

NEGATIVE IMPLICATIONS OF ABUSE OF MOTHER TONGUE ON THE CULTURAL LIFE OF THE PEOPLE OF EBONYI STATE

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Abstract

Language in any form it is spoken, be it at the international, national, ethnic or local levels, remains a veritable tool for communication and also a vessel for carrying people's culture. However, despite this vital role, language is usually abused by a lot of people even including the owners of the language. A situation like that is not encouraging because of the attendant consequences on people's cultural heritage. It is against that back drop that this study is carried out to investigate the negative effects of abuse of mother tongue on the cultural life of the people of Ebonyi State. Survey design was used to elicit information from a population of 144 autonomous community leaders in Ebonyi State who invariably constituted the sample of study being a small population. A 23 item questionnaire was the instrument used to collect relevant data needed for the study. The four research questions formulated was answered using mean and standard deviation. The lone hypothesis that also guided the study was tested at 0.05 level of significance using t-test. The results of the study showed that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of Urban and Rural community leaders on the negative effects of abuse of mother tongue in promoting the cultural heritage of the people of Ebonyi State. Based on the findings, conclusion was made followed by recommendations among which are that parents should stop the habit of discouraging their children from speaking their mother tongue, relevant authorities in Ebonyi State should formulate policies regulating abuse of mother tongue in the area.

Introduction

Language acquisition begins at birth, usually from the child's mother. Obviously, it is the mother that the child first comes in contact with when he is

born. In that circumstance, the mother becomes the child's first teacher in her own tongue. This explains the reason why the language which the child first learns from the mother is called mother tongue. Apart from the mother, there are also other significant persons from whom the child learns his first language. The significant persons include his father, brothers, sisters and other close persons. It is in realization of this fact that Harper (2009) defines mother tongue as the language you learnt from your parents when you were a child. In the same vein, Quirk (2009) and Hornby (2010) explain mother tongue as the language you first learnt to speak when you were a child. The term mother tongue also goes by other names like 'local language' and 'language of the immediate community' (Emenanjo in Ipaye, 1992 and Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). The point therefore, is that all the concepts come into play in this study.

Language in any form it exists is the commonest medium of communication. This is so because in every society, every person, under normal circumstances, speaks the language. Allied to this truism, language does not require any technical device to put it into use except where handicap poses a challenge. In the wider perspective, including the national and ethnic levels, we talk of language for national culture and integration. But within sub-cultural areas of the ethnic group, mother tongue is rather used where it serves as the medium for informal and initial education of the young and literacy of the pre-primary and junior primary levels (Emenanjo, 1992). All over the world, including Ebonyi State, language remains the most salient aspect of people's cultural heritage. The premium position of language among other aspects of cultural heritage namely marriage, religion, farming, dressing, music and dance and the rest, therefore need to be stressed. To be concise, there is none of any of these aspects of culture mentioned that can be expeditiously practiced without language. This assertion agrees with the view of Oladele, (1992) that if we are not ultimately to lose our national identity together with our indigenous culture, we must begin to pay more attention to our indigenous language. One important fact to be noted is that every aspect of culture has its own peculiar or mode of language and terminologies which the owners of the language inevitably employ while exhibiting that aspect of culture. Also, in exhibiting any element of culture, people usually use language to communicate such as to call themselves names, express their views, inculcate ideas, describe events, say prayers, give directives, discuss or reconcile issues, prescribe medicine for curing diseases and a lot more.

It may be relevant to argue that mother tongue or language of the immediate community plays relatively the same or almost the same role with general language (Okeworo, 2014). Under this rubric, the relative impacts of

language, as earlier highlighted, also apply to mother tongue. The point can be summed that language and mother tongue are the two sides of the same coin. They are the same vessels that carry people's culture. Judged from this perspective, there is no doubt in the claim that a person who does not speak his language or mother tongue cannot transparently showcase his cultural identity. The Igbo society like every other ethnic group in Nigeria is endowed with rich cultural heritage. Ebonyi State being part of the Igbo society is not in any way an exception. This being the case, discouraging people in the area from speaking their mother tongue is a serious abuse of language which will lead to negative implications on their cultural life. Against this background, this study attempts to investigate the negative effects of abuse of mother tongue on the cultural life of the people of Ebonyi State.

Statement of the Problem

The relative importance of mother tongue in the socio-cultural life of people in any society has been briefly highlighted. The worry of this study therefore, is whether mother tongue is effectively promoted in Ebonyi State to help boost the cultural life of the people. The study is also bothered to know the negative implications of abuse of mother tongue on people's cultural life in the state and the measures that will be taken to address the ugly trend.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to investigate the effects of abuse of mother tongue on the cultural life of people in Ebonyi State. More specifically, the study seeks to find out:

- (a) the people that usually abuse mother tongue in Ebonyi State.
- (b) the various dimensions in which people usually abuse mother tongue in Ebonyi State.
- (C) the negative effects of abuse of mother tongue on the cultural life of the people.
- (d) ways of promoting mother tongue in Ebonyi State to help boost people's cultural life.

Scope of the Study

The study focuses on investigating the effects of abuse of mother tongue on the cultural life of the people of Ebonyi State. There is usually the erroneous impression that the dialect spoken in some parts of Ebonyi State, particularly, the Abakaliki block is inferior to the dialect spoken by people in other parts outside

that circle. Consequently, such impression usually leads to abuse of the mother tongue of Abakaliki people even by the indigenes who own the dialect. In the light of that pitfall there is a felt need to find out how abuse of mother tongue in the area affects the cultural life of the people and the measures to be taken to improve the anomalous situation.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- (a) Who are the people that usually abuse mother tongue in Ebonyi state?
- (b) In what dimensions do people usually abuse mother tongue in Ebonyi State?
- (c) What are the negative effects of abuse of mother tongue on the cultural life of the people of Ebonyi State?
- (d) How can mother tongue be promoted in Ebonyi State to help sustain the cultural life of the people?

Hypothesis

The study was further guided by this hypothesis:

H₀: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of community leaders in urban and rural areas of Ebonyi State on the negative impacts of abuse of mother tongue on the cultural life of the people.

Methodology

Survey research design was used to elicit information needed for the study. The population of the study consists of all the 144 leaders of autonomous communities in the 13 local government areas of Ebonyi State (Ebonyi State Public Bureau, 2015). Since the population is not a large one, it therefore constitutes the sample of the study. The instrument that was used to collect data for the study is a 23-item structured questionnaire titled "Mother Tongue Abuse Questionnaire" (MOTAQ). The instrument has 4 clusters which contain items based on the research questions that guided the study. It is designed in line with the Likert type response of strongly agree (**SA**), Agree (**A**), Disagree (**D**) and Strongly Disagree (**SD**) with the assigned values 4, 3, 2 and 1, respectively. The instrument was face-validated by three experts, one in Science Education Department and two in Educational Foundations Department, all in the Faculty of Education, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki.

The reliability of the instrument was ascertained through test re-test approach in which the instrument was administered to ten community leaders (five in urban

and five in rural areas) in Enugu State. After an interval of two weeks, the same instrument was re-administered to the same people. The scores obtained from the two sets of tests were analyzed using Pearson r . A value of 0.72 was obtained and it was considered high coefficient reliability of the instrument.

Method of Data Collection

The researcher reached the respondents directly with the help of 5 research assistants whom he properly guided on how to administer the instrument. This approach helped in making necessary clarifications and also in securing all the questionnaires.

Method of Data Analysis

The four research questions that guided the study were answered using mean. In that case, a mean of 2.50 showed acceptance of the view expressed while any mean below 2.50 indicates rejection of a view. The hypothesis postulated was tested at 0.05 level of significance using t -test.

RESULTS

Results of the analyzed data are presented in the tables below according to the research questions.

Research Question 1

Who are the people that usually abuse mother tongue in Ebonyi State?

Information contained in table 1 provides answers to this research question.

Table 1: People that usually abuse mother tongue in Ebonyi State.

S/N	Variables	SA	A	D	SD	X	Decision
1	Enlightened parents do not always communicate with their children in mother tongue.	65	40	25	15	3.1	Accepted
2	Parents who dwell outside home do not usually communicate with their children in mother tongue.	59	46	18	21	2.9	Accepted
3	Most nursery and junior primary school teachers use English Language more frequently to teach pupils.	50	38	30	26	2.8	Accepted
4	Parents from different dialect backgrounds do not usually speak mother tongue in their families.	70	50	18	06	3.30	Accepted
5	Members of the public usually mix up English language and mother tongue while interacting.	56	43	25	20	3.10	Accepted
6	Indigenous gospel preachers mostly use English Language in their sermons.	47	39	30	20	2.60	Accepted

Data in table 1 above show that the mean responses for all the items are up to the cut-off point (2.50) and above. The findings therefore seem to prove that all the respondents agreed that mother tongue is usually abused by enlightened parents, parents who dwell outside home, nursery school teachers, parents from different dialect backgrounds, members of the society and local bible preachers. These categories of people abuse mother tongue by always speaking another language always. The mean ratings for the items in which decision was made are 3.1, 2.9, 2.8, 3.3, 3.1 and 2.5, respectively.

Research Question 2

In what dimensions do people usually abuse mother tongue in Ebonyi State?

Answers to this research question are given in table 2.

Table 2: How people usually abuse mother in Ebonyi State.

S/N	Variables	SA	A	D	SD	X	Decision
7	Mother tongue is abused when parents encourage their children to speak only borrowed language	90	30	15	9	3.40	Accepted
8	Frequent use of English language by indigenous preachers does not discourage Speaking mother tongue	25	20	52	47	2.10	Rejected
9	Using English Language always by Nursery and Junior Primary school teachers to teach pupils sup presses mother tongue	48	36	33	27	2.70	Accepted
10	Mixing up English Language with mother tongue while speaking by the public does not affect mother tongue.	19	24	43	58	2.10	Rejected
11	Mother tongue is abused when parents from different dialect backgrounds always communicate on their families using English or general language.	52	41	39	12	2.90	Accepted
12	Mother tongue is not abused when parents who dwell outside the home communicate with their children in borrowed language	32	38	34	50	2.20	Rejected

S/N	Variables	SA	A	D	SD	X	Decision
13	A child forbidden from speaking his mother tongue will find it difficult to acquire traditional education.	60	30	29	25	2.70	Accepted
14	A child denied the chance of speaking his mother tongue will find it easy to pronounce local names of people, animals and things.	19	24	43	58	2.10	Rejected
15	A person who cannot speak his mother tongue will find it difficult to learn local songs, folk tales and traditional ways of greeting.	73	50	15	7	3.30	Accepted
16	Inability of a person to speak his mother tongue will hinder him from learning norms and values of his society	48	36	33	27	2.70	Accepted
17	A person who cannot speak his mother tongue will not find it easy to associate well with those who speak it .	52	48	39	12	2.90	Accepted
18	A person who cannot speak his mother tongue can make remarkable inputs to promote his culture.	25	20	52	47	2.10	Rejected

According to data presented in table 2, items 7, 9 and 11 have mean responses of 3.40, 2.70 and 2.90, respectively, all of which exceed the cut off mean. This implies that the respondents accept the idea that it is abuse of mother tongue in Ebonyi State in a situation where parents who belong to different dialect backgrounds discourage speaking it.

On the other hand, items 8, 10 and 12 with mean responses of 2.10, 2.10 and 2.20, respectively, each below the cut off mean, show rejection of the ideas stated. Conversely, the items which are frequent use of English language by preachers, mixing up English language with local dialect when people interact and discouraging children from speaking their dialect by parents who reside out home are also include always of abusing mother tongue.

Research Question 3

What are the negative effects of abuse mother tongue on the cultural life of the people of Ebonyi State?

Table 3 provides answers to this research question.

In table 3, items 13, 15, 16 and 17 with their mean scores as 2.70, 3.30, 2.70 and 2.90, respectively, show acceptance of all the ideas stated.

Pertaining to items 14 and 18, each with mean scores of 2.10, indicate rejection of the ideas expressed. Conversely, the variables stated in those items are also negative effects posed by abuse of mother tongue.

Research Question 4

How can mother tongue be promoted in Ebonyi State to help boost the people's cultural heritage?

Answers to this research question are contained in table 4.

S/N	Variables	SA	A	D	SD	X	Decision
19	Mother tongue can be promoted if parents encourage speaking it in their families.	80	53	9	2	3.50	Accepted
20	Speaking mother tongue by the public without mixing it up with English or other languages can help to promote it.	80	48	13	3	3.40	Accepted
21	Mother tongue will not be promoted if nursery and junior primary school teachers always use it to teach pupils.	32	33	35	44	2.40	Rejected
22	Mother tongue will be promoted if parents always use it to teach their children traditional stories, songs and names of things.	58	45	13	28	2.90	Accepted
23	Using mother tongue always by parents to say proverbs, teach children norms and values of the society will not help to promote it	27	30	35	52	2.20	Rejected

Data on table 4 reveals that items 19, 20 and 22 with means as 3.50, 3.40 and 2.90, respectively, indicate that the respondents accept the relative views to be the correct ways of promoting mother tongue in Ebonyi State. On the other hand, items 21 and 23 with 2.40 and 2.20, respectively, as their means show that the respondents conversely accept the ideas given as other ways of promoting mother tongue in the state.

Hypothesis

Ho: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of community leaders in urban and rural areas of Ebonyi State on the negative effects of abuse of

mother tongue in promoting the cultural heritage of the people.

Table4: *t*-test Analysis of community leaders in urban and rural areas of Ebonyi State on the negative effects of abuse of mother tongue in promoting the cultural life of the people of Ebonyi State.

S/N	Location	N	SD	X	df	t-cal	t-crit	Decision
1	Urban	60	1.8	56	142	1.50	1.90	HO: Accepted
2	Rural	84	1.2	60				

Data in table 4 shows that community leaders in both urban and rural areas of Ebonyi State express similar views on the negative effects of abuse of mother tongue in promoting the cultural life of the people. The result in the table proves that the *t-calculated* value, 1.50 is less than the *critical value*, 1.90 at 0.05 level of significance. On this basis, the null hypothesis postulated is accepted. This means that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of community leaders in urban and rural areas of Ebonyi State on the negative effects of abuse of mother tongue in promoting the cultural heritage of the people.

Discussion

The findings of the study with regards to research questions one and two showed that enlightened parents, parents who dwell outside home, nursery school teachers, parents from different dialect backgrounds, members of the society and local bible preachers abuse mother tongue. They do that by not speaking it always and also by restricting others from speaking it. The findings agree with the opinion (Okeworo, 2014) that parents and other relevant people who take greater interest in another language on the expense of their own usually influence their children and other close ones consciously or unconsciously to cultivate the same attitude.

In Ebonyi State, it is common to see parents who forbid their children from speaking or attempting to speak their mother tongue. Outside the home too, there are other people that do not desire speaking mother tongue. Using schools as example, many teachers ban pupils or students from speaking vernacular in the class and or in the school. Apart from the verbal warnings such teachers normally

issue to that effect, there are usually inscriptions on the walls of the classrooms like, '*Vernacular is not allowed in this class*', '*Do not speak vernacular in this class*' and so on. Members of the class who venture to flout such warnings hardly go unpunished. Even in the nursery schools, teachers and care-givers do not always use mother tongue to teach the young children. This is contrary to the policy (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013) that the medium of instruction in nursery schools should be principally the mother tongue.

In churches too, a good number of gospel preachers abuse mother tongue by always resorting to English or general language during their sermons or moral lessons to the congregation. The story is not in any way different in other public places where people predominantly adopt English language as the medium of communication such as while holding meetings, during celebrations, in the farm, in the market, and so on. Abuse of mother tongue in all the afore-mentioned dimensions and others, have serious negative implications in the cultural life of the people of Ebonyi State.

The findings of the study in respect of research question three indicate that abuse of mother tongue in Ebonyi State has a lot of negative effects on the cultural life of the people as it inhibits the chance of the young generation to learn traditional education, norms, values and cultural practices of the people which will enable them to adjust well or belong fully in the society. For example, children who do not speak their mother tongue will always find it difficult to learn local names of animals, trees and other things within and outside their environment. All the same, they can not learn local songs, folktales, ideas of numbers, and other essential things they need to learn from their parents and other close persons for useful possible start in life. The implication is that, though such children can still be taught in borrowed language, they are usually faced with the problem of associating the concepts and ideas they learn with the situation that is obtainable in the local setting. The finding lends credence to Omebe (2002) that before a child leaves for school, he is supposed to have learnt many things from his parents such as speech, name of people, animals and other objects around him. He adds that it is in the home that parents use mother tongue to offer children the first informal education which prepares them to face formal education actively.

Furthermore, the findings of the study in line with research question four prove that mother tongue can be promoted if all relevant persons including parents, teachers and indeed, the general public always encourage speaking it.

The findings in this regard corroborates the view (Oladele, 1992) that it is imperative to pay more attention to the promotion of our indigenous language if we are not ultimately to lose our cultural heritage and identity.

The result of the study as regards to the findings for the hypothesis postulated showed that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of urban and rural community leaders on the negative effects of abuse of mother tongue on the cultural heritage of the people of Ebonyi State. The finding is line with the report of Sooter (2013) quoting the Federal Government of Nigeria and UNICEF (1993) that failure to use language of the immediate community to teach young children in schools makes them to fail to achieve in line with the aspirations and needs of the society in terms of academics, moral and cultural values. The similarity of the views expressed by urban and rural community leaders with regard to impact of abuse of mother tongue on the people's culture shows that people's cultural life binds both set of dwellers in the state, that is, urban and rural dwellers. Therefore, abuse of mother tongue by the dwellers in any of the locations is detrimental to conservation of the people's cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The knowledge of mother tongue is crucial for preparing young children to adjust properly in their society. In the light of this fact, parents and all those who come in contact with young people should always encourage them to speak mother by using it to teach them traditional education and initial experiences that will prepare them for useful adult life.

Recommendations

In line with the findings of this study, it is recommended as follows:

- (a) Parents, both those at home and those in diaspora should stop the habit of discouraging their children from speaking mother tongue. They should to this by using it as a medium for communicating and also for interacting with them.
- (b) Nursery and junior primary school teachers should adhere strictly to the stipulation of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013) that the medium of instruction at those levels of education should be principally mother tongue or language of the immediate society. In addition to this, teachers should desist from the habit of restricting pupils or students from speaking vernacular in their classes. They should also stop punishing them any time they speak vernacular.

- (c) Indigenous preachers, particularly in local churches where majority of the congregation constitute illiterates, should always use mother tongue so as to give them, especially the young ones, the inspiration to speak it.
- (d) Members of the public should promote mother tongue by avoiding mixing it up with English language or any other general language whenever they are discussing or interacting.
- (e) There is need for leaders of thought, traditional leaders and elites of Ebonyi State to liaise with relevant authorities to formulate policies or laws regulating abuse of mother tongue in the area. Seminars, workshops and public talks should always be organized for parents and members of the public generally in Ebonyi State on the need to promote mother tongue and the duties expected of them to enforce it.
- (f) There is need for media establishments (radio and television) to always present children programmes in mother tongue so as to inspire their viewing colleagues to develop interest in speaking using the same medium.

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