

**Investigating the Potential for Major Nigerian Languages to Serve as National Languages:
Linguistic, Cultural and Economic Significance**

Chinyere Rebecca Mogboh

Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University
Awka, Nigeria
Phone: +2347069263437
Email: bekychinyere@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores the multicast of multilingualism in Nigeria and the opportunities and challenges of nationalising Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo as national languages within the larger framework of English hegemony, globalisation, policy stagnation, and ethnic conflicts. The research employs a qualitative research design and non-participant observation to draw evidence based on markets, schools, religious meetings, festivals and media, comparing South Africa, India and Switzerland. The problem addressed is the ongoing relegation of indigenous languages to the peripheral position within the national discourse, even though indigenous languages are significant culturally, demographically, and economically. Findings indicate that Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo are highly linguistically sustainable, culturally attractive, and grassroots economically valuable, but are still limited by the established dominance of English and poor policy enforcement. Cross-national comparisons underscore effective models of multilingual policies of inclusion that strike a balance between unity and diversity. This paper concludes that Nigeria should implement a bilingual system that promotes Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo in education, business, and culture, yet keep English as a global language, which will maintain integration, inclusivity, and sustainable growth of the nation. By so doing, the paper adds to the burning debate of language sovereignty, cultural preservation, and social empowerment in postcolonial African societies.

Keywords: Multilingualism, Language Policy, Indigenous Language, English Hegemony, National Development

Introduction

Nigeria is a classic example of multilingual complexity within a post-colonial African setting in the vibrant area of sociolinguistics that intersects identity, power, and societal progress. Being the most linguistically diverse nation-state in Africa, the country accommodates hundreds of native languages whilst English is the official language of governance and education and commerce; while Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo play important roles as potent regional lingua francas respectively. The resulting multilingual topology offers both potential and tension: as carriers of culture, identity and local knowledge. Having over 300 native languages living in coexistence with English, the linguistic terrain of the country presents the challenge of cultural diversity as well as the difficulty of creating a single national identity. According to Obins Nuhu, Andrew Onoja and Daniel Nimran “Nigeria is estimated to have more than 500 native languages; therefore, Nigeria is a multilingual country” (3). Such linguistic plurality is not simply a historical phenomenon, but one which highlights the possibility of native languages to stimulate the development of the nation. In fact, multilingualism is the presence of numerous languages within the same

country (Lilian Duru, Ijeoma Udushirinwa and Nonye Nnani, 18), which shows the ability of this diversity to be used to unite, not to divide people.

Scholars and researchers alike have stressed that language can be not only a means of communication, but also the base of culture and economic exchange, which is proved by the statement that “Language is culture and culture is language, the only creative property peculiar to human beings. It is the exclusive path to thinking that renders human feasible” (Duru, Udushirinwa and Nnani, 23). It is another concept that posits that “it is the key to the heart of people and, therefore, their knowledge and treasures (Francis Egbokare, cited in Duru, Udushirinwa and Nnani, 23), indicating that failing to support indigenous tongues is the way to forget about the heritage of the Nigerian people. It is further attested to Emeka Nwaobia perspective stating that “The archives of the identity and lifestyle of a people is not only the possession of their language but also handed over to other people and new generations, through the channels of language” (113). All these points together establish the research field as an area that is interested in the way in which linguistic policies within a multilingual society such as Nigeria can

strike a balance between colonial legacies and indigenous empowerment.

Moving to the centre of interest of this paper, this study focuses on the prospects of the major Nigerian languages: Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo to become national languages based on the criteria of their linguistic sustainability, cultural appeal and economic benefits. The languages commonly known as the “big three” dominate the demographic and regional spheres but their status as national languages have not been studied in detail in the context of the English hegemony. As Chuka Chukwube notes “the three major (national) languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as the L2 languages of national culture and integration” (82). This places them in the role of cross-ethnic bridges. In linguistic terms, their strength is demonstrated when the National Policy on Language state that “Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba should be treated as the potential national languages that should be developed and be used as L1 and L2 throughout the formal educational system” (cited in Chukwube, 82). Duru, Udushirinwa and Nnani emphasizes on the involvement of these languages in local trade is economically emphasized. They opine that “the economy cooperation among speakers of different languages, just like the

way we teach agriculture in English while our farmers farm in Yoruba, hausa, Igbo, Edo, Efik, Nupe, Kanu, etc. result not in our under development but in an enhanced economic prosperity” (21).

This topic becomes highly timely in the age when globalisation threatens the linguistic variety and the countries should rethink the language policies to develop them in a more sustainable way. The use of English, an importation of the colonials, in Nigeria, at a time when decolonization is really being advocated is what renders this question pressing. The unfamiliar lines of such attitude, as Sale Maikanti, Austin Chukwu, Moses Odibah and Moses Ogu cautions “will increasingly blow out the indigenous languages such as the so-called major ones (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) out of existence especially in Nigeria unless measures are taken to curb the trend” (521). Economically, grassroots innovation is driven by the native languages but as Chukwube notes “With the technical backwardness and failure of Nigeria to fully develop her national languages that is the foundation of human development, there is trepidation on the degree of globalisation preparedness of the nation” (83). This is worsened by the policy gaps, in which the domination of the Nigerian indigenous

languages by English restricts the technological and social empowerment (Kola Owolabi, 116). The driving factor behind the work of the researcher lies in the fact that he saw how these languages are thriving as a part of the community life, but also how they are excluded in the formal sphere because, as Morakinyo Ogunmodimu notes, “the substitution of an indigenous language would erase the elitism established by English” (157). Subtly, the study enquires into how these languages can bring about greater economic inclusivity and which obstacles, such as “globalisation, or ethnic tensions, hinder their nationalization” (Ogunmodimu, 158).

Through the analysis of the linguistic strength, cultural richness, and economic roles of Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, this paper aims to suggest ways of their enhancement, resolving the conflict between unity and diversity. According to Chukwube “Structural preparedness is obvious, as the development of Nigerian languages is on different levels, including the national and regional levels” (80). On a cultural level, Duru et al. note that “they promote cohesiveness because multilingualism in Nigeria has assisted in spreading culture” (24). Economics, Oyemike Benson submits that “the use of native language is the key to

the overall development of any country” (8). Despite these suggestions on the gains, there remains some perspectives stressing on the downside of such a move. According to Obins et al. “Any attempt to impose any particular tribal language or languages on the country is fraught with grave danger for the peaceful development of the federation” (6). The present study is designed to carve a path that will lead to linguistic sovereignty that will see the major languages of Nigeria play a major role in a unified and successful future.

The research is guided by one critical question: why do indigeneous languages in Nigeria continue to be marginalised in the national discourse, as a result of which cultural dilution, economic exclusion and disjointed unity continue to occur under the banner of English. This problem is experienced in both educational and policy spheres, where the indigenous languages are not given due attention, making it impossible to develop in a holistic manner. Several scholars have attempted to answer these questions in their own capacities, with Ogunmodimu submitting that “There is the salient fear of domination of the minor languages by the major ones” (157) as one of the criticisms against adopting an indigenous language as the national

language in Nigeria. To empower an indigenous language, as the national language is to by extension, to empower the ethnicity of the language so chosen over others (158). Nida Eugene and William Wonderly contend that:

In Nigeria, there is simply no politically neutral language. In fact, the division into three major regions reflects the three language poles: Hausa, Yoruba, and Ibo. The political survival of Nigeria as a country would even be more seriously threatened than it is if any of these three languages were promoted by the Government as being the one national language (65).

This is a warning against promoting any of the three predominant languages in Nigeria Hausa, Yoruba, or Igbo, to the rank of a national language because such an action poses a threat of fueling ethnic conflicts. The scholars emphasise that no politically neutral language exists in Nigeria and therefore there are the possibilities of greater socio-political fragmentation in case language policy is biased in the favour of other groups. At the heart of this study is the

question of the endemic linguistic marginalisation of Nigeria, where national discourse continues to marginalise indigenous languages despite their integration, cultural and economic potentials. The study charts a way forward towards linguistic sovereignty that balances the demands of solidarity with the maintenance of the multi-ethnic Nigeria identities.

Methodology

This research paper used qualitative research design and non-participant observation as its exclusive method of collecting primary data on the linguistic roles of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, cultural roles and economic roles. The researcher monitored natural language use in market and school settings, motor parks, religious meetings, cultural festivals and local media settings without intervening in the process. Linguistically, speech pattern, code-switching, proverbs and idiomatic expressions provided data that showcased communicative strength. There was a cultural focus on the use of native languages in prayers, songs, rituals, and communal performances which stressed identity and tradition. In economic terms, it was observed with an emphasis on bargaining,

advertisement, and the local media content in which the native languages favoured grassroots innovation and trade. The field notes were highly structured to give first hand testimonies of how these languages operated in the domains and proved that they could be used as national languages.

Also included in this research is a comparative analysis of countries that are facing comparable cases of multilingualism as Nigeria, like South Africa, India and Switzerland, which have embraced inclusive language policies to strike a balance between unity and diversity. Through the analysis of how these countries are coping with linguistic plurality, the research shows certain lessons that can be replicated in the effort of Nigeria to nationalise Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. Such comparison facilitates the argument through placing the problems and opportunities faced by Nigeria in the global context.

Prospects and Challenges in Nationalizing Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo

The opportunities and obstacles of Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo becoming the national languages in Nigeria are discussed below with consideration of linguistic feasibility, cultural importance and the economic importance. Although these

languages have demographic power, cultural richness, and can help create a sense of national identity, their status is not achieved without challenges, including the dialectal diversity, ethnic sensibilities, globalisation, and the well-established dominance of English. This part thus analyses the prospects as well as the limitations that characterise the discourse on their nationalisation.

Linguistic Sustainability of the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo Languages

Linguistic sustainability is the capacity of a language to retain its livingness over generations by being used in educational, media, governmental, and everyday activities. Within the Nigerian context, Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo are highly sustainable because they have large numbers of speakers, have integrated into the culture and have developed orthographies, but are under threat by English dominance and globalisation. It is important to look at their sustainability in order to determine their potential as national languages and their contribution to the keeping of the linguistic heritage in Nigeria. Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo have a high level of linguistic sustainability due to their high numbers of speakers and

domination of their areas, but English domination is a challenge.

The Hausa language (with an estimated 63 million speakers) is a trade language of the Northern part of Nigeria, and standardised since the 1930s, which is used in education and media education such as BBC Hausa (Ethnologue, np). According to Adegbija Efurosibina “The standard orthography in Yoruba, used by 47 million people, is taught in southwestern schools, and in Nollywood” (67). Nolue Emenanjo notes that “Igbo, having 46 million speakers, has dialectal problems, yet is doing well in oral traditions and trade” (45). The observation shows the use of Hausa expressions such as “Nawa ne kudin wannan?” (How much is this?) in Northern markets to facilitate trade; and “Elo ni oja yii” expression (How much is the item), was used in Yoruba markets in Lagos. In Onitsha, bargaining is pushed by phrases in

the Igbo language such as “ego ole ka ihe a di?” (How much this thing?).

What this implies on the discussion of national languages is the fact that Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo have a solid background of sustainability and therefore are more capable of being considered national languages, as the language that is well structured and has well laid foundations are more likely to prove successful in broader national applications. Ayo Bamgbose writes that the survival of any indigenous language is a matter of purposeful planning, and its practical continuation into education and governance (52). Similarly, Kola Owolabi opines that “the future of Nigeria language lies in the modernization of the natives’ languages in specialised fields” (116). Collectively, these observations imply that linguistic sustainability is not only a cultural asset, but also an operational precondition with regards to the redefinition of national language policy in Nigeria.

Table: Comparative Overview of Nigeria’s Major Indigenous Languages in National and Cross-National Contexts

Language	Speakers (L1+L2, Nigeria)	Standardization	Education Use	Media Presence	Market Speech Example	Comparison Nation
Hausa	63 million (Ethnologue 2023)	High (Arabic/Latin)	Regional L1/L2	BBC Hausa, radio	“Nawa ne kudin wannan?” (How	Zulu (South Africa: 12 million, education)

Language	Speakers (L1+L2, Nigeria)	Standardization	Education Use	Media Presence	Market Speech Example	Comparison Nation
					much?)	
Yoruba	47 million (Ethnologue 2023)	High (1974 orthography)	Primary medium	Nollywood, newspapers	“Elo ni oja yii?” (How much?)	Tamil (India: 75 million, regional use)
Igbo	46 million (Ethnologue 2023)	Medium (dialect issues)	Limited formal use	Local radio, literature	“Ego ole ka ihe a di?” (How much?)	Romansh (Switzerland: 40,000, protected)

Cultural Appeal

The Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo are the anchors of their cultures by maintaining identity and creating a sense of cohesion, although they face dilution from globalisation. During Osun Osogbo festivals, Yorubas proverbs, such as “A kii fi owo osi juwe ile baba eni,” (One does not point at the house of the father with the left hand) strengthened respect and tradition. Igbo masquerades in Awkuzu had one of the praise singers use such phrases such as, “Onye kwe, chi ya ekwe” (If one agrees, his spirit agrees) emphasizing a religious belief. Hausa sermons of Kano mosques contained such statements as “Mutum ya ji tsoron Allah” (A person should fear God), which contributed to the enhanced communal ties. In South Africa, languages such as Sesotho are encouraged in the media as a way of cultural pride thus diminishing ethnic

conflict (Mkhize, 89). Similar practises are reflected in the regional festivals in India that speak languages such as Bengali (Chakraborty, 112). The quadrilingual model in Switzerland does not destroy cultural diversity, but preserves it instead (Darquennes, 2013: 45). In Nigerian schools, observations indicated that these languages encourage empathy, yet English hegemony has been seen to erode the heritage, and policies such as the South African one should be adopted to encourage cultural festivals (Emenanjo, 23; Bamgbose, 45; Igboanusi, 39).

The cultural value of Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo as a part of the national language discourse is that they serve as the carriers of collective memory, continuity, and identity in the presence of the challenges of globalisation and the overwhelming power of English. The languages are used as means

to communicate as well as vehicles of indigenous philosophies and rituals, as well as shared values that keep communities connected. To support this point, Bamgbose further asserts that cultural heritage maintained in the language is critical towards nation-building since language promotes inclusiveness and stability (52). On the same note, Emenanjo emphasises that native languages are reservoirs of history and cultural wisdom whose disregard destroys social unity (28). Herbert Igboanusi also adds that the local languages also help people in creating intercultural understanding since they teach individuals to have empathy and solidarity, particularly in multi-ethnic situations (44). The implication is that making these languages their national symbols would not only bring people of different languages together but also reverse the homogenising effect of global languages. The cultural strength they possess reveals that they are not only local instruments, but they can become national resources at integration. This renders them key considerations in language sustainability debates and in the quest to identify a workable national language in Nigeria.

Economic Benefits

These languages spur grassroots economies, however, English-centred policies restrict a wider impact. For example, Hausa expressions such as “Kawo kudi ka ji dadin ciniki” (Bring money, enjoy trading) improved the bargaining efficiency in Kano markets due to their relatability to the people. Compared to the English language, it is observed that the natives find it easier to communicate in the indigenous languages at market places. In the Yoruba markets observed, the indigenous Yoruba language is shown to facilitate trade better than the English language as it is the language everyone understands (both the educated and uneducated). This aids faster and for easier transaction of business between buyers and sellers. Moreso, in Igbo markets, the business of buying and selling is made easier by the native Igbo language as it is the language everyone understands. These points foreground the economic significance of an indigenous language as a national language. This stance is corroborated in Thulane Mkhize view where he opines that “The implication of Xhosa being used in commerce enhances inclusiveness in South Africa (92). Here, the language is not elitist as the English language is, so everyone can interact easily, thus allowing for business to happen easily.

Igboanusi observes that “indigenous languages are a means of driving grassroots innovation, which is consistent with the finding that native media promoted trade” (45). In essence, indigenous languages allow for easy transaction of business because of its inclusive nature, thus aiding economic growth.

Comparative Analysis

The approach used by Nigeria is less effective as compared to its counterparts using policy inclusivity, cultural preservation, and economic impact. The 11-language policy in South Africa encourages inclusivity, but not all of it is being implemented (87). The fact that regional autonomy to languages such as Hindi is enjoyed in India means that it is balanced between unity and diversity (Chakraborty, 2009: 110). The quadrilingual Swiss model makes sure that it is represented, yet the marginalisation of Romansh is similar to the situation with Nigeria and its minority languages. Chukwube observes that “The policy that promotes Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba in Nigeria is not enforced as observed in English dominated schools” (82). The market witnessed that the dominance of Hausa brought about discomfort to the Igbo speakers just like

South Africa experienced in the early days. One such approach that Nigeria might consider is pegged on the model of India, where despite the fact that individual languages are protected locally, the national promotion of the major languages is encouraged (Bamgbose, 52; Igboanusi, 35; Maikanti et al., 522).

Nigeria is experiencing English hegemony, globalisation, policy stagnation, and ethnic conflicts that continue to perpetuate marginalisation. The dominance of English coupled with the marginalisation of native languages and poor policy execution has increased cultural and educational disparities. Kola Owolabi notes that in cases where English replaces local languages, the end result is disempowerment of students and communities over the long term (523). There is a need thus to have a balanced model that appreciates Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo as their identity vehicles and unity and keeps English as a global instrument. The case of South Africa with regard to the introduction of indigenous languages in education shows that empowerment does not necessarily have to be accompanied by disunity. With the establishment of a bilingual system, Nigeria would be able to transcend the stagnation of policy and linguistic dominance to a more

inclusive system, which supports cultural pride and preserves the development of the nation.

In this paper, we suggest a compromise: (1) Introduce mother-tongue education in Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, such as in South Africa, but bilingualize it (Mkhize, 88). (2) Government should use such languages as India practises with Hindi (Chakraborty, 111). (3) Finance media and technology, such as the Romansh assistance in Switzerland (Jeroen Darquennes, 46). (4) Publicity of cultural festivals to make it more attractive. (5) Organise interethnic councils to alleviate tensions, securing minor languages. This is a solution to marginalisation, ensures cohesion and improves inclusivity, which are not the case with existing policies giving preference to the English language.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that the future of the linguistic environment of Nigeria is determined by the effectiveness with which the nation strikes a balance between its multilingualism and the necessity to have its nation. As it has been analysed, Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo have the potential to serve as national languages due to their demographic power, cultural richness, and

economic sustainability, but they are limited by the English hegemony, stagnation in policy, and ethnic sensibilities. Cross-country lessons provided by South African, Indian, and Swiss experience show that an integrative approach to language policy can be achieved without compromise to diversity. In the case of Nigeria, the way to go is by embracing a bilingual practise that sustains the local languages as an identity and source of empowerment at the same time keeping English as a global tool. Such a framework could not only safeguard cultural heritage, but also ensure that the grassroots innovation and social cohesion were strengthened. Finally, the nationalisation of indigenous languages, in a realistic and non-exclusive manner, is a move towards linguistic sovereignty, of which, language becomes not only a unifying element but also a source of sustainable national development.

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