

The Languages of the North Central Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria

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Abstract

Using descriptive survey, personal/participatory observation, and a review of relevant literature, the study presents an appraisal of the linguistic situation of the languages in North Central Nigeria as it relates to the vitality of the languages, efforts in language documentation and description so far in the region, and the attendant challenging issues. As against the approximately 150 languages identified in North Central Nigeria by Crozier & Blench (1992) and Blench (2011), this study identified 124 languages in the zone with Plateau having the highest number (46) and Kwara housing only four (4) languages (c.f. Table VIII). The linguistic situation in North Central is a replica of the linguistic situation in Nigeria as a whole which is characterized with extreme linguistic diversity with multiplicity of languages whose exact number cannot be given with a high degree of certainty. From all indications, most of the languages in the region are yet to attain high level of development and standardization. Again, even though it could be said that language endangerment is a common phenomenon in Nigeria, the threat is more in northern Nigeria than any part of the country. The fact that there exist some appreciable levels of linguistic description in some of the major or macro-minority languages in the zone notwithstanding, there are certain challenging issues that may need to be addressed to allow for more progress in the documentation and description of the languages. This, we believe, would empower and revitalize the languages.

1. Introduction

Nigeria is known for its extreme linguistic diversity with multiplicity of languages whose exact number cannot be given with a high degree of certainty (Omachonu 2015, 2017). Nigeria alone houses a quarter of Africa's languages. Of the about 2,035 languages spoken in Africa (representing $\frac{1}{3}$ of the world's languages) (Heine & Nurse eds. 2000) and of the approximately 1050 languages spoken in West Africa, about 550 are spoken in Nigeria (Blench 2011). Equally, of the four language phyla (families) in Africa, with the exception of **Khoisan**, three (Niger–Congo, Afroasiatic and Nilo-Saharan) are represented in Nigeria.

Nigeria as we have it today is a federal constitutional republic comprising 36 states and its Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. At present, for equity in political representations and resource sharing as well as administrative convenience, the entity called Nigeria has been divided into six geo-political zones namely:

Name of Zone	States within the Geopolitical Zone
North Central	- Benue, FCT, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau
North East	- Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, Yobe
North West	- Kaduna, Katsina, Kano, Kebbi, Sokoto, Jigawa, Zamfara
South East	- Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo
South-South	- Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross-River, Delta, Edo, Rivers
South West	- Ekiti, Lagos, Osun, Ondo, Ogun, Oyo

The North Central¹⁷ which is our major concern in this chapter is made of six (6) States and the FCT as could be seen from the listing above: Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja. These are states whose languages and sociolinguistic situations we are, to a very large extent, familiar with. Of the approximately 150 languages in North Central Nigeria, (see Crozier & Blench 1992, Blench 2011), all, except Hausa and Yoruba, are minority or small group languages which suffer varying degrees of endangerment. Most of them are undocumented and only sparsely and insufficiently described. The primary aim of the present study therefore is to appraise the linguistic situation of the languages in the States in North Central Nigeria as it relates to the vitality of the languages, efforts in language documentation and description so far in the zone, and the attendant challenges.

In what follows, the remaining parts of the chapter shall address the following, and in this order:

1. The languages of the Zone;
2. The linguistic situation and the vitality of the languages of the States;
3. Language endangerment in North Central Nigeria;
4. The effects of State/LGA creation on the languages in the Zone;
5. Work done so far on the languages;
6. Challenges and the way forward.

¹⁷ Formerly known as the Middle Belt which consists of people(s) in the present BENUE, NASARAWA, TARABA, ADAMAWA, PLATEAU, SOUTHERN KEBBI, KOGI, KWARA, NIGER, SOUTHERN KADUNA, FCT, SOUTHERN GOMBE, and the two minority Local Government Areas of TAFAWA BALEWA and BOGORO in southern Bauchi State (See also Shilgba, 2011) but in the new political classification or zoning, the North Central is made up of only six states and FCT as listed earlier .

2. The Languages of North Central¹⁸

Tables 1-7 below contain the names of the States in the North Central Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria, with the names of the languages spoken in each State, the population of the speakers and the LGA(s) spoken.

Table I: Languages in Benue State

	Language	LGAs Spoken
1	Tiv	Makurdi, Buruku, Gboko, Katsina-Ala, Konshisha, Kwande, Logo, Guma, Gwer West, Gwer East, Tarka, Ukum, Ushongo, Vandeikya
2	Idoma	Oturkpo, Ado, Agatu, Apa, Gwer West, Ohimini, Okpokwu, Ogbadibo
3	Igede	Obi, Oju
4	Etulo	Buruku, Katsina-Ala
5	Jukun	Makurdi, Guma
6	Ufia	Ado

Benue State is made up of twenty three (23) Local Government Areas namely: *Ado, Agatu, Apa, Buruku, Gboko, Guma, Gwer East, Gwer West, Katsina-Ala, Konshisha, Kwnade, Logo, Makurdi, Obi, Oju, ogbadibo, Ohimini, Okpokwu, Oturkpo, Tarka, Ukum, Ushongo and Vandeikya*. It is somewhat a multilingual state with at least 6 languages: Idoma, Tiv, Igede, Etulo, Jukun, and Ufia. Of the twenty three (23) Local Government Areas in Benue State, Tiv alone is spoken in fourteen (14) LGAs as could be seen from the table above, while Idoma is spoken in eight (8) LGAs namely: Agatu, Apa, Gwest West, Otukpo, Ohimini, Okpokwu, Ogbadibo and Ado. Igede, Etulo and Jukun are spoken in two LGAs each whereas Ufia is spoken in only one LGA (Ado) in the state. Contrary to the belief at certain quarters and even some literatures that Akweya and Agatu are languages on their own in Benue, Akweya and Agatu are just dialects of the Idoma language (See Nyagba 2000; Umaru 2016; Omachonu, Adeyanju, Anagbogu, Ianna & Imoh, 2017).

Table II: Languages in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT)

	Language	LGAs Spoken
1	Gbagyi	Bwari, AMAC, Gwagwalada, Kuje, Abaji, Kwali

¹⁸ While thanking my Research Assistant and younger colleague, Abigail Musa Dalhatu for the initial compilation of the field reports from our consultants on the languages in the states in North Central Nigeria and FCT, we wish to specially and specifically acknowledge the following for information on the languages of the respective states: Dr Umaru Jacob Yakubu for Benue, Naomi JohnPaul for Kogi, Dr Idris Bida for Niger, Dr Mrs Arokoyo for Kwara, Dr Mrs Akinremi and Mary Nimram for Plateau. The information on the languages in FCT were provided by Abigail Musa Dalhatu. We also thank Precious Omachonu for the good job of careful proofreading of the final draft of the manuscript.

2	Bassa	Gwagwalada, Abaji, Kwali, Kuje
3	Gade	AMAC; Kuje, Kwali
4	Gwandara	AMAC, Kuje, Gwagwalada
5	Nupe	Gwagwalada, Kuje
6	Ganagana	Abaji, Kwali, Kuje
7	Egbira	Abaji
8	Koro	Gwagwalada, AMAC
9	Hausa/Fulani	Bwari, AMAC, Gwagwalada, Kwali, Kuje

The Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja is located in North Central Nigeria. It is made up of six (6) Area Councils with a total population of 1,405,201 (Census, 2006). The Federal Capital Territory is a multilingual setting where many languages are spoken as could be seen from Table II above: *Gbagyi*, *Gade*, *Gwandara*, *Ganagana*, *Nupe*, *Bassa*, *Egbira (Ebira)*, *Koro* and *Hausa/Fulani*. *Gbagyi* which is originally the major indigenous language of the area is spoken in all the six Area Councils. *Gbagyi* has two major dialects known as *Gbagyi Nge* and *Gbagyi Nkwa dialects*. *Koro* is spoken in Gwagwalada and the Municipal Area Councils. *Gwandara* has its speakers in Gwagwalada, Kuje and Municipal Area Councils. Similarly, *Gade* has its speakers in Kuje, Kwali and Municipal Area Councils while *Bassa* on the other hand, is spoken in Gwagwalada, Kuje, Abaji and Kwali. *Ganagana* is spoken in Kuje, Kwali and Abaji, whereas *Ebira*, the *Egbira Koto* dialect, to be precise, is spoken in Abaji Area Council.

Table III: Languages in Kogi State

	Language	LGAs Spoken
1	Igala	Ankpa, Dekina, Idah, Ofu, Olamaboro, Igalamel/Odolu, Ibaji, Omala, Bassa
2	Yoruba	Yagba East, Yagba West, Mopa-Muro, Ijumu, Kaba-Bunu
3	Ebira	Okehi, Okene, Adavi, Lokoja, Ajaokuta, Kogi
4	Ọkọ́	Ogori-Magongo
5	Bassa Nge	Bassa, Dekina
6	Bassa Kwomo	Bassa, Ajaokuta, Dekina
7	Kupa	Kogi
8	Kakanda	Kogi
9	Ayere	Kaba-Bunu
10	Nupe	Lokoja
11	Gbagyi	Lokoja

Kogi State is made up of twenty one (21) Local Government Areas namely: *Adavi, Ajaokuta, Ankpa, Bassa, Dekina, Ibaji, Idah, Igalamel/Odolu, Ijumu, Kaba-Bunu, Kogi, Lokoja, Mopa-Muro, Ofu, Ogori-Magongo, Okehi, Okene, Olamaboro, Omala, Yagba East, Yagba West*. It is also a multilingual state housing, at least, eleven (11) languages: *Igala, Yoruba (Okun), Ebira, Oko, Bassa Kwomo, Bassa Nge, Ayere, Kupa, Kakanda* and pockets of *Gbagyi* and *Nupe* speakers in Lokoja Local Government Area of the state. Igala, Yoruba (Okun) and Ebira are the three major languages of the state with each spoken in nine, five and six LGAs respectively. It may also be correct to say that Igala is also spoken in Ajaokuta LGA and Lokoja. Of course, the word ‘Ajaokuta’ is Igala, meaning ‘a market of stones’. Bassa Kwomo which is somewhat next to the major three is spoken in three (3) LGAs in the state while Bassa Nge is spoken in only two LGAs. The other smaller group languages namely; *Oko, Ayere, Kupa* and *Kakanda* are spoken in one LGA each. Contrary to the belief at certain quarters that Ayere is a dialect of Yoruba (Okun), it is not. My hands-on experience with Prof. T. K. Adeyanju and some speakers of both Ayere and Okun Yoruba during the burial of his younger sister at Kabba in 2013 showed that there was no mutual intelligibility between Ayere and Okun Yoruba. Incidentally, Prof. Adeyanju is from Ayere even though he doesn’t understand the language. Ayere is only a few kilometres from Kabba town and it is located in Kabba/Bunu Local Government Area of the state. Okun is majorly the dialect of Yoruba spoken in Kogi West Senatorial District, and like the Bassa Kwomo and Bassa Nge, they got the name ‘Okun’ from their most common (general) greetings.

Table IV: Languages in Kwara State

	Language	LGAs Spoken
1	Batonu	Baruten
2	Boko-Baru	Kaiama
3	Yoruba	Ifelodun, Moro, Ilorin South, Ilorin East, Ilorin West, Asa, Offa, Oyun, Irepodun, Isin, Oke-Ero, Ekiti
4	Nupe	Edu, Pategi,

Kwara, as one of the (6) States in the Middle Belt of Nigeria, is made up of sixteen (16) Local Government Areas. It has a fewer number of languages compared to the other states in the zone. The languages spoken in Kwara are Batonu, Boko-Baru, Yoruba, and Nupe. Batonu language which is reported to have no variant is spoken only in Kosubosu. Similarly, Boko-Baru, also a language without any variant, is spoken only in Kaiama. Yoruba, which appears to be the most widely spoken language in Kwara covers twelve LGAs out of a total of sixteen. The version of Yoruba spoken in Kwara is characterized by Igbomina, Ibolu and Ekiti-Kwara dialects. It is to be noted, however, that Hausa and Fulani are spoken as second languages in most of the LGAs of the state, especially, in Ilorin.

Table V: Languages in Nasarawa State

	Language	LGAs Spoken
1	Alago	Awe, Doma, Keana, Obi
2	Eggon	Nasarawa Eggon, Akwanga, Awe, Doma, Keffi, Kokona, Lafia
3	Mada	Akwanga, Doma, Keffi, Kokona, Laifa, Obi
4	Gbagyi	Karu, Toto
5	Gade	Karu
6	Gwandara	Karu, Awe, Doma, Keana, Lafia, Obi, Kokona
7	Migili	Lafia, Awe, Doma
8	Jaba	Keffi
9	Nyankpa	Karu,
10	Rindre	Wamba, Akwanga, Lafia
11	Kantana	Wamba
12	Afo	Kokona, Nasarawa, Keffi
13	Tiv	Keana, Awe, Doma, Lafia
14	Idoma (Agatu)	Nasarawa, Doma, Toto
15	Egbira	Nasarawa, Toto,
16	Bassa	Toto, Kokona
17	Fulfude	Lafia, Keffi, Kokona, Nasarawa, Toto
18	Hausa	All the 13 Local Government Areas
19	Ninzo	Wamba
20	Kulere	Wamba
21	Arum	Wamba
22	Buh	Wamba
23	Jukun	Awe, Obi
24	Koro	Karu
25	Akye	Lafia
26	Yashi	Wamba

Nasarawa State is linguistically heterogeneous, with different languages across the thirteen (13) LGAs of the state whose exact number is difficult to give with any degree of certainty. While some of the languages are found in just one LGA, others are spoken across several LGAs (see also Omachonu 2017). From Table V above, one could say that twenty six (26) languages have been identified to be spoken in Nasarawa State. From personal observations as well as interactions with some speakers of certain languages in the state, it must be stated here that it was a bit difficult to say, for instance, (1) whether some languages are the same or different, and (2) whether some languages that are claimed to be spoken in the state can

be said to exist truly as languages of the state. For example, while there is the belief at some quarters that Koro and Migili are the same, some other people who speak these languages, for various reasons, consider themselves as speakers of different languages. In the course of this study, however, it was discovered that there is a difference between Koro and Migili. For instance, it is said that there is no mutual intelligibility between Koro spoken in Panda, Karu LGA and the Migili in Lafia, Awe and Doma. However, the fact still remains that Migili in Nasarawa is mutually intelligible with the Koro of Niger State. It must be noted, however, that Migili does not share intelligibility with the Koro spoken in Panda, Karu Local Government Area of Nasarawa State, and those in Kaduna State and Bwari (FCT).

Table VI: Languages in Niger State

	Language	LGAs Spoken	Remarks
1	Nupe	Borgu, Mashegu, Wushishi, Lavun, Mokwa, Edati, Gbako, Bida, Katcha, Agaie, Lapai	
2	Gbagyi	Shiroro, Chanchaga, Bosso, Gurara, Suleja, Tafa, Munya, Paikoro	Gwari is a dialect of Gbagyi spoken in Munya, Paikoro
3	Kambari	Agwara, Borgu, Magama, Rijau, Kontagora, Mashegu, Mariga	
4	Busawa	Agwara	
5	Lofawa	Agwara	
6	Buda	Borgu	
7	Gugawa	Borgu	
8	Busa	Borgu,	
9	Hausa	Mashegu, Rijau, Kontagora, Munya, Wushishi, Suleja	
10	Fulani	Kontagora, Shiroro, Munya	
11	Dukawa	Mashegu, Rijau, Mariga	
12	Kamuku	Mashegu, Mariga, Rafi,	
13	Pangu	Rafi	
14	Ungwai	Rafi	
15	Bauai	Rafi	
16	Ura	Rafi	
17	Dakarkari	Rijau	
18	Koro	Shiroro, Munya, Tafa	
19	Basa	Mariga, Mashegu, Shiroro	
20	Gwandara	Tafa	
21	Gade	Tafa	

22	Aho	Tafa	
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Niger State has twenty five (25) Local Government Areas namely: *Agaie, Agwara, Bosso, Bida, Borgu, Chanchaga, Edati, Gbako, Gurara, Katcha, Kontagora, Lapai, Lavun, Magama, Mariga, Mashegu Mokwa, Munya, Paikoro, Rafi, Rijau, Tafa, Shiroro, Suleja, and Wushishi*. Twenty two (22) languages have been identified to be spoken in the twenty five LGAs with Nupe spoken in eleven LGAs of the state followed by Gbagyi spoken in eight LGAs and then Kambari and Hausa spoken in seven and in six LGAs respectively. Apart from Fulani, Dakawa, Kamuku, Koro and Basa spoken in three LGAs each, the other smaller group languages in Niger State such as Buda, Lofawa, Pangu, Gwandara, Gade, and so on are spoken in one LGA each. Whereas some languages are spoken in many LGAs, for instance, Nupe, Gbagyi, Kambari and Hausa, some LGAs have many languages spoken in them. For example; Borgu, Rafi and Tafa house, at least, four different languages each as shown in Table VI above. Lastly, contrary to the opinion in certain quarters that Gbagyi and Gwari/Gbari are different languages, studies in Nasarawa and Niger states where the language is spoken as one of the major languages have shown that it is the same language that is given these different names. For instance, in Niger State, while the variety known as Gbagyi is spoken in Tafa, Suleja, Gwandara, Bosso, Chanchaga and Shiroro LGAs, Gwari/Gbari is spoken in Munya and Paikoro LGAs. They are rather dialects of the Gbagyi language and not distinct languages (see also Dalhatu, 2017).

Table VII: Languages in Plateau State

	Language	LGAs Spoken
1	Buji	Bassa
2	Ce	Bassa
3	Jere	Bassa
4	Rigwe	Bassa
5	Izere	Bassa
6	Gusawa	Bassa
7	Amo	Bassa
8	Ribina	Bassa
9	Lemoro	Bassa
10	Iguta	Bassa
11	Cara	Bassa
12	Maigemu	Jos East
13	Fobor	Jos East
14	Fursum	Jos East
15	Sherere	Jos East
16	Federe	Jos East
17	Gwong	Jos North

18	Jarawa	Jos North
19	Maza	Jos North
20	Kabong	Jos North
21	Rusau	Jos North
22	Jukun	Wase
23	Kanuri	Wase
24	Hausa	Wase
25	Fulani	Wase
26	Diyuom	Mikang
27	Yuom	Mikang
28	Tehl	Mikang
29	Ron	Bokkos
30	Kulere	Bokkos
31	Mushere	Bokkos
32	Goemai	Shendam
33	Paipung	Shendam
34	Koenoem	Shendam
35	Burum	Kanam
36	Yankam	Kanam
37	Bukuru	Jos South
38	Kofyar	Qua'an Pan
39	Pyem	Mangu
40	Mupun	Mangu, Pankshin
41	Kadung	Mangu, Pankshin
42	Mwaghavul	Mangu, Pankshin
43	Berom	Riyom, Barkin Ladi
44	Ngas	Pankshin, Kanke
45	Tal	Pankshin, Mikang
46	Tarok	Wase, Langtan North, Langtan South

Table VII above shows the distribution of the languages spoken in the seventeen (17) LGAs in Plateau State. I am not sure we have been able to identify exactly the number of languages on the Plateau. So far, our record shows that Plateau State houses forty six (46) languages thereby placing it as the state with the highest number of languages in the zone, North Central Nigeria. Unlike the other states where a particular language is spoken across many LGAs in the state, in Plateau, it is only Tarok that is spoken in three LGAs namely; *Wase, Langtan North, Langtan South*. Following closely behind are Tal, Kadung, Mupun, Berom, Ngas and Mwaghavul spoken in two LGAs each. Similarly, unlike the scenario found in other states where a language is spoken in many LGAs in the state, in Plateau, one finds a situation where many languages are spoken in one LGA in the state. For instance, in Bassa Local Government Area alone, eleven (11) languages namely; *Buji,*

Ce, Jere, Rigwe, Izere, Gusawa, Amo, Ribina, Lemoro, Iguta and Cara have been identified to be languages spoken by the various speech communities in the LGA.

3. The Linguistic Situation and the Vitality of the Languages

From Tables I-VII above, one could summarise the language situation of the Zone in a single table thus (See **Table VIII** below):

Table VIII: Summary on the Linguistic Situation in North Central Nigeria

S/N	State	Capital	No. of LGAs	Population 2006 Census	No. of Langs.	Dominant Langs.
1	Benue	Makurdi	23	4,219,244	06	Idoma, Igede, Tiv
2	FCT	Abuja	06	1,406,201	09	Gbagyi, Bassa, Gade, Gwandara, etc
3	Kogi	Lokoja	21	3,278,487	11	Igala, Ebira, Yoruba (Okun), etc
4	Kwara	Ilorin	16	2,371,089	04	Yoruba, Nupe, etc
5	Nasarawa	Lafia	13	1,863,275	26	Eggon, Mada, Alago, Gbagyi, Gwandara, Tiv
6	Niger	Minna	24	3,950,249	22	Hausa, Gbagyi, Nupe, etc
7	Plateau	Jos	17	3,178,712	46	Tarok, Ngas, Berom, Mwaghavul
	Total			20,267,257	124	

The linguistic situation in North Central is a replica of the linguistic situation in Nigeria as a whole. The North Central Zone just like Nigeria is characterized with its extreme linguistic diversity with multiplicity of languages whose exact number cannot be given with a high degree of certainty, for examples, the situations in Plateau, Nasarawa and Niger. The multiplicity of languages is caused by the diversity of ethnic groups that were brought together to form the geo-political zone, North Central Nigeria. The zone alone as could be seen from Table VIII above houses more than a quarter of languages in Nigeria. Apart from the fact that two of the three major languages of Nigeria; Hausa and Yoruba are spoken in the zone, the three language phyla (families) in Nigeria; Niger-Congo, Afroasiatic and Nilo-Saharan are represented in the zone.

In assessing to ascertain or determine the vitality of the languages in the states in North Central Nigeria, the following yardsticks or criteria could be used as indicators of the level of development of the languages (c.f. Ianna and Dugga 2010; Omachonu, 2017:10 as modified):

1. **Attitude and Intergenerational Transmission-** use by adults, the youths and children

2. **Language analysis:** orthography, phonetics/phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, reference grammar, dictionary, and so on.
3. **Publications:** primary manuals or primers, readers, liturgical books, bible translations (new & old testaments), hymn books, written Oral Literature, creative writing/literature, and so on.
4. **Mass Media:** news on state radio, news on federal radio, magazine, programmes on the radio/television, newspapers, news bulletin and periodicals.
5. **Other Domains of Usage:** Home, Official, Religious, Commercial, etc.
6. **Specialised Publications:** hygiene, physiology, medicine, agriculture, and so on.
7. **As a medium of instruction in schools or course of study:** primary, secondary (junior and/or senior), tertiary institutions.

If we apply the criteria above to assess the languages in North Central, it would be crystal clear that even though most of the languages are still used or spoken by adults, the youths and children in the speech communities, most of them are yet to attain high level of language standardization and development. Of the languages in North Central Nigeria, apart from the major two, Hausa and Yoruba; in Benue, Tiv for instance, has the highest level of standardization, followed by Idoma, and then Igede, and so on. Most of the languages are yet to secure approved orthography. Tiv as well as Idoma has an approved and published orthography. Apart from the orthographies and the dictionaries, one finds a pocket of linguistic analysis on the phonetics, phonology, morphology, semantics and syntax of Tiv and Idoma. There are also publications on the languages such as primers, liturgical books, bible translations, hymn books, creative writings, and so on. The two languages are also used on the media especially radio and television stations within the state. They are also used as medium of instruction in selected primary and secondary schools in the state. This is similar to the case of Gbagyi in FCT, Igala and Epira in Kogi, Nupe in Kwara, Eggon, Mada and Alago in Nasarawa, Gbagyi and Nupe in Niger and Tarok, Ngas, Berom and Mwaghavul in Plateau State.

Adekunle (1976) classified languages in Nigeria into three categories: A, B and C, where A consists of languages which are used as national major indigenous languages like Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa. B comprises languages which are recognized and used officially at federal and state levels whereas C consists of minor languages which have no official recognition even at the state level. Going by this categorization, we could say that most of the languages spoken in North Central Nigeria belong to the minority languages which lack both functional transparency and the capacity for functional loads. Functional load as Shagba (2018:119) puts it 'refers to the number of functions a language is able to perform while functional transparency refers to the domineering effect a language has in a domain where it is used. Considering the criteria, number of speakers, geographical spread as well as their functional loads and functional transparency, Shagba (2018) classified the minority languages of the Benue Valley, to which most of the languages in the North Central also

belong, into two major groups namely; the macro-minority and micro-minority languages. According to her, the macro-minority languages are those which can be taken to be major languages spoken in each respective state, for example, the dominant languages in the respective state in the zone shown in Table VIII above while micro-minority are the smaller group languages in the region that clearly lack both functional transparency and the capacity for functional loads (See also Bamgbose's 1991 categorization of Nigerian languages into major, minor (main) and small group languages). In our considered opinion, the linguistic situation in North Central Nigeria as it relates to the status of the languages agrees with these classifications.

4. Language Endangerment in North Central Nigeria

In Nigeria, language endangerment is no longer a mere strong possibility but a stark reality. Most languages in Nigeria suffer varying degrees of threats suggested by the use of certain adjectives in the literature: **receding, disadvantaged, deprived, disuse, weakened, unsafe, sickly, moribund, dying, disappearing, extinct** and **dead** languages (Omachonu 2014, 2015, 2017). As Omachonu (2017) had noted, even as it could be said that language endangerment is a common phenomenon in Nigeria, the threat is more in northern Nigeria than any part of the country. The following compelling pieces of evidence abound in the literature (c.f. Omachonu 2017: 31-32):

1. In a list of over 150 Nigerian languages in danger of disappearing compiled by Ugwuoke (1999:15-27), over eighty percent (80%) of the languages are in the north.
2. In another list from the same source, of Nigerian languages spoken by less than 500 people, the north alone has about ninety percent (90%) of the languages with Adamawa, Bauchi, Kaduna, Niger, Plateau and Taraba at the top of the list (c.f. Omachonu 2009).
3. In yet another list from Centre for Endangered Languages (CEL), of the states in Nigeria losing their languages, Bauchi, Gombe, Plateau, Nasarawa, Kebbi, Niger, Kogi, Sokoto, Kaduna and other states from northern Nigeria were also listed.

Even at present, with the continued presence of Hausa as a predator in the north, small number of speakers of the languages, language contacts and languages in competition within such multilingual milieu as well as lack of scientific development, documentation and linguistic description or study of the languages, the situation is worsening by the day.

5. The Effects of State/LGA Creation on the Languages of the States

Frankly speaking state and Local Government creation has torn some ethnic groups/language speakers apart. For instance, it was as a result of state creation, one finds Igala being spoken in Anambra, Enugu, Edo and Delta besides Kogi. Tiv is spoken in

Nasarawa and Taraba besides Benue while Gbagyi, for instance, is spoken in Nasarawa, Kogi, Kwara besides Niger State.

Politically, when a particular community or settlement develops and increases in population, it becomes necessary that a Local Government is created for it and this is important for geo-political balancing. In the course of this exercise, it was observed that the creation of certain LGAs sometimes implies the division of a linguistic group which results into the members of a linguistic system living apart whether far or near. In the course of this study, a few effects (negative or negative) of such creations in North Central were observed:

A linguistic group following such a creation may gain more population to speak their language in a situation where the group is in contact with a smaller group in an LGA, in that, the smaller group would prefer to learn and use the language of the larger population for recognition or other social or economic benefits that may be associated with it. A practical example is the case of Bassa in Dekina LGA of Kogi State where the Bassa, being the minority in the LGA would prefer to speak Igala, the majority language. The negative effect of this decision, however, is that Bassa is becoming depopulated while its speakers gradually shift to Igala with no interest or intentions to develop or maintain their own language since they consider it as a hindrance to their economic advancement.

Similarly, the creation of an LGA may also bring about inferiority complex on the part of a group towards another group of the same linguistic system, such that, when the speakers of a language find themselves in two separate LGAs and one LGA seems to be larger and enjoys better opportunities (be it economic, social or political), the speakers in the other LGA may begin to see themselves as inferior and therefore, they resort to speaking the other variety thereby abandoning their own to suffer the risk of extinction. For instance, the Gbari dialect in Nasarawa LGA prefer to speak Gbagyi Nge of Karu LGA because they are a minority in their LGA and they feel inferior towards the Gagyi Nge in Karu LGA being that Karu LGA has witnessed more exposure to modernity and development over time.

Lastly, State/LGA creation could create room for reduplication of a language as two different languages if such a language is spoken in two different states or LGAs, for example, Gbari in Nasarawa LGA and Gbagyi Nge in Karu LGA both in Nasarawa State, Nupe in Lokoja LGA and Bassa Nge in Bassa LGA both in Kogi State. Bassa Nge is actually a dialect of Nupe.

6. Work Done So Far on the Languages

Even though most of the smaller group languages in North Central are yet to secure approved orthography, the major ones in the respective states such as Tiv and Idoma in Benue, Igala and Ebira in Kogi, Nupe in Kwara, Gbagyi in FCT, Eggon, Mada, and Alago in Nasasarawa, Gbagyi and Nupe in Niger and Tarok, Berom, Ngas and Mwashavul in

Plateau have approved and published orthographies. Apart from the orthographies and dictionaries as well as other publications such as primers, liturgical books, bible translations, hymn books, creative writings, and so on in some of the major or macro-minority languages of the region, one finds pockets of linguistic analysis on the phonetics, phonology, morphology, semantics and syntax of the languages in the various Departments of Linguistics in the Nigerian universities and elsewhere in the world.

On the languages in Benue state, Eugene (1969) reports that the first emerging literature in Tiv was a small reader called “Zua Tiv” which was published in 1914. Following this was the production of the Gospel of Mark in 1916. Also, the contribution of Malherbe is considered remarkable to Tiv language. He developed Tiv orthography in 1911 which even the current Tiv orthography has not departed from. Abraham (1940a) wrote *A Dictionary of the Tiv Language* and in the same year Abraham (1940b) published *Tiv Phonetics and Tonal Principles*. These were after his ‘*The grammar of Tiv*’ (Abraham 1933). Besides the numerous undergraduate linguistic works on Tiv, other remarkable scholarly works especially at the postgraduate level and scholarly articles in books and journal include among others: Orjime (2004), (Yina 2007), Udu (2009), Karshima (2012, 2015), Akase (2015), Adzer (2016), and numerous others. Similarly, appreciable amount of works have been done on Idoma even though not as much but far less on Igede when compared to Tiv and Idoma.

On languages in Kogi, the first published account on Igala, for instance, was in Clark’s (1848) specimens of dialects. In 1935, Philpot published an article entitled ‘notes on the Igala’, followed by Armstrong’s (1951) paper on Igala. Thereafter, Fresco wrote an article entitled the ‘Tone of the Yoruba and Igala Disyllabic Noun Prefix’. Subsequent works on Igala include: Silverstein (1973), Akinkugbe (1976), the published orthography of 1986 (See Omachonu 2000 for the accounts). Contemporary works on Igala Linguistics (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics) include: Omachonu (2000, 2001a&b, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2011(ed.) and 2012, 2015, 2016, etc), Ejeba (2008, 2009, 2011a&b, 2012a&b and 2016), Idakwoji (2015) and numerous others. Compared to Igala; apart from Ebira and Gbagyi, other minority languages in Kogi State have received far less research attention and as a result, very few studies are recorded on the languages.

The earliest works which appeared on Gbagyi, whether in Kogi, FCT, Niger or Nasarawa, include that of Koelle (1854) and Edgar (1909). Later on, other works began to emerge such as Hyman and Magaji (1970), Shekwo (1973, 1985), Nana (1979) and Blench (1989). In 1986, the first attempt at developing Gbagyi orthography was made by Sanda but in 2013, Adagbagyilo came up with what looked like a more acceptable version of the orthography. In 1992, Rosendall carried out a comparative study on the phonology of Gbagyi lects and this work has remained one of the most influential references on the language. Also, Blench and Musa (2005) made a draft of the dictionary of Gbagyi and in 2009, Galadima carried out a syntactic analysis of the main sentence types of Gbagyi. Besides the numerous undergraduate linguistic works on the language especially in Nasarawa State University, other remarkable scholarly works especially at the postgraduate level and scholarly articles in books and journal in recent times include among

others: Imam (2011), Dalhatu and Gwamna (2012), Galadima in Gwamna and Filaba (eds. 2012), Blench (2013), Galadima and Aboki (2014), Chiemezie (2016), Dalhatu (2017a, 2017b), Dalhatu and Oyebade (2017) (See Dalhatu 2017a for full accounts on the sources on Gbagyi).

Works done on languages in Nasarawa especially Alago, Eggon and Mada are reported to be few. However, works recorded in the literature of the languages in Nasarawa state include Maddieson (n.d and 1982) on Eggon, Gerhardt (2005) on Yeskwa, Goroh (1972/3b) on Koro, Goroh (1983) on Eggon, Gerhardt (2000) on Koro, Follingstad (n.d) on Tyap, Greenberg (1963) on Eggon, Armstrong (1964) on Eloyi, Price (1989) on Mada, Sibomana (1985) on Eggon. Other works on Mada include Ridan (1992), Nkamigbo (2011) and Blench (2015). Recently, there was a TETFUND sponsored documentation project on languages of Nasarawa State (Omachonu, Adeyanju, Anagbogu, Ianna, & Imoh 2016). (See Omachonu 2017 for accounts on the sources on the linguistic description of languages in Nasarawa).

Nupe, being the dominant language in Niger State seems to have enjoyed a reasonable level of research over time. Nupe is said to have been first studied by Bishop Crowther in 1960s and a first reader in Nupe language was published by the Church Missionary Society (Johnson, 1988). Koelle (1954) was the first scholar to publish comparative wordlists of Nupe dialects. A major advance was marked by the work of Alexander Banfield, who made about four significant publications on the language. He comprehensively and correctly analysed the tone system and produced a grammar (Banfield and Macintyre, 1915) as well as a dictionary of Nupe (Banfield, 1914, 1916), and these works have remained significant reference sources in Nupe Linguistics. However, a credit is given to Westermann (1927) as the first linguist to place Nupe within the framework of Niger-Congo languages. In Blench's (2013) opinion, earlier publications on Nupe have been scattered but for Forde's (1955) review of all the existing publications on Nupe. This makes Forde (1955) an important source of literature on Nupe. Harms (1983) as well as Hyman (1973) too did some works on Nupe. It is to be noted that besides the numerous undergraduate linguistic works on Nupe, other remarkable scholarly works especially at the postgraduate level and scholarly articles have appeared in books and journals in recent times (See Madugu 1981 and 1985 for accounts on the sources on Nupe).

On the languages in Plateau, there have been series of publications on especially the major languages of the state; for instance, Kuhu and Dusu (1985) on Berom, Longtau (1993, 2000, 2008) on Tarok. Other works recorded on the languages in plateau include that of Anon (2000), Blench (2000a, 2000b on Izere, 2003 on Ron), Bouquiaux (1967) on Berom, Anaguta, Irigwe, Kaje and Rukuba, Bouquiaux (1970, 2001) on Berom, Gachal (1994) on Ngas. Similarly, it is to be noted that besides the numerous undergraduate linguistic works on the languages in Plateau, other remarkable scholarly works especially at the postgraduate level and scholarly articles have appeared in books and journals in recent times (See Blench 2009 for full accounts on the sources on the languages of Plateau).

7. Challenges and the Way forward

Given the linguistic situation of North Central Nigeria as enunciated above, certain challenging issues have been observed as we proceed to relate:

1. Lack of exact/accurate language statistics in North Central Nigeria, and like it is in Nigeria at large, the situation is occasioned by several factors such lack of comprehensive linguistic survey (Since SIL 1976, there has not been any such comprehensive survey), indeterminacy or unclear distinction between language vs. dialect and language vs. ethnicity, language politics (a situation where two groups speaking the same language insist their languages are different because they belong two different states or LGA), duplication of same language in different states as a result of ignorance.
2. Language endangerment, worst case scenarios and Language death due to severe endangerment in North Central Nigeria.
3. Slow pace of language study and development especially among the minority or small group languages.
4. Major, Macro vs. Micro-minority languages conflicts and politics in the zone.
5. The difficulties in putting in place a comprehensive and well-articulated language policy and planning that could accommodate the multiplicity of languages in the respective states of the region.

Against the backdrop of the above challenges, the following suggestions are put forward towards charting a progressive way forward (culled from Omachonu 2017:83-4):

1. A joint action/effort of the government, the owners of the languages and the concerned linguists both within and outside the speech communities towards aggressive revitalization and maintenance of the languages should be encouraged.
2. On the part of the native speakers of the affected languages, a strong language loyalty (e.g. cast-iron and total commitment of resources of all descriptions: time, funds, intelligence, expertise, effort, etc) is required to resist the threat of endangerment.
3. Timely intervention on the part of the indigenous linguists as part of their social responsibility to the people and the nation through sensitization, documentation, research/ description and advocacy, and so on is required.
4. The governments at various levels in the respective states to take decisive and vehement stand, and invest time, commitment and resources towards saving the endangered languages.
5. Beyond what an individual linguist can do, one may suggest some forms of institutional involvement or intervention (Govt & NGO) through the establishment of Studies in Language Endangerment in the various Departments of Linguistics and African/Nigerian Languages in our universities and other institutions of higher learning. The aim of the programme(s) would be to:
 - i. Support individuals, communities and groups who aspire to document, maintain, renew or revive their languages;

- ii. Undertake independent research in language endangerment;
- iii. Select appropriate models for language maintenance programmes;
- iv. Prepare reports and documents for academic and professional purposes;
- v. Develop curriculum for language pedagogy programmes;
- vi. Undertake language development and documentation tasks;
- vii. Use historical and archival materials in language renewal and revitalization;
- viii. Among other wake-up calls, we may need to emphasize intensive and extensive development and standardization of the languages through the state-of-the-art documentation and description which could minimize language death and the effects of endangerment on languages in Nigeria.

8. Conclusion

The study presented an appraisal of the linguistic situation of the languages in North Central Nigeria as it relates to the vitality of the languages, efforts in language documentation and description so far in the region, and the attendant challenging issues. As against the approximately 150 languages identified in North Central Nigeria by Crozier & Blench (1992) and Blench (2011), this study identified 124 languages in the zone with Plateau having the highest number (46) and Kwara housing only four (4) languages. The linguistic situation in North Central is a replica of the linguistic situation in Nigeria as a whole which is characterized with extreme linguistic diversity with multiplicity of languages whose exact number are yet unknown. From all indications, even though most of the languages are still used or spoken by adults, the youths and children in the speech communities, most of them, apart from Hausa and Yoruba, are yet to attain high level of language standardization and development. Similarly, even though it could be said that language endangerment is a common phenomenon in Nigeria, the threat is more in North Central Nigeria than any part of the country. The fact that there exist some appreciable levels of linguistic descriptions in some of the languages in the zone notwithstanding, there are still certain challenging issues that may need to be addressed to allow for more progress in the documentation and description of the languages of North Central Nigeria.

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