

# Identity and Language Attitudes among Sierra Leonean Refugees in Oru Camp, Ogun State, Nigeria

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## **Abstract**

*The concern of this study is to investigate the language attitudes of Sierra Leonean refugees in Oru camp with respect to their indigenous languages and the language of the host community, Yoruba. This is with a view to ascertaining their identity patterns. A mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) was adopted and consequently questionnaires and interviews were used to elicit data from teenagers, young adults and full adults purposively drawn from each of the three ethnic groups sampled: Mende, Temne, Limba. The result indicated that a significant majority of teenagers and young adults positively evaluated their indigenous languages although their proficiency was very poor. The full adults expressed a high evaluation of their indigenous tongues and also reported a high proficiency in them. In terms of attitude towards Yoruba, the teenagers highly evaluated Yoruba and correspondingly had a high proficiency in it. The young and full adults negatively regarded Yoruba (as a result of the negative attitude of the host community towards them) and had a very poor proficiency in it. Refugees need to identify with their host community for purposes of inclusion and the benefits of diversity.*

## **Introduction**

The concern of this study is to investigate the construction of ethnic identity and language attitudes of Sierra Leonean refugees in Oru camp, Nigeria. It is acknowledged that refugees are plagued with numerous challenges, ranging from food, healthcare, shelter, resettlement, etc. However, this study is specifically on the language and identity question in the experience of refugees. The reason for opting to study the language proposition among other inconveniences

encountered by refugees is because language is central in the lives of individuals as a veritable means of identification and solidarity within and across cultures (Berry, 2008). This is especially so as the Sierra Leonean refugees in this study have emerged from a hostile situation where survival partly depended on the language or identity one expressed (Ed-zar-zar, 2002). Consequently the refugees are conscious of the primacy of ethnolinguistic identity in their daily lives; that is, their own language and culture in contrast to the language and culture of others.

### **Objectives**

The study aims to:

1. examine the attitude of Sierra Leonean refugees to their indigeneous languages;
2. examine the attitude of Sierra Leonean refugees to the host community language;
3. evaluate the linguistic identity prototypes of the Sierra Leonean refugees.

### **Language and Ethnic identity.**

Identity represents an individual's perception of himself irrespective of the way he is perceived by others (Berry, 2008); this perception ranges from the personal to the social and ethnic. Numerous research have suggested that language is the strongest means of projecting ethnic identity (Masaki et al, 2010). Demirezen (2006:2) posits that the relationship between language and ethnic identity is 'bi-directional' and spolsky (1999) too, who cited the example of the children of Israel who maintained their ethnic identity during the slave period in Egypt by not abandoning their language. Giles and Coupland (1977) note that language, is not just an instrument for the exchange of messages but serves as a means of distinguishing a group from other groups. The depth of the identity projection through language is eloquently elaborated by Johnson (2009) who states that ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity, thus indexing a symbiosis between language and ethnic identity. According to Gibson (2004) this distinction is evident among minority or immigrant groups within a dominant culture where bilingual language use is often analysed as having two parts: the 'we' versus 'they' code. In this distinction, the 'we' code represents in-group speech which connotes intimacy and

solidarity while the ‘they’ code is associated with status and used with the dominant out-group.

### **Language Attitudes**

Anderson (1975, cited in Korth 2003:23) states that the idea of attitudes is generally one used in social psychology but defines language attitudes as ‘thinking, feeling and reacting’ with regard to people, objects, social groups or events”. This definition stresses that attitudes are psychological constructs, rooted in the individual’s mind but expressed through behaviour or action. This behaviour could be positive or negative, favourable or unfavourable. Thus in the context of language attitude, a positive feeling towards a language or variety translates to a positive behaviour towards the language, and the reverse is the case too. However, there are exceptions to this rule, for it does not always follow that positive beliefs lead to positive behaviour. This disposition is not fixed, for there are often inconsistencies between professed attitude and ensuing action. Carson (2005:32) underscores the point that ‘we can believe one thing, yet maintain a totally contradictory behaviour”. Language attitude therefore is used to refer to any cognitive, affective or conative principles of evaluation towards different languages and the speakers. Precisely, language attitudes are the evaluation people make about their own languages and the languages of others.

An intriguing dimension of language attitude studies is the position of Fasold (1984) who states that attitudes towards a language are often a reflection of attitudes towards the speakers of the language. It follows then that if people do not like a particular ethnic group, such a dislike is extended to their language or variety. The reverse also holds where a favourable reception of an ethnic group correlates with a favourable disposition towards their language; language is therefore taken as a symbol for inter-group relationship. Carson’s (2005) position is that this situation is the product of stereotypes which is reflected in the pronounced views respondents hold about other ethnolinguistic groups they have encountered. Preston (2010) suggests that there is sufficient proof in sociolinguistics which shows that evaluative reactions (attitudes) towards linguistic stimuli are determined to a large degree by the association of linguistics features and social groups and by the stereotypes attached to social groups.

### **Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory (ELIT)**

Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory is a social psychological approach proposed by Giles and Johnson (1981) as an extension of the Social Identity Theory (Oakes, 2001). They posit that as people grow up they also learn to group themselves and other people into social categories which usually use language as a marker for ethnic distinctiveness. Korth (2003) maintains that social categorization often employs language as a marker for ethnic distinction. Additionally, she stresses the demand of ELIT that individuals may feel a sense of belonging to a group because they feel that they share the same system of symbols and meanings (language). Contingent with this position, an individual's view of his or her heritage culture against the other cultures is found to correlate with language preference, knowledge and actual use (Phinney, 2001). Clement and Noels (1992) maintain that when an individual is offered an option he/she will identify with that group which would most likely provide the greatest positive social identity. They suggest that identity with other groups largely depends on whether the individual belongs to a majority or minority group. There is often a tendency for members of the minority group to identify with the dominant culture and language. On the contrary, members of the dominant culture usually do not see the need to identify with the minority culture and language (Korth, 2003).

### **Methodology and Data Collection**

In this study, a mixed approach was adopted incorporating the qualitative and the quantitative methods both of which are employed in the fields of social science and anthropology (Korth, 2003). The qualitative research is often carried out in fields whose concern is human behaviour (Strauss and Corbin, 1991) and aims at gathering an in-depth appreciation of human behaviour and the reasons which produce such acts. Consequently the approach makes use of interviews, among other means, to gather information. On the contrary, the quantitative method is the empirical investigation of social phenomenon by means of statistical instruments, whose central aim is to gather sufficient data on which to make generalizations. As a result, the method employs questionnaires and structured questions to gather data and conclusions are reached based on the aggregation of respondents' responses.

### **Sampling and Sample Population**

The collection of data for this study was facilitated through the selection of respondents based on the purposive sampling technique. This method was employed due to the limited number of the population. The population of the Sierra Leonean group in the camp as at the time of this study was about 700 going by the report of the leaders of the group in the camp. However, a total of 120 respondents from 3 ethnic groups (Mende, Temne, Limba) were used in the study. The selection of these 3 ethnic groups is informed by the numerical strength and availability of respondents. These respondents were further grouped into three age brackets as follows: teenage group (13-19 years); the young adults (20-39 years) and the full adults (40-60 years). Due to the unequal distribution in age bracket the selected respondents were as follows: the teenage group (45), the young adults (45), the full adults (30).

### **Analysis and Discussion**

In this section, the results of the investigation are presented. First, we shall focus on the attitude of respondents towards their own indigenous languages, and next we focus on the attitude of respondents towards the language of the host community.

#### **Respondents' Attitude towards their Indigenous Languages**

The questions about attitude were designed primarily to evaluate the importance and value which respondents attached to their indigenous languages. To achieve this end, an incomplete statement based on the spectrum of importance was presented and four options were given. This is followed by an enquiry into the proficiency level of respondents measured on a five-point scale comprising 'very poor', 'poor', 'fair', 'good' and 'very good'. These questions are vital because they help to rate the respondents' feelings about their indigenous languages and the symmetry/asymmetry between their professed attitude and ensuing behaviour. The information elicited through the questionnaire is represented in the table below.

**Table 1:** Cross-tabulation of attitude versus proficiency in the indigenous language

I believe my indigenous language is \_\_

| Age       |           | Rate your proficiency in speaking your indigenous language |      |      |      |           | Total     |
|-----------|-----------|--|------|------|------|-----------|-----------|
|           |           | V.poor   | Poor | Fair | Good | very Good |           |
| (13 – 19) | Less Imp. | 11   | -    | -    | -    | -         | 11        |
|           | Important | 27   | -    | -    | -    | -         | 27        |
|           | Very Imp. | 7  | -    | -    | -    | -         | 7         |
|           |           | 45   | -    | -    | -    | -         | 45 (100)  |
| (20 – 39) | Important | 21   | 2    | 0    | -    | -         | 23        |
|           | Very Imp. | 18   | 4    | 0    | -    | -         | 22        |
|           |           | 39   | 6    | 0    | -    | -         | 45 (100)  |
| (40 – 60) | Very Imp. | -  | -    | 2    | 12   | 16        | 30        |
|           |           | -  | -    | 2    | 12   | 16        | 30 (100)  |
| Total     | Less Imp. | 11   | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0         | 11        |
|           | Important | 48   | 2    | 0    | 0    | 0         | 50        |
|           | Very Imp. | 25   | 4    | 0    | 12   | 16        | 59        |
|           |           | 84   | 6    | 2    | 12   | 16        | 120 (100) |

Chi-Square tests summary: value  $\chi^2 = 48.776$ ,  $8 < 0.000$

The result shows that a significant majority of the teenage group 27 (60%) and 7 (15.5%) highly evaluated their indigenous languages while a minority 11 (24.4%) were neutral. However, in terms of proficiency all the teenage group reported ‘very poor’ degree of proficiency in their indigenous languages. Among the young adult group, a significant majority 23 (51.1%) and 22 (48.9%) highly evaluated their languages. In terms of proficiency, a significant majority 39 (86.7%) and 6 (13.3%) reported ‘very poor’ and ‘poor’ respectively. Among the full adults, 30 (100%) respondents highly esteemed their indigenous languages. In terms of proficiency a significant majority 16 (53.3%) and 12 (26.7%) reported a ‘very good’ and ‘good’ proficiency while 2 (6.7%) reported a ‘fair’ proficiency. Based on the significance value of  $\chi^2=48.776$ ,  $8 < 0.000$ , it is evident that age is significant in relation to respondents’ attitude towards their indigenous languages.

### **Respondents’ Attitude towards Yoruba**

The focus of investigation on this section is respondents attitude towards Yoruba,, the language of the host community. The inquiry follows the same format as the previous one, in terms of attitude and

language proficiency. This investigation is important because it helps to ascertain the degree to which the refugees have identified with their host community and the symmetry/asymmetry between professed attitude towards Yoruba and actual behaviour. This information, elicited through the questionnaire is represented in the table below.

**Table 2:** Cross tabulation of attitude versus proficiency in Yoruba

| I believe Yoruba is ____ |               | Rate your proficiency in speaking Yoruba |      |      |      |           |           |
|--------------------------|---------------|--|------|------|------|-----------|-----------|
| Age                      |               | V.poor                                   | Poor | fair | Good | very Good | Total     |
| (10 – 19)                | Important     | -  | -    | -    | 1    | 27        | 28        |
|                          | Very Imp.     | -  | -    | -    | 4    | 13        | 17        |
|                          |               | -  | -    | -    | 5    | 40        | 45 (100)  |
| (20 – 39)                | Not Important | 19                                       | -    | 0    | -    | -         | 19        |
|                          | Less Imp.     | 9  | 3    | 0    | -    | -         | 12        |
|                          | Important     | 10                                       | 4    | 0    | -    | -         | 14        |
|                          |               | 38                                       | 7    | 0    | -    | -         | 45 (100)  |
| (40 – 60)                | Not Important | 12                                       | 3    | -    | -    | -         | 15        |
|                          | Less Imp.     | 4  | 0    | 1    | -    | -         | 5         |
|                          | Important     | 4  | 4    | 2    | -    | -         | 10        |
|                          |               | 20                                       | 7    | 3    | -    | -         | 30 (100)  |
|                          | Not Important | 31                                       | 3    | 0    | 0    | 0         | 34        |
|                          | Less Imp.     | 13                                       | 3    | 1    | 0    | 0         | 17        |
|                          | Important     | 14                                       | 8    | 2    | 1    | 27        | 52        |
|                          | Very Imp.     | 0  | 0    | 0    | 4    | 13        | 17        |
| Total                    |               | 58                                       | 14   | 3    | 5    | 40        | 120 (100) |

Chi-Square test summary  $\chi^2 = 80, 561, 12, < 0.000$

The result shows apparently that a significant majority of the teenage group 28 (62.2%) and 17 (37.8%) highly evaluated Yoruba. Additionally a significant majority of the teenagers 27 (60.0%), and 1 (2.2%) reported a ‘very good’ and ‘good’ proficiency in Yoruba respectively. Among the young adult group, a majority 19 (42.2%) undervalued Yoruba, a minority 9 (20%) were neutral while a minority 10 (22.2%) highly evaluated Yoruba. In terms of proficiency, a significant majority 38 (84.4%) and 7 (15.6%) reported ‘very poor’ and ‘poor’ proficiency respectively. Among the full adult group, a majority 12 (40%) undervalued Yoruba, a minority 4 (13.3%) highly evaluated Yoruba while a minority 3 (13.3%) were neutral. In terms of proficiency a majority, 20 (66.7% ) of the full adult group expressed very poor proficiency in Yoruba, while a minority, 7 (23.3%) and 3

(10%) reported 'poor' and 'fair' proficiency in Yoruba. The significant value of  $\chi^2=80, 561, 12, < 0.000$  signifies that age is a significant factor in terms of attitude towards Yoruba.

The statistical data above shows three contrastive language attitudes manifested by the respondents: positive attitude, but poor proficiency, positive attitude and good proficiency, and negative attitude and poor proficiency.

### **Positive attitude and poor proficiency**

The result shows that the three age groups displayed a positive attitude towards their indigenous languages. The implication of this positive attitude is the projection of ethnic identity and psychological distinctiveness. It is a testimony to the fact that the respondents were conscious of their ethnolinguistic background which marked their distinction from other ethnic groups. However, the teenage and young adult groups did not behave according to their belief, due to their poor proficiency in their indigenous languages. This mismatch or asymmetry between positive attitude and ensuing behaviour is what Holmes (2008) terms covert prestige, to show that although a code may be deemed prestigious or highly evaluated but it is not openly used. This result supports Carson's (2005) position that we can believe one thing, yet maintain a totally contradictory behaviour. This is a suggestion that a mental disposition does not necessarily provoke corresponding behaviour (Romaine, 2003). This results corroborates Mejaizmit's (2007) finding that Hispanic youth in Brisbane, Australia who tended towards integration expressed positive attitude towards Spanish, although they did not speak it.

Moreover, the implication of asymmetry among the teenage and young adult groups is a subtle aversion towards their heritage languages and indication of a weak sense of belonging to their ethnic groups. Thus, these age groups attached only a symbolic value to their heritage language which implies that they did not really see themselves as ethnic persons and did not desire to be seen as such. However, this does not rule out the possibility of the respondents behaving according to their beliefs in future due to the mutability of attitudes (Gaw, 2009).



### **Positive Attitude and Good Proficiency**

Contrary to the asymmetry displayed by the teenage and young adult groups towards their indigenous languages, the full adults behaved according to their belief by reporting a high proficiency in their indigenous tongues; this is what Holmes (2008) termed overt prestige. The symmetry between professed positive attitude and action among the full adult group implies a strong sense of belonging, rootedness and attachment to their ethnic groups. It is an overt way of declaring that they perceived themselves as ethnic and culturally rooted people and desired to be perceived as such.

The positive attitude towards Yoruba expressed by the teenage group is an affirmation of linguistic adaptation to the host culture. The implication of symmetry between professed positive disposition and action among the teenage group represents an overt sense of belonging to Yoruba culture. It is a testimony that they saw themselves as Yoruba and desired to be seen as such. By this symmetry they increased the scope of their group membership. This finding confirms the position of Lammy (1979, cited in Thoudhlana, 2005) who argued that bilingualism enhances inter-ethnic communication and that such bilinguals can be mistaken for in-group members, which has significant effect on their social identity. The teenagers' facility in Yoruba suggests that they enjoyed unhindered interaction with the host community. This result also confirms Hoff's (1968) and Rees' (1960) findings which suggest that the children are quick at acquiring the new culture and so socialize the elders by acting as links or interpreters.

### **Negative Attitude and Poor Proficiency**

Contrary to the positive attitude towards Yoruba expressed by the teenage group, the young adult and full adult groups displayed a negative attitude towards Yoruba coupled with a corresponding behaviour. This symmetrical disposition is a negation of linguistic adaptation to the host culture; an overt sense of detachment from Yoruba. This aloofness indexes that they did not see themselves as Yoruba and did not want to be seen as Yoruba. This finding runs counter to the position of Masaki, et al (2010) who reported the tendency among minority groups to linguistically and culturally identify with the dominant group. This is a unique finding and so

inquiry was made through oral interview to unravel the reason(s) for the marked behavior of the young and full adult groups. The result is as follows:-

...Most of us here don't speak Yoruba because of the way they take us. If you see the way they look at us... as if we are not human being like them (Sule)

...I don't think I'm interested, this thing is not easy Osy, how can I learn their language. I no tell you what they did to my daughter; their boys raped my daughter and I reported to police, but the police did not do anything. (Saffiatu)

...It is good to speak Yoruba because of integration but the integration is not working. All the things they promised us they have not done it... How can you give a family 75 thousand naira, not one person, a whole family, even the 75 thousand we have not seen it (Lebbie).

The respondents above, from the young adult and full adult groups stated why they did not speak Yoruba, and their reasons ranged from the hosts (hostile) attitude towards them (Sule, Saffiatu ), and the challenges of integration (Lebbie). This finding corroborates the position of Fasold (1984), Holmes (2008) and Edwards (1982) that attitudes towards a language are often a reflection of attitudes towards the speakers of the language. The first and second respondents above believed that it is not necessary to identify with a group that did not treat them humanely. This result also confirms Valenta's (2010) finding in Norway, where refugees who felt rejected or marginalised were less likely to integrate, especially with regards to the acquisition of the host's language. The implication of this finding is that the relationship between hosts and guests was strained. This finding is a negation of the conclusion of Meludu and Emerole (2009) who stated that one of the reasons why Oru refugees encountered difficulty integrating into their host community was language barrier. The position of the present study is that it is the attitude of the host community which discouraged the full adults from learning Yoruba. The third respondent (Lebbie) explained that economic considerations

proved an obstacle to linguistic adaptation to their host community. His position implies that they were too uncomfortable to consider learning Yoruba. This is to say that the right condition can create the right attitude or effect a change in attitude and behaviour.

### **Linguistic Identity Prototypes**

In this section, the various linguistic identities reported by respondents are measured given their expressed language attitudes. The linguistic prototypes observed in the sample given the attitude of the three age groups comprise the following: strong Yoruba identity, weak ethnic identity and strong ethnic identity.

#### **Strong Yoruba Identity**

A strong Yoruba identity is manifested by the teenage group. Their acculturation pattern is assimilation in that they had acquired Yoruba, the host's language at the expense of their indigenous languages. This identity prototype has implication for in-group and out-group relationship. The group endorsing this prototype is likely to exhibit an egalitarian attitude and promote inter-cultural and mutual inter-ethnic acceptance. They would most likely serve as a bridge across ethnic and national divides and therefore would practically endorse the virtue of diversity.

#### **Weak Ethnic Identity**

A weak ethnic identity is manifested by the young adult group, as they neither identified with their own ethnic group nor with the host community culture; as a result, their acculturation pattern could be termed marginalization. The implication of this prototype is a problematic relationship between this group and their in-group and the host community. This group would most likely perceive themselves as modern while seeing others with ethnolinguistic roots as uncultured. This group may not contribute to intra-group or inter-ethnic harmony but are most likely to promote international solidarity.

#### **Strong Ethnic Identity**

A strong ethnic identity is expressed by the full adult group. They retained their heritage languages but did not adopt the language of their hosts. As a result their acculturation pattern is separation. The implication of this prototype is that members of this group are most

likely to be ethnocentric. Their relationship with other national groups is expected to be marked within a 'we' and 'they' categorization and characterized with discrimination and prejudice. However, they are most likely to enjoy a very close and strong affinity with in-group members.

### **Conclusion.**

The investigation of language attitudes in this study has revealed the trajectory of identities among the Sierra Leonean groups in Oru refugee camp. However, it should be noted that attitudes are transient and mutable and so is identity; they are capable of changing over time for various reasons. On the whole, negative attitudes towards Yoruba, the host community language is seen as a negation of the ethos of diversity. Diversity is anchored on the recognition and appreciation of difference. Diversity helps us to accept other cultures and even adopt some of their ways of life. It offers us the opportunity to learn, mature and become more tolerant of others. It breaks divisive cultural walls and opens a window of understanding of other cultures. By this means, to a great extent, the individual is rid of prejudice and racism.

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