

## NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY: PROSPECTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MINORITY LANGUAGES

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### **Abstract**

The Nigerian society is characterised by a high degree of linguistic diversity. A sociolinguistic survey of language diversity and language use puts the number of languages spoken in Nigeria at 540 (NERDC 2008 revalidated, 2021). Three of these languages are classified as major group languages: Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. This suggests that more than half of the Nigerian population could be members of historically rooted ethno-linguistic minoritised groups. Until recently, there was no explicit national language policy in Nigeria; only a national policy for languages in education (National Policy on Education, 1977, revised 1981, 2000, 2004) was in place. While the National Policy on Education (NPE) recognised all Nigerian languages as meaningful media of instruction at the early stage of education, it treated Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as the languages of national culture and integration selected to be developed and used all through the formal education system, thus ranking them above all others in national consciousness to the detriment of the ethno-linguistic minoritised languages. To redress this disparity, the National Language Policy (NLP) has designated all Nigerian languages as equal and undertaken to advance their teaching at designated levels of education. This article highlights the prospects and implications of the implementation of this policy on the development of minority languages, particularly with reference to the languages spoken in Rivers State which has a plethora of minority languages. It discusses the role of the government, linguists, language communities and institutions of higher learning for an effective implementation of NLP in Rivers State.

**Keywords:** Indigenous language; language policy; language teaching; minority languages, NLP.

### **Introduction**

The importance of language as a tool for expression of thoughts, socio-cultural interactions, governance, and education in the process of nation building cannot be overemphasized. It is in recognition of its importance to human and societal developments that nations make deliberate efforts to determine the status, use, promotion and preservation of languages culminating in the articulation of language policies. On this note, the Federal Government of Nigeria approved a National Language Policy (Henceforth NLP) in September, 2022. Aito (2003) believed that NLP must be specific with the implementation strategies backed by the government. Language policy is thus defined as a formal decision taken by the government over language matters, ranging from recognition of a particular language, a national, regional or official language to offering the necessary support to enable the fruition of the policy (Chukwukere & Ajileye, 2024). The government is at the centre of formulating and implementing language policies and the approval of an NLP by the Federal Government of Nigeria aimed at accommodating the effective use of all Nigerian languages in the socio-economic development of the Country is a positive move towards upholding the linguistic rights of the different ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Earlier effort made in the history of formulating a language policy in Nigeria was that mentioned in the National Policy of Education (henceforth NPE) which recognised all Nigerian languages as meaningful media of instruction at the early stage of education and specified that Mother Tongue (MT) or Language of the Immediate Community (LIC) should be used as a medium of instruction in the first three years of schooling.

The NPE which was published in 1981 has undergone several revisions: 1981; 1998; 2004; and 2013. Linguists had criticized the language in education policy on the grounds that it is not a well-articulated and explicit national language policy; not being contained in a single document (Emenanjo, 1998; Mba, 2012). Apart from lacking a clear-cut direction, it also showed favouritism toward Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as it ranked them above all others in national consciousness by treating them as the languages of national culture and integration selected to be developed and used all through the formal education system. The Nigerian 1999 Constitution (Chapter V, Section 21) also prioritizes English (the official language) and the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) over other Nigerian languages. This unequal treatment of Nigerian languages by the government brought about a significant impact on the linguistic behaviours of the speakers of ‘unrecognised’ languages culminating in willful neglect of such languages by their own speakers even in interpersonal communications.

Responding to the advocacy and need to develop a language policy that would accord status to all Nigerian languages and promote their effective use in order to preserve them for posterity, the Nigerian Government on November 30, 2022 approved a new National Language Policy which makes the mother tongue a compulsory medium of instruction in the first six years of learning. The policy is geared towards ensuring the promotion and preservation of Nigerian languages as national heritage to be transferred to future generations; ensuring that the mother tongue is used as a medium of instruction at designated levels of education and ensuring the utilization of the languages at various domains of national development among others (National Language Policy, 2022). A careful implementation of the National Language Policy will have long-term ramifications for the vitality of minority languages. This means that if the state has a vested interest in ensuring that all Nigerian languages are used in education, young speakers will attach significance to their native languages, thereby boosting their communicative competence, self-esteem and ethnic identification while enhancing the social significance of minority languages which is the major concern of this article.

### **Minority Languages**

To characterize minority languages here, we follow the precedent set by the European Charter Document for Regional or Minority Languages, adopted in 1992 by the Council of Europe. Though the Charter applies to the member states of the Council of Europe only, but it can serve as a model for other groups and nations. The charter defines minority languages based on two criteria: a numerically smaller speaker population, and a lack of official status. Only the English Language is accorded an official status in Nigeria while Nigerian indigenous languages are classified as major and minor languages based on numerical strength. Hence, minority languages would be all those languages whose speakers represent a minority within the country visa-vis the number of speakers of major ethnic groups like Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The notion of minority languages as stated here is simplistic as not all languages classified as minority for not belonging to the ‘big three’ are

exposed to the same kind of threat of extinction. We, therefore do not explore the notion of minority languages in Nigeria in this paper but focus on the languages spoken in Rivers State as none of them is among the three classified as majority languages.

### **The Language Situation in Rivers State**

Attempts made at identifying the languages spoken in River State all proved one point – Rivers State is home to diverse ethnic groups, each having a unique identity marked by a distinct language. According to Kari (2019, p. 2), Williamson (1980) puts the number of languages in Rivers State at 27, Ndimele and Williamson (2002) identify 25 while the Government of Rivers State (2006) recognises 24 indigenous languages of the state excluding Bille, Iḡani-Igbo, Nkḡrḡḡ and Ogbogolo. Kari (2019), however, identifies 28 languages as listed in alphabetical order thus: Abuan, Aḡureni (Mini), Baan-Ogoi, Bille, Defaka, Degema, Egbema, Echie, Eḡpeye, Eleme, Eḡḡenni, Gokana, Iḡani, Ikwere, Kalabari, Kana, Kiriḡe, Kugbo, Ndḡḡi, Ndḡni, Nkḡrḡḡ, Obolo, Obulom, Oḡual, Ogbah, Ogbogolo, Ogbronḡagum (Bukuma) and Teḡ.

Rivers State has 23 Local Government Areas (LGAs) and the existence of 28 languages clearly shows the diverse ethno-linguistic reality of the state. While some LGAs like Ahoda East, Akuku-Toru and Andoni have only Eḡpeye, Kalabari and Obolo, respectively as their indigenous languages, two or more languages are spoken in LGAs like Abua/Odual, Ahoda West, Degema, Gokana, Opobo/Nkoro and Port Harcourt City. In some instances, one language is spoken in two or more LGAs. Kalabari is spoken in Akuku-Toru and Asari-Toru; Ikwere is spoken in Emohua, Ikwere and Obio/Akpor LGAs; Kiriḡe is used in Ogu/Bolo and Okrika LGAs. Whereas two languages (Baan-Ogoi and Gokana) are found in Gokana LGA, as many as four languages are found in Abua/Odual LGA (Abuan, Abureni (Mini), Kugbo and Odual), Degema (Bille, Degema, Kalabari and Ogbronḡ agum) and Port Harcourt (Ikwere, Kalabari Kiriḡe and Obulom,) LGAs. Thus Abua/Odual, Degema and Port Harcourt LGAs boast the highest number of languages in the 23 LGAs of the state (cf. Kari 2019, p.5).

### **Rivers State Languages in Education**

Following the creation of Rivers State in 1967, a committee named Rivers Readers Committee chaired by Professor Ebieḡberi J. Alagoa with late Professor Kay Williamson and Professor Otonti A. Nduka as members, was set up. This committee initiated the Rivers Readers Project and worked in collaboration with the Rivers State Government to produce orthographies, primers and other pedagogical materials for many languages of the state which were used in schools in various communities from the late 1960s up to the late 1970s in the old Rivers State to encourage mother-tongue education (cf. Kari, 2019, p. 18).

By the 1990s, the teaching of Rivers indigenous languages in school had stopped. The Rivers Readers Project became inactive but was revived in 2008 as the Rivers State Readers Project under the administration of Governor Rotimi Amaechi with its activities coordinated by a Board. The Board facilitated the approval of orthographies for 17 languages of the State by the Federal Government of Nigeria, through the National Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC). This development, however, did not translate to the teaching of the languages with approved orthographies in schools showing the Rivers State Government's nonchalant attitude

towards the use of mother tongue in education- a situation described by Kari (2019) as disappointing.

### **The National Language Policy Uptake in Rivers State**

The Government of Rivers State had recognised the importance of promoting and preserving the indigenous languages of the state since 2003 and passed the Education (Teaching of Indigenous Languages) Law, 2003. The enactment is reproduced hereunder:

The Rivers State Education (Teaching of Indigenous Languages) Law, 2003, as enacted by the House of Assembly of Rivers State of Nigeria states as follows:

- The teaching of indigenous languages is made compulsory in all pre-primary, primary and junior secondary schools in Rivers State.
- The Ministry of Education shall ensure that the teaching of these indigenous languages forms part of the academic curricular of the affected schools.
- The Ministry shall cause the local languages to be one of the subjects examined at the end of each term or year in the First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC) and the Junior Secondary School Certificate (JSSC) examinations.
- The Ministry of Education shall ensure that teachers are trained to cater for all the schools through workshops and compressed certificate courses on local languages spoken in the State in universities or other institutions approved by the Ministry.

Despite the passage of this law, the teaching of Rivers State languages is yet to commence fully in schools; the Rivers State Government that approved the Law as reproduced above has neglected its implementation to the detriment of the languages. Although, some individuals and language groups are engaging in supplemental indigenous language teaching in some community schools but the teachers are drawn from community-based language activists and enthusiasts who lack the training to effectively teach literacy in their languages. Nevertheless, the formulation of the National Language Policy has bolstered the noble step taken over two decades ago and should serve as a catalyst to the swift implementation of the teaching of Rivers State indigenous languages in schools.

### **Prospects, Recommendations and Suggestions for the Implementation of NLP in Rivers State**

The National Language Policy is a comprehensive documentation that states the philosophy, goals, objectives, scope, implementation strategies, funding etc for the actualization of the use, promotion and preservation of Nigerian languages. The focus of this section is to examine the scope and coverage of the NLP that the languages of Rivers State can benefit from to gain vitality and sustainability through education. The NLP makes provisions for the use of Nigerian languages in the following domains: education, media, information and communication technology, legislature, governance, administration and politics, health, banking, trade activities etc. We focus on a meaningful execution of the NLP in teaching and learning. These recommendations are addressed to different interest groups and agencies.

### **The State Government**

The NLP makes a significant shift in mother tongue education by mandating that the mother tongue or the dominant language of the child's immediate community should be used as the medium of instruction at designated levels of education (NLP, p. 9). Literacy and education are organized

around a centralized system coordinated by the state—the arbiter of public life. The Rivers State government should leverage on this mandate, armed with the already enacted Rivers State Education Law (2023) to commence the effective teaching and learning of indigenous languages in Basic and Senior schools by taking the following steps:

- (1) Reconstitute the Rivers State Readers Project Board manned by specialists in linguistics and language education to coordinate the production of curriculum, instructional materials, and training of adhoc staff for initial commencement of teaching and learning of indigenous languages in schools.
- (2) Engagement of young graduates from the various language groups in the state who are competent speakers of their mother tongues to be trained prior to the commencement of teaching.
- (3) Engagement of linguists to train the trainers.

### **The Linguist**

Emanonjo (1998) advocates for proactive actions by linguists in going out to meet policy makers in the Ministry of Education in actualization of language policies. Some indigenous linguists, language enthusiasts and activists under the aegis of Rivers State Language Developers Forum (of RSLDF) have had several engagements with the Directorate of Rivers State Readers Project Board to make the government act quickly in implementing the Rivers State Education Law (2023) through the Ministry of Education but the government's approach has been everything short of determination. The mandate of the NLP has provided the needed impetus for the linguists to mobilise political will for a swift implementation of this policy.

- (2) Linguists should produce texts books and other relevant materials needed for the implementation of NLP in the different languages of Rivers State.

### **Language Committees**

- (1) All language groups in the state should form language committees where they do not exist. For they can, with or without government backing or even recognition, do enormous good for their languages.
- (2) Where they are dormant they should be reactivated.
- (3) Where they exist, they should be proactive when the occasion calls for it, they should always call on the government and ministry officials to prioritise the teaching of River State indigenous languages in school as a way of revitalizing and preserving some of their languages that are dying out in the overall interests of their languages and identities.
- (4) They should collaborate with indigenous linguists and tap their expertise for the academic advancement of their languages.

### **Rivers State Institutions of Higher Learning**

In actualizing the NLP, institutions of learning were identified as key stakeholders. This is a wake-up call for the two universities domiciled in Rivers State to establish the Department of Linguistics and African Languages for knowledge production, research and teaching of the indigenous languages of the State. The policy also stipulates that the language of the immediate community hosting a tertiary institution should be taught as a General Studies Course (NLP, P.22). So, tertiary institutions in Rivers State have a major role to drive the process of developing the indigenous languages of the State for national development.

Toward the end of 2024 Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (IAUE) established a department of linguistics. This is a step in the right direction and the Rivers State University (RSU) should do the same. Ironically, these universities prioritised the study of foreign languages as they both have since been running the department of French and other foreign languages. These universities should not just set up the department of linguistics but should encourage the speakers of these languages seeking admission, to study linguistics and their languages with a commitment to awarding them full or partial scholarship. This way, the needed experts and manpower in the languages of Rivers State and linguistics will be gotten in few years' time.

## Conclusion

This paper highlights the language situation in Rivers State pointing out that the State is made up of diverse ethno-linguistic groups whose languages have been neglected, first by the Nigerian State which in the past tagged them as minority languages that were not accorded any significance in national development and the State Government that failed to carry out its own policy aimed at entrenching the use of mother tongue in education. The paper discusses the prospects and implications of the NPL and its implementation on the development of minority languages, particularly with reference to the languages spoken in Rivers State. It highlights the role of the government, linguists, language communities and institutions of higher learning for an effective implementation of NPL in Rivers State to preserve the distinct linguistic groups of the State. Creations are tacitly displayed in diversity which must be preserved for a balanced linguistic ecology.

The diversity of language systems is congruent with the existence of the human beings. Nigeria is gifted with linguistic diversity. Just as inclusive educational practices, the teaching of indigenous languages in Rivers State schools will contribute to the languages' vitality and preservation. The existence of a language policy does not necessarily mean that it is enforced. All stakeholders must be deliberate to see that this laudable Policy is enforced in Rivers State.

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