

# THE FUTURE OF NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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## Abstract

This paper examines the prospects of National Language Policy and Language Development in Nigeria, with a focus on promoting linguistic diversity, cultural preservation, and inclusive education. The paper highlights various aspects, including multilingualism, mother tongue education, official language status, language documentation and research, technology and digital resources, community engagement, inclusive education, and collaboration and partnerships. By incorporating these strategies, Nigeria can pave the way for the preservation and development of its indigenous languages while ensuring effective communication and integration across linguistic communities. This paper explores the national language policies in shaping the future of Nigeria's multilingual society and highlights potential strategies for sustainable language development.

**Keywords:** Community engagement, development, digital resources, language, language policy.

## Introduction:

Nigeria is a country enriched with a rich cultural heritage and linguistic diversity. This diversity is reflected in the numerous ethnic groups and languages spoken throughout the nation. However, the dominance of the English language has overshadowed the indigenous languages, raising concerns about the preservation of Nigeria's linguistic and cultural identity.

Nigeria is renowned for its rich linguistic diversity, with over 500 indigenous languages spoken across the country. However, the dominance of English as the official language poses challenges to the promotion and preservation of indigenous languages. This paper explores the future trajectory of national language Policy and Language Development in Nigeria, addressing the importance of incorporating indigenous languages within the education system, promoting multilingualism, leveraging technology, fostering community engagement, and establishing partnerships for sustainable language revitalization efforts.

## Definitions Clarification

### Language

Language refers to a system of communication consisting of spoken, written, or signed words and the rules for their use and understanding. It is a fundamental aspect of human communication and plays a crucial role in expressing thoughts, ideas, emotions, and culture (Odebunmi & Okebukola, 2021, p. 45).

Language is a complex system of communication that involves the use of words, symbols, and gestures to convey meaning. It is a fundamental aspect of human culture and society, enabling individuals to express their thoughts, emotions, and ideas. Language plays a crucial role in various aspects of human life, including education, politics, economics, and social interactions.

### **Language Policy**

Language Policy refers to a set of principles, guidelines, or rules that are designed to govern or influence decisions and actions. In the context of language, language policy refers to the principles and guidelines that determine how languages are managed, promoted, valued, and used within a specific context or society (Ibrahim, 2021, p.15).

### **Development**

Language development, on the other hand, encompasses efforts to improve and enhance the usage, vitality, and resources available for a particular language. These efforts may include language planning, curriculum development, language education policies, linguistic research, technological advancements, and community engagement initiatives. Language development aims to foster linguistic diversity, cultural preservation, and inclusive education while promoting effective communication and integration among linguistic communities.

The goal of national language Policy and Language Development is to strike a balance between promoting a common language for national unity and preserving the linguistic and cultural heritage of diverse populations within a country. It often involves ongoing evaluation, adaptation, and implementation of policies and initiatives to address the changing needs and dynamics of language use in society (Onwuegbu, Nwosu, & Ugwu, 2020).

### **National Language Policy**

National Language Policy (NLP) pertains to the policies and strategies adopted by a country or nation concerning the use, status, promotion, and management of languages within its borders. These policies often aim to address linguistic diversity, language rights, language education, language planning, and language preservation to foster national unity, social cohesion, and sustainable development. NLPs can vary from country to country depending on factors such as historical background, cultural dynamics, and societal needs.

Okon (2021, p. 25), defined National language policy as a set of principles and guidelines established by a government or governing body to regulate the use and development of languages within a nation or state. It encompasses decisions related to the official language(s) of a country, language education policies, language planning, language rights, and language preservation efforts.

The development of a national language policy involves several key considerations. Firstly, it involves determining the official language(s) of a country. An official language is typically designated as the primary means of communication in government institutions, legal proceedings, education systems, and public services. In some cases, countries may have multiple official languages to accommodate linguistic diversity within their borders.

Language education policies are another important aspect of national language policy development. These policies outline the strategies and approaches for teaching and learning languages in educational institutions. They may include provisions for bilingual or multilingual education programs, language immersion initiatives, or the promotion of indigenous languages.

Language planning is an integral part of national language policy development as well. It involves making decisions about the standardization and codification of languages, creating dictionaries and developing grammar, establishing language academies or regulatory bodies, and developing terminology for specialized fields. Language planning aims to ensure linguistic consistency and facilitate effective communication within a nation.

Language rights are also addressed in national language policies. These rights encompass the protection and promotion of linguistic diversity, ensuring equal opportunities for individuals to use their preferred languages in various domains of life. Language rights may include provisions for minority languages, indigenous languages, sign languages, or immigrant languages.

Furthermore, national language policies often involve efforts to preserve endangered languages. Language preservation initiatives aim to document, revitalize, and promote languages that are at risk of extinction. These efforts may include language revitalization programs, the establishment of language archives, or the integration of endangered languages into education systems.

The development of a national language policy is influenced by various factors, including historical, political, cultural, and demographic considerations. It requires extensive research, consultation with linguistic experts and communities, and collaboration between government bodies, educational institutions, and language stakeholders.

Language is a fundamental aspect of human communication and culture. National language policy refers to the principles and guidelines established by a government to regulate the use and development of languages within a nation. It encompasses decisions related to official languages, language education policies, language planning, language rights, and language preservation efforts (Osoba & Ogbonnaya, 2021, p.6).

### **Language Policies in Nigeria**

The language policy of Nigeria has evolved over the years, guided by different political, social, and economic considerations. Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria adopted English as the official language to foster unity and facilitate communication among its diverse population. However, this has resulted in a decline in the usage and recognition of indigenous languages. The Nigerian government recognizes three major languages (Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba) as optional subjects in schools, but there is still a significant gap in implementing inclusive language policies at the national level.

Both the documents of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) and the National Policy on Education (2014) have made some stipulations that could be termed Nigeria's language policy. Section 55 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria stipulates that “the affairs of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and Hausa and Igbo and Yoruba when

adequate arrangements have been made thereof". Similarly, in the National Policy on Education, the government recognizes the role of language as a means of social interaction and national cohesion; and preserving cultures. For this reason, it stipulates that:

- a. every child shall learn the language of his immediate environment and in the interest of national unity is required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages.
- b. for smooth interaction with our neighbours it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in primary and Junior secondary schools. Specifically, for early childhood/pre-primary education, the policy stipulates that the government shall "ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community" (NPE, 2014).

Therefore, a summary of Nigeria's language policy reveals the following:

- a. Use of English in the affairs of governance at the national and state levels and any of the three major indigenous languages.
- b. Use of the mother tongue at the pre-primary level
  - i. Use of the mother tongue, the English language and the French language at the primary level.
  - ii. Use of English, French and any one of the three major languages (provided it is not the child's mother tongue) at the junior secondary level.
  - iii. Use of English and any indigenous language at the senior secondary level. (French and Arabic are language options).
  - iv. No specific prescriptions are made in the policy document for language education at the tertiary level.

### **Implications for Sustainable Development**

In essence, Nigeria has a multilingual/multicultural policy on language in the training of manpower needed for the development of Nigeria. It recognizes the strategic roles of both the native languages and English in education and overall manpower development. However good the intentions of the government are in the stipulations of these policies, the implementation is far from realization, especially in the use of the mother tongue, and hence, the objectives of the policy are far from being achieved. There is, therefore, the need to overhaul the policy as it regards the use of the mother tongue concerning the provisions and implementations.

In line with Salawu (2020, p.10) as cited in Lawal, a framework that relates linguistic communication to educational, socio-economic and political needs in Nigeria is hereby proposed:

- a. that English be used at international and interpersonal levels, for example for broadcasting, business and economic transactions; and as a medium of (and subject in) higher education.
- b. that the three major languages as well as other native languages which have had their orthography developed be used at the interzonal levels, e.g for broadcasting, justice, administration, etc; and as a medium of primary and lower secondary education; and a subject at all levels of education.
- c. that other minority languages be used for informal purposes, semi-formal use at interzonal level, for example in customary courts, at lower levels of administration, etc.

These reforms become necessary against the backdrop of the fact that research has shown that the child learns best in his mother tongue. Fafunwa submits that:

if the Nigerian child is to be encouraged from the start to develop curiosity, initiative, industry, manipulative ability, mechanical comprehension and coordination of hand and eye, he should acquire these skills and attitudes through his mother tongue; after all, this is the most natural learning medium.

The development attained by Asian countries according to Ehusani, was partly because they held on to their local languages. For this reason, the Nigerian government has serious tasks to carry out to ensure that the process of language engineering for native languages is set off. This does not call for mere provisions of a blueprint; but rather, an urgent and pragmatic approach to the implementation of any of such proposals. Against the background of the multilingual composition of Nigeria and that language planning and engineering is not easy; against the stark realities of globalization; the status, roles and functions of the English language in Nigeria about education, to empower, secure and achieve advancement is undoubtedly a foregone conclusion.

### **Challenges and Implications**

The neglect of indigenous languages in Nigeria poses several challenges and implications for the nation's linguistic landscape. Firstly, it threatens the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage. Indigenous languages serve as carriers of cultural values, traditions, and oral history, which contribute to a sense of identity and belonging.

Moreover, the dominance of English hinders effective communication and inclusivity, especially for those with limited proficiency in the language. It also perpetuates inequalities in access to education and employment opportunities for speakers of indigenous languages (Yakubu, 2021, p.16).

### **Challenges of Implementing a National Language Policy and Language Development in Nigeria**

Key challenges include:

1. **Linguistic Diversity:** Nigeria is a linguistically diverse country with over 500 languages spoken. This diversity poses challenges in selecting a national language and implementing policies that accommodate multiple languages.
2. **Language Attitudes and Preferences:** Different ethnic groups in Nigeria have strong attachments to their native languages, leading to a preference for mother tongue education rather than a national language. Balancing these preferences with the need for a common language can be challenging.
3. **Education System:** Developing language policies that are integrated into the education system is a challenge. Inadequate resources and infrastructure, as well as a lack of trained teachers for teaching specific languages, hinder effective implementation.
4. **Socio-political Factors:** Political considerations, such as power dynamics and regional interests, can influence language policy decisions. Balancing these interests and ensuring equitable language development can be difficult.
5. **Standardization and Orthography:** Developing standardized forms and orthographies for Nigerian languages that lack a written tradition is a significant challenge. This process requires consensus among speakers and linguistic experts.

6. **Implementation and Enforcement:** Even with well-defined language policies, implementation and enforcement can be challenging. Adequate funding, institutional support, and monitoring mechanisms are necessary for effective implementation.
7. **Attitude and Perception:** Changing attitudes towards language usage and promoting the value of Nigerian languages in official settings can be an uphill task. Perceptions of some languages as inferior or less prestigious may impede the successful implementation of language policies.
8. **Economic Considerations:** Implementing language policies requires substantial investments in teacher training, curriculum development, and language materials. Mobilizing resources to support these initiatives can be a challenge in resource-constrained settings.
9. **Global Communication:** In an increasingly interconnected world, ensuring that a national language policy aligns with international communication standards can be challenging. Balancing local linguistic diversity with global communication needs is necessary.
10. **Long-term Sustainability:** Sustaining language policies and development efforts over time is crucial. Regular evaluation, adaptation, and commitment from successive governments are needed to ensure the continued success of language policies.

### **Strategies for Sustainable Language Development**

To ensure a better future for national language Policy and Language Development in Nigeria, several strategies should be implemented:

Firstly, there is a need for inclusive language policies that recognize and promote the use of indigenous languages in education, government institutions, and media. This involves the development of curricula, textbooks, and teaching resources that facilitate the learning of indigenous languages alongside English by language institutes such as NINLAN.

Secondly, community engagement is vital in creating awareness and fostering pride in indigenous languages. Encouraging language revitalization initiatives, such as cultural festivals, language immersion programs, and digital platforms, can contribute to the preservation and promotion of these languages.

Thirdly, recognition and promotion of indigenous languages: The Nigerian government can officially recognize and promote the value of indigenous languages through policies and initiatives. For example, South Africa's Constitution recognizes 11 official languages, ensuring their protection and promotion.

Furthermore, mother tongue education: Incorporating mother tongue education in early childhood and primary education enhances language development and academic success. For instance, the Oaxacan region in Mexico implemented a bilingual education program that includes Indigenous languages alongside Spanish.

Curriculum of indigenous languages: developing language-specific curriculum and teaching materials is crucial for sustainable language development. For example, in New Zealand, the Māori Language Commission has created resources and curricula to support the revitalization of the Māori language.

**Support for Language Teachers:** Providing professional development opportunities and resources for language teachers helps maintain and improve language instruction. For instance, Canada's Nunavut territory offers training programs and support for Inuktitut language teachers.

**Community Engagement:** Active involvement of communities in language development efforts fosters ownership and sustainability. For example, the Hawaiian community in the United States collaborates with schools and organizations to revitalize the Hawaiian language through immersion programs and cultural activities.

**Technology and Digital Resources:** Utilizing technology and digital resources can enhance language learning and preservation. For instance, the Endangered Languages Project provides online resources and tools for documenting and revitalizing endangered languages worldwide.

**Collaboration and Partnerships:** Building partnerships between government agencies, educational institutions, community organizations, and language speakers strengthens language development efforts. For example, the Basque Language Office in Spain collaborates with various stakeholders to promote and revitalize the Basque language.

**Also, language Documentation and Research:** Conducting linguistic research and documenting languages plays a vital role in their preservation and revitalization. For example, the Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages in Australia documents and preserves Indigenous languages through audio recordings, dictionaries, and grammar descriptions.

Furthermore, intergenerational transmission and encouraging intergenerational transmission of languages ensures their continuity. For example, the Sami Council in Norway organizes language camps and family language weekends to facilitate language use and transmission among younger generations.

Lastly, awareness and attitude change: Promoting awareness about the importance of language diversity and fostering positive attitudes towards indigenous languages are key. For example, the Welsh Language Society in Wales engages in language promotion campaigns to shift public attitudes towards the Welsh language. These strategies, when implemented in combination, can contribute to sustainable language development by safeguarding, promoting, and revitalizing endangered or marginalized languages.

## **Conclusion**

The future of national language Policy and Language Development in Nigeria depends on recognizing the value of linguistic diversity and implementing inclusive language policies at all levels. Preserving and promoting indigenous languages are crucial in maintaining Nigeria's cultural heritage and fostering inclusivity. By adopting sustainable strategies for language development, Nigeria can harness the power of multilingualism to enhance communication, education, and social cohesion within the nation.

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