

A survey of language diversity and vitality in Edo State

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Abstract

Language is central to national development, cultural identity, and education. This study investigates the linguistic landscape of Edo State, Nigeria, within the framework of the National Language Policy (NLP), which emphasizes mother tongue instruction in early education. Using secondary data from the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), the research identifies 26 languages spoken across the state, underscoring its multilingual character. The geographical distribution of these languages reveals varying degrees of diversity across local government areas, with Akoko-Edo emerging as the most linguistically heterogeneous. The study also assesses the level of language development in the state, showing that only a few languages—such as Edo, Esan, Yoruba, Izon, and Urhobo - have attained standard orthographies, literary works, dictionaries, and curricular presence. By contrast, most other languages remain underdeveloped, lacking the resources required for educational application. This underdevelopment presents a major obstacle to the implementation of the NLP, which depends on well-developed indigenous languages for effective teaching and learning. The paper concludes by calling for both government and community-driven initiatives to support the development of all indigenous languages in Edo State. Such efforts would not only foster inclusivity and preserve cultural heritage but also strengthen the implementation of language-in-education policy.

Keywords: Language policy in education, indigenous language development, Edo State linguistic landscape, mother tongue instruction.

Introduction

Language is a very important part of man. It is one of the most important human attributes and endowments that are essential and germane to national, socio-economic and human development. Language and culture are interwoven; and together, they define a people's cultural traits, norms, and values. In addition to the invaluable role of language in human development, it is also fundamental to the attainment of national goals and objectives (FRN, 2022). Language is the medium for curriculum delivery and attainment of educational objectives and philosophy (Odiagbe, 2016; Odiagbe & Moyinoluwa, 2018). Language is an extremely important aspect of a community as well as an index of identity. It is an archive of the people and their way of life. Bloch and Trager (1945:5) aptly defined language as 'a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates'. Chomsky (1968:41) philosophically described language as 'a species-specific possession, the human essence', while Essien (2010:16) defined languages as 'a system of rules and principles in which sound structure and meaning are integrated for communication.' (Udoh, 2021).

It is primarily a medium of communication. It is an important index of identity and it serves as a repository of a people's culture, history, exploits and way of life. It is a source of identity, an essential part of culture, as well as a vehicle for transmitting the culture of a people. Language expresses indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), values, and traditional practices. In fact, it is the most obvious marker of culture. It is used to participate in communal activities, and it fosters political and democratic culture, as well as enrich the individual. It can divide and cause conflict as much as it can unite (Udoh, 2021).

Brief history of Edo State

Edo State was created on the 27th August, 1991 when the defunct Bendel State formerly known as Mid-Western Region and later Mid-Western State was split into Edo and Delta states. It is named after the Edo ethnic group which is a major ethnic group in the State.

Geographical location

Edo State is located in the heart of the tropical rain forest and it lies between longitude 5°E and 6°42” and latitude 5°45”N of the Equator. Edo State shares boundaries with states such as Ondo, Kogi, Delta and Anambra States. Edo State has its capital at Benin City. Edo State has a total area of 17,802 square kilometres. The State is in the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria. Edo State is made up of 18 local government areas.



Edo State showing 18 Local Government Areas

The people

Edo State has a population of 3,218,332 (2006 Census). The people consist of different ethnic groups but the two major ones are Edo and Esan. Although English is used as the official language, Nigerian Pidgin is quite popular in the State. The people are predominantly Christians but a few people still practice African traditional religion and Islam (FRN, 2021).

Economy

Traditionally, Edo indigenes are farmers and craftsmen being particularly famous for the Binin bronze sculptures. The State is blessed with rich agricultural land, woods and rivers all of which give rise to good farming and fishing occupations as well as robust timber trade. The State also has rich mineral deposits such as limestone and gypsum which are used in the production of cement in the state. Small scale industries are being encouraged to increase the level of economic activities, enhance employment opportunities and effectively utilize local raw materials (FRN, 2021).

Statement of the problem

The National Policy on Education (NPE 1970, 1998, 2004 and 2014) emphasized the use of indigenous languages as medium of instruction, teaching and learning. Specifically, the policy states thus: “The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of immediate environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject. From the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment, French and Arabic shall be taught as subjects.” However, the National Language Policy (FRN, 2022) extended the use of mother-tongue as a medium of instruction to the entire six years of primary education. The NLP states thus: “To ensure effective delivery of instructions and attendant positive learning outcomes, Mother Tongue (MT) or Language of the Immediate Community (LIC) shall be used as the medium of instruction from Early Childhood Care and Development Education to the six years of primary education. However, Arabic language shall be the medium of instruction for Islamic schools. During this period, English language shall be taught as a school subject.” It also stipulates that English language shall be used as the language of instruction at the junior secondary education level. At the post-basic education level, the NLP stipulates that the medium of instruction shall be English language. However, a combined use of mother tongue or language of immediate community and English language shall be encouraged. With this emphasis on the use of mother-tongue for instruction in schools, it has become necessary to find out the level of development of the various Nigerian languages. This is because if these languages are not adequately developed, it will become difficult to use them as medium of instruction in the school system. It is against this background the researchers seek to find out the level of development of indigenous languages in Edo State.

Purpose of the study

This study seeks to determine:

1. the linguistic situation and number of languages in Edo State ;
2. the different geographical locations of the state where the languages are spoken; and
3. the level of development of the languages spoken in Edo State.

Research questions

1. How many languages are spoken in Edo State?
2. In which geographical locations of the state are the languages spoken?
3. What is the level of development of the languages spoken in Edo State?

Methodology

This study is an *ex post facto* research as it relied on secondary data. It used data provided by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) in a nationwide survey of language diversity and use in Nigeria. However, the data was validated by the researchers.

Presentation of results

Research Question 1: How many languages are spoken in Edo State?

Table 1 below shows the list of languages spoken in Edo State.

Table 1: Languages Spoken in Edo State

S/N	NAME OF LANGUAGE	OTHER NAMES	DIALECTS
1	Aduge		
2	Akuku		
3	Edo	Bini	Oza, Igueben, Uhe
4	Emai-luleha-Ora		
5	Enwan		

6	Esan		Ogwa, Ekpoma, Ebhossa, Ewohimi, Ewu, Ewatto, Ebelle, Igueben, Ugboha, Uromi, Irrua, Ohordua, Ugbiaja, Uzea.
7	Etsako		Yekhee, Agbelo and Etsa-Yekhee
8	Etuno	Igara	
9	Ghotuo		
10	Idesa		
11	Igwe		
12	Iheievbe		
13	Ika		
14	Ikpeshi		
15	Itsekiri		
16	Ivbie North-Okpela-Arhe		
17	Izon		
18	Oko-Eni-Osayen		
19	Okpamheri		
20	Okpe		
21	Oloma		
22	Ososo		
23	Sasaru		
24	Ukaan		
25	Urhobo		
26	Yoruba		

Source: Adapted from NERDC (2021)

The information in Table 1 above shows twenty-six (26) languages are spoken in Edo State. This reveals that Edo State is a multilingual state.

Research Question 2: In which geographical locations of the state are the languages spoken?

Table 2: Geographical spread of languages in Edo State

S/N	Geographical Location	Name of Language(s)
1	Akoko-Edo	Aduge; Akuku; Etuno; Enwan; Igwe; Ikpeshi; Ivbie North-Okpela-Arhe; Oko-Eni-Osayen; Okpamheri; Okpe; Oloma; Ososo; Sasaru; Ukaan; Uneme
2	Esan Central	Esan
3	Esan North East	Esan
4	Esan South East	Esan
5	Esan West	Esan
6	Etsako Central	Ivbie North-Okpela-Arhe; Uneme (Etsako)
7	Etsako East	Etsako
8	Etsako West	Etsako
9	Egor	Edo (Bini)
10	Igueben	Esan, Edo
11	Ikpoba-Okha	Edo(Bini), Itsekiri, Urhobo
12	Oredo	Edo (Bini)
13	Orhionmwon	Edo; Ika;
14	Ovia North East	Edo; Izon; Yoruba
15	Ovia South West	Edo; Izon; Isekiri; Yoruba
16	Owan East	Emai-luleha-Ora; Ghotuo; Idesa; Ihievbe
17	Owan West	Emai-luleha-Ora
18	Uhunmwode	Edo(Bini)

Source: Adapted from NERDC (2021)

Table 2 above shows that the monolingual L.G.A.s are Esan Central, Esan North East, Esan South East, Esan West, Etsako Central, Etsako East, Etsako West Egor, Oredo, Uhunmwode and Owan West. The bilingual L.G.A.s are Etsako Central and Orhionmwon while the multilingual (where more than two languages are spoken) LGAs are Akoko-Edo, Ikpoba-Okha, Ovia South West and Owan East. Akoko-Edo is the most linguistically heterogeneous in Edo State.

Research Question 3: What is the level of development of languages spoken in Edo State?

Table 3: Language development

Languages with Standard Orthographies	Edo, Esan, Yoruba, Izon and Urhobo
Languages With Non Standard Orthography	Ika, Etuno, Itsekiri, Okpe, Etsako
Languages without Orthography	Ukaan, Sasaru, Ososo, Oloma, Okpamheri, Oko-Eni-Osayen, Ivbie North-Okpela-Arhe, Ikpeshi, Iheievbe, Igwe, Idesa, Ghotuo, Enwan, Emai-Iuleha-Ora, Akuku and Aduge
Languages with curriculum	Edo
Languages with Literature	Edo, Esan, Yoruba, Emai-Iuleha-Ora, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Etsako, Ososo, Izon, Okpe, Okpamheri, Etuno.
Languages without Literature	Akuku, Ihievbe, Idesa, Oloma, Oko-Eni-Osayen, Ukaan, Aduge, Sasaru, Ghotuo, Ivbie North-Okpela-Arhe, Ikpeshi, Igwe, Enwan, Ika.
Languages with Dictionary	Edo, Esan, Yoruba, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Emai-Iuleha-Ora. Izon, Okpe.
Languages without Dictionary	Akuku, Ihievbe, Idesa, Oloma, Oko-Eni-Osayen, Ukaan, Aduge, Sasaru, Ika, Ghotuo, Ivbie North-Okpela-Arhe, Ikpeshi, Igwe, Enwan, Ososo, Okpamheri, Etuno.

Source: Adapted from NERDC (2021)

Table 4: Language functionality

Languages used in Mass Media	Edo, Esan, Nigerian Pidgin, English.
Languages of Instruction (Primary 1-3)	English
Languages of Instruction (Primary 4-6)	English
Observed Lingua-franca	Nigerian Pidgin
Official Language	English

Source: Adapted from NERDC (2021)

Table 5: Language attitude

Language at Home	English, Nigerian Pidgin
Language at School	English
Language at Work	English, Nigerian Pidgin
Language at Market Place	Nigerian Pidgin, (every other language in the different locations where they are spoken).
Language at Church/Mosque (Places of Worship)	English, Nigerian Pidgin, (every other language in the different locations where they are spoken).

Source: Adapted from NERDC (2021)

Discussion of findings

The findings from research question one reveals that twenty-six (26) languages are spoken in Edo State and this makes Edo State is a multilingual state. The languages spoken in the State are Yoruba, Urhobo, Ukaan, Sasaru, Ososo, Oloma, Okpe, Okpamheri, Oko-Eni-Osayen, Izon, Ivbie North-Okpela-Arhe, Itsekiri, Ikpeshi, Ika, Iheievbe, Igwe, Idesa, Ghotuo, Etuno, Etsako, Esan, Enwan, Emai-luleha-Ora, Edo, Akuku, Aduge.

The findings of research question two shows that the monolingual L.G.A.s are Esan Central, Esan North East, Esan South East, Esan West, Etsako Central, Etsako East, Etsako West Egor, Oredo, Uhunmwode and Owan West. The bilingual LGA's are Etsako Central and Orhionmwon while the multilingual (where more than two languages are spoken) LGA's are Akoko-Edo, Ikpoba-Okha, Ovia South West and Owan East. Akoko-Edo is the most linguistically heterogeneous in Edo State.

In terms of level of development, the findings of research question three show that many of the languages spoken in Edo State are not developed. For instance, only five of the languages (Edo, Esan, Yoruba, Izon and Urhobo) have standard or NERDC approved orthography. Similarly, only one (Edo) of the languages has a curriculum. This is very worrisome. This shows that these languages are neglected in terms of development. This will pose a serious problem in the implementation of the provisions of the National Language Policy (NLP), particularly the provision that stipulates the use of mother-tongue as a medium of instruction from Early Childhood Care and Development Education to the six years of primary education (FRN, 2022). This finding underscores the position of critics

of the provision of the NLP which stipulates the use of mother-tongue as a medium of instruction from Early Childhood Care and Development Education to the six years of primary education. One of the major reasons they give for raising an objection to this policy is that most Nigerian languages are not developed enough to be used for teaching and learning. Part of their argument is that these languages do not express most concepts that need to be taught in schools. That is, the indigenous languages are unable to express modern concepts used in education (Adiele, 2018).

Conclusion

In the light of all these, there is the need to pay more attention to the development of **all** languages in Edo State. The development of these languages will foster a sense of belonging to the speakers and facilitate the implementation of the NLP. For the languages without standard orthographies and school curriculum, the speakers should initiate the development of the orthographies and curricula through collaboration with NERDC. For the sake of equity and democracy, every language should be developed. Whatever resources there are available should be spread to cover all the languages spoken in the State. The undeveloped languages need to be first developed, so that they can be empowered to be used in education.

Important government documents and publications should always be translated into the various languages spoken in the State. The state government should encourage the translation of the Nigerian *National Anthem*, the *Pledge*, the *Constitution* and other advocacy materials into the various languages. This will enhance the development of these languages. Every citizen of the state who has access to these documents in his own language will certainly feel a sense of belonging and pride in his heritage.

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