

Functions and Consequences of Bilingualism in Orogun Kingdom of Urhobo Land, Delta State, Nigeria

James E. Odivwri

Department of Sociology
Nigeria Police Academy
Wudil, P.M.B. 3474, Kano
Nigeria

Abstract

The study examined the role bilingualism plays in Orogun Kingdom, the factors responsible for its development and the effects of bilingualism in the Kingdom. The data for the study were obtained through oral interviews, participant observation and secondary sources. The identified factors of bilingualism in the area of study include historical antecedent/migration, geographical proximity, marriage and the socialization process, colonial governmental arrangement and mythology. The study revealed that the basic functions of bilingualism in Orogun Kingdom are code switching, instrument of social solidarity and integration as well as ethnic sub-identity. The consequences of occurrence of bilingualism in the Kingdom are in areas of biculturalism, code-switching/code mixing, borrowing, language dominance, social discrimination, non-proficiency in both language and identity crisis.

Keywords: Juxtaposition, biculturalism, code-switching, identity crisis, non-proficiency, monolingualism, historical migration

1. Introduction

It is common for most frontier communities to be bilingual in nature. For example, in Delta State, Nigeria Ebu in Delta North Senatorial District speak both Igala and Igbo languages; Kiagbodo, an Ijaw town in Burutu Local Government the people speak both Urhobo and Ijaw languages and many Isoko towns sharing boundaries with Ndokwa areas speak Isoko and Ukwani languages. In Urhobo land, three Kingdoms are noted for their bilingual nature. These are Orogun, Okpe and Uvwie Kingdoms.

Bloomfield (1993:56) described bilingualism as the native like control of two languages while Haugen (1933:7) refers to bilingualism as the ability to produce complete meaningful utterances in other languages. Anyanwu (2008) argued that the term bilingualism implies the existence of two languages in the repertoire of an individual or a speech community. She explained that bilingualism as dual language performance by an individual covering all stages, starting from Bloomfieldian native like control of two languages and the minimal knowledge of a second language. Mackay (1968:555) contend that in order to study bilingualism, we are forced to consider it as something entirely relative because the point at which the speakers of a second language becomes bilingual is either arbitrary and or impossible to determine. Therefore, because of this relative nature bilingualism as conceived here entails the alternate use of two languages by the same individuals in a given speech community which is in line with MacKay's conception.

In the study area of Orogun, the people speak Urhobo and a variant of Ukwani language, which the denizens themselves refer to as "Orogun" language. In Orogun Kingdom, both individual bilingualism and societal bilingualism exist in the geo-cultural landscape.

2. The Area of Study

The study was carried out in Orogun Kingdom in Urhobo land of Delta State, Nigeria. Orogun Kingdom is one of the seven Kingdoms that make up the present day Ughelli North Local Government Area in Delta State. It lies to the North of the council area and it is bounded in the North by Abraka Kingdom; to the South by Agbarha Kingdom and to the West by Kokori and Eku in Agbon Kingdom.

In the East, by Abbi, Umuebu and Amai Kingdoms. It also shares common boundaries to the south-east with Emevor and Owhehogbo in Isoko North Local Government Area.

Orogun Kingdom is divided into five quarters, namely; Unukpo, Umusu, Imodje, Emonu and Ogwa. It is a predominately an agrarian area and consists of twenty two towns. These are Orogun Inland (Otorho), the traditional Headquarters of the people; Igbuku, Obodeti, Ebor, Arhagba, Orho-anware, Obiogo, Emonu, Oko-uno, Orhomuru, Ugono, Esanubi, Ovara (umusu), Ovara (Unukpo), Oko-Idiovwa, Uzuaka, Okpe, Ekridjerhue, Erhobaro, Idjerhe, Orhokpokpo and Imodje.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theory underpinning this study is the Symbolic interactionism theory. The theory was put forward by George Robert Mead (1934) and developed by Herbert Blumer (1969). Blumer (1969) has outlined three basic premises in understanding the symbolic interactionism perspective. According to him, humans act towards things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things; the meanings of such things is derived from the social interaction that an individual has with others and society and that these meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he or she encounters. According to Otite (1994) Symbolic interactionism places emphasis on the actor's views and interpretation of social reality.

The theory enables us understand the meanings which an individual impute to situations. The meanings are not fixed, but constructed and negotiated in interaction situations (Haralambos and Heald, 2004:18). Symbolic Interactionism theory points out the interaction of people with objects, events, people, language and cultural symbols in society and how we impute meanings to them in our everyday lives. Since language is an important aspect of culture of a given society, the theory is quite relevant in the understanding of the speaking of both Urhobo and Ukwani languages by the Orogun people. Mazzotta and Myers (2008) noted that one of the most important traits of symbolic interactionism theory is that of language and meanings. As symbolic interactionism is clearly a theory based upon communication, we need to recognize all of the times and ways in which we use communication in our culture (Mazzotta and Myers, 2008:22).

4. Factors of Bilingualism Development in Orogun Kingdom

The development of bilingualism in an area has been attributed to various reasons. These include geographical proximity, history, migration, religion, public and international relations (Romaine, 1995; Benji, 1994). The Orogun Kingdom is no exception. One major factor for the emergence of bilingualism in Orogun Kingdom is historical antecedent. The history of Orogun kingdom points to Efe, as the founder who once settled in Ogelle kingdom. Later in their migratory history Efe came to settle at Ndoni near Aboh, an Ukwani speaking area. It is believed that the occurrence of the two languages in the kingdom is due to the historical experience of Orogun people with the Urhobo of Ogelle kingdom and the Ukwani people. As Odeka (1982) puts it Orogun kingdom got herself involved in the bilingualism and customs which exist in the kingdom up to date as a result of earlier association of Orogun people with the Western Ibo speaking tribes in Ndoni / Kwale and blood relationship with Ogelle kingdom (Odeka, 1982:15) Thus, the migratory theory is quite apposite in the causation of the phenomenon of bilingualism in Orogun kingdom.

Another factor responsible for bilingualism in Orogun is geographical proximity. Orogun kingdom is a border community, sharing the same geographical boundaries with Ukwani speaking people particularly Amai, Umuebu and Abbi and the Urhobo speaking people like Agbarha, Kokori, Eku and Abraka. The result is that cultural traits – languages and other cultural values of the ethnic groups above have diffused into the kingdom and this led to the amalgam of both Ukwani and Urhobo languages in the area. Even to a large extent the geographical factor has affected the variant of Urhobo spoken by most speakers in Orogun Inland (Otorho) as the type of the Urhobo spoken here has some elements of Isoko colouration. Otite (2009) argued that some group societies exist in the periphery of their ethnic groups and therefore their language differ somewhat from those of the centres or core cultures. This he supported by making reference to Obiaruku and Orogun people whose cultures and languages integrate both Urhobo and Ukwani socio - cultural symbols with their linguistic continuities and discontinuities.

Closely associated with the above factor is that of marriages and the socialization process. Firstly, as the history of Orogun kingdom indicated, Orogun had paternal and maternal relationship with Ogelle Kingdom and Ukwani speaking people. Secondly, in the earliest time, it was the practice of most Orogun descendants to marry from Ukwani and Isoko areas and preferred sending their daughters to other Urhobo villages and towns.

One reason for this was that the bride wealth paid on Ukwani women then was relatively cheaper compared to Urhobo areas. As it is the tradition that the wife is the custodian of the children while the husband is always out in search of means of livelihood, it stands to reason that the language of the mother will dominate that of the father who is not always at home, so the children grow up to acquire the language of their mother. This is exactly what has happened in the case of Orogun kingdom. Those who are not bilingual acquire the bilingual ability through adult socialization.

Another reason often associated with bilingualism though not a potent one is colonial governmental administrative arrangement. In 1932, following Constitutional changes, there was a re-organization by the government through introduction of native administration and grouping of the same ethnic groups into districts councils. Prior to this, Agbon, Orogun and Abraka kingdoms as well as Aboh Division had their headquarters at Abraka (Oritsedere, 1965:2). To this effect, Agbon kingdom opted to be merged with other kingdoms in Urhobo West to form Western Urhobo District Council. The Ukwani people came under two District Councils, namely; Ukwani and Ndosimili. However, both Orogun and Abraka opted for Ukwani District. In this connection, the Orogun had their representatives sent to the Council with its headquarters at Obetim (Kwale). This arrangement, it is observed made it a matter of necessity for Orogun people to acquire the Ukwani language for easy communication with the pure Ukwani stock. Exchange of Ukwani cultural traits thus opened its gateway into Orogun. However, this arrangement was revised on September 19th, 1955 when Orogun people officially joined their kiths and kins in Central Urhobo District Council with Headquarters at Ughelli (National Archives, 1955).

Mythology has been used by the people to explain the occurrence of bilingualism in Orogun. The Orogun people believe that they speak two languages in the kingdom today because the “*Ogborigbo*” (Monitor Lizard or Iguana), one of their totemic animals has two tongues. *Ogborigbo* or Iguana are found all over Orogun kingdom, moving leisurely and entering people’s houses swallowing eggs. They are never harmed nor eaten by any indigene of Orogun whether maternally or paternally related. It is believed that when you harm it by beating it with a stick you receive pains on the part of the body beaten and if killed or eaten by an indigene, the victim is afflicted by a disease akin to leprosy. It is not uncommon among the Orogun to make such statements like: “*Ogborigbo vwe erevwi – ive*” (Urhobo) or “*Ogborigbo nweni ere nebe*” (Orogun) meaning the monitor lizard has two tongues, which the indigenes allude to during some occasions in the kingdom, signifying the bilingual nature of the people.

5. Functions of Bilingualism in Orogun Kingdom

First, bilingualism makes code-switching possible. Code-switching is the process by which the native speakers of languages within a speech community frequently change from the speaking of one language to another. As observed by Trudgill (1985), speakers either move along a scale of formality, according to situation, or switch from one separate style of a dialect to another. Code-switching has been described as “a strategy at negotiating power for the speaker, reflects culture and identity and promotes solidarity” (Greene and Walker, 2004:435). Both writers maintain that code-switching involves alternative tonal registers or dialectical shift within the same language. They argue further that “Code-switching is a linguistic tool and a sign of participant’s awareness of alternative communicative convention.” Among the Orogun people, there is usually code-switching from Urhobo to Orogun and vice versa. But the switching is situational. For example, when two Orogun persons are in conversation in any of the two languages and a visitor present is to be prevented from understanding what is being said, they engage in code switching. Therefore, the people engage in code switching for the purpose of confidentiality. A situation may arise whereby the people are gathered for social function and since not all the natives are purely bilingual, both Urhobo and Orogun languages are used interchangeably to enable all present understand what is being said. Crystal (1987) noted that code-switching behaviour occurs when speaker may not be able to express themselves in one language; they switch to the other to compensate for the deficiency.

The bilingual nature of the people also acts as instrument of social solidarity and integration. Since the people mythological believe that they speak two languages because the *Ogborigbo* has two tongues, speakers of the two languages are seen as one blood relation because the *Ogborigbo* is regarded as their “father.” It is not surprising therefore to hear such statement as *Anya nyi bo fu* meaning “we are all one” among the indigenes. Such statement conjures spirit of “we – ness” among the people. As Adogbo (2010) noted the “*Ogborigbo*” is the visible symbol of unity, of kinship, of togetherness and common affinity among Orogun people.

Some polities in Urhoboland have marginal or mixed languages which they use to assert their separateness or identity. These are Uvwie, Orogun and Okpe kingdoms (Otite, 1982:257).

In Orogun, the use of two languages is often used to assert their ethnic sub-identity. Any bilingual individual in the kingdom can interact fully with Ukwani speaking people and Urhobo speaking people without much hindrance within or outside the kingdom. The people believe that the dialect of Ukwani spoken by them is not pure Ukwani but that they speak “Orogun” language. The Ukwani people regard the Orogun language as “Igabo” for it is less complex than theirs. (See table 1).

Table 1: Differences in Orogun and Ukwani Vocabulary and their Proximity to Urhobo

Ukwani	Orogun	Urhobo	English
Ntekele	Oriko	Otete	Small
Imiri	Imiri	Osio	Rain
Mboka	Oke	Ohro	Rat
Maalaka	Imidaka	Imidaka	Cassava
Ngaji	Ukujere	Ukujere	Spoon
Unenu	Egedege	Egedege	Storey Building
Ekparoka	Ikuoku	Oteta	Talking
Omoto	Imoto	Imoto	Lorry
Mmalo	Mado	Ohwo	Person
Odogoma	Ikpukpuyeke	Ikpukpuyeke	Duck
Kala?	Kadana?	Etiena?	Now?
Ukpo	Oghore	Oghore	Hook
Okpolo	Ogoro	Ogoro	Frog
Mbele	Ekere	Ekere	Edible frog
Kosi / Lofu	Fiena	Chero	Forgotten
Onoma	Ononu	Ovwu	Annoyance
Opia	Mpama	Oda (Agada)	Cutlass

Source: Fieldwork by the Author

As observed by Otite (1975) and quite rightly too, although two languages are spoken and two sets of symbolic systems are present in Orogun, these are not manipulated for exclusive ethnic identifications (Otite, 1975:125). But some writers opined that bilingualism confers status, self pride, comfortability and prestige on individuals (Akere, 1977; Kachru, 1989).

6. Consequences of Bilingualism in Orogun Kingdom

The occurrence of bilingualism in Orogun has in its trail produced some identified effects. These are in areas of biculturalism, code-switching/code mixing, borrowing, language dominance, social discrimination, non-proficiency in both languages and identity crisis. One of the effects of bilingualism in Orogun is biculturalism. Language is an integral part of culture. Culture is the totality of the way of life of a people. This includes dressing, language, dance/ music, art, technology and artifacts. Speaking a language also involves learning about the culture of the people who speak the language. It is not surprising therefore that two social-cultural systems lie in juxtaposition in Orogun Kingdom, those of Urhobo culture and some aspects of Ukwani peoples’ culture in areas such as language, names, festivals, greetings, dressings etc.

Another effect is that of code switching and code mixing. Code switching refers to the use of more than one language or variety in conversation. But code-mixing is the change from one language to another within the same utterance. According to Oha (2010) code mixing refers to any admixture of linguistic elements of two or more language system in the same utterance at various levels: phonological, lexical, grammatical and orthographical. In differentiating code-switching from code-mixing, Oha (2010) says: Code-switching involves the movement whether psychologically or sociologically motivated from one discrete code (language or dialect) to another within a communicative event. Code-mixing, on the other hand, means the blending of two separate linguistic systems into one linguistic system (Oha, 2010: 17). Code-switching and code-mixing are quite common among Orogun people.

The phenomena occur because of lack of in-depth knowledge of one of the two languages in the kingdom and due to change in members involved in conversation. e.g 'Ogune egedege' (He built a storey house). There is switching from Ukwani to Urhobo. 'Biko go ofigbo bianum na fi'a' (Please, buy palm oil for me from the market) Here, there is intermixing of Urhobo and Ukwani.

In analyzing code-switching, Kachru (1989) pointed out that it undermines certain traditional values, innovations in the structure of one of the languages code-switched.

Borrowing is a common feature of language by speakers of languages that have mingled as a result of interaction of the speakers of languages concerned. Thus, the Hausa language borrowed the word *Akwati* (Box) and *Keke* (Bicycle) from the Yoruba words *Apoti* and *Keke* respectively. Apart from language borrowing, cultural borrowing also occurs. In the same vein, there has been a lot of language borrowing from the Ukwani language by the Orogun people with some degrees of phonological modifications. Let's illustrate this with some few words/concepts.

Ukwani	Orogun	English
Maalaka	Imidaka	Cassava
Mmalo	Mado	Person
Kala?	Kadana?	Now?
Oga afia	Ojene afia	Has gone to the market.
Odima	Omane	It is not good

In many bilingual communities, there is a tendency for one of the languages spoken to dominate the other. This may be due to the manner in which one of the languages was acquired or as a result of the importance which the people in that speech community attach to one of the two languages spoken. As observed by Cheng and Butler (1989) bilingualism can lead to a situation whereby one language may be more dominant than the other and that this tendency could make the individual to switch always to the dominant language. Despite that the Orogun people are bilingual, speaking Urhobo and a variant of Ukwani dialect, the Urhobo language dominate the social landscape of the kingdom as evidenced in burial and marriage songs among the people.

One important consequence of bilingualism in the area is non-proficiency in both Urhobo and Ukwani languages. Orogun is regarded as bilingual even though not all the indigenes could in real sense of it be regarded as bilingual. Inherent in this is the problem of intelligibility and non-proficiency in both languages. The information gathered revealed that the variant of Ukwani spoken by Orogun people is not all intelligible to the proper Ukwani speakers because of the tune modifications by the Orogun people. Most social and educational psychologists agree that in learning language the theory of retroactive and proactive inhibition come into play. The learning of both Urhobo and Ukwani have not been easy for some individuals, especially those who acquire theirs through adult socialization. Thus, the speaking of Urhobo or Ukwani interfere with each other. Consequently, many individuals are not proficient in two languages spoken in the kingdom. Because of this, as earlier stated, in community meetings and some social gatherings both Urhobo and Ukwani are used. However, Urhobo being the dominant language is mostly used in such occasions subject to the origin of people in attendance.

One serious implications of the occurrence of bilingualism in Orogun kingdom is in the area of social discrimination. As noted earlier, not many of the denizens are bilingual; some are more proficient in speaking Urhobo while some can only speak Ukwani well. Those who can only speak Ukwani have been known to be discriminated against in social circles within the larger Urhobo community as they may not be able to blend well in Urhobo speaking while even within the local government level; some have suffered from social and political discrimination in terms of employment and political office holdings. By historical and geographical accident, Orogun kingdom is cramped in the net of overlapping two forces. Consequently, it is not surprising to note that among the other Urhobo speaking people, they are regarded as non-pure Urhobo while among the Ukwani speaking people they are referred to as non-pure Ukwani but Urhobo.

Identity crisis is a common consequence of bilingual communities and Orogun is not an exception. The bilingual nature of Orogun people has created identity dimension in the socio-cultural landscape. There is no doubt that there is direct relationship between bilingualism and linguistic identities. A sociological theory that explains this is symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism theory was put forward by Herbert Blumer in 1969. According to him, it is a process of interaction in the formation of meanings for individuals. The core principles of the theory are meaning, language and thought. Here, we are more interested in the language principle.

According to the theory, language is important for the development of “self” and that a person cannot know a language without knowing the associated attitude and values of its speakers.

To a large extent those who have internalized another linguistic system to the point of using it quite well for communication purpose becomes cultural hybrids on the usage of two different patterns of group life not knowing which of them they belong. Thus, the Orogun people found themselves in the web of conflicting linguistic development. Linguistically, Orogun people speak Ukwani and Urhobo and language in all its ramifications determine ones ethnic group. The question therefore is that to which ethnic group do the Orogun people belong? Otite (1975) noted that although two languages are spoken and two sets of symbolic systems are present in Orogun, these are not manipulated for exclusive ethnic identifications. Historically, Orogun clan is plagued by paternal and maternal relationships with Urhobo and Ukwani ethnic groups respectively thus compounding their clear ethnic identity. The problem of ethnic identification is thus very crucial in the social life of the people. The assertion made by Otite and the research findings revealed that the Orogun people are faced with the problem of clear ethnic identity since they cannot claim Ukwani or Urhobo entirely because of the complexity of both languages spoken in the kingdom.

Conclusion

The study revealed that even though Orogun community is bilingual, not all natives are purely bilingual. Those natives who live along the border towns of Ukwani speaking people tend to speak more of Ukwani than Urhobo while those natives sharing boundaries with the pure Urhobo stock speak more Urhobo than Ukwani. This has really showed influence of geographical proximity. The occurrence of bilingualism plays important role among the people, particularly social solidarity and integration, sub-ethnicity identification and code switching. It has, however resulted in cultural borrowings, language code mixing/code switching, social discrimination and ethnic identity crisis. The trend now is that Orogun Kingdom is moving towards monolingualism –the speaking of Urhobo language instead of Ukwani due to social discrimination in other parts of Urhobo land.

Acknowledgement

I express my profound, gratitude to the various chiefs in the Kingdom that provided me with the needed information, particularly Chief Francis Ovedje Akpobasa. I also thank Mr. Amos Ifere, who served as my research assistant and to Professor Marida Hollos of Brown University, U.S.A. who was then a visiting Professor at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Benin for her guidance.

References

- Adogbo, M.P. (2010) *Comparative Historical and Interpretative Study of Religions*. Lagos: Mathouse Press.
- Anyanwu, E (2007) Challenges of Bilingual Education retrieved from [http / www. Jim-mission.org.uk](http://www.Jim-mission.org.uk) on 4th August, 2008.
- Akere, F. (1977) A Socio-linguistic Study of a Yoruba Speech Community in Nigeria: Variations and change in the Ijebu Dialect of Ikorodu. An Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Edinburgh.
- Benji, Wald (1974) Bilingualism, *Annual Review of Anthropology* Retrieved from [http/arjournals reviews. Org/doi/abs](http://arjournals.org/doi/abs) on 19th November, 2009.
- Blumer, H. (1969) *Symbolic Interaction Perspective and Method* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Crystal,D.(1987) *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language*, England: Cambridge University press.
- Fishman, J.(1968)(Ed) *Readings in the Sociology of Language*, Newtown and Co.m.v.
- Haralambos and Heald (2004) *Sociology: Theme and Perspectives*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press
- Kachru, Y. (1989) Code-mixing. *Style Repertoire and Language Variation: English in Hindy Poetic Creativity*. World English 8 (3).
- Mazotta, R. and Myers, W.B. (2008) *Language and Meaning: Symbolic Interactionism USC Update Undergraduate Research Journal Vol. 1 Spring*
- Odeka, O. (1982) *The Short History of Orogun Origin*, Lagos: CSS press
- Oha, A.C. (2010) *Introduction to Socio-linguistics*. Lagos: National Open University of Nigeria.
- Okolugbo (1982) *The History of Ukwani Speaking People of the Niger Delta* Np. Np.
- Oritsedere, W.E. (1965) *The Big Challenge*
- Otite, O. (2009) Nigeria's Identifiable Ethnic Groups retrieved on 29th August, 2010 from www.onlinenigeria.com/tribes/tribes.asp.
- Otite, O. (1982) *The Urhobo People*, Ibadan: Hinneman.
- Otite, O. (1976) "On the Concept of a Nigerian Society" in *Ethnic Relations in Nigeria*. Sanda, A. (ed) Department of Sociology, University of Ibadan. Pp12.
- Otite, O. (1975) Resource Competition and Inter- Ethnic Relations In Nigeria in Leo A. Depres (ed) *Ethnic and Resource Competition in Plural Societies* pg.125
- Pertain, O.N. (1962) *Native Administration in Nigeria*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Romaine, S. (1995) *Bilingualism*, Oxford: Blackwell publishers
- Trudgills, P. (1983) *Socio- Linguistics: An Introduction to Language*, Great Britain: Cox and Wyman.
- National Archive (1955) District 1.1183 Transfer of Abraka and Orogun Clans to Urhobo Division., Ibadan
- Williamson, K. (1987) *Linguistic Geography of Nigeria*. Port Harcourt: Saros Publishers.
- Williamson K. (1968) "Languages of the Niger Delta" in *Nigerian Magazine* No. 97 June/August