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Is Yace A Dialect Of Yala?

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Abstract

This paper concerns the current realities on the linguistic relationship between Yala [ybr] and Yace (Ekpari) [ekr]. The two speech varieties are Idomoid, spoken primarily in Yala LGA, Cross River State, Nigeria. Our background research found that a recent study (Udoh 2003) regarded the speech varieties as dialects of one language, Yala. Through the use of wordlist, interview and observation schedule, we gathered linguistic and sociolinguistic data. Our data analysis reveals that Yace is a distinct language. It further shows that many Yace speakers are bilingual in Yala, even as most Yala speakers cannot speak or comprehend Yace.
1. **INTRODUCTION**

This paper concerns a sociolinguistic survey of the Yala [yba] and Yace [yce]. The survey is intended to determine the extent of relationship between Yala and Yace. The fieldwork was conducted in August 2017 by Linus Otronyi and John Muniru.

The rationale for carrying out this research was drawn from the comments on the said two languages made by Linus’s supervisor for his Master of Arts thesis. As a native Yala speaker, Linus had known Yace to be a distinct language—different from Yala. While writing his thesis in 2016, Linus mentioned Yace as a neighbouring language to Yala. But his supervisor, who had read a 2003 publication on the two languages where Professor Udoh (2003) noted that “Yace is a dialect of Yala,” quickly corrected Linus and pointed his (Linus’) attention to Udoh’s assertion (2003). The supervisor told Linus that he could not claim that the two languages are different unless he conducted more research to nullify the professor’s assertions.

Although the *Ethnologue* and *Index of Nigerian Languages* listed the two languages separately, it is not sufficient to prove Udoh wrong, considering that Udoh (2003) is the most recent survey and publication on the language.

*Map showing Yace, Yala and other neighbouring language areas*
1.1. Previous Research

1.1.1 Yace

Robert Armstrong (1981b) publishes a wordlist of Yace (which he calls “Yatye”). Herbert Stahlke in 1970 is reported by Armstrong (1989) to have published materials on “Yatye” which is “spoken along the Tiv border around Alifokpa,” mentioning two dialects of the language. In 1989, Armstrong presents a brief description of the linguistic features of Idomoid languages alongside Yace. However, Imelda Udoh (2003) states in a footnote that “Yache [Yace] and Kukelle are dialects of Yala”.

The Ethnologue (2014) also reports that people of all age groups are reported to be fluent users of Yace. Of the 50,000 Yace speakers, 15,000 are bilingual in Yala [yba], a neighbouring major language of Yala LGA. The people also use Bekwara [bkv], Igede [ige], Tiv [tiv] and English [eng]. As of 1980, portions of the Holy Bible, especially the Gospel of Mark have been translated and printed in the language. Written materials in the language are done in Latin script.

Regarding the level of use of the language, Lewis, et al (2014) puts its endangerment level at “6a (Vigorous)”. “Vigorous” implies that the language is used orally by all generations and is being learned by children as their first language.

1.1.2 Yala

The first wordlist of the Yala language (which is in the Yala Ogoja dialect) was published in Sigismund Koelle’s Polyglotta Africana (1854). In 1914, N.W. Thomas lists Yala as “Agala” in his Specimens of Languages from Southern Nigerian. P.A. Talbot calls Yala “Iyala” in his book, The Peoples of Southern Nigeria (1926), and mentions that “Ubiri” is a name for one of the three Yala dialects.

In 1976, Bunkowske wrote his Ph.D. thesis on the Yala Ogoja dialect. In 1989, Armstrong asserted that there are three distinct Idoma dialects—Yala Ogoja, Yala Ikom and Yala Obubra in Cross River State. He also presented a general overview of the grammatical structure of Idomoid languages, including Yala and its dialects.

1.2. Language classification

Armstrong (1989) provides the following classification for Yala [yba]: Niger-Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo, Benue-Congo, Idomoid, Akweya, Etulo-Idoma, Idoma, Yala.

Armstrong (1989:323) also presents the following linguistic genetic classification for Yace [ekr]: Niger-Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo, Benue-Congo, Idomoid, Yatye-Akpa, Yace

1.3. Yace communities

Speakers of Yace are found primarily in Yala Local Government Area of Cross River State, especially in Osina, Imbuor, Uchu, Aliforkpa, Wonyer, and Maa communities.
1.4. Population of Yace speakers

As of 2002, the population of the speakers of Yace is estimated to be 50,000 (See the Ethnologue 2014. In 1937, the speaker are 6,600 (RGA) and 10,000 in 1982 according to United Bible Society (UBS).

2. Methodology

2.1 Interview

We conducted a group interview in each of the communities of Aliforkpa, Ijiegu and Okuku. Aliforkpa and Ijiegu are Yace-speaking villages while Okuku is an Yala-speaking village. In each community we first spoke to a community leader to explain our purpose and to obtain permission. The community leader invited a group of more than 20 people, almost exclusively males but of various ages, to the interview. Following the Group Interview Questionnaire, we asked this group about their community’s contact patterns, comprehension of Yala, their attitudes toward Yala speakers and the vitality of their own language.

2.2 Wordlist

In order to determine the level of lexical similarity between the two speech varieties, we collected and compared the Swadesh 200-item wordlist in Yace and Yala.

We analysed the wordlists using WordSurv 7, a program developed by John Wimbish (1989) that calculates the percentage of words or forms judged to be similar by surveyors. To judge similarity, we typically followed the methodology for comparison as described by Frank Blair (1990). In this method, corresponding phones in two words to be compared are classified into three clearly defined categories. Words are only considered similar if at least half the phones in the words are category one (roughly “almost identical”) and no more than a quarter of the phones are category three (roughly “not similar”). For a more detailed explanation of this method, see Survey on a Shoestring (Blair 1990:27-33).

2.3 Observation

We observed which languages people used as they interacted with one another in each community we visited. We noted how the choice of language differed depending on factors including: the age category of the speaker and listener, the time, location, and topic of discussion. Throughout each day we recorded our observations in a notebook and discussed them as a team at the beginning of the next day. Our observations were summarized and saved for future reference. This tool provides a useful comparison between the community’s perceived and actual language use.
3 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Sociolinguistic relationship

3.1.1. Ethnolinguistic identity

The speakers of Yala and Yace reported emphatically that they are ethnically and linguistically different groups. According to the Yace speakers, “We are Ekpari people! We speak Yace language.” Yala speakers admitted that when they say the Yace speakers are part of them, it is only for political reasons. As far as Yace speakers are concerned, they only share the same local government area with the Yala but not the same ethnic and linguistic identity.

3.1.2. Lexical similarity

The results of the wordlist comparison below are as follows:

Yala Obubra and Yala Ikom are more lexically similar to each other than to Yala Ogoja. At 80% similarity, Yala Obubra and Yala Ikom can be considered two dialects of the same language.

Yala Obubra and Yala Ikom have 52% and 50% lexical similarity, respectively, to Yala Ogoja, which suggests they should be considered a closely related but distinct language.

Figure 1 Lexical similarities between the Yala dialects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yace</th>
<th>Yala</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>52%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

3.1.3. Contact Patterns

3.1.3.1 Intermarriage

Yace speakers said that they do marry Yala. Thirty percent of their spouses (especially wives) are reported to be Yala.

3.1.3.2. Market

According to the people, there are markets all over Yala-speaking and Yace-speaking areas. However, Yace speaker frequently carry out their shopping activities at the large market in Okuku (a Yala community).

3.1.3.4. School

While there are primary and secondary schools in all Yace communities, their children travel to Okuku for tertiary education such as the College of Health Technology.

3.1.3.5 Hospital

Virtually all Yace communities are reported to have a small health centre or dispensary. However, the people added that only minor ailments are treated at the health centre and that they
usually travel to Cross River State Specialist Hospital at Okuku for the treatment of major illnesses.

3.1.3.6 Politics

Yace speakers do share political offices with the Yala. For instance, the last chairman of the Yala LGA was a native speaker of Yace.

3.2. Comprehension

Yace speakers reported comprehending most of what is said in Yala. During group interview in both Alifokpa and Ijiegu, the people reported using Yala and English to communicate with the Yala. Yala speakers, on the other hand, reported that they do not understand Yace, though they said there are few individuals among them who are capable to speak and understand the language.

3.2 Attitude towards Yala speakers and their language

In general, the Yace speakers expressed positive attitudes towards Yala speakers and their language. People in Yala and Yace villages reported that Yala speakers are very nice people to relate and live with. They said that Yala people are “brothers” to them, adding that they are very “accommodating and friendly”.

Similarly, the Yace speakers reported that it is good to speak Yala. They added that speaking Yala would help “to foster good relationship between they and them”. Interestingly, the people also view the Yala as being superior to their own, considering that Yala has a huge population of speakers.

On whether they learn to speak Yala, Yace speakers said they (especially the older ones) do learn to speak Yala so that they “can speak without interpretation” with Yala speakers.

3.3 Vitality of Yace

3.3.1 Intergenerational transmission

From the people’s response, the older generations of the Yace speakers appear to be transmitting their vernacular to the younger generations. Parents reported teaching their children to speak their local languages, and the children use the vernacular for communication at most times.

3.3.2. Domains of language use

Yace speakers reported speaking their respective heritage languages in informal domains—at home, in the farm, in the market and during community meetings. We also observed their language use in the villages we visited, and confirmed that both men and women of all ages mostly speak their vernacular with each other. We also observed children speaking their local dialects with each other and their parents in all the villages visited.

3.3.3. Attitude of Yace speakers toward their own dialect

Yace speakers expressed a positive attitude towards their own dialect. Each group reported that it is good to speak the dialect. The groups believe that their dialects are as good as English.
They said they would not be happy if their children fail to continue speaking their dialects in the future.

3.3.4. Government policy

The Nigerian government recognizes the existence of every vernacular in Nigeria. It encourages their oral use and does not restrict development of any into a standard written form (see National Policy on Education, 1981). Therefore, the Yace speakers in Nigeria are at liberty to promote oral use of their language and develop it into standard written forms.

3.3.5. Available literature

According to the people, they have seen materials written in Yace. However, no formal literature is acknowledged by the people.

3.3.6. Yace rating on the EGIDS

Considering the indicators of vitality described in sections 3.3.1-3.3.5, Yace is best put at level 6a “Vigorous orality” on the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS). This implies that the dialects “are used for face to face conversations by all generations and the situation is sustainable.” (See www.ethnologue.com/about/language-status)

CONCLUSION

The Yala and Yace are distinct languages. Speakers of the two languages reported they are separate ethnic groups. In line with the people’s perception, the result of wordlist comparison shows that the shared vocabulary between the two the languages are just 18%.

In terms of comprehension, most Yala cannot comprehend any conversation in Yace, but Yace speakers (especially the adults) could understand most of what is said in Yala.

Speakers of Yace expressed positive feelings and attitudes towards the Yala and their language. They said that Yala people are their “brothers”. They added that they (the Yala) are very “accommodating and friendly”.

On the vitality of the Yace, they are best rated at level 6a on the EGIDS, which is “vigorous orality,” primarily because the language is still being transmitted to children by their parents.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


