

The Linguistic Situation in the South South Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria

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Abstract

Several studies have been undertaken to explore the linguistic or language situation in Nigeria from various viewpoints. Over two decades ago, I had cause to examine the linguistic situation of Akwa Ibom State. The perspective then was to investigate the nature of the relationship between the varieties spoken in Akwa Ibom State with respect to their statuses as languages and dialects. This paper expands the scope of the earlier study beyond that thematic content and geographic spread to filial relationships, multilingualism, language use, language demography, state of research, level of literacy, literary and literacy materials, language vitality and various other themes across the South South Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria, which comprises Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers States. Although the region is grouped together into a homogenous unit of sorts, we do not expect total uniformity in linguistic matters across the States; neither do we rule out elements of commonalities. We do, however, expect interesting throw up of linguistic features. We will adopt a survey approach, analyse our findings and draw conclusions as well as make suggestions on future directions.

1.0 Introduction

What does ‘language’ mean? And what should we expect when we make reference to the ‘linguistic situation of the South South Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria’?

Language holds much fascination for human beings in general with different individuals and groups attempting to understand the intricacies and complexities of human language. Great poetry has been crafted, epic stories woven, parodies, satires, riddles and puns have been spawned from the fascination of human beings with language. The solemn, mundane, gross and pedestrian treatises have all found some space through the manipulation of the gift of language. The one thing that distinguishes humans from non-humans is said to be language. One of the foremost 20th century linguists, political thinker and mathematician, Noam Chomsky (1968), says of language that it is the “quintessence

of humanity.” In other words, language is the very core of humanity; it is what makes us human; it is what makes us think, imagine, create, build, transfer, share, love, quarrel, fight, integrate, segregate, sing, dance, and whatever else human beings do. Therefore Urua (2007) avers that language is life! Nothing is possible as far as human beings are concerned without language. But with it all things are possible! Technically, borrowing from Essien (2003:387), we define language as:

... a system of structured arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which human beings make meaning and communicate with each other in a community. Put more simply, language is a system of rules in which sound, structure and meaning are integrated for communication.

Language is what binds human beings together; it is also what differentiates human beings. Can we imagine what the world would be like without language? Take some time to reflect on this!

Nigeria is well known as the country with the most populous black population in the world – the claim has been made that one in every four black persons globally is Nigerian! That analogy can also be extended to language demography in Nigeria. Blench (1998:187) among many others, describes Nigeria as, “... the most complex country in Africa, linguistically, and one of the most complex in the world”. If Nigeria is regarded as one of the most complex in the world, the South South languages can also claim to be at the centre of that complexity, where in Cross River State, the claim has been made that nearly every village speaks a different language, where women in a household speak a different language from the men! Talk about linguistic gender balance! Still citing Blench (1998:187), he further posits that “Cross River also has a highly fragmented language picture”. The picture that emerges from this is that Nigeria is highly multiethnic and multilingual. In Figure 1, we present a political map of Nigeria showing the thirty-six states and the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja and Figure 2 is the linguistic map of Nigeria as presented by Crozier & Blench (1992).

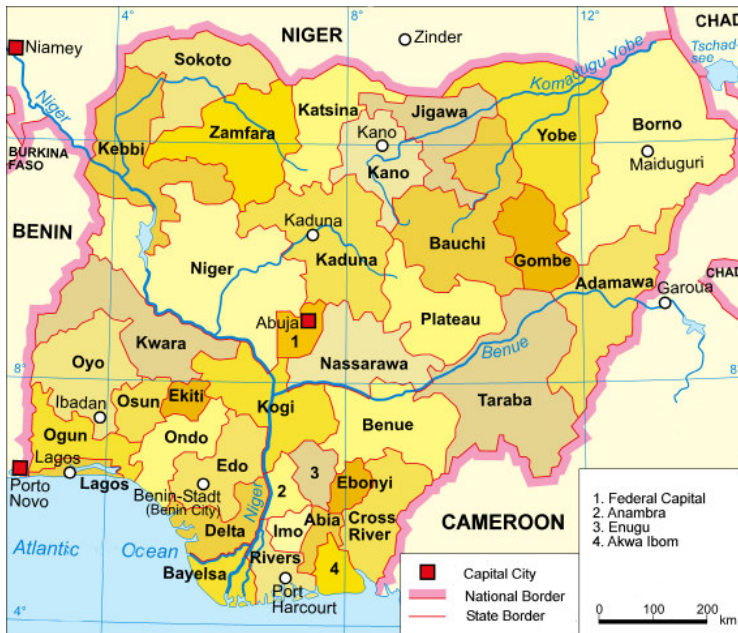


Figure 1: Political Map of Nigeria showing 36 States and the FCT Abuja

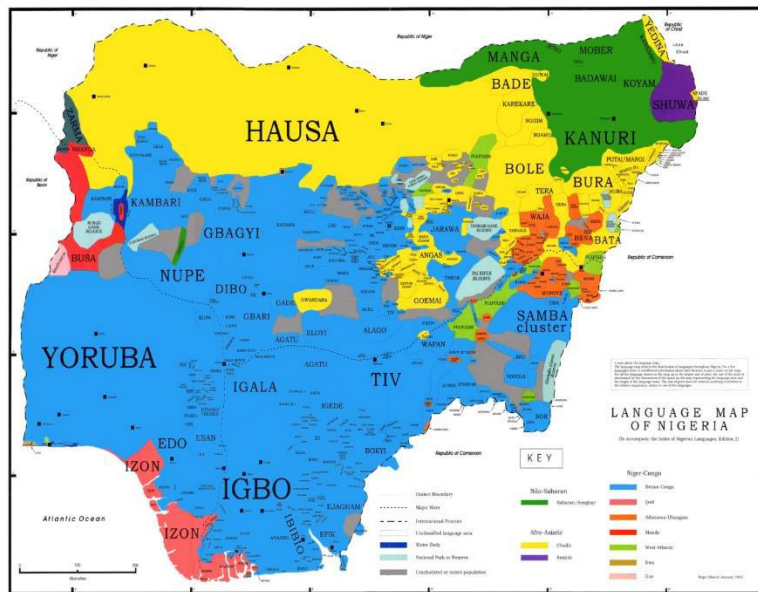


Figure 2: Language Map of Nigeria (Crozier & Blench 1992)

It should be clear from the onset that the ‘South South’ as used here is a geopolitical description and terminology, circumscribing a specific region in the Nigerian political landscape. It is not a linguistic description and for this reason, we should not expect the type of linguistic affiliations that are usually associated with genetic language groupings. Notwithstanding, because of the proximities, we expect commonalities. The composition of the zone consists of the following six States: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers. Given the multilingual nature of the Nigerian nation, it would not be fallacious to say that the South South Geopolitical Zone would also be multilingual.

Developmentally, indigenous Nigerian languages have not fared well at all from independence as a result of the colonial legacy that impinged on our cultural and linguistic heritage. In fact, Bamgbose (2003) makes the unsavoury observation that years of neglect by the colonial government placed Nigeria’s indigenous languages in a subsidiary status. Of course, we do not need to beg the question; we are aware to which language(s) our languages are subsidiary. This state of affairs did not end with the exit of the colonial government but has spilled over to the Nigerian-run government. Our languages have been ignored and marginalised for use in different platforms for different functions. Many more Nigerian languages have neither writing systems nor orthographies; there is no clearly defined language policy to guide the management and development of these languages. Even at traditional cultural functions, where one should expect the use of indigenous languages, it has been observed that there is a preference for the use of the English language. Our indigenous languages have not been used in the educational system, until marginally only recently. The National Policy on Education which tangentially discusses language matters in Nigeria, relegates our indigenous languages largely to the primary school level, whereas a foreign language such as English is made compulsory. We must not also forget that in Nigeria, without the English language there is no hope of making progress in life educationally beyond the primary and secondary level. Even where the Federal government has made some token pronouncements that these languages be used for education at the primary school level, the educational institutions are not compliant and the agencies of government who should be supervising, monitoring and enforcing compliance are not doing so. We can go on and on, but the summary is that our languages have been ignored for too long! And yet several studies and research have shown that learners perform better when they learn in their own mother tongue or first language.

2.0 South South Zone Languages – the State of Affairs

Figures 3 and 4 illustrations of the languages spoken in the South South region of Nigeria consisting of various language families in the Niger Congo, namely, Volta Congo, Bantoid, Benue Congo, Cross River, Defoid, Edoid, Ekoid, Idomoid, Ijoid, Igboid, Tivoid.

Let’s move back to the situation, the state of affairs of languages in the South South Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria. The language situation doesn’t differ markedly from what is

happening in the rest of the country. However, since each individual differs from the next individual, we expect to find some differences that distinguish the zone from the other five Geopolitical Zones – North East, North West, North Central, South East and South West.

One of the key distinctive features of the South South Zone is the use of ‘pidgin’, formally known as Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE). Pidgin is a hybrid language arising from a language contact situation between two or more languages. Nigeria’s pidgin English has as its base the English language on one hand, and Nigerian languages on the other. Ethnologue records 30 million speakers of NPE in Nigeria. Much of that is in the South South zone, although in cosmopolitan areas like Lagos and Abuja, NPE is also commonly in use, particularly among the younger generation.



Figure 3
Ethnologue
Language
(Nigeria Map 9)

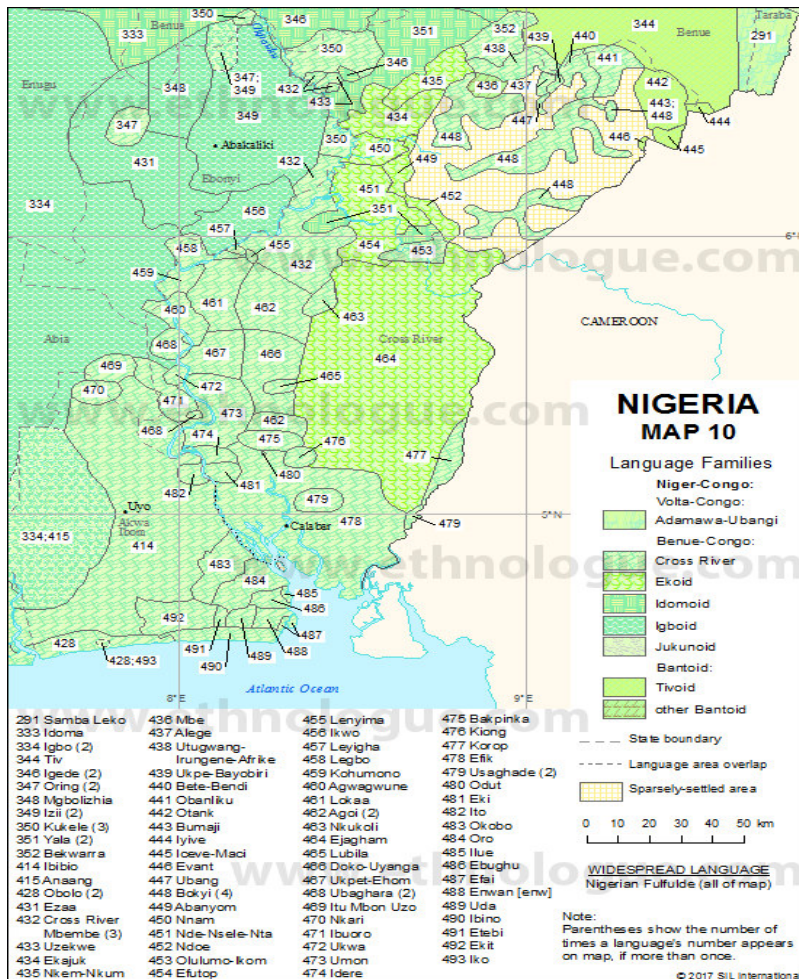


Figure 4 Ethnologue Language (Nigeria Map 10)

3.0 Language Family

Nigeria's over 500 languages are located in three language families, viz., Niger Congo, Afro Asiatic and Nilo Saharan. The Niger Congo family makes up 75% of the total, Afro Asiatic about 25% while Nilo Saharan has just about two or three languages and that on the Saharan side. Within the Niger Congo phylum, Benue Congo (BC) has the highest percentage of languages spoken in Nigeria. An examination of the languages found in all the six states in the South South zone, reveals that nearly 99% of these languages belong to the Benue Congo branch.

In Akwa Ibom, Cross River State, Delta, and Edo States, for instance, 100% are *ab initio* from the Benue Congo branch of the Niger Congo phylum, suggesting a common ancestry. A close examination of the languages in each state shows an even tighter affinity. Apart from Khana which belongs to the Ogoni group of the Delta Cross, and is listed

primarily for Rivers State but also spoken as a border language in Oruk Anam LGA in Akwa Ibom State all the other varieties spoken in Akwa Ibom State belong to a single group, namely, Benue Congo → Cross River → Delta Cross → Lower Cross. In Bayelsa State, all the languages belong to either the Edoid or Ìgbòid group of the Benue Congo; 4 of the languages are from the Atlantic Congo split resulting in the Ijoid group. In Cross River State, 20 of the 48 languages belong to the Upper Cross group of Delta Cross, 8 belong to the Bendi sub group of the Cross River group while 5 belong to Lower Cross and 3 to Idomoid of the BC branch. Delta has the fewest number of languages listed for the zone and yet 5 of the 7 are of the Edoid sub group of the BC branch, the other two belonging to the Ìgbòid and Yoruboid each. Sixteen (16) of the 20 languages belong to the Edoid sub group of BC while the other 4 belong to the Ìgbòid, Ukaan and Yoruboid sub groups. Many of the languages in Rivers State belong to the Central Delta sub grouping of BC; a few belong to the Edoid, Ìgbòid, Ogoni, and then there is the Ijoid sub grouping from the Atlantic Congo branch. Clearly, these groupings reflect a common ancestry, the differences arising from splits along space and time.

4.0 Number of Languages

Ethnologue has provided a useful tool in identifying the number of languages in Nigeria. Whether or not we agree with the details is another matter entirely. But until we find a better alternative, we will continue to work with what is available to us. Udoh (2003) even with the state of knowledge seems to under-represent the number of languages in the Geopolitical Zone. For instance, as at 2003, Akwa Ibom had been documented as having at least 18 language varieties, but only 10 is listed therein.

There are a total of 125 local government areas in the South South Geopolitical Zone with a breakdown as follows:

- AKS – 31
- Bayelsa – 8
- Cross River State – 18
- Delta – 25
- Edo – 19
- Rivers – 23

From the data provided in Ethnologue (2017, 20th edition), this zone has a total of one hundred and thirty-two (132) languages, excluding the English language and NPE as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of languages spoken in each of the South South States

Akwa Ibom	Bayelsa	Cross River	Delta	Edo	Rivers	Total
20	12	48	7	20	25	132
1	1	1	1	1	1	1
1	1	1	1	1	1	1
22	14	50	9	22	27	134

When English and NPE are included, it would up the number of languages to one hundred and thirty-four (134) in the 125 Local Government Areas (16% of the 774 LGAs in Nigeria) within the South South Zone. When we realise that Nigeria itself is said to have about 515 languages, then it is easy to work out the arithmetic of the percentage or ratio. In other words, this zone alone has approximately 26% of the total number of languages spoken in Nigeria, meaning that more than one in every four languages in Nigeria is found and spoken in the South South zone.

We had earlier mentioned the issue of language density in relation to the Middle Belt which is equivalent to the North Central Geopolitical Zone and alluded to a similar proliferation of languages in the Cross River region. This has actually been borne out by the number of language varieties listed for Cross River State which has 48 entries. The closest to it is Rivers State with 27, Akwa Ibom and Edo tie at 20, Bayelsa with 12 while Delta has 7. Interestingly, in spite of the differences in the number of listed languages, apart from Akwa Ibom and Cross River State with over 4.2 million and 9.2 million speakers respectively, the rest are quite close in the range of the number of speakers.

5.0 Number of Speakers and Level of Vitality

Beyond the issue of deciding the number of languages in Nigeria is the number of speakers. Beyond the sheer number of the languages, part of the issue that contributes to the complexity of the state of affairs of languages in Nigeria, also lies on the number of speakers of the individual languages. Brann and other scholars of Nigerian languages have attempted to group Nigerian languages by number of speakers, resulting in various nomenclature, such as ‘major’, ‘minor’, decamille, etc. We provide a tabular representation of our present state of knowledge on the number of speakers of the languages spoken in the South South Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria in Table 2.

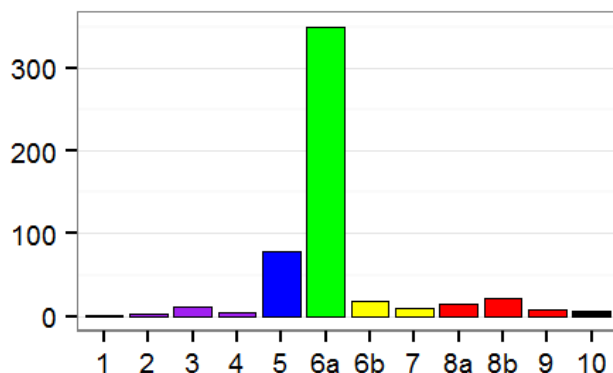
Table 2: Total No. of speakers and LGAs

	State	LGAs	Population	Population (2006 Census)
1.	Akwa Ibom	31	9,268,610 ?	3,920,208
2.	Bayelsa	08	1,521,100 ?	1,703,358
3.	Cross River	18	4,224,030 ?	2,888,966
4.	Delta	25	1,738,200 ?	4,098,391
5.	Edo	19	1,785,792 ?	3,218,332
6.	Rivers	23	1,901,970 ?	5,185,400
	TOTAL		20,439,702	

5.1 Level of Vitality

Using the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS), Ethnologue (2017) provides the vitality level of Nigerian languages along the following parameters in Table 3.

Table 3: Level of Language Vitality Status



Using colour codes designed by Ethnologue (2017), Table 3 shows the status of a language vis-à-vis the level of development and the level of language endangerment. The horizontal axis shows the ‘estimated level of development or endangerment’ while the vertical axis provides information on the approximate number of languages.

For instance, the colour green in 6a has an estimated 350 languages which though not standardised are in vigorous use by all generations in such language communities. The EGIDS levels are grouped along the follow lines:

- Purple = Institutional (EGIDS 0-4) — The language has been developed to the point that it is used and sustained by institutions beyond the home and community.
- Blue = Developing (EGIDS 5) — The language is in vigorous use, with literature in a standardized form being used by some though this is not yet widespread or sustainable.

- Green = Vigorous (EGIDS 6a) — The language is not standardized but in vigorous use among all generations.
- Yellow = In trouble (EGIDS 6b-7) — Intergenerational transmission is in the process of being broken, but the child-bearing generation can still use the language so it is possible that revitalization efforts could restore transmission of the language in the home.
- Red = Dying (EGIDS 8a-9) — The only fluent users (if any) are older than child-bearing age, so it is too late to restore natural intergenerational transmission through the home; a mechanism outside the home would need to be developed.
- Black = Extinct (EGIDS 10) — The language has fallen completely out of use and no one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language.

Beyond these, it also gives the extent of use of these languages along the following parameters: National, Provincial, Wider Communication, Educational, Dispersed, Developing, Vigorous, Threatened, Shifting, Moribund, Nearly Extinct, Dormant, Second Language only and Extinct.

Not surprisingly, our **National** language is English; the **Provincial** languages are Hausa, ̀gb̀ and Yor̀b̀. Out of the 10 or 11 Nigerian languages listed for **Wider Communication**, two are from the South South, namely, Efik and Ibibio. **Educational** includes Edo, Emai-Ora and Izon. **Developing** includes Anaang, Ejagham, Gokana, Isekiri, Bete-Bendi. Most South South languages are **Vigorous**. A few are **Threatened** including Doko-Uyanga, Usaghade. Ilue and Kiong are classed as **Moribund**. Others such as Bete, Defaka and Bakpinka are **Nearly Extinct** while O'chi'chi' is listed as **Extinct**.

6.0 Language Use in Education/Examination by National Examination Bodies

Very few indigenous Nigerian languages are used for teaching and learning at the formal settings. In the South South zone, the well known ones in use include Efik, Ibibio, Edo, Emai-Ora, Izon and many languages in Rivers State, thanks to the Rivers Readers Project spearheaded by the late Professor Kay Williamson. However, many others in the zone as in other zones in Nigeria remain undocumented and undescribed. Some languages in the South South zone are examined by national examination bodies such as the West African Examinations Council, National Examinations Council, and in tertiary educational institutions. Efik has enjoyed a long standing presence as an examination subject in WAEC but was discontinued in the 1990s but thankfully it is back on; Ibibio only recently started to enjoy this status with NECO first in 2012 and then WAEC in 2014. The Edo language in Edo State also enjoys this status.

7.0 Media Presence

Reference here is made to print and electronic media. How many of the 132 languages in the zone have any media presence? Difficult to tell and this constitutes one of the knowledge gaps on these languages. Again the recurrent names include Efik, Ejagham,

Bekwara in Cross River State, Ibibio, Anaang, Oro and several other varieties in Akwa Ibom, Edo in Edo State; in Bayelsa there is Nembe, Epie and Ogbia, in Rivers Ikwerre, Kalabari, Khana and Okrika (Nwagbara 2013); in Delta, we have Isekiri and Urhobo. The broadcast language in many radio stations in the zone is the English language with local languages used in special programmes. There is no radio or TV station dedicated to local languages.

Within the Zone, there are a few magazines and newspapers in local languages but these appear quarterly or biennially, not daily like the English counterpart.

8.0 Internet Presence/Social Media

Closely related to media presence is internet presence of these languages to reflect the current technological era. Various websites and blog spots exist for a few of these languages – Ibibio, Efik, Edo, Esan, Afemai, Ghotuo, etc. YouTube videos also exist on teaching and learning these languages, online dictionaries, concordances, etc. Other materials include animations, etc. Some of the languages in the zone are present in the social media platform – Messenger, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, etc. so much so that it is possible to harvest robust language data from these platforms through crowd sourcing.

9.0 Akwa Ibom State – The Linguistic Situation

Twenty (20) varieties which have been documented and described based on the deliberate policy of the University of Uyo Department of Linguistics & Nigerian Languages to provide at least some basic information about the languages in our immediate locality, having realised that if we do not engage in the documentation of our languages, others may not do it for us. Also we wanted to make our discipline relevant to the wider community. In the course of this, we have discovered border languages such as Obolo in Eastern Obolo LGA of Akwa Ibom State; Khana in Oruk Anam and settler fishing communities, such as Ijo among the Iwere people in Ini LGA; Ìgbò is a very well known border language across several border LGAs including Ikot Ekpene, Ika, Essien Udim, Etim Ekpo, Obot Akara, and Ini in Akwa Ibom State. Orthographies exist in Ibibio, Anaang, Ekit; Oron is work in progress, having lost one of our active researchers in the area, Mr. Etim Sam – may his soul rest in peace.

The Government of Akwa Ibom State has made teaching Ibibio as a school subject in primary and secondary schools and so Ibibio is now taught in schools across the state, especially with the examination of Ibibio at NECO and WAEC. Ibibio is also taught and researched in tertiary degree and NCE awarding institutions in the State – University of Uyo, AKS College of Education, Afaha Nsit. Recently, the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly has presented a bill to make local languages to be used in schools. Literacy materials are available including various dictionaries – Kaufman (1984), Ekong (2010) and Urua, Ekpenyong & Gibbon (2012), pocket Ibibio dictionary. Bible translation of the New Testament Bible into the Ibibio language has been completed and awaiting printing while work has commenced in the translation of the Old Testament Bible into the Ibibio language.

Ibibio is used in churches for sermons and songs. Apart from traditional music, the Ibibio language has been used in the composition of modern music (classical, R&B, hip hop, reggae, etc.).

10.0 Gaps in Our Knowledge

Various gaps still exist in the knowledge we have concerning the status of languages in this South South Zone, with respect to the number of languages, number of speakers, language, use in different areas, language vitality – endangerment or robustness, intergenerational transmission, language use in education (pre-primary, primary, JSS, SSS, tertiary), examination by national examination bodies, media presence, Internet presence, etc.

11.0 Action Required and Conclusion

Given the state of our knowledge about the status of languages in the South South zone, we wish to recommend the following:

1. Linguistic Departments should place more emphasis and focus on comprehensive linguistic and cultural field studies as I have always proposed.
2. Less interest in the fancy theories.
3. Formation of research groups to conduct a thorough survey of the languages spoken in the zone.
4. Training of graduate students and community members in the skills required to engage in the survey.
5. Crowd sourcing from the stakeholders and the speakers of these languages and interested persons to supply credible and reliable data on the status of these languages.
6. Pooling of resources, especially funding and manpower to carry out the work.
7. Provision of resources (funding, personnel, equipment, etc.) by universities, governments at the state, local government, NDDC and other stakeholders.

When we have a rich mine of data on our languages, we will be in a better position to understand these languages and from there then propound as much theoretical constructs as possible arising from the rich linguistic data at our disposal.

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