Towards Revitalization of the Urhobo Language: A Return to Orality

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This paper discussed certain aspects of the struggle of the Urhobo people to hold a place of worth in the politics of the Nigerian nation and what happened to the Urhobo language in the course of that quest. The Urhobos are a group of people found in the delta region of the country. This research has been carried out in order to examine ways to revive the urhobo language and to bring the people to a point where they can appreciate the language and be proud of it. Indeed, the language has been very much neglected. As at today, needful steps have to be taken towards the revival of the language; creating the need for Urhobo language teachers to walk back in time and return to orality, in the hope of reviving, nurturing and preserving the language. To accomplish this oral tradition has been delved into coupled with an examination of play as a means of restoring the language; a process which would involve the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). This paper also determined who plays what role in the process of revitalizing the Urhobo language. The method of study was eclectic, involving verbal interaction and interviews. This study was based on Noam Chomsky’s Theory of Universal Grammar.

Key words: Revitalizing, Urhobo, Language, Revival, Return, Orality, ICT

INTRODUCTION

Language is said to be a binding force, for, when a people can communicate with one another there is an unbroken chain of understanding which holds a people or peoples together. Genesis chapter 11:8-10 is full evidence of this. Language is a means of expression amongst people of a given community. By means of language a people can express their emotions, emotions such as joy and sorrow; wants and needs; feelings such as cold and warmth. Language is used to express, to articulate aspirations and ambitions. Hornby (1995) defines language as “the system of sounds and words used by humans to express their thoughts and feelings … the particular language system used by a people or a nation”. Language is important to a people, not just as a means of self-expression; it is a people’s identity. Language can be used in oral form or in written form. In fact, the first form of language ever used was oral; as when God said in Genesis 1:3 “Let there be light”. David and Robert (2018) sum it all up in their definition which says: “Language, a system of conventional spoken, manual, or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture express themselves. The functions of language include communication, the expression of identity, play, imaginative expression and emotional release”. Urhobo is a language that used to thrive during the oral tradition period. According to Ekeh (2008), “there are 22 subcultural units in Urhoboland” as at then. In recent times, as was noted in Akpofure-Okenrentie (2018), the sub-cultural units have increased by two more units. Each of these units speaks its own dialect. It is quite significant that the cultural affinity of an Urhobo person was recognised from the dialect of Urhobo language which he spoke. In this regard Ekeh (op cit) says “In the realm of language, Urhobo is a land of great dialectic variability. Remarkably, each sub-culture has its own dialect of the Urhobo language. Native speakers of the Urhobo language can easily tell from what sub-culture a speaker of the Urhobo language hails”. It should be noted that although Urhobo has “great dialectic variability” the Agbarho dialect is the standard Urhobo dialect which is spoken generally and which is used in writing the language. Aziza (2007), cited in Akpofure (2015), and Akpofure-Okenrentie (2018). As at now, the language is classed among the endangered languages.
young people in a community begin not to want to speak their natural language, when they begin to speak a language that is not their mother-tongue; that is the first step towards endangering a language. When the older generation does not enforce the speaking of the mother-tongue, but instead flows along with the younger ones, and joins them in speaking the new language; that is the second step towards the death of the language. At this point the language is endangered already. If this trend continues, the language would eventually stop being spoken; it will go extinct. At this point, one could say it is no longer endangered, it is beyond endangerment. It would be termed dead. Thompson (2013) states that: “Endangered languages are languages that are on the brink of extinction, much like endangered species of plants or animals. A language is considered to be endangered when parents are no longer teaching it to their children and it is no longer being actively used in everyday life”. This is the point which the Urhobo language has reached. The younger generation of Urhobo people does not speak their language. The parents are not helping matters either. They speak what their children speak to them. McGuinne (2013) also suggests that: “a language becomes endangered when it loses power to another language because of colonialism”. This is also very true of the Urhobo language which, in Urhobo homesteads and families, is indeed, no longer being taught, especially as parents and guardians opt rather, to speak pidgin or any of the other surrounding languages like Itsekiri to their offsprings. The same predicament occurs to a language when it experiences “language shift”. Language shift is actually the process that leads to language endangerment. The people of a community come in contact with another language which they think is superior to their own. This new language becomes the fashionable one to speak. This way, they shift their interest from the mother-tongue to the new language, Ravindranath (2009), in the abstract to his article “Language Shift and the Speech Community: Sociolinguistic change in a Garifuna community in Belize”, also states that “Language shift is the process by which a speech community in a contact situation (i.e. consisting of bilingual speakers) gradually stops using one of its two languages in favour of the other”. This is the case with the Urhobo person, the Urhobo language and pidgin as well as the Queen’s English. But, just at what point was it that Urhobo began not to be taught in Urhobo homes and when did the language shift begin to occur? According to Ekeh (2006) first direct contact between the British and the Urhobo was some time in 1891 “when the government of the Niger Coast Protectorate was established on the coast”. This means that from the 1890s, through the 1900s to the early 2000s, the Urhobo language shift had begun to occur. Until that time the Urhobo language could be said to have possessed all the attributes of a living language. This is because prior to that time no other language could be said to have threatened the Urhobo language for, though the Urhobo traded with other tribes there is no record that says Urhobo abandoned her language and opted to speak other languages. When they did speak other languages, it was as a means of interaction that promoted commerce as with Urhobo versus Itsekiri or Ijaw or Kwale or Bini, as the case may be. This interaction normally ended at the Market Place. Let us note that all of these places mentioned share common boundaries with Urhobo. Even though this was the case, the Urhobo family spoke Urhobo at home. Also, the Urhobo speech community was rich in dialects, not only numerically but also in speech before Britain came. This is why the subcultural origin of a person could be determined because people spoke their languages/dialects then. But, these days, the wealth of the Urhoboland in spoken language/dialect is not commensurate with its wealth in physical number of dialects. By this it could be deduced that prior to the coming of the English to Urhoboland, the land was linguistically rich. Linguistically rich in the sense that everyone, i.e. every member of every subcultural unit, and of every family spoke the dialect of the subcultural unit which they belonged to. That is, they spoke the exact type of Urhobo language that was spoken in their unit. For example, people from Agbon subcultural unit spoke Agbon, those from Uvwie spoke Uvwie while those from Agbarho spoke Agbarho. Spoken Urhobo language then was pure and unadulterated. The spoken language was so pure that one could distinguish between the dialects. But, with the introduction of pidgin and English languages, Urhobo lost its originality because of interferences of strange phonemes. For instance, instead of “Akpewve” [əkpwévə] one would hear “Akpewe” [əkpwɛ̃wə]. In these two pronunciations the Urhobo [o] is distinctly missing from the second one. Clearly these strange phonemes and funny articulation of Urhobo words only started being heard after the entrance of the English language and pidgin. This implies foreign language interference. This means that the predicament of the Urhobo language began with the arrival of Britain in Urhoboland. McGuinne (op cit.) confirms this when he states:

By creating states, European monarchies relied on the eradication of differences between areas they controlled and by arbitrary allegiance to an invented nation state, promoted by a common language, most European states managed to make every language but the ones used by Europe’s governments endangered.

It is significant to note that while promoting their commerce and language, they put the sickle to the root of the Urhobo language; the very nerve centre of the Urhobo land, its tradition and its culture. This eroded that quality of originality which aided the determination of the Urhobo subcultural or dialectal origin without having to ask the question “wé ɗe Urhôbô rì tíwó?” That is, “What part of Urhobo do you come from?” Urhobo had lots of other troubles especially political concerns. They may not even have noticed the language aspect at that time but it is with this linguistic backdrop in place, that Urhobo’s struggle for position and identity began. This struggle necessitated the education of the Urhobo people.
METHODOLOGY

In this study the method of research has been varied. There was a need to know what happened in the past which caused the language to be in danger of extinction. For this reason, the study began in retrospect as history was delved into. Thereafter, there was a search for songs that related to orality and language learning. In the quest for songs in orality, there was interaction with some Urhobo people. Through these people, songs that would help in the process of revitalisation were made available. Briefly, these were the steps followed:

i. A brief study of the history of the Urhobo people was done.

ii. Verbal discussions were held with Urhobo persons such as Mr J. Arerian, Reverend G. Ivworin, Mrs G. Omodeko, and Mr. O.I. Idigun.

iii. There was a telephone conversation with an Urhobo elder, Chief F.O. Sohwo.

iv. Books that treat matters relating to Urhobo were consulted.

v. There was also a spell of browsing on the internet.

OBJECTIVE

In a world where one’s language is one’s identity, there is a need to preserve and nurture one’s language. Fewer and fewer people now speak the Urhobo language, having shifted from their own natural language. The aim of this study is, therefore, to revitalise Urhobo, restore its worth, and highlight it so that the owners of the language would return to speaking it, and hopefully, this would help to preserve it.

Theory of Universal Grammar

According to the Medical Daily, the theory of Universal Grammar was proposed in the 1960s by Linguist Noam Chomsky who claimed that “We are all born with an innate knowledge of grammar that serves as the basis for all language acquisition. In other words, for humans, language is a basic instinct”. This explains the existence of language during the oral era. Otherwise, how did our fathers learn the Urhobo language if they did not have an innate knowledge of it? Akpofure-Okenrentie (2018) tells of an 8-month-old baby who surprised her family when she said her brother’s name for the first time. This proves that the knowledge of language is innate in her because nobody taught her to say “Dayo”. Dovey (2015) reveals that “The theory, however, has long been met with widespread criticisms - until now”. Supporting Noam Chomsky’s claim she quotes Slate as reporting that:

The ability to walk upright for long periods of time is distinctly human; it sets us apart from our closest genetic cousins, the great apes. However, walking is both innate and learned, and while every human child is born with the underlying mechanisms to do so, the skill will never manifest without proper guidance and

examples”. In this respect Chomsky thought that language is much like walking. He proposed that we are all born with the fundamental understanding of the underlying mechanisms of language.

She argues that “Chomsky’s original work called Universal Grammar is the reason why humans can recognize grammatically correct yet nonsensical phrases such as “colourless green ideas sleep furiously”. She explains further that “Past research has shown our ability to distinguish words from nonwords even without an understanding of the language, is a skill that even nonverbal babies possess. Researchers have long failed to prove this same instinctual knowledge also exists for grammar”. When a baby cries at birth, the baby is using language already. The harsh reality of life which he first encounters as he comes out of the warm comfort of his mother’s womb forces him to express himself. He cries! His cries are responded to. He has communicated already even before he is one-minute old. Also, if his first cries are not responded to he would cry louder and louder till he gets attention. Compare his linguistic ability to that of a baby who comes into the world silently, who makes no noise even though his present environment is not at all friendly; who does not cry even though he is slapped hard. Finally, he is understood to be still. You see that the one is full of language because he is alive and the other has no communicative skill because he is still. The baby who enters the world with cries proves already that he has come with the ability to use language, without which he would not be able to communicate. This proves that as long as a new born has life in him he also has the ability to use language, as this study also proves, this also implies that as long as humans come into the world living, they also possess the ability to use language since it has been proved that “language is a biological instinct: babies don’t learn to develop speech – they are born with the ability”. To buttress this assertion, Griffiths (2014), speaking about a recent study carried out in the US, says: “The US research says that babies are born with basic fundamental knowledge of language, which shed light on the whether nature or nurture is responsible for speech in humans”. Chomsky’s assertion about the Universal Grammar is further confirmed when she quotes Professor Iris Berent of North Eastern University in Boston, who co-authored the study with a research team from the International School of Advanced Studies in Italy as saying “The results suggest that, the sound patterns of human languages are the product of an inborn biological instinct, very much like birdsong”. If this suggestion is held as true, then the theory of Universal Grammar holds true. The study also showed that “Young infants have not learned any words yet and do not even babble, yet they still share a sense of how words should sound with adults. The researchers believe that this finding shows that we are born with the basic, foundational knowledge about the sound pattern of human languages”. The study on hand has proposed that, to revitalize the Urhobo language, there is a need to walk back in time to orality, to play again the moonlight plays, and to sing again
the songs that had been left behind, because the play and the words of the songs would embellish the language, rendering it attractive to learners, and foster articulation of Urhobo words. In that way, speeches of the language would be realised. It is worthy of note that the song was first words, i.e. spoken words before they became songs. In light of the foregoing, this study is based on Noam Chomsky’s Theory of Universal Grammar.

The Urhobo people get education

When one talks about educating somebody, one is talking about teaching the person, showing him how to do something which he did not know how to do before, impacting his being in order to make him a more independent, self-expressive, self-actualising and self-reliant person. Hornby (1995) defines education as “a process of training and instruction, especially of children and young people in schools and colleges, etc. which is designed to give knowledge and develop skills. 2. It is the field of study dealing with how to teach: a college of education. 3. The process of teaching somebody about something: an AIDS education programme”. Smith (2018) suggests that education “is a process of inviting truth and possibility. It can be defined as the wise, hopeful and respectful cultivation of learning undertaken in the belief that all should have the chance to share in life”. One could take his suggestion as apt and quite applicable to the Urhobo situation and the idea of educating the people.

It is with great admiration and awe that one reads of what the predecessors of the Urhobo did for the Urhobo people. If not for their foresight at the time, Urhobo should not now be a people. Perhaps they would have been a people subject to others; the Itsekiris for example. Obiomah (2015) does record however, that even as a people they mostly played second fiddle to Itsekiri. That notwithstanding, the network of communication which they maintained all over the country and even reaching overseas at that time was wonderful. The dogged determination to educate the people is unimaginable. Truly, it must take only a people really committed to accomplish that, given the fact that the Urhobo nation could be likened to a mini Nigeria. The struggle from the time of Itsekiri dominance to the institution of the Urhobo Progress Union (UPU) must have been long, hard and painful, but Urhobo got there. Ikime in Ekeh (2006) mentions a source which claims that: “The aim of the UPU is to maintain a good reputation and so earn for the Urhobo a better place in public “. Education is indeed very valuable. Without it, one is like the only blind man in a city bright with light. The Urhobo people were somehow like the blind who could be led anywhere whether he liked it or not. He could be told anything and he would have to accept it because he knew no better. Ikime (op cit) advances a reason why UPU wanted Urhobo to get education. He says: “The Union seeks to promote education in Urhoboland because it strongly believes in the immense advantage of education in social and economic structure of a society”. It is clear that Urhobo needed education for progress. It is also clear that language is the vehicle through which education could be acquired. This language had to be English. Understandable. But what is the education of a people if the natural language of the people is not nurtured and sustained? The first language did not have to be jettisoned for the second and foreign language to thrive, nor for the education of the tribe to have been effective. An all-round education produces a person who can hold his ground when it comes to speaking his maternal language as well as the language of education. It was also stated that: “Unless the Urhobo tribe ... is unified under one central treasury and one native authority, the economic, social and educational aim of the union will be greatly hindered, and for this reason it had in mind the unification of all Urhobo clans under one Supreme Council by the people”. Let us note carefully the word “tribe”. One could say that in this context the word denotes nothing. Standing alone, divorced from the word “language”, it has no identity. It is the word “language” which gave, and still gives now, all the clans and the diverse dialects the identity as Urhobo - this is why it was possible for them to be unified. It may be argued that the “Urhobo people” embodied the word language. Perhaps. But if it does, then the linguistic value of the people would have been taken into consideration in the education of the “people”. What happened to the Urhobo people is much like bringing a child into the world, nurturing the child, but not giving the child a means of personal self-expression. Personal self-expression in the sense that he does not have any linguistic group he could claim to belong to. The educated Urhobo child who speaks English is most certainly, not likely, to be accepted in Britain as British. Back home in Urhoboland, he could possibly not fit in because he is bereft of the Urhobo language as well as its culture since language and culture are somehow intertwined. Leveridge (2008) implies this when he says: “The relationship between language and culture is deeply rooted”. Language is used to maintain and convey culture and cultural ties. Different ideas stem from differing language use within one’s culture and the whole intertwining of these starts at one’s birth”. Aziza in Ekeh (2005) says the same thing when she opines that: “If a child grows up with little or no knowledge of his supposed Mother tongue, he may be able to communicate fluently for everyday purposes in a lingua franca but he will be at a loss for knowledge of the deep culture of his people”. This is the predicament of the Urhobo tribe that has been educated but whose language seems to have been given up for pidgin. The quest for the education of the “people” resulted in the establishment of the Urhobo College, where of course the medium of education was English, where also, Urhobo could have been taught as a subject but it was not.

The Urhobo language during the process of getting education

History has it that Chief Mukoro Mowoe was the first leader of the Urhobo people. In his time the language must also have been a binding force, as is exemplified in the coming together of the Urhobo people to form one body – the
Urhobo Progress Union. This indicates the symbol of unity that the Urhobo had at that time as Ekeh (2005) implies when he says: “The languages of Urhobo culture are the main symbols of the Urhobo people as an ethnic nationality. The languages give their speakers positive self-image” The words “ethnic nationality” imply a people who belong linguistically to one ethnic group and the self-image is expressed in the individual desire of every Urhobo man, woman, boy and girl to identify with the ethnic group which they belong to. However, as at then, with the coming of the English, pidgin had crept into Urhoboland and was gradually displacing the language of the Urhobo people. The Urhobo Progress Union must have been, at that time, unaware of this phenomenon, otherwise, why was it not addressed? The presence of these foreigners had already indicated the beginnings of a language shift which was to lead to the gradual death of the Urhobo language. In fact, the process of death had already started, and if allowed to continue, could prove disastrous in future. Ekeh (2006) highlights this predicament when he says that: “The gradual death of these languages is … a sign of the disintegration of the unity of the Urhobo nation. Once the language which binds the Urhobos together dies, the basis of their unity and group will be undermined”. Presently, it is clearly seen that the process of death has reached a terrifying stage. As at now, the pidgin language has fully taken over and replaces Urhobo in most homes. Also, even in the homes of elites and educationists it had replaced not only Urhobo but also the Queen’s English. It is common place for one to hear phrases like “Off the television na”, instead of “gbé förhie ékpété rűghé nà”; or “Switch off” / “Turn off the television”. This language shift has become so prevalent in Urhoboland that Mowarin (2005) also cited in Akpofure-Okenrentie (2018), aptly opines that:

Ideally, Nigerian pidgin is supposed to be a language of inter-ethnic communication in Urhoboland. However, it has now penetrated the orbit of homes in Urhoboland. It is now been used as a language of intra-ethnic communication in urban centres like Warri, Sapele … Nigerian pidgin has already acquired a number of native speakers.

This assertion aptly describes the state of the Urhobo man, woman, boy and girl who cannot speak the Urhobo language but who are absolutely fluent when it comes to speaking pidgin. Warri based Urhobo children even create and coin words and slangs in pidgin. It is commonplace to hear phrases like:

i. See as e dey go laik Gongola State
ii. Shuo! Wai u jost stand dere laik Standard Bank?
iii. A beg komot … befor u dey luk peson laik Lucozade
iv. A beg dey go. Me, a no get pepe wen e rest o.
v. A beg a beg a beg. Oya vamuz! As a dey see u so …
    Va ….muuuuz!

These expressions come so naturally to them that it is very easy to believe that there is indeed a tribe of people that could be referred to as the “pidgin race” because these native speakers are the same persons who, according to Mowarin, are now categorized as the “migwo generation of Urhobos”. One meets regularly, youths and even adults, parents and heads of homes who cannot express themselves beyond “míguó” in Urhobo, and even at that, the word is mostly used as a lie because they do not match the word with the necessary or commensurate action. They equate it with the English “good morning” or “Good afternoon”. One wonders if in the 50s and 60s the Urhobo salutation was also a lie, as it mostly is these days. Other groups of people have even said that the Urhobo greeting is a lie. They accuse the Urhobo of saying they are “on their knees” while standing, walking, sitting or doing anything else. The truth is that some parents these days, only tell their children “say miguó to Uncle”, while they fail to explain the meaning of the word “míguó" to their little ones or teach them by demonstration or example, proper Urhobo salutation. This can hardly be boasted of these days. This loss of cultural essence is also implied when Mowarin (op cit), cited in Akpofure-Okenrentie (2018) says; “The gradual death of the Urhobo language is also eroding some of the traditional practices.” What exactly is the complaint here? Urhobo came together as a people! They hustled for identity and position. These were not out of place. But the very nerve centre, the core, the throbbing heart of Urhobo! This was left to fend for itself, to flail and flounder in this oceanic world; and if it lives, it lives or perish otherwise. There was not an iota of concern! Or was it unawareness? The instance of educating the people would have helped to put the Urhobo language in the curriculum of the Urhobo College. It is perceived that the worth of the language was barely recognized then! Here is what Skyhawk (2012) says as touching the premium that should have been placed on the Urhobo language:

I can’t stress enough the importance of our tribal languages when it comes to the core relevance or existence of our people. Our languages can teach us many things through daily use. Language can teach us respect for ourselves and each other, our elders, women and most importantly, the things that allowed us to exist. Our children deserve nothing less than to have inherited their own language. You could argue that when a tribe loses its language, it loses a piece of its inner most being, a part of its soul or spirit. That is how important and meaningful our languages are to us as the original inhabitants of this hemisphere.

Sadly, Urhobo did not realize this at the time!

Urhobo College did not teach Urhobo language

A letter which conveyed the Union’s intention to the Provincial Officer in October 1947, states, in paragraph two of that letter, “The school is owned by the Urhobo people. But it is being run under the auspices of the Urhobo Progress Union”. It is amazing that a school such as this did not teach the language of the Urhobo people. Obiomah (2015) states also that in its frenzied struggle to
create a niche for the Urhobo tribe at the national level. Urhobo leaders at that time delved into other social areas like sports. The information goes that:

Even in the area of sports Chief Mukoro Mowoe the Urhobo leader established a famous football team, W.P. (Warri Province United, which was known nation-wide for featuring at National Football Finals in Lagos where such teams as Stationary Stores, Pan Bank, and Football King Thunder Balogun were famous.

In the light of everything else that UPU tried to achieve for the Urhobo tribe, one is tempted to see the neglect of the language as a gross oversight on the part of the owners of the school. It may be argued that at the time the National Policy on Education did not provide for the teaching of indigenous languages. But, the same steps that were taken to found the college could also have served to introduce the teaching of the Urhobo language into the curriculum. At this point, it is pertinent to note that, if at the time Urhobo College was born, the Urhobo language had been introduced, both the college and the language of the tribe would have been nurtured together. Urhobo College and the Urhobo people would have been trail-blazers for the teaching of the languages of the community. It is truly said that one does not appreciate the worth of a thing until that thing is lost or almost so, as is the case with the Urhobo language today. The “migwo generation” of children is a product of parents who chose not to speak Urhobo to their children, or if they did, did not enforce being responded to in the same language. The present generation of Urhobo parents could be said to be grossly responsible for the predicament of the language today. That is why UPU alone should not take the blame. Modern day parents could not possibly be exonerated because, even though the canopy failed, the umbrellas could have held up. Maybe they were just too proud of having their children stand out as the best English students. Perhaps they simply got carried away with the ability to speak the Queen’s English almost like the Queen herself. The fact remains that all of the Urhobo tribe, from one generation to the other, at a certain point in the life of the language, propagated the Queen’s language and failed the Urhobo language. If the Urhobo Progress Union had been aware of the threat that English, especially pidgin posed to the language, they simply withheld it. Maybe they were just too proud of having their children, or if they did, did not enforce being recognized in their language of origin.

Unfortunately, this was not done. But as Aziza (op cit) buttresses this point when she says: “In most communities in Urhoboland today it is easy to observe that while the elders, i.e., the supposed leaders have Urhobo as their mother-tongue, the youths, i.e. the supposed followers have pidgin and English as theirs. During Chief Mukoro Mowoe’s time both groups still had Urhobo as their mother-tongue. UNESCO (2003) is quite explicit about the effects of such state of a language when it opines that “A language is in danger when its speakers cease to use it, use it in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains, and cease to pass it on from one generation to the next. That is there are no new speakers, adult or children”.

Individual measures taken to preserve the Urhobo Language

The predicament of the Urhobo language haven been noticed, certain groups of Urhobo persons had, on their own, taken steps to work towards its preservation. Such steps had been taken in the following spheres.

Youth / Peer group effort

In the course of discussion with Reverend G. Ivworin, he told me what they did as youths in the Agbarho community. He said that at social gatherings, they placed restrictions on themselves as youths. No one was allowed to speak English or pidgin. Anyone who did so was liable to pay a fine. The fine was determined by general consensus of the group anytime they had an outing. No English word was to be said in the sentence during a speech. Anyone who did so was liable to pay a fraction of the full fine as a token. For example:

i) “Wọ gétí mè?” for “Wọ m rè?” or “Ôbòô ré mè tā nà ròwè?”
ii) “Mé mìn towélì mé” for “Mé mìn òríòmà /íkpáshá mèé”
iii) “Rá getí towélì wè” for “Rá réé úkpáshá wè rèè”

Also, link words such as “so”, “now” are not to be used either. For example:

i) “Ô wè èghó kèvwè nè wò kèwè jàwówó, … o rèè vè ètínèé” for “Ô wè èghó kèvwè nè wò kèwè jàwówó, jè … o rèè vè ètínèé”
ii) “Mé ñèrhùè rèèrhùè rèèrhùè, nò wè bèvwè ré” for
iii) “Mé ñèrhùè rèèrhùè rèèrhùè, òtòyè nà, ó bèvwè ré”

Elders’ influence

Some elders like Reverend G. Ivworin’s great aunt, Madam Lady Ogide, of Orhokpokpo, Agbarho, not only forbade the speaking of other languages in the home environment, they also encouraged the proper pronunciation of Urhobo words. A telephone conversation with Chief Fred O. Sohwo revealed that Chief Oshevire Onakpoma Akpofure restricted his household from speaking the “oyibo” language saying, “Úwèwèwí mè die úwèwèwí rè oyibò” / “My house is not a white man’s house”. Chief Sohwo reports that the said Chief was so firm about
it that one had to comply willy nilly. His grandson Chief Fred Otovwe Sohwo tows the same line with him. He said that in his household his children spoke Urhobo from the womb, because, he spoke Urhobo to them while they were in the womb. Visitors to his home knew not to speak any other language if they must interact at all because when they start speaking English or pidgin he was quick enough to say: “Àwáààrèn je èphèrè yènà úwèèùwí nànnà. Úrhòbò òyè è jè vve úwèèùwí nànnà” / We do not speak that language in this house. It is Urhobo that one speaks in this house”. He also reported that in the household of his uncle, Chief Macaulay O. Akpofure (SAN), even the white, the “Oyiôbò”, spoke Urhobo. There could be some other persons who have encouraged the speaking of the Urhobo language that are not known of. Be that as it may, the percentage of these persons is minimal compared to the majority who did not do so.

Government effort

Government’s effort as touching the preservation of indigenous languages is documented in the National Policy of Education (1998). Article number 17 b states that for primary education, the curriculum shall include (1) Language of the environment, (2) English and (3) French. It also states that for the first three years, the language of the environment shall be the medium of instruction. This is well stated, but experience has shown that things did not work out favourably in this sphere because there were no teachers trained to execute these lofty ideals. As a result, the language of the environment, which in this case, was Urhobo, stands today in danger of extinction.

Reviving an endangered language such as Urhobo

Findings show clearly that neither the minor efforts made by individuals, nor the “huge” effort made by Government as stated in the National Policy of Education have had any effect in terms of language preservation. This simply points to the fact that, to revitalise the Urhobo language it is necessary to return to the basics. The Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary (1995) defines the word basic as an adjective which refers to that which forms a “base from which something develops or on which something is built... the basic vocabulary of a language”. This implies that it is absolutely needful to walk back in time to orality. Orality implies “Oral tradition”. The time when all there was, was only verbal speech; no form of writing. All forms of communication were verbal. Activities such as circumcision, marriages, births, seasons of festivities such as new yam, fishing, hunting etc were celebrated in songs (poems). Foley (2018) states that “Oral tradition, also called orality is the first and still most widespread mode of human communication. Far more than “just talking”, oral tradition refers to a dynamic and highly diverse oral-aural medium for evolving, storing, and transmitting knowledge art, and ideas.” In Urhoboland these would also include folktales, myths, proverbs, riddles jokes, traditions and laws which govern the land were all oral and these were all passed down from generation to generation simply by word of mouth. In fact, this was what language was all about during the oral tradition. This is why this study proposes a return to orality. The family should, by all means, go back to a time of songs and games by moonlight. The school also should return to the basics of orthography in Urhobo, i.e., when the Urhobo alphabet did not contain a “c” nor a “Q” nor an “X”; when the “E” and the “O” made much meaning, because they were properly pronounced. In line with this thought, the researcher visited people in the community who still remembered some of these moonlight play songs. The following play songs were found.

1. ’Kèlè Kèlè (A song for a type of hide and seek game)

Kèlè Kèlè ... Kèlè Kèlè Kèlè Kèlè ... Kèlè
Sà sà sà îyè ... îyè Sà sà sà îyè ... îyè
Èmèkùrèdè ... îyè Someone’s name
Ònà óhwò, Ònà óhwò...îyè This is someone, this is someone
Úbì re ùdîrù ... îyè Udjeru is a type of yam
Mè ìjè ru ìgbà ré ... ìyèéééééé! I have run into the circle ... hurrah!

At this point, the searcher has to start all over. If he is lucky enough to catch someone, whoever got caught would take over the search. (Verbal discussion with Reverend Godwin Jwworin and Mr Idigun, Delta State University, Abraka, Thursday 28 June 2018 at 12.30 p.m.).

2. Obiomah in Eke (2005) gives this song-poem the title, « Before Time Was » In Urhobo orality, it is generally referred to as Oghwóghwó.

Oghwóghwó

Oghwóghwó ghwóghwó, dàmùkèré
Oghwóghwó ghwóghwó, dàmùkèré
Úrhe óvwó re óhè ógò nà, dàmùkèré
Òtò jè màà, dàmùkèré
Enú jè màà, dàmùkèré
Mí gbé chá mí gbé mòw, dàmùkèré
Mí gbé rá mí gbé mòw, dàmùkèré
Oghwóghwó ghwóghwó, dàmùkèré
Oghwóghwó, dàmùkèré.

The following is Obiomah’s English version of it:

Oghwóghwó ghwóghwó the legendary
Oghwóghwó ghwóghwó wonder bird:
In the void a lone tree
A magic trapeze,
Earth was not born,
A magic trapeze,
Nor yet the sky,
One swaying trapeze
I’d soar aloft
And back to it
I’d roam afar.
And again to it
Oghwóghwó preternatural
Ethereal bird of memory!

Towards Revitalization of the Urhobo Language: A Return to Orality
According to Obiomah, « The equivalent of *of this bird* is the Phoenix, the bird of eternal ages, there before creation of the earth and sky ». The Researcher also met an erstwhile colleague who gave her the story that follows. It is the story behind the play song "Oghwoghwô”.

**The Toucan and the Chameleon**

A long time ago, when the earth was formed, the toucan and the chameleon were vying for seniority. Toucan and Chameleon both claimed seniority. To prove his seniority Chameleon said that when he came to life the earth was not yet solid. It was jelly-like so he had to move with great care lest he should sink. This explains why he moves the way he does. Toucan on his part said when he came to life the earth was covered with water, with one tree growing from the water, on which he perched after flying round and round. There was no land, so when his father died, he buried him on the back of his head. That is why the toucan has that hunch on his head. So Toucan was declared the senior.

(*This is the story as Mr. Julius I. Arerierian wrote it down Monday 13th June, 2011, 4.00 pm. The words are his, not the Researcher’s). Mama Edijana Ledjewe supplied the melody of this play song, 9.55 a.m., June 24, 2011. Although the music cannot be put here just now, she is worthy of mention.

Another version of this story says it was the bird’s mother that died and whom he buried on his head because he found no land. This is a very peculiar trait of orality. There are usually many versions of one story. Vocabulary to learn from this play song is as follows:

/ Órhúkpé – lamp/, /kpo [kpo] – to hit, "to strike"/ à sârhrá – thrice/, /kpo – in this context, it can mean "to be big / great", i.e. "big oyibo"/ "great oyibo". It can also mean "to become"/ /kpo oyibo – to become oyibo, E.g. "O hirhîé kpo oyibo"/ "He/she turned into oyibo”; “He/she became white".

/Ôbô re- as, like /, / á vvû nú – with mouth/, / kârâ – lock/, /ébô – sac/.

Ôbô re á vvû nú kârâ ébô / As one with mouth locks sac / Te oná – with this! / Te oná – and this /gbâ – tie/, /mu ôtô – to the ground/, / yâgha – scatter/, /ôwô – leg/.

3. **Mé sa éní**

Úbi úphó, mî phré phrê … Éní ósá (2ce)

Dié wó sâ re? … Mî sa énî! (2ce)

Ke énî ná rhô? … oná!

Mî ne énî ná rhô? … oná!

Énî ná ke ó rhô? … oná!

Úbi úphó, mî phré phrê… Énî ósá

(Verbal discussion with Mrs Gladys Omodeko, Delta State University, Abraka, Thursday 28 June 2018 at 1.19 p.m.)

This is sung about a hunter who only wants to hunt big games. He calls himself “ubi upho”/ “greed”. This is said of a greedy person i.e.

Ôshârê na Òrhûé ve úbi úphó rôdê

The man is a very greedy hunter

"Phré” is to somersault. It also describes an act of jumping / going from place to place, jumping high and low in quest of something. In this case the target is an elephant. That is why he says:

"mî phré phrê"; this means "I jumped and jumped , went everywhere, went up and down". "Énî” is elephant and "Ósâ” is debt. The payment for all my search is an elephant.

Dié wó sâ ré – What did you shoot?

Mê sa énî – I shot an elephant.

Ke énî ná rhô? – So where is the elephant?

Mî ne énî ná rhô? – I say, "where is the elephant?”

Énî ná ke ó rhô? – The elephant! Where is it?

Oná! – Here it is!

The suggestion of the song-poem being used as a means of teaching the Urhobo language as a way to revitalize the language may be questioned. But, it is not out of place. As the Author mentioned in Akpofure-Okenrentie (2018) “The fact is that in the learning of a language, whether as first language or as second language, it is required that the learner should first be exposed to the beginning skills, which are listening and speaking”. It is needful to recognize early enough, the importance of learning a language effectively. This is the reason for the application of the song-poetry. The song (poetry) has a great attraction for young people. It has the power to facilitate language learning. Reilly (2012) opines that “Poetry, as no other literary genre, draws language leaners attention to such specific linguistic elements as sounds of a language, as
well as to sound’s function and patterning”. Akyel (1995), cited by Reilly (op. cit.), suggests that “poetry reading tasks encourage students to employ their knowledge of all linguistic forms including the knowledge of phonetics and phonology to make meaning of poetic texts”. Aguillar (2013) supports Reilly (op. cit.) when she says:

When read aloud, poetry is rhythm and music and sounds and beats. Young children, babies and pre-schoolers included, may not understand. All the words and meanings, but they will feel the rhythms, get curious about what the sounds mean and perhaps want to create their own … 2. Poetry opens venues for speaking and listening … 3. Poetry builds resilience in kids and adults; it fosters social and emotional learning …

The Role of ICT in the Revitalization of the Urhobo Language

In time past, when oral tradition existed in communities, poetry, songs, as well as folk tales, were passed down from the older to the younger generation. In this way, the language was learnt, nurtured and preserved. These days, movies, home videos, games and other activities have largely taken the place of moonlit nights spent reciting poetry, singing songs and telling folk tales while sitting around warm fireplaces from homestead to homestead. Oral tradition has been forgotten. Happily, the internet would help to preserve the oral tradition in documented form. This is where one begins to think of ICT and the role it can play in the effort of revitalising the Urhobo language.

Information and Communication Technology

For Taher (2015:1), ICT information and communications technology – or (technologies) is an umbrella term that includes any communication device or application, encompassing: radio, television, cellular phones, computer and network hardware and software, satellite systems and so on as well as the various services and applications associated with them, such as video conferencing and distance learning.

In addition to this, audio, tape recordings can be used to preserve the Urhobo language teaching material, and also to transmit it. Culturally, Urhobo background is quite rich with poetry, folktales, and songs. David T. Okpako’s “Kpoha’s songs”, for example, features lots of songs which teach morals and portrays the tradition and heritage of Urhobo which could be used to teach the language in an Urhobo language class.

CONCLUSION

This study has discussed the quest of the Urhobo people for political relevance in the nation and what happened to the language in the course of this quest. It was found that the language shift had started as far back as when the British first came to Nigeria and that the shift was a gradual process until it came to be finally noticed. The realisation is that the language had been grossly neglected. For instance, the people got education but lost or almost lost their language. At this point, where the Urhobo people and their language find themselves, the Researcher suggests that the people should return to orality. They should walk back in time to where they left off and begin to learn again what they stopped learning when they shifted from their own language. How can this be done? Hopefully, there are still some people around who have not forgotten the wealth of the oral tradition – their doings, their sayings, their songs, their music, their dances, their festive and cultural activities, their births, their deaths, their marriages, circumcision, their plays … the language is tightly embedded in all of these. How can these be recovered? There may be more steps than these, but this author notes four steps to take. 1. Search. 2. Recover 3. Activate – that is to put into action, begin to use all that you have recovered. 4. Preserve and continue to draw from and to refresh what is being preserved.

This paper also shows that Information and Communication Technology plays a great role in the teaching, learning and the preservation of a language, which in this study, is the Urhobo language. Modern homes are replete with ICT gadgets. Also, parents have been known to be the first teachers of language to children. For the children to embrace the language at school, its learning must begin from home. By way of conclusion, it is recommended that in keeping with McGuinne’s explanation, that “without a natural intergenerational transmission process in place any attempt to revitalize a language will be unsuccessful” and that “in order for a language to be transferred from one generation to the other it has to be used as a regular daily medium of communication”. He also adds that a most effective way of revitalization is “a natural use of the language at home, where children are encouraged to become active, rather than passive users of a language”. To this end, it is suggested that not only should parents and elders of the home speak Urhobo, recorded cassettes of Urhobo plays, songs proverbs, riddles and jokes should also be provided in the home. Not only should they be provided, they should be played regularly, listened to and spoken to. Why spoken to? An integral part of learning a language is repetition. This is why a language learner must repeat (like a baby) what the audio player says. However, these questions arise. How many Urhobo parents are ready to speak the language to their children? How do we get the generality of the Urhobo population to accept to speak their own language? What is the percentage of children who will readily accept to speak the language? The fact is that, Information and Communication Technology would indeed facilitate the teaching and learning of Urhobo, but, would the exercise not be wasted if it were to be simply activated and put back in the cooler? This is what would happen if the Urhobo population does not embrace the process of revitalisation.
RECOMMENDATION

The following recommendations are made;
1. Lots of Urhobo people do not understand the importance of their language to their identity as a people. Using the internet, an awareness campaign should be carried out in order to educate them.
2. The older generation in the community should make a point of speaking the Urhobo language and enjoy doing so. They should also encourage the young ones to listen, understand, and respond to them in Urhobo.
3. Urhobo folktales should be resurrected and told to the children in the language.
4. Young people should be encouraged to take pride in Urhobo and speak it.
5. They should be encouraged to listen to audio tapes and watch videos of Urhobo fables and tales rather than spend all of their time playing games on the internet.
6. Parents should engage their children regularly in discussions in the language with rewards attached to each exercise. This would be an incentive.

One last question. Will there not be a gap in the generation? A gap that includes a group of Urhobo persons that have completely lost the language? If Urhobo starts now to effect these recommendations, the yet-to-be-born would be born into a rich Urhobo background; and grow with the language. What about those already born without the language, the ones who already have “pidgin tongue and who would be unwilling to embrace their natural language?

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