

LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT AND REVITALIZATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In Nigeria, a country with over 500 indigenous languages, there is a critical state of language endangerment. This abstract provides an overview of this situation and the efforts towards revitalization. Several key factors contribute to the decline and potential extinction of many Nigerian languages. The article examines complex drivers, including urbanization, the dominance of major languages such as English, Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, as well as a breakdown in intergenerational transmission. It also highlights how the marginalization of indigenous languages in formal education and official contexts accelerates their loss. The article presents case studies of languages like Emai, Arochukwu, and Tera to illustrate these sociolinguistic challenges. Despite these obstacles, promising revitalization efforts are underway. These include supportive government policies, community-driven initiatives, and the use of technology and media to promote language use. The conclusion stresses the urgent need for a holistic, inclusive, and well-resourced approach to safeguard Nigeria's linguistic heritage for future generations, underscoring that language preservation is vital for cultural identity, social cohesion, and inclusive development.

Keywords: Language, Endangerment, Nigeria, Emai, Arochukwu, Tera

I. Introduction

Nigeria, recognized as one of the world's most linguistically diverse nations, is home to over 500 indigenous languages (Omoniyi, 2012; Umera-Okeke & Okitikpi, 2017). This linguistic richness stems from its extensive and intricate ethnocultural landscape, with languages predominantly belonging to the Niger-Congo, Afro-Asiatic, and Nilo-Saharan families (Saleh, Akoshi, & Saleh, 2025). These languages are more than just tools for communication; they are crucial repositories of history, knowledge systems, and unique philosophies, embodying the values and worldviews of various ethnic groups and serving as a cornerstone of the nation's cultural, socio-economic and

political framework (Aroge & Makalela, 2024). The significance of language as cultural heritage lies in its role in transmitting traditions, oral literature and indigenous knowledge across generations (Aroge & Makalela, 2024). The loss of a language can lead to the disappearance of entire systems of meaning, unique histories, and communal identities, representing a significant cultural and intellectual loss for all of humanity.

Globally, language endangerment has reached a critical point, with UNESCO (2019) reporting that at least 40% of the world's languages are at risk of extinction. In Nigeria, the situation is particularly dire, with many indigenous languages facing decline or extinction. This is due to several factors, including urbanization, the dominance of major languages like English, Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, insufficient intergenerational transmission and their marginalization in official contexts (Saleh et al, 2025; Aroge & Makalela, 2024). Rapid socio-economic shifts and inadequate language policies further worsen this language shift, reducing the contexts in which these languages are used and sometimes resulting in language loss (Naveed & Mehdi, 2025). This article aims to provide a conceptualization of language endangerment and revitalization in Nigeria. It offers a theoretical framework to explore the connection between linguistic diversity, language shift, cultural identity and policy interventions. The study also emphasizes the need to safeguard Nigeria's linguistic heritage and proposes strategies for effective revitalization through research, policy and community action.

II. Theoretical Perspectives on Language Endangerment

Fishman's (1991) Reversing Language Shift (RLS) theory asserts that the key to language revitalization is the intergenerational transmission of a language within the home and community. The theory suggests that a language shift from a minority to a dominant language

can be reversed if speakers actively transmit the language to younger generations. Fishman (1991) emphasizes that successful revival efforts prioritize grassroots, community-based actions over top-down institutional policies.

Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory, developed by Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor (1977), offers a framework for assessing a language group's vitality based on its status, demographic strength, and institutional support. The theory explains that languages with higher vitality are more likely to survive because their speakers are confident in the language's utility. Giles et al. (1977) highlight that revitalization must consider not only linguistic factors but also social attitudes, political recognition, and community empowerment. Language Ecology theory views language as an ecosystem that interacts dynamically with social, cultural, political, and environmental factors. From this perspective, language endangerment results from disruptions in these ecological relationships. Haugen (1972) and Mühlhäusler (1996) contend that revitalization involves restoring balance by supporting diverse linguistic ecologies and adapting strategies to specific sociocultural contexts. These theoretical perspectives provide a robust foundation for analyzing language endangerment and revitalization in Nigeria by emphasizing the interplay of social, cultural, demographic, and ecological factors.

III. The Linguistic Landscape of Nigeria

Nigeria stands as one of the world's most linguistically rich countries, with more than 500 distinct languages spoken across its varied regions (Omoniyi, 2012). These languages primarily belong to three main families: Niger-Congo, Afro-Asiatic and Nilo-Saharan. The country's intricate ethno-linguistic composition includes major languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, which act as lingua francas in different areas and are spoken by millions. In addition to these, countless minority languages are spoken by smaller communities; many are at risk of

extinction due to a decreasing number of speakers and limited contexts of use (Saleh et al., 2025). The distribution of these languages is uneven. Sociolinguistic features like multilingualism, language choice, and diglossia define Nigeria's language use, which is influenced by social identity, interethnic relations, and economic mobility. As the official language, English remains dominant in formal settings such as government, education, and media, impacting the use and status of indigenous languages (Omoniyi, 2012; Owojecho, 2020).

IV. The Role of Language in Identity and Cultural Continuity

Language is fundamental to identity and cultural continuity. It is the primary vehicle for expressing thoughts, emotions, and cultural values, and for many Nigerians, their indigenous language is inextricably linked to their sense of self and community (Fishman, 1991). Language and Spirituality: Indigenous languages often contain specific vocabulary and concepts essential for understanding spirituality and religious practices, and the loss of such a language can lead to a disconnect from these traditions as the nuance of the original concepts is lost in translation. Oral Traditions and Intergenerational Transmission: In many Nigerian cultures, oral traditions are the primary means of transmitting history, folklore, and traditional knowledge from one generation to the next. The language is the vessel for this intergenerational cultural transmission (Crystal, 2000), and its endangerment puts this rich cultural heritage at risk. Cultural Homogenization and Loss: The decline of indigenous languages is linked to cultural homogenization. The dominance of English, as a language of mobility, can erode local cultural practices and values. This threatens the diversity of Nigeria's ethnic groups, leading to the loss of traditional knowledge and unique worldviews for the entire nation.

V. Factors Contributing to Language Endangerment in Nigeria

Several dynamic factors pose a threat to the survival of many of Nigeria's indigenous languages. Urbanization and migration have increased contact between different language communities but have also spurred language shifts toward dominant languages. When people relocate to cities, they often adopt major languages like Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, or English to better integrate and access opportunities, which leads to a decline in the daily use of their native tongues (Aminu & Rambo, 2024). The dominance of major languages, particularly English and the three primary indigenous languages, pressures speakers of minority languages to shift for socioeconomic survival. This dominance is strengthened by educational policies that prioritize English and, at times, one or two major Nigerian languages for instruction, which limits the learning and transmission of minority languages to younger generations (Owojecho, 2020).

Globalization and socioeconomic pressures have also hastened language endangerment. With global markets, media and technology primarily operating in English and a few dominant Nigerian languages, minority language speakers are often motivated to abandon their languages for perceived economic benefits (Saleh et al., 2025). This trend is exacerbated by a breakdown in intergenerational language transmission, where parents may not teach their children minority languages out of concern for potential social exclusion or limited future opportunities (Omoniyi, 2012; Aminu & Rambo, 2024). Combined, these factors create a complex sociolinguistic environment where many indigenous languages in Nigeria are becoming increasingly marginalized and endangered, highlighting the urgent need for revitalization efforts.

VI. Case Studies of Endangered Languages in Nigeria

Several indigenous Nigerian languages are at risk of disappearing due to a decreasing number of speakers and less use in daily life. The Emai language in Edo State, for instance, has seen a drop in active speakers as younger generations are shifting to dominant languages like English and Yoruba for better educational and economic opportunities (Ogunyemi & Bada, 2019). Similarly, the Arochukwu language, which is part of the Igbo language cluster in Abia State, is becoming increasingly vulnerable. Its speakers often switch to Igbo and English for wider communication and social mobility, which reduces the intergenerational transmission of Arochukwu (Aminu & Rambo, 2024). Another threatened language is Tera (Nymalti) in the northeast, which, despite having over 100,000 speakers, is classified as endangered by UNESCO. This is due to pressures from dominant regional languages and migration to cities (Usman, Usman & Aji, 2025). The factors contributing to the endangerment of these languages mirror larger sociopolitical and economic trends, including urbanization, migration, the dominance of major languages, and a lack of institutional support. Additionally, sociolinguistic attitudes that favour dominant languages contribute to language shift, as indigenous languages are often neglected in formal education and media (Saleh et al., 2025; Owojecho, 2020).

VII. Efforts and Strategies for Language Revitalization

Nigeria has employed a combination of government policies and grassroots initiatives to preserve and revitalize its languages. Government efforts have included policies that acknowledge the importance of indigenous languages, though their implementation has been inconsistent. The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) has worked on creating orthographies and educational materials for some languages, promoting

mother tongue instruction in primary schools (Saleh et al., 2025). Community-driven initiatives are also vital for language preservation. Local groups and cultural organizations conduct language classes, cultural festivals and documentation projects. Education is a key component, with a focus on mother tongue instruction to build early proficiency and pride (Owojecho, 2020).

Modern technology and media are also increasingly being used for revitalization. Radio programs and digital platforms in minority languages promote usage and pride among young people. Digital archives and language learning apps help with preservation, and partnerships between linguists, communities, and NGOs support documentation, resource development and awareness campaigns (Aminu & Rambo, 2024). These combined strategies highlight the potential for sustaining Nigeria's endangered languages through multifaceted, community-centered and technologically innovative approaches.

VIII. Global Lessons from Language Revitalization

Examining language revitalization efforts in other countries offers valuable insights for Nigeria, as they showcase universal principles and strategies that have proven successful. Case studies abound on strategies targeted at revitalising languages. They are:

Māori (New Zealand): The revitalization of Te Reo Māori in New Zealand provides a compelling case study. A key strategy was the establishment of kōhanga reo (language nests), which are immersion preschools where children are taught exclusively in Te Reo Māori (Hinton, 2011). This focus on early childhood education has been crucial in creating a new generation of speakers.

Irish Gaelic (Ireland): In Ireland, revitalization efforts have focused on the language's symbolic role in national identity. The language has a strong presence in the education system and is promoted through official signage, broadcasting, and public services (O'Reilly, 2016). This demonstrates that a language can be a powerful symbol of national pride even without widespread daily use.

Welsh (Wales): Wales has had remarkable success, highlighting the importance of strong government support and policy implementation (Baker, 2011). Key policies include mandatory Welsh education in schools and the establishment of Welsh-medium schools. The creation of a dedicated Welsh-language television channel, S4C, has also been instrumental in giving the language a public platform.

XI. Challenges to Revitalization Efforts

Efforts to revitalize endangered languages in Nigeria face several significant challenges. A primary obstacle is the lack of adequate funding and resources for documentation, material development, teacher training, and community programs. Many initiatives rely on limited government funds or sporadic donor support, which threatens their long-term effectiveness (Owojecho, 2020). Political and social factors also hinder revitalization. Language policies often prioritize dominant languages, and many indigenous languages lack official status or institutional backing. Furthermore, socio-political conflicts and ethnic tensions can further marginalize smaller language communities.

Attitudinal barriers and issues of language prestige are also major challenges. English and major Nigerian languages, such as Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, have high prestige and social value, while many minority languages are viewed as irrelevant or of lesser value. These perceptions influence

the language choices of parents and youth, which accelerates language shift (Aminu & Rambo, 2024). Finally, ensuring the sustainability of these programs is difficult due to weak institutional frameworks, limited community involvement and a lack of long-term strategic planning.

X. Language Endangerment and Sustainable Development

Language endangerment in Nigeria is a significant barrier to sustainable development because the loss of linguistic diversity undermines the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to education, reduced inequalities, and peace and justice (United Nations, 2021).

Education and Inequalities: When education is delivered exclusively in a foreign language like English, it can hinder learning and alienate students from their cultural heritage, creating a disconnect that exacerbates inequalities (Matsinhe, 2021). Peace and Justice: Preserving indigenous languages promotes cultural dignity and belonging, which are essential for social cohesion and preventing conflict. The threat to a language and its associated identity can lead to feelings of disenfranchisement and injustice (Davis, 2021). Thus, language revitalization is a vital tool for fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and stable society in Nigeria.

XI. The Role of Technology and Social Media in Language Preservation

Technology and social media have become powerful tools for language preservation and revitalization in Nigeria. They provide new avenues for language learning, cultural transmission, and community building those traditional methods cannot match (Eze, 2023). There exist specific applications aim at the preservation of languages, such as:

Digital Storytelling and Content Creation: Platforms such as YouTube and TikTok are used for digital storytelling, allowing creators to produce content like animated folktales and vlogs in indigenous languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, or Hausa. This makes traditional narratives more accessible and engaging for a younger, digitally-native audience (Okere, 2022).

Social Media for Community Building: Platforms like WhatsApp facilitate online communities for speakers of endangered languages. These groups encourage daily conversations, share cultural information, and organize real-world events. They create an informal space for intergenerational knowledge exchange and peer-to-peer learning, helping to normalize the use of indigenous languages (Eze, 2023). **AI-Powered Language Apps:** The growth of AI has led to the development of language apps that support Nigerian languages. While some platforms offer courses for major languages like Yoruba and Igbo, other projects are focused on creating text-to-speech and speech-to-text models for a wider range of Nigerian languages (Awarri, 2024). These apps often use gamification to make learning interactive and engaging. While not a substitute for face-to-face interaction, these technologies extend the reach of revitalization efforts by democratizing access to resources and empowering grassroots movements.

X. Language Endangerment and Education Policy in Nigeria

The National Policy on Education (NPE) in Nigeria has a significant gap between its stated goals and its practical implementation regarding mother tongue instruction. The policy dictates that the "mother tongue or the language of the immediate community" should be the medium of instruction for the first three years of primary school (Okere, 2022). This is based on the pedagogical principle that children learn best in their native language, which provides a strong foundation for learning a second language (Crystal, 2000). However, inconsistency in policy

application remains a challenge. In urban areas and private schools, English is often the sole medium of instruction from the start, which contradicts the NPE (Nwachukwu & Joseph, 2023). This is driven by the perception that English holds greater social and economic value. Furthermore, Nigeria's vast linguistic diversity, with over 500 languages, makes it difficult to select a single dominant language for instruction in multilingual communities (Owojecho, 2020). The scarcity of trained teachers and instructional materials in indigenous languages exacerbates this issue, leading to their marginalization and decline (Owojecho, 2020).

XI. Socio-Political Implications of Language Loss

The decline of indigenous languages in Nigeria has profound socio-political implications, including fueling marginalization, identity crises, and inter-ethnic conflicts. Since language is a fundamental marker of identity, its loss can lead to a profound identity crisis for individuals and communities (Adegbija, 1994). When a language is not valued, its speakers may feel disenfranchised, which can lead to resentment and inter-ethnic tensions, particularly for minority groups whose languages are not among the three official major languages. Furthermore, language politics are intertwined with issues of federalism, governance, and cultural autonomy. The choice and promotion of certain languages over others can be a source of conflict. When a group's language is not recognized, it can be interpreted as a lack of political representation, which can hinder national integration and exacerbate political fragmentation (Bamgbose, 2011).

XII. The Economics of Language Preservation

The preservation of endangered languages requires substantial and sustained funding for activities such as teacher training, curriculum development, and media production (King, 2015).

However, it also presents significant economic opportunities. Cultural Tourism: Preserving indigenous languages can help develop Nigeria's cultural tourism sector, attracting visitors interested in authentic cultural experiences and leading to economic growth and job creation (Aina, 2017). Creative Industries: Incorporating more indigenous languages into the creative industries, such as Nollywood and Afrobeats, can create unique, globally marketable content, further expanding the creative economy (Policy Center, 2024).

Language Technology: The burgeoning field of language technology offers immense potential. The development of AI-powered language apps and speech-to-text tools for Nigerian languages can create new jobs for linguists and programmers, while also attracting learners from the diaspora (Awarri, 2024). Initiatives like the NaijaVoices Language Heritage Micro-Grant are exploring sustainable, community-led funding models (Lanfrica, 2025).

XIII. Recommendations

To address the challenges of language endangerment, several policy improvements are essential. Legal recognition and protection for endangered languages are needed, along with advocacy for linguistic rights. National and regional governments should allocate sufficient funding to comprehensive language revitalization programs. The integration of endangered languages into formal education, particularly through mother tongue instruction in early schooling, is crucial for their long-term vitality (Saleh et al., 2025).

Encouraging active community participation and raising awareness about the inherent value of indigenous languages will foster grassroots support. Leveraging technology, such as mobile apps, digital archives, and social media platforms, can enhance language documentation, learning, and daily use, especially among younger generations. Collaborative partnerships

between linguists, communities, NGOs, and government agencies should be promoted to combine expertise and resources for more effective revitalization.

XIV. Conclusion

This study highlights the critical state of language endangerment in Nigeria, underscoring the complex sociolinguistic and structural factors that drive language shift. Despite challenges like funding deficits, unfavourable attitudes, and policy gaps, revitalization efforts show promise through community engagement, education and technological innovation. Preserving Nigeria's vast linguistic heritage is urgent not only for cultural identity but also for social cohesion and inclusive development. A holistic, inclusive, and well-resourced approach involving all stakeholders is essential to safeguarding Nigeria's endangered languages for future generations.

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