

The Ika Language: A Microcosm of Language Endangerment in Nigeria

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Abstract

Language endangerment is a growing concern for linguists and policymakers across Africa. In Nigeria—a nation of over 400 ethnic groups and approximately 525 languages (Ethnologue, 2023)—pressure from dominant languages, especially English, is accelerating intergenerational language shift. This paper uses the Ika language (spoken in parts of Delta and Edo states) as a case study to examine how such shifts undermine transmission and vitality. Employing a quantitative design, an online questionnaire based on UNESCO's nine guidelines for assessing language vitality was completed by 108 respondents from Nigeria and the diaspora. Results indicate a troubling pattern: many parents who are competent in Ika do not use it when speaking with their children—an acid test of endangered status. Based on these findings, the study recommends leveraging Nigeria's new language policy (which empowers teachers and learners to use indigenous languages), promoting Ika through the entertainment industry, and engaging linguists to work toward standardisation. These targeted revitalisation strategies aim to halt language erosion among Ika speakers and offer a model adaptable to other Nigerian language communities.

Keywords: endangered language, Ika, revitalisation, culture, Agbor

Introduction

Language is the central medium through which humans share ideas, feelings, and knowledge; it underpins social development and cultural continuity. Preserving a language—even one spoken by a minority—is therefore vital because language embodies cultural identity (Crystal, 2000) and serves as the principal vehicle for transmitting norms, values, beliefs, and historical memory across generations (Fishman, 2001). The lexical choices and idioms of a language reflect the cultural contexts in which they arise (Kramsch, 1998).

A people's language reveals their worldview. Lardi (1973) argues that cultural manifestations are communicative acts assumed by particular speech communities; as children acquire their community's language, they also internalise its culture and develop cognitive frameworks. Sapir (1929) similarly

contends that no two languages represent the same social reality, implying that each language encodes unique cultural knowledge. Thus, when a language declines, the distinctive concepts it carries—such as local cosmologies, ritual practices, and social roles—are at risk. Harrison (2007) warns that language loss entails the disappearance of irreplaceable perspectives and knowledge.

Languages also encode material culture and locally specific objects and practices. For example, the Nzu (local white chalk), common in southern Nigeria, is not merely a marking substance but has medicinal associations and spiritual connotations of purity and innocence within Igbo cultural practice. Such culturally embedded meanings are often untranslatable and may be lost when a language fades. This paper examines the Ika language of Delta and Edo states as a microcosm of Nigeria's broader language endangerment problem, analysing current vitality and proposing context-sensitive revitalisation measures.

Language Endangerment And Its Rise in Nigeria

Guerin and Yourupi (2017) consider a language as endangered when it is no longer being transmitted to a younger generation. The Linguistic Society of America (2023) defines an endangered language as one at risk of disappearing as its speakers die out or shift to other languages. Hornberg (1996) states that there were at least 7000 languages in the world in 1500 AD, when European nations began the era of colonial expansion, and today there are about 6000 languages. In recent decades, the rate of extinction has accelerated. Hundreds of languages have disappeared (their last speakers having died), and many more are on the verge of extinction (their last speakers being old and having no children learning the language).

The loss of any language impacts the global community, as each language offers a lens through which we understand social affairs, human relationships, and our place in the universe. Peter and Julia (2011) identified factors that can be responsible for this, which are globalisation, mass migration, culture replacement, and neo-colonialism. Sasse (1992) points out that the reasons why parents stop their children from speaking their native languages are almost always economic and social, to 'blend' instead of maintaining bilingualism. Guerin and Yourupi (2017) also hold this view, stating that economic pressures can foster negative attitudes towards the local language and the associated cultural heritage. In Nigeria, many do not see the relevance of their native language in the global space, causing indigenous languages to shrink in value, economically and socially.

In addition to this, another factor that can negatively impact the vitality of a language is politics. This normally takes place when language policies are not implemented because of a lack of sheer political will and funding for indigenous languages.

In Nigeria, the primary cause of language endangerment is imperialism. For example, under British colonial rule, English became the language of administration, social interaction, and instruction in schools. This was emboldened by the fact that there are over 200 languages in Nigeria that do not

allow for a national language because of the ethnic diversity. These indigenous languages were referred to as vernacular, which in Nigeria is a derogatory word for low-level social language. English became an official language in Nigeria, discouraging the use of local languages in public spaces.

Another major cause is migration from rural communities to urban areas. The quest for better education and white collar jobs brought together people from different ethnic groups, and the convenient language for communication became English. With time, parents did not see the need to have their children speak their native languages. The English language soon became the First language or mother tongue of these urban children.

Because English ranks high as the preferred language for administration and social interactions, it has assumed a prestige that no indigenous language can attain for now. For example, all major examinations in Nigeria require at least a credit pass in English to access higher education. This explains the reason parents in Nigeria prioritize learning and speaking English because they see it as a passport to a better future. Another cause of language endangerment in Nigeria is intermarriage. In modern times, the case of intermarriage has increased because of migration and globalization. There is now less emphasis among parents on marrying from the same ethnic nationality. In Nigeria, most of such families adopt English as their major language of communication to avoid mistrust among the couple and their extended family.

Presently, there is a disturbing trend where parents only speak English to their children. This is considered fashionable, especially in the southern part of the country. Many children can no longer speak indigenous languages except English. You rarely hear local languages being spoken by youths, especially among children from middle or upper-class families. To worsen the already existing crisis, texts written in local languages have been grossly neglected in schools because the study of local languages is not a priority in the Nigerian educational system.

Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) explains this situation this way, 'Often education is only available in the more dominant language of a region. Parents may begin to use only the more dominant language with their children to help them learn the language of education to succeed in school (SIL, 2023).

UNESCO tagged 2019 the year of indigenous languages (IY2019) emphasising the critical need to promote and protect linguistic diversity. With approximately 6500 to 7000 languages spoken worldwide, nearly 2700 are at risk of disappearing completely as their last speakers pass away.

Ika Socio-Linguistic Background

The Ika-speaking people are mainly found in Ika North East, and Ika South Local Government Areas of Delta State, Nigeria. Speakers are also found in Orhionmwon Local Government Area in Edo State.

The Ika language belongs to the Niger Igbo cluster of dialects (Ikekeonwu, 1986) spoken in areas bordering the west of the River Niger; Nwaozuzu (2008) refers to these dialects as the West Niger

group of dialects. Linguistically, they are bounded in the West by Bini speakers (Edoid), north by Aniocha speakers (Igboid), South by Ukwani speakers (Igboid), and North by Ishan speakers(Edoid)

There are different schools of thought regarding their origin. For example, Jacob Egharevba in his work, *A Short History of Benin* (1979), states that the early people of Ika migrated from Benin wave by wave. He asserts that the founder who headed the first wave was known as Eka. Oral traditions would claim Bini origins, but many are beginning to question such claims, as linguistically, Ika is classed as an Igboid language, and there is no mutual intelligibility between the Ika language and the Bini language. Few of their lexicons have Bini vocabulary, but it is believed to have been caused by their proximity to the Edo people.

The Ika language is not only spoken by the natives living within the two LGAs, but also in Edo state in villages like Igbanke, Ota, and Olijie. They are believed to have been founded by Agbor migrant farmers who found arable farmland in the Edo areas. The two local governments in Delta State play host to a State University and a budding radio station.

Now, most of the research being conducted on the Ika language has been on its origin and comparative study with the Igbo and Bini languages. Till today, there is still a raging controversy on where the Ika-speaking people originated from.

As a point of note, for this research, the use of the Ika comprises all communities and kingdoms within the two local Government Areas, which include the Agbor Kingdom, Owa Kingdom, and Abavo Kingdom.

Linguistic Signs of Language Endangerment

Guerin and Youripi (2017) identify knowledge erosion as a linguistic sign of endangerment. This can be attributed to displacement, war, the adoption of a new religion or political organisation, or bans on customary practices. Soon, the language associated with the former will most likely be lost. In Nigeria, the adoption of foreign religions like Islam and Christianity greatly affected certain terms or registers used in African Traditional Religion, which was preserved in rituals, chants, proverbs, etc.

Measuring Endangerment

Language endangerment occurs when an indigenous language faces decline in usage, speakers and intergenerational transmission (Eze, 2025). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2003) uses four levels of measuring endangerment.

- vulnerable (not spoken by children outside the home)
- endangered (children not speaking the language)
- severely endangered (only spoken by the older generation)
- critically endangered (spoken by few members of the older generation)

Going further, UNESCO gives nine factors for determining language vitality.

- F1 intergenerational language transmission
- F2 absolute number of speakers
- F3 proportion of speakers existing within the total population
- F4 language use within existing contexts and domains
- F5 response to language use in new domains
- F6 availability of materials for language education and literacy
- F7 government and institutional language policy
- F8 community attitude towards their language
- F9 amount and quality of documentation.

The questionnaire's data design for this paper is developed based on the aforementioned measures to assess language vitality.

Methodology

This study uses a quantitative research method. An online questionnaire was designed based on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and distributed online to individuals and Ika social media groups, both in Nigeria and the Diaspora. It was to measure the current viability of the Ika language in the wake of the growing fear of language loss in Nigeria. The choice of an online questionnaire is to create easy access for Ika-speaking people not resident in Delta State. Feedback was received from 108 persons, which served as data for analysis. Respondents were drawn from adolescents, teenagers, and adults. However, it should be noted that being an online questionnaire, it was accessed by the highly educated, 84% of the respondents had tertiary education, and most could afford good phones and data. The adolescents and teenagers made use of their parents' phones to respond to the questionnaire.

Data Analysis of the Survey of Ika Language Use

Data results are examined with the UNESCO measurement of language viability.

F1 Intergenerational language transmission

Of the 108 respondents, 56 are parents and 30% admit that their children do not understand Ika language while 38% of the children do not understand it fully. This is the most important factor, and

this percentage shows that the rate of transmission to the next generation is below average. This would also imply that 68% of the next generation is on their way to losing the language.

F2 Absolute Number of Speakers

67% of our respondents could speak Ika, and only 14% could not speak the language.

F3 proportion of speakers existing within the total population

Of the 108 respondents, 67% could speak the Ika language.

F4 language use within existing contexts and domains

Only 40% of our respondents speak Ika at home. 25% do not speak it at all at home.

F5 response to language use in new domains

84% of the respondents are comfortable speaking the Ika language.

F6 Availability of Materials for Language Education and Literacy

Only 35% of respondents have seen texts written in the Ika language, and 19% own such a text. 35% can read a text written in Ika.

F7 Government and Institutional Language Policy

Despite the Government policy on language that says that pupils in primary schools should be taught in the language of the locality (Mohammed, 2018), it has not been effective in the field because 62% of respondents who had elementary education in Ika-speaking areas were taught in English. The fact that 60% of respondents have not seen a text written in the language is proof that not much has been done on the part of the government to promote literacy in local languages in Nigeria.

F8 Community Attitude Towards Their Language

Despite the seeming part of failure of the government in enforcing policies, 99% of respondents express interest in their children speaking the language. 89% want the language of instruction in schools to be Agbor. 81% want Ika to be spoken freely in schools.

F9 Amount and Quality of Documentation. The fact that only 19% of respondents have texts written in Ika, and only 49% have seen such a text, goes to show the poor level of documentation and available materials of the language.

For Intergenerational language transmission, 66% of the respondents can understand Ika. However, only 30% of the children of the respondents can speak the language. This is the most important factor, and this percentage shows that the rate of transmission to the next generation is below average. The absolute number of speakers from the respondents makes up 48%. For language use within existing contexts and domains, only 34% speak the Ika language in their homes. Ika is not used as a language

of instruction in schools in Ika South and North East local Governments. This is a setback for the promotion of vernacular in public spaces. All the respondents wanted the Ika language to be taught in schools, but 6% didn't want it to be spoken freely in schools. These are critical domains for language learning.

For the availability of materials for language education and literacy, 48% have seen a text written in the Ika language, but only 22% of respondents could read it. This shows a low literacy rate among Ika language speakers. As a result, 82% of the respondents did not own any text written in the Ika language. For the amount and quality of documentation, from those who received their elementary education in Ika local governments, 53% were taught purely in the English language. This implies that there was no form of text written in Ika being studied in schools. 48% of respondents have never seen a text in the Ika language, and only 22% of those who have can even read it. Only 18% of those who have seen such texts own them.

With the new language policy in Nigeria, where pupils from Primary 1 to 6 would be taught in the mother tongue of the locality, all respondents assented to the Ika language being taught in schools. This will be a catalyst for the revitalisation of the language.

Even though many of the respondents could not understand or speak Ika, they all want their offspring to speak the language. This shows they are well disposed to their language being spoken.

From this data analysis, it is safe to say, firstly, that there is poor transmission of the Ika language from the older generation to the younger, especially for families living outside Ika-speaking areas. Using the UNESCO 2009 yardstick measurement for language endangerment will place the Ika language as endangered because most of the children below 20 years old do not speak the language. There is a gradual language shift to the English language for the present generation because of the dominance of English. This is enabled by poor language policy implementation in Nigeria, the priority given to the English language in certificate examinations, the non standardisation of indigenous languages, the absence of a national language as a result of the multilingual nature of the country, the rise of social media that promotes Nigerian Pidgin and the Nigerian English, the migration of youths to foreign lands where they have to acquire new languages, and several other factors.

Using the UNESCO measurement for language endangerment, the Ika language can be placed as endangered because of the low transmission of the language to the younger generation.

Recommendations

An endangered language does not have to go extinct if the right measures are taken towards its revitalisation. The Ika language has great possibilities for revitalisation through various instruments of promotion. Firstly, the university located in the land can establish a language centre for the promotion of indigenous languages with a focus on the Ika language. Research into developing and standardising the language would greatly promote literature to be written in Ika. Languages that have

a rich collection of written texts are more difficult to erase than languages that are only orally transmitted.

Social media skit makers, movie or music makers using the Ika language in their works should be encouraged by natives, making sure their works go viral. Presently, there has been an increase in the use of the Ika language on social media. Skit maker, De Anointed Sarah, King Agren, a pop singer and YouTube channels promoting the language in their works should be encouraged and also given recognition awards to motivate the younger generation towards creating local content on social media.

Conclusion

Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a repository of culture. By preserving languages, we enrich our collective understanding, respect diverse perspectives, and ensure that no culture is lost in the tracks of time. This work has shown that low transmission of our indigenous languages to the younger generation is a major cause of loss of language vitality. However, the endangerment of a language always ends in its death. Parents, traditional rulers, policymakers and the executive arm of the Government all have critical roles to play in stemming the tide of language shift leading to the eventual loss of the mother tongue.

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