

## LANGUAGE EXTINCTION, PRESERVATION STRATEGIES AND THE NEW NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY OF NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*Language plays a vital role in any society. Yet, the ambivalent attitude of Nigerians to their languages is worrisome. It is glaring that this attitude probably birthed the publication of the new national language policy, a novel document for the use and preservation of languages in Nigeria. This paper highlights the socio-political and educational factors contributing to language loss in Nigeria. Language extinction, a global issue, has dire implications for cultural identity and heritage preservation. Over 172 Nigerian languages are at risk of extinction due to diminished intergenerational transmission, lack of adequate documentation, and dominance of English in education and public life. Drawing on insights from UNESCO and the Endangered Language Project, it critiques existing national language policies. It explores strategies proposed by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) for mitigating language extinction. These include official status recognition, curriculum integration, resource development, and community engagement. The study underscores the urgency of proactive strategies to preserve Nigeria's linguistic diversity, emphasizing that language is both a vehicle of cultural knowledge and a marker of identity. It calls for concerted efforts to revitalize endangered languages and ensure their continuity for future generations.*

**Keywords:** Language, language loss/extinction, language policy, NERDC, Nigerian languages.

### Introduction

The fate of languages and their speakers has always been the concern of linguists. Language extinction is a major aspect of linguistic inequality and is analogous to linguistic genocide, which entails the withering away of languages. When a language is not well documented, its speakers stop using it, it is used in fewer communicative domains, and it is not passed down; it is first endangered and then extinct. Agwuele (2010) states that language endangerment is a sociolinguistic term used to describe languages that are in the process of being eclipsed in their cultural domain by other languages. Thus, an endangered language is likely to become extinct. Part of UNESCO's Red Book's

classification of language endangerment includes those that are "extinct" and "nearly extinct." These are languages that are nearly or completely extinct, with few or no living speakers. However, the criteria for defining "seriously endangered," "endangered," or "potentially endangered" languages vis-a-vis the "safe" or the "non-endangered" seem to be more nebulous (Azuonye, 2002:41).

Adekunle (1976) in Odamah et al. (2025) classifies the languages of Nigeria according to their functions. He considers Class A as the major indigenous languages spoken by at least six million native speakers and used widely outside their state of origin by Nigerians whose mother tongues are

different. They are Hausa, Igbo, and Yorùbá. He identifies Class B languages that are not often used outside their state of origin, yet they are officially recognized and used at the national or federal level as some of the nine major languages. They are Kanuri, Fula, Edo, Efik, Tiv, and Ijo, etc., whereas Class C are minor languages with no official recognition at the state level. Adekunle's assertions about the aforementioned classification, particularly concerning Class C languages, may be subject to some questioning. It should be acknowledged that the Federal Government of Nigeria (1979) officially recognizes Hausa, Igbo, and Yorùbá as tools for the conduct of business in the National Assembly side by side with English. The multilingual character of the Nigerian nation has resulted in its inability to develop a national language that can reflect and integrate the cultural diversities of the nation. This development has placed the English language in a preponderance of official life. Though regional languages like Yorùbá, Igbo, and Hausa are also recognized by the 1999 constitution as official languages, it is, however, important to emphasize the fact that English enjoys more prominence among the other languages because, while these indigenous languages are restricted to the regions that culturally produced them, the English language cuts across cultures, borders, and races. Thus, the focus of this paper is on the dwindling fortunes of the Yoruba language and its progressive systematic displacement by the English language among secondary school students in Yorubaland.

It is impossible to revive a language that has gone extinct. Languages with many thousands of speakers are no longer being acquired by children; at least 50% of the world's

more than six thousand languages are losing speakers. We estimate that, in most world regions, about 90% of the languages may be replaced by dominant languages by the end of the 21st century. Nigeria is a heterogeneous society, and with this, various ethnic groups each have their own peculiar language and dialects being spoken in different communities (Akinkurolere and Adewumi, 2013). Abdul (2005) acknowledges this polarity and argues that "The numerically—and politically—major ethnic groups are the composite Hausa-Fulani of the north, the Yoruba of the southwest, and the Igbo of the Southeast. While Ayeomoni (2012) maintains that there are over 400 languages in Nigeria, which are from various ethnic groups.

It has become a subject of concern that some Nigerian languages may be at risk of becoming extinct; this fact is further buttressed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO: 2006) prediction that the Igbo language, one of the three major Nigerian languages, may become extinct in the next 50 years. Similarly, a study was carried out in 2018 on the extinction of indigenous languages in Nigeria, which came to the conclusion that a lot of Nigerian languages would go extinct in a few years unless proactive steps are taken.

According to the Endangered Language Project (2020), 172 Nigerian languages are going into extinction. Some of these languages include

1. Ake language, spoken in four villages in Lafia LGA, Nassarawa State, Nigeria, with less than 2,000 native speakers as of 2006
2. Alago language Spoken in Awe and Lafia LGA, Nassarawa State, Nigeria, with about 15,000 native speakers as of 2011

3. Bade language, spoken in the northern part of Yobe State, Nigeria, with only 250,000 native speakers as of 2007
4. Bakpinka language, spoken in Cross River State, Nigeria, with about 4,000 native speakers as of 2006
5. Centuum language, spoken in Balanga LGA, Gombe State, Nigeria, with less than 100 native speakers as of 2011
6. Defaka language, spoken in Opobo-Nkoro LGA of Rivers State, Nigeria, with less than 200 native speakers as of 2001
7. Deguza language, spoken in Bauchi State, Nigeria, with about 2,500 native speakers as of 2003
8. Dulbu language, spoken in Bauchi LGA, Bauchi State, Nigeria, with less than 100 native speakers
9. Fyem language, spoken in Bauchi and Plateau State, Nigeria, with less than 3,000 native speakers
10. Geji language, spoken in Toro and Bauchi LGAs, Bauchi State, Nigeria, with about 1,000 native speakers as of 2005
11. Guruntum, spoken in Paali and Duguri districts of the Alkaaleeri LGA of Bauchi State with 15,000 native speakers as of 1993
12. Gyem language, spoken in Bauchi State, Nigeria, with about 1,000 native speakers as of 1995
13. Ilue language, spoken in Cross River State, Nigeria, with about 5,000 native speakers as of 1998
14. Jilbe language, spoken in only one village in Borno State with about 100 native speakers as of 1998
15. Kono language, spoken in Kona village, Saminaka LGA, Kaduna State, with about 5,000 native speakers as of 2000
16. Kudu Camo language, spoken in Bauchi State, Nigeria, with only 42 native speakers as of 1990.
17. Mvanip language, spoken in Taraba State, with about 100 native speakers as of 1999
18. Ngwaba language, spoken in Adamawa State, Nigeria, with about 10,000 native speakers as of 1994
19. Polci language, spoken in Bauchi State, Nigeria, with about 22,000 native speakers as of 1995
20. As of 1993, there were about 44,000 native speakers of the Reshe language in Kebbi and Niger State, Nigeria.
21. Sambe language, spoken in Plateau State, Nigeria, with only 2 elderly native speakers as of 2005
22. Somyev language, spoken in Kila Yang village, Mambila Plateau, Taraba State, Nigeria, with about 15 native speakers as of 2000

This is a giant cause of concern for the affected cultures and Nigeria as a country. According to UNESCO, every language reflects a unique worldview with its value systems, philosophy, and particular cultural features. The extinction of a language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural knowledge embodied in it for centuries. This includes historical, spiritual, and ecological knowledge that may be essential for the survival of not only its speakers but also countless others."

A person's native language holds great significance as it is embodied in their heritage and belief systems. Consequently, the loss of these languages would result in the loss of a personal connection to who they are and where they come from. In other words, even if they learn to speak another language, their sense of identity and belonging will be uprooted, and they will not be able to

pass down this heritage to the next generation.

### **Rationale for the Study**

Language is more than a means of communication; it is a repository of cultural values, knowledge systems, and collective identity. The extinction of a language represents the loss of unique worldviews, philosophies, and traditions cultivated over centuries. By investigating the causes of language extinction and evaluating the strategies proposed in Nigeria's National Language Policy,

Language extinction has become a pressing global concern, threatening cultural heritage, identity, and historical continuity. In Nigeria, a linguistically rich nation with over 400 languages, the phenomenon of language loss is particularly acute. The displacement of indigenous languages by dominant ones, especially English, has led to a decline in intergenerational language transmission, diminishing the use of native languages in education, governance, and public life. This study emerges from the urgency to address the sociopolitical, educational, and cultural factors contributing to language extinction in Nigeria and to explore strategies for preserving its linguistic diversity. It also aims to contribute to the revitalization and preservation of endangered languages. The research underscores the role of language as a tool for fostering national unity, cultural pride, and sustainable development. The following questions guided this study:

1. To what extent does the National Language Policy published by the NERDC address the identified causes of language extinction in Nigeria?
2. What specific strategies and mechanisms does the policy

propose for the preservation of endangered Nigerian languages?

3. Are there sustainable measures for the preservation of endangered Nigerian languages in the New National Language Policy?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Language Explained**

Mankind is blessed with the wonderful instrument of language to convey and understand different individuals' emotions, thoughts, and opinions. The use of language is profoundly entrenched in human culture. The child absorbs the language from their parents and family members.

We utter and hear certain words and sentences. As one grows up in different cultures and environments, one's language is shaped and refined because of interaction with different environmental forces. Language is processed in different regions of the world, forming different cultural and ethnic entities.

Language is a complex phenomenon. Linguists, psychologists, and philosophers have attempted to define and describe it in their own words. It is a means of communicating ideas, feelings, and emotions through spoken and written words. Language is a primarily human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires through a system of voluntarily produced symbols." - Sapir

In the opinion of Henry Sweet, a phonetician, "Language is the expression of ideas through speech sounds combined into words. We combine words into sentences, and this combination responds to the transformation of ideas into thoughts. Thus, language is a system of conventionally spoken or written words

used by human beings to express themselves as members of a social or cultural group. From childhood, every person acquires the ability to use words from a vocal communication system for speaking and listening. This vocal communication system comprises a circumscribed set of sounds resulting from movements of certain organs within the throat and mouth and is commonly known as language. Using these sounds, people can exchange information and opinions, express emotions and feelings, influence the activities of others, and feel friendliness and hostility towards others. Language is an important means of communication, but it encompasses more than just spoken and written forms. Language is the expression of ideas through speech sounds combined into words. Sentences combine words, mirroring the transformation of ideas into thoughts (Henry Sweet, 2018).

Isphording & Otten (2014) provide two meanings of language. First, language is a tool used to shape thoughts and feelings, desires and actions, and a tool that is used to influence and be influenced. Second, language is a clear sign of good and bad personalities, of family and nation, and of human dignity. Similarly, Canagarajah & De Costa (2016) found that language is a means of spiritual connection, which is essential in living together. As a term in linguistics, it defines language as a system of arbitrary sound symbols, which are used by members of a society to cooperate, interact, and identify themselves (Oviogun and Pals 2020).

John McWhorter, an associate professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, as cited by Nordquist (2018), said that "Language—more specifically human language—refers to the grammar and

other rules and norms that allow humans to make utterances and sounds in a way that others can understand. Language is called a social phenomenon because it has relevance only in a social setting. Language undergoes a continuous, often unnoticed, process of growth and change. It becomes sharp, crisp, refined, and versatile with time (Nordquist, 2020).

### **The New National Language Policy of Nigeria (NNLP)**

Some time ago, the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) organized a stakeholders' roundtable in Abuja on developing Nigeria's National Language Policy (NNLP). During this event, a technical committee was established after extensive deliberations to oversee the policy's development. This committee comprises representatives from key ministries, language institutions, and related agencies. The chairman of the committee is the president of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria, who also serves as a member of the NERDC governing board. The primary objective of forming this committee is to place language-related initiatives at the core of Nigeria's national development (Vanguard, July 28, 2010).

The Nigerian government has established several bodies to promote the development of indigenous languages. These include the Nigerian Arabic Language Village, which caters to Muslims who communicate in Arabic and aims to preserve Arabic language culture. Additionally, the Institute of Nigerian Languages in Aba is responsible for building the capacity of teachers to effectively teach Nigerian languages in schools and support the implementation of the National Language Policy.



The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) is also leading efforts to establish a National Language Policy. Additionally, the Language Development Centre plays a crucial role in promoting Nigerian languages. These organizations, along with others, contribute to the advancement of Nigeria's linguistic landscape by implementing various initiatives aimed at language development. Collectively, these institutions are committed to ensuring that language related activities remain a central focus in Nigeria's national development agenda.

Igboanusi (2010) in Aruya (2015) observed that indigenous language development in Nigeria tends to favor major languages, resulting in language conflicts fueled by competition among the country's numerous ethnic languages striving for dominance and survival. However, it is essential to note that developing a national language policy does not necessarily imply adopting a single national language. While some countries, like Indonesia, have chosen one national language (Bahasa Indonesia) from among 750 languages for government, education, and diplomacy, others have adopted a more inclusive approach. For instance, South Africa, with its diverse linguistic landscape, has recognized 12 languages for official purposes, including governance, education, and business.

In Nigeria, where there are approximately 500 languages according to the latest language delineation (Vanguard, July 2015), the challenge lies in determining which languages should be prioritized within a national language policy (Adenipekun, 2010). The notion of a linguistically homogenous nation is increasingly outdated, especially for African countries like Nigeria,

characterized by significant linguistic diversity.

Adenipekun (2010) provided examples from other multilingual countries to illustrate various approaches to language policy. Rwanda, after transitioning from colonial rule by British, German, and French administrations, embraced bilingualism as a unifying strategy. Similarly, nations such as China, India, and Malaysia have actively promoted a single national language to foster a sense of national unity, such as Mandarin in China, Hindi in India, and Malay in Malaysia.

In Nigeria's case, the idea of recognizing ethnic languages as "languages of nationalities" has gained attention. State assemblies are constitutionally mandated to promote state languages, but there is no clear policy framework to guide this effort. Should states with multiple languages adopt just one? Given the critical role of language in national development, it is imperative to explore and define the type of language policy Nigeria needs to ensure inclusivity, unity, and progress. (Aruya, 2015).

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) and the National Policy on Education (2013) outline provisions that form the basis of Nigeria's language policy. Section 55 of the Constitution states that the National Assembly's affairs shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, when necessary, arrangements are made. Similarly, the National Policy on Education emphasizes the importance of language in fostering social interaction, national unity, and cultural preservation. Key stipulations include:

1. Children should learn the language of their immediate environment and one of the three major Nigerian

- languages (Hausa, Igbo, or Yoruba) to promote national unity.
2. French is designated as Nigeria's second official language and must be taught in primary and junior secondary schools to enhance interactions with neighboring countries.
  3. Early childhood education must use the mother tongue or the immediate community's language as the primary instruction medium.

A summary of Nigeria's language policy highlights the following educational and administrative directives:

- Governance: Use of English alongside Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba at the national level.
- Pre-primary education: Instruction in the mother tongue.
- Primary education: Use of the mother tongue, English, and French.
- Junior secondary education: Instruction in English, French, and one indigenous language (not the student's mother tongue).
- Senior secondary education: Focus on English and one indigenous language, with optional courses in French or Arabic.
- Tertiary education: No specific language guidelines are provided.

Globally, language policies have often promoted one dominant language, but many nations now aim to protect and enhance regional and ethnic languages as tools for national development. Language policies, shaped by legislation and government actions, play a crucial role in fostering literacy, protecting linguistic diversity, and supporting national priorities. In Nigeria, the link between language policy and the development of indigenous languages is

evident, reflecting the belief that democracy and cultural preservation are tied to the effective use of local languages.

The National Policy on Education (6th Edition, 2013) further elaborates:

1. In monolingual communities, the language of the immediate environment will be the medium of instruction for the first three years of primary school, with English introduced as a subject.
2. From the fourth year, English becomes the medium of instruction, while the local language, French, and Arabic are taught as subjects.
3. In junior secondary school, core language subjects include English, French, and the local language, with Arabic as an elective.
4. At the senior secondary level, core languages include English and one of the three major indigenous languages, with elective options in literature, Arabic, and other Nigerian languages with developed orthographies.

The policy also emphasizes the use of English and major indigenous languages in the National Assembly and recognizes French as essential for fostering regional cooperation. These measures reflect the government's recognition of language as a cornerstone of social interaction, national cohesion, and cultural preservation. However, the successful implementation of these policies requires robust programs and activities to achieve the nation's developmental goals.

### **The Concept of Language Loss and Extinction**

Language is a fundamental aspect of any society, which is both a natural and a constructed phenomenon. The loss

of a language signifies the erosion of a people's values, culture, and identity. Language loss occurs when a group of people ceases to use their mother tongue, often due to the dominant influence of a second or third language. It represents the systematic or random reduction in the use, structure, and cultural relevance of a language. Language loss is the result of a systematic or random reduction in the form and content of a language and its spheres of competence (Ofodu, 2014). Agwuele (2010) elucidates that language endangerment refers to the process where more dominant languages replace a language within its cultural context. Endangered languages are those at risk of extinction, and UNESCO's Red Book categorizes them as "extinct," "nearly extinct," "endangered," and "seriously endangered" (Azuonye, 2002:41).

One primary factor leading to language endangerment is language contact, where interaction between languages often results in the dominance of major languages over minor ones. UNESCO reports the gradual extinction of nearly 50% of the world's languages due to their lack of transmission to younger generations. In Nigeria, more than 36 languages are classified as endangered in UNESCO's Red Book on Endangered Languages. The impact of language endangerment extends to the culture of the affected speech communities. As language and culture are closely intertwined, the loss of a language often results in the disappearance of culturally significant practices, such as oral traditions, songs, poetry, and historical narratives.

In African countries like Nigeria and Ghana, which were formerly British colonies, colonial influences persist; the preference for Western culture among elites exacerbates language loss. Many

parents discourage their children from speaking their mother tongue, favoring English and Western cultural practices. This shift not only undermines traditional languages but also diminishes the collective and individual identities of the affected communities.

**Strategies from the New National Language Policy (NLP) on Language Extinction.** The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (2022) proposes innovations and strategies in national language policy aimed at finding measures to reduce rates of language extinction. The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council proposes a wide range of measures to safeguard the rates and levels of language withering or death in Nigeria. Below, we explain our analyses of the proposed strategies.

#### 1. Mass Production and Dissemination of the NLP.

We should encourage strategic actions focused on mass production and dissemination. This is as observed in Chapter 6 (Section 117a), which emphasizes the importance of making the policy widely accessible through

“mass production and dissemination of the NLP through various channels, such as print and electronic media, stakeholder consultations, press briefings, social media channels”

The policy's approach to dissemination is rooted in making the policy accessible to the widest possible audience, which is crucial for any strategic effort. The policy ensures that information about language preservation reaches diverse demographics, as widespread



dissemination in various media not only democratizes access but also integrates these languages into both formal and informal societal frameworks. This large-scale visibility is essential in promoting indigenous languages

Languages are a part of everyday discourse, which is critical to their survival. This approach helps reach a broad audience, raising awareness and encouraging language use across society.

#### 1. Status Recognition and Inclusion:

The government aims to preserve Nigerian languages by giving them official status and actively including them in educational programs at all levels. This means integrating them into the curriculum, ensuring their use in teaching various subjects, and creating resources in those languages. This is stated in Objective 16b.

"Preserve Nigerian languages and save them from extinction through status recognition and inclusion in educational programs across all levels of the Nigerian education system."

#### 2. Promoting and Activating Languages:

NERDC strategic moves to eliminate language extinction as moves in Objective 16c:

... activate Nigerian languages as powerful tools for mass literacy development."

The government intends to utilize Nigerian languages as tools for mass literacy development, making them relevant and accessible to a wider population. This could involve creating literacy programs, promoting their use

in media, and encouraging their adoption in public spaces.

#### Equipping Learners:

##### Objective 16d

"Strengthen and promote the equitable utilization of all Nigerian and foreign languages."

The government emphasizes the need to equip learners with the skills to utilize Nigerian languages effectively, both within Nigeria and internationally. Such efforts could involve promoting language learning programs, developing resources for language acquisition, and encouraging their use in cultural events and international exchanges.

#### 3. Development of Resources:

The government emphasizes the development of textual and instructional materials in various Nigerian languages, including sign language. This involves creating textbooks, dictionaries, educational tools, and other resources that make learning and using those languages easier. This is as observed in Objective 16g:

"Promote the development of textual and instructional materials in various Nigerian languages, including sign language."

#### 4. Regular Review and Adaptation:

The government emphasizes regular review and updating of curricula to ensure they are relevant and effective in promoting the use and preservation of Nigerian languages. Corroborating this fact, point 22 of NERDC explains that

... Effective supervision shall be made to develop and regularly review the curricula for teaching and

learning of all Nigerian languages.

#### 5. Development of Orthographies and Metalanguages:

The government highlights the need to develop standardized writing systems (orthographies) and linguistic frameworks (metalanguages) for Nigerian languages, making them more readily accessible and usable. By implementing these strategies, the government aims to create a supportive environment for the preservation and development of Nigerian languages, ensuring their vitality and continued existence for future generations. As pointed out in 23:

... Efforts shall be made to develop orthographies. and meta languages for the teaching and learning of all Nigerian languages."

#### 6. Stakeholder Involvement and Feedback Channels:

Ensuring that language preservation aligns with community needs, the NLP proposes in Section 176c: "creating opportunities for stakeholders' feedback" It also highlights the importance of involving community and faith-based organizations, NGOs, and traditional institutions to foster language ownership and participation, stating the need for "Interfacing with Community Based Organizations (CBOs), Faith Based Organizations (FBOs), Non - Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the Press, and traditional institutions" (Section 177c). This involvement strengthens language preservation efforts by engaging stakeholders directly."

It is quite unfortunate that, after about three years of publishing this

document, some of these laudable strategies are moribund and not accessible to many people, communities, and even religious circles. Not many teachers are aware of this document. So then, how will these strategies be implemented?

### Conclusion

The phenomenon of language endangerment and extinction poses a profound threat to cultural heritage, identity, and knowledge systems in Nigeria and beyond. This paper demonstrates the displacement of indigenous languages. The erosion of linguistic diversity undermines not only the unique worldviews embedded in these languages but also the collective identity and historical continuity of their speakers. While Nigeria's multilingual framework reflects its rich cultural tapestry, inadequate implementation of language policies has exacerbated the marginalization of indigenous languages. Proactive measures, such as those proposed by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), must be urgently implemented to reverse the trend of language loss. These include the integration of indigenous languages into education, the development of textual and instructional resources, stakeholder engagement, and the promotion of cultural pride in native tongues.

Preserving endangered languages is not merely an academic or governmental challenge—it is a societal imperative that requires the commitment of individuals, communities, and institutions. Without sustained efforts to revitalize and support these languages, Nigeria risks losing invaluable cultural and historical legacies. Thus, fostering the survival and growth of indigenous languages is

essential for ensuring that the diverse voices of Nigeria's heritage continue to resonate across generations.

### Recommendations

This paper recommends the following as part of the possible solutions to the actualization of the strategies enunciated in the new national language policy:

- Enhanced Policy Implementation: The government must ensure that the provisions of the National Language Policy are actively enforced, including integrating indigenous languages into education at all levels.
- Resource Development: Priority should be given to producing teaching materials, orthographies, and linguistic resources for endangered languages to facilitate their revival and use.
- Community Engagement: Collaboration with local communities, traditional institutions, and NGOs is vital to create a sense of ownership and commitment toward language preservation.
- Awareness Campaigns: Conduct nationwide campaigns to promote the importance of indigenous languages as cultural treasures and practical tools for communication.
- Continuous Evaluation: Establish mechanisms for regularly reviewing and updating the National Language Policy to address emerging challenges in language preservation effectively.

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