

## LANGUAGE POLICY REFORMATION: ROUTE TO CULTURAL PRESERVATION.

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### Abstract

*Language is the most vital instrument for all ethnic cultural preservation. There will be no ethnic relationship without a well organized indigenous language and there will be no language without culture. This is because culture is the mother to every language. In Nigeria as a case study, there are more than five hundred different ethnic groups with different cultural backgrounds, but the national policy stipulated that only three Nigerian languages; Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba must be taken in West African Examination Council (WAEC) or Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE) endangering other languages and their culture. Just of recent that Efik/Ibibio was added to the School certificate. This paper contends on the threats some cultural groups are encountering in Nigeria due to the said policy and the effects on their cultural and language preservation. Using the ethno linguistics vitality theory as a framework (Gile, Bourhis, and Taylor, 1977) the study necessitates why the policy should embrace other minority languages in Nigeria for proper cultural preservation and sustainability of their languages which is part of human existence. Summary and suggestions were given.*

**Keywords:** Nigeria, cultural group, language, policy, endangered.

### Introduction

A policy is a system deliberately designed as a principle to guide decisions within an organization or society. Language policy is stipulated rules guiding a language in a given society. For Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) put language policy as a body of ideas, laws, regulations, rules and practices intended to achieve the planned language change in the societies, group or system. McCarty (2011:8) in his own way defines language policy as a complex socio-cultural process and as modes of human interaction, negotiation and production mediated by relations of power. Language policy is a very broad body of principles that can be grouped into components. Spolsky (2004:5) argues

that a useful first step is to distinguish between the three components of the language policy of a speech community: (i) its language practices- the habitual pattern of selecting among the varieties that make up its linguistic repertoire. (ii) its language beliefs or ideology – the beliefs about language and language use. (iii) any specific efforts to modify or influence that practice by any kind of language intervention, planning or management. The broad scope of language policy concerns its regulation.

In Nigeria, the language policy raised English language to the top. That is why in every remote area, parents keep communicating to their children with a foreign language endangering both their ethnic languages and their culture. The policy stipulated that the official language of Nigeria is English language which is the formal language of the colonial masters. The questions which need to be answered while researching on minority languages are:

a. upon the domination of English language across the country Nigeria, why is language policy still stipulates that only three amongst other indigenous languages should be learnt and be taken in Senior Secondary Certificates?

b. how could the remaining ethnic groups preserve their languages and culture?

The major ethnic identity of any cultural group is their language. It seems some minority languages are marginalized in Nigeria and thereby engraving their cultural identities. The marginalization proves itself that the whole nation was grouped into three linguistic autonomies. North is for Hausa language, East for Igbo language and West for Yoruba language. Amongst the three groups, the whole Easterners speak Igbo language as a standard language though surrounded with some dialects. The southeastern Nigeria has no problem as they only have Igbo as their standard language. The Westerners have Yoruba language, mixed up with Ijaw language group with some dialects too. In the Northern part of Nigeria where Hausa language dominated, there are numerous indigenous languages that have been placed as minority languages and all of them have their identities known as their culture.

### **Overview of Minority Languages in Nigeria**

The Ethnography data list of Nigerian languages according to Dada (2010: 418) that the recent (2005) Ethnological data listed five hundred and twenty one (521) languages for Nigeria. The data stipulated that the (510) are living languages, (2) are second languages without mother tongue speakers and (9) are already into extinction. The further explanation on Nigeria Ethnography reports that “indeed, going by the Ethnographic data report for Nigeria, some of these five hundred and ten (510) living Nigerian languages have as low as 400-100 native speakers. Instances include; Janja, Benue-Congo language spoken in Bass Local Government, Plateau State, Jibe, Afro-Asiantic language spoken in Borno State, Ndunda, Niger-Congo language spoken in Taraba State and others. Other languages spoken in Nigeria are as follow; Abanyom, Abishi, Abon, Abuo, Aburenu, Afade, Agatu, Ajawa, Ajiya, Ake, Akpe, Akpes, Akuku, Akum, Baan, Baangi, Baatonum, Bacama, Batu, Bena, Bete, Bille Bo-Rukuul, Bina and many others.

In Nigeria, languages are classified according to some criteria and this is why Igboanusi (2001:13) stresses that “Nigerian languages are classified into major and minor based on; population of the speakers, educational consideration, geographical expanse of speaking territories and publications in different disciplines”. Egwuogu (2008) cited in Egwuogu (2017:48) reports thus, the three major indigenous languages enjoy greater prominence in the national life of the country than others as each is spoken as a mother tongue is not less than seven out of the thirty six (36) States of the Federation. The minority languages are used for local communication, being used only to the primary activities of life because they are not even recognized outside the territory. Those languages

are very informal; they are used just for interpersonal relationship, market square, local institutions and religion.

It is believed that the new National policy on Education in Nigeria published in 1977 (revised in 1981) gave a general view for a change in Curriculum which includes the significant structures in the Nigerian educational system. In the policy document, Government stated that “any existing contradictions, ambiguities and lack of uniformity in educational practices in the different parts of the Federation should be removed to ensure an even and orderly development of the country”. It is clearly observed that government stressed on the promotion of national unity as the major objective of Nigerian education. The government forgot that after promoting the national unity with a foreign language, there must be loop holes in the area of cultural preservation. Though, the Government considered it to be in the aim of national unity that each child from any language background should be encouraged to learn one of the three languages other than the own mother-tongue. Looking at the situation so far, how close is it in achieving the said national unity other than endangering other minority languages and their inherited culture that will help the child to grow up with ethics and value? Earlier debates on the Nigerian Language policy countered on the conflicting importance of so called minority languages which are also the indigenous languages in Nigeria.

It is very obvious that indigenous languages that are called minority languages have not been rescued from dying due to lack of positive attitudes from government which has even infected the native speakers like disease. This time, the negligence posed on the minority languages and the negative attitudes on part of the native speakers have brought a lot of negative impacts which increases every day. The government does not do anything to motivate the native speakers and on the other side, the native speakers feel neglected and some of them diverted to pidgin. Adegbija (2004:54) puts that:

Attitudes towards languages are motivated by several factors including their socio-economic value, status-raising potentials, perceived instrumental value, perceived esteem, perceived functions or roles in the nation, numerical strength, political and economic power of its speakers use in the official domains, educational value etc. Generally, positive attitudes, covert or overt, are developed towards a language that is perceived to have a value in all these different areas...

The attitude of government towards minority languages does not really prove that language is an important part of any cultural society because, it is the only thing that enables people to express themselves in communication and in any cultural display. Conversely, negative attitudes, covert or overt attributed to any language in the manner to its lack of use both at home and otherwise lower the distribution and exhibition of their culture. Example Hausa which is a dominant language in the Northern Nigeria has fully gained positive attitudes from many minority languages just because of the political dominance in Nigeria. Hausa language got great influence because the people use the language to get favors in the national level. Actually, many speakers of minority languages in the north, especially in Kaduna that has other languages such as; Gure-Kahugu, Wadana, Gbayi, Amokata, Kamuku, Kitimi and more are now Hausa speakers. They have silenced their indigenous languages and buried their culture. In Bauchi States which also has many languages like Angas, Barke, Barawa, Boboh, Gera, Gewzawa, Kayung, Jeraina and others have left their languages and diverted to Hausa language. Hausa language is one the Chadic branch of African Language which is the most famous language spoken in sub Sahara Africa. Other minority language speakers have promoted Hausa to the extent that it is now in the British Broadcasting Corporation. For most other people from south, anyone from Benue State is a Hausa man. It is also believed that all their culture and identity is from Hausa people. The Yoruba and Igbo languages spoken in the East and West respectively have good reputation in the nation and are even taught in every level of learning to tertiary institutions. This attitude brought in a shift because children from minority language area that were born in any area where any of the three languages are spoken and taught in school, they

compulsorily learn any of the three languages. Meanwhile, there is no sense of cultural belonging from the minority language native speakers to the nation and this must either put the languages into extinction or kill them. At this point, the minority would not narrate themselves from diminished lingual communities but to the larger, retained and prominent language from the three approved languages. Nigerian government forgot that when a language dies off, the future generations also lose the highest important of their culture. The government did not even remember that culture is the part of human existence. The most vulnerable aspect of culture is language, therefore every language; both major and minority languages are very important to preserve. The major reason why language goes into extinction is when it loses its vitality. When the language is no longer taught to the younger generation of the community, then the remaining fluent speakers are mainly the older members of the community, which after passing on, the language entirely dies off. When they die off, there is no one to transfer the ethical value to the younger generations. Any society without ethical value is finished and that is why the younger generation comes out boldly in social media to speak whatever they feel they can speak.

### **Language Extinction and Death**

Every minority language is exposed to extinction or death when there is a little or no vitality remaining. Most minority languages resulting into loss of knowledge, sociolinguistic identity, and social values, has posed challenges to linguists and interdisciplinary researchers over finding concrete solutions of documenting or preserving linguistic heritage. Though the word “death” is not commonly use in Sociolinguistics but there is really language “death”. Authors like Campbell and Muntzel (1989) identify four kinds of language death:

(a) “Sudden death” is the case where a language abruptly disappears because almost all the speakers suddenly die or are killed, without an intervening period of bilingualism example (Tasmanian) and is therefore outside the examination.

(b) “Radical death” is also like sudden death in that the language loss is rapid and usually due to severe political repression, which often goes with genocide, to the extent that stop speaking the language out of self-defense example is Indian massacre by Salvador soldiers in an event called matanza in 1932. Another typical example of this was reports of a military invasion of Odi, a community in Bayelsa State of Nigeria, by the human rights. Twenty-nine groups from all parts of Nigeria visited Odi on Wednesday December 8 1999. Odi, a town on the bank of the famous River Nun is populated by the Ijaws of the Niger Delta. Estimated population before the military invasion is put at 60,000. The inhabitants of the rural community survive through fishing, farming, harvesting, processing of oil palm produce, and trading. It is an oil community, and Shell Petroleum Development Company was present and controls three oil wells there.

In early November a group of lawless elements who had taken refuge in the area was reported to have abducted six policemen. It was later reported that despite the intervention of social movements in the Niger Delta and elsewhere in the country and Bayelsa State government officials, the law officers were killed by the hoodlums. This was then followed by President Obasanjo issuing a 14-day ultimatum to the government of Bayelsa State to produce the miscreants, or he “Obasanjo” will proclaim a state of emergency. The ultimatum was yet to expire when General Obasanjo ordered troops into Odi and the surrounding communities. The East-West road was cordoned off by the Orashi River at Mbiama and by the River Niger at Patani. A major military operation commenced, via the use of heavy artillery, aircraft, grenade launchers, mortar bombs and other sophisticated weapons. So ruthless, savage and thorough was the operation that it could only have been intended to achieve a genocidal outcome. So, the special squad completely destructed lives and property such that; crops were razed, yam barns were burnt, garri processing plants were willfully wrecked, canoes were set ablaze, and every house in the entire community, with the exception of the First

Bank, a Community Health Centre and the Anglican Church, were burnt down. No aspect of the community's existence was spared thereby led to language death.

(c). “Gradual death” involves gradual replacement of one language by another. An example is the replacement of Gaelic English in parts of Scotland. Just like in Nigeria today, many minority languages are gradually replaced by Pidgin English leading to gradual death. According to research, some minority languages in Delta State are being replaced by Pidgin. If you go to Warri and the surrounding towns, all most everybody speaks Pidgin in place of their local languages. Today in some parts of Igbo land, despite all the efforts by elites, many families have prohibited their children by speaking their native language.

(d). “Bottom-to-top death” is when a language refuses to be used as a medium of communication but may survive if there are attentions like in religion and cultural folk songs. Example Tzeltal language in Mexico has only a few older speakers in different villages, but survives in the register of prayer.

Other factors that lead to language extinction and death are;

(e) Globalization of English: in our society, English has become the best means of globalization in almost all sectors, be it industrial, economic, social, cultural, linguistic, or whatsoever. With the globalization of English and its growing popularity, most of the languages are being outshined as English has become the only source of communication with global citizens. Most families adopt the English language as the mother tongue of their children from birth. They see other languages as inferior to the English language, thereby reducing the usage, prestige, and support for minority languages within their community. In line with the above explanation, Hornsby (2014) opines that a language is deemed endangered when the children in a community are being spoken to in a language other than that of their parents.

(f). Lack of Economic Activities: The minority languages, precisely in Nigeria, lack the power of communication in financial and job creation. Hence, language does not become a language of the economy; unless a language throws an economic incentive or job opportunity at its people, it is bound to be endangered. Thus, lack of economic activities and opportunities is one of the major causes of language endangerment and death.

(g) Political Bias: Political bias can indeed play a significant role in language extinction. The government or dominant political groups may actively promote the use of one language over others for political, economic, and/or cultural reasons. It proves detrimental to the promotion of a language as it creates discrimination among social groups and plays a divisive role on sociopolitical grounds.

### **Summary and suggestions**

The challenge of language endangerment or extinction in Nigeria, a multi-pronged approach is necessary, involving concerted efforts from various stakeholders, including government bodies, educational institutions, linguistic researchers, and community leaders and parents. Firstly, there is need to increase the recognition and promotion of linguistic diversity as a fundamental aspect of Nigeria's cultural heritage. This entails the inclusion of indigenous languages in educational curricula, media programming, and public discourse, thereby elevating their status and fostering pride among speakers. There is need to foster the use of minority languages in different sectors and/or promote them in national policy on education, its effective use and cultural heritage.

Also, language endangerment or extinction poses a significant threat to Nigeria's cultural heritage and socio-cultural fabric. However, with concerted efforts and proactive measures, it is possible to reverse the tide of language loss and ensure the survival of Nigeria's rich linguistic diversity. By prioritizing language revitalization, promoting supportive language policies, and fostering collaborative partnerships, Nigeria can chart a path towards preserving its linguistic heritage for

future generations. Putting these factors into consideration will promote national sustainability and development. Incorporating other languages in national policy on education will promote peace and development of the country. However, there is need to overhaul and reform the policy as suggested in this paper to situate language properly in its role in Nigeria as a tool for sustainable development and peace promotion.

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