Language Endangerment: An Examination of the Shrinking Domains of Idoma Language

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Abstract
African languages, especially Nigerian minority languages, are either losing their number of speakers to other Nigerian languages and/or to the English language. Idoma language which is our focus in this study is not an exception. One of the effects of such linguistic practice or choice is a continual shrinking or restriction of domains where these languages were formerly used; the apparently growing population of those that should constitute the native speakers of such languages notwithstanding. Some of the motivating questions for this study include: Why should these languages grow into endangerment in the full view of descendants of their original speakers? And why should the national language policy exist like an irresponsible mid-wife that fails to assist a pregnant woman in labour of child birth? The researcher administered a set of questions to randomly selected Nigerian undergraduates from different linguistic backgrounds to derive a sociolinguistic explanation for their choice of alternative communicative means instead of their mother tongue. The findings reveal that language loss or endangerment is currently a global issue but can be remediated through aggressive revitalization process. This is because the survival of any natural (human) language is tied to the willingness of its speakers to continue to use it actively as a communicative means.

Introduction
The African societies have lost so much of their rich cultural heritage, communal worldviews, status defining parameters, socio-cultural expedition, proverbs, cultural rhetorics and intermediary links with the world of their ancestral spirits to colonization and globalization. Among other spheres of interests that the continent has continued to lose in exchange for western new value system are the boundless domains of her linguistic practice. The Idoma people are not exception in the aforementioned cultural and sociolinguistic tragedy. For instance, once around the Idoma community, annual inter-tribal wrestling contests (and other sporting events) were organised and encouraged to produce champions through the various age grades. In place of such art that have been producing champions for the villages, a new order was designed to produce winners for the respective political units e.g. states, countries or institutions that the contestants represent. Both the sponsorship and the calendar of events are now the prerogatives of appropriate states, national and continental agencies. Nothing probably may seem to have been lost except that the coach is no longer the elderly member of the contestants’ cultural community. The implication is that the event which once was officiated by the appreciated elders and cheered by spectators who shared common cultural and linguistic value is on display in foreign arena; watched by people who do not know the actual cultural ranking of the contestants and/or champions. Above all, the language of the officiating personalities and media commentary is now foreign to the events presented to the foreign audience.
Language Endangerment
According to Auwal (2012:349), “Language is instrumental to our perception of the reality around us. It influences the way we think, behave and express our environment. If we lose this instrument, for life there would be no alternative that would serve us a similar purpose.” It is unfortunate that this useful means of communication available to man is dying around the world unprevented in most cases while linguists have continued to deploy certain adjectives to describe the varying degrees of threats or danger these languages around the world and in particular Nigerian languages are facing. Some of the terms used include the following twelve: receding, disadvantaged, deprived, disuse, weakened, unsafe, sickly, moribund, dying, disappearing, extinct and dead languages. For example, Omachonu (2015:3) defines language endangerment as a situation “When a particular speech community finds itself…where its language (the means/medium of all round expression) faces degradation and threat of extinction. In other words, when they survival of linguistic system or language is threatened and weakened; realistically, it is endangered”. According to Isola, (2010:2); “When a language dies, the culture dies”. In the words of Vande-Guma (2015:57), “…if a language is endangered then the survival of the various genres expressed through that language are susceptible to extinction.”

Free Encyclopedia defines an endangered language as “a language that is at risk of falling out of use as its speakers dies out or shift to speaking another language.” According to Auwal (2012:350) (drawing from Tandefelt, 1992; and Fakuade, 1999), language endangerment is systematic and if the encroachment is not resisted the language of the weaker cultural influence will fall prey to the language of the stronger socio-political tradition. Woodbury’s explanation in Dega’s (2015:18) underscores the point raised above when he writes “many languages…are being replaced by the popular languages in the regions because languages are no longer learned by the younger generation or even adult speakers”, This too is not a threat to Idoma language. The suppressive and expansionist influence of English language on the communicative competence, acquisition and pragmatics of the indigenous Nigerian languages, expressed by Salawu (2013:93), is not even a major threat to Idoma language. Equally, the situation in the contemporary Idoma land is not a defense of the educated man mentality as described by Adegbija, (2001:290) when he writes the Ogori-Magongo youths “…frequently speak English, both to display their achievement of the educated “status” and to exclude from interactions some their fellow Ogorians”.

Earlier Works on Language Endangerment
A number of works have been done in the area of language endangerment in different parts of Nigeria’s geolinguistic zones. For example, Ugwuoke (1999) cited in Omachonu (2015:4) listed over 150 Nigerian languages in danger of disappearing; and over eighty percent (80%) of the language are in the North. Adegbija (2001:290) Batibo (2001) cited in Schaefer and Egbokhare (2011:67) reported the dramatic cases of languages in West Africa especially in Northern areas of Nigeria under Hausa influence. According to him, about 180 of Nigeria’s 400 languages now have less than 500 speakers; the implication is that many of these languages are moribund, with children no longer learning them as mother tongue.
Macaulay’s (2005-2006:163) work shows that the consequence of creolization of Nigerian Pidgin Effurun/Warri/Sapele speech community is the endangerment of Okpe and Ovwie. Schaefer and Egboh (2011:65) also assessed age-constrained linguistic innovation in oral tradition narratives of the Nigerian language Emai and their implication for language endangerment. Auwal (2012:351) raises a lamentation over the fate of the minority languages in Kebbi State in the following words: the youngest generations are already in the verge of total shift of the Language of the Wider Communication (LWC) for economic reasons. The net implication is that they do not know that they are being deprived of their cultural, moral and identity.

The gap this present work seeks to fill is that to the best of knowledge of this writer, of the several works that have been done on state of endangerment faced by most Nigerian languages, nothing much has being done in Idoma language. The motivation for this work however stems from the almost ceaseless alarm raised by linguists around the world that more languages are dying (Emenanjo, 2010; Gippert, Himmelman and Mosel, 2006; Omachonu, 2012; Egboh, 2004; Ugwuoque, 1999; Amfani, 2001; Okwudishu, 1997 and Valiquette, 1992). And if this note of alarm is true then attempts should be made to examine our own language, Idoma, closely so that suggestions can be made on how to prevent it from going extinct.

**Domain in Linguistic Study**

Linguists have continued to create theoretical explanations that can enhance understanding of virtually all aspects of the science of language study. One of such theoretical explanations is the concept of domain’. Fishman (1968) in Pride and Holmes (1972:20) defines domains as“A sociolinguistics construct abstracted from topics of communication, relationships between communicators and locals of communications in accord with the institutes of a speech community in such a way that individual behavior and social patterns can be distinguished from each other and yet related to each other.” According to Hudson (1996:78), “…domains are congruent combinations of a particular kind of speaker and addressee, in a particular kind of place, talking about a particular kind of topic.” Holmes (2013:23) underscores Hudson’s opinion when she writes:“Domain is clearly a very general concept which draws on three important social factors in code choice – participants, setting and topic.”

There seems to be an agreement among linguists on the focus of domain and the three major issues mentioned in all the definitions are topics, settings and participants. Crystal (2008:155) stretches these dimensions to some particular units of linguistic practice when he says “domains refers to a group of institutionalized social situations typically constrained by a common set of behavioural rules, e.g. the domain of the family is the house, of religion is the church,” etc. Melchers and Shaw’s (2011:13) definition appears more like an amplification of Crystal’s opinion when they write: “The term ‘domain’ simply stands for ‘a recurring situation type’, ‘a definable context of life in a society’. Typical domains are the school, the family, work, local as well as national administration, the church and the media.” O’Grady et’al (2011:253) observe that “One aspect of knowing a word or expression may involve knowing the kind of contexts in which it may
be used and the kinds of people who are likely to use it”. This implies that a knowledge of domain can enhance the understanding of the linguistic elements used by interlocutors.

Crystal was profound when he adds “the notion is seen as of particular importance in the analysis of multilingual setting involving several participants, where it is used to relate variations in the individuals’ choice and topic of language to broader sociocultural norms and expectation of interaction.” In other words, a good knowledge of sociolinguistics and respect for standard linguistic practice demand that interlocutors should work within the frame of agreeable domain. This is because a linguistic practice that violates or disregards the importance of domain is a direct effort to push the language into a sphere of endangerment. According to Melchers, and Shaw, (2011:13)“... loss of a domain is often an indication that the dialect is endangered” They further argued that “Languages are dying out all over the world as, domain by domain, their speakers go over to languages perceived as more powerful or useful”(Melchers and Shaw (2011:210).

From the foregoing, one can say that a language can become endangered when there is a restriction in certain spheres or domain where it was formerly used. Melchers and Shaw (2011:56) report that All children living in Wales are obliged to learn Welsh at school...Nevertheless, because of restrictions in domains, Welsh is regarded as an endangered Language.Millar (2007:427) unequivocally states the implication of a failure by a speech community to develop the various domains in a language thus “… the lack of development in certain domains mean that it may be rather difficult to speak or write about certain topics in your native language...”. On the table given below, there are some linguistic domains with specific reference to certain settings. It is important to note that a slight shift in the setting will translate to a change in the topic and/or the participants.

**Table 1: Domain, Topics and Participants Variation in Typical Settings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains</th>
<th>Settings</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Family</td>
<td>Home, farm, prayer, kitchen</td>
<td>Official/informal discourse</td>
<td>Father-son, mother-daughter, parent-children, parents-friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Friendship</td>
<td>Gym, stream, farm</td>
<td>Formal/Informal discourse</td>
<td>Coach-trainee, trainee-trainee, mother-child, father-son, etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Religion</td>
<td>Church, funeral, naming ceremony, wedding, etc</td>
<td>Formal/Semiformal because of roles and states of the participants</td>
<td>Pastor-congregation, congregation-congregation, parents-pastor, couple-couple, pastor couple, pastor-mourner</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Linguistic Independence in Benue State

The linguistic hierarchy in Nigeria presents a harsh reality especially for the minority languages. Dega (2015:23) gave a list of few languages like Etio, Igede, Bura, Angash, Annang, etc., which are invariably being endangered by the dominant Nigerian languages. Benue State is one of the political units that houses some of the minority languages in Nigeria. For example, Idoma, Tiv, Igede, Akpa, Utonkon, Etio are some of the languages in that belt. Of these languages, two major linguistic families (or phyla) can be identified. These are Kwa and Benue-Congo groups of languages.

Idoma, which is our focus in this study is largely an endoglossic language used throughout the territorial land mass of Idoma. On the Nigerian Political Map, Idoma nationality can be located in the lower Benue State. The Idoma language can be located on point 143b in the Han’s Provisional Language Map of Nigeria. Using the “Family Tree Model” that was developed in the 19th century as an aid to the historical study of languages, the Idoma language belongs to the Niger Congo; “Kwa” group. Other Nigerian languages in this linguistic group include Igala, Igbira, Igbo, Igede, Yala, Yoruba, Urhobo. Other languages in the group include Ika, Ijo (Ijaw), Ishan, Isoko, Nupe and Ogoni.

One scene that makes the Idoma linguistics landscape uniques is that despite the continual socio-economic and/or political contact between the Idoma people and all her neighbouring ethnic nationalities (e.g. the Tiv, Igede, Igala, Alagon and Ibo), the degree of interlingual influence at most points is quite marginal and restrictedly around dialectal fringes or boundaries. This is because it is only few contact areas between the Agatu/Ochekwu and the Igala, Otukpa/Orokam and the Igala, the Adoka and Igala, Ichama and Ibo, Owukpa and Ibo that we can find a relatively interlingual and dialectal spills across the linguistic boundaries.

Unlike most languages in the North Central region in Nigeria where Hausa, the regional lingua franca is dominating the minority languages, no Nigerian language can claim such superimposed
influence on Idoma. In other words, even the English and its Pidgin based means of communication put together are not a significant threat to the survival of Idoma as it is feared by speakers of other Nigerian minority languages. For instance, there is hardly a fluent speaker of any of the following minority languages Jju, Tyap, Hyam and Moro’a in the southern Kaduna region that does not engage in code-smith or code-mixing in a stretch of spontaneous utterance. Likewise, people from the Delta State hardly make strings of utterances without infusing words from the Nigerian Pidgin in their mother-tongues. According to Schaefer and Egbokhare (2011:66), minority vernaculars are disappearing at an alarming rate across Africa. This is as a result of what they described as a decreased reliance on the mother tongue in the home and increased use of English and/or the English-based pidgin. Apart from the seemingly hitherto unperceived insidious lack of intergenerational transmiss that the language is suffering, there is no encroaching effects of bilingualism, language shift, linguistic borrowing or radical threat on the Idoma language yet.

Shrinking Domains: The Idoma Experience
Idoma as a language is losing a number of the domains where it was formerly used; the apparently growing population of those that should constitute the native speakers of such languages notwithstanding. This is what the writer refers to as shrinking or restriction of domains. Some of the motivation questions for this study include: Why should these languages grow into endangerment in the full view of descendants of their original speakers? The net implication is that a time will come when all the genres to express the rich cultural values would have been lost or gone attritted. This is because according to Dixon (1997:199), “each language encapsulates the world-view of its speakers – how they think, what they value, what they believe in, how they classify the world around them, how they order their lives. Once a language dies, a part of human culture is lost – forever.” Omachonu (2015:1) expresses the same fear when he writes: “when a language is lost, the entire people, their culture and everything that makes them a ‘unique entity’ are lost. A whole civilization is lost (cf Gippert, Himmelman and Mosel, 2006). Vande-Guma (2015:58) addresses the issues from a perspective of ethnolinguistic disloyalty in the following terms: “In Nigeria…there are millions of professionals who engage in vast discursive issues in the English language but become nervous when confronted with the opportunity to address a gathering in their mother-tongue.” Some of the factors that affected Idoma and other Nigerian indigenous languages from flourishing include loss of interest in:

- **Cultural rhetorics and use of proverbs as communicative mechanics:** With multilingualism, values and forms such as “Night of Thousand Laughs” have displaced our once cherished cultural rhetorics.
- **Annual Festivals:** The rise of Christianity literally killed annual cultural festivals but the wake of nominal religion has elevated it to the status of cultural carnival.
- **Wrestling Contest:** Organised sporting council has hijacked the hallowed annual inter-clan, age-group and inter-tribal wrestling contests and consequently reduced it to entertainment affair.
• **Tales by Moonlight**: The new order of entertainment such as tv, computers games, partying, internet interaction etc. has taken the place of folkloric, storytelling and dances.

• **Communal Farming Contribution**: Large scale farming for commercial interest has overthrown subsistence farming which has produced great farmers through healthy competitive labour for communal existence.

• **Traditional Medical Practice**: The slow-paced rural development and almost non-infrastructural propaganda of the successive national and state government have killed African traditional expertise even in the area of traditional medical practice.

• **Communal Hunting Expedition**: There is virtually no community now that engage in communal hunting expedition in Idoma land; instead it is individuals that go hunting for animals either as career hunters or for hobby.

• **Marriage Ceremony and Phases of Bride-Price debates**: At present, there is just a single marital talk or visit before church wedding. This is because the cultural courtship orientation that is used to strengthen the bond of relationship between the bride and groom’s families is no longer observed.

• **Communal Sanitation Work**: The local government sanitation department is the sole mobilizer of communal sanitary works now.

• **Burial Ceremony and Debate of the Cause of Death**: The foreign culture of depositing a dead body in a mortuary, organized under-takers’ band and dance have eroded the cultural fun of burial debate that make death dreadful.

**Data Presentation**

The data for the study were sourced from two groups of respondents of common academic exposure but different linguistics backgrounds. Altogether, a total of fifty (50) undergraduates are involved as our research subjects. Of this number, 20 are of Idoma origin while the remaining 30 are drawn from across the multiethnic and plurilingual Nigerian societies. The reason for this is to use the out-group experience to confirm whether or not the in-group responses are peculiar or universal; since the subject matter of the research (language endangerment) is perceived to be a global linguistics threat.

Just as the Eskimos take pleasure in categorizing snow into a large number of different entities, and the Ibos, the various vegetables for soup is how the Idomas categorise yam species (Yule, 1996:247).

According to Spolsky (2004) in Mustapha (2013:51), the members of a speech community share also a general set of belief about appropriate language practices, sometimes forming a consensual ideology, assigning values and prestige to various aspect of the language varieties used in it. A careful investigation of the social life of Idoma people will reveal the peculiar linguistic codes or registers adopted by speakers for negotiating illocutionary and perlocutionary effects on their interlocutors. During such interaction, everyone who shares the in-group identity with the speaker(s) can tell whether or not his communicative attempt is successful; be it at any ceremony,
burial ceremony, communal hunting expedition and/or sanitation wok, chanting or idolatric worship incantation, etc.

With the passage of time most of the contemporary Idoma youth have not only lost interest in the cultural social events, they have failed to learn the ritual, dances, storytelling that translate to good performance or practice. They do not only disdain speaking the language but willfully adopt some foreign accent to bastardize the little incoherent vocabulary items and the few faulty sentence structures (mainly greeting words and/or short responses that maybe described as clichés) in their repertoires. For example, the first daughter of the writer of this work is fond of rendering the Idoma equivalent of the phrase welcome(or thanks for coming) phonologically strange from the norm; whether viewed from any of the dialectal zones of Idoma. For instance, instead of anya owá she will say anya owá.

Different Species of Yam in Idoma Land
Idoma by implication of her political unit in Benue State makes up the Food Basket of the Nation. It is grossly lamentable that most Idoma youths do not know the difference between the species of yam farmed in the territory. For example, most of the respondents that are Idoma regard all the tubal species as yam; a generic name rather than appropriate reference to particular product listed below:

- **Inenchi**: A white strong yam that looks deceptive small. It is usually the first to be eaten each year.
- **Ashangwu**: A breed that has larger head than the lower part of the stem.
- **Ododiyo**: A strong yam with bluish colour around the head
- **Otu**: Good for pounded-yam but quick in turning black if not eaten in a hurry.
- **Ode**: A high breed of white texture and unusual fatness.
- **Oku**: A special breed with yellow texture.

Other Tubal Classes of Yam Include:

- **Obuna**: Water yam
- **Ulayi**: A three leaf-yam with yellow texture
- **Ederu**: Cocoa yam
- **Agbaha**: Another species of cocoa yam of a weak and gummy texture.
- **Oyira**: Cassava from which gari, ikwirikwu, akpu and opu ona are processed.

According to Vande-Guma (2015:81), “The genres reveal rich and vibrant rhetorical traditions that need to be documented before they become extinct.” Hudson (1996: 402) added that some of the endangered languages have much to tell us about the natural world, e.g., invaluable information about ecological matters, and even perhaps about the nature of reality. Nettle and Romaine (2002:69) say “each language...(is) a way of coming to grips with the external world and developing a symbolism to represent it so that it can be talked and thought about.” Harrison (2007:7) shares a similar view when he writes “Language disappearance is an erosion or extinction
of ideas, of ways of knowing, and ways of talking about the world and human experience”. Wardhaugh (2010:402) citing Crystal’s (2002) decries the loss of languages but mainly because such loss is loss of knowledge about the possible characteristic of human languages and not because of what such languages might tell us about any other aspect of the world around us. Dega (2015:23) quoting Benard’s (1992:76) writes: “Every time a language dies, we have less evidence for understanding patterns in structure and function of human language, human prehistory, and the maintenance of the world’s diverse ecosystem.”

There is a cultural preference and segregation observed by Idoma farmers of these tubal crops that the younger generation of Idoma do not know now as a result of the shrink domains in the use of Idoma. For example, certain combinations are allowed to co-exist on a plot of land while some cannot even be imagined. For instance, ‘ulayi’ and ‘obuna’ may share or be planted on the same heap with any other species of yam, but not as the chief crop occupying the centre of the heap. They must be planted by the side of the heap as supportive crops. Where they are sown as the main crops on a heap, it is because the farmer could not get enough yam seedlings from the first six classes of yam presented above. More so, the times for planting ‘ulayi’ and ‘obuna’ are not the same with any of the six classes of yam. This is because the yam must be allowed to start growing its leaves before the supportive crops are sown. ‘Ederu’ and ‘Agbala’ can be sown on the same piece of land as mixed crops but never together with any type of yam. Beside, while the core yams are regarded as male prerogative, ‘obuna’, ‘ulayi’, ‘ederu and ‘agbaha’ are considered as women’s stuff to support their husbands in feeding their members of family throughout the year.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this current work has examined the “shrinking” domains where Idoma language used to serve its speakers in every communicative field and event. For example, the Idoma has “ofu owaja”; a funeral rite where unrestricted obscene songs encoded in immoral arousing language are permitted to celebrate the departed member of the society, usually on the night the individual was buried. But with the massive proselytes raised by different Christian churches across the speech community, this aspect of funeral rite has been lost Vande-Guma (2015:57) decries the “viability of subsisting indigenous genres of cultural expressions and the risk of their becoming extinct as a result of the inability of most bilingual Nigerians to utilize these genres in high formal traditional context such as traditional marriages, funeral inquest ceremonies amongst many other traditional oral interactive events. It is no doubt that Kuju was right when he reported in the year 1999 that “the number of languages in the world are shrinking.”
References


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