

Transcending implementation challenges in the Nigerian language policy

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60787/jolan.vol5no1.407>

Francis O Egbokhare
Department of Linguistics and African Languages
University of Ibadan, Ibadan
Oyo State

francis.egbokhare@gmail.com

Abstract

Despite Nigeria's constitutional and educational policy provisions promoting the use of indigenous languages, implementation has historically fallen short due to various systemic, political, and logistical challenges. The new Nigerian language policy reimagines indigenous languages not just as cultural symbols but as tools for national transformation. This paper explores the transformative philosophy of the new policy, unpacks the challenges of the past, presents implementation efforts, and outlines strategies to foster sustainable and inclusive outcomes. Through digital innovation, grassroots mobilization, academic reform, and inter-agency collaboration, Nigeria can effectively reposition its linguistic diversity as a driver of national development.

Keywords: Nigerian Language Policy, Language Planning and Implementation,
Language and National Development.

Introduction¹

Nigeria is a quilted patchwork of over 500 languages and 250 ethnic groups (Hansford et. al. 1976). English is the official language being the language of the bureaucracy, formal or organized business, education and governance. Arabic and French are the two foreign

¹ This paper was first presented as a lead paper at the 35th Annual Conference of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria (LAN) Held at Al-Qalam University, Katsina, from 14th to 18th of October, 2024.

languages. Other foreign languages such as German, Chinese, Russian and Portuguese are taught in the school system. The indigenous languages can be classified as major, state and local languages based on their status as dominant languages, their territorial spread and population of speakers. Thus, we have three major languages made up of Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, thirteen state languages, over forty-four local languages and numerous others unclassified. Nigerian pidgin is the most widely spoken language yet it has only recently been recognized, albeit incorrectly, in the National Language Policy (FGN 2022) as Nigerian Pidgin English. However, in Glottolog, it is captured as ISO 639-3.

The regional distribution of languages presents an interesting picture. The North West Zone has the highest level of diversity with about 176 languages. The North East is the next most diverse area with about 133 languages followed by the North Central which has 125 languages. This is very interesting because of the dominance of Hausa which gives people the impression of a monolithic North. The South West and South East have about 8 and 7 languages respectively while the South-South (Niger Delta) has 116 languages. The number of languages in Northern Nigeria is about 439 as against about 131 in the South. The five most diverse states in Nigeria are Bauchi (80), Plateau (74), Taraba (54), Adamawa (46) and Kaduna (43). Apart from Edo (30) and Cross Rivers (34), Southern Nigeria states are fairly linguistically homogenous, or so it seems, if one does not consider dialectal variations and lack of intelligibility between extreme dialects. As evidence of diversity. Also, it is necessary to note that the language count does not represent the fact of urban diversity and the existence of linguistic enclaves. In spite of the fractious picture of diversity, communication between Nigerians is not a problem. Many Nigerians are bilingual. In addition, about 90% of Nigerians can be reached with Pidgin, English, Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo.

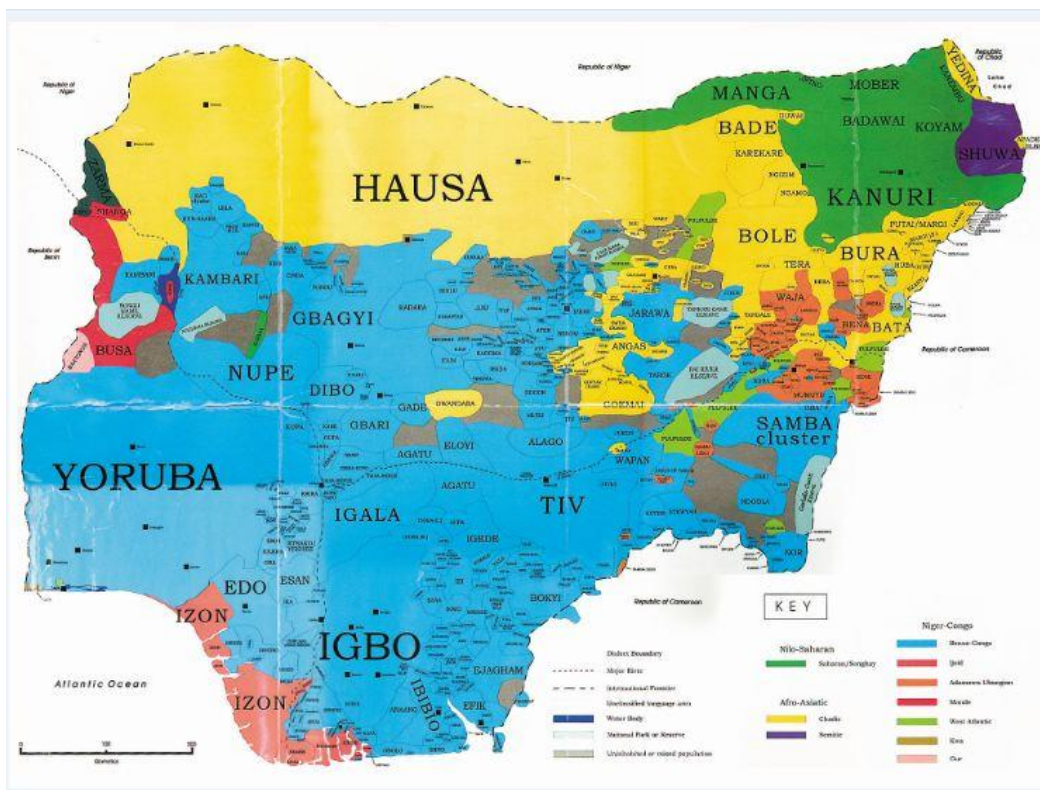


Figure 1: Language map of Nigeria (cf. Hansford et. al.1976)

Understanding some myths and realities about Nigeria's ethnolinguistic landscape

The linguistic ecology of a multilingual setting is always changing, even if imperceptibly. Where the dynamic forces endure for a sustainable length of time, it is easy to identify notable currents and movements in terms of language use patterns. However, observation of change and their analyses may be hampered by absence of reliable quantitative data on a significant scale over a period of time. Such data which should reveal the sociolinguistic concomitants of socioeconomic and political pressures on language in different milieus across epochs are unavailable. The absence of national census data on Nigerian languages proves a limitation to language policy and planning.

A language policy does not exist in isolation. The philosophy and ideology of the policy need to align with national vision while its framing elements must derive from the socioeconomic, cultural and technological factors that drive language use and linguistic behavior. The social formations and ideological currents driving the Nigerian society are

not well understood because we have maintained a still image of society, while projecting a reality that is erroneous. From negotiated census figures, inadequate and un-adapted information parameters in census to fossilized ethnolinguistic map, there is an abiding risk of basing language policies on myths. In other words, Nigeria's ethnolinguistic classification is outdated and does not reflect the dynamic realities. Ethnolinguistic and religious maps of Nigeria are frozen in time and are based on the premise that ethnicity is land-locked, language correlates with ethnicity and both are interoperable. In addition, membership of a group is inherited, allocated or assigned, hence belongingness to a linguistic community is based on patrimony. There is also the assumption that religion or ethnicity correlate with identities and that their boundaries are coterminous.

Apart from the challenge of data fidelity, that is the fact that there are no accurate census figures since the projections are based on negotiated figures from a historical era, having a still language map undermines the fluidity of population demographics due to migration, and the fact of self-identification. There is the need to shift to population-based analysis for both language count and distribution across territories for a representative data on language.

Following from the above, some received knowledge about the Nigerian linguistic situation need to be reviewed.

- I. Bilingualism: The idea that Nigerians are bilinguals: and that location, employment characteristics, age and level of education determine the levels of bilingualism, the types and numbers of languages Nigerians speak. There is growing evidence of endangerment and loss of many Nigerian languages, especially, minority ones due to shifts to English, Nigerian Pidgin and the Major languages.
- II. Language distribution: The idea is espoused that Igbo is spoken in the East, Yoruba in the South West, Hausa in much of the North. These need to be revised because they are no longer true, if ever they were true. Similarly, linguistic diversity needs to be qualified. The language map shows that the SW and SE are the least diverse areas of Nigeria. However, a lot has changed that need to be reflected. Extensive migrations from rural to urban areas; displacement of minority populations in the North due to violence; desertification and economic reasons; incidence of linguistic enclaves created by migrant workers, herders and fishing communities; urbanization and segregated urban settlements.

The better way to look at communities today is in terms of population mixtures, admixture, intermixtures and degrees of densities. Lagos and Abuja are probably more diverse than most states in Nigeria. However, in looking at linguistic and cultural homelands, it is adequate to look at existing maps.

- III. English is a foreign language used for business, bureaucracy, education and is lingua franca among educated elite.

The Loss of indigenous languages is at an epidemic level. There are now a class of Nigerians who claim English as mother-tongue and others who are not proficient in any Nigerian language.

- IV. Hausa is the largest spoken language in Nigeria. Not anymore. Nigerian Pidgin is now the largest spoken language. Apart from the fact that it has creolized in some parts of Nigeria, with a substantial population for whom it is a mother language, it is first and second language as well as language of intergroup communication to over a hundred million Nigerians.

Historical barriers against the implementation of language provisions in the Nigerian Constitution and the National Policy of Education.

Human societies are continuously being dynamized by socioeconomic, political and technological forces. These forces alter power relationships, have implications for the perception and image of self thereby determining identities. Power relations affect the fortunes of a language. The power position of a people and consequently their language is determined by socio-political and historical forces (Liberson 1982). The profile of a language therefore, depends on dominance in culture, science and technology and education among other things.

Nigeria is one of the most linguistically diverse nations in the world, with over 500 languages spoken across its geopolitical zones. This diversity, while often cited as a challenge to national unity, it can be a significant asset when managed through inclusive language policies. Section 55 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) mandates the conduct of National Assembly business in English and, when feasible, in Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. Similarly, the National Policy on Education (NPE) advocates the use of the mother tongue or language of the immediate community as the medium of instruction in the early years of education (Federal Ministry of Education, 2004). Yet, despite these official endorsements, implementation has largely been symbolic.

It is clear that the policy is restricted to assigning status and functions to different languages. Also, in spite of the inclusion of Nigerian languages, English holds sway as the official language, medium of education and is in fact creeping into domains hitherto reserved for local languages.

Nigeria has struggled to translate policy into practice due to issues ranging from a lack of political will to insufficient educational infrastructure. As Bamgbose (1992) famously outlined, the challenges to implementing mother-tongue education in Nigeria are multifaceted. The challenges are:

- a. Multiplicity of languages and the complexity of choosing which one to prioritize.
- b. Small-group languages lacking viable school-age populations.
- c. Shortage of trained teachers capable of delivering instruction in indigenous languages.
- d. Lack of instructional materials and technical vocabularies in subjects like science and mathematics.
- e. Absence of political will to fund or enforce language policies.
- f. Negative societal attitudes toward indigenous languages, often perceived as inferior to English.

A lot has changed since the parameters of the prevailing policy directions were set out. The sociopolitical dynamics and the global context in which Nigeria exists is now radically different. Some old challenges are no longer tenable as new opportunities for mitigating them now exist. Although some challenges persist, the evolution of Nigeria's political system, demographic shifts, and the rise of digital technologies have created new opportunities. For instance, many language communities now engage in self-directed initiatives such as Bible translation, community publishing, and language standardization. Additionally, a new generation of Nigerian youths is more attuned to cultural and linguistic revival through music, media, and digital storytelling.

A reclassification of the above-mentioned challenges falls into two categories namely:

- a. Sociopolitical and
- b. Resource mobilization.

The former occurs as a result of lack of inclusive planning, centralized policy frameworks, and limited community engagement. Many language policies have historically adopted a top-down approach that alienates the very communities they aim to serve. The latter includes insufficient funding, lack of coordination among governmental tiers, and failure to

integrate academic institutions and NGOs into the policy execution pathway. In essence, implementation has been limited not by a lack of intent, but by a disconnect between policy vision and grassroots realities.

The National Language Policy (FGN, 2022)

It is important to note that the new language policy differs from previous policy provisions in terms of its philosophical and ideological framing. In this regard;

- a. It treats Nigerian languages as resources not mere (cultural) artefacts with relevance to socioeconomic production.
- b. It is framed with a philosophy that Nigeria's diversity is an asset, not a liability.
- c. It is much broader than preexisting policy provisions, and covers the entirety of the sociopolitical, economic, educational and technological spaces.
- d. It addresses the sustainable development goals,
- e. It effectively interfaces Nigerian languages with the vectors of development, as a medium of instruction and through local content provision in digital and non-digital technologies.
- f. It responds to the nature of the Nigerian state and the human development challenges, and therefore, has a potential to contribute to the resolution of these challenges
- g. It frees the diverse nationalities and communities to take ownership of their languages and pursue whatever steps they deem appropriate to sustain their heritage.
- h. It responds effectively to the national question, the challenges of national integration and the aspirations of Nigerians for their communities and their cultures, and languages.
- i. It responds to Nigeria's population dynamics and identity politics
- j. It is designed to make Nigerian languages attractive to youths by tying them to the vectors of development and therefore enhancing their utility value, and by so doing enhancing their preservation, modernization and transmission.
- k. responds to the regional and global aspirations of Nigeria.

Significant changes that we can leverage on to drive sustainable implementation of the NLP 2022

As we have stated earlier, the socioeconomic, political and technological context of Nigeria has changed significantly. We can take advantage of the supportive changes in order to minimize challenges of implementation. A few strategies for sustainable implementation are outlined below.

- a. Healthy competition by communities driven by identity politics in the democratic dispensation.
- b. Many communities have language committees actively involved in developing their languages and writing religious literature in their languages. Many retired teachers and civil servants are serving in local language committees and are actively producing language learning content for the basic school system. This is an asset that needs to be mobilized, recognized, facilitated and deployed. In this way, we can achieve more in a short time with less funding from government. The primary challenge these individuals and their communities face is the bureaucratic process for recognition and validation of content and the paywalls imposed by respective governments.
- c. Digital technologies are a game changer in fostering participation, building bridges, eliminating barriers and reducing cost. The following show how the deployment of digital technologies may eliminate some of the intractable challenges earlier listed (Egbokhare 2014). Digital technologies:
 - Provide a means for efficient and sustainable publishing in small group languages.
 - Reduce the cost of training. It provides opportunity for cost effective training of teachers.
 - Provide means of sharing, converting and translating materials from one language to another. Communities can learn from one another and share resources freely.
 - Provide networking opportunity such that subject experts can collaborate in the development of technical vocabularies.
 - Boost creative application and innovations in local languages and cultures.
 - Create a positive value to local languages and cultures.

In order to optimize the benefits of above, the following activities and actions are recommended.

- a. Effective Communication and Mobilization of Local Language Communities through an annual hybrid summit of Nigerian Languages for networking, training and resource sharing.
- b. Language Information Aggregation through design and implementation of information aggregation portal to determine state of practice. The kinds of information that will be required would include:
 - National inventory of assets relevant to language policy implementation
 - Survey of community-based language organizations, LGA language committees, as well as a determination of available resources and state of practice
 - Number of languages and linguistics departments in tertiary institutions
 - Resource-mapping of tertiary institutions
 - Creating an expertise database
 - Database of Nigerian languages teachers and their qualifications, competencies and experiences
 - Determining number of languages with writing practices, official and unofficial orthographies
 - Determining the number of languages with some level of teaching materials according to their types
 - Annual review meetings with communities online
- c. Online and Off-line support system for communities, MDAs and teachers. A one-stop shop on all you can know and what you can do.
- d. Capacity and resource needs analysis. We need to determine what levels of capacity are needed, where and how to deploy them.
- e. Development of Training Curriculum and Open Education Resources for the School System (focus is not just on the formal school system but also for crowd participation, lifelong learning and home-schooling)
 - Development of self-learning multimedia content for use of communities and individuals

- How to do it tutoring for diverse use by prospective teachers and parents
 - Development of online templates for teaching materials
 - Online illustration templates
 - Language teaching and learning resources for radio
 - Self-tutoring Open-Source language Apps.
- f. Rapid Cascaded Teacher Training for Nursery and Basic School Systems.
- Development of extensive yearly training planner for year-on-year capacity development
- g. New Programs, Academic Regulations and Curricular Adjustments
- Creation of conversion and supplementation programs across all areas, including STEM disciplines. This will ease up terminology development and creation of metalanguages
 - New diplomas and certificate programs that will tie Nigerian languages to the vectors of development, such as natural language processing, local language content, language business, language acquisition and learning, speech pathologies and therapy, forensic linguistics, digital story-telling, among many others.
 - Regulations to ease Credit transfer and student mobility between institutions in natural settings of respective languages. Hausa learners can be enrolled anywhere in the country, fulfil requirements but go to Universities in the North to satisfy requirements for Hausa. Same will be applicable to other languages.
 - Joint degrees between Nigerian Universities.
 - Develop language mandates to tertiary education institutions by giving them explicit language development and training plans for languages in their locality
 - Prioritizing language policy implementation in undergraduate and Masters thesis in tertiary institutions, in such areas as content development, lexicons, technical vocabulary, etc.
 - A database of projects, long essays,
- h. Certification, standardization and recognition
- Validation and recognition for community efforts in language development and removing bottlenecks in the way of private and community initiatives.
 - Professionalizing practice in the diverse areas through open skills certification.

- Content validation through a crowd-based rating system.
- i. Partnership framework
 - Interagency policy implementation committee to monitor every aspect of the implementation
 - Develop an M&E framework for the policy
 - j. Critical to a successful implementation are the Federal Ministry of Education and two institutions. These are the NERDC and the National Institute for Nigerian Languages at Aba. Whereas NERDC can handle the massive implementation and monitoring in conjunction with Linguistic and Languages-based associations, NINLAN should be funded and primed to develop and implement approved training programs and issue requisite recognitions for skills and competencies.
 - k. Digital Transformation: Digital platforms can revolutionize language learning and preservation. E-learning tools allow students to learn at their own pace in local languages, translation software and AI tools can help develop technical vocabulary across disciplines. Online databases can host dictionaries, orthographies, and curricula, making resources accessible even in underserved areas. Open-source apps can support language learning in formal and informal contexts.

The following show how the deployment of digital technologies may eliminate some of the intractable challenges earlier listed (Egbokhare 2014).

Curricular and institutional integration

To sustain language development, it must be embedded in Nigeria's educational and research frameworks. Some proposed reforms include:

- a. New certificate and diploma programs in areas like speech therapy, digital storytelling, and natural language processing (NLP).
- b. Curriculum reforms that support credit transfer and regional language specialization.
- c. Joint degrees and partnerships among universities, enabling students to study languages within culturally authentic contexts.
- d. Prioritization of language policy research in undergraduate and postgraduate programs.

Such academic restructuring will ensure that the implementation of the language policy is not only top-down but also research-driven and practice-oriented.

Institutional roles and governance mechanisms

Implementation will require inter-agency cooperation. The following institutions must play crucial roles:

- a. NERDC (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council): Oversee mass-scale policy rollout, content development, and monitoring.
- b. NINLAN (National Institute for Nigerian Languages): Lead in teacher training, curriculum development, and certification of competencies.
- c. Federal Ministry of Education: Provide policy direction, funding, and legislative support.
- d. Universities and Polytechnics: Serve as training grounds, research hubs, language mandate areas and centers of language innovation.

A dedicated monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework and a community-partnered rating system for language content can further streamline progress.

Conclusion

The new Nigerian language policy provides a visionary framework for turning linguistic diversity into a strategic developmental advantage. It transcends the preservationist ethos of past policies by embedding languages within contemporary national goals. However, success depends on converting this vision into action through inclusive planning, digital empowerment, and robust institutional support. By centering language in national development, Nigeria can craft a more culturally coherent, economically viable, and globally competitive future.

References

- Bamgbose, A. (1992). *Language and the nation: The language question in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Egbokhare, F. O. (2014). *Language and technology in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects*.

Ibadan University Press.

Federal Republic of Nigeria. (1999). *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended)*. Government Printer.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (2021). *Sociolinguistic survey of language diversity and use in Nigeria*. NERDC Press, Lagos, Nigeria.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (2022). *National Language Policy (NLP)*. NERDC Press, Lagos, Nigeria.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (2023). *National Language Policy Implementation Guideline*. NERDC Press (NLPIG), Lagos, Nigeria.

Federal Ministry of Education. (2004). *National policy on education* (4th ed.). NERDC Press.

Hansford, K., Bendor-Samuel, J., & Stanford, R. (1976). *An index of Nigerian languages*. Summer Institute of Linguistics.