Endangered Identity: Causes and Consequences of Dialects' Extinction in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is home to a rich linguistic diversity, with different dialects at risk of extinction. Indoctrinated language like English is at the verge of side-lining major languages such as the Nigerian Pidgin, and other major ethnic dialects like Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo which is leading to their gradual decline. This language shift is driven by social, economic, and educational factors, as well as urbanization. Local dialect extinct would result in the loss of cultural identity, traditions, and historical ecological knowledge tied to these dialects. This study uses language shift theory and ecological linguistics to understand the causes and consequences. These theories explain how younger generations adopt dominant languages, leading to the abandonment of indigenous dialects; as well as show how the loss of dialect also mean the loss of cultural and environmental knowledge tied to it. The causes include globalization, migration, colonial legacies, and educational policies that marginalize indigenous dialects. The consequences of language loss are weighty, contributing to social inequality, decrease in ethnocentrism, cultural erosion, loss of valuable local knowledge, among others. To address this, solutions like documentation, revitalization through the inclusion of dialects into formal education setting, and community-driven initiatives are essential. Government policies and public awareness campaigns should promote the use of indigenous dialects and support language preservation ideas. Protecting Nigeria's linguistic heritage is vital to preserving its cultural identity and ensuring its diversity for future generations.

Keywords: language, dialect extinction, causes, consequences

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, located in West Africa, is renowned for its remarkable linguistic diversity. It is home to approximately 400 to 500 languages spoken across the country (Blench, 2019). This vast array represents about 15% of the world's total languages (Lewis, 2009). Each indigenous dialect embodies distinct cultures, histories, and traditions, making a vital contribution to Nigeria's rich cultural identity. Unfortunately, this linguistic heritage is facing significant threats. As noted in UNESCO's (2010) in Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, a substantial portion of Nigeria's languages is at risk, with 115 classified as endangered. Of these, 25 are considered critically endangered, signifying an immediate danger of extinction (Moseley, 2010). The three of Nigeria's major languages: Yoruba, Igbo, and Ishekiri that are also facing the threat of extinction (UNESCO, 2010). Similarly, Ohiri-Aniche (2014) observes that around 400 minority dialects in Nigeria are deemed endangered, with 152 of them facing the threat of extinction.

As noted by Babalobi (2020), twenty-nine minor dialects in Nigeria have vanished, while an additional twenty-nine are at risk of disappearing. The National Council for Arts and Culture (2020) has identified nine of them that are now extinct to include Ajawa, once spoken in present-day Bauchi; Basa-Gumna from Niger State; Auyokawa and Teshenawa formerly spoken in Jigawa State; Gamo-Ningi, a Kainji dialect from Bauchi State; Homa from Adamawa State; Kubi, also from Bauchi State; Kpati, which was spoken in Taraba State; Odut was once used in the Odukpani area of Cross River State. The extinction and decline of Nigerian dialects can largely be attributed to the dominance of English and Nigerian Pidgin, which have increasingly replaced indigenous

dialects. As younger generations tend to adopt these more widely spoken foreign languages, the threat to indigenous tongues becomes even greater. This does not only jeopardizes cultural diversity but also diminishes the historial knowledge and traditions that these languages reflect.

CONCEPTS OF LANGUAGE AND DIALECTS EXTINCTION

Language serves as a powerful tool for human communication, facilitating the exchange of ideas and interaction among people. Language is a cultured system of communication comprising a set of rules to the use of words. It operates as a sophisticated system of signs and symbols, connecting words (signifiers) to concepts (signified) to convey meaning (Saussure, 1983; Chukwu & Ugwu, 2023). Moreover, language does not merely reflect reality; it also influences our understanding of the world, shaping our thoughts and perceptions (Sapir, 1921; Hussein, 2012). Language has the capacity to create complex symbols, enabling it to generate meaningful expressions. Language has underlying rules that help us create and understand many different sentences (Chomsky, 1957). It is essential for humans to convey thoughts, emotions, and ideas, enabling effective interpretation through various means such as spoken words, sign language, and written text. This flexibility allows individuals to connect and share complex messages in multiple forms. Indeed, language reflects and is shaped by the cultural and historical contexts of its users, resulting in diverse forms and variations across different societies and time periods (Nicholas & Stephen, 2009). Languages transcend mere communication; they embody cultural identity, encapsulating the values, beliefs, and histories of their speaker communities. Each language carries traditional knowledge, offering unique insights into nature, social practices, and community customs (Harrison, 2007). Most experts agree that there are around 6,000 to 7,000 languages spoken in the world today (Moseley, 2010). Some linguists predict that by 2100, between 50% and 90% of these languages will be critically endangered or extinct (Austin, & Sallabank, 2011).

Dialect endangerment is sometimes known as moribund language. Whaley (2014) defines an endangered language as one with decreasing speaker numbers, which may eventually lead to it becoming moribund or extinct. As Darhemi (2002) puts it, an endangered language is one at risk of disappearing entirely, ceasing to serve as a tool for communication and potentially leaving no trace in human history. This situation arises when younger generations do not learn the language, leading to a decline in the number of fluent speakers. Dialect loss happens when there are no native speakers left, turning it into a "dead language". Woodbury (2012) argues that languages may be deemed dead or endangered when they are no longer spoken in the same form as they appear in historical texts. He also believes that any language that is declining in use or not being passed down to the next generation is at risk of becoming endangered and may soon become extinct. If a language reaches the point where no one speaks it at all, it is classified as an "extinct language," meaning it has completely vanished from use and left no community of speakers or associated cultural practices.

UNESCO (2010) reports that approximately 43% of the world's languages are at risk of extinction. This troubling figure underscores the serious issue of language endangerment, which threatens cultural diversity. It is important to note that when a language fades away, it also carries with it the stories, wisdom, and identities of its speakers, which can never be fully recovered. Wurm (2003) outlines five stages that lead to language endangerment. The first stage is potential endangerment, where a language faces strong external pressures but still has communities of speakers actively passing it on to their children. The second stage, endangerment occurs when the number of speakers decreases significantly, and children are mostly not learning the language. In the third step, seriously endangered, the language is unlikely to survive another generation, making extinction imminent. This is followed by the moribund stage, where very few speakers remain, typically older adults, and the language is no longer taught to children. The fifth stage is extinction, which happens when no speakers are left, and the language is no longer in use. Suffice it to say that an endangered language is characterized by: (1) an aging speaker base, (2) limited community use, (3) breakdown of intergenerational transmission, (4) lack of written forms, (5) language replacement, and (6) imminent extinction risk (Bamgbose, 2011).

Selected Indigenous Endangered Languages in Nigeria

UNESCO (2010) categorizes language endangerment into four levels, in-between "safe" and "extinct", predicated on succession and heritage across generations. These levels include: vulnerable, definitely endangered, severely endangered, and critically endangered. It is worthwhile to note that, languages classified

as vulnerable are spoken by most children, but their use is often limited to specific contexts like the home. In definitely endangered languages, children no longer learn it as their mother tongue at home. Severely endangered languages are primarily spoken by grandparents and older generations, while the parent generation may understand it but does not speak it to children or among themselves. Finally, in critically endangered languages, the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, who use the language only partially and infrequently. Accordingly, we have identified the following Nigerian languages within these categories.

Table 1: Languages status of being endangered in Nigeria

S/N	Language	Status	State of Location
1	Akum	Critically endangered	Taraba
2	Bakpinka/Iyongiyong	Critically endangered	Cross River
3	Defaka	Critically endangered	Rivers
4	Dulbu	Critically endangered	Bauchi
5	Gbiri-Niragu	Critically endangered	Kaduna
6	Gyem	Critically endangered	Bauchi
7	Ilue	Critically endangered	Akwa Ibom
8	Jilbe	Critically endangered	Borno
9	Kudu-Camo	Critically endangered	Bauchi
10	Luri	Critically endangered	Bauchi
11	Mvanip	Critically endangered	Taraba
12	Sambe	Critically endangered	Kaduna
13	Somyev	Critically endangered	Taraba
14	Yangkam	Critically endangered	Plateau
15	Kuteb	Critically endangered	Taraba
16	Duguza/Tunzu	Definitely endangered	Plateau and Bauchi
17	Polci	Definitely endangered	Bauchi
18	Fyem	Severely endangered	Plateau
19	Geji	Severely endangered	Bauchi
20	Gurdu-Mbaaru	Severely endangered	Bauchi
21	Gura	Severely endangered	Borno
22	Hya	Severely endangered	Adamawa
23	Kona\	Severely endangered	Adamawa/Taraba
24	Ngwaba	Severely endangered	Adamawa
25	Ndunda	Severely endangered	Taraba

S/N	Language	Status	State of Location
26	Bade/Bede/Bedde	Vulnerable	Yobe and Jigawa
27	Gur	Vulnerable	Kaduna/Niger/Nasarawa/Plateau
28	Gera	Vulnerable	Bauchi
29	Reshe	Vulnerable	Bauchi

Source: UNESCO (2010), Blench (2019). World atlas of the languages in danger of disappearing

Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

Theoretical Framework

Language Shift Theory

Language Shift Theory refers to the gradual process by which a community abandons its native language in favor of a more dominant language, often due to social, economic, or political pressures (Fishman, 1991). This shift occurs when younger generations no longer learn or use their heritage language and instead adopt a more widely spoken or prestigious language, leading to a decline in the use and transmission of the minority language (Labov, 1972). Over time, if no efforts are made to preserve the language, it can become endangered or even extinct. Language Shift Theory was initially developed by William Labov and Charles A. Ferguson, and has been further refined in the context of language maintenance, loss, and survival (Labov, 1972; Ferguson, 1959).

One key concept in Language Shift Theory is intergenerational language transmission, where a language loses speakers when it is no longer passed down to younger generations (Fishman, 1991). In many parts of Nigeria, for instance, younger generations increasingly speak English or Nigerian pidgin including the dominant ethnic languages like Hausa, Yoruba, or Igbo, rather than their ancestral languages, resulting in the decline of minority languages. The shift is also often driven by social, economic, and political factors; people are more likely to adopt a dominant language if it provides access to better job opportunities, education, or social status. In Nigeria, English is the official language of government and education, leading many speakers of local languages to shift to English for better opportunities.

The education system plays a crucial role in language shift, as formal education in a dominant language can discourage children from using their native language. In Nigeria, for example, English is the primary language of instruction, and students are often discouraged from using their indigenous languages, which contributes to their decline in educational settings. Similarly, urbanization and migration lead people to adopt the dominant languages spoken in cities, as these languages facilitate social integration and economic survival (Fishman, 1991). Migrants from rural Nigerian areas to cities may shift from their local languages to English or Nigerian pidgin for practical reasons. Language prestige also play a significant role in the shift, as dominant languages are often associated with higher social standing and economic success, while minority languages are perceived as less valuable (Ferguson, 1959). As a result, people may switch to languages like Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, or English, believing that these languages will open doors to greater success in society. Again, this can lead to language loss; a situation where fewer and fewer people speak the language, and it eventually dies out if it is not actively maintained.

Ecological Linguistics

Ecological Linguistics views language as part of an interconnected system that includes the environment, culture, and society. In this view, languages are like "ecosystems," influenced by many factors around them. When a language is endangered, it is not just about losing words; it reflects larger social, cultural, and environmental changes (Phillipson, 2008). Robert Phillipson, and Michael Halliday, Peter Mühlhäusler and Bernard Spolsky have been key proponents of this theory. They emphasize the interdependence of language, culture, and the

environment. According to them, language is more than just a communication tool; it also carries the cultural and ecological knowledge of its speakers, and when a language dies, that knowledge often disappears too (Mühlhäusler, 2003).

Ecological Linguistics sees language as deeply connected to the environment, culture, and society, where all these elements influence each other. When these systems change or face disruptions, languages are at risk, with language endangerment reflecting broader social and cultural transformations (Haugen, 1972; Phillipson, 2008). Language is not just a tool for communication; it also carries important cultural and ecological knowledge, which is lost when the language disappears (Mühlhäusler, 2003).
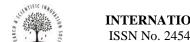
To successfully preserve a language, it is essential to protect the social and cultural contexts in which it is spoken, meaning revitalization efforts must include not just education, but also active use of the language in everyday life and community traditions (Mühlhäusler, 2003). Much like environmental sustainability, language sustainability is critical for a language's long-term survival, and this involves making the language relevant in modern contexts, such as schools and the media (Haugen, 1972). Lastly, languages are repositories of unique cultural and ecological knowledge, and their loss means the disappearance of valuable information about local environments and ways of life (Haugen, 1972; Mühlhäusler, 2003). Nigeria, with its rich linguistic diversity, provides an ideal example of how ecological linguistics can apply to language endangerment. Many languages in Nigeria are threatened due to the rise of English, as well as dominant languages like Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo. This not only leads to the decline of these languages but also results in the loss of local knowledge tied to those languages.

Causes of Language Endangerment in Nigeria

Languages have always faced extinction throughout history, but the current rate of decline is particularly alarming due to several interrelated causes. Austin and Sallabank (2011) highlight that languages are disappearing at an alarming rate due to globalization, mass migration, cultural replacement, imperialism, and neocolonialism. Globalization, in particular, endangers the linguistic heritage of indigenous communities, threatening the long-term survival of their languages (Sale, Chukwu, Odibah, & Ogu, 2021). This phenomenon promotes dominant languages like English, French, German, and Spanish in educational systems, often sidelining local languages. Such linguistic dominance undermines the cultural significance of minority tongues, leading to their gradual disappearance.

Mass migration and urbanization also compound the problem. When people move to urban areas or different regions in pursuit of improved economic, educational, and social prospects, they frequently embrace the dominant language of their new environment (Nzeaka, & Ehondor, 2021). This shift can result in language replacement, where their original language is gradually supplanted by the dominant one in everyday interactions. As a result, younger generations tend to grow up speaking the dominant language instead of their ancestral tongue. Again, their proficiency in the native language may diminish as the dominant language becomes the main mode of communication. Hence, cultural replacement typically favors dominant cultures, overshadowing and diminishing the significance of minority cultures and languages (Awonusi, 2004).

Furthermore, language endangerment stems from educational and language policies, colonial legacies, insufficient documentation, and an aging population of fluent speakers. Policies promoting a single national language and few others in education and governance marginalize minority languages, hastening their extinction. The promotion and dominance of "international languages" like English and French weaken the credibility of indigenous language programs (Odugu, 2011). The education system primarily focuses on English and colonial languages, often neglecting indigenous languages, further diminishing proficiency among younger generations. Oyetade (2001) attributes this phenomenon to the low priority given to indigenous languages in the school curriculum. The establishment of English as the official language during colonial rule further marginalized indigenous languages, creating a hierarchy that favored English as a symbol of education and power. This emphasis on English as the official language and lingua franca marginalizes local languages (Sale et al., 2021). Consequently, many Nigerians, especially in urban areas, adopt these dominant languages for social and economic opportunities.

In addition, many indigenous languages suffer from insufficient documentation, lacking essential resources like grammars and dictionaries, which hampers efforts to learn and preserve them. Furthermore, the majority of fluent speakers are elderly, and as they pass away, fewer opportunities arise for younger individuals to learn these languages. As observed by Romaine (2007), languages face danger when they are not naturally passed down to children at home by their parents or caregivers. If young people are not exposed to their native languages at home or in their communities, their chances of becoming fluent diminish, accelerating the decline and potential extinction of these languages.

Moreso, citizens' attitudes toward indigenous languages have profoundly contributed to language endangerment. The unwillingness of younger generations, particularly those who identify as Generation Z, to speak their mother tongues worsen the situation. In the same vein, the inability of many Nigerian parents, particularly within the elite class, to speak their indigenous languages to their children, specifically at a young age, leads to language endangerment. Bamgbose (2016) argues that the attitudes of the Nigerian elite reflect linguistic imperialism, perpetuating the belief that European languages are inherently superior and indispensable across sophisticated domains. This dynamic resembles neocolonialism, where the values of powerful nations eclipse those of less dominant groups, further contributing to linguistic decline. All of these factors, in turn, result in the failure of intergenerational language transmission.

Consequences of Dialect Extinction in Nigeria

Dialect extinction has far-reaching consequences, impacting not only the languages themselves but also the identity, heritage, and cultural essence of the communities that speak them. The causes of language endangerment in Nigeria result in profound effects on cultural identity, social structures, and even the economy. As indigenous languages face decline, much of the cultural heritage tied to these languages, including traditions, customs, and generations of local knowledge, begins to vanish. This view has been supported by Eschner (2020) who argued that, when communities lose their language, they risk eroding cultural heritage, including traditional songs, myths, poetry, remedies, ecological knowledge, and subtle behaviors that are deeply connected to that language. This loss not only weakens cultural connections but also contributes to the social marginalization of minority language speakers, who often find themselves at a disadvantage in educational and professional systems that prioritize dominant languages like English. Hence, as observed by Bamgbose (2000), the rise of global languages over indigenous ones fosters a sense of cultural inferiority and linguistic imperialism, diminishing the value of local languages.

The inability to pass down indigenous languages to younger generations creates a gap between them and their cultural heritage. This disconnection disrupts family and community unity, leading to broader social fragmentation. In addition, educational systems that emphasize global languages over local ones only exacerbate these divides, as speakers of minority languages struggle in curricula that do not reflect their cultural identities. This creates a cycle of inequality, where those who speak dominant languages have greater access to opportunities, while speakers of endangered languages remain marginalized (Awonusi, 2004).

Beyond cultural and social impacts, the decline of indigenous languages also jeopardizes valuable environmental and sustainable knowledge embedded within these languages. Many indigenous communities possess detailed knowledge about their local environments, including resource management practices and an understanding of biodiversity, all of which are deeply connected to their native languages. As these languages disappear, this vital knowledge is at risk, with potentially serious consequences for both the environment and the economy (Romaine, 2007).

Moreover, the shift away from multilingualism toward a single global language as a result of language endangerment lead to a reduction in intellectual and cultural diversity. This linguistic homogenization limits the variety of perspectives and stifles intercultural dialogue. From an economic standpoint, the loss of indigenous languages can negatively affect industries like cultural tourism, where the authenticity of local languages and customs is a key attraction for visitors. Ultimately, the extinction of indigenous languages in Nigeria, driven by factors such as globalization, migration, and education policies, weakens the nation's cultural heritage and threatens its social cohesion and global cultural identity (Bamgbose, 2000).

Potential Solutions for Addressing Language Endangerment in Nigeria

Undoubtedly, language endangerment is a pressing concern that necessitates immediate and collective attention to prevent the irreversible loss of our linguistic heritage. In response to the identified causes, the following remedies have been proposed to combat language endangerment in Nigeria. One of the ways of combating the threat of language endangerment is through documentation, revitalization, and maintenance of endangered languages (Austin & Sallabank, 2011). This approach requires collaborative efforts from governments, communities, linguists, educators, and individuals to safeguard Nigeria's rich linguistic diversity. An important aspect of this process is transitioning languages from spoken to written form, which involves documenting their grammar, vocabulary, and cultural narratives (Omo-Ojugo, 2004).

Nigerian government can support language preservation by establishing documentation centers, enforcing policies to promote indigenous languages, funding language research, and implementing mother-tongue education in primary schools, along with language clubs and courses in educational institutions. Language revitalization focuses on community-driven efforts to revive and increase the use of endangered languages through education, policy, and social initiatives. The revitalization of endangered languages largely depends on applied linguistics and education (Anderson, 2011). The goal is to reverse language decline and encourage usage among speakers. Therefore, efforts to address language endangerment in Nigeria can be strengthened through community-led initiatives, including language revitalization programs and cultural events that foster linguistic heritage (Haruna, 2017).

Language maintenance involves proactive efforts to sustain and stabilize languages that face external pressures, ensuring their ongoing use and transmission. Protecting native languages is important because it will help us in preserving our culture and identity. In light of this, Bamgbose (1993) highlights the role of parents in this process by teaching their children indigenous languages and integrating them into daily life, promoting bilingualism through family language policies. The media and entertainment industries can also support language maintenance by creating indigenous language programming and social media platforms. Effective language planning strategies, including standardization and lexicography, are essential, alongside public awareness campaigns and preservation workshops that educate people on the importance of saving endangered languages. The language endangerment awareness campaign could feature impactful slogans such as "speak up for your mother tongue," "lose a language, lose an identity," and "save your language, save your heritage," to inspire action.

An alternative to language revival is "post-vernacular maintenance" (Zuckermann, 2009). It involves partial preservation of a language through targeted education that introduces learners to specific words, concepts, and cultural elements from a language no longer in everyday use. To further combat language endangerment in Nigeria, embracing "linguistic social responsibility" is crucial (Bamgbose, 2016). This concept encourages promoting and preserving indigenous languages across various domains, including education, media, and community engagement, fostering an environment where mother tongues are valued and actively spoken. In addition, implementing laws that protect language rights and encouraging the use of indigenous languages is essential for preserving cultural heritage and preventing further language decline in Nigeria. To tackle the challenge posed by neocolonialism in Nigeria, education should be decolonized. This can be done by incorporating local languages into our school curricula. National and international recognition of language rights should also be promoted.

CONCLUSION

Language endangerment in Nigeria is driven by factors such as globalization, migration, the dominance of English, and negative attitudes toward indigenous languages. As younger generations adopt dominant languages like English and Nigerian Pidgin, many indigenous languages are at risk of extinction. This shift is fueled by the desire for better economic opportunities and social status. The loss of these languages also results in the erosion of cultural identity and ecological knowledge tied to them. Theories like Language Shift explain how the abandonment of native languages occurs, while Ecological Linguistics highlights the loss of valuable cultural and environmental insights when languages disappear. The consequences of language loss include increased social inequality, cultural erosion, and threats to industries like cultural tourism. To combat this, solutions such

as language documentation, revitalization, and community-driven initiatives are essential. Government policies, educational programs, and media support are also needed to preserve indigenous languages and raise awareness about their importance. A collective effort is required to protect Nigeria's linguistic heritage and ensure its cultural diversity for future generations. For any culture that desires to promote its identity, it becomes pertinent to retain and revive its dialect to be adopted by generations unborn.

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