it is discovered that the use of Yoruba is higher in percentage than that of Erushu. This is evident in (Table 3).

**Ethnicity and language-related attitudes:** A safe conclusion can still not be drawn from the above analysis without recourse to the language attitude of our respondents. Thus, we present in (Table 5 and 6) respondents' language attitude and ethnic identity. Typical language attitudes include language loyalty, pride and awareness of the norm (Garvin, 1954a). To Haugen (1956) language attitude can be positive or negative in respect of the languages involved.

Baker (1992) is of the view that the relationship between two (or more) languages within a variety of contexts or domains can be explored in terms of individual attitudes. This is the approach adopted for the study. He states further that an attitude to something is not like height, weight or attending church, which can be

Table 6: Respondents' self-report on ethnic identity

Opinions	No. response	Strongly agree	Agree	Indifferent	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I need to speak Erushu to express my ethnicity identity		2.7	8.3	0.3	47.7	41.0
Yoruba is enough for me to express my ethnic identity		16.7	44.7	1.7	31.0	6.0
I do not need to encourage my children to learn Erushu	1.0	10.0	60.0	-	14.0	15.0
Yoruba is a threat to Erushu		8.7	25.7	-	35.0	30.7
Erushu speakers are socially inferior to Yoruba speakers		23.3	59.7	1.0	10.3	5.7
Erushu speakers feel ashamed to speak it in mixed gatherings		18.7	58.7	1.3	11.7	9.7
If care is not taken Yoruba will completely replace Erushu in future	1.0	21.0	13.7	0.3	24.3	39.7

directly and accurately measured. In comparison, attitudes cannot be directly observed. Hence, language attitudes can only be ascertained through the use of indirect questions from respondents. This is to ensure that the information to be obtained is reliable. We have tried to do exactly this with the opinion questions posed to our respondents. In what follows, we present the responses we got to these attitudinal questions.

In response to the question: which of the following languages (Erushu, Yoruba, English and others) do you consider most prestigious?; subjects responded as presented in (Table 5).

Yoruba once again recorded 79.7%, English with 14.0% was even rated more prestigious by the educated class of course, than the mother tongue. Responses to other attitudinal questions on Erushu were however positive. In response to the question: Are you proud that you speak Erushu? 87.7% ticked Yes and 11.3% picked No, 1.0% did not respond. Again, we asked: If hitherto you don't speak Erushu could you have learnt it? 83.0% picked Yes, while 5.3% said No, 1.0% stood for no response. Responses to some other questions based on ethnic identity, language shift and maintenance have been summarized and presented as Table 6.

Responses of tend to suggest that respondents consider themselves ethnically as Yoruba.. We observed that 88.7% did not see the need to speak Erushu to express their ethnic identity. To corroborate this, 61.4% (strongly) agreed that Yoruba is enough for them to express their ethnic identity. A natural corollary of their attitude evident is that 70.0% of them did not see any need to encourage their children to learn Erushu. Further still, 83.0% (strongly) agreed that Erushu speakers are socially inferior to Yoruba speakers while 77.4% (strongly) agreed that some Erushu speakers feel ashamed to speak it in mixed gatherings. All these express a negative attitude towards this community heritage language whether the owners are aware of this or not. Besides, this partly explains why the people prefer Yoruba to Erushu in matters of ethnic identity.

On the other hand attitudinal questions, which juxtaposed Yoruba directly with Erushu, received positive

responses from the subjects. Thus, only 34.3% (strongly) agreed to the fact that Yoruba is a threat to Erushu, others disagreed. Moreover, only 34.7% also (strongly) agreed that if care is not taken Yoruba will completely replace Erushu in future, others disagreed.

Present finding here is a clear indication that our subjects are not conscious of the linguistic processes taking place within the community at present. Outwardly, they tend to show a positive attitude towards the two languages, Erushu and Yoruba. However, a process of language shift is already evident in their language use pattern and language attitude. To further confirm this, consider their response to the question: what noticeable changes are evident in your language, Erushu, in recent years? 82.7% reported less spoken, especially among the youths; 12.0% said people are no more comfortable speaking it. No essential change and renewed interest in it by scholars had 2.3 and 2.7%, respectively. A balance of 0.3% went to no response. Thus, the dye is cast with all the examined variables in favour of Yoruba language to the detriment of Erushu language.

## DISCUSSION

In Erushu community, language alternation is a common occurrence. This linguistic phenomenon reaffirms the claim that code mixing and code-switching are inevitable phenomena in a bilingual or multilingual society (Scotton, 1979; Gambhir, 1983; Ahukanna, 1990; Essien, 1995; Banjo, 1983; Lamidi, 2002). Furthermore, this has implications for language use and language maintenance. The attendant effect of this is that the diglossic situation as advanced by Ferguson (1966) does not exist in Erushu community in spite of the linguistic pluralism existing there. That is, the roles of the Yoruba language and the Erushu language have not been kept functionally apart. If in the home front where the mother tongue is expected to have an edge over any other language in the community, Yoruba is holding sway, it therefore, means that both the Erushu language and Yoruba language did not have any distinctive or opposing role as both were used for similar roles.

Although a very high percentage of Erushu youths just like their parents claimed to use exclusively Erushu in holding discussions with various interlocutors, however, when Yoruba is compared with Erushu, the use of Yoruba (or a mixture of Erushu and Yoruba) is higher in percentage than that of Erushu. Yoruba, no doubt, has dominance over Erushu among the youths. They prefer it in virtually all the domains to any other language here. For instance, the youths reported to use Erushu mostly when talking with their grandparents, which is not surprising since these people represent the 'old norm' as opposed to the new norm, represented by the youths.

Again, code switching as being practiced in this community is an indication of the fact that our respondents are true bilinguals who find it difficult to keep apart their 2 languages. Indeed, language use patterns in Erushu community are in favour of Yoruba language.

Language attitude is another major area of investigation in studies in societal bilingualism. The importance of attitudes in bilingualism is individual or societal phenomenon must not be underestimated. It is for this reason that the unwholesome attitude of the Erushu people towards their community heritage language leaves much to be desired.

As evident in their responses to the questions on language attitude and ethnic identity, the Erushu people are only superficially committed to the survival of their language. Indeed, the pride and loyalty being demanded in a situation like this are no longer evident. Incidentally, Erushu people consider themselves attitudinally to be Yoruba and this probably accounts for their types of inner attitude they have towards their ethnic language - Erushu

Furthermore, the dichotomy normally made between integrative and instrumental reasons (Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Oyetade, 1990) for learning the second language seems to be irrelevant here because these people are oblivious of their past. They are not conscious of being part of any other ethnic group (now or in the past) apart from the Yoruba race. Hence, the responses got in this data cannot depict the actual figure expected in a real bilingual-bicultural situation (Oyetade, 1990, 1995 and 1996) since the Erushu don't really feel any different from the Yoruba.

### CONCLUSION

If present finding on language attitude is taken along with the one on language use, then our analysis shows that societal bilingualism in Erushu community is anything but stable. The foregoing is a clear indication that attitudes are latent inferred from the direction and persistence of external behaviour. Thus, while the respondents here outwardly manifest a positive attitude

for their mother tongue, Erushu, any time the question posed to them is very potent and direct as in (d) and (g) of (Table 6), their underlying attitude is however different. Attitude is an inner resource, which translates into a potent force in matters of language survival and language maintenance. Indeed, the present language attitude of the Erushu people is not propitious for the survival of their language. The consistent patterns of behaviour as evident in (a, b, c and Table 6) variables confirm a negative attitude. Conclusively, rather than talk of language maintenance here with the present analysis, we should rather be talking of language shift and language endangerment.

The Erushu linguistic experience as presented here is a classic example of African languages under the threat of extinction. The Erushu data presented here is just one of the several instances of endangered languages in Akoko, Ondo State. The current scholarship on endangered languages embarked upon by linguists offers an example of the positive attitude that all Nigerians-linguists, relevant government agencies and language owners themselves-should have as efforts are on to determine the extent and probable solutions to language endangerment in Nigeria. The current trend has to stop if only for the sake of Africa and its values. The zeal with which present day Nigerian linguists is espousing the cause of the endangered languages in Nigeria despite the fact that these are privately funded research programmes behoves the government of the day to rise up to the challenge of stabilizing this community heritage languages.

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