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## **Language Use in the Qua Clans in Calabar: Implications for the Maintenance of Ekin**

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Calabar, like every other urban areas, has its own indigenous population as well as migrants and immigrants residing in it. Interactions among these groups of people have led to a sociolinguistic situation which seems to threaten not only the development and spread, but also the survival of the indigenous languages, culture and ethnic identity of the indigenous people, particularly, the Qua people of Calabar. The Qua people are a distinct ethnic nationality from the Efik and Efut people also of Calabar. Ekin is the mother tongue of the Qua people but the language is threatened by the socio-economic, political and educational issues which surround the Qua geo-political space. This paper attempts to investigate the extent to which language use among the Qua people has been influenced by the contact situation and the implications of this on the maintenance of Ekin. The findings reveal that even though the indigenous Qua people are bilinguals or multilinguals, their bilineality or multilinguality in some cases does not include the knowledge of Ekin, their mother tongue. The study also reveals that the language behaviour of the people tends towards language shift.

### **Introduction**

Mobility leads to ethnolinguistic contacts within and around linguistic communities. These contacts could be socio-cultural, economic, educational or political in nature. Hoffman (1991:1) has noted that the "constant factor in such contacts...is that they always influence in some way the speech behaviour of the people involved and therefore eventually their languages." Contacts have been known to lead to linguistic adjacency, which equally have led to the diffusion of linguistic features across linguistic boundaries. The effects of these contacts therefore have been bilingualism or multilingualism with such consequences as code mixing, code switching, borrowings, interference varieties of languages and, in some instances, language shift/change or death have resulted (Trudgill, 1983, Heine and Nurse, 2000 and Akindele and Adegbite, 2005). Socio-cultural, economic political and educational contacts have been responsible for widespread individual and societal bilingualism or multilingualism in Nigeria. There is hardly any ethnic community in Nigeria where these phenomena are not noticeable.

Bilingualism or multilingualism cannot be separated from language use because they mirror the number of languages in use in a community. The varieties of languages, dialects or registers in use, the participants involved and their roles, language settings and topics are discussed in relation to these phenomena.

**Bilingualism or multilingualism** could vary in form. Harmers and Blanc (1989) have identified two forms which are the additive and subtractive forms. The additive form encourages the acquisition of other languages in addition to the mother tongue and so enhances cultural pluralism. It leads to language enrichment and maintenance in a community. The subtractive form on the other hand, occurs when the acquisition of one or more other languages overwhelms the mother tongue and eventually replaces it. It usually leads to a decline in the population of users of the mother tongue, the frequency of its use and a restriction in the functional range of the language. It therefore encourages cultural assimilation and eventually leads to language shift/change or death.

The present study is a contribution to the sociolinguistic study of the Qua clans in Calabar. The study investigates aspects of language use among the indigenous Qua people in the different Qua clans in Calabar in order to ascertain the form of bilingualism or multilingualism prevalent in them and how it impacts on Ekin.

### **The Qua People**

The Qua people are a distinct ethnic nationality with their own language and cultural traditions. They are of the Ekoid-Bantu stock and they trace their origin to Mbak Akang in Southern Cameroon. The different Qua clans, though founded by different individuals, accept the fact that they are Ekoi in origin and of a common descent historically. The Qua or Abakpa as they are commonly known have ten principal clans in the Calabar Municipal Area. These are Mgbohe-Mgbo (Big Qua town), Akim, Ikpai Ohom, Ediba, Kasuk, Nkonib (Ikot Ansa), Ikpai Omin (Ikot Omin), Mbakoko (Bakoko), Enang Aye and Nyagasang. Neighbouring Qua clans are found in Akpabuyo and Odukpani Local Government Areas. Each Qua clan is headed by a patriarch known as the 'Ntoe'. The Ntoe's council of chiefs is made up of village heads known as 'Esi Mfam Eben', who along with family heads known as 'Esi Njo' rule over the clans. The ten Qua clans make up the Qua Clans Constituted Assembly (QCCA) which is headed by the 'Ndidem', who must be an Ntoe of one of the clans.

The Qua people refer to themselves as 'Akin' and their mother tongue as 'Ekin', but the Efik in particular, and others generally refer to them as 'Abakpa', a name that is coined out of the Ekin words 'ba – come, and kpa – here/then'. Ekin is mutually intelligible with several other clusters of a language spoken in the central and northern parts of Cross River state and in parts of Southern Cameroon. The speakers of these clusters refer to the language as Ejagham. The Qua or Akin people believe that Ekin is a dialect of Ejagham and are thus a part of the Ejagham nation of Cross River State. Ekin is classified as Ekoid Bantu language of the New Benue Congo branch of the Niger Congo family (Bendor Samuel 1989, Essien 2000).

Though there are no records to support their claims, the Qua people believe that demographically, they constitute the largest indigenous ethnic group in Calabar Municipal area (QCCA 2000). Large though they may be, we consider them along with the Efut people of Calabar to form the linguistic minorities in the area. Their position agrees with the description of the linguistic minorities as "...groups of speakers who have as their native variety a language other than that which is the official, dominant or major language in the country where they live" (Trudgill

1983:141/142). The Efut people had since been assimilated into the Efik community as they had lost their own language and culture, and therefore their distinctiveness as an ethnic nationality. (Nair 1972). Their situation confirms the observation made by Heine and Nurse (2000:6) that:

Social, political and economic pressures are already conspiring to eliminate the languages of smaller communities... these languages are being eliminated because they have lost their functions and it is in no one's interest to maintain them.

### **Language Use in the Qua Clans**

The Qua people are not the only people resident in the Qua clans in Calabar. People from other ethnolinguistic groups are known to live there. In recent years, the uncertainties of the Calabar South area has resulted in an influx of residents into the different Qua clans. This trend, we believe, has some bearing on language use in these clans, as this study has shown.

To investigate aspects of language use among the Qua people, 200 indigenous Qua people resident in the different Qua clans were interviewed, 20 from each of the clans to ensure representation. The interview was in the form of questionnaire interview schedule. The questions asked sought to elicit information on the respondents' competence in Ekin, its functional range and the frequency of the use of the language. We believe that the responses got gave insight to the status of Ekin and the degree of its endangerment (whether it is moribund or retreating). In the area of competence, the respondents were asked to rate their receptive and productive skills in oral and written media of Ekin. They were thus categorized along the rating scales of very well, well, fairly well and not at all. The question on the range of use asked for the respondent's self-report of language use in the domains of home and neighbourhood. Finally, they were asked to give a self-report of how often they used their mother tongue. The responses were categorized along the rating scale of always, sometimes, rarely and not at all. We have selected these three questions to report on because we believe that the responses to them have far reaching implications on the maintenance of Ekin.

### **Findings**

The analysis and discussion of the findings of the language survey carried out in the Qua Clans in Calabar are presented in this section. The first part presents the respondents' competence in the use of Ekin, the second; the functional range of the language in terms of the domains of home and neighbourhood and the third; their frequency of use of the language.



**Table 1: Distribution of respondents in terms of their competence in Ekin**

Degree of competence	Understand		Speak		Read		Write	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Very well	104	52	104	52	16	8	8	4
Well	24	12	24	12	24	12	16	8
Fairly well	48	24	48	24	24	12	16	8
Not at all	24	12	24	12	136	68	160	80
Total	200	100	200	100	200	100	200	100

The summary of the language skills in Ekin presented in table 1. It shows that the respondents do not all exhibit equal productive abilities in the four language skills in their mother tongue. The table shows that more respondents understand and speak Ekin very well but only very few can read or write the MT very well. The figures presented above tend to suggest that there are more oral users of Ekin than literate ones in the Qua clans.

**Table 2: Self-report of the respondents' language use at home**

Language	Spouse		Child		Parents		Grandparents		Relatives	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Ekin	40	20	14	7	24	12	24	12	24	12
Efik	22	11	56	28	20	10	32	16	40	20
Efik/Ekin	50	25	44	22	60	30	64	32	59	29.5
English	16	8	20	10	20	8	16	8	20	10
Eng/Efik	32	16	36	18	16	8	28	14	20	10
Eng/Ekin	10	5	16	8	16	8	16	8	8	4
Eng/Efik/Ekin	30	15	14	7	48	24	20	10	24	12
Eng/Efik/NP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	2.5
Total	200	100	200	100	200	100	200	100	200	100

Table 2 above shows the respondents' use of language in the home. The result shows that Ekin is used with other languages in the home. It reveals that even though the use of Ekin in communicating with the spouse is high, the preference for it in communicating with other members of the family is not as high.

**Table 3: Self-report of language use in the neighbourhood**

Language	Neighbour		Friend		Stranger	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Ekin	26	13	6	3	-	-
Efik	24	12	40	20	20	10
English	30	15	30	15	76	38
Ekin/Efik	16	8	16	8	-	-
Eng/Efik	56	28	40	20	39	19.5
Ekin/Eng.	8	4	16	8	-	-
Eng/Ekin/Efik	12	6	24	12	-	-
Eng/Efik/NP	20	10	18	9	50	25
NP	8	4	10	5	15	7.5
Total	200	100	200	100	200	100

Table 3 above summarises the pattern of language use in the neighbourhood in the Qua clans we observed. The neighbourhood we observed is inhabited by the Qua people and people from other ethnolinguistic background. We found that English closely followed by Efik dominate this domain. Ekin is used alternately with English or Efik but it is not used with strangers at all.

**Table 4: Self Report of the Respondents' Frequency of the Use of Ekin**

Use of Ekin	Frequency	Percentage
Always	56	28
Sometimes	64	32
Rarely	32	16
Not at all	48	24
Total	200	100

Table 4 above summarises the respondents' report of their frequency of the use of Ekin. The result indicates that only 28% use Ekin often. The others we will opine use Ekin only when it is necessary while some do not use it at all. Those in the "not all group" are those who are not competent in the language.

Language use in the domains of home and neighbourhood was investigated in this study. From the investigation, we discovered that Ekin, the mother tongue of the Qua people is implemented along with Efik and English in the home domain. We would want to believe that the prominent use of Efik and English in the home domain especially between parents and their children is not unconnected with the socio-economic benefits derivable from the acquisition of these languages in the larger Calabar community in particular. The summary of the respondents' language use in the home indicates that their claim of the role of Efik is at variance with the trend we observed in the clans. This we have learnt is a matter of grave concern to the leaders of the Qua Clans Constituted Assembly (QCCA). The responses present Efik as performing supplementary or complementary role in the society but this, we are told is hardly the case. In an oral interview with the Chairman of the Qua Language Committee, a committee formed by QCCA, to "organize the revival, learning and sustenance of Ekin", he expressed dismay at "the predominance of Efik in Qua clans". This invariably means that the role of Efik in the Qua clans is replacive rather than complementary or supplementary. Only in a few instances can the use of Efik be seen as supplementary, he claims. The unrestricted use of Efik in the Qua clans has led to the severe erosion of the Qua language and culture, and this in turn has far reaching implications on the existence of the Qua people as a distinct ethnic group in Calabar town. Simply put, "an uncertain future stares the Qua in the face as a people", he opines. The very survival of the Qua clans is at stake without their language. The implications of this on group solidarity and vitality cannot be overemphasized.

The restrictive use of Ekin in the Qua neighbourhood is a matter of concern. One would have thought that the ethnic homogeneity of the Qua clans would have encouraged the functional allocation of existing languages to situation types or domains as is found in the diglossic situation between Efik and English in the Efik communities or in some other homogenous communities in Nigeria. This however, is

not the case. The overwhelming preference for Efik, especially, by the Qua people in all situations and domains impacts on the maintenance of Ekin. In some Qua clans such as Ikpai Omin, Kasuk, Ikpai Ohom and Nkonib, it has led to the assimilation of the Qua people and in some others such as Nyagasang and Mbakoko it has led to the de-ethnicization of the Qua people. The end result is the development of negative complexes as a result of the negative attitude of the Efik in particular, towards Ekin and the culture it represents. This is reflected in the ethnopaulisms directed at the Qua people in their homeland (Ansa, 2004). We also observed that the self confidence exhibited by the Efik in matters pertaining to their language and culture is observably absent among the Qua. Their self confidence seems to have been eroded along with their language. Some of the people interviewed, especially those we would categorise as the young generation, saw nothing wrong in their being regarded as Efik. This trend was noticeable in all the Qua clans.

We found that the responses to the question on attitude is at variance with what the respondents claimed in their use of language in different domains and what we actually observed in the Qua clans we visited. For instance, when asked how often they used Ekin, only 28% claimed the use of Ekin always, 72% varied between "sometimes", "rarely" and "not at all". We would want to believe that though favourably disposed to the use of Ekin, their mother tongue, the attitude of many of the respondents to Ekin is conditioned by factors beyond their control. These factors include socio-economic, political and educational factors which inhibit the use of Ekin in the community.

Even though we did not investigate the school domain, we are aware that there is an overwhelming preference for English in this domain (Ansa 2006). This we believe is not unconnected with the government stance on the use of language in education. Also, the in-migration of non Ekin speakers in predominantly Qua communities has led to the problem of mixed language abilities and backgrounds which is prevalent in the school system. This notwithstanding, the government was aware of this problem when it posited that the medium of instruction in the lower primary school should be the mother tongue of the learners or the language of the environment (NPE 1998:1). The trend in the Qua clans is decidedly different. The case of the minority language in mainstream education does not seem to be of any concern to the government both at the Local, State or Federal levels. The other language known to exist in the school system is Efik, the dominant local language in Calabar (Ansa 2002). The use of only English and Efik in school does not augur well for the maintenance of Ekin in the society.

### **Implications for the Maintenance of Ekin**

This study on language use in the Qua clans in Calabar has far reaching implications on the maintenance of Ekin in the different clans. The situation in the Qua clans however confirms Trudgill's (1983:142) assertion that:

Where the minority is smaller or less influential, the minority language or languages are unlikely to have official status, and their speakers, often out of sheer practical necessity, will tend to be bilingual.

The Qua people or Akin are therefore out of necessity bilingual or multilingual depending on their needs. This agrees with Egbokare (2004:10) when he asserts that: "the politics of dominance created linguistic imperatives and pressures in terms of an overwhelming need to acquire and use the dominant language of power and opportunity". We discovered from the study that there is no differentiation in communicative functions for Ekin and the other languages, particularly Efik, which exist in the community especially in the home domain. Other languages are used by the Qua people in the same domains, situations and role relations as Ekin. This trend poses a threat to the survival of Ekin in the Qua clans in particular, and in Calabar, in general. The tendency is, as we have observed, toward language shift rather than maintenance. If this trend is allowed to continue unchecked, there is the possibility that the Qua people will become de-ethnicised in future and their language will be listed like the Efut language among the dead languages in Cross River State.

### **Conclusion**

We will conclude this essay by restating the importance of language to a people. The role of language in ethnicity, group identity and intra-group relations cannot be overemphasised. Egbokare (2004: 507) opines that "language is an encyclopedia of knowledge of the cultural life of a people, their medicine, their religion, philosophy, literary traditions and verbal arts. It contains knowledge relating to a people's habitat and their adaptation". Therefore, when a language 'dies', its native speakers 'disappear' as well. To this end, we recommend that the Qua people especially, should intensify effort at not only reviving their language and its use in their community, they should equally carry out language management activities which will aim at not only developing the language; but also ensuring that it is taught to the people, especially the young generation. We are not aware that any orthography has been provided for Ekin. The fact that Ekin is one of the dialects of a language spoken in several local government areas and in a country other than Nigeria should not be lost on the people. The QCCA should coalesce with other dialect speakers of Ejagham to agree on a standard variety, which could then be developed and taught not only in the Qua clans in Calabar but also wherever the language is in use in the state, as has been done among speakers of the Yoruba language and Igbo. This is particularly necessary because Ejagham is one of the three languages approved by the Cross River State government and used in the electronic media for purposes of transmitting official information and for mobilization.

In addition to this, we would advocate that the Qua people should form pressure groups which will fight for the institutionalization of Ekin and its use in selected domains in the public sector in Calabar. They could equally agitate for the legitimisation of the language rights of the Qua people especially in the areas designated Qua clans in Calabar. These, we believe, in addition to their efforts in the Ekin language project will go a long way in ensuring that Ekin is maintained in the community. The efforts will also ensure the group's vitality in affording the young and future generation access to the community's cultural history; improving their sense of belonging as a result of their identification with the group and more



importantly, establishing the Qua people's distinct ethnic identity in the midst of other ethnic nationalities, in their home state Cross River, and in Nigeria.

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