Language Attitudes and Identity Construction among the Urhobo Community in Bayelsa State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates how language attitudes shape identity construction among Urhobo migrants in Bayelsa State, Nigeria, focusing on their interactions with their heritage language (Urhobo), the language of the host community (Ijaw), English and Nigerian Pidgin (Naija). It seeks to document patterns of language use across age groups and to identify the key sociolinguistic factors that influence attitudes, proficiency, and identity negotiation. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach. A total of 350 copies of the questionnaire were administered, out of which 334 were valid and used for analysis. Respondents were sampled from three Local Government Areas of Bayelsa States (Sagbama, Southern Ijaw, and Yenagoa) and grouped into three age groups: teenagers (13-19 years), young adults (20-49 years) and older adults (50 years and above). Qualitative insights were gathered through semi-structured interviews and open-ended responses. The research is guided by the mentalist theory of language attitudes and draws on ethnolinguistic vitality concepts. Across all age groups, respondents predominantly use Urhobo in intra-ethnic interactions, indicating a strong orientation towards ethnolinguistic identity. The Urhobo value their language with

corresponding high proficiency rate (71% of teenagers, 79.4% of young adults, and 89.5% of older adults. Use of Ijaw is considerably limited, attributed to complexity in dialectal variation and perceived hostility within the host community. Although respondents express generally positive evaluations of Ijaw, self-reported proficiency remains low. English, on the other hand, is widely valued for its instrumental functions. The study concludes that Urhobo migrants manifests multiple linguistic identities, favouring an ethnic identity represented by Urhobo and a modern identity represented by English. The findings suggest that the Urhobo community should identify more with the Ijaw language and culture to promote integration and diversity. The results of the study have implications for language policy, identity construction, and community development in multilingual settings, highlighting the need for further research in this area.

Keywords: Urhobo migrants, Ijaw,language use, language attitudes, ethnolinguistic identity

1.1 Introduction

Language is a central resource through which individuals construct, perform, and negotiate social identities. Language plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals' perceptions of themselves and their place within a given environment, influencing how they are perceived by others and how they perceive themselves. In multilingual societies, language choices act as symbolic boundaries or create a dichotomy that distinguish insiders (in-groups) from outsiders (out-groups), reinforce cultural belonging, and regulate access to social and economic opportunities. For migrant communities, the sociolinguistic negotiation of identity becomes particularly complex as speakers must balance allegiance to their heritage language with the practical demands of integration into a

host-language community. In other words, in a migratory context, bilingual use often reflects a complex negotiation of identity, with the 'we' versus 'they' code or 'high' versus 'low' code (Valdes, 2000). The 'we' code in this dichotomy stands for in-group communication which is primarily restricted to the home due to low status and implies closeness (Ikolo, 2025). But the more dominant group uses the 'they' code which is connected to high status. This assertion is consistent with Korth's (2005:27) theory, which holds that people may believe they are a part of group X because they believe they have a common system os symbols and meanings and, as a result, a shared sense of identity.

This paper offers a sociolinguistic examination of language attitudes and identity construction among members of the Urhobo community residing in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Bayelsa, being predominantly Ijaw-speaking, presents a unique linguistic ecology in which minority groups navigate issues of acceptance, belonging, linguistic accommodation, and symbolic resistance. Previous empirical studies in Nigeria and other African multilingual settings show that migrant groups often maintain strong sentimental attachments to their ethnic languages, even where language shift to English or dominant regional languages is increasing. At the same time, the uptake of host-community languages may be shaped by factors such as perceived ethnolinguistic hostility, dialectal complexity, and the extent of everyday intergroup contact.

A robust understanding of the attitudinal dynamics behind language choice is crucial because attitudes frequently predict long-term patterns of language maintenance or shift. Studies have shown that although heritage languages may hold symbolic prestige, constrained domains of use and weak intergenerational

transmission can lead to gradual decline. Moreover, English continues to function as a marker of modernity, education, and wider communication, particularly among younger Nigerians. These nationwide trends mirror many of the identity tensions found among migrant communities.

Guided by these concerns, the present study addresses the following questions as seen in (1.3 below)

1.2 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The study aims to examine languageattitudes and identity construction among the Urhobo in a migrant context. The specific objectives of the study are to:

i. examine the attitudes of Urhobo migrants towards their ethnic language and the language of the host community;

ii ascertain the degree of correlation between the feelings of respondents and their true linguistic behaviour with regard to language use; and

iii highlight the implications of linguistic identity patterns for in-group and inter-ethnic relationships.

1.3 Research Questions

Based on the aim of the research, the following questions have been devised for this study:

i. What is the attitude of Urhobo migrants towards their ethnic language and the language of the host community?

ii. What is the degree of correlation between the feelings of the respondents and their
true linguistic behaviour as regards language use?

iii What are the implications of linguistic identity patterns for in-group and inter-ethnic relationships.

2.1 Language Attitudes

The study of language attitudes is important for sociolinguistics because it can 'predict a given linguistic behaviour. More importantly for this work, it will enable us analyse the feelings of the migrants about the languages at their disposal to issues of identity. Generally, language attitudes refer to the feelings, opinions, and evaluations that individuals or groups hold towards languages, dialects, or language varieties. These attitudes can be influenced by various factors, including cultural identity, social status, and power dynamics. Korth (2005 cited in Nwagbo 2014:43) defines attitude, as 'thinking, feeling and reacting with regard to people, object, social groups or events. Petty and Cacioppo (1981:6) state that 'attitude' should be used to refer to a general and enduring positive or negative feeling about some person, object or issue'. For Eagly and Chaiken, (2005:745), attitude is 'a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour'

From the various definitions on 'attitude' above, we understand that attitude is deeply rooted in the individual's psyche and it is a tool used in the evaluation of a phenomenon. Consequently, Bohner (2001:240) at the individual level, attitude influence perception, theory and behaviour', and at the intergroup level, attitude towards one group and other groups are the core of intergroup cooperation and conflict'. What this means is that 'attitudes determine for each individual what he/she will see and hear, what he will think and what he will do' (Allport 1935:806,

cited in Kircher 2009: 49). In a multilingual contexts, language attitudes can play a significant role in shaping identity, social relationships, and language use. For the Urhobo community in Bayelsa State, language attitudes towards their native language and the language of the host community can have important implications for their identity construction and negotiation within the dominant culture. This paper explores the complex dynamics of language attitudes and identity construction among the Urhobo community, shedding light on the ways in which language shapes their experiences and perceptions.

The two most important theories on language attitude study are the behaviourist theory (behaviourism) and the mentalist theory (Mentalism).According to the behaviourist theory, attitudes are behaviour or responses to a given situation. However, this position has been faulted by critics who believe that behaviour is not consistent across contexts. Every particular instance of human action is determined by a unique set of factors. Any change in circumstance be it ever so slight might produce a different reaction (Ajzen 1988:45). This means that the behaviour of an individual depends on other factors like time, context, etc. and not just attitude alone. Therefore, the fact that one behaves in a particular way in one context does not mean that the individual will behave like that in another context. Hence there is no one to one correspondence between attitude and behaviour.

The mentalist theory, which is adopted in this study, on the other hand, holds that language cannot be observed directly since it is mental. On the basis of the mentalist approach, Ajzen (1988:4) defines attitude as 'a disposition to respond favourably or unfavourably to an object, person, institution or event', while Allport (1935:810) had earlier described it as 'a mental and neutral

state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a direct or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related'. These definitions suggest that attitudes do not determine behaviour but influence it. In other words, attitude is not behaviour but a precondition of behaviour (Gardner and Lambert 1972). The definitions also stress that attitudes are psychological constructs, rooted in the individual's mind but expressed via behaviour or action, which could be positive or negative, favourable or unfavourable (Sarnof,1970;Gaw, 2011). Thus, in the context of language attitudes, a positive feeling towards a language translates into a positive behaviour towards the language, and vice versa. However, 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. Hence Carson (2005:32) underscores the point that 'we can believe one thing, yet maintain a totally contradictory attitude.'

Language attitudes just like attitudes themselves are not static but are subject to change over time (Hamers and Blanc, 2000). The trajectory of change may be from favourable to unfavourable or vice versa. There are various factors that can alter people's attitude to a language: age, education, gender, etc. Children may change their attitude towards a language when they become teenagers, and teenagers often change their attitude towards a language when they become adults. These changes may be as a result of environmental experience and social interaction.

The language-ethnic group relationship is important when considering the motives in the study of language attitudes. The two basic motives propagated by Gardner and Lambert (1972) are

integrative and instrumental. They hold that the integrative motive is a situation where an individual wish to identify with the target community by way of learning their language in order to perhaps, become a member of the group. The instrumental motive is evident where an individual linguistically identifies with the dominant culture for reasons of work, favour, success and social mobility. What this suggests is that for whatsoever reasons, languages serve as a means of identification with a dominant culture.

2.2Empirical Review

The past decade has witnessed a significant expansion of scholarship on language attitudes, identity construction, and language maintenance among minority and migrant communities in Nigeria and beyond. This section takes a look at some empirical review relevant to this study.

Alebiosu (2016) examines the elite segment of Nigerian society and finds that while elite express sentimental loyalty to their ethnic languages, they prefer English for prestige, professional advancement, and social mobility – reinforcing the ideological dominance of English despite its coexistence with strong ethnic identities.

Olatoye (2022) offers insight into shifting perceptions of Nigerian English, showing that while educated Nigerian listeners increasingly recognize local English varieties as identity-affirming, traditional prestige norms still favour Standard British English. This tension between emerging endonormativity and lingering exogenous prestige highlights the broader ideological landscape within which language attitudes develop in multilingual societies. Similarly, Aboh (2023) demonstrates that university students' attitudes towards Nigerian English sub-varieties are shaped by

exposure, peer group dynamics and evolving youth identity forms. His findings underscore the role of younger speakers as key drivers in the nativisation and legitimizationof local English varieties.
Research on indigenous languages also reveals complex patterns of maintenance and shifts Ayomoto (2019), in a study of Ijaw families across Bayelsa State, reports that although emotional attachment to Ijaw remains strong, English increasingly dominates educational and urban domains due to its perceived instrumental value. Dialectal variations within Ijaw further complicates communication and limits wider inter-dialect use.Nwagbo (2021) examination okpe intergenerational transmission reaches a similar conclusion: despite symbolic attachment, home domain use of Okpe is declining rapidly among young people, who prioritize English and Nigerian Pidgin (Naija). But studies reveal pressures that minority languages face even within their traditional homeland.

Beyond Nigeria, scholarship on migrant identity construction offers relevant parallels. Umana (2023) shows that Nigerian migrants in Cape Town manage multilingual identities by alternating between ethnic languages, English and Pidgin, adopting whichever linguistic identity best supports integration, belonging or safety in specific contexts. Mair (2022, similarly, reports that Nigerian migrants in Germany maintain their ethnic languages within private networks while embracing English or Pidgin in public spaces to negotiate cosmopolitan identities. These findings collectively demonstrate that migration produces layered identity performances where language choices symbolize both connection and adaptation.
Studies focusing on institutional contexts further highlight structural influences on language attitudes. Obiakor (2024)

observes widespread acceptance among Nigerian teachers of the cultural and pedagogic value of mother tongue instruction yet classroom practice remains overwhelmingly English-dominant. This policy practice divergence stems from insufficient materials, inadequate teacher preparation, and social pressure that favours English.

Most recent research in the Niger Delta reveals the socio-political dimensions of multilingualism. Dudafa and Otodo (2025) link linguistic exclusion to heightened inter-ethnic tension in Bayelsa, noting that multilingual competence and cross-linguistic accommodation serve as buffers that promote peace and social cohesion. His works supports the argument that language practices are central to conflict prevention in ethnolinguistically diverse settings. Complementing this, Onowode (2022) reports that while older urhobo adults retain strong use of their heritage language, younger speakers, especially those in highly urbanized settings increasingly adopts English and Nigerian Pidgin (Naija) for everyday communication. This generational shift is in line with findings in other South-South minority communities, suggesting that without targeted revitalization, heritage languages may experience continued erosion.

2.3 Method of Data Collection

In this section, the researcher presents the methodology used in this study. The methodology employed in this work is a mixed method comprising elements of quantitative and qualitative methods, both of which are employed in the fields of social science and anthropology.

The research instruments employed are questionnaire, interviews and participant observation.The collection of data for this study was based on the purposive sampling technique. This method is best used for community situations. First, this method was employed because of the limited number of the population. Second, the study is not inclusive of all the groups in Bayelsa State, but restricted specifically to the Urhobo Community for reasons of simplicity in analysis. Therefore, in administering the questionnaire and conducting of interviews, members of the Urhobo Group were targeted. The respondents were divided into different age groups. This division will help us make strong conclusion.

2.4 Method of Data Analysis

Based on the techniques utilized for data gathering uses both qualitative and quantitative data analysis. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 2.0 was used in the analysis of the quantitative data. The analyses were performed using percentages, tables and cross tabulations to make it easy to examine how responses are distributed across various variables. The observer impression was used to assess the qualitative data. The observer impression is an analytical approach whereby a bystander or an expert, who is also the researcher, examines the data, and subjects it to interpretation via forming an impression, and thereafter reports their impression in a structured and descriptive form. The advantage of this type of analysis is that it is easy to comprehend and the results are better appreciated.

3.1 Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

A total of 334 respondents of Urhobo origin who cut across various categories like age, sex, marital status and occupation were used in this study as presented in the table below

Table 1 Demographic information of respondents

Variables	Frequencies (N = 334)	Percentages	Cumulative percentages
Gender			
Male	162	48.5%	48.5%
Female	172	51.55	100%
Age group			
13 – 19 years	122	36.5%	36.5%
20 – 49 years	136	40.7%	77.2%
50 years and above	76	22.8%	100%
Marital status			
Single	156	46.7%	46.7%
Married	178	53.3%	100%
Educational qualification			
Primary	58	17.4%	17.4%
Secondary	215	64.4%	81.7%
Tertiary	61	18.3%	100%
Occupation			
Working(civil& public servants)	65	19.5%	19.5%
Farming	36	10.8%	30.2%
Trading	100	29.9%	60.2%
Schooling	133	39.8%	100%
Residencehistory			
0 – 5 years	81	24.3%	24.3%
6 – 10 years	113	33.8%	58.1%
11 – 15 years	108	32.3%	90.4%
16 – 20 years	32	9.6%	100%

3.2 Language Attitude among the Urhobo Ethnic Group in Bayelsa State

Language attitude among the Urhobo ethnic group in Bayelsa will be investigated in this section. The researcher will consider the attitudes of the respondents towards their indigenous language (Urhobo) and the language of the host community (Ijaw). The goal of this investigation is to determine the relationship between language attitude and linguistic practice. Consequently, the analysis is a correlation of respondents' feelings about their language and their actual use of the language. This investigation is important in ascertaining the languages actually preferred by respondents so as to know if there is correlation or not between professed belief and actual behaviour.

3.3 Attitude towards Urhobo

The questions about attitudes are aimed at knowing the value and importance which respondents attached to their language. On the basis of the cognitive component, the respondents' thoughts and beliefs were measured as regards the value they attached to their language. An incomplete statement was presented 'I believe Urhobo is …', and four options were given which are: 'very important', 'important,' 'less important' and 'unimportant'. This is immediately followed by an enquiry into the proficiency level of respondents regarding Urhobo. Their proficiency level is measured on a five-point scale comprising 'very poor', 'poor', 'fair', 'good', and 'very good'. These investigations are important because it helps to rate respondents' feeling about their ethnic language and useful in terms of making predictions about the perception of their identity. It also helps to know if there is a tally between their professed attitude and behaviour. The information

elicited through the questionnaire is represented in the tables below.

Table 1(a) Cross Tabulation of Attitude towards Urhobo Language and Age Group

I believe Urhobo is …

	Age Groups			Chi-square
Attitude towards Urhobo	13 – 19	20 – 49	50 and above	Value; p-value
Very important	88(72.1%)	108 (79.4%)	68 (89.5%)	10.211
Important	29 (23.8%)	26 (19.1%)	7 (9.2%)	0.11
Less important	1 (0.8%)	1 (0.7%)	-	
Unimportant	4 (3.3%)	1 (0.7%)	1 (1.3%)	
Total	122 (100%)	136 (100%)	76 (100%)	

Table 1 (b) Cross Tabulation of Proficiency Rate in Urhobo Language and Age groups .

What is your proficiency rate in Urhobo?

	Age Groups			Chi-square
Proficiency in Urhobo	13 – 19	20 – 49	50 and above	Value; p-value
Very poor	8 (6.6%)	2 (1.5%)	1 (1.3%)	36.932
Poor	4 (3.3%)	5(3.7%)	1 (1.3%)	0.00
Fair	16 (13.1%)	9 (6.6%)	-	
Good	26 (21.3%)	23 (16.9%)	3 (3.9%)	
Very good	68 (55.7%)	97 (71.3%)	71 (93.4%)	
Total	122 (100%)	136 (100%)	76 (100%)	

Tables 1 (a) and (b) above show that a significant majority of the respondents expressed positive attitude towards Urhobo with a corresponding high proficiency in Urhobo as well. Across all age

groups, 88 (72.1%) and 29 (23.8%) of the teenage group reported that Urhobo is very important and important (high evaluation) respectively. Only an insignificant minority 1 (0.8%) and 4 (3.3%) reported Urhobo is less important and unimportant respectively. Similarly, the younger adult 108 (79.4%) and 26 (19.1%) reported that Urhobo is very important and important respectively. The same high evaluation goes for the older adult group. The proficiency rate in Urhobo as claimed by the teenage group is also very encouraging. 26 (21.3%) and 68 (55.7%) reported a 'good' and 'very good' proficiency rate in Urhobo. Only an insignificant minority reported 'very poor (6.6%) and poor (3.3%) respectively. An impressive proficiency rate in Urhobo equally goes for the young adult group and the older adult group. Based on the significance value $x^2 = 10.211$; p-value= $0.11>0.05$, it is apparent that age is not significant in relation to respondents' attitude towards Urhobo. However, in terms of proficiency rate, the significance value $x^2 = 36.932$; p – value= $0.00<0.05$ shows that age is a significant factor with respect to proficiency rate in Urhobo.

The implication of positive attitude towards Urhobo among the three age groups is the projection of ethnic identity and psychological distinctiveness. This positive attitude of the Urhobo migrants is a further testimony to the fact that the respondents were conscious of their ethnolinguistic background which marked their distinction from other ethnic groups. The three age groups translated their psychological beliefs into reality.

This result shows a strong connection or symmetry between expressed attitude and action among the three age groups. Symmetry between professed positive attitude and action among

the three age groups implies a strong sense of belonging and attachment to their ethnic group. It is an overt way of declaring that they perceived themselves as ethnic (Urhobo) people and desired to be perceived as such. In other words, there is no mismatch or asymmetrical disposition between positive attitude and their language behaviour. However, the fact that there is little or no correspondence between attitude and action in the present situation does not preclude the possibility of respondents behaving in future according to their belief, because attitude is mutable (Gaw, 2011).

Consequent upon this investigation, an enquiry was made into factors responsible for respondents' impressive attitude towards the Urhobo language and their encouraging proficiency rate, especially among the teenage age group. The oral interview yielded the following results:

> It is true that we are in Ijaw land, but I like my language very well. It is my language that makes other people to know where I am from. It is the language that I speak that make (sic) other people know that I am Urhobo person. Myself and my husband (sic) … speaks Urhobo to all our children. I like everything about Urhobo – our food, dressing, songs, music. (Ojiyovwi – Sagbama).

> It is our language, Urhobo, that separates us from other people in this State like Ijaw, Calabar, Ibo, etc. It is shame to

anybody that cannot speak his language. That is why I always speak the language with my children so that they can also know how to speak it. There is none of my children that cannot speak Urhobo. (Oghenetejiri – Ofoni)

We Urhobo people are very proud of our language. That is why we sing in my language that … 'if I come to this world again, I will come through Urhobo'. Anywhere I enter , people always know that I am Urhobo. I cook and sell food. People call me 'Mama Banga Soup'. (Mama Banga Soup – Amassoma)

My brother, it is the Urhobo language that unite (sic) all Urhobo people in Bayelsa together. In fact, we have an association of Urhobo people called (Urhobo Progress Union, Bayelsa Chapter). It is there we discuss how our Urhobo people and the language can move forward. We encourage all our people and children to speak the language at home and when we see one another because that is our identity. In short, anybody that cannot speak Urhobo is lost. (Edirinverere – Yenagoa)

> I can speak Urhobo very well today because of my parents. Right from when we were children that my mummy especially speaks the language to us. If I want to buy anything my mummy will ask me to say the thing in Urhobo. If I cannot say it, she will not buy it for me. That forced me to learn Urhobo (James – Ofoni)

> I lived with my grandmother in Ondo State before my daddy relocated to Bayelsa. I learnt Urhobo from her. My grandmother would always tell us … 'mi nyooyibo-o' meaning that 'I don't understand English'. She told me that during the Nigeria Civil War, those who cannot speak their language were killed . This is why today I am proud to say I can speak my language. From time to time, we travel to my State, Delta, to witness how our people do their burial and traditional marriage. (Efeoghene – Yenagoa).

These interview results attest to the fact that a sense of belonging to an ethnic group is achieved mainly by identifying with the language of the group due to the intrinsic value of language. The first interviewee (Ojiyovwi), sees language as the window to one's origin or root and the need to strongly identify with the language even in a different ethnolinguistic environment. The second

interviewee (Oghenetejiri), observed that language is a major marker of ethnic difference that marks them out from others. For Mama Banga Soup, the third interviewee, pointed out that it is a pride to identify with a language and believes that she would be born into the Urhobo language group in the world to come. The fourth interviewee (Edirinverere), expressed the fact that language is the prime symbol of unity and sees anyone who cannot speak the language as being lost. James, the fifth interviewee, attributed his ability to speak the Urhobo language to the effort of his mother. The sixth interviewee (Efeoghene), equally attributed his ability to speak the language to the effort of his grandmother. He also revealed some strategies adopted to maintain their indigenous linguistic identity by maintaining links with their state of origin.

The above interview extracts reveal that among other basic cultural elements, a sense of belonging to an ethnic group has a lot more to do with the language of the group. In other words, language represents the primary means of constructing ethnic identity among other factors. In addition, a sense of belonging to or identifying with an ethnic group creates the idea of sameness (in-group) and otherness (out-group) which has the potentials for the kind of psychological distinctiveness capable of creating discrimination.

An important point to note in these interviews which has been corroborated by earlier research, is that language brings about differences among groups by creating 'we and they' or in-group and 'out-group', or insiders and outsiders (Valdes, 2000; Korth, 2005). In the above interviews, the interviewees used 'pronominal elements like 'our', other people, 'we', 'our people', my language, our identity, etc. These terms are important markers of ethnic distinctiveness and identity. Although language appears to be the

prime factor in the construction of ethnic identity as shown by the report, there are other elements like 'food' 'song', dressing', and music' as identified by the respondents which also serve as identity markers to mark belonging.

Table 1(c) Cross Tabulation of Attitude towards Urhobo and Educational Status.

	Educational Status			
Attitude towards Urhobo	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	Chi-square value; p-value
Very important	51 (87.9%)	164 (76.3%)	49 (80.3%)	6.516
Important	6 (10.3%)	45 (20.9%)	11 (18.0%)	0.36
Less important	-	1 (0.5%)	1 (1.6%)	
Unimportant	1 (.7%)	5 (2.3%)		
Total	58 (100%)	215 (100%)	61 (100%)	

Table 1 (c) is a cross tabulation of the attitude of the respondents towards Urhobo vis-à-vis their educational status. The aim of this investigation is to ascertain whether there is a significant relationship between the attitude of the respondents towards Urhobo and their level of education.

Based on the significance value of $x^2 = 6.516$ and the p-value= 0.36>0.05, shows that there is no significant relationship between their educational status and their attitude towards the language. What this translates to is that irrespective of the respondents' level of educational attainment, they all expressed a positive attitude towards Urhobo. It is only an insignificant minority 5 (2.3%) and 1 (0.5%) among those with secondary level of education that reported that Urhobo is 'unimportant' and 'less important' respectively.

3.4 Attitude towards Ijaw

The core of this investigation in this section is respondents' attitude towards Ijaw, the language of the host community. The respondents were presented with an incomplete statement. ' I believe Ijaw is …' and four options were provided which are: 'very important' 'important', 'less important' and 'unimportant'. This is followed by an inquiry into the proficiency level of respondents concerning the language of the host community. The evaluation of their proficiency level is gauged on a five-point scale comprising 'very poor', 'poor', 'fair', 'good', and 'very good'. The importance of this investigation is to ascertain the degree to which the migrants have identified with their host community and also the nature of relationship that possibly exists between the migrants and their hosts. This investigation will also reveal if there is concurrence between professed attitude towards Ijaw and action. This information elicited through the questionnaire is presented in the tables below.

Tables 2 (a) Cross Tabulation of Attitude towards Ijaw and Age Groups

I believe Ijaw is…

Attitude towards Ijaw	Age Groups			Chi-square value; p-value
	13 – 19 years	20 – 49 years	50 years and above	
Very important	58 (47.5%)	37 (27.2%)	33 (43.4%)	20.496
Important	29 (23.8%)	52 (38.2%)	23 (30.3%)	0.002
Less important	19 (15.6%)	12 (8.8%)	7(9.2%)	
Unimportant	16 (13.1%)	35 (25.7%)	13 (17.1%)	
Total	122 (100%)	136 (100%)	76 (100%)	

Table 2 (b) Cross Tabulation of Age Groups and Proficiency rate in Ijaw

What is your proficiency rate in Ijaw?

Proficiency rate in Ijaw	Age Groups			Chi-square value; p-value
	13 – 19 years	20 – 49 years	50 years and above	
Very poor	37 (30.3%)	62 (45.6%)	29 (38.2%)	
Poor	18 (14.8%)	21 (15.4%)	6 (7.9%)	14.372
Fair	13 (10.7%)	18 (13.2%)	10 (13.2%)	0.073
Good	36 (29.5%)	24 (17.6%)	18 (23.7%)	
Very good	18 (14.8%)	11 (8.1%)	13 (17.1%)	
Total	122 (100%)	136 (100%)	76 (100%)	

Table 2 (a) above shows a uniformity of attitude by respondents towards Ijaw across the age groups. A significant majority of the respondents expressed positive attitude towards Ijaw. In the teenage group for instance, 58 (47.5%) and 29 (23.8%) reported that Ijaw is 'very important' and 'important' respectively. Similarly, the young adult, 37 (27.2%) and 52 (38.2%) reported that Ijaw is 'very important' and important respectively. Among the young adult group, a significant minority 35 (25.7%) reported that Ijaw is 'unimportant'. For the older adult group, 33 (43.4%) and 23 (30.3%) reported that Ijaw is 'very important' and 'important' respectively. However, there is an obvious disparity between positive attitude of the respondents towards Ijaw and their actual use of the language as evident in their proficiency rate. There is poor proficiency rate across the age groups. The teenage age reported a semi-proficiency rate as 37 (30.3%) and 18 (14.8%) reported a 'very poor' and 'poor' proficiency in Ijaw. Still among the teenage group, 36 (29.5%) and 18 (14.8%) reported a 'good' and 'very good proficiency in the language of the host community respectively. This result seems to suggest that their positive

attitude and semi-proficiency rate in Ijaw is 'semi' affirmation of linguistic adaption to the host culture. For the young adult group, 62 (45.6%) and 21 (15.4%) reported a 'very poor' and 'poor' proficiency in Ijaw respectively. Similarly, for the older adult group, 29 (38.2%) and 6 (7.9%) reported a 'very poor' and 'poor' proficiency in Ijaw respectively.

This result shows that there is no connection or symmetry between expressed attitude and action among the age groups. This mismatch or asymmetrical disposition between positive attitude and language behaviour among the age groups is what Holmes (2007) terms covert prestige to show that although a code may be deemed prestigious, it is not openly used. This result equally supports Carson's (2005:32) position that we can believe one thing, yet maintain a totally contradictory behaviour which suggests that a mental disposition does not necessarily provoke behaviour. This finding supports 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. In addition, this result also confirms Berry's (1992) assertion that an individual's positive attitude towards a language is not an indication that he used the language. The results show that the respondents only attached a symbolic value to the language of the host community.

The implication of the asymmetry between professed disposition and action is that the migrants represent a covert sense of not belonging to the Ijaw culture. It is evident that they saw themselves as Urhobo and desired to be seen as Urhobo. This attitude will however, restrict the scope of their group membership. This result is not in consonance with the position of Masaki, et al

(2010) who reported the tendency among minority groups to linguistically and culturally identify with the dominant majority group.

An enquiry was made as to the reasons responsible for their poor proficiency in Ijaw. The oral interview yielded the following results:

> I like to learn Ijaw since we are staying in their land but the language is too difficult to learn. (Oke – Amassoma)

> There are different dialects of Ijaw. Some will speak 'Epie', others will speak 'Ogbia', some will speak 'southern Ijaw' … somebody gets confused. So I prefer to speak Pidgin or English which they also understand. (Oghenero – Tombia)

> I can't speak Ijaw but my children understand a little. The reason is that I was not brought up here. To expect me to begin to learn the language at this my age will not be easy..o (Festus – Mbiama)

> I don't like Ijaw language because their people are aggressive, quarrelsome … Any little thing, they are ready to fight and prove that they are militants. In short, they are too hostile for my liking. (Godswill – Opolo)

> I don't have interest in learning Ijaw but for those who feel it is useful for them, they can go ahead. But as for me, it is almost impossible. (Akatugba – Ogbogeni)

> Bros, I good make we urhobo people integrate with Ijaw people by learning and speaking their language but if person never get work, you no go reason go that side. No be to learn or speak the language nai go put food for my table (Kester – Yenagoa).

The interviewees from the oral interview above, gave reasons why they could not speak Ijaw.

In as much as the first interviewee (Oke) loves to learn the language, she found it difficult.

The second interviewee (Oghenero) complained of the different dialects of the language making it difficult for him to learn and felt that since English or Pidgin could serve his communication needs, he did not see any reason to learn Ijaw. The third interviewee (Festus) saw age as a barrier in learning the language he was not brought up with. The fourth interviewee (Godswill) claimed he hated the language because of the attitude of the host which he described as being aggressive and hostile. This finding confirms the position of Edwards (1982); Fasold (1984) and Holmes (2008) that attitudes towards a language are often a reflection of attitudes towards the speakers of the language. For Godswill and perhaps others, feel that it is unreasonable to identify with a language whose people are hostile and aggressive. This result also supports

Valenta's (2010) findings in Norway, where refugees who felt marginalised or rejected are less likely to integrate, especially with regard to the acquisition of the host's language.

The fifth interviewee completely lacks interest in the language of the host community possibly for reasons best known to him. The last interviewee (Kester) seems to appreciate the need for integration with the host community by learning their language. However, getting a job appears to be more important to him than speaking a language.

4.1 Summary of Findings

First, with respect to the migrants' ethnic language and the language of the host community, significant symmetries and asymmetries were found between expressed language belief and actual behaviour. The migrants' indigenous language (Urhobo) was positively evaluated by all the age groups especially the younger and the older adult groups. They expressed a significant proficiency and use of their ethnic language which represents overt prestige and ethnolinguistic face. Similarly, as regards the language of the host community, all the age groups positively evaluated Ijaw. However, they did not match their positive feeling or disposition with their actual behaviour as seen in the poor proficiency and use of Ijaw, which represents covert prestige.

Second, based on age groups in the study, two linguistic identity prototypes were identified. They are weak Ijaw identity and strong ethnic identity. Although the weak Ijaw identity is expressed by all the age groups, the teenage group fared best since they had partially acquired the Ijaw language through education and the neighbourhood, but not the expense of their own heritage

language. Hence,their acculturation pattern is integration. This means they projected a bicultural identity: Ijaw and Urhobo identities. This age group is most likely to contribute towards inter-ethnic relationship and understanding and may serve as a link between their heritage culture and the host community. Strong ethnic identity is expressed by the younger adult and the older adult groups who have retained and maintained their ethnic language without incorporating their host's language except few of them. Hence, their acculturation pattern is termed separation. They projected an ethnolinguistic identity, which suggest that they would most likely be ethnocentric (that is, they would want to see their own group better or more important than others) and expected to exhibit acts of prejudice and discrimination between their in-group and out-group.

Finally, the majority, if not all the respondents in the study were at least bilinguals projecting multiple linguistic identities. The linguistic repertoire of the migrants consisted of the following languages: Urhobo, English, Nigerian Pidgin (Naija) and Ijaw. This does not mean that they had adequate or equitable proficiency in the languages at their disposal. Through these languages, the migrants projected diverse faces like ethnic, cosmopolitan, metropolitan and global faces.

4.1 Conclusion

The findings in this study reveal a balance between language and ethnic identity, with language playing a crucial role in shaping identities (Ikolo, 2025). This study on language attitudes has revealed the trajectory of identities among the Urhobo ethnic group in Bayelsa State. The three age groups used in this work have

shown that language is the most significant factor in the construction and negotiation of identities.

The study reveals a concurrence between positive attitudes towards Urhobo and actual language use across all age groups. However, a mismatch exists between positive attitudes towards Ijaw and its actual usage among all the age groups, except for the teenage group, who demonstrated partial proficiency. This finding does not preclude the possibility that the younger and older age groups may adjust their behaviour in the future to align their attitudes, as attitude can evolve over time. The language attitudes exhibited by Urhobo migrants underscore their desire to maintain psychological distinctiveness as an ethnic group in Bayelsa State, highlighting the complex dynamics of language, identity and culture in migrant contexts.

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