

Emmanuel Ogheneakpobor Emama¹

Department of English and Literary Studies

Delta State University

Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria,

Abstract

Language endangerment is a significant concern in linguistic research, particularly with the rapid decline of some languages. This paper examines how Urhobo speakers' attitudes contribute to the endangerment of their language, drawing on William Labov's Variationist Sociolinguistic theory, which considers sociolectal variables such as age, gender, and education. It highlights a shift in language use among Urhobo speakers towards Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin, indicating a positive attitude towards these languages. Data were collected through fieldwork, and the paper concludes that the negative perception of the Urhobo language has led to asymmetrical multilingualism in the region. Revitalisation of the Urhobo language is possible if speakers cultivate a positive attitude towards it.

Keywords: Urhobo, Language Endangerment, New Englishes, language Attitude, Language contact

Introduction

The decline of the world's approximately seven thousand languages is now a significant concern to linguists Austin and Sallabank.² Urhobo is one of the world's endangered languages. Urhobo is a Southwestern Edoid language, and the Edoid languages are a member of the Benue-Congo group within the Niger-Congo phylum.³ The Urhobo language is spoken in the Delta and Bayelsa states of Nigeria.⁴ states that Urhobo language speakers number approximately 1.2 million, based on the 1991 national census. The leading cause of endangerment for the Urhobo language, as well as most of the world's endangered languages, is language shift, which is occasioned by the negative attitude of Urhobo speakers towards their language. Webb and Kembo⁵ define language shift as '...a process in which speakers of one language begin to use a second language for more and more functions until they eventually use only the second language.'

¹ emmanuel@delsu.edu.ng

² Austin, Peter K., and Julia Sallabank, eds. The Cambridge handbook of endangered languages. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

³ Williamson, Kay and Roger Blench (2000). 'Niger-Congo' In Brend Heine and Derek Nurse (eds) African Languages: An Introduction. Cambridge University Press
Aziza, Rose O., and Mowarin Macaulay. "Phonology-Syntax Interface in the Derivation of Yes/No Questions and Sentential Negation in Urhobo". *Journal of Linguistic Association of Nigeria (JOLAN)* No. 9. (2005/2006) Pp134-145

⁴ Aweto, Albert "An Outline Geography of Urhoboland) <http://www.waado.org/UrhoboGeography>. Aweto (2002)

⁵ Vic Webb & Kembo Sure (2000). An Introduction to Language and Linguistics in Africa. Oxford. Oxford University Press



While Urhobo speakers develop a negative attitude towards the Urhobo language and shift from the language, they develop a positive attitude towards Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin. This research is hinged on Labov's Sociolinguistic Variationist theory.⁶ . The paper notes that asymmetrical multilingualism now prevails in Urhoboland, where Nigerian English and its Pidgin are spoken in the homes of Urhobo speakers and used for intergenerational transmission from mother to child, resulting from a language shift among Urhobo speakers. The paper recommends that the Urhobo language can be revitalised if Urhobo speakers adopt symmetrical multilingualism.

Contact and Language Endangerment

Within the past four hundred years, languages have been in contact. Language contact has become increasingly pervasive over the past hundred years due to globalisation. Winford⁷ states that 'contact linguistics is par excellence a cross-disciplinary field that shows the integration of social and linguistic in a unified framework.' Two leading causes of contact between languages are migration and colonisation. In Africa and Asia, colonisation has been the leading cause of language contact between European languages, such as English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish, and the indigenous languages of Africa and Asia. Contact linguistics studies the outcome of language contact; more studies in bilingualism and multilingualism rely on contact linguistics. Two effects of language contact between European and Indigenous African and Asian languages are code-switching and language shift. Language shift results in language attrition when speakers of a language, in this case, an African language, decide to stop speaking their ancestral language or not pass it on to their children, opting instead to use another language. Language shift from Indigenous languages to ex-colonial languages like English, French and Spanish, which are more dominant and more useful languages than their Indigenous languages, resulted in the endangerment of the indigenous language. Therefore, ex-colonial languages have greater social prestige and are often associated with socio-economic development. Urhobo is being considered in this study as a replacement for Nigerian English and Pidgin. Both are natural and contact languages known as New Englishes in Nigeria.⁸

There is the prognosis by linguists that over half of the about six to seven thousand languages spoken in the world will go into extinction at the end of the twenty-first century (Hansford et al., 1976; Bradley, D and Bradley, M. 2002: Xi) Endangered languages are found mainly in Australia, the United States of America, Canada, Asia and Africa. Egbokhare⁹ a renowned African linguist asserts that most of the two thousand and four hundred Indigenous languages in Africa would go into extinction within a century thus:

⁶ Labov, William "The Social Setting of Linguistics" Change In T, A, Sebeok (Ed) Current Trends in Linguistics 11 195-251, 1972.

⁷ Winford, Donald. "An introduction to contact linguistics." (2003).

⁸ Mowarin, Macaulay and Tonukari Emmanuel "Pidgin as Lingua Franca for Anglophone West African Countries", *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities* No. 21, (2013b) pp. 142 - 150.

⁹ Egbokhare, Francis.O. *Naija: The language of the Future.* (Eds.) Akande, T Akinmade & Salami, Oladipo. *Current Trends in Nigeria Pidgin English: A Sociolinguistic Perspective.* De Gruyter Mouton , pp. 1-38,(2021).

'There is a grim prediction that in the next 50 – 100 years, 90 per cent of the languages of Africa will be extinct. This will be a tragedy given the huge information base and folk wisdom that will perish if allowed to happen.'

Endangered languages are primarily minority languages that are threatened by the world's major languages, also known as global languages. World languages include English, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, and Hindi (source: <https://www.babel.com/magazine>). Ex-colonial languages, including English, French, Portuguese, and Belgian, endanger Indigenous languages in Africa.¹⁰ Linden¹¹ gives an overview of the number of endangered languages in the world thus:

'There is hard evidence that the number of languages in the world is shrinking. Approximately half of the roughly 6,000 languages now spoken are already endangered or on the brink of extinction. A language disappears somewhere in the world every two weeks.'

While significant world languages, such as English, Mandarin, Spanish, French, Arabic, and Hindi, are thriving and vibrant, many minority languages are in danger of extinction. Minority languages without a written orthography are more prone to linguicide.

World Englishes and New Englishes in Anglophone West Africa.

English is now regarded as a global language for two reasons: first, it has the largest number of speakers. The language's 1.462 billion speakers have now surpassed speakers of Mandarin Chinese, which is 1.119 billion. (source: <https://www.babel.com/magazine>). English now has a wide distribution of speakers. The language is spoken on the five continents of the world. In addition, English now has many dialectal variations since the language is no longer a monolithic entity. Due to this reason, Kachru et al. (2009: XXVII)¹² evolved the term world Englishes to 'refers to a wide range of differing approaches to the description of English(es) worldwide.' Kachru and Smith¹³ (1985:210) evolved the three circles of world Englishes to capture the varieties of English spoken worldwide. The three circles of world English are Inner Circle English, also known as English as a native language (ENL); Outer Circle English; and Expanding Circle English. Native English speakers typically speak inner-circle English in countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States of America, New Zealand, and Australia. Outer circle Englishes or English as a second language (ESL) is spoken in ex-colonies of Great Britain. The countries include Anglophone African countries in West Africa, East Africa and Southern Africa. These countries include Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia in

¹⁰Haugen, Einar. "The ecology of language." *The ecolinguistics reader: Language, ecology and environment* (2001): 57-66.

¹¹Linden, Eugene. "Lost tribes, lost knowledge." *Time* 138, no. 12 (1991): 46-52

¹² Kachru, Braj B., Yamuna Kachru, and Cecil L. Nelson, eds. *The handbook of world Englishes*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009.

¹³ Kachru, Yamuna, and Larry E. Smith. *Cultures, contexts, and world Englishes*. Routledge, 2008.

West Africa; Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania in East Africa; and South Africa in Southern Africa. Outer Circle English is spoken in India, Singapore, Hong Kong, Pakistan, and other parts of Asia. Expanding circle Englishes or English as a foreign language (EFL) is spoken in countries where English is neither a mother tongue nor a second language. Some countries where English is used as a foreign language or as a member of the expanding circle of English include China, the Benin Republic in West Africa and Argentina in South America.

In Anglophone West African countries where Outer Circle English is spoken, West African Pidgin English (WAPE) is also spoken alongside English as a second language. WAPE is a contact language that evolved from the contact between English and Indigenous languages in the respective countries (Mowarin, 2009; Mowarin, 2021; Emama, 2022¹⁴). The outer circle English and English-based pidgins spoken in Anglophone West African countries constitute New Englishes in West Africa¹⁵. Anglophone West African countries are complexly multilingual, as each country has many indigenous languages in addition to the outer circle of English and its English-based Pidgin.

Nigerian English and Its Pidgin as New Englishes in Nigeria and Urhoboland.

In Nigeria, Nigerian English is the country's official language. It is the language used for formal communication in the country. It is the language of education, the judiciary and administration. Nigerian English is regarded as the language of the upper class because it is spoken by competent speakers, who are often highly educated and hold top positions, such as those of civil servants and chief executives of multinational companies in Nigeria. According to Bamgbose¹⁶ Nigerian English has undergone nativisation or indigenisation, as features from indigenous languages, such as lexical items and tonal features, are now present in Nigerian English. Some words from Nigerian languages that are now part of the Nigerian English lexical inventory include gele (a head tie), akara (a fried bean cake), suya (smoked cow meat), and moi moi (grounded, cooked beans). Nigerian Pidgin is the language of wider communication in Nigeria. Nigerian Pidgin is used for informal communication in Nigeria and serves as a primary language for inter-ethnic communication. Nigerian Pidgin is used extensively in

¹⁴ Mowarin, Macaulay. Pidgin Rhetoric in Nigerian Poetry. *The Journal of New Poetry*, No. 6. International Research Confederacy of African Literature and Culture (IRCALC), Morrisville (pp. 121 – 140), (2009b). USA

Mowarin, Macaulay. "Emphasis, Focalization, and Topicalization in Nigerian Pidgin" (Eds.) Akande, T Akinmade & Salami, Oladipo. *Current Trends in Nigeria Pidgin English: A Sociolinguistic Perspective*. De Gruyter. Mouton. Germany, pp. 221-248, (2021).

Emama, Emmanuel.O. " Music domains as index of the vitality of the Urhobo language". *Aridon 2* (1), (2022). 131-146

¹⁵ Edgar, Schneider W. *English Around the World. An Introduction*. *English Worldwide*, 33, 1, (2012), p. 100 - 104

Omoniyi, Tope. (2009). *West African English. The Handbook of World Englishes*. Kachru, B.B.B.B., Kachru, Y.Y., & Nelson, C.L.C.L. (Eds.). . Oxford. Blackwell Publishers

¹⁶ Bamgbose, Ayo. "English in the Nigerian environment." *World Englishes: Critical concepts in linguistics 2* (2006): 105.

the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Egbokhare¹⁷ (2021:114) observes that Nigerian Pidgin is ethnically neutral. Two prominent radio broadcasting stations in Nigerian Pidgin are WAZOBIA FM and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Why is the lexicon of Nigerian Pidgin mostly English? The syntax is that of Nigerian languages.¹⁸

Triglossia in Urhobo Land

Urhobo land has a triglossic relationship between Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin and Urhobo. In terms of power relations, Nigerian English is the most prestigious language due to its value in Nigerian society. It is termed the high variety. Nigerian Pidgin is less important to Urhobo speakers than Nigerian English. Nigerian Pidgin is categorised as the Mid-variety. The Urhobo language is the least important and has the lowest variety among the Urhobo people. Urhobo land's three varieties of languages are supposed to play different functions. Nigerian English is used for formal communication in Urhobo land. It is the language of education, the judiciary and administration in the civil service. Nigerian Pidgin is used for informal and inter-ethnic communication between Urhobo people and members of other ethnic groups that are neighbours of the Urhobo people.¹⁹ These ethnic groups include Ijaw or Izon, Itsekiri, Ukwani and Bini. Urhobo is ideally the language of intra-ethnic communication between Urhobo speakers. There will be a symmetrical multilingualism or relationship between the languages if each plays the ideal role it is supposed to play in the speech community. However, there is an asymmetrical relationship in the functions that each of the three languages plays. This asymmetrical multilingual relationship occasionally causes Urhobo speakers to shift their language use from Urhobo to Nigerian English and Pidgin. This is the main reason why the Urhobo language is now endangered.

The Sociolinguistics of Urhobo Language Endangerment

This study is based on fieldwork, and data were collected on language shift in Urhoboland through the administration of questionnaires on Urhobo speakers based on Labov's²⁰ sociolinguistic variationist theory. Labov, (1972, p. 121) states that variationist sociolinguistics analyses the effect of social factors such as age, gender and socio-economic status and ethnic or other characteristics of the speakers on linguistic variables which represent a linguistic change in progress.' These questionnaires were drawn in order to undertake an analysis of the Sociolinguistic variables of the respondents about their use of English, NP, Urhobo and other languages based on the sociolinguistic variable of use of these languages according to attitude, age, gender, sex, formal and informal

¹⁷ Egbokhare, Francis O. "Breaking Barriers: ICT Language Policy and Language Development. Postgraduate School Interdisciplinary Research Discourse". Ibadan. Ibadan University Press (2004)

¹⁸ Emama, Emmanuel Ogheneakpobor and Macaulay Mowarin. "The language of Nigerian stand-up comedy." *The European Journal of Humour Research* 12, no. 2 (2024): 36-52.

¹⁹ Emama, Emmanuel, O. "The Utility Value of Urhobo, English, and Pidgin in Selected Rural Urhobo Communities" *Abraka Humanities Review*, 12, no. 3, 42-50 (2017)

²⁰ Labov, William. "The social stratification of (r) in New York City department stores", in William Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972f

setting and language used at home, among others. The analysis of the data highlights the degree of endangerment of Urhobo in English and Nigerian Pidgin due to language shifts. Participants were asked which language they use in social contexts, such as the market, home, Bank, and friends. Based on the results of the questionnaires, tables and graphs were created to illustrate the attitudes of Urhobo speakers towards Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin, and Urhobo, as shown below.

In the first sociolinguistic survey, Urhobo adults and children were asked to express their attitudes towards English, Nigerian Pidgin, and Urhobo in the triglossic context of Urhoboland. The research

Attitude for Adult and Children's Usage of Language

Research Question 1

What is adults' attitude toward using language (English, Nigerian Pidgin, mother tongue and other languages)?

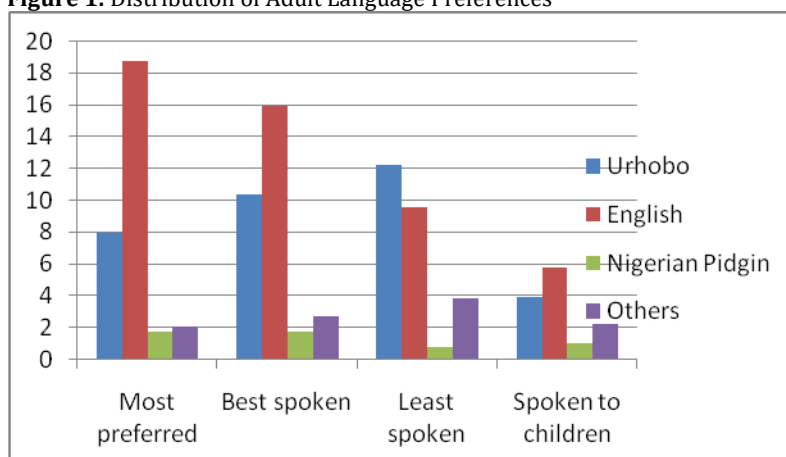
Table 1 presents the distribution of adults based on their attitude toward language usage.

	URHOBO		ENGLISH		NP		OTHERS		TOTAL	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Most preferred language.	108	7.9	256	18.7	23	1.7	27	2	415	30
Best spoken language.	141	10.3	218	15.9	23	1.7	37	2.7	420	31
Least spoken lang.	167	12.2	131	9.5	10	0.7	52	3.8	359	26
Lang spoken to children	53	3.9	78	5.7	14	1	30	2.2	175	13
TOTAL	470	34.3	684	49.8	70	5.1	147	10.7	1371	100

Source: Mowarin, 2024

Table 1 details adults' language preferences. English (18.7%), followed by Urhobo (7.9%) and other languages (2%). The least preferred language was Nigerian Pidgin (1.7%). The best-spoken language by adults was English (15.9%), the second-best spoken language was Urhobo (10.3%), the third-best spoken language was other languages (2.7%), and then other languages (1.7%). The least spoken language by adults was Urhobo (12.2%), followed by the English language (9.5%), other languages (3.8%), and then Nigerian Pidgin (0.7%). The majority of adults agree that English is the language spoken to children (5.7%), some speak Urhobo to their children (3.9%), a few speak other languages (2.2%), and very few speak Nigerian Pidgin (1%). The distribution is presented in Figure 1

Figure 1: Distribution of Adult Language Preferences



Source: Mowarin, 2024

Figure 1 shows the distribution of adults' attitudes toward language use. The figure shows that English was the most preferred language, the best-spoken language, and the language used to speak to children. This could be because it is assumed to be spoken and understood by all, and hence it is preferred. It is also spoken to encourage children to speak English. Urhobo was the least spoken language, which could be attributed to the respondents sampled.

Research Question 2

What is children's attitude toward using language (English, Nigerian Pidgin, mother tongue and other languages)?

Table 2: Distribution of Children's Attitude towards Language Usage.

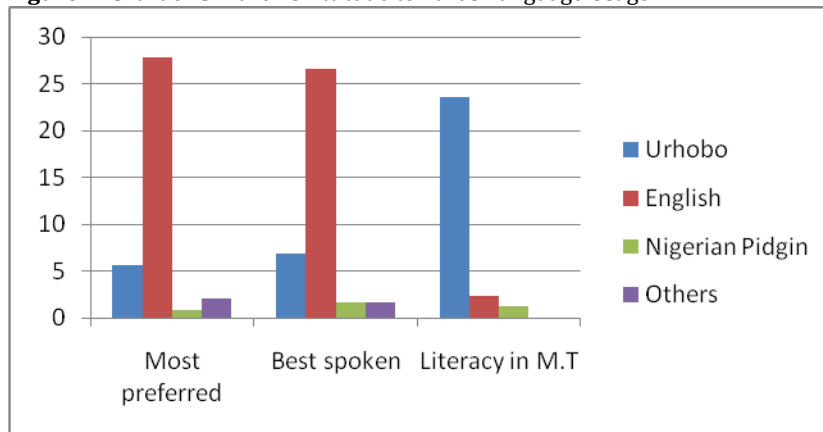
	URHOBO		ENGLISH		NP		OTHERS		TOTAL	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Most Preferred Lang.	69	5.6	341	27.8	10	0.8	26	2.1	445	36.0
Best Spoken Language	84	6.8	327	26.6	21	1.7	21	1.7	452	37.0
Literacy in M.T	289	23.5	28	2.3	15	1.2	0	0	332	27.0
TOTAL	441	35.9	697	56.7	45	3.7	47	3.8	1229	100.0

Source: Mowarin, 2024

Table 2 is a breakdown of children's language preferences. The most preferred language is English (27.8%), followed by Urhobo (5.6%), and the third is other languages (2.1%). The least preferred language was Nigerian Pidgin (0.8%). The

best-spoken language by children, as expected, was the English language (26.6%), followed by Urhobo (6.8%), and Nigerian Pidgin and other languages were the least spoken languages (1.7%). Most literacies in M.T. were in Urhobo (23.5%), followed by English, and the least in M.T. was Nigerian Pidgin (1.2%), with no literacy in M.T. for other languages. The distribution is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Chart of Children’s Attitude towards Language Usage.



Source: Mowarin, 2024

Figure 2 shows the distribution of children’s attitudes to language use. The figure shows that English is the children’s most preferred and best-spoken language.

From Tables 1 and 2 and Figures 1 and 2 above, it is observed that Urhobo adults and children stated that Nigerian English is their most preferred and best-spoken language. In the answers to the questionnaires, the researchers observed that Urhobo speakers do not distinguish between Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin; instead, both are regarded as distinct languages. In this study, both languages have been categorised as New Englishes in Urhoboland. Since Urhobo speakers regard New Englishes as their most preferred and best-spoken language, Urhobo speakers have engaged in a language shift from Urhobo to New Englishes, and this decision by Urhobo speakers will result in the endangerment of Urhobo due to the language shift from Urhobo to New Englishes.

5.3 Research Question Three

To what extent is the domain of use of languages (English, Nigerian Pidgin, mother tongue and other languages) predominant among adults and children in Urhobo land?

The data on the domain of language use (English, Nigerian Pidgin, mother tongue, and other languages) were crosstabulated against the respondents’ age, categorised as adults and children. The preferences for language by young and old Urhobo speakers are presented in Table 3

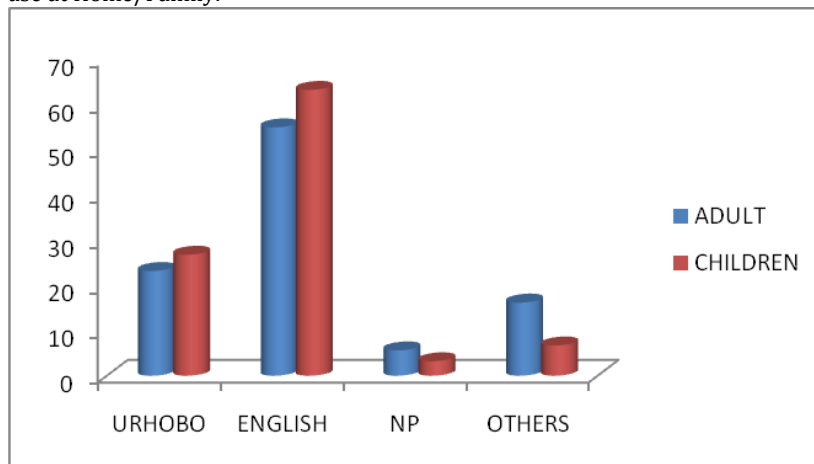
Table 3: Distribution of Adult and Children respondents based on the language use at home

LANGUAGE	ADULT						CHILDREN					
	MALE		FEMALE		TOTAL		MALE		FEMALE		TOTAL	
	F	%	F	%			F	%	F	%		
URHOB0	160	11.7	158	11.5	318	23.2	247	20	83	6.8	330	26.8g
ENGLISH	492	35.9	262	19.1	754	55.0	464	37.8	313	25.5	777	63.3
NP	41	3	36	2.6	77	5.6	30	2.4	10	0.8	40	3.2
OTHERS	143	10.4	80	5.8	222	16.2	45	3.7	37	3	82	6.7
TOTAL	836	61.0	535	39.0	1371	100.0	786	63.9	443	36.1	1229	100.0

NP = Nigerian Pidgin. Source: Mowarin, 2024

The distribution of respondents by age and language spoken at home is presented in Table 3. Table 3 shows that the majority of adults and children prefer to speak the English language. However, more children (63.3%) prefer English to adults (55.0%). The second most preferred language by adults and children was the mother tongue (Urhobo). Surprisingly, more children (26.3%) speak Urhobo than adults (23.3%). One would expect that more children would speak English and fewer would speak Urhobo. As envisaged, more adults (16.2%) speak languages other than English than children (6.7%). The least widely adopted language was Nigerian Pidgin, used by both children and adults. However, there were more adult speakers (5.6%) than child speakers (3.2%). The distribution is presented in Fig. 3.

Fig. 3: Distribution of Adult and Children respondents based on the language use at Home/Family.



Although more male respondents were sampled, a higher proportion of female adults, 158 out of 535 (29.5%), were comfortable using the Urhobo language than male adults, as only 160 out of 836 (19.1%) used Urhobo in their homes.

The reason could be that most male adults are likely to impress their family members by speaking English most of the time; as shown in Table 1, as many as 36% of male adults speak English at home. In comparison, only 19.1% of female adults were comfortable speaking English. This also highlights the educational disparity between the two sexes. Male adults were more likely to be literate than female adults. The pattern observed in the adults is reflected in the children in the domain of language use. More male children spoke English at home than their female counterparts. This could align with the adage "like father like son" or "like mother like daughter." These findings have implications for the literacy level of female folks in Urhobo land.

What is essential from Table 3 and Graph 3 above is that Urhobo adults and children use English more than Urhobo due to their preference for Nigerian English and its Pidgin. This is the language the children and adults use at home. Ideally, Urhobo adults and children are supposed to speak Urhobo at home. However, due to a language shift, they speak New Englishes at home, having shifted from Urhobo to New Englishes. Table 3 and Graph 3 also highlight that more children speak New English than adults. This suggests that children in Urhobo are experiencing language attrition due to language shift.

5.4 Research Question 4

To what extent is the domain of language use (English, Nigerian Pidgin, mother tongue and other languages) predominant among adults (male and female) in Urhobo land? This sociolinguistic variable is based on gender or sex.

Table 4 presents data on the domain of language use (English, Nigerian Pidgin, mother tongue, and other languages) in terms of respondents' gender (male and female).

Table 4: Use of languages (English, Nigerian Pidgin, mother tongue and other languages) in terms of respondents' gender (male and female)

LANGUAGE	ADULT			
	MALE		FEMALE	
	F	%	F	%
URHOB0	318	23.2	330	26.8
ENGLISH	754	55.0	777	63.3
NP	77	5.6	40	3.2
OTHERS	222	16.2	82	6.7
TOTAL	1371	100.0	1229	100.0

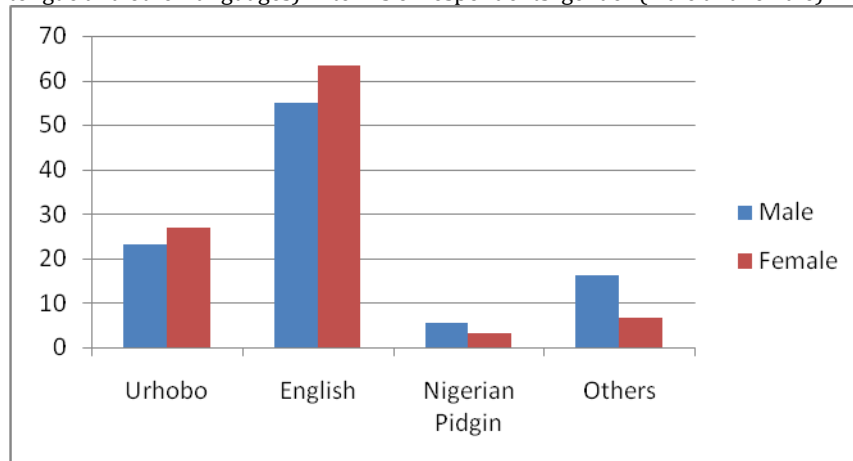
Source: Mowarin, 2024

The table shows that English was the most preferred language for both male and female respondents. The female had a higher percentage (63.3%) than the male (55%). The second preferred language was Urhobo, with a higher percentage of females (26.8%) than males (23.2%). Other languages were the third preferred, 16.2% of males and 6.7% of females. Nigerian Pidgin was the

least preferred language, with males having a higher percentage (5.6%) than females (3.2%).

The distribution is presented in Figure 4

Figure 4: Distribution of use of languages (English, Nigerian Pidgin, mother tongue and other languages) in terms of respondents' gender (male and female)



Source: Mowarin, 2024

The figure shows that more females speak English and Urhobo than males, while more males speak Nigerian Pidgin and other languages than females. The data above indicate that if more females speak Nigerian English, it means that most females will not be positively inclined to transmit Urhobo to their children through intergenerational language transmission, as Urhobo mothers are more competent in Nigerian English than in Urhobo. The data also shows that male and female Urhobo speakers have engaged in a language shift from Urhobo to New English.

5.5 Research Question Five

To what extent is the domain of language use (English, Nigerian Pidgin, mother tongue, and other languages) prevalent in formal and informal settings among adults?

The preferences of language use by adults based on settings (formal and informal) are presented in Table 5

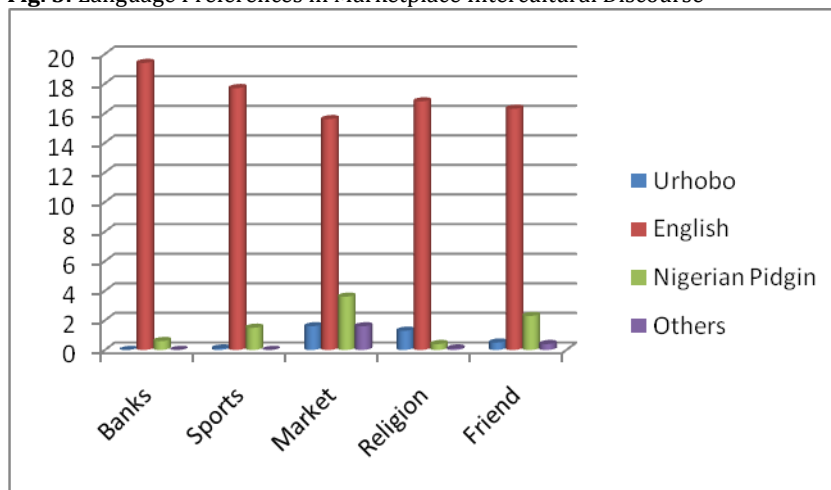
Table 5: Distribution based on the language used in formal/informal settings for adult respondents

	URHOB0		ENGLISH		NP		OTHERS		TOTAL	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Banks	0	0.0	266	19.4	9	0.6	0	0	275	20.2
Sports	2	0.1	243	17.7	21	1.5	0	0	266	19.3
Market	22	1.6	214	15.6	50	3.6	22	1.6	308	22.4
Religion	18	1.3	230	16.8	6	0.4	2	0.1	256	18.6
Friends	7	0.5	223	16.3	31	2.3	5	0.4	266	19.5
TOTAL	49	3.5	1176	85.8	117	8.4	29	2.1	1371	100.0

Source: Mowarin, 2024

The distribution of adult respondents by the language used in formal and informal settings is presented in Table 2. Table 2 shows that in banks, most adults speak English (19.4%), with Nigerian Pidgin being the second most preferred language (0.6%), while none speak Urhobo or other languages. In sports, the majority of adults speak the English language (17.7%), and the second most preferred language is Nigerian Pidgin (1.5%); a few speak Urhobo (0.1%), while none speak any other languages. In the market, the majority of adults speak the English language (15.6%), and the second most preferred language is Nigerian Pidgin (3.6%). Additionally, 1.6% speak Urhobo and other languages. In a religious setting, the majority of adults speak the English language (16.8%). The second most preferred language is Urhobo (1.3%), followed by Nigerian Pidgin (0.4%) and other languages (0.1%). Among friends, the English language is the most preferred means of communication (16.3%), followed by Nigerian Pidgin (2.3%), Urhobo (0.5%), and other languages (0.4%). The English language was the most preferred in all the settings considered (85.8%), with the Bank having a higher percentage (19.4%) than the others, which could be because the Bank is a formal setting (English being the formal language), while the others are not. Nigerian Pidgin is mainly spoken in the market (3.6%). The language is an Indigenous version of the English language that can be easily understood by buyers and sellers, regardless of literacy level. Urhobo is mainly spoken in the market (1.6%); it is likely that most traders are illiterate, not fluent in English, and would prefer to speak in their native language. Other languages (1.6%) are also primarily spoken in the market, likely because they serve as a gathering place for all, including literate and illiterate individuals, indigenes and non-indigenes, and people from various tribes who come to conduct business.

Fig. 5: Language Preferences in Marketplace Intercultural Discourse



Source: Mowarin, 2024

Table 5 and Figure 5 highlight the distortions that multilingualism has undergone in Urhobo land. Nigerian English is primarily intended for formal communication. For instance, the setting for such formal communication is the Bank. Among friends who are Urhobo speakers, Urhobo is considered a language for interlocution. However, Nigerian English is used in the table and graph above. These distortions underscore the presence of asymmetrical multilingualism in Urhobo land.

Discussion and Findings

The first finding, as presented in Tables 1-5 and Figures 1-5, is that the respondents did not distinguish between Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin. This is apparent in Table 5 and Figure five, where respondents stated that they communicate in Nigerian English in the market. In Urhoboland, buyers and sellers primarily communicate in Nigerian Pidgin, while in rural areas, they also use Urhobo and a mixture of Urhobo and Nigerian Pidgin. Nigerian English is rarely spoken in markets. Additionally, friends often communicate in Nigerian Pidgin rather than English, as English is typically reserved for formal communication. So, illiterate and semi-literate Urhobo people who mainly communicate in Nigerian Pidgin presume that they are communicating in Nigerian English while they are communicating in Nigerian Pidgin. This is due to the position of importance attached to Nigerian English as the language of a higher social status. It also foregrounds that Nigerian English and its Pidgin constitute New Englishes in Nigeria, so both languages are inextricably linked.

Tables 1 and 2 and Figures 1 and 2 call attention to the language shift by Urhobo adults and children from Urhobo language to Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin, which both constitute New Englishes in Urhobo land in particular and Nigeria in general; New Englishes constitute the most preferred language and the best-spoken language by Urhobo speakers. The Urhobo language is the least preferred and least spoken language due to the negative attitude of Urhobo people towards their language and their positive attitude towards Nigerian English and its Pidgin. This negative attitude towards Urhobo speakers by Urhobo speakers has now endangered the Urhobo language.

Table 3 and Figure 3 analysed sociolinguistic variation based on age. The data focus on the fact that Urhobo adults and children are more fluent in New English than in Urhobo. This is due to the language shift from Urhobo to new Englishes by Urhobo adults and children. The data show that the percentage of children who speak English is higher than that of adults. This can be attributed to the fact that children are now experiencing language loss in Urhobo at a higher rate than adults. This fact can also be attributed to the lack of intergenerational transmission of Urhobo from mothers to their children.

Sociolinguistic variation in language use among Urhobo speakers, based on sex, is the focus of Table 4 and Figure 4. The data showed that Urhobo men and women speak English more often than Urhobo. This is due to the language shift by Urhobo men and women from the Urhobo language to English. The data showed that more women than men communicate in English. Because more women communicate in English than in Urhobo, it will hurt the intergenerational transmission of Urhobo from mothers to children. This is why

Urhobo is more endangered among Urhobo children than adults. According to the trend in Table 4 and Figure 4, the Urhobo language is on the path to extinction, as most Urhobo children no longer communicate in their native language.

The sociolinguistic variation in language use, as presented in Table 4 and Figure 5, focuses on the use domain across different fields of human activity. The results of this survey highlight the fact that due to the language shift by Urhobo speakers from Urhobo to New English, activities such as interlocution between friends who are Urhobo speakers are now conducted in English rather than in Urhobo. This is because the Urhobo are experiencing a language shift to a new English.

The results of the five sets of sociolinguistic variations analysed in this study highlight the fact that Urhobo speakers are undergoing a language shift from Urhobo to New Englishes; this shift has led to Urhobo becoming an endangered language. However, because Urhobo children are shifting from Urhobo to New Englishes, attention is focused on the potential extinction of Urhobo due to a lack of intergenerational transmission from parents to children. The Urhobo language can be revived if there is intergenerational transmission of the Urhobo language from mothers to children. There is also a need for symmetrical bilingualism between Urhobo and New Englishes so that each language fulfils its communicative function within the Urhobo speech community, rather than the current situation where there is a language shift from Urhobo to New Englishes.

Language is the key to the heart of a people. If we lose the key, we lose the people. A lost language is a lost tribe, a lost tribe is a lost culture, and a lost culture is a lost civilisation. A lost civilisation is an invaluable knowledge lost...the whole vast chives of knowledge and experience in them will be consigned to oblivion, (Indent)

Conclusion

The prolonged contact between Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin and Urhobo in Urhoboland has resulted in a triglossic situation in Urhoboland. This contact led to linguistic hybridisation between the three languages. Ideally, there is a symmetrical relationship among the three languages, with each language fulfilling its communicative function within the speech community. Unfortunately, there is a language shift by Urhobo speakers, who are supposed to speak the Urhobo language at home, to Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin due to the positive attitude that Urhobo speakers have towards Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin and the negative attitude they have towards their mother tongue. Data from the five sociolinguistic variables in the study drew attention to the factors that led to language shifts among Urhobo speakers, resulting in the Urhobo language being seriously endangered. The Urhobo language can be revitalised if Urhobo speakers develop a positive attitude toward their language and reduce the shift from Urhobo to New Englishes in most communicative domains. The triglossic relationship between English, Nigerian Pidgin and Urhobo highlights that linguistic hybridisation is now a norm in Urhobo land. There is now a positive attitude toward Nigerian Pidgin,

unlike the former stereotyped negative attitude towards the contact language, which was often perceived as the language of illiterates. The study concludes that Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin, which constitute New Englishes in Nigeria, are the leading cause of the endangerment of the Urhobo language due to the positive attitude towards the new Englishes and the negative attitude towards Urhobo. This has resulted in a language shift from Urhobo to new Englishes.