

Protecting Nigerian languages from extinction in the face of globalization: The Ibibio perspective

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60787/jnlp.v6i2.72>

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Abstract

Many Nigerian languages are becoming moribund, with some no longer widely spoken and others already extinct. For instance, the Efut language of Calabar Municipality and the Kiong language of the Okoyong people, both in Cross River State, have completely disappeared. This decline is partly due to the reluctance, whether overt or covert, of native speakers to use their languages in everyday communication. Additionally, colonialism and the intensifying forces of globalization in the 21st century have exacerbated the problem.

The Ibibio language is among those at risk. Many young speakers, who should serve as its custodians, are increasingly ashamed to use it, both in public and within the home. Beyond the lingering effects of colonialism, a major challenge is that many parents actively discourage their children from speaking Ibibio. Furthermore, the language is rarely taught in schools as a subject for assessment and examination. This lack of institutional support, combined with social stigma, drives many to prefer English, even in cultural contexts where indigenous languages are more appropriate.

This paper advocates for a revitalization strategy that includes: the teaching of Ibibio from nursery to secondary school; its use as a medium of instruction in select subjects, as practiced in countries such as China, Japan, Russia, and the Nordic states; active use by parents in the home; and a reduction in the dominance of English in churches, health centres, and social gatherings. The study adopts historical and multidisciplinary approaches in its methodology.

Keywords: language, extinction, preservation, globalization, revitalisation.

Introduction

Several studies and observations by both scholars and non-scholars, including Uwem Akpan and Okon Essien, have concluded that many Nigerian indigenous languages, particularly those belonging to minority ethnic groups, are either extinct or on the brink of extinction. This is a deeply troubling development. The loss of any language is concerning because language serves as a powerful vehicle of identity. It is through language that ethnic groups and communities are recognized and defined.

Language communicates more than just words, it answers critical questions such as: *Who are these people? Where are they located nationally or globally? What are they contributing to the global economy or cultural landscape?* While people may also be identified through clothing or cuisine, cultural globalization has blurred these distinctions. Many communities now adopt foreign attire or food, making it harder to trace cultural identity through such markers. For example, non-Hausa groups such as the Nupe, Idoma, Angas, and Birom have adopted Hausa-style clothing and language. As a result, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between a Hausa individual and someone from the Tiv or Nupe groups based solely on dress. In contrast, language remains a unique and distinguishing feature in both private and public spheres.

Secondly, language plays a critical role in how communities express their needs, actions, inactions, intentions, and demands. It allows for communication that is meaningful and context-specific, often understood only by those within the group. For the purposes of this paper, however, the focus is on language that is spoken, written, and capable of being transmitted across generations. This is distinct from language use limited to immediate or situational expression.

A third dimension relates to the global status of languages. In international diplomacy, only a few languages, such as English, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, and Arabic, are recognized for use in drafting and preserving official documents, particularly within organizations like the United Nations. These languages confer global recognition and status upon their speakers. However, not all languages can attain this international status. What is essential is that every language remains significant and valuable to its speakers and deserves to be preserved.

Historically, there have been highly advanced civilizations whose languages, like Latin, continue to be used in academic and religious contexts, even though the original ethnic identity of their speakers is no longer clearly defined. Latin-speaking communities are believed to have existed in regions such as France, Italy, the Vatican (Holy See), and parts of Spain. These people, though no longer recognized as a distinct nationality, left behind a linguistic legacy. For present and future generations, allowing our indigenous languages to become extinct could mean the erasure of our own cultural legacy. Therefore, the need to revive and value these languages is urgent and pressing.

Ibibio, in particular, is both a people and a language. It represents a distinct ethnic group and is considered the fourth largest in Nigeria. Geographically, the Ibibio people are located in the South-South region of Nigeria. Culturally, language is a core component of their identity. Linguistically, Ibibio belongs to the Niger-Congo language family, more specifically to the Bantu sub-family and the central branch of this extensive family (Hall & Grayson, 2005). Despite the challenges posed by colonialism in the 19th and 20th centuries and the recent pressures of cultural globalization, the Ibibio language has endured and continues to provide its speakers with a strong sense of identity.

This paper seeks to emphasize that, throughout history, language has been a central marker of identity for native populations, not necessarily for immigrants. It argues that language,

more than clothing or food, is the epicenter of a people's cultural and communal identity. With this foundation, the paper will now proceed to conceptual clarifications relevant to the topic under discussion.

Conceptual clarifications

Globalisation

Globalisation is one of the prominent terms in contemporary international political economy. It is often used to describe the complex web of relationships between states, particularly in areas such as production, trade, and consumption—relationships increasingly driven by advances in science and technology. According to Mayhew (2009), globalisation is a politically motivated phenomenon, led by institutions such as the U.S. government, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the G8. He further argues that globalisation predates colonialism and is creating a “new, topologically and hierarchically structured economic space,” distinct from the historically dominant, territorially-based and state-regulated world economy.

Colonial theory and language decline

The decline, and in some cases, extinction, of indigenous languages in Nigeria and across Africa is attributable to multiple factors. One of the major factors is rooted in colonialism. The colonial theory posits that colonial administrations systematically devalued indigenous languages. In Nigeria, British colonial policy deliberately suppressed local languages in favour of English, which was promoted as the medium for mass education, literacy, and administrative governance. Indigenous languages were not considered viable tools for development or enlightenment.

During the colonial era, the use of indigenous languages in schools was actively discouraged, and pupils were often punished for speaking them. These languages were labeled as "vernacular", a derogatory term that implied inferiority. As a result, an elite class emerged

across various communities, taking pride in speaking English, especially the Queen's English, while devaluing their native tongues (The *Punch*, July 19, 2020).

A key question then arises: what about the post-colonial period? The answer lies in what many describe as colonial mentality. Even decades after independence, many Nigerians—both educated and uneducated, continue to valorise English and Western culture, often at the expense of their indigenous languages. This attitude is further reinforced by globalisation and the dominance of English in international media such as CNN, BBC, and other global networks. Consequently, indigenous languages face even greater pressure now than during the immediate post-independence period of the 1960s.

The hegemony of major Nigerian languages

Another issue concerns the unequal attention given to indigenous languages. Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo have received far more institutional and media support than other Nigerian languages. Hausa, for example, enjoys international media coverage through platforms like BBC Hausa and VOA Hausa. This visibility reinforces the value of the language and instills pride among its speakers. In contrast, many minority languages receive only minimal airtime, if any, on local radio and television.

During the tenure of the late Idongesit Nkanga as Military Governor of Akwa Ibom State, efforts were made to showcase local ethnic languages on state-owned media. However, the initiative faced resistance from segments of the population who believed Ibibio alone was sufficient for all local communication. Consequently, other local dialects were sidelined.

Furthermore, Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo are widely taught in primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions. These languages are offered as subjects in national exams such as WAEC and NECO and are available up to the Ph.D. level. They have produced a significant number of professors and researchers. Conversely, admissions into programmes for other indigenous

languages are limited, and many students only opt for them as a last resort, often with reluctance or even shame.

Other contributing factors

Parents

Parents play a crucial role in the intergenerational transmission of language. Unfortunately, many parents, both educated and uneducated, fail to induct their children into their linguistic heritage. Many believe indigenous languages lack value. For non-educated parents, this belief is compounded by their own lack of fluency in English. Hoping their children will succeed where they did not, they often discourage the use of native languages at home. However, research shows that children who are fluent in their mother tongue tend to perform better in English and other subjects. Multilingualism is a strength, and in certain situations, knowledge of a native language can even be life-saving.

Churches

Churches, particularly Pentecostal denominations, are often complicit in the marginalization of indigenous languages. These churches frequently use English, sometimes with foreign accents, for sermons, prayers, and songs, even in homogeneous rural communities where most members do not fully understand English. Moreover, indigenous names are sometimes replaced with foreign equivalents (e.g., *Urua* becomes *Weeks*, *Ngozi* becomes *Blessing*, *Mbom* becomes *Mercy*), further eroding cultural identity. This pattern of behaviour, especially by respected religious leaders, encourages congregants to undervalue their native languages.

Ironically, the early missionaries who introduced Christianity in Nigeria did the opposite. They learned local languages, used them to teach catechism, and translated religious texts. Languages such as Efik were documented, codified, and used to spread the Gospel.

Unfortunately, today's elites have not sustained this commitment to indigenous language preservation.

Mosques

A similar pattern is observed in many mosques. Arabic, the liturgical language of Islam, is widely taught and memorized by children in Muslim communities. While this is essential for religious observance, it sometimes results in the neglect of local languages, particularly in Northern Nigeria and other areas with significant Muslim populations.

Government

As the chief policy-making body, the government bears significant responsibility for the preservation or decline of indigenous languages. In the 1980s, the Federal Government introduced the National Policy on Education, which included provisions for the use of mother tongues in early childhood education. While commendable in theory, the policy has not been effectively implemented. Over time, government interest waned, and public enthusiasm declined. A renewed political will and legal framework are needed to enforce indigenous language education across all levels. If this is done, many Nigerian languages will experience revitalization and active use.

Language policy

A policy is a formal government document that outlines a set of ideas and plans designed to regulate and maintain uniform standards and quality within specific sectors. For a linguistically diverse nation like Nigeria, the effective implementation of a national language policy is crucial to accommodate its heterogeneous nature. For many years, Nigeria lacked a comprehensive national language policy. Instead, language-related issues were addressed through various policy documents, most notably the *National Policy on Education (NPE, 2014)*, which provides directives concerning language use within the education sector.

The NPE serves as one of the key frameworks guiding the teaching and learning of languages in Nigeria’s educational system. The language provisions of the policy - first introduced in 1977 and revised in 2004, 2007, and 2014 - identify several language categories: Mother Tongue (MT), Language of the Immediate Community (LIC), Major Nigerian Languages (Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo), foreign languages (French, Arabic), and English. According to Section 1:8.g. of the 6th edition of the NPE (2014), “every child shall be taught in the mother tongue or language of the immediate community for the first four years of basic education. In addition, it is expected that every child shall learn one Nigerian language.” At the post-basic level, English is designated as one of the compulsory cross-cutting subjects (Section 3:38.1.i.), while “any Nigerian language that has a curriculum” is listed under the Humanities.

The *National Language Policy (NLP)* was formally launched on May 25, 2023. It is anchored in the broader Nigerian philosophy of fostering unity and harmony, grounded in the principles of freedom, equality, and justice. The NLP adopts an integrated, multilingual approach informed by sociolinguistics, language description, and pragmatics. It emphasizes status planning, corpus planning, language-in-education policy, and domain-sensitive models of language use.

This policy represents a deliberate and strategic initiative by the Federal Government of Nigeria to regulate and promote the development and use of all Nigerian languages as instruments for national development (NERDC, 2022). Significantly, the NLP eliminates the longstanding dichotomy between “major” and “minor” languages, and provides clear policy declarations, strategic directions, and implementation guidelines for language use across all sectors and levels of government. While English remains the official language, the policy affirms that all Nigerian languages may be used in public domains.

Challenge

When examining the linguistic provisions of Nigeria's *National Policy on Education*, which was first introduced in 1982, we observe an initial enthusiasm: schoolchildren across the country actively learned their mother tongues and one other Nigerian language. However, within a few years, this promising development fizzled out due to inconsistency in implementation. Had the policy been consistently enforced, it could have made significant contributions toward preserving Nigerian languages and using them as instruments for mass literacy and, by extension, national development.

Active languages in Nigeria

Determining the exact number of thriving versus endangered languages in Nigeria is difficult. A language is considered endangered or on the path to extinction when the number of active speakers becomes significantly smaller than the population in the geographic area where it is traditionally spoken. Interestingly, even widely spoken languages like Yoruba and Igbo are perceived by their speakers to be under threat.

Some languages, however - such as Ibibio, Oron, and Anaañ - are demonstrably endangered. While they are still spoken, their use is rapidly declining among younger generations. What is urgently needed is a comprehensive linguistic survey to accurately assess the status of all Nigerian languages. Unfortunately, the lack of funding remains a major obstacle. It would be in the nation's best interest for the government to invest in such research, as it holds far-reaching implications for cultural preservation and educational advancement.

Extinct languages in Nigeria

It is difficult to determine exactly how many Nigerian languages have gone extinct. However, since the first nationwide language census in the 1960s, scholars agree that approximately 20 Nigerian languages have been completely lost. A language is considered extinct when there

are no longer any native speakers - either because the speakers have died or have abandoned the language in favor of others, often English.

In many cases, the last speakers of these languages passed away without transmitting their linguistic heritage to the next generation. Some languages are now spoken only by elderly individuals, and once they are gone, the languages will die with them unless urgent revitalization efforts are made.

Here is a list of some extinct or nearly extinct Nigerian languages, as recorded by Elugbe & Udoh (2006):

State	Languages
1. Bauchi	- Ajawa, Mawa, Gamoningi, Duguza Kubi, Gyem, Kuducamo, Geji, Gera
2. Ebonyi	- Ikwo
3. Nasarawa	- Basagumna
4. Jigawa	- Auyokawa, Teshenawa
5. Taraba	- Kpati, Mvanip, Ndunda, Kona, Akum
6. Kebbi	- Reshe
7. Kaduna	- Sambe
8. Akwa Ibom	- Ilue
9. Cross River	- Bakpinka, Efut, Kiong.
10. Rivers	- Defaka
11. Plateau	- Yankam, Duguza
12. Yobe	- Bade

The need to pass the indigenous language to children

Language is at the heart of culture, and culture is central to human identity. Numerous studies have shown that children who begin their education in their mother tongue perform better academically than those who are taught exclusively in a foreign language. Renowned Nigerian intellectuals like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and Chike Obi were first educated in their native languages, which provided them with a strong foundation. When they encountered English, they were not intimidated by it; instead, they transferred their cognitive skills to master it successfully.

Language forms a key part of one's identity. Consider the case of African Americans in the United States. Unlike other ethnic groups such as the Chinese or Japanese, who maintained their languages and cultural identities, enslaved Africans were stripped of their names and languages. This was a deliberate strategy by slave owners, who understood that preserving language meant preserving identity - and with it, the power to resist oppression. Although enslaved people did resist in many ways (Uya, 2005), the loss of language left a lasting impact on their cultural continuity.

The ability to speak one's language, and others, enhances a person's global competence. When people are denied their mother tongue, whether due to societal neglect or misguided parental choices, they suffer a cultural and emotional loss. That's why it is crucial to raise children who can speak their indigenous languages. Ironically, while many Nigerians abandon their native tongues, Americans often send their children to France or Germany to learn additional languages. It is disheartening that we treat our own languages as irrelevant in modern society. This mindset is not only unfair but also detrimental to our national identity and development.

Revitalisation of indigenous languages

A child's first exposure to language and culture occurs at home, through interactions with parents and siblings. Therefore, parents must be encouraged to use indigenous languages as

the primary medium of communication at home, even before their children are enrolled in crèche, nursery, or primary school. Lack of inter-generational transfer of language leads to the extinction of the language.

In our nursery, primary, and secondary schools, instruction should be conducted in indigenous languages, as is the practice in countries such as China, Japan, Russia, and the Nordic states. In Nigeria, where several indigenous languages may coexist within a single state, the dominant local language should be adopted for formal instruction, while others can be promoted at home, in churches, and in community settings. Children should be actively encouraged to interact in indigenous languages, and efforts must be made to develop teaching materials and textbooks in these languages, particularly for nursery, primary, and early secondary education.

In our context, religious institutions, especially Pentecostal churches, play a powerful role in shaping attitudes and behaviours. Congregants often listen to their pastors and spiritual leaders more attentively than to their parents or elders. Religious leaders, therefore, should act as champions of indigenous languages. They should encourage their congregations to use local languages during services, including in homilies, Bible readings, and announcements. The use of English in local churches should be minimized to foster cultural pride and deeper understanding.

In health centres, communication between healthcare workers and patients should also be conducted in indigenous languages, especially for patients who are not literate in English. Many patients, particularly in rural areas, are better able to describe their symptoms and understand medical advice when addressed in a familiar language. Unfortunately, it is still common to find healthcare personnel using only English in environments where most people barely understand it, creating serious communication barriers.

Recreational and cultural events, such as traditional marriages, should also prioritize the use of local languages. It is disheartening to see such occasions conducted entirely in English,

especially when the audience is largely composed of native speakers. Even in mixed settings, local languages should be used as the primary medium of communication, with English serving only as a supplement when necessary.

Children's social experiences—like folktales and moonlight storytelling—are richer and more meaningful when delivered in indigenous languages. These traditions, which once played a key role in informal education and cultural transmission, are now fading due to rapid modernization and the breakdown of communal trust. Reviving them can help rebuild social cohesion and instill cultural values in the younger generation.

Role of Government

The Federal Ministry of Education must take proactive steps to ensure the survival and development of indigenous languages. A bill should be presented to the National Assembly to mandate the use of indigenous languages in teaching at all levels of the school system. The new National Language Policy must be enforced.

To support this initiative, the government must also invest in the training of a new cadre of teachers proficient in various indigenous languages. These teachers will be responsible for passing on linguistic knowledge to younger generations. Additionally, resources such as orthographies, textbooks, and digital tools must be developed to facilitate effective learning and sustain interest in these languages.

Conclusion

The focus of this discussion is the Ibibio language, which is now at risk of extinction due to declining usage among younger generations. This trend is not unique to Ibibio; many other indigenous languages across Nigeria face the same threat. Sadly, parents, siblings, religious leaders, and educators are not doing enough to encourage the use and teaching of these languages.

Language is not just a means of communication, it is the most vital marker of identity. While food and clothing may reflect aspects of a culture, language carries the weight of a people's history, worldview, and values. It is the principal medium through which culture is transmitted and preserved.

In Nigerian schools, indigenous languages were intended to drive mass literacy and national development. Yet, progress in this area has been negligible. Meanwhile, Asian countries, now regarded as global industrial powerhouses, have developed by building on the foundation of their indigenous languages, not colonial ones. Their local knowledge systems merged seamlessly with modern education and technology, fostering innovation and resilience.

Research shows that children who learn in their mother tongue from an early age transition more easily into learning foreign languages, whether English, French, or others. Unfortunately, only the Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo languages have made significant inroads into the digital and global space. Other languages must follow suit, but this process requires starting from the ground up.

The forces of globalization wait for no one. To keep pace with the world and preserve our identity, we must act now. Let us invest in our languages and turn them into tools for empowerment, education, and sustainable development.

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